

ICH REPORT
A Short Dissertation

Title

Research and Documentation of NIL-er GAAN(The Song of Nil)

Research & Documentation

Sukamal Maitra



Name of the Grantee Organization

Kolkata SHILPOBHUMI

File No. - 28-6/ICH-Scheme/2015-16/112

A Short Dissertation

Title

Research and Documentation of NIL-er GAAN(The Song of Nil)

Research & Documentation

Sukamal Maitra

Organization

Kolkata Shilpobhumi

Introduction

In ancient period the poor, illiterate, labour classes Hindu people faces many oppression, deception mainly in religion from the literate, higher classes Hindu people. Higher class Hindu those who basically adopted their customs and manners from the Arya Community detached them from their worship and culture. For this conditions the lower class Hindu make their own culture and rituals and also developed their own goddess like Shiva, Kali, Olaichandi, Sitala, Manasa, Sanischar those are popular in Folk God. Different rituals, festival, song, dance, drama developed based on the worship of those folk gods. Nil Festival is a this kind of festival or rituals which is developed based on the worship of lord Shiva. According to the name of Shiva this festival known as 'Nil' because Shiva is popular in others name as 'Nilkantha'.



The believers of the Hindu religion celebrate this on the last day of month of Chaitra (in Bengali calendars called Choitro). People believe that the festival will carry prosperity by eliminating the sorrow and sufferings of the previous year. The festival is actually a festival to satisfy "Lord Shiva", the great "Debadideb" of Hindu Religion. Though the festival takes place on the mid night of Chaitra

Songkranti, the preparation phase usually starts before one month of the day. The arrangement team of the festival go from village to village to procure the necessary components like paddy, oil, sugar, salt, honey, money and other items with the arranged cosmetics such as Shiva, Parvati and Narod. The cosmetic Shiva is locally called "Nil Pagol" or "Jal Katha". On midnight of the Songkranti, the worshippers are gathered together to worship the God.



Many song constructed and developed for this particular festival which is popular in 'Niler Gaan'. This song had the own and unique style and techniques and different performance style. Basically this song prepared based on two type of Taal like 'Kaharba' and 'Dadra'. Song Gaan, Acting based on mythology, Folk Dance, Panchali Geet, different balancing and daring activities etc were the others important content of this festival also. In course of time difference of region, language, activities, customs and manners this form divided in many others like Charak, Gajan, Gamvira, Del, Pata, Hajrah etc. but all are inspired and developed from the 'Nil'. For the difference of region the activities and manners also being different. Due to this practical reason the song which was the most strong part of this festival should also going to be changes and original 'Niler Gaan' going to be transformed from it's own original form. Gradually the Higher Class Hindu enter into this rituals and impose their own culture, activities, style. Song also be affected and finally the 'Astak Gaan' which was the part of the 'Srikrishnakirtan' also merged with the 'Nil Gaan'.



Recently this festival celebrated in few places of West Bengal with the different name like Charak, Gajan, Gamvira, Del, Pata, etc. in which the original form of 'Nil' is usually absent. Only some places of the Bengal where it's survive by some expert. But in ancient period it takes the great roll to developed own and original culture of underprivileged lower class people. Based on this festival a unique community was developed which is popular as 'Bala Gosthi'(main Sannasi

in this Rituals and Festival). They teaches to others how to sang the Nil Gaan or Doha, how to show balancing and other daring activities. This Community also lost from the society.

Part of the Festival : This Rituals held in two part-

- 1) Before the festival : This festival starting one moths before of the Chaitra Sankranti the last day of the Month of Chaitra or Chaitro(according to the Bengali Calendar), which is 13th or 14th April according to English calendar year. Different activities done based on this festival. The arrangement team of the festival go from village to village and they perform different Doha, Folk song, Acted mythological drama in this one month.
- 2) During the festival : the main festival held in the last day of the month of Chaitra (according to the Bengali Calendar). This day the people sing the different song, doha, pannchali, acted mythological drama and most important is daring game like jump into the Knives/thorn, walking on the fire, Lying on spike etc.

Process of Celebration

First Part : The said Rituals celebrated in Two Part. First Part of the Rituals starting in the 1st day of the Month of Chaitra(according to Bengali Calendar), Middle of March as English Calendar and finished in Chaitra Sankranti or the last day of Chaitra(according to Bengali calendar), 13th -14th April according to English calendar. But it's also celebrated in the month of Baishak, Jaistha and Asar (as Bengali calendar) in some district in West Bengal, that's mean it's extend upto the month of June. Different Rituals and activities happen in the first part of this Rituals or Festival which is celebrated by the marginalized people of the State.



The whole Rituals organized and performed by a special community of this marginalized people. People called this community the 'Bala Group', many Bala Group exists in a particular region and they organized and performed this rituals in different places in around the district sometime in others district also. Every Bala Group has made up by 10 to 20 people who called Sanyassi and they have one leader who is older than other, Leader called 'Mul Sanyassi' who trained others member about the Rules, Techniques and Process of Worship. He also trained themselves different activities which they performed in the last day of the Rituals in front of the Public.



From the starting of the Rituals the Bala Group living together and travelling from village to village and collect paddy, vegetables, mustered oil for cooking and money from the villagers.

There two type of Bala Group seen, one group travelling with a wooden deck which is called 'Pata' or 'Paat Thakur'. This deck is engraving with Om Namah Shivay, picture of Snake, Eyes, Trident. One small Trident attached on the upper portion of deck.



The deck is 3-7 feet in length 6-8 inch in wide and 3-4 inch in height. The worshiper bathing this deck in the very early morning and worship this deck with flower in the bank of river or village pond, Mul Sanyassi of the group mainly doing this worship under the supervision of Brahmin, although it is heard that Brahmin not used in this Rituals in any part of the whole Rituals, Mul Sannyasi was the priest in this Rituals. But recent scenario is



totally different; Brahmin is the priest in this Rituals now. After the bathing the deck covered by a red cloth and worshiper take it in his head and place it in village Shiva Temple. From this temple the journey would be start in next day. All group member of the Bala Group travelling door to door in village with this wooden deck on head, this worship called 'Pata Puja' or 'Paat Thakur Puja'. The team travelling with the many local musical instrument like dhak,dhol,kasor,ghonta,harmoniyam,kortal. Whenever they reached at a village house the women of that house clean the house yard with water where the wooden deck or 'Paat Thakur' is placed. After this the house member worship the 'Paat Thakur' with Red Sindur, Mustered Oil, Flower. The team member of the Bala Group playing the different musical instrument and also they sang the different mythological story based song which story basically on the subject of Shiva-Parvati life story and with the song they dance also, the different folk based danced is seen in this time. After the worship and song and dance the group collect some cooking item like paddy or rice, Mustered oil, vegetables etc. and different fruits and some money also. They repeat this process in every village house in whole month.



The other Bala Group also doing the same activities describe above except the bathing Rituals, but they have not carry any Wooden Deck, they travel with a Trident which decorated with the Flower, red sindur, Damru(a musical instrument, which can be seen in the hands of Lord Shiva).



They wear the typical village dress, white or saffron color T-shirt or Vest, white color Dhoti. Some people also wear different type of half pant. Some group specially paint their own design like some logo or picture in T-shirt and Vest, it's like a uniform of that particular group. But they not wearing any shoes or chappal, they travel the all places in naked feet. In this travelling period the all group

member live together, after the finishing of the Rituals they return to their home and engaged their own job.

There have an verbal story exist in the time of 'Paat Thakur' chan or Wooden Deck bathing Rituals. It's heard that when village people going to bath the 'Paat Thakur' many barrier would come to prevent this Rituals, like Devi Shitala(one of the most popular folk Goddess of village) who stop them on the road, then the worshiper pray to her that they going to bath the 'Paat Thakur' so kindly she leave the road. They pray this through a singing pattern. After that Devi Shitala leave the road and the worshiper going forward with the sound of Lord Shiva. They again faced a barrier on the road after some time, a death body lying on the road, some people sitting around the death body and stop the worshiper, when worshiper asked them to introduced themselves they told that they are death, the worshiper again pray to them that they going to bath 'Paat Thakur' so they must leave the road and one of worshiper who carrying a long Stick made by cane touch the stick to the death body and death body leave the road. This all story people dramatized in this time on the road front of the people, there have a dramatic portion have seen in this part of the Rituals.

Previous day of the last day of the month of Chaitra is a important day of this Rituals. Different ritualistic activities starting in early morning in that particular day. One of most attractive part is 'Song Naach' or 'Polymorphous Dance'. In that particular day the Bala Group travelling door to door of the village

with some people those who dress of Lord Shiva and Parvati and others mythological character. When the group reached at any village house they song the mythological story based song mainly on Shiva-Parvati and also dance on it, the



woman of the house worship that man who dress as Lord Shiva and Devi Parvati with full respect, it seems that Real Lord Shiva and Devi Parvati have come to their home. After the worship the woman bowed with her hands on their feet and give them some paddy, rice, potato or other vegetables and little amount of money. The group attend every house of that village this way. It's important to say that all

character of this part is Male only and male character became a Female character, the children also entered in this 'Song Naach', children dressed as Goddess Parvati.

From the evening of this day the arrangement of the main worship of the Lord Shiva has started, every Bala Group and villagers joined this worship. The

main worship has started in the night and going up to the midnight, the Brahmin priest supervised the complete worship, the worship has completed with Sanskrit Mantra Chanting, flames of Fire, Puspanjali. This worship also seen



some where in the last day of the month of Chaitra or Chaitra Sankranti. Somewhere the all worshiper included Bala Group travel around the Banyan Tree and shouted with the name of Lord Shiva

under which the Lord Shiva Worship has done. The different type of seasonal fruit like jackfruit, mango and seen in this worship.



After the completion of Lord Shiva Worship different type of dance performance presented publicly by the community member, not only

the same region people performed in here, others region people also join this Rituals. Different group travel the whole night from one place to another place and

present their performance which is based on mythological character like Shiva-Parvati, Rdha-Krishna, Maa Kali, Maa Chamunda. This dances called in different name like 'Mukha Naach', Kalir Naach', 'Chamunda Naach', 'Hajrah Naach'. They uses different type of



Musk, Costume, Properties, flambeau and Weapon like Shord,Chopper, Big Knife in the time of Dancing, they also dress like Shiva-Parvati, Kali, Radha-Krishna,

Chamunda. This presentation starting from the mid night and end in the next day morning, it's very wonder to see that huge muss gather in every performance place and they continue watching this performance till morning with same interest and patience.

Second Part : This part held in the last day of the month of Chaitra which is popularly known as Chaitra Sankranti in the state of Bengal as Benali Calendar Year. Different daring activities presented this day by the Bala Group member who called the Sanyassi. The activities are described below separately one by one.

Charak : The most popular activity is 'Charak', in this connection worship of 'Nil' also called 'Charak Puja'. Charak basically a cut part of a long Tree which is not too thick, it's call 'Charak Gaach' or 'Charak Tree', some part of one side of

this Tree has a sack on the ground, some bamboo structure made in upper side of this Tree where some iron hook hanging by the rope. In the time of activity some Sanyassi of the Bala Group attached this iron hook to their back skin and round around the Tree in hanging



position. The whole bamboo structure spinning continuously for a while. But all activity started after the worship of this 'Charak Tree'. Somewhere this Tree engraving with Goddess Kali and decorated with different paint art and jewelries. Brahmin priest worship this Tree. Villagers worship and give up flower and fruits with complete devotion to this Tree for the good of the Monk.

Jhanp : 'Jhanp' is the one another activities which presented that particular day publicly in a open ground. The English translated meaning of the 'Jhanp' is 'Jump'. Actually the Sanyassi jump from the different height on the sharp curved blade which tied up by the rope and worshiper hold the two part of the rope above the 2-3 feet from the ground, some where the blade tied up on a jute bag and the bag tied up on a strong net, the two side of the net hold by the others worshiper

above the ground. It's a really daring and wondering activity of the Sannyasi doing and surprisingly nobody hurt to do it. A flat rectangular bamboo structure made and some part of it has a sack to the ground which is 20 to 25 feet in height, height divided by the 5 to 6 feet from bottom to top, some Sanyassi jump from the top of the structure and some Sanyassi sometime 15 to 18 years old child also jump from the 6 – 12 feet of the



structure. At the bottom of the structure some sharp curved blade which fixed with a wooden platform which called 'Boti' in Bengali region are arranged. The Brahmin priest worship the Bamboo Structure, jumping place and Curved Blades before starting the 'Jhanp'. All Sanyassi and worshiper worship the Lord Shiva and bamboo structure before jumping and after the worship they bathing in the river and round around the Lord Shiva Temple and



Jumping Structure and place for a while, after all of these Rituals the leader of the Sanyassi or the 'Mul Sanyassi' climbing to the top of the bamboo structure and throw some Fruits and Sweets of worship to the villagers. After that he Jump on

the Blades in lying position. It's miracle that no one hurt or bleed by this Jump, whenever he fall on the Blades some others worshiper picks him up and he go away in a healthy state, some woman and worshiper stand in a line beside the Jumping Place with water, milk, pest of rice and banana, when a Sanyassi cross themselves after jumping they pours water,



milk on his head and collect the water and milk falling his head and they drink it, they also feeds him pest of Rice and Banana which called in Bengali 'Chalkolka'. All Sanyassi and worshiper those who decided to Jump they fulfill their vow.

Baanfora : ‘Baanfora’ is a another popular activities in this particular day. Some of the Sanyassi of the Bala Group inserted a Iron Wedge from one side of the cheek to the other of own, they also doing this in their own Ear and Lips also naturally without pain or bleeding.



Apart from all of these many others activities also held by the Sanyassi on that particular day. They walking and jumping in the intense fire, lying on the sharp spike and moving around with it. Somewhere a live person buried under the ground for a while and after some time the other Group Member get him out of the ground alive and without any complication. All worshiper believe that they always safe from any kind of danger by the grace of Lord Shiva, the blessings of Lord Shiva always with them and for this



they do not hurt from any activities during this Rituals. According to their version that particular day is the examination day of them to the Lord Shiva and in front of the people that how much they devoted and honestly worship and kept the vow in previous one month. They believe that if they commit any sin or crime in keeping with the vow they could not do any activity safely and perfectly. This is the overall scenario of this Rituals, but other activity also seen in somewhere else. In that particular day somewhere celebrated a musical drama show which called ‘Gajan’ or ‘Gajan Gaan’. ‘Gajan’ is a folk theatre form of the Bengal region basically in the South Bengal. During the worship of the Lord Shiva some club, organization or individually some rich man of the village organized this show for the public. Different folk theatre group



performed their production in different places. Some organization arrange a competition on it and declare trophy and cash prizes. One group performed in many places. The main subject of this performance is mythological specially the narrative on Lord Shiva and Devi Parvati. Mahisasur Bodh, Love Story of Shree Radha and Lord Krishna also performed. But it's interesting that recently different social issue like government health system, War, Earthquake is also include as subject of 'Gajan'. It's full of song and music, character getting bright makeup and costume, and important part is that there have no female character seen, male person dress as female and performed like a female. But children can be seen in performance. They use very loud music and style of performance also very loud and stylized. The dance pattern and singing style also very different. All artist attached with different theatre group and regular practicing this form whole year. They are very dedicated to their job and trying their best to perform.



Another form of folk theatre also developed around this Ritual which name is 'Gamvira' or 'Gamvira Gaan'. This form particularly seen in the North region of the West Bengal especially in the District of Malda. This practice seen in the month of Baishak according to Bengali calendar year. The name of Gamvira is came from the name of 'Lord Shiva', the Lord Shiva also popular in the name of 'Gamvir' to the villagers, so they called this folk form 'Gamvira' because Lord Shiva is the one of most important part of this Drama Form. 'Gamvira' is a very strong and popular folk theatre form of Bengal from the past. Different folk theatre group performed in this particular day in different



places whole night at street, field or stage also publicly. Subject of this drama form build by the different social relevant issue in village, state or country level. Health problem, economic problem, corruption, food crisis, water crisis, earth quake etc.

reflect in this theatre form, but there have a character in play who called 'Nana' or 'Bura Baba'. This 'Nana' or 'Bura Baba' actually the Lord Shiva who come to the earth to call of the devotee, devotee actually the actors of the play complain to him about all of their problems and the situation of the



country and pray to him to resolve all problem. The Lord Shiva here called 'Nana' or 'Bura Baba' promise them to resolve all their problem and then go back. 'Gamvira' always mixed with the recent and mythology in contents and character, so it's a nice communicative media for common people to aware themselves any social issue. Many 'Gamvira' team have seen in this north region especially in Malda district. Like 'Gajan Gaan' 'Gamvira' also based on song and music, so it's also called 'Gamvira Gaan'. Only male character performed here, no female character either in text or performance have seen in this theatre form. But in present scenario female person generally female child also entered in this theatre form. Costume and make-up is very simple like common man but like villagers, they were 'Bengali Dhoti' and Vest and ties a towel to the waist. Leader of the team hanging many medal which he awarded in different shows at his chest. It's a sign of his excellence in this Theatre form.

Area in where this Rituals survive :

Basically this Festival is held in different district of the West Bengal and some district of Bangladesh also. But only some places it survive till now.

1. 24 parganas(N)
2. 24Parganas(S)
3. Nadia
4. Bardhaman
5. Howrah
6. Malda

During this documentation it's strongly observe that except some mythological book there have no written or audio visual document on this Rituals and cultural tradition. Some scholar discussed and explains only some part of this tradition which also based on myth and oral based story. So to make this documentation it accept the recently available form, style, technique, characteristic in authenticity for the project work and as well as the all available myth and oral story also should be included in this documentation. Basically this Rituals build up on believe and respect and complete devotion of marginalized people to their God those mentioned in the scriptures of upper class Hindus as Folk Gods. These people has their own style of song and dance which reflect little beat in this Rituals till now in somewhere, but after the expansion of 'Vaishnava Religion' different Vaishnava culture merge with this Rituals and it's strongly affected the song and music part of this Rituals. In past 'Nil Gaan' or the 'Song of Nil' has own performance style and techniques, has own Taal, Rhythm, but they could not carrying their authenticity and originality due to the influences of upper class Hindus Religious practice. 'Nil-er Gaan' or the 'Song of Nil' was a very strong and popular Rituals practice of marginalized people of the east region of India which slowly going to die with it's Song, Music, Performance style. Very small people of recent generation of this community has shown their interest to practice this Ritualistic activities. It survives only by being centered on Worship of Lord Shiva.

This documentation make a audio-visual scenario of this Ritual and collect the authentic information on this Ritual and cultural tradition from which a person can experienced the Characteristics, Activities, Custom, Practice of this Rituals and Festival and as well as the Style, Techniques, Presentational Form of this Cultural Tradition. This is only and unique documentation on this Ritual and cultural practice where thoroughly described the all activities, procedure, type and techniques from the beginning to last which was never done before. It's a important and valuable written and video documents on this Rituals which deserve to support and encourage for survive and populate among the more people especially to the recent generation and also deserve to preservation.