

CREATING FOLK PANTHEON, PERFORMANCES, AND BELIEFS:

A visual narrative of *Gajan* (hook swinging) in Bengal

Visual Ethnography

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ABSTRACT: The essay aims to elucidate how the rural community in Bengal worships their folk deity Shiva in the festival, *Gajan*. With visual narratives of photographs, the essay portrays the processual nature of the embodiment in the festival and the different dimensions of festivity with rites of passage. The *antaja sampradaya* (lower rung of the social hierarchy) celebrates this festival, during the last month of the Bengali year and ritualistically welcomes the New Year with decorated temples, costumes, rites, and customs. The essay focuses on ritual symbolisms, social organisations, belief systems, and performances through a series of photographs.

KEYWORDS: *Gajan*; Bengal; Hook-swinging; Rituals; Performance; Hinduism; Folklore.

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INTRODUCTION

Rituals, festivals, and performances play a crucial function in configuring a community's identity and representation. The rite of spring in Bengal, the *Gajan* festival, is one of the most important festivals that stand as emblematic of the cultural, religious, and social scenario of rural Bengal. Celebrated during the last month of the Bengali calendar, *Chaitra*, this festival demonstrates how belief systems, rituals, and performances are central to the community-formation, social system, and cultural consensus. Though the festival is widely spread throughout Bengal and Bangladesh across sectarian boundaries, the *antaja sampradaya*, or the lower rung of the social hierarchy, is considered the central practitioner of these rites of spring (Sanyal 1981; Nicholas 2013; Sircar 2016). Through different rites of self-immolation, bodily feats, and embodiments, the festival centres around the deity Shiva or, in places, Dharma. Unlike the fierce *Rudra rupa* of Shiva, the deity is unique with localised characteristics, rural dynamism, and peasantised formations. The participants, called *bhaktas* perform rites like *hindola* (swinging over the fire), *seva khata* (rolling over mud), *charak ghora* (hook swinging), and others (Adhikari 2006). These specialised

ritualistic performances are structured around different caste communities, bringing an inter-community relationship established and practised during the ritual enactments. It reflects a kind of social system of the rural folk and a religious mechanism with a cosmological belief system and agrarian underpinnings. Through divine embodiment, the participants go into a *divine state of being* for the days of the festival and ritualistically enact the various rituals of penance and ritualistic self-sacrifice (*kricchrasadhana*). Through a series of photographs, the essay aims at narrating the significant aspects of the festival, especially the embodied nature of the performances and the belief systems. It tries to reflect on the performative actions and sacred activities of the festival through photographs collected during the fieldwork in Bengal.

With its different ritualistic rites, colourful presentations, rural pantomime, and Jatra performances, *Gajan* becomes kaleidoscopic village ritualism where the villagers gather and participate to encounter and experience both the religious and aesthetic richness of the rites. The performance of the human body in the *Gajan* festival becomes an emblem of the community's devotion towards their familiar deity. It carries a long tradition of worshipping agriculture and fertility (Maity 2012). Rarh, a geographical unit of undivided Bengal province, stretching from the Chota Nagpur plateau on the west to the Ganges delta in the east, is strewn with folktales, folk songs, and rural performances around *Gajan* festival (Bhaumik 2018). Especially in the districts of Bankura, Birbhum, Hooghly, Purba, and Paschim Medinipur, a host of rituals developed around different folk deities of the rural pantheon (Chattopadhyaya 2012). The word '*gajan*' primarily refers to 'the village people' where '*gaa*' means in Bengali '*gram*' (village) and '*-jan*' means '*janagan*' (people). Etymologically the term also owes to the idea of *gorjon* (roar or shouting), as the participants during the rituals have to chant some holy mantras in high pitch (Sett 2010). In the popular cultural spectrum of Bengal, the festival is also known as the *Charak Jatra* or the *Charak Puja* as it is the most exciting and significant rite and spectacle of the entire festival.

The temple rituals have concrete connectivity with other sacred groves of the deity scattered around the villages, which are considered the earlier spaces where the festival used to be celebrated (Ghosh 2020). Closely connected with the agricultural season and fertility cult, the village deity or *grama devata* stands as the savior of the village from all kinds of calamity and disasters. The temple premises become the sacred space or the *Gajan tola* where rituals are enacted. The *garbhagriha* or sanctum sanctorum of the temple becomes the sacred space where the *bhaktas* are being transformed by the deity's grace. The principal devotee is the *Pat bhakta* or *Mul sannyasi*, who initiates the rituals and the festival with active collaboration with the temple priest. Other significant devotees are *Kamini bhakta*, the representative of Parvati and Shakti; *Ban bhakta*, who is in charge of the hook swinging rite; and *Dul bhakta*, who enacts the *Hindola* or the fire swinging ritual.

HISTORY AND BELIEF

Rituals and religious festivals generally find their early representation in scriptural texts or religious books. *Gajan* is a festival of the rural folk pantheon that finds very little presence in the mainstream Hindu religious scriptures like the shastras and religious texts like Vedas, Upanishads, even the Puranas. Therefore, the early anthropological and historical attempts have been solely dedicated to a chronological search for the festival's authentic deity and a genealogical attempt (Korom 1997). It is believed that Ramai Pandit's *Sunya Purana* first obliquely refers to the festival of hook swinging while describing the creation of the world (Pandit 1908). Similarly, *Dharma Mangal Kavya* (17th-18th century) of Ghanaram and *Anadi Mangal* of Ramdas Adak refer to differ-

ent mythical stories behind the origin of the festival (Chakrabarti 1912; Adak 1939). Early anthropologists and historians argue about the festival in different symbolic relations with other sectarian thoughts and religious sects in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Haraprasad Sashtri, a noted Bengali sanskritist and educator, in his brief report in the *Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* (1894), refers to the Buddhist origin of the *Gajan* ritual (Law 1933). To Shastri, *Gajan* was nothing more than a remnant of decaying Buddhism in Bengal. Shashi Bhushan Dasgupta, who argues about the origin of deity in his book *Obscure Religious Cult* (1995), relies on an admixture of primitive practices as the origin of the deity and rituals (Dasgupta 1995). Similarly, Ashutosh Bhattacharya, a scholar in Literature and Anthropology, proposes a primitive origin of the deity where a pre-Aryan sun god or solar deity gradually becomes incorporated into the Hindu folk pantheon in the form of the *Gajan* festival in Bengal (Bhattacharya 1975). These distinctive modalities and inter-relationships among these explanations make the identification and significance of the festival more *processual* rather than static, where the local understanding of the festivals, rituals, and performances and their implication in a specific time and place becomes crucial. Local belief and generational communications remain a central tenet of the festival.

The most significant aspect of the *Gajan* festival is the representation of the deity Shiva and the celebration of the festival as the holy marriage between Shiva and Shakti, symbolically referring to the marriage between Purusha and Prakriti: the union that makes creation and regeneration possible (Davis 1976). This regenerative aspect and union are associated with two cultic sequences: human fertility cult and agrarian fertility cult. On the one hand, symbolically, through the ritual, the fertile nature of the female body is being celebrated; on the other hand, the earth as the goddess is being worshipped (Ferrari 2010). To the popular belief, this is the ritual of showing reverence to the *matri shakti* or the mother-power. This sacred union or hierogamy keeps the locality and the community balanced socially, ecologically, and also keeps the people healthy. The festival comes out as a marriage celebration where the *bhaktas* are the bridegroom's party rejoicing, dancing, and enacting spectacular feats. This significantly refers to the very human nature of the deity and a process of domestication where, instead of having a sort of divine distance from the deity, it is more of an association of the divine with the human and domesticating the deity as a family member. The fierce god Shiva was brought down to the mundane world where he is part and parcel of the domestic bearing: "a jolly, ganja-loving, pot-bellied, playful leader of mischievous ganas, a very peasantised mutant who ruled Bengal" (Sircar 2016: 3). As per the belief, the ritual austerities, bodily enactments, and superhuman calibre came as an embodied utterance of the divine prowess reflected through the *bhaktas*. They are the divine representative and thus the uplifted being.

SOCIAL ORGANISATIONS

However, beyond the divine dimensions of the festival and belief system, the performed and ritualised body in the *Gajan* festival also shares a critical relationship with the larger social order and power dynamics. As an inevitable outcome, rituals are also influenced by prevalent social and cultural outlooks. Everyday practices, social conduct, kinship, and generational relations are all intrinsically connected to the sensibility of the people, nurtured and developed around the festival. As mentioned earlier, the festival brings different caste people into a ritualistic framework where everyone has a specific function. Unlike the mainstream Vedic Hinduism, where the Brahmin priest presides over the rituals, in *Gajan*, the ritual priest belongs to the lower caste order. The *Pat bhakta* or *Mul sannyasi* remains the principal worshipper who directs the whole rituals. The role of the Brahmin priest in the festival is

minimal, while lower caste like *Sadgope, Napit, Kamar, Bagdi*, and *Dom* actively participate in the festival and rituals. A ritualistic community formation happens where the society gathers and performs liminal acts, which complement and contradict the established social order in different layers (Turner 1982). Therefore, the ritualistic transformation of the people to *bhakta* has significant social implications and is very intrinsic to the societal (re)organisation.

THE RITUAL PERFORMANCES

The festival has three significant aspects: the ritualistic transformation of *bhaktas*, enactments of different rites, performances, and pantomime. In the last week of the Bengali month, *Chaitra*, the last four days are considered the most significant *Gajan* days where rituals are enacted and performed. All the devotees, organizers, ritual specialists, and assistants gather around the Shiva temple from the very first day. The duties of the people are almost pre-defined, caste-specific, and primarily generational in nature. On the first day of the *Gajan*, the initiation of the festival happens through a ritual called 'utti dan,' where the *bhaktas* are given a holy thread (namely *poita*) across their body by the *Pat bhakta* as an entry to the Shiva's clan. They all chant the holy mantra, "Attyo gotro poritejjyo, Shiva gotro probesito" (renouncing my own clan, I am entering the Shiva's clan) (Adhikari 2006: 62). The first day is called the *Alam Kata* and *Gamri Kata*. During this ritual performance, the *bhaktas* went to a *Dom* household in the village and cut bamboo from the garden, which will be used for the coming four days as a holy one. A colourful cloth is fastened at the top to make it look like a flag. Along with this, the *bhaktas* went to a village corner to collect the branch of a tree called *gamri* or *gamar*, a native Indian beech wood used for making boats and musical instruments. For centuries, the tree has been considered holy in the locality and worshipped as part of the festival. All the participants in the festival are supposed to have specific food cooked without spices and oil. Avoiding any external contacts, they are primarily instructed to be at the temple premises throughout the festival days. The *bhaktas*, in due interval, have to chant a holy mantra in unison: *Buro Shiv er charane seva lage, joy Baba* (We devote ourselves in the service of the old Shiva, all hail the name of Shiva).

On the second day of the festival, known as *Raat Gajan* (literally the night's *Gajan*), the *bhaktas* collectively worship the Sun and take a holy bath called *mahasnan*. At night they perform the *Hindola* or the fire swinging, where the participants swing themselves upside down while fire leaps from below. Ritually this is the initiation of the bodily possession where the *bhaktas* enter into the state of 'Shivaness' and perform all other rites. On this day, both the *Pat bhakta* and the *Kamini bhakta* collectively perform the Neel Puja, where Shiva and Parvati get ritually married (Nicholas 2008). A male *bhakta* wearing a saree performs the role of Parvati, which is followed by a dialogue between the general audience and *bhaktas*. These ritualistic dialogues are called *Torja gaan*, where different stories and mythical explanations of the festival and deities are presented in dialogue forms. *Torja Gaan* dates back to the early oral tradition of religious and mythical storytelling, where the community gathers to listen and participate (Ghosh 2013). On the next day, known as *Din Gajan* (literally the day's *Gajan*), the *bhaktas*, in unison with the *dhakis* (drummers), go to the holy pond where the *Ban fora* or the hook piercing ritual is performed. A local person called *Ban master*, who gets this duty generationally, puts iron hooks into different muscle body parts of the *bhaktas* as a process of ritualistic penance and self-sacrifice. The piercing of the body with iron hooks and spikes is also widespread in the Southern parts of India (Oddie 1995; Obeyesekere 1981).

The final day of the *Gajan* festival is known as the *Charak Day* or the day of the *Charak ghora* ritual. In the broader anthropological and historical

record, the entire festival has often been referred to as the *Charak puja* as it is the most prominent rite in the entire festival. *Charak* refers to a big wooden pole and a wooden pulley used for the hook swinging rite. On this final day, as a ritualistic showcasing, the *bhaktas* participate in the hook swinging rite, where their bodies are hooked into a wooden pole and swung around. In the state of Bengal and also in the larger North Indian region, *Charak day* attracts huge gatherings because of the ritualistic showcasing where people beyond the community come to witness the spectacle. In recent years, the growing digital interactions and emerging alternative media forms enabled a wider circulation of the recordings of the rites, sometimes beyond their ritual contexts and sacred spaces. Whereas the ethnic identity, indigenous belief system, and community ritualism are growing with efficaciousness and grandeur, new



Photo 1 The decorated Shiva temple for the days of the *Gajan*. The *Gajan* festival is considered the holy marriage (*hierogamy*) of Shiva and Parvati. In the rural pantheon of Bengal, Shiva is known as the *Bholebaba*, or the Lord of simplicity, who is a homely deity, and Parvati is the homely mother, a very domesticated portrayal of the divine couple. The temple is considered His home during the festival, and the *garbhagriha* (sanctum sanctorum) is His secret abode. The *bhaktas* dance around the temple as a ritualistic celebration of the marriage and stay at the *Natmandir* or the open space at the front of the temple. The temple takes an entirely new garb with decoration and lightings for the entire festival days.



Photo 2 *Mahasnan* or the holy bath. Every village temple has a specific pond dedicated to this festival. The devotees, called *bhaktas*, go to the pond every evening during the sunset to dip in the holy water. *Pat bhakta* accompanies them and recites the holy mantra before bathing. For the days of the festival, the devotees are considered an embodied portrayal of Lord Shiva. The process of embodiment starts with the holy mantra, holy bath, and putting a sacred thread over their body. They all do the *pranam* or express ritualistic reverence with folded hands while looking toward the setting sun. As the festival is intrinsically associated with the agricultural season, showing reverence to the Sun, the source of energy, is crucial for ritualistic efficaciousness.



Photo 3 The collective chanting and worship. During the *Gajan* days, after the holy bath, devotees gather at the temple premises and worship the deity. To the local people, this is a ritualistic process of inviting both Shiva and Parvati to the festival and eventually to the holy marriage. This rite is presided over by a local Brahmin priest appointed in the temple as the daily worshipper throughout the year. Along with the priest, there is always a *Mul bhakta*/*Pat bhakta*/chief devotee who initiates every ritual at the temple that all other devotees follow.



Photo 4 The ritual of *Bhog daan* or serving the holy food. During the daily puja in the morning, the devotees gather up at the temple and serve food to the deity Shiva. The local people can also enter the temple and serve food/*bhoga* to the deity during this ritual time. Only uncooked food, fruits, vegetables, and milk can be served. Apart from the *Gajan* devotees, the females of the nearby households gather to pour milk on the Shiva Lingam and serve food to the deity. As per the ritual beliefs this devotional process results in good fortune, healthy domesticity, and marital stability.



Photo 5 The procession of *Ghot tola*. This is a traditional ritual part been carried out since the time of the local king. *Pat bhakta* and a few others went to the *Rajar bari*, or the king's house who once started this festival in the locality and advocated it with land and money. Even now, the successors of the king serve fruits, rice, vegetables, and flowers to the deity every year. Earlier, the king used to come to the temple premises, and now, following the same, the giving of the king's house is carried with a kingly gesture and arrangements.



Photo 6 The rite of *Alam kata* or cutting the bamboo. In this ritual process, the devotees and the *Pat bhakta* go to the *Dom para* or the *Dom* caste locality in the village and cut bamboo from their family garden. This bamboo is considered the holy one. There are several conjectures about this particular ritual in the community. According to the few respondents, this was earlier being established by the social potentates for including the *Dom* community in the festival. They were earlier restricted in the festival because of their association with death rituals and beef-eating. As per a few others, a significant section of the devotees belong to the *Dom* community, and they are traditionally associated with the bamboo craft. So, ritually they devote bamboo and worship as a process of reverence to the deity and their caste profession.



Photo 7 *Gram jatra* or the procession. The devotees take the bamboo from the Dom locality and go on a village procession. The devotees are considered the embodiment of the deity Shiva, and therefore, their touch on roads, houses, belongings, and even on the villagers is considered holy. With the cane stick, which every *bhakta* holds as a ritual symbol, they touch the roof of the house, their valuable belongings, children, and diseased villagers.



Photo 8 *Torja gaan* or the poetic dual at the temple premises. On the second and the third day of the festival, the devotees and local people gather to listen to the folk poetry recitation, which revolves around different mythical stories, legends, and religious explanations. *Torja* is an enigmatic (*prahēlikādharmī*) riddle-rhyme where two leading singers perform with their peers in a disguised fight with musical instruments. The language of *Torja gaan* is straightforward and concise. With the unison of *dhak-dhol*, the performers make the presentation and dual more of a musical battle. The *Torja gaan* dual happens with consecutive question-answer sessions between two teams or sometimes between two individuals. The question and answer of the *Torja gaan* are called *chapan* and *utor*, respectively. In *chapan*, one of the performers asks one question, and the answer will be given in the *utor* part. In the festival of *Gajan*, *Torja gaan* came as an integral part of describing the rituals and the greatness of Shiva-Parvati in the form of a poetic dual between the *bhaktas* and the general audience of the locality.



Photo 9 The rite of *Hindola* or fire swinging. One of the significant aspects of the *Gajan* festival is *krichasadhana* or the notion of self-sacrifice under specific ritualistic patterns. *Hindola*, sometimes called *Jhulan*, is a ritual process where devotees are hanged upside down and swung from the pole while fire leaps up from below. The devotees believe this is a process of expiation for all the wrongdoings in life through self-infliction of pain.



Photo 10 - 11 *Swang nach* or the rural pantomime. Loosely translated as the droll dance, the *Swang nach* is one of the most exciting happenings in the festival of *Gajan*. Different comic replicas and figures of animals and vegetables are made out of cupboards, straws, or readily available materials. In a few cases, popular mythical figures are also being made. This performance is added with riddles and poems on domestic dealings, affairs, lifeways, and other local issues. The *swangs* are replicas of elephants, cows, banana trees, cucumbers, monkeys, pirates, Ravana, British sahibs, sepoy, and many others. Moreover, there are sexually explicit *swangs* that symbolically or metaphorically show the human reproductive organs and sexual intercourses. To the locals, this performance is more of a celebration of fertility ritualistically and mimetically. Making comic replicas and mocking different aspects of community life has been a crucial aspect of village ritualism for a considerable time (Bandyopadhyay 1972).



Photo 5 *Swasan jatra* or the journey to the crematorium area. To the widespread religio-cultural consensus, Shiva is a deity who lives in the crematorium area with ashes smeared on his body. To make the marriage between Shiva and Parvati possible, the *Pat bhakta* goes to the crematorium area late at night and returns to the temple in the guise of Parvati. At the crematorium area, a secret marriage ritual between Shiva and Parvati occurs. According to scholars like Fabrizio. M. Ferrari, it is a process of ritual transvestism where the practitioner is identified externally with either the object of his worship or the spirit by which he is possessed (Ferrari 2010).



Photo 13 *Seva khata* or ritual austerities. *Seva khata* is another ritual in the *Gajan* festival, which is the process of ritualistic austerities. On the day before the final festive rite, the *bhaktas*, after taking a dip in the holy pond, come back to the temple by rolling over the mud or concrete road. In this ritual procession, all devotees, accompanied by drummers, come back to the temple while the villagers throw flowers at them. From a ritual perspective, this is a process of embodying Shiva and thus having enormous physical prowess and tolerance.



Photo 14 Preparing the *Charak kath* or the *Charak* wood. A big wooden pole is kept submerged in the temple pond throughout the year. This big wooden pole is known as the *Charak kath*. On the festival's last day, this wooden pole is taken out of the water by the *bhaktas* and decorated with flowers. Pujas or worshipping is done by putting vermillion and sandalwood paste on it. The exact process also goes on for a wooden pulley that will rotate the bamboo structure over the standing wooden pole during the hook swinging rite.



Photo 15 The final rite of *Charak ghora* or hook swinging. The culminating rite of the *Gajan* festival is the *charak ghora* or the hook swinging rite. Two horizontal bamboo structures are put on top of the big wooden log called the *Charak kath* or the *Charak* pole. The *bhaktas* are stung on iron hooks and hung from the four ends of the poles, and swung by rope. Once after this rite, the *bhaktas* went back to their own clan, leaving the divine clan of Shiva. They collectively chant: *Shiva gotro poritejjyo, Attyo gotro probesito* (renouncing Shiva's clan, I am entering my own clan). *Charak* etymologically refers to a *chakra* or rolling in cycles. The villagers and tourists gather to see this spectacle in huge numbers. This devotional act is intended to satisfy the deity, Shiva, with ritual penance and tolerance. To scholars, this symbolically also refers to the earlier belief around Sun's movement and the vernal equinox when spring enters the northern part of the globe (Bhattacharya 1975).

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