

## Dancing for Themselves: Ritual Celebrations of *Chaitra Parva* in West Bengal (Photo Essay)

Maheswar Kumar

### Abstract

*Chaitra Parva*, a seasonal overlap between spring and summer, is celebrated annually through a series of ritual rites, many of which include dance and music, invoking Lord Shiva (a Hindu male deity). It is mainly performed by the ordinary non-Brahmans known as ritual bhaktas, who undertake perilous austerities, renunciation, and self-mortification to appease Lord Shiva. This four-day festival is known as – *Falhar* (fruit worship), *Jagaran* (night of awakening), *Bhakta Ghora* (wheel celebration), and *Balidan* (animal sacrifice). This reflection on the dance festival in writing and photography aims to visually capture how the *Chaitra Parva* festival embodies rural West Bengal's cultural landscape. It also sheds light on how those ritual rites, accompanied by dance and music, connect the people with a sense of belongingness while representing a unique cultural identity.

### Keywords:

Culture, Ritual, Dance, Music, *Chaitra Parva*, West Bengal

Ritual, primarily considered a reflection of

human nature, society, and culture, influences manifold performance traditions, and plays an “adoptive role in the course of both biological and cultural evolution” (Stephenson 2015: 21). The Bengali month of *Chaitra*,<sup>1</sup> a seasonal overlap between spring and summer, mirrors that performative tradition in the form of *Chaitra Parva*<sup>2</sup> (Spring Festival) by considering it for “acknowledging, celebrating, trumpeting the continuum of the life-death-life” (Khokar 1981: 75). *Chaitra Parva*, a four-day (April 11-15 approximately) festival, is celebrated annually through a series of ritual rites, many of which include dance and music, invoking Lord Shiva, the *Ardhanarishwara*<sup>3</sup> (the composite form Shiva and Shakti). This festival is directed at “world renewal” (Nicholas 2008: 1) and “fertility-compelling celebration” (Ferrari 2010: 102), aiming to bring rain – desiccated fields with crops, ponds with fishes, wives with children, unmarried with marriage, blind with sight, metaphorically reversing the relationship of life and death. The rituals are mainly performed by the ordinary non-brahmans known as ritual bhaktas,<sup>4</sup> who, to appease Lord Shiva, undertake perilous austerities, renunciation, self-mortification, and lead an

1 The transliteration “*Chaitra*” has been adopted here following its popular usage in English-language scholarship and vernacular references to the Bengali calendar. While the Bengali pronunciation tends closer to “*Choitro*” (চৈত্র), “*Chaitra*” is widely recognized in academic and cultural writing, allowing for both accessibility and fidelity to local enunciation.

2 The transliteration “*Chaitra Parva*” is used here in line with common academic usage, though in Bengali pronunciation it is often rendered closer to “*Choitro Porbo*” (চৈত্র পর্ব). “*Parva*” is a Sanskrit-derived term meaning “festival” or “occasion.” Retaining “*Chaitra Parva*” balances fidelity to enunciation with accessibility for wider readership, while the gloss “Spring Festival” clarifies its seasonal context.

3 The transliteration “*Ardhanarishwara*” is employed here following its widespread usage in English-language scholarship, though Sanskritized spellings such as “*Ardhanārīśvara*” are also found. The term refers to the composite form of Lord Shiva and Goddess Shakti, embodying both masculine and feminine principles. This choice reflects a balance between phonetic enunciation and popular recognition in cultural and academic discourse.

4 The term “bhakta” (ভক্ত) derives from Sanskrit, meaning “devotee” or “worshipper.” In the context of *Chaitra Parva*, it refers specifically to non-Brahman practitioners who undertake ritual austerities and devotional performances. The transliteration “bhakta” has been retained in its widely accepted form, consistent with both scholarly usage and vernacular enunciation, rather than the more Sanskritized “*bhaktah*.”

ascetic life throughout the festival for the well-being of the respective communities, their families, and for themselves.

This reflection on the dance festival, supported by a couple of photos, aims to visually capture how the *Chaitra Parva* festival embodies rural West Bengal's cultural landscape. It also sheds light on how those ritual rites, accompanied by dance and music, connect the people with a sense of belongingness and represent a unique cultural identity. The photos presented here were taken by me during the fieldwork conducted in April 2021 at the Lohoria temple in Barria village of Baghmundi block in Purulia district.

The first day, *Falhar*<sup>5</sup> (fruit worship) [Figure 1-2], begins with the ritual bhaktas symbolically emerging from a period of death or birth impurity and worship the goddess, Shakti, taking Her into the Shiva temple, followed by dance and music and chanting magical mantras. At twilight, the bhaktas take their ritual bath and then commemorate in the Shiva temple for the day's procession to offering *Falhar*, containing unripe mangoes added with brown chickpeas and jaggery.

5 The term "*Falhar*" is retained in its popular anglicized form, reflecting local pronunciation in rural Bengal. In Sanskrit, the closer transliteration would be "*Phalāhāra*" (literally, "fruit consumption/offerings"). The simplified "*Falhar*" has been chosen to remain faithful to vernacular enunciation and common cultural usage, while the gloss "fruit worship" clarifies the ritual context for non-specialist readers.

6 The transliteration "*Jagaran*" follows common Bengali and Hindi usage, though in Sanskrit the term is "*Jāgarāṇa*" (जागरण), meaning "wakefulness" or "keeping vigil." The simplified form "*Jagaran*" is widely recognized in popular and scholarly contexts in Bengal, and has been retained here to reflect local enunciation. The explanatory gloss "night of awakening" situates the ritual meaning for broader readership.

7 The term "*Gajan*" (গাজন) refers to the broader set of ritual festivities dedicated to Lord Shiva at the end of the Bengali month of *Chaitra*. The word is often traced to "*garjan*" (গর্জন, meaning "roar" or "loud call"), symbolizing invocation and collective expression. The transliteration "*Gajan*" is retained here as it is the most common form in both scholarly and popular writing. The phrase "*Gajan canes*" designates the ritual staffs carried by devotees (bhaktas) during processions and performances, integral to their vows and symbolic enactments.

8 "*Chhau*" refers to a traditional dance form originating in eastern India, including West Bengal, Jharkhand, and Odisha. The spelling "*Chhau*" is widely used in English-language scholarship and popular references, though regional pronunciations may vary slightly. In the context of *Chaitra Parva*, *Chhau* performances are often ritualized, combining martial movements, acrobatics, and storytelling, and serve as a medium for devotional and communal expression.

9 The term "*Bhakta Ghora*" combines "bhakta", meaning devotee, with "*ghora*" (ঘরা), meaning "to move around" or "circulate." The transliteration follows common usage in Bengali cultural studies. The gloss "wheel celebration" conveys the central ritual action—devotees moving or circling in a ceremonial manner—making the performative and symbolic aspects of this day of *Chaitra Parva* clear to English-speaking readers.

The second day, *Jagaran*<sup>6</sup> (night of awakening) [Figure 3-6], unfolds with the journey of the wooden plank representing *Ardhanariswara* in every household of the village. The bhaktas then play with ash and dance with their *Gajan*<sup>7</sup> canes, charged with the music of a percussion instrument, the *Dhak* (a traditional barrel drum). While the principal bhakta carries the wooden plank, a few newborn babies, children, men, and women lie upright in his path to get Lord Shiva's blessings. After having peace water from the holy pond, all bhaktas reassemble in the Shiva temple, worship Him, get their sacred thread and garland and ritually enter the world of rigorous ascetic life. The bhaktas afterwards, at midnight, begin their bhakta-dance in unison and march towards the dancing arena where the folk performances of *Chhau*<sup>8</sup> take place throughout the night. The third day, *Bhakta Ghora*<sup>9</sup> (wheel celebration) [Figure 7-10], starts with the bhaktas' sun worship at the sacred pond, and the principal ascetic simulates death by lying upon the wooden plank studded with iron spikes, symbolising the life-death-rebirth cycle. On the other hand, a few devotees walk upon the hot embers to receive blessings from Lord Shiva to fulfil their vows. Finally, the wheel

bhaktas begin the arduous hook-swinging ceremony by piercing their back skin with two sharp iron spikes tied with jute ropes. While dancing with other bhaktas, the wheel bhakta reaches the performing site, climbs the bamboo-ladders, ties up with the T-shaped *Gajan* pole, and starts moving ritually, folding his hands in homage to Lord Shiva. On the fourth day, *Balidan*<sup>10</sup> (animal sacrifice) [Figure 11-12], as an age-old custom of propitiation, commences when the bhaktas apply mustard oil mixed with turmeric powder on the stones of Shiva Linga and put the same on each other's bodies, followed by their final bhakta-dance of the festival. Afterwards, they take their last ritual bath and start their concluding worship of Lord Shiva. Finally, to break their ascetic life, the bhaktas and the ordinary people offer uncastrated goats, whose blood is allowed to seep into the earth as a symbolic act of purification, ensuring fertility for the life-death-rebirth continuum.

The following photos, arranged chronologically, will visually help the readers understand the ritual rites of *Chaitra Parva* and its legacy carried forward by the respective communities for ages.

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<sup>10</sup> The term "Balidan" (বলদান) is derived from Sanskrit, meaning "sacrifice" or "offering." In the context of *Chaitra Parva*, it specifically refers to the ritual sacrifice of animals as an act of devotion to Lord Shiva. The transliteration "*Balidan*" is retained in its widely recognized form in both scholarly and popular contexts, while the gloss "animal sacrifice" clarifies the practice for readers unfamiliar with the ritual.





**Figure 1:** The bhaktas, accompanied by the music of the Dhol, carry the epitome of goddess Shakti into the Shiva temple.

This initial act of carrying Shakti establishes the festival's central union of divine energies. Through sound, movement, and collective devotion, the ritual announces its opening moment, preparing the space for offerings that connect fertility and renewal.



**Figure 2:** Worshipping of Lord Shiva during Falhar with His symbolic and seasonal fruit, unripe mangoes, added with brown chickpeas and jaggery.

From the arrival of Shakti, the rites transition to offerings that link agricultural cycles with divine abundance. This embodied exchange between people and deity shifts the ritual focus toward communal blessing, paving the way for acts of submission and surrender.









**Figure 3** (Previous Page) : The children lie on the path of the principal bhakta, who carries the wooden plank and crosses over their bodies, bringing healing power with the blessings of Lord Shiva.

Here, the vulnerability of children signifies trust in divine grace, while the plank becomes a moving shrine of protection. This sacred object soon undergoes its own ritual consecration, deepening its role as a vessel of cosmic energy.



**Figure 4:** Ritual worship of the wooden plank takes place in the holy pond with vermilion, incense, wood apple leaves, rice, and lotus flowers (representing Shiva and Shakti).

By immersing the plank, bhaktas merge elemental forces of earth, water, and fire into ritual action. Once purified, the body and the community are readied for ecstatic dance, where devotion becomes performance.





**Figure 5:** The bhaktas, with their Gajan cane and garlands, representing Shiva's trident and snake on His neck, respectively, dance with great gusto and march towards the Chhau dancing arena.

This collective movement transforms symbolic objects into extensions of Shiva's power. The body in dance becomes both sacred and theatrical, naturally transitioning into the more stylized performances that mark the festival's nocturnal climax.





**Figure 6:** The night of awakening's final ritual is celebrated by witnessing vibrant performances of the Purulia *Chhau* dance.

Through Chhau, myth and ritual converge, allowing artistic expression to carry divine narratives. As night turns toward dawn, the ritual gaze shifts from human enactments to celestial forces, aligning the community with cosmic cycles.



**Figure 7:** The bhaktas worship *Suryadeva* (an incarnation of Lord Shiva) along with the priest, who provides access to the divine cosmic world by means of ritual acts.

In this moment, worship turns upward to the sun, reaffirming the interplay between light and shadow. From cosmic invocation, the bhaktas descend again into bodily ordeal, where the human frame becomes a stage for transcendence.

**Figure 8:** The principal bhakta lies upon the wooden plank and simulates death, which has the spiritual power of the life-death-rebirth cycle.

The body stretched upon iron spikes manifests impermanence and endurance. From this symbolic death, the ritual progresses toward fiery trials that test and purify both individuals and community.







**Figure 9:** Ritual space for walking upon the fire of logs and pieces of wood is being prepared to pay homage to Lord Shiva to fulfil devotees' private vows.

Crossing fire becomes a passage through suffering toward divine protection. The intensity of this trial prepares the ground for the most dramatic ordeal—the suspension of the body in the hook-swinging ritual.



**Figure 10:** The wheel bhakta begins his arduous hook-swinging ceremony by moving ritually both forward and backwards, along with the T-shaped *Gajan* pole, stranded above almost 30 feet from the ground.

Suspended between heaven and earth, the bhakta embodies Shiva's cosmic dance of destruction and renewal. After this spectacular apex, the festival shifts toward closure, guiding ascetics back into ordinary life through acts of preparation and cleansing.





**Figure 11:** All bhaktas assembled in a queue for their ritual rites of paring nails, shaving beards, and preparing for the concluding celebration.

This grooming signals the transition from ascetic detachment back to communal reintegration. The body, once mortified, is now readied for a final act of purification and shared joy.





**Figure 12:** To mark the end of *Chaitra Parva* and to leave the ascetic life and return to their everyday lives, the bhaktas put mustard oil mixed with turmeric powder on each other's bodies and start their final dance of reverence for themselves.

The *Chaitra Parva* festival concludes with dance, not as sacrifice but as renewal. Through ritual touch and colour, the bhaktas affirm continuity—of fertility, of social bonds, and of a cultural identity sustained across generations.