

Aniket De

The Boundary of Laughter: Popular Performances across Borders in South Asia

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. 272 pages. Hardcover, £60.00. ISBN 9780190131494.

The *Boundary of Laughter* offers a rich, interdisciplinary study of a folk theater genre called Gambhira. In pre-partitioned Malda, North Bengal, Gambhira was performed in accordance with a ritual calendar, in rural shrines and fields, in the form of a dialogue between Shiva and the peasants. The actors addressed their complaints to the god, bargaining for a better life, and in the process brought up broader social issues. With British colonial censorship, the influence of anticolonial Swadeshi ideas, and the formation of new nation-states, the fate of Gambhira took rapid turns. Aniket De guides readers through the changing history of ideas around Gambhira and its politics of cultural representation from pre-partitioned Bengal until the present day. The diverse time periods and themes are connected through a theoretical *fil rouge*: the notion of a “shared space” as distinct from “territory.”

Territory is space controlled by government authorities, institutions of surveillance, and infrastructures of the nation-state, like the barbed-wire lines and checkposts at the India-Bangladesh border. Building upon geographers like Doreen Massey, De understands space as fluid and constantly reshaped. He suggests that Gambhira is a shared space that persists with resilience despite the rigidization of international borders. The space of Gambhira is shared between Hindu and Muslim audiences, with performers and participants spanning across the spatio-temporal Radcliffe Line. Gambhira is inherently open to change, incorporating many innovations; yet it remains shared among a peasant

class connected by experiences, daily struggles, and common ethics. De is able to analyze this space without romanticizing it. He is not trying to hide tensions to make us believe in a flattened, neutral space of interfaith harmony. He is recovering a story that got lost under the weight of the hegemonic narrative of communalism and nationalist understandings of heritage.

This book argues that Hindu-Muslim communalism and rigid binaries between Indian and Bangladeshi nation-states cannot do justice to the reality of Gambhira, which remains an irreverently shared space across South Asian borders. The story of Gambhira and its performers urges us to avoid seeing all cultural histories and social relations through the lens of nation-states. Gambhira performers, who are simultaneously actors, composers, and cultural mediators, have shaped a popular political space on their own terms, autonomous from, if not transgressing, elite discourses and urban centers of power.

In chapter 1, “Chronicles of a Toiling God,” De explains that the ethics and aesthetics of Gambhira are based on *dardām*, bargaining: a common ground for all peasant communities. Based on the political economy of labor and labor migration in the region of Malda, an interethnic class solidarity is staged through bargaining with Shiva, which reflects the farmers’ need to bargain with landlords and moneylenders. The politics and poetics of bargaining, together with a shared spatial imagination—riverine movement upstream and downstream, to access resources of a shared production environment—constitute the common denominator that enables Gambhira to reconcile differences.

Previously imagined by educated elites as a space of the *choṭalok*, the disrespectable and unsophisticated low classes, in the Swadeshi period nationalist intellectuals recovered Gambhira as a form of political theater to spread anticolonial ideas to the masses (chapter 2). Showing dexterity in connecting his specific case study to the larger history of folklore in Bengal, Aniket De presents the ways Gambhira was documented, promoted, or disregarded, following the intellectual agenda of a gentlemanly elite of *bhadralok* scholars and political leaders. While most scholarship on these topics is centered on Calcutta, where *bhadralok* folklorists idealized the Bengali countryside in their search for cultural authenticity, De gives attention to the intellectuals of the *mofussil*, conversant with modern Western education but also with local dialects and regional traditions. These figures include Benoy Kumar Sarkar (1887–1949), whose work had a profound impact on the conventions of the performance and on its public reception, and a plethora of composers of Gambhira songs and plays, whose works often remain unpublished.

With a spotlight on performers like Govinda Seth and their songs, chapter 3 shows how Gambhira came to be feared by colonial authorities as a social weapon. Over the 1920s and 1930s, Gambhira performers developed a popular political space that transcended religious differences at a time of crystallization of Hindu-Muslim identity politics. As numerous interlocutors explained, Gambhira is not about religion and has little to do with being Muslim or worshipping Shiva: it is about pointing out wrongs and setting them on the right course (134).

The last chapters, “Divided States, Shared Songs” and “Economies of Expression,” follow the transformations of Gambhira and the fate of its performers from the Partition of India (1947) until the present. The most striking change was introduced by the famous Gambhira master Muhammad Sufi, who recast Gambhira as a dialogue between two Muslim peasants, a grandpa (*nānā*) and his grandson (*nāti*), both donning a *luṅgi* and a conical hat, like agricultural laborers.

As one interlocutor observed, the relationship with one's grandparents is lighthearted and playful; while respected as an elder, one can crack jokes with them. De reads this innovation as a remarkable act of translation, replicating social implications, spheres of authority, and, most importantly, the space for bargaining (*dardām*). While most Indian scholars dismissed the form of Gambhira that developed in East Pakistan as a Muslim or secular counterpart of an authentically Hindu or Buddhist tradition, De suggests that the reconfiguration of Gambhira after Partition, presenting a peasant elder in place of Shiva, is an act of care: a matter of being sensitive toward one's neighbors, making both Hindu and Muslim communities feel welcomed and included. For a nation that has been infamously unsafe for its religious minorities, this is no little accomplishment.

While Gambhira remains a shared social space, "created by social interrelations [that] could not simply be overwritten by national territory" (152), its representation and sponsorship in the two new nation-states followed different trajectories. In Bangladesh, Gambhira became a national tradition, broadcast on television and enjoying state patronage. This brought a more cooperative relationship with the state, at the expense of older patterns of bluntly attacking structures of power. In India, Gambhira remained a local tradition of Malda, far from the aesthetic regime of staged folklore catering to urban audiences. The key moment of this divergence was 1971, when Bangladesh emerged as an independent nation after the Liberation War, and the affective border between East and West Bengal had left all porousness behind.

The last chapter shows how the business of folklore in India and Bangladesh unfolded in accordance with the intellectual and financial interests of a number of parties invested in the commodification of Gambhira: nation-state institutions for the preservation and study of folklore (e.g., Bangla Academy in Dhaka); private corporations; NGOs, constituting an unregulated parallel state in contemporary Bangladesh; and the work of Bengali folklore scholars.

Bangladeshi folklorists represented Gambhira as a secular and progressive theater form, free from the obscurantist clutches of (Hindu) religion. NGOs recruited Gambhira artists for their social awareness campaigns, imposing their own topics, scripts, and, at times, even costumes. This patronage has created new hierarchies between performers, producing fractures within existing troupes. In Chapai, where De has conducted most of his fieldwork on the Bangladeshi side of the border, the author found that NGOs and state-salaried folklorists have glorified the tradition while neglecting its performers, treating them as contract laborers and appropriating their songs as merchandise (198). Indian folklore scholars, instead, put emphasis on the antiquity of the tradition and on the Hindu-Buddhist heritage of Bengal. With their works written in Bengali and widely distributed through affordable local publications, Bengali folklorists' discourses had a tremendous impact in shaping local understandings of Gambhira.

The epilogue opens with an oral commentary by Gambhira performers on a tragic piece of news: a singer hung himself in Jalpaiguri (North Bengal), terrorized about the news of a potential all-India NRC (National Register of Citizens) operation. The NRC operation in Assam, with its list of legitimate citizens released in August 2019, has been a horror for Bengali citizens, particularly for the poor, nonliterate, and landless. In the midst of new fears of statelessness, the anxieties raised by the nonsecular Citizenship Amendment Act, and the Hinduization of Indian politics, the author reiterates that Gambhira has shaped a shared space to articulate an alternative notion of belongingness

across communal and national lines, even at a time when legislation and political leaders have hardened those lines.

This book fills a tremendous gap. While literature on Partition is vast, and there is an abundance of studies on refugees, the state, and the cultural history of Bengal, these bodies of scholarly literature add little to our understanding of how borders are interpreted and negotiated by borderland people, or how postcolonial borders have reshaped cultural traditions from below, changing the landscape of verbal arts and performance genres. The impact of Partition-induced migration and national boundaries on regional musical schools, tunes, performances, and artists' lives is still underexplored (see Nakatani 2011; Ayyagari 2012; NDTV 2017; Basu 2019; Bhoumik 2022; *The Travelling Archive* 2023). *The Boundary of Laughter* is remarkable for its foregrounding of people's understandings of a cross-border tradition and their ways of mobilizing a shared heritage.

Furthermore, Aniket De gives attention to a little-studied region split by postcolonial borders (Malda, northern Bengal). He does so by conducting fieldwork on both sides of the national border, spending time and traveling with contemporary performers, attending numerous performances, but also digging out unwritten biographies and unpublished notebooks of past performers. Something to be appreciated throughout the book is the awareness about the researcher's positionality in the field. Time and again, the author's voice appears to express self-reflection and to question his own bias and his motives, showing a commendable sincerity and respect toward the cultural owners of the tradition he studied.

The book is animated by a constellation of original verses, jokes, and rhymes collected from the manuscripts and stages of Gambhira artists, carefully selected, beautifully translated, and transliterated from their Bengali original. In addition to colorful fieldwork notes and ethnographic anecdotes, the author also delights us with some unique photographic documentation. A refreshingly mixed methodology, combining the toolboxes of the historian and the ethnographer, makes Gambhira come to life not only through a literary analysis of performance texts but also through accounts of composers and their homes, backstage chats, and visits to archeological sites, where performers provide their own interpretations on such icons of national patrimony.

The appetite for the sounds, voices, and sensory dimensions of the Gambhira performative arena is stimulated by the author's prose, to the extent that readers may wonder why fieldwork recordings and audiovisual samples were not part of the publication project. This might be a question for the publishers, often recalcitrant to enrich texts with multimedia components, rather than for the author.

The question of whether the recent welfare scheme for folk artists implemented by the Trinamool government in West Bengal has affected Gambhira performers remains to be addressed (see Department of Information & Cultural Affairs 2019). In 2019 there were 2,300 enlisted and certified "folk artists" in Malda, as beneficiaries of the governmental scheme "Lokprasār Prakalpa." How many of them are Gambhira artists? What do they gain from their "folk artist identity card" in terms of status, legal protection, and economic security? What is the impact and the compromise in their freedom to laugh at structures of power? This discussion is not something critically missing from the already overwhelming amount of detail and depth of information presented in the book but rather a personal curiosity, awaiting follow-up papers on the topics that the book could not include.

In general, this book is an interesting read for scholars of Bengali cultural history, folklore and performance traditions, South Asian borderlands, and Partition scholars. Clear and concise language; vivid depictions of places, people, and performance settings; and amazing ethnographic vignettes make this book accessible also for students of South Asian studies.

With its focus on popular theater, Aniket De offers a stimulating approach to Hindu-Muslim collaboration and everyday solidarity. While many have discussed the shared space of devotion in Bengali religious syncretism and cross-sectarian faith (e.g., Stewart 1995, 2001; Jalais 2010) and the shared Dalit-Muslim space of an agriculturist class solidarity in the form of organized party politics (e.g., Sen 2018), the irreverent space of Gambhira emerges through the entertaining, as much as political, power of laughter.

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