

# Critical evaluation of Gambhira festival, an intangible cultural heritage resource of Malda District, West Bengal

Dr. Barnali Das

Assistant Professor, Department of Geography, Kalyani Mahavidyalaya, City Centre Complex, Kalyani, Pin no- 741235

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## ABSTRACT

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*The word 'Folk' comes from the word 'Lok' (intense lifestyle of village people). So, the word folk means 'lok utsab' or the festival of rural people. Folk dances of West Bengal harmonize the beautiful culture of the state by their colours and celebration. In the past the folk dances were either agricultural or devotional. Now a days the folk dances more inclined towards to present many socio-political problem. Very popular folk dances of West Bengal are Chau dance of Puruliya District, tribal dance at Sonajhuri hat of Birbhum district, Gambhira dance of Malda district etc. Gambhira of Malda district is an intangible cultural heritage resources where the holy devotional dance done by worshippers of Shakti (Goddess Chandi). A whole mixture of all kind of art forms, like dance, dialogues, songs and music, Gambhira seems like a documentary-dance course or else a folk play. Gambhira dance is done along with melodic instruments, like flute, dhak or drum, Judi, cornet and harmonium. The present paper is an attempt to know the dynamics on the evolution of Gambhira and to highlight the present condition of Gambhira Artisans. This paper also highlighted the role of tourism sector to promote this famous folk drama worldwide.*

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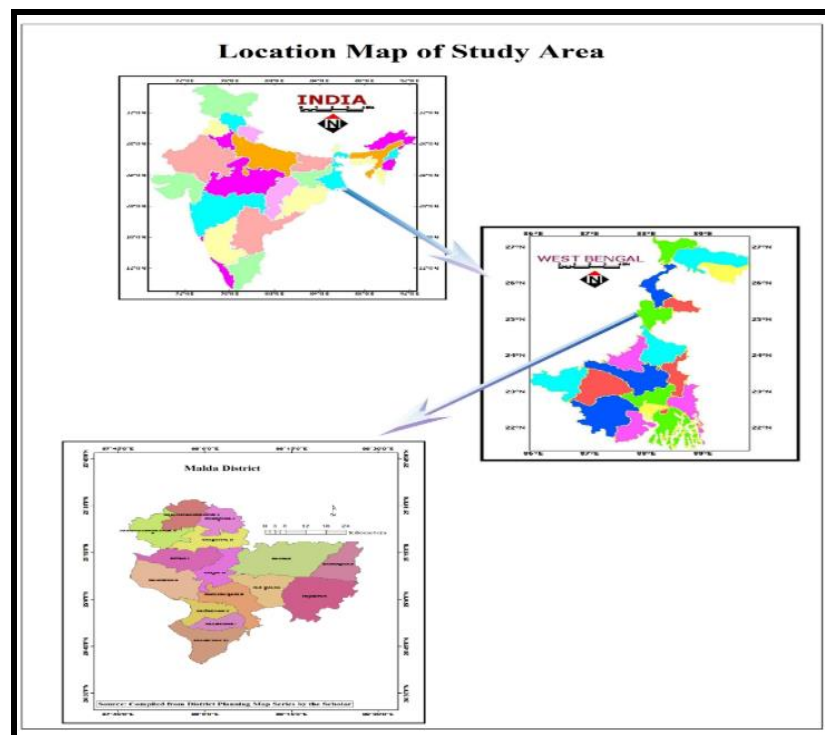
## 1. Introduction

The Gambhira festival is popular in North Bengal of west Bengal and in some parts Bangladesh like- Rangpur, Pabna, Rajshahi etc. The North Bengal includes the districts of Malda, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri and Coach-Bihar. Lord Shiva is mainly worshipped in Gambhira festival. The term Gambhira means the room or space of worship. In Malda district, Gambhira considered as one of the main important festival.

There are so many opinions about the origin of the Gambhira festival like Hardias Palit had used the term 'Adyer Gambhira'. According to him Gambhira is the other name of Lord Shiva. So the festival where Lord Shiva is worshipped is termed as Gambhira. Another meaning of Gambhira is the dark space of worship of Shiva in a room. Haraprasad Shastri has stated the Gambhira festival came from Buddhist culture. Professor Asutosh Bhattacharya traced its root in Surya puja, (which is a tribal culture) where God Sun is worshipped. According to some Gambhira artist of Malda district Bhoalahat P.S. of Bangladesh is the place from where Gambhira songs were originated. In Jalpaiguri district, the word Gamira is known as solo song. So the word Gambhira might also be originated from the word Gamira.

## 2. Study area:

Malda lies at east of the confluence of the Mahananda and Kalindri rivers. The latitudinal and longitudinal extension of Malda district (The Gateway of North Bengal) is 24°40'20"N-25°32'08"N and 87°45'50"E-88°28'10"E respectively. The total area of the district according to Surveyor General of India is 3733 sq. km and total population is 3290468 (source: - Census of India, 2001). The district is bounded on the north by the Purnea (district of West Bengal), on the south by Murshidabad, on the east by South Dinajpur and North Dinajpur (district of West Bengal) and Rajshahi (Bangladesh) and on the west by Murshidabad, the Santhal Paraganas. On the route of Darjeeling, 349 km north of Kolkata, Malda is the base for visiting the ruined cities of Gour and Hazrat Pandua, although it's more famous for its large Fazli mangoes and folk songs like Gambhira. Many picturesque heritage relics are still pronouncing their ancient glorious stories. With its glorified past history and heritage buildings (monuments, mosques etc.), folk drama (Gambhira) and large Fazli mangoes, the Mango city would be an important tourist destination worldwide.



### 3. Aims and Objectives of the Study:

1. To study about the Gambhira (folk culture) of Malda district.
2. To study about past and present conditions of the Gambhira artists.
3. To make a survey on the present conditions of Gambhira artists.
4. To evaluate the scope of developing the economic status of Gambhira artists.
5. To promote Gambhira festival as an important element for developing heritage tourism in Malda district.

### 4. Database and Methodology:

The present study attempts to analyse the present status of Gambhira festival and dance from the perspective of development of heritage tourism in Malda district. To fulfil the objectives of the study, both primary and secondary data sources are used here. The methodology of research is both statistical and cartographic.

The secondary data for present study have been collected from books, journals, maps etc. Statistical handbooks published by Bureau of Applied Economics and Statistics and gazetteers of different author are the sources among of data used in the study. But the data related to Gambhira is not available from such sources. So, primary data is the only source on Gambhira related information. For collecting primary data, a number of questionnaires have been prepared and surveys were conducted on Gambhira artists. District planning map, maps produced by NATMO (National Atlas and Thematic Mapping Organisation), Satellite Images and maps published from some other sources are used to generate new maps as per requirement of the study.

### 5. Structure of Gambhira Festival:

Gambhira festival has two important parts. First part includes worship of Lord Shiva and some rituals related to this festival where the second part includes songs and dance with dramatic performances. This festival runs for 4 or 7 days and ends on Chaitra Sankranti (mid of April) through Charak Puja. The rituals are as follows-

1. **Ghat Bhara (26<sup>th</sup> Chaitra)** - On that day a clay pot is taken to the nearest pond and after filling up with water, it is kept in the place where the Puja is performed.
2. **Chhoto Tamasha (27<sup>th</sup> Chaitra)** -The worship of Hara-Parvati is done on the next day is called 'Chhoto Tamasha'.
3. **Bada Tamasha(28<sup>th</sup> Chaitra)**-This is the third day where worship of Hara-Parvati is done. In the afternoon, the processions of pilgrims with Mask-Dance are performed
4. **Ahara (29<sup>th</sup> Chaitra)** - It is the 4<sup>th</sup> day of the festival where again the worship of Hara-Parvati is done with the flame of fire. Serve food to Brahmin and unmarried girl is also a part of that day. That is why this day is called 'Ahara'.
5. **Chadaka Puja (30<sup>th</sup> Chaitra or Chaitra Sankranti)** - It is the last day of the festival where somebody is tied with a hook (Borshi) on his back and then he is moved around a bar with a long rope.

### 6. Structure of Gambhira Drama:

Gambhira is a folk musical theatre or a kind of yatra in Malda district. The presentation of Gambhira here is based on musical theatre cast. The audiences leave about 14/12/16 as part of the eagle's feet and sat on the ground. In this given

drop, point Gambhira festival is famed. The drama are divided into six parts- I) Mukhopado II) Shiva Vandana III) Duet IV) Char yari V) Palabondigan VI) Report. 5 main types of dance form of Gambhira are the initiation, the worship, the physical movements, the Lahar and the leave-taking. In 7 dance forms like Kali, Chamunda, Narsinghi, Basuli Ugrachanda, Gridhini bishan and Mahishasur mardini these five points are found.

During the performance of Gambhira songs sung these are called Gambhira songs. The song is accompanied by a chorus. The singers are standing in the backstage. Gambhira dances include various kind of dances like solo dance, group dance and musk dance. In this folk play there are only two

dancers who performed the dance like- Siva (remains essentially a friend and a guardian of the common people) or Nana (maternal grandfather) and Nati (grandson). Prime Gambhira dance focuses on God and Goddess( Lord Shiva and Parvati). Another type of Gambhira is mask Gambhira dance. It can be divided into two like mythological dance in which mask is used like the Vana, Narsinghi, kali, chamunda, the mythology of Sabitri and Satyaban, Lakshmi, Saraswati. The Narsinghi mask is the largest to be used in the Gambhira mask-dance. Another one is society related character dance Like- old man-woman, Animal centred dance, like- monkey, snake, tiger, deer.



Different types of Masks used in Gambhira Dance

### 7. Past and present scenario of Ghambhira Groups and Artisans:

Gambhira song began to deteriorate in the three decades before. After independence the departure of the Sufi master from the field of Gambhira resulted in Gambia's value off. After Gopinath Seth and Biswanath Pandit, further innovation is hard to discover in the next period of the composer's works. Merely one of the scariest things is that it is instantly becoming a vote-centred business; political leader's uses Gambhira songs only to increase their vote bank. As a consequence it has now become only a propaganda and flattery instead of critique, which is really unfit for the future of Gambhira. Dr. Debaprashad Satiyar, the famous artists of Gambhira once expressed his deep regret that it has instantly become a product for a group of selfish business men. They are now working as an agent. During the year of 1999 there were twelve Gambhira groups in the Malda. In 2006 the number of such groups was eight, out of these groups a few former artists still active and they have forever been a

relatively marginalized group. Moreover, their position has declined in recent decades due to insolvency of the rural poor economic position. The main challenges they face to maintain their everyday life with this occupation. Most of their artisans changed their control from this genre. Due to unplanned dissemination activities the young generation feels uninterested to keep them stay involved in this area. These should not be the future of Gambhira song .To encounter the challenges and to keep this culture alive required proper guidance and preparation. Also required opportunities to keep up through strong platform, preparation and certification through a systematic inventory of all traditional artists and practitioners, presentation and retrieval activities, dissemination activities through electronic media, television set, wireless, as well as organizing seminar also prevent its worsening.

Gambhira song is a kind of musical drama, so it suggests diverse settings or scenes and present different kinds of

conflict and dramatic actions. In fact, the art of playacting outstrips the appeal of its music. Principal singers in its performance are two; a grandfather and grandson. Their witty dialogue depicts all sorts of social and economic evils. It is full of bitter satire and spares none.

The first part of Gambhira is acquainted with Hindu religion but the second part of the festival is secular. Gambhira song is open for all classes of people. The function of Gambhira song is open to all class of people. Gambhira songs are sung in Malda's local language. The Gambhira performance continues from 2.5 hours to 3 hours. A group of Gambhira is constituted with 12 to 14 number of persons, all of are male members. Earlier, only Motor Babu Group had the female performer. But, at present, only male members use to perform in disguise of female. The performance of Gambhira is carried out either in Shiva temple or sometime it is performed in the open field under tarpaulin shade. The associated instruments like Dhol, Kartal, Flute, Trumpet, Khanjani, Harmonium etc. are used in performing Gambhira dance. The old and famous Gambhira performers are named as Biswanath Pandit, Matar Babu, Nirubabu, Md. Sufi and Md Soleman etc.

In total Malda area, there are ten to twelve numbers of Gambhira troops such as-

1. Nana He Gambhira troop (Tapan Halder)
2. Bansbari Gambhira Troop (Ashim Roy)
3. Kutubpur Gambhira Troop (Fulbari)
4. Aiho Troop or Netai troop (Aiho)
5. Jadabnagar Loksanskriti Sanstha(Rajkumar Das)
6. Aneswa Cultural Troop (Amal Mandal)
7. Harischandrapur Gambhira Troop
8. Madhughat Gambhira Troop
9. Old Malda Gambhira Troop named as Lubdhak Ekti Sanskritik Prayas
10. Gazole Gambhira Troop

The name of the present Gambhira artist are Lakhan Sutradhar, Rajkumar Das, Netai Das, Ashim Roy, Amal Mandal and Tapan Halder, Bimal Gupta etc. though,

Gambhira festival is generally performed in a specific time i.e. at the end of month of *Chaitra* (April)for four to seven days, but the festival generally continues throughout the year. According to Lakhan Sutradhar, 16<sup>th</sup> *Baisakh* is the remembering day of Gambhira song in Malda district. The different public awareness programmes are projected to general people throughout the year by State Government. It is one of the medium, through which the items like- education, health, public awareness about different social matters are tried to focus to public. These songs had gained popularity through Gambhira Parisad. The founder of Gambhira Parisad (folk cultural association) is Dr. Tara Pada Lahiry (radio artist). Dr. Ashutosh Bhattacharjee is the president and Dr. Protap Chandra is the secretary of this organisation. Its main object was to revive folk songs of Bengal and give wide publicity at home and abroad.

### 8. The Obstacles:

It has been ascertained after a Survey, that the Gambhira artists of Malda are facing various inconvenience which are enumerated below-

1. As the remuneration of ten to twelve numbers of artist are much higher and the amount is not available all the time, so artist are not at all eager to come in this profession for the obvious reason.
2. The artists cannot fully devote themselves in practice, as they have engaged themselves in alternative profession.
3. The success of Gambhira song exclusively depends on writer, singer and the performance. So, if sufficient time is not spared for increasing the quality, the satisfactory success will not be achieved.
4. Different masks, dresses are required as the associates of this performance, but due to lack of monetary fund, these cannot be collected.

In many occasion Government performs public awareness programme, but the outcome monetary value from these programmes is very low. This factor has created present generation to be non-interested in this profession.



Gambhira artists engaged in other profession due to low remuneration

### 9. Recommendation with the help of tourism:

Gambhira is famous for folk songs of Malda. As such, the songs cannot be sent in a loss account by any means. To get the folk songs survived, different projects are required. Government and local authorities should take initiative to protect this famous cultural heritage element of this district.

1. Among them, tourism is one of the vital issues. Gambhira song is to be highlighted to the cultural loving tourist which will ultimately attract the tourist. Ultimately, Gambhira artist will be economically benefitted in the tourist season. Here organiser or planner should follow the model of Sonajhuri hat with Tribal song and dance.
2. Government should patronize the Gambhira party by financial aiding. It will help the artisans financially as well as mentally. They fully engage themselves to improve this folk song.
3. To utilise the Gambhira song in different public awareness, programme to be telecasted and broadcasted in television and radio respectively. This will very helpful to promote this heritage resource nationally as well as globally.

### 10. Conclusion:

Cultural heritage resource means the resource are inherited from the past and necessity to preserve for future generations. Both tangible and intangible heritage resources are present in a country or society. Malda district of West

Bengal has many heritage resources both tangible and intangible. Gambhira is the only intangible cultural heritage resource of this district. Basically Gambhira is a mixture of all kind of art forms, like dance, dialogues, songs and music. So, it seems like a documentary-dance course or a folk play. The mask-wearing Gambhira of Malda is famous amongst other Gambhira dance variations. This folk form is originally a strong weapon of common people to express their grievances and aspirations. As study reveals that the present generation is not interested about this famous folk culture of the district. On the other hand many Gambhira artist are forced to change their job due to uncertainty of income. So Government and local bodies should take initiative to preserve this famous cultural heritage. Tourism is the best way for publicity of this folk culture at national and international sector.

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