

GAMBHIRA : TRADITIONAL MASKED DANCE OF BENGAL

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Introduction

The meaning of the term *Gambhira* is not clear.¹ The term is redolent of the seclusion of the inner apartment. At least during the era of Sree Chaitanya it was not difficult to understand it. But the household temple and inner apartment now appear to have no relevance to the worship, festival songs and the masked dance being displayed, at the current time.

The present research-scholar concentrated upon the term *Gambhira* as the temple of God Siva.² But in reality it is not found to have any connection with the temple, because even now-a-days the worship, the festival and masked-dance are performed under the canopy of the blue firmament, although at some places, under the security of a tarpaulin-awning. In this respect it is on par with the difictory characteristics of other folk-deities.

Today, we would emphasie the fact that God Siva, one of the celebrated Hindu Trinity has been indissolubly linked with the *Gambhira* festival and its dance and songs.

It encompasses the installation of the idol of Siva, the performance of his worship and the *Gajan* and other accessories. The real identity and characteristics of Siva referred to in connection with *Gambhira* have been overlaid by dubious conjectures cropping up through the passage of time.

In the context of arriving at the meaning of *Gambhira* apart from the one discussed above, the present author has tried to establish *Gambhira* as the shrine or the pedestal of the hamlet-deity, the temple of Siva, the alcove for the performance of *Gajan*, the *Gajan* festival etc. This is the result of practical experience without putting a premium on the terminological interpretation. Therefore, it is quite in the fitness of things, that we should embark on the issue through objective study.

The *Gambhira* festival lies embedded in the paraphernalia of worship, songs and dance even at present. In course of the objective study we have got at the fact mentioned above. The ardent endeavour of the pendrices is noteworthy in this sphere. It is widely in vogue among the clans of the Nagars, the Dhanuks, the Chains and the Rajbanshis. The percentage in the festival is so to say mutagory and figures at anything to the tune of five.

The geographical boundary extends through North Bengal comprising the districts namely, Maldah, Dinajpur, Rangpur, Rajshahi, Coochbehar, Pabna and Bogra. In 1908, Maldah district was carved out from the amalgam of Dinajpur, Purnia and Rangpur. Eminent folklorist and ethno-anthropologist, Dr. Asutosh Bhattacharyya writes, "North Bengal is mostly composed of Maldah, Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, Coochbehar, Rangpur, Rajshahi, Pabna and Bogra. The northern part of this region is inhabited by Kocheas, one of the aborigines of Indian origin. This tribe is conspicuous by its fundamental dissimilarity with the clannish segment living in the Rahr and converted to Hinduism.

"The aboriginies of the Rahr mostly belong to the proto-Australoid stock, whereas those of North Bengal owe their origin to the Indo-Mongoloids, who are not of sallow complexion in conformity to others belonging to the mother stock. They are, on the contrary, swarthy. It is no denying the fact that they are the descendants of the yellow race despite this complexioned discord."³ Risley's report also endorses this view. "Kochh, Kochh-Mondol, Rajbansi, Paliya, Desi, a large Dravidian tribe of North-Eastern and Eastern Bengal, among whom there are grounds for suspecting some admixture of Mongolian blood."⁴

The *Gambhira* worship-cum-festival is celebrated throughout the entire district (Maldah), though a few rituals of Siva worship are celebrated in the name of *Gambhira* in the adjoining districts of West Dinajpur and Murshidabad, yet the worship-cum-festival goes down in the district of Maldah as the national festival. So this discussion of its expansive and pervasive mode of celebration would centre round the geographical boundary of the district of Maldah.

In view of our statistics, we can arrive at the conclusion that a few *Gambhira* ceremonies are being celebrated and patronised solely by the Kochh-Rajbansis.

About seventy years ago, the late research-scholar Haridas Palit, traced the existence of Siva of the Aryans in the *Gambhira* worship of the aboriginal Kochhas.⁵

Accepting hearsay, he admitted it as the worship of Siva. Nowadays *Gambhira* has gained currency as the traditional worship of Siva. But he is

not Siva of the pristine tradition. The aboriginal trace is marked through the dancing with skulls in the *Gambhira* festival at Jagdola under Bamangola P.S. in the district of Maldah. It is looked upon as an aspect of the primitive religious rites for the dancing with human skulls. Even now the impact of the magic feats and tantric performance is noticeable in the performance of this type. This is expanded later.

The chief participants in the *Gambhira* Masked Dance are the Rajbansis. So we must try to find out any traces of *Gambhira*, in the rites being performed by the participants. Dr. Bhattacharyya has expressed his assumption of the term *Gambhira* to be of tribal stock. "No consistent meaning of *Gambhira* has yet been established. It has got no affinity with the Sanskrit term "*Gambhira*" meaning gravity, nor from Gambhir Nath of Nath-cult. Besides the music, is not at all solemn, "*Gambhira*" in Oriya parlance, means a small apartment. But this meaning is not applicable here. Gamar wood in Bengal is termed *Gambhira* in Sanskrit. It is superfluous to note that this meaning is not corroborated here. So it seems to be of tribal origin. With the passage of time, it gets mixed up with the name of Siva, although it was not connected with Siva and it has got no connection as yet."⁶

It is natural to connect the sonorous harmony of the *Gambhira* songs with that of the *Ganmbhira* songs of the Kochhes.

The elements of the folk culture of North Bengal have spread from North to South. It can easily be understood by the following trends of gradual development of Saivism.

So the term *Gambhira* has assumed the name under the impact of Sanskrit. It is true beyond any shade of doubt that *Gamira* has not stemmed from the term "*Gambhira*".

Songs of the Rajbanshis in adoration of Garakshnath are termed '*Gamira*'. Social awareness exists in the *Gamira* songs as is found to be present in the *Gambhira* songs. That the presence of such social references exist in all folk songs is admitted. Garakshnath is a certain god, but there is another village God named '*Gorkha*' eulogising whom there are rhymes galore.

Again the worship of Gorakshnath signifies the worship of Siva. "It is done to save the paddy from the ravages of beasts and thieves. It is the Puja of Siva."⁷

Rajbansis are the votaries of Dharma Thakur, a form of the worship of the sun, though some critics have tried to establish it as the worship of Siva. But there is a great difference between "*Gambhira*" and "*Gamira*" in respect of the form and nature of songs, as the former being mostly derisive

belong to the fragmentary term — performance. Whereas the latter in the district of Jalpaiguri of Bengal stands for the monotonous performance of songs without the accompaniment of dance.

The Dharma Thakur as enshrined in the *Sunya Purana* has been traced in the deification attuned to the evolution of Siva of the *Gambhira*-cult.

Two songs are given below :-

1. Whence dost the Gosain hail
 Where is thy stay
 Sans food, sans water? Yet
 Comest thou day after day.
 Sans water, sans land void every where.
 Stayest thou, on camphor,
 and is thy food air?
 Is Shivanath Mahesh?
2. Nayan Sen Dutta is the son of Kausen
 To Him down I bow repeatedly,
 who on earth has established the Maheshwar vow
 Ensconcing Siva in Gambhira.
 Devotees dance together
 Chanting in praise of Siva
 This cipher.

(Bholahat Gambhira — collected from Late
 Satish Chandra Gupta of Aiho.)

In essence these refer to the worship of Siva. Late Hara Prasad Sastri had erroneously forged a link between it and Buddhistic Nihilism. Perhaps the view being upheld by Dr. Bhattacharya contains the right answer:

“Sans form means cipher or circular shaped something. Circularity is one of the traits of the sun. It does not convey any vestige of Buddhism. In this sense, it has been incorporated in the book entitled “Rules for the worship of Dharma”, of *Dharma Puja Bidhan*.

‘The bottle-shaped sphere, asomatic, potentate to the Sun, the God holding one sphere, obeisance I make.’

Here the epithet “asomatic stands for the Sun. There is no gainsaying the fact that the cipher is the alias of the Sun.”⁸

It is to be mentioned in this connection, that the Gambhira worship or the festival takes place on the concluding day of the year. Though the dates of celebration vary according to the convenience of the people of different

areas of the district, yet the actual date claiming the sanction of the pristine practice is the last date of the month of Chaitra (in Bengali Calendar) remarkable for the ceremony of *Charaka* or gyration while resting on hooks tied to a pole. Dr. Bhattacharyya looks upon it as the festival of Apollo.⁹

Therefore we can well conceive an idea about the conformity of the worship of the Sun with the worship of Siva; a phase of development in the stage of evolution, with the *Gambhira* being patronised by the aborigines.

The Mask

The mask occupies a place of importance in the folk-arts and techniques in Bengal. The origin and evolution of this art is instinct with variety.

Mask was not in vogue in undivided Bengal. Regionality moulds the basic elements constituting the folk-culture of Bengal. So the characteristics of the mask are notable in respect of the same regions.

Since the dawn of civilisation, primitive man would give vent to his joy through the medium of dance under the blue firmament to placate the gods and the demigods. In days of yore, it was beyond human comprehension to interpret the myriad activities of Nature. Man attempted blindly to pacify the gods and demigods in order to receive their blessing and good fortune. They danced besides other rituals with a view to gratifying the gods and the demigods and all the heavenly bodies exclusively leaning on this sole means of supplementing their livelihood.

The anguish of self-expression along with the necessities of human life were mitigated through the dynamic vigour of dances and songs which have been handed on as the super-structure of society. According to the scientific view, culture is composed of three ingredients: the other two components are (ii) The material means to grapple with the struggle for existence and (iii) the social structure being the prime base of culture. The dance and song of primitive man was like work en masse. The epic dances and songs were an indispensable weapon in the struggle for existence.¹

These genres of art cater to satisfy material necessities and on the other hand represent magic and prove a creative art, subservient to the exposition of supra-mundane thoughts.²

In primitive society, epics dealing with festival ceremonies, gods, dances and ballads mingle to form the rich texture of a total art. As magic has slowly been imbibed into the domains of religion and science owing to the transformation of the gradually evolving society, dance-song and words have grown into the form of performing art. The mask-dance owed its origin to

myths and legends, as the rites of worship emerged from the base of religion. Sometimes the animal world supplied it with incentive and inspiration. There lay some reason behind the wearing of the animal-mask and the rhythmical footwork in dance-performance : the gesture and posture of the animal would be caught in dance to inspire those engaged in predatory pursuits.³

Imitative magic and the practice of offering devotion to the theomorphic divinity serve to ratify this point of reasoning.

History has not put on record chronological evidence pertaining to the evolution of the mask, which is shrouded in the limbo of the past. But there is no denying the fact that religion has engendered this dance and that the dramatic art sums up in itself religion and the process of deification conspicuous by their presence in its genesis.

Before focussing on this masked dance, we may discuss the inclusion of this type of dance in the gamut of the folk-dances of Bengal.

Since the immemorial past the culture of Bengal has been enriched, nurtured and fed by the strange amalgam of diversified cultures of the cis-mountainous tribes and classes. Their tunes and dramatic elements lie entwined with dance, song in the culture of a nation. In this chequered way the folk culture of Bengal has been adorned with the myriad elements of many mingling cultures.

The art of dance, the act of incorporating it into the dramatic art, with embellishment and accessories did not emerge within a given span of time but came into being gradually.

From folk-dance came the movements of deer, serpent, frog and cock being supplemented by the foot-work of lion and tiger. These were imbibed into classical dance which, however, kept its mark of distinction in respect of subtle thought processes that shaped sophistication into the aforesaid elements.

Folk dances of Bengal have been nurtured by the influence of the customs and mores of the non-Bengali aboriginals living on the outskirts and hill-tracts as a segment of the population of Bengal.

Among the alien strands adding to the chequered characteristics of the folk-dances of Bengal are the *Dhan* dance of the Lepchas, the *Baichham* dance of Serpas, the *Singichham* dance, the *Mepachham* dance the *Chamrichham* masked dance of the Tibetans, the *Dhamphu*, the *Maruni* the *Madal-Khanjani* dance, the *Soharay* of the Santhals, the dance performed on the occasion of Shalai festival, the *Kaaraam* of the Oraons which stand out in

bold relief on the canvas of the cultural heritage of Bengal. Folk dances can be broadly classified as :

- (a) The spontaneous, unsophisticated and rhythmical community dance;
- (b) The dramatic dance-performance usually solo dance.

There can be :

(1) Dances based on religious rites and rituals such as the *Gajan* dance, *Kalikaach*, *Sabkhela*, *Gridhini Bishal*, *Madan Kaen* being supplemented by several types of the *Gambhira* dance : *Kali*, *Narsinghi*, *Chamunda*, etc.

(2) Dances performed on the occasion of social festivals : viz. *Bahurupi*, *Kathi* dance, *Letho*, etc.

(3) Dances falling in the category of the fighting-dance coupled with tactics : viz. *Dhaali*, *Pyke* or *Paikan*, *Roy Benshey*, *Biyacham* of the Sherpas etc.

On one hand the masked dance of the *Gambhira* type falls under the category of religious festivals, the first and initial division of the folk dance, on the other hand it has adapted to some extent the mode of the folk dance imbibing the rites and customs of the hill tribes of Bengal. Especially it has assumed the form of the magic dance like the masked dance of Tibet. But it is not a religious folk dance of the category of a one-man performance.

The *Gambhira* masked-dance is to a considerable extent primitive in form. In this connection it is apt to cite the views of Dr. Bhattacharyya—“Different components of culture in every society converge from two directions into the focus of life. Primarily some constituents of culture coming out of higher society are assimilated by the Society. Again from one direction some constituents coming out of primitive life and society have merged into it. When culture nurtured in the domain of higher society deflects from the higher ideals and trickles down into society, a degenerated form of culture comes into limelight — and is galvanised into a new lease of life. Likewise cultural ingredients coming from the lower society mingle into the higher society; but it follows the path of assimilation gradually. The human society of Bengal is influenced by it in these two ways. But it is not sufficient to say that it is influenced from outside. The secret of some communities of Bengal being based on the aboriginal society comes to light. There is no denying the fact that the community of people of the marginal regions of Bengal is primarily constituted by the primitive people.”⁴

Now we shall discuss mask generally. The ancient Greek and Latin

terms for mask indicates their original classical meaning. The Greek word is *Prosopon* ('Face'), the Latin word is *persona* ("mask"), literally, the mask over the face through which (*Per-*) the actor sounds forth (*Sonat*). The relatively recent word "mask" comes from Italian *mascherr*, German-*maske*, French-*maske*, which derive from late Latin *masca*, *mascha*, *mascus* and Arabic *maskhar ap*. The Arabic word is usually translated 'buffoon', but Geoffrey Parrinder states : "The transformation of man into animals is expressed by a special word (*maskh*)."⁵

The full meaning of any specific mask, even when one knows what it represents, cannot be revealed or understood apart from its function. The function of masks might be indicated in general as follows :

(i) to evoke certain reactions in the beholder, for instance awe of the god represented, fear in an enemy, or ecstasy of the wearer, culminating in possession or trance;

(ii) to cure disease (in men, cattle, crops) by impersonating the supernatural curer, or to dispel disease and evil by exorcising the demons causing them;

(iii) to impersonate and identify with certain supernatural beings in order to effect some individual or communal good, for instance, fertility (e.g. fecundity of domestic and game animals and women and crops);

(iv) to enhance the self, as by wearing the mask of a privileged secret society or by representing clan or family totems or other heraldry;

(v) to criticise and thereby control or alleviate social wrongs by terrorizing wrong doers or by satire and buffoonery ridiculing them.

"Primitive peoples use the mask as a ritual object whenever supernatural powers need to be invoked; for the hunt, or war on the occasion of rituals of power and authority, initiation rites, gatherings of medicine men, death and reincarnation rites. When man puts on a mask he changes into another being and establishes the link between image and god, and between the living and the dead. The mask is the instrument of mysteries and esoteric cults. It conceals, frightens, doubles, separates and unifies; it is the Janus face of primeval godhead, the face of clay, with eyes open or of night with eyes closed its expression symbolizes life and death at once. This arcane duality is the basis of all design."⁷

"Therefore, man increases his magico-religious possibilities by hiding his face and concealing his body.... By wearing a mask he becomes what he is resolved to be, homo religious and Zoon politikon. Such behaviour has a good deal of bearing on the history of culture."⁸

A division is made by W.H. Dall into 'mask proper' 'mask ette' resembling mask but worn not upon but above or below the face and 'maskoid' resembling mask, but not intended to be worn.⁹

But this division is primarily anthropological.¹⁰

With the pervasive use of mask in most of the countries in the world it is not possible to ascertain the source and the course of evolution of the masked dance. Sporadically it is in vogue among the people acquainted with modern education side by side with the primitive people. It does not owe its birth to a particular source. Despite the impossibility of tracing the gradual stages of development of the masked dance or hunters wearing masks, in the pristine paleolithic age at the dawn of civilisation it must be taken note of, and is found to prevail in ancient Greece, Mexico and Peru.¹¹

The *Chhau* Dance is in vogue in the western region of Bengal. It is enriched by the folk but does not match the masked dance in respect of beauty and entertainment of the former appellation. It admits of allotropic modifications in a sense, as it is akin to *Mukha*-dance being performed on the occasion of the Behu festival in the district of Chittagong, to *Mukh-Khail* in the district of Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri, to *Choow* (derived from *Chadmabesh*, a Sanskrit term meaning disguise) in Parulia and to *Kukha*-dance in Malda of Bengal (now West Bengal).

Instead of masks appropriate colour was used on the face of the dancers portraying characters in imitation of the characters of *Kathakali* (of Kerala, South India)—as it was available in some parts of Bengal—viz. *Kali Kaach* of Vikrampur in the district of Dacca (erstwhile East Bengal) having Kali as the chief character.

In days past, the painters and artists of Kalighat (Calcutta) known as the *patus* would paint the face of persons observing the austerity of a devotee (*sanuasi*) or representing the chief character during the celebration of the *Gajan* at Tarkeswar in the district of Hooghly, to make them look like Siva, Gouri, ghosts and other accomplices, in the manner of masks. The custom of painting faces was adopted as the mask was not in vogue. It is conspicuous by its dissimilarity with masks available in other parts of Bengal.

Masked dance was extensively found in the tribal areas. Gradually it permeated the lower rungs of Hindu society.

According to our statistical survey, the *Gambhira Puja* (worship) and *Gambhira* Masked dance were primarily in vogue among the Rajbansis and other tribes, but in course of time it trickled down to the people living at the lower rungs of society. Especially it was introduced through the Puja Celebrated by the Koch recognised community. That it is a folk deity can be

recognised by its manner and technique. Other tribal communities connected with it belong to the Mongoloid tribe of Koch-Rajbansis, Pals and Deshis-clan.¹²

The difference between *Gambhira* with other mask-forms in vogue in other areas of Bengal is based on religion. The masks generally were originally made of Margo or Fig wood and were kept and worshipped generation after generation. It was customary on the part of the dancer to observe purity and austerity, feeding only on rice coupled with ghee. The margo and fig (sacrifice) wood is very sacred to the Hindus. Though masks are now being made of terracotta) dry clay and cork. Yet one folk mask-maker, Sambhu Das of Ahio, in Habidpur district, sticks to the mode of making masks of wood. The masks being used in the *Chhau* dance of Pnrulia in the Western part of Bengal are made of paper pulp. This is easy to wear being light and delicate. In comparison the *Gambhira* mask is very heavy.

In the course of enquiries, it was ascertained that mask is used in two respects — one for merry-making having no connection with religious rites — viz. *Mukha Khail* of Jalpaiguri and dances using the masks of animals, as found in Jhargram of Midnapur District and in the *Kalikaach* performed on the occasion of the *Gajan*, the *Dhaichandi* of Cooch Behar and the *Ravankata* masked dance of Bishnupur of Bankura District, performed at a particular time for the festival. The fact of the old *Gambhira* mask being made of wood removes any shade of doubt regarding its primitive origin.

Mask-making

The trunk of margo or fig wood is kept in rain and sunshine for a great length of time. Then it is hollowed out from within, with the help of achisel. Worm-eaten wood is discarded. Tracing eyes, nose and mouth with pencil and painting with colour, openings are made on the upper portion and rear portion and behind the two ears. Two openings are made for the eyes on the mask. Varnish paint is applied on the face. Eyes are drawn with the aid of a delicate brush. The hair, made of jute, is coupled with soot. Mustard oil or varnish paint is applied as gloss, to touch up the mask.

Three types of colours are used in the mask of Goddess Kali — white, red and black. It may be added here that white, red and green colours are in use in the mask of Narasinghee and we also find the use of red, white and black colours in the mask of Chamunda. Earth colour was in abundant use before. Nowadays varnish paint is preferred as it gives a glitter. According to the shastras, *Mukha* (Mask) was prepared according to the descriptions set apart for different gods and goddesses. Before the dance, the aforesaid *Gambhira* approached the family of worshippers and infused life into the wooden mask. The worshippers who possessed such masks used to offer their deepest respects on the auspicious Vijaya Dashmi Day. These

customs and rituals are not now in use. Many believed that some of the *Mukhas* were living. It is said that many dancers lost their lives while dancing; this belief is now almost obliterated. The tongue and ear of the mask are made of different wood. After the final touch of painting the mask is kept high above within a room and treated with a holy regard. Candles are daily lighted in order to bring a sense of purity and holiness in the room.

The dancers take purely vegetarian diet on the day of dancing. Nails are cut and oil-bath is avoided on that day. The dancer takes up the mask after bowing before it. On a particular '*tithi*' of a year the day of 'Bara-Tamasha', the dancer dances with the mask in the *Gambhira* place and again replaces it in the room, in the same manner. The mask is re-painted if it is fading.

Connections with Tibet

The Tibetan Lamas wear masks of different animals and dance to the accompaniment of music. The Tibetan masks bear close resemblance with those of Chamunda and Nara Singhee of Malda. The view has been put forward that the Lamas use different masks of Malda.¹³ But this assumption only is based on outward resemblance. In practice, this outward characteristic trait ought to have been considered along with the semblance of its magical character, which was completely ignored by the researcher who put forward this view.

The use of Wooden masks among the Tibetans is prevalent. The principal item among rituals taking place on a particular *tithi* in the *Gumpha* of Tibetan lamas, relates to dancers representing witch and evil-spirits, dancing with masks.

The prakrit word *daini* in Bengali was derived from Sanskrit *dakini*. The meaning of *dak* in Tibetan is 'knowledge' whose feminine form is *dakini*. A class of Buddhist monks was for this reason called *dakini*. These Dakinis used to perform many magic rites for the application of various types of Tantric rituals which in turn commanded the respect of the common people.

The presence and influence of magical traits and Tantric scripture in *Gambhira* mask dancing will be reviewed later. An introduction to mask dancing amongst the Tibetans may now be added in brief.

The Tibetan ritual dance of gods and evil spirits in different costumes with masks, is marked by stylised movements in choreography and splendid foot-work. The supreme terror and heroism are clearly perceptible in every movement of dancing. The composition and colouring process of a mask is dictated by customary emblematic rules.

The Tibetan *Singheecham* is a function held on a particular 'Tithi'. Two persons dance with lion masks on. This particular form of dancing pulsates with vibrant movements and foot-work. *Yachocham-Mepachham* are not connected with any ritual. The masked *Mahakal* dancing of the Nepalese of Darjeeling brings back the memory of *Gambhiras kali* dance and *Kali Kaach*.

The Tibetan religious masks are similarly kept by the Lamas with all humility and devotion. The method of keeping these masks is identical to those followed in the case of *Gambhira* masks. It is quite natural that the style of mask will vary according to environment and rituals. The outward appearance of a Tibetan Mask invokes terror or appears comical. The wooden mask recalls the presence of evil. The Bhutiya dance with wooden masks of the *Mahakal* or *Kanchan Jangha* of Darjeeling similarly evokes magical traits.

As the Kali, Narasinghee, Chamunda, etc. of Gambhira bear the stamp of magic in the dance, so also the dancing of Kali and Chamunda wearing human skulls, or dancing with dead bodies, like vultures, indicates the Tantric influences. It is the admitted view of many a scholar that the use of religion and magic was widely prevalent in the sub-continent from ancient days and the birth of the Tantric system dates from primitive times.

The first and feeble foot-steps that were imprinted on the fertile soil of Bengal through the almost forgotten Nigrabatu were afterwards imbued with heterogenous influence from Austrian alpine, Dravidian and Mongolian cultures.¹⁶

With the Aryans came a philosophical grand assimilation of different cultures, which created a new era on the horizon of Bengali religion, literature and art. The life and mind, work and worship of Bengal, received its sustenance from the art and culture of Golud. There is on one side Brahma worship and self-purification, on the other there is animal worship and physical connections. There lies on one side the Vedas, the Puranas, on the other, magical arts and ghost worship, meditation and philosophical contemplation.

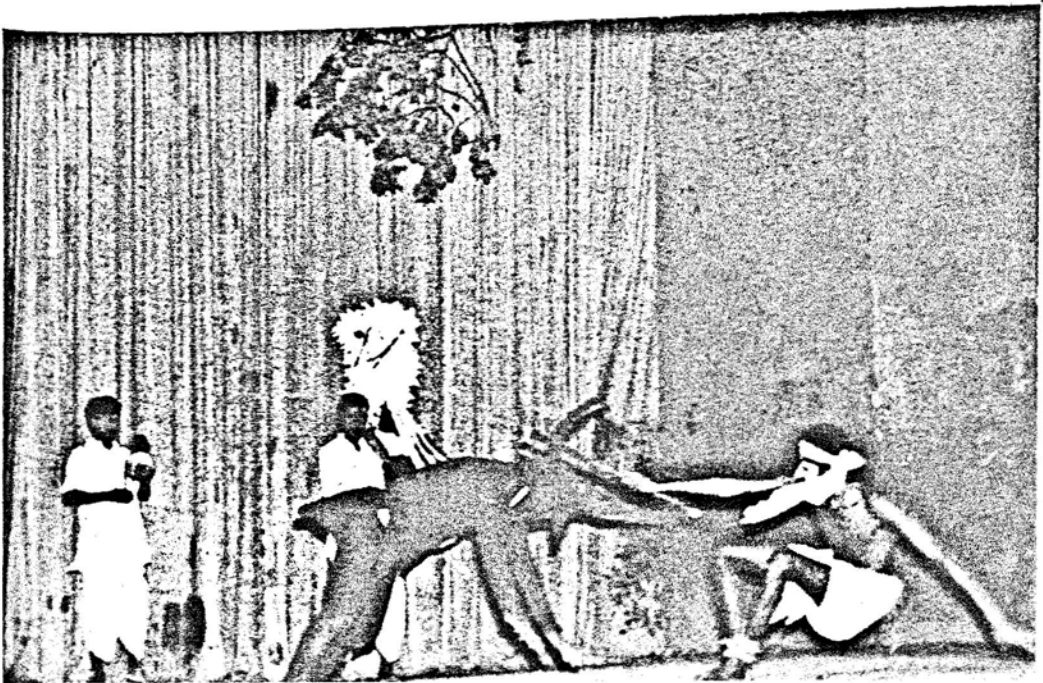
Mother or Sakti cult is present in the Tantric mode of worship. The Tantric mode of worship belongs neither to the Hindus nor to the Buddhists. Its real source is very ancient and pre-historic. That ancient and prehistoric source has given birth to philosophy or Tantric-cult, which is flowing from time immemorial and through the passage of ages, this has come to be known at places as Hindu Tantra and at others as Buddhist-Tantra.¹⁷

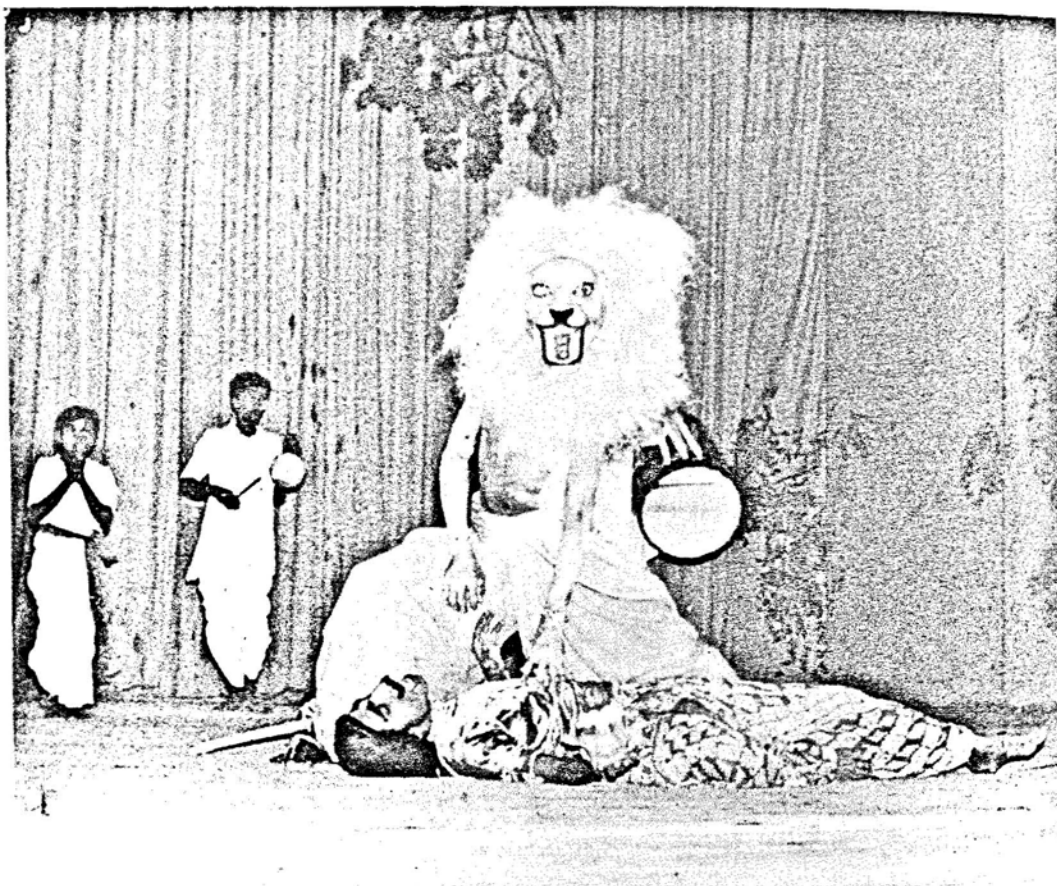
The tantric mode of worship was widely prevalent in Tibet. Tantric practices flourished on a large scale throughout Eastern India, until the beginning of the thirteenth century, when the Islamic invaders devastated the



Mask of Koli (above) Gambhira

Buffulo Dance (below) Gambhira





Slaying of Hiranya Kashpu—Gambhira

The Narsinghee Dance—Gambhira (Photos author)



great Universities and Centres of Tantra. Many thousands of books, manuscripts, paintings and icons were destroyed. Those who were able to, escaped to Nepal, Tibet, Assam, Burma, South India, and Java. This was the end of the golden age for Tantrism in India "only in Tibet, Nepal and the more remote areas of the Indian Himalaya, were the original Tantric teachings preserved."¹⁸

A Tibetan disciple-associate of Atish considers that Dipankar Srigyan Atish took lessons from his father.¹⁹ When Dipankar had been to Tibet from Gaud Vanga, he taught the current lessons of Buddhism of Gaud-Magadh there to many Tibetan Scholars viz. Bibhuti Chandra, Dhyana-shila, Mokshahar.

Gupta²⁰ and Subhakar Gupta were amongst the residents of Jagaddal Monastery and from here, some Sanskrit manuscripts were translated into the Tibetan language.²¹

The spread of the Tantric cult from Gaud (Malda) was influenced by the visit of Jagadal to different Buddhist stupas. Some have opined that all the Tantra treatises had been introduced by the Mahayani Buddhists and they have also said that the Sakti-goddesses like Kali, Tara and the like, are also deities of Tantric Buddhists. This is not wholly true. Because antiquarians like Sir John Marshall, Earnest Mackay, R.D. Banerjee, Dayaram Sahani, N.G. Mazumder, R.C. Chandra etc. have admitted that pre-historic and prevedic civilisations of Harappa and Mahenjo-daro had also known the worship of Siva-Sakti.²²

But it is true that owing to an atmosphere of wide liberalism of Bengal, particularly in the 'Pala' Era, the deities of the Buddhists and the Brahminical religions had witnessed and enjoyed, a comingling. Buddhists have acknowledged many a deity of Brahminical religion, so also the Brahmins have accepted many gods and goddesses of Mahayani Buddhists — Tara, Chamunda, Vasali, Vairab, Ganesh, Lokenath, Kshetrapal etc. and their cults have thus been introduced.²³

The masked dance of *Gambhira* contains many elements of Tantric cult. Apart from these, the dance with human skull in hand (corpse dance), the dance of the Big Vulture etc. emerged from the mixture of Tantric occultism and Shavari practices. It is quite apparent that this distinguished masked dance has been enriched by the occultism of Tantra and necromancy.

Lamas of Tibet had accepted the festival of Lord Siva and Lord Buddha, which were introduced from the native land of Dipankar, when the latter made a journey to Tibet. At that time they imitated many a religious theme of Gaud and Magadh. After that they no longer wished to divert from their

ancient ideas. Even to-day, traces of *Gaudiya Gambhira* masked dance can be noted in the festivals of Lamas.²⁴

In fact, their source is the same occultism and magic. Magic and religion are closely intertwined. In times of crisis in human life, man resorts to supernatural powers for salvage. Magic brings confidence amid doubts and misgivings; it awakens a hopefulness and fortitude amid despondency. This necromancy is present in the roots of all old religions. The original magic gradually became differentiated into Religion, Science and Arts.²⁵

Magic and religion attempt to create a supernatural surrounding on the basis of mythological tradition, and they also both exist in an atmosphere of the miraculous, in a constant revelation of wonder-working powers. They are surrounded by taboos and observances which mark off their acts from those of the profane world.²⁶

The word magic comes to us, through Latin, and Greek, from a Persian word meaning 'the work of priests' or 'wisemen'. Such activities were performed for the benefit of mankind. But the word has altered its significance, and is now usually applied to acts of a selfish or even harmful kind distinguished as black magic.²⁷

A distinct masked dance of Maldah has influenced a necromantic dance of Tibet but further research is necessary regarding this.

In ancient times, Assam and North Bengal had constant communication with Tibet. There is no doubt that the people journeyed between the said lands through insurmountable mountain passes. Dr. Niharranjan Ray, the scholar indicates that a pass existed to maintain communication with Tibet. This path lay in Jalpaiguri-Darjeeling of North Bengal upto Bhutan across the Himalayas to Tibet, and extended even to China. In the treatise of Ptolemy there is perhaps a slight reference to such a path. Many customs and practices of the Kailas area of Tibet have found their way into Bengal.²⁸

Countries which were at one time under the Indian influence Cambodia or Java, to some degree also Burma, Thailand and Vietnam but above all Bali have kept alive in their culture, aspects of Indian art, which in India itself have either long since vanished or become stultified and lifeless. In the art of these countries Indian art forms, including the mask, have been modified to produce a style of almost baroque exaggeration. The ancient epics the Mahabharat and the Ramayana (the latter is called Ramakien in Cambodia and Thailand) are enriched with local myths and performed on many occasions. Good examples of this continuation of Indian traditions abroad are the masks of Cambodia, or the entirely Hindu-inspired masked-dances of Bali. Javanese masks have developed their own very characteristic style, which in turn, has influenced the mask of Japan. In the rest of Indonesia

especially in Sumatra and Borneo masks have remained untouched by Indian influences and are the product of an indigenous Indonesian tradition or of several traditions — some masks represent evil forces which can be neutralized by dance ceremonies and performances of rites as in Ceylon or Tibet.²⁹

The masks of *Gambhira* at Maldah are not isolated items. They are directly or indirectly related to other masks elsewhere. Because, folk dance and masked dance cannot create their own style in a secluded and severed environment. It is quite possible that there has been an establishment of some link with art of some adjacent areas or of distant places at some period. It may also be that the intermediate area has dried up. Its influence is not traceable in other Asian countries like Bali, Java, Indonesia and Cambodia. It is likely that it has found its route to Tibet from the North. In this respect it has some spiritual connection with the masks of Tibet, Bhutan and Sikkim. The masks of Tibet, Bhutan and Sikkim may have some affinity with the art of Northern India, particularly of *Gambhira*. But China's influence is impressed on the masks of Mongolia. India's link with Tibet emphasised more in history than her relationship with Bhutan, Sikkim. Buddhism and its trantism are established in a distinguished manner.

During the dance, the dancers who appear in the role of the main characters in *Gambhira* like Kali, Chamunda, Narasinghee etc. reach such ecstatic points that they have to be grabbed round the waist from behind by a person. The dancer then vehemently spins his head for a time and then is quelled like a man fallen in a swoon.

The common people believe that this dancer is exorcised by the goddess. In this the element of magic or the supernatural can be noted. In Bengal other dances are meant for pleasure as a pastime. But the masked dance of *Gambhira* is an exception. Here magic and occultism cast their influence.

The main characters of *Gambhira* dance are Kali, Narasinghee, Chamunda, Ugrachanda, Jhantakali. It is to be noted that Siva or other deities are not present on the main pedestal. It is another form of the Sakti cult in its original pattern.

The masks of *Gambhira* are of a massive and unweidely size. The mask of Narasinghee is about two feet. It also reminds us of the massive Tibetan masks. The Tibetan masks are huge, monstrous masks, which do not just exaggerate the basic features of the human face, in order to portray wickedness; they are more the arbitrary product of an inflamed imagination so that the face loses its normal proportions.³⁰

But still there is a question which remains. Why is the dance confined to Maldah of Gauda alone? No particular vestige of it survives in the adjacent

northern district of Dinajpur, although one or two forms of Siva-worship go by the name of *Gambhira* in Dinajpur even to-day in some places like Tapan, Gangarampur and Bangshihari P.S. The masks that are found there are of a different type. Teleghat Banghira of Tapan P.S. and Singrail of Gangarampur in West Dinajpur witness the dance on the occasion of Siva worship. That dance is also attended by the handling of the human skull. But to-day, there is evidence of traces of tantrism, occultism and necromancy only in the neighbouring districts like Darjeeling. In Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet this custom can be seen generally.

Owing to the lack of patronage, the custom has evaporated and disappeared in the intervening places. It survived in Tibet in the northern Zone centering round the necromantic dance there and in the sites of Maldah it continues to be associated with some mythological characters, making it acceptable to the Hindus. But having failed to grasp the themes of the initial epoch, it lost its original capacity to capture the heart of the people. In later stages it has accepted the stories of the vanquishing of demons like Sumbha—in order Nishumbha, Hiranyakashipu, Tarakatur, Sudhanya etc. to relieve the humdrum mood. These are the additions of modern times oriented towards the creation of characters. These and *Tapa* dance, *Buffalo* dance etc. centre round rural life and have been created to depict rural life. In reality, the origin of *Gambhira* is traceable in the main characters and relates to magic and tantric beliefs.

Part Three

As *Gambhira Puja* was originally held on the last day of Chaitra (Bengali Calendar) and on the three preceding days it can be regarded as a local solar worship. The *Gambhira* can be deemed to have connections with festivals of original sun worship, oriented towards a desire for having sufficient rainfall and good crops at the end of the year. In the past, various festivals and ritual were held with the change of seasons and the appearance of crops.

So it is not inconsistent to maintain that the masked dance of *Gambhira* is one of the variants of such festivities.

The masked dance of Maldah (*Gambhira*) starts from the various festivals of Darjeeling, Dacca, Parulia, Chittaganj and Maldah of Bengal. Presumably the mask of Maldah is the oldest.

The masked-dance of, *Gambhira* or '*Mukha naach*' is held at night of the '*Baro-Tamasha*'. It is not completely a mask-dance proper so to say. Some dancers are with masks and some are without. Solo-dance and Group-dance—both are present.

Originally masks were made of wood (Margo or Fig.), but now-a-days

they are made of earth, Indian cork. Sometimes they are made of papier mache, but in Maldah the mask industry has not developed. Some masks are manufactured at Aihoo and English Bazar.

So far, the *Gambhira* dances can be classified on the basis of subject matter in the following manner:

- (A) *Puranic* or Mythological/*Vān, Kālī, Basuli, Gridhini Visal, Chāmunda, Narasinghee, Ugrachanda, Mahishmardini, Kārtic-Ganesh, Lakshmi-Saraswati, Rādha-Krishna, Rama-Lakshmana, Killing of Demon Hiranyakashipu, Killing of Tārakasur, Siva-Durga and Hanumān Dance etc.*
- (B) *Rural/Crane, Tapa, Milking the cow dance etc.*
- (C) *Animal/Serpent, Tiger, Bear, Deer, Buffalo Dance etc.*
- (D) *Social/Drunkard, Mem-sahib, old Dame Dance etc.*
- (E) *Mixed Dance/Fairy dance, Bamboo, Dead, Wizard, Canvas dance etc.*

Notes on Dances

(1) *Siva-Durga Dance*. Generally children participate in this dance of about 5-7 minutes, they dress as Siva or Durga. Pipes, drums, gongs and cymbals are used.

(2) *Rama-Lakshmana Dance*. This is a dance based on a special rhythm.

(3) *Housewife with pitcher Dance*. This is a secular dance in which participants carry pitchers. Both children and adults participate in it.

(4) *Horse dance*. A horse is made of coloured papers and split bamboo, the dancer enters into the frame of the horse. The mask of a horse from waist to neck is worn in this dance; there two characters (I) Rider (II) Cavalryman. The second controls the rein. The size of the horse varies according to the adults and children who are participants.

(5) *Drunkard's Dance*. The 'Khemta style' with slipperly feet and an intoxicated mood is noteworthy.

(6) *Old man & Dame Dance*. A comic dance.

(7) *Van or Trident or Arrow Dance*. This dance is the prelude of all other dances. There are many participants. A trident usually $1\frac{1}{2}$ cubits or $1\frac{1}{2}$ cubits in length is carried both sides. Some pin it on a dress meant for covering by the waist. All the participants have two heads on the arrow.

Then cloth pieces soaked in mustered oil on the set on fire. Each of the participants dances in time with the drum. From each of the Gambhira *pandals* a team of dancers peregrinates the rural area. Those who take part in this dance refrain from eating fish, mutton, onion or garlic. They pare nails and live on vegetarian diet from a day before the date of actual performance.

(8) *Buffalo-Cow-boy Dance*. There are two Participants, One plays the role of a buffalo and the other — the cow-boy. It lasts for 4-5 minutes.

(9) *Fairy Dance*. Artificial wings made of Cotton are pasted on a rod which is fastened to the two arms at the back; the dancer moves them. Here there are one or two participants. They enter the stage wearing skirts and waving handkerchiefs. The dancer balances on the tips of the toes to give the effect of flying. There are bird-like movements. Here the style is reminiscent of *Baiji* Dance or *Khemta* Dance. The wings are flapped to the beating of drums.

10. *Tāpā Dance*. This is a secular dance. It depicts the catching of fish in the shallow water by two fishermen with a basket — named Tapa in the local dialect.

(11) *Kāli Dance*. Performed in various styles. Here also the dress is sometimes a skirt and sometimes black trousers. The human hand is made of white cloth and is hanging from the waist; on the neck a garland of human heads which are sometimes made of clay and sometimes cloth, The upper portion of the dress is black. The style of Kali dance can be compared with the Narasinghee dance. The speed is initially slow; the right hand sometimes is lifted up and sometimes placed below. It resembles a dance with dish in hand. The mask of Dakshin Kali or Kali of crematorium may be like that of Kalighat. The Mask at Maldah has its peculiarity. Therefore it is not modelled completely on that of Kalighat. The dance gains its quick momentum after initial tardiness. The beating of the drum is also quickened. Superstition holds that goddess Kali possesses the dancer. At that time incense is burnt. The dancer in trance has to be forcibly held round the waist, then becomes quiet. The drum beat is thus :-

Guru, Guru, Guru, Guru,
Dhii Naa, Dhing Trang
Tinak Natin Tinak Jhi Jhin Jhena
Nak Tina Tin
Nak Tina Tin Tina

Kali dance commences slowly and gradually in the middle, medium pace is maintained and lastly the dance terminates in high uncontrollable speed. The Lion steps and tiger-steps of the danseuse are noteworthy to the tune of

Trang Natin Trang.... There is no wreath of human heads either round the neck or the waist of Kali. Some forty years ago, the style of the dance was simple. A round disc of split bamboo used to hang from the waist. Then a red cloth-piece used to be wrapped round a white cloth-piece. These were tied around the waist with rope. Now the attire is made of cloth and the human-head is also made of cloth. There is one point of similarity between Kali and Fairy dance. Both dances are accompanied by *Khemta*, *Ar-khemta*, *Choutal Daskoshi*, *Gridhini Bishal*, *Daggha Posta*, *Dummi-Khaharuba* etc.

(12) *Gridhini Vishal Dance*. An artificial crematorium is imagined. The activities of the vultures are imitated. Human heads used to be placed in the middle — now this practice is not in vogue. It lasts for about 10 minutes.

(13) *Nārasinghee Dance*. A man dances with a Narasinghee mask. This is a solo dance. and is equivalent to the Kali dance. It lasts for 7/8 minutes. It is executed in various rhythms. These five principles are employed in seven kinds of dances viz. Kali, Chamunda, Narasinghee, Vasuli Ugrachandra, *Grindhini Vishal*, *Mahismardani*. The dance ends amid the sounding of victory trumpets. The puranic characters and themes are the topic of the dances. Narasinghee dance is taken by many to be the Avataric Narasingha Dance. But this is not the man-lion who killed Haranya-Kashipu, the demon king.

One of the images of Goddess Chandi is described as Narasinghee. The Meditation on Narasinghee is worth mention in this connection.

“नारसिंह रुपिणो देवी दैत्य दानवदर्पलाम् ।
शुभदा सुप्रभा नित्या नारसिंही नमाम्यहम् ॥”

Trs: I bow before the deity Narasinghee, the goddess who humiliates the pride of Giants and Demons, who gives bliss and happiness, whose nature is immortal and whose halo is refulgent.

It should be mentioned that the moustache on the Narasinghee mask is a later addition. There is no male deity in *Gambhira*. So it should be a female one.

(14) *Bear Dance*. The dance of the bear is also included in the *Gambhira*. The man-bear dances with the mask of a bear blackened by tar and jute.

(15) *Chāmundā Dance*. During the dance the dancers assume the appearance of birds and pigeons.

(16) *Chāli (Canvas) Dance*. In the Chali dance, the Canvas is beautifully decorated. it is fastened round one child or children are made to dance from behind it.

It may be mentioned in this connection that the dancers are garbed in strange attire in order to deceive the drummer. If the drummer bungles the beat he incurs the displeasure of the onlookers. The beat of the drums is of five kinds. These go by the name of Sutra. (1) *Abahan* (Invocation); (2) *Puja* (Worship : ringing); (3) Movement of the limbs (Spasmodic); (4) *Lahara* (Wave and Surge); (5) *Visarjan* (Valedictory).

The following are the rhythmic sounds followed in the principal dances :-

I(a) *Kali dance*

a. Invocation

Dhing Dhing Dhiding Nating
Dhin Dhina Ting Dhidhing Nating
Dhing Na Dhia Na Dhidhing Nating
Dhing Dhina Dhing, Dhidhing Dhina
Dhina Dhidhing.

b. Worship—(Burning of incense and worship)

Dhing Dhina Dhinak Dhiding
Dhing Dhina Ting Nating Nating
Dhinak Dhidhing Dhing
Nating Nating Nating Nating Tinak

c. Movement of the limbs

Dhing Dhina Dhing
Tinak Dhi Dhing

d. *Lahara*

The previous *tala* in a very quick tempo.

e. *Visarjan* (Valedictory)

Dhidhing Dhinak
Dhidhing Dhinak Dhing
Gur Gur Gur Gur Dhing
Gur Gur Gur Gur Dhing
Tinak Tinak Tina Ting

(2) *Chamunda Dance*

a. Invocation

As Kali Worship

b. *Puja*

Dhing Dhina Dhing Dhidhing Dhina
Dhidhing Nating Tina
Gur Gur Gur Gur
Dhing Dhing Dhi Dhing Dhinak
Dhing Dhing Dhing Niting Tine

c. *Lahara*

As the previous one — in quick succession.

d. Movement of the limbs

Dhing Nating, Dhing Nating
Dhing Na Ting, Dhing Nating
Dhing Na Ting Dhing Nating

e. Veledictory

Dhing Dhina Dhing
Dhinak Dhiding
Dhiding Dhina
Dhing Dhina Dhiding

3. Narasinghee Dance

a. As before

b. *Gur Gur Gur* and

Dhina Dhing Trang, Dhina Ting Dhina
Gur Gur Gur Gur Gur Gur
Dhik Dhinak Dhing
Dhing Dhinak Dhing
Dhing Dhing Nating Nating
Gur Gur Gur Gur Gur Gur
Dhing Dhina Dhing
Dhiding Dhina Dhiding.

c. As before in a quick motion.

d. *Dhiding Dhina*

Dhinak Dhiding
Ting Dhina Ding Dhina.
Dhinating Dhinating Dhinating Dhinating
Dhinating Dhinating Dhinating Dhinating
Dhinating Dhinating Dhinating
Dhing Dhinadhing
Dhiding Dhina Dhiding

4. *Vāsuli* Dancea. *Dhinna Dhingnadhing*

Dhiding Dhing
Dhindhing Dhiding
Dhina Dhiding

- b. *Dhidhing Dhidhing Dhinak*
Dhidhing Nakur
Dhidhing Dhina
Nating Dhing
Nating Dhinak/Jalad/
Dhing Dhinak Dhing
Dhing Dhing Nating Nating
Gur Gur Gur Gur Gur
Dhing Dhina Dhing
Dhidhing Dhina Dhidhing.
- c. As before in a quick motion.
- d. *Dhing Dhing Dhing Dhing Dhin Dhing Dhina*
Gur Gur Gur Gur
Trang Dhina Ting Dhina
- 5. *Ugra-Chanda Dance*
- a. As before.
- b. *Dhidhing Dhinak*
Dhidhing Tonia
Ting Dhidhing Dhing
Gur Gur Gur Gur Gur
- c. As before in a quick succession.
- d. *Dhing Dhina Dhing*
Tinak Dhidhing/12/
Dhing Dhina Dhing
Trang Dhina Dhina
Dhidhing Dhina Dhidhing
- 6. *Gridhini Vishal*—First 'Gur Gur' (12 times) then
- a. *Dhidhing Dhing*
Dhing Dhing Dhing
Tinak Tinak (20 times)
Gur Gur (12 times so then)
Dhing Tina Tina
Ting Dhing Tina
Tina Ting Dhing
Tina Tina Tina
Ting Ting Ting
Gur Gur (12 times)
Tinak Ting (20 times)
Gur Gur (12 times)
Dhing Dhimadhing Dhing Dhina Dhing
Dhidhing (the previous sound comes again).

- c. Gur Gur (30 times, very fast)
- d. Ting Nating Ting Nating Tin (8 times)

(7) *Mahish Mardini*

- a. *Dhing Nating Nak*
Dhina Dhing Nating Na
(Sometimes very fast).
- b. War Dance
Dhinadhing Trang
Dhinadhing Trang (20 times — very quick)
Then
- c. Valedictory
Dhing Dhina Dhing
Dhidhing Dhidhing
Dhina Dhidhing

(8) *Van Dance*

- a. *Dhidhing Tina Ting*
Dhidhing Tina
Dhidhing Dhik
Dhina Ting Dhina
Gur Gur (8 times)
Dhing Dhina Ting Tinak
Dhidhing Nating Tina
- b. *Lahara*—As previous quick.
- c. Valedictory
Dhing Na Dhing Nating
Dhidhing Nating
Tinadhing Tinadhing Dhidhing

(9) *Jhanta Kali Dance*

- a. *Dhidhing Dhidhing Dhidhing*
Dhina Nating/3 times/then
Nak Tina Ting Ting
Nak Tinating Tina Ting
Gur Gur Gur Gur/then/*dhing*
Tina Ting
Ting Kuti Ting
Tini Kuti Ting

b. *Lahara*—As previous, quick.

c. Valedictory

Dhing Dhidhing Dhing
Dhidhing Dhing Dhidhing
Gur Gur Gur Gur
Ting Dhidhing Dhing
Dhina Dhing.

In this connection it may be pointed out that a writer having watched sabre-rattling during battle scenes in the dance of Narasinghee and of Kali dance, has surmised that the festival was originally held by the class of warriors. But this is not correct. Their magic character is apparent in the dances.

Drums and cymbals are the main musical instruments in all the dances.

NOTES

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