

Gajan: Fertility, Femininity, Freud and Futility

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Abstract: *Perhaps [transgression] is like a flash of lightning in the night which, from the beginning of time, gives a dense and black intensity to the night it denies, which lights up the night from the inside, from top to bottom, yet owes to the dark the stark clarity of its manifestation, its harrowing and poised singularity.* — [Michel Foucault](#) ([Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews](#)). Gajan is a Bengali festival which is a combination of Foucauldian concept of multidirectional functioning of power structure, transgression and Bakhtinian concept of Carnival. This festival gives the subaltern masses the power of subverting every establishment, institutions of superstructures, order of hierarchy, and every form of classification possible- in terms of gender, caste, race, dialect, religion and law. It invokes the surreal state of mind were all barriers that separate the rational from the irrational collapses, leading to a random state of mind. It is the liberation of the libido, trapped desire for the 'Other' and an open display of the Freudian 'unconscious'. Gajan generally deals with the liberation of two kinds of marginalized groups: the *namasudra* (the caste of untouchables) and women. It portrays a woman who can be angry, thirsty, ferocious, warrior like almost giving men an 'anti-penis envy'. The aim of my paper is to deconstruct the fertility rites and its association with the castration complex, the various fissures and silences in the mythmaking of Gajan, its rites evolving gradually as a taboo, the issue of transgenderism, the eruption of the unconscious, its gradual marginalization and disappearance from a psychoanalytical, political anthropological matrix.

Key words: *Subaltern, castration complex, penis envy, transgenderism, subversion, carnival, myth, popular religion*

1. Introduction

Levi Strauss (1963:229) says "...the purpose of a myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction". Sumanta Banerjee moving on from Mikhail

Bakhtin calls popular religion “a counter-system that constantly opposes and demystifies the established order and the established religion”. Myth and popular religion intersect in various parts of the globe and adds not only to the richness of the culture but also to the framing of social ideology which in turn dictates the social, political and gender relations. I have selected a specific popular culture of Rarh Bengal: ‘Gajan’, to show how it preaches self sacrifice, penance of masculinity, worship of womanhood and her fertile womb and how it acts as a social leveller, being a carnival of the subaltern masses. It is in a sense subversion of patriarchy and the various attributes created by it: order, morality, superiority, discipline, dominance, hierarchy, cast, gender, religion and the entire myth of a powerful, non-submitting, undaunted male overpowering the soft, vulnerable, submissive, fluid and marginalized female.

“There is as much reason for a man to wish that he was born a woman, as for woman to do otherwise” (Gandhi, in Kakar 1997:65). Transgenderism is the state or condition in which a person’s identity does not confirm unambiguously to conventional ideas of male or female gender. Gajan is marked by reversal of gender roles, cross-dressing, and transgenderism as is evident in its various rites and the various myths that is responsible for its evolution as a ritual. Indeed it is a practise based on Judith Butler’s theorizing of gender as a performance. Infact it can be proudly boasted the *Dharma Mangal* narrative which as old as Indian culture deconstructs stereotyping of gender and sketches woman in a different matrix altogether. It portrays a woman who can be angry, thirsty, ferocious, warrior like almost giving men an anti-penis envy. The fact equally surprises me that this part of the myth and rites have strangely been marginalized and fallen out of practise.

The word Gajan is derived from ‘garjan’- the soul stirring cry of the mendicants. It is the roar of the lion- the spine chilling call of mythical God Shiva. Gajan and its various rites may apparently appear a Bacchean chaos like the dance of Nataraj(another apparition of Shiva) known as

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'tandav' and the legend says the universe was created from the chaos by the vibrations created by the dance; similarly from the chaos of Gajan is born a revelation of a different order. The temporary renunciation by the Gajan 'sannyasi' (priest) of food, shelter, clothing, sex- rather than being a repressive device- is pedagogical in that it allows a more powerful understanding of male and female ethos in a set of cultural environment. Gajan sannyasis temporarily renounce their masculinity and turns into a ritual woman; through body piercing and bleeding they imitate the menstrual cycle in order to empathize with the pangs of womanhood, especially the childbirth, in Freudian terms it can be understood as the desire of the 'Other'. In doing so they also try to satisfy an offended, virtually obliterated female deity, it is also important to note in this context that though the festival is meant to satisfy a female deity yet it has evolved as a festival for of the worship of the most masculine of all Gods; Shiva and sometimes Dharmaraj, where the Buddhist influences are still traceable in Bengal. "Gajan is the representation of fertility cycle as well; it can be divided into four agricultural phases: tilling and ploughing (piercing representing penetration), seeding (Charak Puja), harvesting (the sacrifice of male victim), and stasis and nurturing (rituals involving the handling of fire and macabre dances)." (Ferrari, Fabrizio. *'Guilty Males and Proud Females'*:179). These four phases also represent the human fertility cycle: intercourse, conception, childbirth and menopause.

Symbolically Gajan is celebrated during spring; it is called 'Charak' which means wheel, representing the rotation of the earth and the completion of a year, therefore like a phoenix it is the time to die and be reborn simultaneously. It is ritualized by setting up of a high pole from which hangs a devotee with the help of a strong rope he swings himself in the space going round and round the pole. These dangerous feats are performed by farmers who are baked in the sun for the whole year and pray for rains by appeasing Lord Shiva who is very close to the tiller of the soil. Folk street theatre during the time of harvest is as prehistoric as agriculture

itself and is celebrated all over the world but none so passionate, gory, and complex like Gajan.

The aim of my paper is to deconstruct the various fissures and silences in the mythmaking of Gajan, its rites evolving gradually as a taboo, the issue of transgenderism, the eruption of the unconscious, its gradual marginalization and disappearance from a psychoanalytical, political anthropological matrix.

2. The Silences of the Mythmaking

“The importance of myths to people throughout the Indian subcontinent cannot be overstated. They are all evoked in all sorts of settings, they are used as guides to action, their characters are used as exemplars for humans, and the logic of their manifold encompassed narratives are models of the logic of classification.” (Nicholas, Ralph. *The Rites of Spring*: 17). Both Hindu and Buddhist influences have left their stamp on the mythmaking of the bloody festival of Gajan. In mythological tales Bali was the king of asuras (demons). His son Baan was a devotee of Shiva and together with his subjects offered blood to appease the god. According to legend Usha, the daughter of Baan, fell in love with the grandson of Krishna, Anirudha. A bloody feud ensued. Finally Krishna negotiated and brought about an amicable settlement by which Baan came to be known as one of the first ranking disciple of Shiva. There are two things to be noted in this context first; Baan being from the lineage of the demons belonged to the suppressed class but worshiped Shiva, one of the most powerful God of Hindu mythologies. Second; as Foucault said power is everywhere and flows in every direction, it becomes essential to notice that Baan is not altogether powerless though marginalized he produces a constant upthrust to which ultimately the most subtlest of all politicians; Krishna had to succumb. Baan is not the only marginalized alter-ego or the dark shadow of the hero to win the position of being a great disciple of Shiva indeed he shares this subaltern space with the greatest villain of all times Ravan. Thus Shiva has

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evolved as the God of the subaltern masses owing to his iconoclastic identity. This tradition has been continued in Gajan also, he is worshiped by the subaltern masses and for a day gain the immense potential of subverting every establishment.

The Gajan Carnival:

The Gajan festival was a great social leveller. The humble downtrodden peasants acquired Shiva-hood for a day. When he appears in the sitting room of the Landlord with holy bel (wooden apple) leaves in his ears and his palm the landlord had to get up and touch his feet. Such was its force and impact. The farmer, the oil maker, the fisherman, the potter, the cobbler, the barber, the scavenger, the undertaker- all become intoxicated for a month and were given due respect. As Foucault puts it where there is power, there is resistance and power is multidirectional, and resistance is another form of power. Gajan combines Foucauldian concept of power and Bakhtinian concept of carnival. The class which gain Shiva-hood were not even allowed to step into the shadow of the *zamindars*, such was the social practise, but their disguise gained them the status of the superior, almost god-like. “Resistances do not derive from a few heterogeneous principles; but neither are they a lure or a promise that is of necessity betrayed. They are the odd term in relations of power; they are inscribed in the latter as an irreducible opposite.” – [Michel Foucault](#), ([The History of Sexuality 1: An Introduction](#)).

The influence of Buddhism:

According to historians during the Middle Ages the Buddhist came to be cornered in India and specifically West Bengal; they sought shelter under the banner of Hinduism. But they brought with them certain Tantric rituals of Buddhism, which involved bloodletting as well as mendicancy. Buddha laid great stress on monasticism and that is why during Gajan, ordinary house holders become mendicants for a month, put on ochre robes and beg from

door to door. Dharmaraj is the Lord of Buddhist in some places the Gajan offerings are divided into two with a drawn line- one side is for Shiva and the other side for Dharmaraj. Alternative versions of the same they are observed in festivals stretching from Myanmar to Japan speaking of a strong Buddhist influence.

Banglapedia describes Dharma thakur as:

“A Hindu deity, symbolizing the sun; who is also known as Dharma raja. Dharma thakur was originally a non-Aryan God and the deity of the Kom tribe ,but was later elevated to the Vedic pantheon Dharma thakur is associated with agricultural an human fertility. Magical beliefs and rituals merge with Vedic rites in his worship. He is worshipped mainly by low casts Hindus such as Dom’s and Bagdis and Hadis who believe he can cure leprosy and bless them with children.”(Ferrari, Guilty Males: 67)

Transgender and Ungendering:

In 1012 king Dharmapal II after being defeated in went into hiding. His wife Saphula cut off her two breasts during Gajan praying for the welfare of her king and kingdom. The bloody aspect of inflicting self-injury greatly disturbed British rulers. In 1864 the government banned some gory acts, ever since then this festival has come to a steady decline. The above legend is very important as it projects the issue of transgender which forms a very important part of Gajan, and this is the very reason which lures me to it. The queen decides to cut off her breasts as a sacrifice, the female organ associated with motherhood and Femininity, in order to protect her king and kingdom. This rite essentially transforms her into a ritual male, helping her to become a person so powerful as to protect a kingdom and the king, what could have been a more masculine attribute. She chose to cut off her Feminity in order to perform the duty that a land demands from the ruler and liberates herself from the limits of womb and motherhood. Therefore as we see the female is always the stronger, the ferocious, the angrier, the potent conqueror, the thirsty waiting to be quenched by the

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sacrifice of the male. The central deity of the Gajan was, and remains identified with the earth. Although the Gajan is nowadays dedicated to Dharmaraj or Shiva, these gods represent the evolution of an ancestral sacrificial male victim. To please such a goddess male devotees must acknowledge the pain they inflict towards the female world and become 'ritual woman'. Conversely women display their generative power, fertile potency and make men feel inferior, powerless, guilty and jealous of their power to reproduce. Their suffering is therefore acknowledged and rendered into power.

3. The 'Dharma Mangal' myth: its deconstruction.

The greatest myth associated with the worship of Lord Dharma is the epic of '*Dharma Mangal*'. These are long narrative Bengali poems dealing with the epic story of Lausen. In analyzing '*Dharma Mangal*' we may begin features of their plots, most of which follow the common pattern and can be reduced to a relatively simple outline, if we concentrate on the actions of the hero Lausen. Together with his mother Ranjabati, he was sent to earth to make Dharma's worship widespread, or to establish a new, "complete" form of that worship. Plots of most *Dharma Mangal* present an initial set of problems facing Lausen's father, problems which had their origin before Lausen's birth. His father lost a crucial battle with a man, Ichai Ghosh who had rebelled against their common overlord, Gauresvar and therewith he also lost his land and his status as a *raja*; moreover, his six sons were slain in battle and both their wives and his wife committed suicide. To make matters worse, he then made an enemy of his overlord's minister, Mahamad, by secretly marrying that man's youngest sister, who turned out to be barren. All of the foregoing is the situation into which the hero Lausen is born. To begin the action of the poem, *Dharma Mangal* first describe the barren wife's ritual self sacrifice to Dharma. Lausen's birth and his education as a warrior follow immediately. With this preparation, Lausen then must prove

himself as a warrior against animal and female opponents, who test his character and ability. *Dharma Mangal* describe how Lausen uses his capacity as a warrior to become a raja, a local ruler with a new land, Moyna, with a cohort of untouchable Dom (the lowest caste 'namasudra') warrior under his leadership, and with subjects whom he attracts to his land. His status as a raja however is conditioned upon his continuing service as a warrior to his overlord the king, Gauresvar. By engaging in the king's service with his army, Lausen then conquers rebels against his overlord and wins wives who themselves model different aspects of Lausen's own character, and who completes his status as a raja. Established as raja Lausen again must face and slay a much more difficult opponent, the rebel, Ichai Ghosh who originally had stolen his father's land and taken away his father's status as a raja. Finally because of the plotting of the king's minister, Mahamad against him, Lausen must vow to become a renunciate adept and must sacrifice himself to Lord Dharma, partly following his mother's model. In his absence, his subalterns are left to govern and protect his land and they also must shift their own roles. Dharma restores Lausen after his self sacrifice. Through the virtue of his self sacrifice, Lausen is able to save his land, defeat the king's minister, and end his obligation of service to the king. Lausen's self sacrifice provides the model for a "complete" form of worship of Dharma, one "virtuous" and well suited for the great difficulties of the Kali Age.

The last major episode: the shifting of subaltern roles

The last major episode of the poem requires that Lausen assume a new role. He was summoned to Gaur to correct a disastrous flood brought upon the land by the minister's improper, self-interested, an incomplete worship of Dharma on behalf of the king. Describing the journey, Ghanaram writes that Lausen went to Gaur as an ascetic and he took his brother with him (Mahapatra 1962:559). Lausen successfully interceded with Dharma on the king's behalf. As suggested by the minister, and commanded by his overlord, Lausen then journeyed to Hakanda in order to sacrifice

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himself to make the Sun rise in the west, and thus free the king and the land from “sin”. According to Ram Das Adak, for this undertaking Lausen had to “unbind his hair, give up his royal silk shawl (patta) and assume the grab of *sannyasi* (Cattopadhyay 1938:201). Thus, in this episode Lausen’s roles of warrior and raja are replaced by the role of renunciate adept who can intercede with Dharma for Gauresvar and worship on the king’s behalf. By sacrificing himself on behalf of the king and for his sins, Lausen both took on some of king’s own authority without claiming the throne, and acquired coercive power over Dharma himself without departing from the supplicant position of being Dharma’s devotee. In Lausen’s absence at Hakanda and without the king’s knowledge, the minister and the entire army of Gauresvar then attacked Moyna. Lausen’s absence from Moyna, because of his shifts in role from warrior and raja to advisor and ascetic or renouncer in the turn opened the way for Kalu the Dom (lowest caste ‘*namasudra*’), his wife Lakhe and Kalu’s sons, and for Lausen’s wives Kalinga and Kanara also to shift their roles in order to defend the city. Subaltern martial agency is represented by *Dharma Mangal* texts as including some capacity to shift between normal and extraordinary roles.

At Hakanda Lausen ultimately cut off his own limbs and head in an act of self-sacrifice. One must note that his example provides the sanction for the rural sacrifices and the dangerous and painful ordeals, commonly performed in the Dharma Gajan, as well as for the specifically “Lauseni” elements of ritual which sometimes are performed. Lausen’s extraordinary worship at Hakanda of course became the model for making Dharma’s worship widespread, or for establishment of the complete “baramati”, and thus it fulfilled Dharma’s purpose for Lausen’s mortal life.

During each one of Lausen’s prior absences from Moyna, his younger brother Karpur had been left with the responsibility for ruling in Lausen’s place and Kalu had accompanied Lausen as his chief military assistant. This

time Lausen told Karpur to stay in Gaur to take care of their imprisoned parents. Karpur's virtue in caring for them would be required for the sun to rise in the west Lausen chose Kalu despite his *jati* (caste). Lausen carefully reminded Kalu that his fundamental duty was to love and nurture the subjects of Moyna in Ram Das Adak's account; this instruction specifically included a reminder about the rate of the land tax. In Ghanaram's account he entrusted to Kalu the lives lineages, and *jatis* of the cities young women, whom Kalu was to treat as his mother. According to both authors Lausen told Kalu to continue to be the city's magistrate and head of police (*kotal*) during the night, but its *raja* in the day time. Concluding his instructions to the city, Lausen told Lakhe to protect the city from enemy attacks and he told Kalu to make sure that no one, whether invited guests, or blind, crippled, or ailing beggars should go without food. Kalu should worship Dharma in the land spend plenty of money for the care of Lausen's parents, and write a report on their condition to Lausen each month.

Mahamad, the evil minister, then invented an excuse to take command of the entire army of Gauresvar and lead it to Moyna. He claimed that Moyna was being ravaged and depopulated by a wild rhinoceros, and added that if Kalu were to act impudently in the manner of their old enemy of state, Ichai Ghosh, the king's army would be able to give him a proper punishment.

It is clear that Kalu failed to fulfil his new responsibilities: moreover, that failure is represented as an almost inevitable consequence of his nature as a Dom, but his failure also involved an offence to the goddess, in her violent aspect as Bhadrakali. All text agrees that when the army of the minister was discovered Kalu arranged to worship the goddess before going into battle. According to Ghanaram, instruction to perform this worship came in a dream, carried by Hanuman at the command of Dharma himself but his wife Lakhe also supported worship of Bhadrakali as their lineage deity. He and the Dom men invited the goddess to their worship, but then they got drunk on wine and meat,

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and forgot to make the offerings to her. Enraged by this omission, she vowed to destroy Kalu and his lineage. Kalu passed out and was unconscious when Mahamad attacked Moyna. Despite the somewhat more favourable representation of Kalu's action by Ram Das Adak, one cannot escape a conservative reinforcement of masculine *jati* roll boundaries in this episode. Dom men will be Doms; therefore Kalu cannot be a raja.

Unable to rouse her husband from his stupor, Lakhe then confronted the minister, after vowing to "repay the debt" of salt their family owed to Lausen. It is also cleared that, unlike Kalu, she fulfilled her responsibilities to defend her city for her raja. She disbelieved the minister's lie that Lausen had died of starvation. In a decision which again reinforces *jati* boundaries, she refused the minister's offer to establish Kalu as a raja in Moyna, despite his promise that she herself would become the queen of the city, and that Lausen's four wives would become her own slaves. With the assistance of the goddess, whose forms she invoked to guard the four gates of the city, she defeated the minister's army, slaughter a third office forces, and drove the survivors' back across the Kalindi River. In these passages we are given along with further instructions in the dharma of subalterns, model performances of the shaming of a man by a wife or mother who thereby becomes the guardian and guarantor of honor. Ghanaram has Lakhe, return from battle, say to her husband "When has any hero found himself in danger knocked back his wine and stayed drunk while a girl fights?" (Mahapatra 1962:621) The shift in roles by Lausen's subalterns is accompanied by a further shift in role of the goddess Bhadrakali who becomes Moyna's divine protectress in Lausen's absence. Both the goddess's role of defending Moyna and her worship by Lakhe and Kanara complement and are subordinated to Dharma's role and worship. *Dharma Mangal* texts thus partly erase their own representation of the goddess as the supporter of independent rebels and the marginalized and downtrodden class.

My point in narrating the entire story in an encapsulated form is that I want to show two distinctive features which lie hidden in the narrative. First, transgenderism as I have already said is the basic core structure of any narrative associated with Gajan. Second the narrative demonstrates a wild kind of feminism in the manifestation of the Freudian 'unconscious'. Gajan is always a platform for the reversal of gender roles, men have always tried to bring out and imitate whatever is uniquely feminine and women emerge as proud, potent, ferocious counterpart of man. Feminists have always argued that society since historical times has always been patriarchal and they are true to a great extent but this unique festival of Bengal emerges as a female carnival. The women liberate themselves from their stereotypical role of a wife, a mother and takes up arms to protect and defend the land from an apocalypse. It is very important to note in the context that the deity in question is Bhadrakali, a super woman who is a warrior a protector in short she is nothing that is typically female. It is the manifestation of the libido energy trapped in the generative body of a woman who is much more than just a womb. For a day the trapped desire of the female unconscious to play the role of the 'superior Other' and to free herself from the feeling of inferiority that resides in her unconscious due to the lack of penis. The narrative is a proof that the main seat of power is not the male phallus and even if it is, it can be subverted whenever necessary. In this narrative the hero is not only a woman but also a '*namasudra*' (the lowest untouchable caste) in other words she is doubly marginalized yet she proves a better raja than Kalu, her husband and also a better queen and an administrator than then real queen. She sacrifices her sons not only willingly in the battle but with a vigour which can be hardly expected from a man. She shows a Lady Macbeth kind of nerves of steel but unlike her she neither falters nor breaks down psychologically. She not only liberates herself from the typical role of an over protective mother but also proves a potent competitor to the throne. However the politics of patriarchy still persists in various forms, the goddess, Bhadrakali, act as a seat of female power, the main deserver of worship, yet the festival follows the worship of

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Dharma and Shiva only, and she has been very tactfully marginalized and suppressed into a mystic oblivion.

4. Performances in Gajan: A theoretical interpretation

Gajan is the festival of rites ranging from religious to dangerous sometimes extending to threshold of madness. It is a time of total subversion of law, rationality patriarchy and has a surreal quality. The various rites are: *pitphoron* (piercing one's own back with hooks), *jibaphoron* (piercing the tongue) *agunkhela* (firewalking on burning coals), swinging from the *Charak gach* (pole), and *mara khela* (dancing with the heads of the corpses), and *swang jatra* (a kind of folk theatre, with the aim of criticizing the authority wearing a mask without being flogged).

Charak Gach: the male phallus

The Charak tree – identified with Dharmaraj, a trait missing in liturgical scriptures- plays a central role in most ritual services dealing with penances and self-offerings. In the *Shunya Purana* its ritual use is mentioned on several occasions, especially with regard to the worship of the wooden plank. The Charak gach is a polished wooden pole often besmeared with turmeric and of variable height (2-8mts). The Charak pole is also a ritual remnant of the impaling of the male victim who according to South-Asian ritual pattern is tied to the sacrificial stake in order to be immolated. The fact that Charak gach is so connected with act of piercing that it rightly recalls the wide spread presence in various villages of the impalement stake. A post of various heights often equipped with one or more sharp iron or wooden points is often present and is usually considered the male child of the earth goddess. Male sacrificial victims were impaled on such an implement in order to please the earth or similar voracious female deities. In the *Shunya Purana* (128-32) as well as during the Gajan, the victim is beheaded only when the goddess is present. A Goddess is usually

invoked and worshipped during hanging ceremonies, dances, circumambulations and self-tortures. The process of calling the deity is pivotal to the Gajan. Yet what is interesting is that while the goddess is always vigilant and present, Dharmaraj needs to be sought out, even awakened. This however depends entirely on the revivification power of the earth which is to symbolically deliver her son and future groom, only at a later stage will the spouse, the actual recipient of sacrifice, devour the meat of the victim whose identification with the pole suggests sexual maturity and the commencement of the fertilizing process. As long as the victims are males the stake also represents the sacrificial male himself.

Robinson (1980:81) sees in the charka (wheel), occasionally depicted at the top of the lower half, the various energy seats (libido) and in the nailed fruits the representation of the male organ. There have been disputes however whether the pole is stylizations of the male phallus 'royal symbol of the authority of a ruler' as in popular Hindu and Buddhists tradition or more closely resemble female genitalia. The presence of turmeric and spikes may in fact suggest a hidden female symbolism. It is indeed symbolic representation of vulva surrounded by nails, thorns, and eyes. This is confirmed by some rural community and tribes of West Bengal that it is worshipped as Shiva's wife. Male emblems like arrows and phallic shaped offerings the fruits are impaled on the vacuum (the charka or the vagina). This strangely reminds me of the Shiva-linga which is a union of the male and the female sexual organs the most powerful site of regeneration. Unlike the western myth it is not just the male phallus which is the site of power and authority, the oriental concept believes power lies in unison of both male and female parts. Penetration thus appears as guilt, and reflects the ancestral fears of agriculturalist who interprets it as impalement. The use of turmeric-a deflector of blood as a 'cooling' offering is very significant.

Agun Khela: the universal woman

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In Bengali village culture fire is often regarded as the consuming hunger and wrath of the earth which communicates through the spirits of the dead. The practice of absorbing heat is the devotional sublimation of the original sacrifice in which the blood and body of the male victim was consumed by the enraged earth. The spirits of the dead are pacified and the offerings are conveyed to the deity who, after accepting it is cooled into granting boons. This is symbolized by the subsequent immersion of the cooked food (*bhog*) in the water of the nearby pond. As for the Gajan, ritual involving the mastery of fire does not seem to pay particular attention to religious and social subdivisions. Devotees from different backgrounds mainly backward class including scheduled tribes sometimes also Muslims are engaged in this rite along with Brahmans (the highest class) who both attend and participate in this ritual. This is a ritual which involves the participation of both men and women. The fire which is prepared from the embers of the cremation ground is used by the devotees for walking, hanging over it, jumping over it from a height, playing with it and sometimes rolling over it. This rite transforms symbolically the nature of men as they experience the pain of the goddess and renounce their masculinity. Women on the other hand confirm their female nature before the deity who being feminine but castrated is moved to anger. To subdue this castration complex men offer themselves as sacrifice. This heat temporarily metamorphoses men as they become women and women are allowed to carry out their generative function. Self offerings can be seen as two different ways of producing the energy necessary to achieve the final union through sacrifice and marriage. In fire rites, this is directly experienced by devotees of both genders who transform heating by following the same ritual path. This can be symbolically interpreted as the sublimation of sexual union and eventually sacrifice as a generative force. During this transformative process the devotees irrespective of gender are all potential mothers. The devotion leads to their transformation or confirmation into generating receptacles.

Ultimately the fire rite does not require gender separation because the only gender now is the universal female.

Mara Khela: The 'Castration complex' decoded:

Mara khela is name given by Bengali villagers to a set of dances performed with decomposed human corpses and head. It must be performed away from a public place of worship and Brahman neighbourhood. While the dancers must be men, male and female corpses of any age and social status will do. Body of Hindus who cannot afford cremation, Muslims, Christians, adivasis and even infants can be put to use. Under no circumstances must the corpse belong to the dancers' community. It is however interesting that the corpses are integrated within the community through the dance. This being the final performances of the marriage ceremony between Dharmaraj and the earth, the sannyasis often imitate this holy marriage, however they refuse to marry a relative and thereby commit incest which strangely gains a stamp of legality. In Bengali villages this ritual sacrifice emphasise the value of behaving as a social process aiming to feed and placate a goddess for her benevolence in purely practical matters such as good harvest, wealth, the birth of male offspring and protection from diseases or cattle epidemics. While the sacrificer takes the body of the victim to consume it with the community, the head is believed to be the property of the goddess. Not only does this violent detachment allow blood to reach the hungry goddess, but the skull is referred to as the bowl in which the blood is to be poured and consumed. The agricultural community of Bengal perform the mutilation, manipulation and beheading of the dead to represent the killing of death (it generally stands for winter season) so that the earth may be regenerated. In Hindu tradition a corpse represents the *purusha*, the inert form in which the soul is enclosed and traditionally believed to be male. A severed corpse has a particular meaning. As in Puranic myth-which insist on cross gender beheading, in Gajan too the decapitation is made by a female on a male irrespective on their bodies actual gender. A living female sacrifices a dead male by

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annihilating his masculinity be it actual or virtual. The *purusha* is rendered into the universal woman through a symbolic castration actualised by the agents of the goddess. Dancing and sporting with her, men marry and successively surrender to her by annihilating what is left of their male ego in the ultimate sacrificial place, the crematorium. Through *mara khela* the devotee aims to transform his male ego into a feminine one by expressing a castration anxiety and then realizing it through decapitation and dismemberment. These very acts also provide the fluids that will satisfy both starvation and aggressive sexual desire of the deity. Susan Shadwell suggests that “the mother’s excessive sexuality is perceived, in infantile terms, as an oral need. The goddess needs to drink male fluids because the boy needs to drink maternal fluids. As the oral is the only erotic idiom known to the child in this early pre-oedipal dependency phase, the reverse projection takes on an oral dimension. (1999:334)”

Another distinctive feature of this rite is the use of abusive language towards the deity. This obscenity can be understood as the crisis of the male who expresses his individual fragmented ego in a public arena. According to Bettelheim the fear of castration is an objective consequence of sex difference that generally increases in puberty. Most of the puberty rites are aimed at an actual or symbolic understanding of the functions of the other sex and the psychological mastery of the emotions they arouse.

Eventually as the libidinal aspect is repressed from the beginning of the festival, to become a woman is for each man a profound physical and psychological experience.

5. Conclusion

In my paper, so far I have discussed about the Festival of Gajan, its carnivalesque quality, the liberation of subaltern population and the trapped unconscious and subconscious, its transgender qualities and a Freudian interpretation of all

its rites and a Foucauldian deconstruction of its power structure. However I have yet to talk about the futility aspect of it. Ever since the British invaded India with their burden of Enlightenment this festival has emerged as a taboo, urban people moulded themselves so much like the British that their own culture seemed strange and filthy to them. The British realized the strong weapon of subversion this festival offered could be a fatal blow to any established authority and the same philosophy struck the patriarchs too, who gave it the stamp of wild paganism. It became suppressed, and evolved as a taboo with the spread of Christian education; nonetheless this suppression made it more alluring and created an air of mystery around it. The liberation of women, the empathizing with the pain of womanhood sadly ends with the carnival itself, with the restoration of normalcy people forget whatever they had undergone in order to become a 'ritual women', the discrimination, the torture continues. My personal opinion, which I have developed during my field work, is that when they perform the rites they are not aware of the significance of the rites, it is just a display of manly courage and a mere ritual performed for Shiva. To deconstruct it is just the intellectual exercise of a scholar which remains just as a documentation. This politics of keeping the women marginalized can be understood from the eventual marginalization of the worship of the earth Goddess and her place was eventually taken up by Shiva and Dharmaraj.

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