



থ্যেপিয়ান
THESPIAN
An International Refereed Journal
ISSN 2321-4805

THESPIAN

MAGAZINE

An International Refereed Journal of Inter-disciplinary
Studies

Santiniketan, West Bengal, India

DAUL A Theatre Group©2013-23

**Title: Re-Reading the Folk Performance: Gambhira as Subaltern
Narrative of Resistance**

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63698/thespian.v11.1.ss.08> || Published: 03 July 2024.

Yr. 11, Issue 17-22, 2023

Autumn Edition
September-October



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THESPIAN
An International Refereed journal
ISSN 2321-4805

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Re-Reading the Folk Performance: Gambhira as Subaltern Narrative of Resistance

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Abstract

Folklore is often viewed as an indigenous counter-narrative to the mainstream epistemologies institutionalised by the power structure of the society. This paper attempts to shed some light on the South Asian folk culture of Malda, Gambhira to showcase how this kind of indigenous culture is trying to deconstruct the barriers of proscenium narratives disseminated by the mainstream theatre practices and how the these composition of lores of the common people are becoming a practice for subaltern resistance. These alternative narratives of struggle not only questioning the limits of the hegemonic culture but also registering their own consciousness through the practice of Gambhira. Rewriting the narratives outside the region-oriented national discourse, Gambhira mirrors a threat to colonial power and knowledge in the globalized world. Gambhira is a non-proscenium theatre of protest, a 'weapon of the weak' through which the subaltern groups' struggle, suffering and misery are highlighted in the disguise of a ritualistic performance. According to South Asian Historiography, lower-class people are always oppressed by educated urban cultural elites but Gambhira has given a social space to the so-called 'Other' from where they can express their anger, problems, and thoughts against the powerful people. For the people from the silent and subaltern margin, Gambhira is an iconoclastic medium of protest that reconstructs the alternative narratives and forms a fresh way to look into history.

Article History

Received **31 Dec. 2023**
Revised **04 Apr. 2024**
Accepted **03 June 2024**

Keywords

Subaltern, Gambhira,
Hegemony,
Deconstruction, Non-
Proscenium



This brief paper attempts to examine how the Gambhira, a ritualistic cultural form of Malda district, can be the medium of protest for a lower-class community to express their crisis and can also be the form of response through the performance. This paper is trying to excavate how Gambhira, as a form of resistance, articulates a natural communication between crisis and community through devotional and ritualistic folk performance. When we are concerned with an art form that has deep community involvement and there are issues of response and crisis, basic ethical tropes can hardly be undermined where we can find non-proscenium hints.

Malda is not just about mosques, mango groves, and temples; it is also about traditional dance forms, rituals, and diverse culture. Malda has special cultural performances like Gambhira, Alkap, Kavigan, Tushu dance, Nabanna dance, Noilabroto, Santhali dance, Rabha dance, Mundari dance, Rajbanshi dance, etc. Gambhira is a hundred-and-fifty-year-old cultural form of Malda district that clearly showcases a community's culture and rituals. Mainly, it performs in the northern part of the Indo-Bangladesh border. According to the Bengali calendar, from 'Chaitra Sankranti' to 'Boishakh', the public gathers in different places of this district for the festival. This is a famous folk form where Shakti worshippers perform devotional and colourful dances accompanied by many sacred musical instruments like Dhak, Kasor, Ghanta, etc. In the Gambhira festival, lots of village deities are represented through ritualistic occasions where rural devotees disguise themselves through masks, dances, and characters. This ritual is prevalent among lower caste Hindu communities like Namasudra, Rajvanshi, Poliya, Koch, Mahali, etc., and they are the true bearers of the indigenous cultural heritage of Malda district. It is a performance through provoking humour



by rural folk and has some inner implications. A lot of social issues are highlighted by the different rituals in Gambhira. These rituals are dramatically displayed through various performances such as Mukho Nach, Ghat Bhara, Choto Tamasha, Boro Tamasha, the act of Hara-Gauri, Shova Yatra, Bolbai song, Lanka Dahon, etc. Many people think that Gambhira is just a type of song, but Pushpajit Roy expressed in his book “Gambhira” that this is not just a song but it reflects a total ritualistic theatrical act (2000). This ritual begins four days before Chaitra Sankranti and continues through the enactment of rituals.

We know that any kind of teaching, delivery of lectures, or presentation, for that matter, is a kind of performance. Gambhira is an open-stage platform through which many ritualistic events take place. The Proscenium theatre is an architectural structure that is made to separate performers’ space from the audience. The audience observes the performance as if through a window, which centralises their attention like a picture frame. But no separate frame is made in Gambhira. So, here, the actors and audiences are very close to each other and watch the ritual as closely as they can from different directions. Here, the Gambhira performers are trying to break the proscenium structure because of the involvement of community and their crises. Illustrating effects that are hallmarks of proscenium theatre are not necessary for these kinds of indigenous ritualistic performances. Mr. Haridas Palit says that in ancient times, the house, which looked like Chandi Mandap, was used to be called Gambhira, which means ‘the house of God’, where religious activities used to be performed (1912).

Modern proscenium theatre is playwright-initiated, text-driven, and plot-based, but marginalised indigenous performance is based on actors’ improvisation, composed of short



and unrelated pieces of entertainment or the number of songs. The songs of Gambhira are full of humour, through which various serious images of society are presented. In proscenium theatre, the dialogues, scenes, and dresses of performers are all instructed, systematised, and well-planned by the playwright. But Tarapada Sarkar, an actor of Netaji Gambhira Dal of Sahapur, Malda, said, “There is no script in Gambhira only the songs are written” (youtube, 00:16:18 – 00:16:22) and actors improvised their thoughts to the performance (youtube, 00:16:18 – 00:16:39). Now a days the Gambhira performers write their scripts. According to Bimal Gupta, an artist of Kutubpur Gambhira Team, Malda, the melody of Gambhira songs are still traditional but it adopts the Hindi filmy songs and music freely for amusement (youtube, 00:15:35 – 00:16:15). The performance of Gambhira shows the inner thoughts of a backward subaltern folk where the actors are neither professional nor well trained. They are not able to support their families by doing one or two shows every year, so the poor rural actors do other jobs throughout the year. Unlike the Proscenium theatre, the subaltern masses unsystematically expressed their feelings through their regional language, culture, and familiar jokes. In the theatre, we find a certain kind of binarization between modern urban theatre and indigenous performances. And this is also a distinction between higher and lower class culture. Gambhira is a performance with a conscious strategy to decolorize the stage and establish the theatrical identity of the indigenous people.

Theatre has always been a form of responsive art, responsive literature, and responsive performance. Gambhira becomes very prominent when the response of the community is concerned. Gambhira, the indigenous performance, had a throbbing social life where the actors responded to current events and critiqued social hierarchies. The



marginalised people are not able to speak strictly because of their hegemonic ideologies. Being a part of the subaltern community, marginalised people used to respond to the situations and crises of humanity through ritualistic folk performances. Gambhira, as an indigenous performance, took on a different role because we found response remained a key content in it. Moreover, the indigenous performances of Malda district, in different ways, have always connected to the larger marginalised community. Gambhira is called media, or a medium to respond to the voiceless.

Gambhira is not only criticising the proscenium stage but also upholding the subaltern people from their subjugation within the power structure of society. The Gambhira festival is very popular among the lower class society of Bengal, and it mediates between metropolitan political ideologies and local cultural worlds. Urban educated cultural elites regularly ridicule the lower-class people of society, but the performance of Gambhira has given rural poor people an important social space from where they can express their anger, their problems, and their thoughts against the powerful. The word ‘folk’ is associated with an illiterate ethnic group of postcolonial “other,” old-fashioned, exotic, unsophisticated primitive cultural community, and these words are perfectly compatible with non-modern or non-proscenium. In this point, Gambhira is trying to discuss local to global and global to local through many disguises of performances.

Disguise is always common in every presentation of subaltern people to voice their displeasure. They are silent but talking about them through gossip, rumours, carnivals, and folktales for safety’s sake. This art of disguise, for James C. Scott, is connected between the public transcript (the open interaction of the powerful and the weak) and the hidden transcript



(the criticism of power by the weak behind the powerful) (1985). According to Scott, these kinds of indigenous performances are the ‘weapon of the weak’. Scott argues in his book “Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance” (1985) that the daily resistance of the subaltern shows that they have not consented to dominance. The way Gambhira identifies the colonial populations who are socially, politically, and geographically excluded from the hierarchy of power. The lower class people of society are being shown through Gambhira performance which creates an atmosphere of resistance and Gambhira becomes the weapon of the weak people. We see that Gambhira is not only a rural cultural event; the terms associated with Gambhira are folk, subaltern, non-modern, and non-proscenium, where it holds the value of indigenous performance.

The Reform is hidden in the word culture. Through the continuous cultural practice of civilization, the improvement of society can be possible. During the cultural events of a nation, just as they make their homes inside and outside clean, bringing new messages to the mind and environment, the Gambhira performance is presented as the language of the oppressed classes of society through which the South Asian historiography can be decorated. Gambhira, as a medium of protest, is trying to give exposure to rewrite the lower-class history again, which was suppressed by the history of powerful people. They are the silent marginal class, but this Gambhira performance gives them identity, covers their wounds, and celebrates their happiness. Today, Gambhira performance has changed in terms of different times, places, nations and borders in local structural events of South Asian history, but its essence remains unchanged. Gambhira is not just a performance; it has become an imagined national culture where popular subalterns are discussed. Socio-political contexts and



historical transformations have been shaping Gambhira worldwide in modern days. The Gambhira performance in Malda, Lord Shiva is a person to whom the poor people of society take their problems. Sometimes Shiva is a corrupt politician, and sometimes he is the head of a big company. Throughout the problematic conversation of the performers, Gambhira makes the audience understand the history of the subaltern, the social problems of the lower classes, and also the corruption of the rulers of society. When we are depicting an ethnic culture, we find folklore and environment blend together. The mango of Malda is a main and traditional fruit that retains the cultural dimension of the district. Mangoes are supplied all over the world from Malda, but why is there no mango industry in Malda? That is what Gambhira is talking about through the performance. Gambhira becomes the language of the countrymen, standing along with them as sympathisers where it is worthwhile as subaltern protest narratives. Alongside the Gambhira in Bangladesh, there is no Shiva at their performance; they used an aged Muslim farmer hailed as “grandfather” (Nana) and his grandson (Nati) in the conversation through which the numerous problems of society emerged.

The stories presented in Gambhira performance are specially crafted to critique the socio-political and hegemonic discourse. The proscenium theatre creates the hegemonic structure to oppress the lower class through its dominant discourse. The way so-called postcolonial doctrine portrays the “other” is not always true. Throughout the ritualistic performance, many traditional ideologies of society are broken and new horizons are revealed. Gambhira is also an iconoclastic performance against colonial rule. The struggles of society with the binaries between upper and lower class, the rich and the poor, the oppressor and the oppressed, the powerful and the powerless, and between master and slave are clearly



presented through the Gambhira performance. Being deprived socially, historically, and politically, Gambhira is always trying to protest against the administrative power of society. Their oppressive and dominant voice of resistance is discoursed in the Gambhira performance, and it helps to enrich the people's mentality, ideology, and sense of the community's crisis. That's why Gambhira is not only a performance but also a non-proscenium subaltern narrative of resistance.

This paper brings insight into Gambhira performance from the perspective of subaltern studies. This research work is based on a subaltern approach to the study of Indian society, culture, rituals, folk performance, etc. Ranajit Guha, main proponent of the Subaltern Studies Group (SSG), tries to define subalternity and how Indian society is visualised from this perspective. (1990). Subalterns are those citizens who are at the margins of Indian society. Gambhira ritual is prevalent among lower caste Hindu communities like Namasudra, Rajvanshi, Poliya, Koch, Mahali, etc. Subalterns are socially, politically, economically, and geographically outside of the hegemonic power structure of the colony or colonial homeland. Gambhira performance is actually working like the media, where the performers can speak for the voiceless. The subaltern identity is conceptually derived from the cultural hegemonic work of the Italian Marxist and intellectual Antonio Gramsci. Subaltern was not conceptualised properly until Ranajit Guha and his colleagues launched the subaltern approach in a big way. In subaltern historiography, Ranajit Guha looks into the politics of the people as opposed to the politics of the elite in Indian history. It constructs the people and elite as binaries. Gambhira is always trying to focus on the suppressed history of lower-class people under the domination of social elites. Proponents of the subaltern approach believe



that the elitist historiography, whether that of neo-colonialists or neo-nationalists, has failed to acknowledge the construction made by the people. Subaltern historiography looks at the people as autonomous domains that it neither raises from nor depends on nationalist elites. Gambhira is actually trying to create an autonomous space for the people. They have separated themselves from the elite. Gambhira is trying to create history from the very bottom. The subaltern historiography constructs the history of “Others,” which is the history of people’s politics, which Gambhira is exactly trying to look for. According to Ranajit Guha, conventional discourses on the peasants have served under colonial historiography (1990). In order to understand the subaltern historiography of the country, it is important to look at the colonial historiography offered by Guha. According to him, the historiography of Indian nationalism has been dominated by colonialist elitism and bourgeoisie nationalist elitism. According to Guha, both originated as ideological products of British colonialism. Both of these varieties of elitism share the thought-making of the Indian nation, and the development of national consciousness is a credit to the elitist effort. Subaltern studies could rewrite the history of colonial and postcolonial India by bringing back focused politics among people. Guha expressed that the existing written history has been done from the point of view of the elite and excluded the perspective of the lower class or subaltern (1990). Gambhira performance is trying to include the perspective of marginalised class in South Asian historiography. It has also been mentioned that history has ignored the contributions made by the masses because of their placement and ignorance. Subaltern perspective processes a scheme to relate the past to the present. It has presented the possibilities of projecting, constructing, or analysing the lower class or subaltern people. In subaltern studies, we find the question about history writing. In order to understand history, it is very important to



understand who has written it and from what perspective it is being written. In volume one of the subaltern studies, Ranajit Guha has made the argument that we need to critically interrogate the very idea of writing history. For that, he believes that in order to make a complete sense of history and a complete sense of the past in order to understand the present, we also need to see how the subaltern is marginalised and conceptualised in elitist historiography. Subaltern studies do so to comprehend their own history. Colonial elites taught us to be civilized by their hand; colonial rulers were given moral superiority in earlier history. But the people in subaltern studies have tried to dismantle it. The Subaltern studies group tries to say that there is no fundamental difference between nationalist history and colonial history. They thought that the general public had nothing to say and that they had no contribution to history, but subaltern studies gave a voice to those who were not part of the history of the elites. The present paper is trying to locate the voice of the subaltern margin in South Asian historiography through the Gambhira.

Gambhira sketches the periphery of the folk performance, where the lower-class community plays a vital role in preserving this tradition. Gambhira is always trying to project the life and living of marginalised people. Gambhira performance has given space to subaltern people and helped to see South Asian historiography in a new way by finding answers to all the questions of social crisis, which is highlighting area of this paper.

Gambhira creates a performative space and, at the same time, a critical space in the world of academia as well. Performative text is different from scripted text because performative text emerges out of improvisations during the performance of a particular production. The on-stage activity of the actors, the props, the sound, the costume, etc. can create a space where



everything gets interconnected and transcends the scripted text of the Gambhira. This paper focuses on the performative aspect of Gambhira, which needs a critical inquiry. Gambhira is trying to show how that performative text becomes a subaltern narrative as well. It has never been seen as an avant-garde performance that breaks the barriers of proscenium space and formulates an alternative space for the subaltern people to raise their voice. The performative text even includes the audience as well. The audience becomes a part of this performance. Gambhira thus questions the authoritarian position that has always segregated the audience from their inclusion. Thus, Gambhira, as a performative text, becomes a very critical text as well, as it claims a discursive venture. Enquiring about something critically also means a scholarly search for possibilities. This work is based on the aspect of the critical space of Gambhira as a folk performance; even being an indigenous performance, it possesses a global appeal as it is a space of possibilities. This brief research work will attempt to explore these possibilities to bring Gambhira performance to the global platform of academia.

Gambhira has had a profound impact on South Asian historiography. The very nature of “folk” is the only sense of subaltern margin. Folklore is the responsive art of resistance and reformation. Along the ritualistic issues, the peasants and the proletariat use folklore as a literature. If folk performances are analysed in depth behind the aspects of humour and cultural events, a new side of history is revealed, and this is what Gambhira tries to do. However, folklore is not limited to the oppressed classes; the upper classes and those in positions of power also have lore. Gambhira speaks not only to the lower-class people, but it also talks about the social crisis, wounds, and injustices and tries to rewrite South Asian history in a new way. The lore of the subaltern gets lost behind the lore of the powerful, and



there is political representation of marginalised people behind it. Gambhira is used as a strategy or medium by subaltern people who seeks to express themselves by creating their own autonomous lore. Rewriting the narratives outside the region-oriented national discourse, Gambhira mirrors a threat to colonial power and knowledge in the globalised world. From the silent and subaltern margin, Gambhira performance is an iconoclastic medium of resistance that reconstructs the alternative narratives of marginalised people and forms a fresh way to look into history.



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