



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Celebration and protest in art: a Comparative Study of Australia's *Corroboree* and West Bengal's *Gambhira* as Forms of Socio-Cultural Expression"

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Abstract

The present paper studies the similarities between art forms to express the respective cultures of Australian aboriginals and marginalized communities of the Indian state of West Bengal. The paper focuses on how these two communities use art to express joy, celebrate cultural practices, articulate societal struggle and display political conditions. Australia's performing art form, corroboree, is a ceremonial gathering that collectively celebrates a spiritual practice of connecting to their ancestors through dreamtime- a mythological episode and spirituality. The word corroboree is derived from the local language, Dharuk spoken by the original inhabitants of Parramatta city in Australia. Despite corroboree's entry into the modern Australian lifestyle, it still holds the significance of the cultural practice to showcase the social struggle the aboriginal people face.

Similarly, Gambhira, a traditional performing art, is primarily practiced in the northern region of West Bengal's Malda district. It is one of the ancient and popular folklore of Bengali culture. Folklore denotes the traditional knowledge of myth, tale, and cultural practices within a group of people who share a common bond through religion, region, caste, or language. Folklores constitute various kinds of folktales, folksongs that orally pass through generations. West Bengal has several types of folksongs like Baul, Gambhira Jhumur, Shyama sangeet, and Lalon geeti; among them, Gambhira exerts a significant influence on the region's cultural practices. The Bengali word 'Gambhir' signifies seriousness. Also, the Hindu Lord Shiva is known by the name of Gambhira. Thus, the word Gambhira has a social context as a traditional art form that addresses serious issues prevailing in the tribal communities as well as a religious context as the term expresses the tribal community's religious sentiments.

This article aims to study both the art forms – *Corroboree* and *Gambhira* – that express their socio-cultural as well as political contexts.

Keywords: Performing art, Corroboree, Gambhira, Cultural expression, Socio-political struggle.

Introduction

Human emotions are best exemplified through artistic performances that enable individuals and communities to articulate their beliefs, emotions, and experiences. Through artistic performances and narratives, cultural

values are not only communicated but also preserved and transmitted from one generation to another. For the Australian aboriginals, corroboree is an example of a strong connection between art and human life. Corroboree is a multifaceted art form that includes dance, music, and storytelling. It is believed that this art is a dance form where 'native people interact with their ancestors through this mythological concept of Dreamtime' (McDonald, 2001). Any foreign person is prohibited from being a part of such interaction. However, in modern times corroboree became the generic term used by Aborigines and colonists alike for gatherings of Aborigines assembled for communal festivity involving a feast followed by drinking, social and intellectual interaction and entertainment in the form of dancing and singing (Troy, 1990).

However, in the twenty-first century, aboriginals in many areas of Australia face exclusion from democratic rights. They have restricted permission for their freedom of movement from one place to another. Such social disparities and the

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lack of recognition for their cultural heritage form the backdrop of modern time corroboree. Such socially excluded aboriginal people use this art not only as a means of cultural expression but also as a powerful tool of resistance and protest against ongoing social oppression. 'In August 2023, the University of Sydney highlighted a Darwin corroboree strike of the native people, which plays an important role in inspiring nationwide protests. It showcases the significance of aboriginal's cultural practices, also rallying them for political and social change' (How a Darwin corroboree strike inspired protests, 2023).

Gambhira, on the other hand, is an ancient festival (Loko Utsav), which is popular in the Malda district of West Bengal (Chakrabarty, 2013). 'Loko Utsav' is a kind of folk drama that cherishes the human experience, whether it is cheerful or sad, and serves as a medium of protest' (Das, 2021). The word gambhira also stands for a certain type of house known as 'Chandimandap' where religious practices are done. As Sachikanta Das writes 'during the reign of Sen kings, when the decline of Buddhism occurred, Shaivism gained prominence. Along with the propagation of Shankaracharya's Shaivism, the festival Gambhira and the worship of Shiva and Parvati (Horogouri) were initiated. Thus, Gambhira is a folk festival of the Saivite sect. In the Vaishnava Grantha, Gambhira was referred to as a Shiva temple or a place of worship' (Bala, 2022).

Even today, the Gambhira art form in Malda showcases the presence of Lord Shiva under the name "nana." Many of the modern-day Gambhiras present the artist's pain of not receiving any government assistance despite its time-tested journey. Such socio-political struggles get the central focus in most of the modern-day Gambhira. Both the art corroboree and gambhira transform from a way of celebration, culture, and religious festivity to a platform for voicing against injustice. These art forms are not only the epitome of resilience for marginalized people but also serve as the symbol of empowerment and social commentary.

Origin of Corroboree

In the ancient days, a corroboree was a form of ritual, performed by the aboriginal people of Australia for many different reasons. Certain corroborees were intricately connected to the mythological narratives of Dreamtime that used to take place within sacred sites during significant occasions such as homecoming, births and deaths. The Australian aborigines believed that their ancestral spirits created the land that they occupied. This dreamtime space is divided into four major aspects: the beginning of the universe, the power of the ancestor's present life and death and power in life. The aborigines owe much to their forefathers for the entire realm of animals, trees, rivers, hills, rocks, etc. The mythological concept of dreamtime is rooted in the past, however its strong connection with the present ensures its safe future. Therefore, the rituals and

performances in a corroboree are believed to be a source of reconnection with their ancestors. The popularity of corroboree impressed almost everyone in Australia (May 1967) and the European colonialists who incorporated this art form into their celebratory practices. Thus corroboree stands for public inclusivity that further protects the aboriginal culture from any white invasion. William Thomas (1858) stated, Corroboree (corroboree) is not an Aboriginal word of Victoria, a barbarism [of] its real term Ngargee. The old Doctors state that many, generations past blacks were very few that the king used to make the young blacks dance before them, and the king's name was 'Nigar-gate' so the aboriginals have various kinds of Ngar-gess (Cahir, 2010). In the modern era, the significant Australian composer John Antil has established corroboree as a form of celebration for everyone. 'After 1946, with his composition corroboree gained popularity' (Haskins, 2014). However, with this revival, the originality of this tradition, which used to be a connection to their dreamtime, deteriorates. In this context, Judith Wright stated in his poem 'Bora Ring.' Only the grass stands upto mark the dancing ring; the apple gums posture and mime a past corroboree, murmur a broken chant (Wright, 1946).

The speaker asserts that the rituals persist only in the reminisces of trees and grass. Vegetation mourns the disappearance of aboriginal customs. The traces of the dancing ring on the grass bear witness to the long-forgotten rituals. The speaker compares the posture of the corroboree dancers with apple-gum trees, leaving a trace of the corroboree rituals. Nature, as a witness to these lost rituals, highlights the deep connection between the land and Aboriginal culture. Such metaphorical references make the corroboree popular among the modern Australian art-culture.

Origin of Gambhira

The study of Gambhira is equally fascinating. Jharni, Natuya, Shyamra, Domni, Alkap, and Gambhira-like traditions in the rural areas of West Bengal, particularly in Malda, are performed even today. 'The term' gambhira' is used in the North region of Malda. Where it is a popular ancient folk tradition' (Ray, 2014). In West Bengal's Jalpaiguri district, Gambhira is similarly recognized. Some Gambhira artists believe that the neighboring country, Bangladesh, is a place from where the word originates. 'In the Rajshahi and Naogaon communities of Bangladesh, Gambhira not only serves the purpose of celebration but also acts as a form of protest against socio-political turmoil' (Roy, 2023). According to some anecdotes, gambhira means the house of god, whereas some other anecdotes believe it to be the character of Lord Shiva.

Malda's Gambhira is divided into three regional types: the town-centric Gambhira of English Bazar, Tal Diyara region, and Varindra region. In the past, only the areas of

Varendrabhumi, such as Malda, Rangpur, Dinajpur, and others, used the term '*Gambhira*' to refer to a Chandimandap or Shiva temple. Additionally, in the Bardhaman district, which falls under the Rarh region, '*Gambhira*' was previously understood to mean a Shiva temple. But at present, this tradition has undergone significant changes and has evolved more as a commercialized art performance. This transformation has led to notable changes in Gambhira's characteristics, particularly in its emphasis on music, choreography, and performance. In Malda, there were a total of fourteen gambhira groups. However, the capacity of groups has significantly weakened which led to the formation of new women's groups. Just like the Bengali Durga Puja, the Gambhira festival has been traditionally celebrated every year from the end of the month of Chaitra (April) to the end of Jaistha (June) on specific dates at designated locations. The Gambhira performances are scheduled generally during March, April, May and June (Indian months Fagun, Chitra, Baisakh and Jaistha, respectively). The dates and locations for these performances are also identified. The dates and locations for the performance are also pre-fixed. The example is given below. The dates may change every year in the English calendar, but according to this year, the dates are as follows.

- 29th Chaitra (12th April): Joth, Tarapur, Tipajani, Dhanjela, Gonipur, Mohodipur, Amtriti, and Parapur.
- 2nd Baisakh (15th April): Bachamari.
- 16th Baisakh (29th April): English Bazar.
- 20th Baisakh (3rd May): Sahapur.
- 25th Baisakh (8th May): Mokdumpur.
- 28th Baisakh (11th May): Old Malda.
- 8th Jaistha (22th May): Phoolbari.
- 15th Jaistha (29th May): Moheshpur.
- 30th Jaistha (13th June): Madhugat (Bala, 2022).

In Gambhira, there are multiple performances named as Ghatvara, Choto Tamasha, Boro Tamasha, Phool Bhanga, Mosan Nach, Ahara, Bolbai, Samsol Chara, and Dyaki Mongol, etc. These art forms have adopted a festival structure that resonates with Bengal's Durga Puja. Thus, while it incorporates a range of artistic performances, it also reflects distinct folk traditions and cultural practices. Consequently, Gambhira is marked by a rich diversity of folk heritage and should be recognized for its unique cultural lineage. However, at present, the scope of Gambhira is limited to Duet and Chariyari theatre songs. It is no longer associated with cultural festivals but rather with performances. The attraction of this folk tradition become less to the present generation. It is now more influenced by mainstream Hindi songs, with less emphasis on folk music. Additionally, artists are facing financial challenges and to preserve this art form, Old Malda Municipality hosts the Gambhira festival every December at Kalachand High School, where the most famous groups of Gambhira take part.

Gambhira as a form of protest

For marginalized communities whose voices are often silenced, Gambhira has evolved into a vital medium of protest for them. As Sachikanta Nath Bala states, "The Gambhira artists, who are below the poverty line, have long been kept waiting by the government with minimal recognition and a few small grants instead of any substantial assistance. They have survived in hardship, relying on the medals, mementos, minimal support, and ancient documentation they receive from their participation in competitions" (Bala, 2022). As a result, it took the form of a medium for their protest. Traditionally, Gambhira existed solely in songs, but over time, it has incorporated dialogues between characters. Historically, during Gambhira festivals, lower-income groups, particularly farmers, would offer prayers to Lord Shiva in the hope that he might listen to their conundrum. However, In its contemporary form, gambhira functions as a platform for critiquing political figures and those in positions of power. Among various folk traditions, gambhira uniquely reflects the political situation and current societal conditions. 'The Gambhira festival is popular among Bengal's lower classes and has provided a platform for rural poor people to voice their emotions, issues, and views against the powerful, while urban educated cultural elites often mock the poorer classes' (Biswas, 2023; Sarkar, 2023). Another type of this folk tradition is Mask Gambhira and the 'Narsinghi mask is the largest' (Das, 2017) that is used in these performances. An understanding of folk art that encompasses the entirety of life through a translation of one of the Gambhira songs.

"E gangai galo bhita-mati.
Jama-kapor ghati bati,
ekhan amader kono upai nei.
Ei je amra khol-kortal niye beriyechi,
amader ekhon kon rasta?
Amra ekhon kothay jabo?
Amader ghar-bari shob bhese gache.
Pyanch kotha ki ar jani!
Beye galo chit company'er pashe.
Ekhon typa niye ure berai" (Swapner Jagat, 2018).
("The river has taken away our land and home.
Clothes, food, and utensils
there's no solution for us here anymore.
We've set out with our cymbals,
but where do we go now?
Where will we find shelter?
Our homes have all been swept away by the flood.
Who knows about the twist!
Washed away toward chit company.

Now we roam around with just a tyaapa in hand.")

According to the 2018 Annual Flood Report, The western side of the Malda district often suffered floodwaters primarily from Nepal and Bihar, which flow into the district through a

network of rivers, mostly the river Mahananda and the river Fulahar (Irrigation and Waterways Directorate Government of West Bengal, 2019). Here in this song, the speaker is lamenting the devastating effects of natural disasters that swept away their home, land, and livelihood. Now they set out with 'cymbals' (khol- kortal). Despite their loss, they still hold on to cultural symbols. Another side some people have faced exploitation and deceitful entities through chit-funds where they lost their money now roaming everywhere with *tyaapa* in hand, which symbolizes nothing left.

“Ami chokhe dekhi aadhaar
taka thekeo chole na Songshar
ami bhukha thaki, jholai liye
khuchra tin poisa hazar” (Swapner Jagat, 2018).
 (“I see darkness in my eyes
money can not run the family
I remain hungry with a sack
Retail paisa three thousand”)

This passage explains the time when currency coins were devalued and socially disrespected. Even vendors did not accept any amount in coins. Such small incidents occupy a central position in the Gambhira performances, where characters acquaint the audience with the socio-economic condition of society. All such performances are composed of the prevalent situation with the main objective of educating and entertaining the audience.

Corroboree as a form of protest

‘For the native people of Australia, corroboree takes many diverse forms to reveal resilience in the face of historical and present social injustice’ (Harries, 2021). Through this art form, Indigenous people assert their identity and challenge intolerance towards their cultural, linguistic, social, and political systems. One of the most devastating aspects of history is the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families, also known as the Stolen Generations. This separation resulted in serious losses within Aboriginal communities. Moreover, systematic oppression such as exclusion from census counts, voting rights, and freedom of movement without permits, in response to all this, the continuous practice of corroboree highlights the resilience of aboriginal people. One of the examples of corroboree as a medium of protest is captured during the Annual Invasion Day of Australia (26th January, an official day which marks Europe’s first fleet at Sydney Cove of Australia, on the other hand, is of the displacement of aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people) (Barrett, 2024) where the performing corroborees often include traditional music, dance, and storytelling, emphasizing the cultural resilience of Indigenous Australians. Moreover, in 2017, the Uluru Statement from the heart (Parliamentary Department, 2017), which was an invitation of the First Nation community to non-indigenous Australians, was issued. This statement calls for the establishment of an indigenous voice in

parliament (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2023). Since then, corroboree has been performed in support of this movement. Such corroboree aims to raise awareness among people about the significance of this movement.

In conclusion, both art forms serve as a profound medium of cultural expression and resilience of the marginalized communities in Australia and West Bengal. Both corroboree and Gambhira, despite their regional differences, not only serve as traditional practices but also evolved into a platform for voicing against societal injustice faced by the lower classes along with the corruption of the ruling classes of society.

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Conflict of Interest

The research embodied in the present paper entitled Celebration and Protest in Art: A Comparative Study of Australia’s *Corroboree* and West Bengal’s *Gambhira* as Forms of Cultural Expression highlights two art forms from two different continents. These two art forms connect two distinct and distant continents through their unique similarities in their respective cultural contexts.

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