

## Article

# Religious Belief through Drum-Sound Experience: Bengal's Devotional Dialectic of the Classical Goddess and Indigenous God

Sukanya Sarbadhikary

Department of Sociology, Presidency University, Kolkata 700073, India; sarbadhikary@gmail.com

**Abstract:** The epistemic question about what constitutes religious belief in non-Western contexts is addressed here through the ontology of sonic experience. I demonstrate that religious beliefs are habitually ingrained as long-sustaining visceral memories, when afforded by sensory—for instance, aural—affects. Bengal's peculiar devotional milieu constructs a prototype of oppositions. On one end is the urban, classical, martial goddess, Durga, with elite histories of acquiring a high Brahmanical form, and whose autumnal rituals are based on scriptural rules, caste hierarchies, and distance among the devotees and deity. On the other end is the rural, indigenous, non-classical, peasant god, Shiva, whose spring-time worship celebrating primordial death and regeneration is based on intensely embodied and communitarian principles of identity among the caste-equal bodies of devotee men, and even their god. Based on immersive ethnographic analyses, the paper argues that these dual psychological ends of the regional sacred cosmos are made vividly real through differential perceptive experiences of percussion sounds (ubiquitous in these festivities), their varied tempos, textures, volumes, and rhythm modulations. Through phenomenological deep listening, I describe stark styles of making and playing the sacred membranophone drum, *dhak*, which embodies distinct rhythm styles, relationships with rituals, and psychophysical effects on the devotional ensembles. I show how the bodies of devotees, *dhak* players (*dhakis*), deities, and even the *dhak*, become tied to the tonalities of the drum, which is taught through generations of deft learning among *dhakis*, to sound distinctly when echoed for Durga and Shiva. The paper's main argument is that these *dhak* sounds, which have remained a conceptual oversight in literature, not only aid in, but indeed, enable the experience of and belief in Bengal's divergent deities. It is through such empowering sensory sedimentations of the different sounds of the same percussion, that people recognize, remember, and maintain the region's devotional dialectic and complex religious lifeworld. In essence, the body's powerful experiences of drum sounds make religious belief palpable and possible.



**Citation:** Sarbadhikary, Sukanya. 2022. Religious Belief through Drum-Sound Experience: Bengal's Devotional Dialectic of the Classical Goddess and Indigenous God. *Religions* 13: 707. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13080707>

Academic Editor: Hans Van Eyghen

Received: 29 June 2022

Accepted: 28 July 2022

Published: 1 August 2022

**Publisher's Note:** MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



**Copyright:** © 2022 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

**Keywords:** religious experience; Bengal; ritual; body; sound; affect; drum; dhak; Durga; Shiva

## 1. Introduction

I grew up in Calcutta, the capital city of the religiously rich state of West Bengal. Rumbling sounds of the sacred percussion, *dhak*, remained for me, like all city Bengalis, the quintessential marker of Durga puja, the five continuous days and nights of worshipping the classical, Sanskritic, martial goddess. Durga famously slayed the most powerful demons in heaven, and in popular Bengali tradition, has also been familiarized as both devotees' strong mother-figure and the sacred daughter-figure. While married to the god Shiva, she annually visits her paternal home in Bengal during these five days of autumn. The first sight of the blue autumn skies unfailingly throbs with the heralding booms of the *dhak* in Bengali hearts. Early in the first morning of Durga's *puja*, the *dhak* plays in soft and happy rhythms, and we know while still in our beds that the goddess is arriving (being invoked), and that her celebratory worship shall now be rejoiced throughout the city. This warm sound is ubiquitously cherished as the goddess's *bodhan* (welcome).

However, we have also heard a very different-sounding *dhak* in the wee hours of the spring month with which the Bengali year ends: a loud roaring thunder-like growling sound, overtop which male voices, almost angrily, shout the names of Shiva. This reverberating sound has long held associations with the unknown, fearful, and even exotic indigenous ‘other’, for urban Bengalis. Like the remnants of an unsettling dream, we have mostly passed over these thunderous echoes, in deep slumber. Thus, while Durga puja’s *dhak* wakes us up to the time of celebrations and invites us to the *pandals* in which the goddess idols are stationed for the duration of her worship, the other *dhak* sounds emerge from and disappear into rustic interiors. Accompanying these latter *dhak* sounds are rural menfolk who come to beg for alms from city people. These folks include both ordinary devotees and drummers playing on their *dhaks*. These rural devotees loudly invoke god, and sound their booming drums through the city roads, and then return for their five-day worship of Shiva in their villages to mark the end of an agrarian year and the beginning of another.

I made a fascinating discovery later during my fieldwork with *dhak* drummers (*dhakis*), who live in rural districts and play both for the village spring-time Shiva worship, and in cities during Durga puja. *Dhakis* often possess two different kinds of drums for the two Bengali pujas, and learn distinct styles of constructing them and sounding their rhythms. The same percussion, *dhak*, holds diverse meanings and generates stark sound-worlds and epistemic worldviews for the people sounding and listening to them.

Popular forms of embodiment of religious sounds constitute the analytical crux in this paper, to help us think about what makes religious belief in (divergent) deities immediate, evident, and tangible for people. In response to the basic epistemological question about why people hold religious beliefs towards—or what sustains the belief in—classical and non-classical gods, I turn to an ontological exploration, and argue strongly that it is through deeply cultivated devotional sensory (aural) experiences that contrary and simultaneous ideas have survived through several centuries in Bengal. These ideas include both classical divine perfection and indigenous humanization of the divine, abstraction and domestication, and ritual hierarchy and communal unity. Further, sacred sounds have been deftly analyzed as critical to constructions of and corporeal experiences in Hinduism (Beck 1993), and there are specific contextual dimensions to the role of sacred sounds in the varied articulations of religious belief. In this paper, through thick descriptions of sacred drum sounds and their sympathetic relationships with rituals, during the worship of a Sanskritized goddess and an indigenous deity, I specifically argue that ritual and performative soundscapes felt by the devotees’ visceral substrata not only sustain but indeed *enable* the imaginations of both classical and non-classical forms of religiosity. Simply, varied modes of sonic affects make both high classical and local indigenous deities real. Further, based on intensive participatory immersion in Bengal’s rich sacred lifeworld and its acoustic atmospheres, this paper argues that while religious belief in Hindu classical deities is often based on imaginations of divine perfection and hierarchical relations of devotees with the deity and among devotees themselves, devotional relationships with non-classical, personalized, indigenous deities are sustained through principles of shared, embodied, and communitarian identity among the devotees and even between the devotees and deity.

The paper’s ethnographic focus is on the consecrated percussion, namely the *dhak*, the membranophone drum which is hung from the drummer’s neck and played on its right-side with two sticks, while the left-side provides necessary booming feedback. The drum is ubiquitous in two most popular religious festivals of Bengal: the mostly urban autumnal worship of the classical deity Durga, and the essentially rural springtime worship of the localized male god, Shiva. Herein, Durga is imagined as the royal prototype of a warrior-goddess embodying divine perfection in Brahmanical scriptures. Shiva, by contrast, is constructed as both an indigenous peasant god with vulnerabilities, and the somber deity to be appeased for immediate agrarian community welfare. This paper is based centrally on my fieldwork among *dhak* makers and drummers (*dhakis*). The people I conversed with belong to lowest Bengali castes, spread over several rural districts. The fieldwork involved

learning about their methods of *dhak* construction, playing, and the drum's origin myths. It also involved learning about the *dhakis'* understandings of the instrument's religious cosmology, and, most importantly, experiencing the *dhaks'* varied soundscapes to realize the distinct religious worlds they affect. The same percussion instrument has stark materialities, rhythms, textures, and acoustic relationships with the drummer and devotee-collectives, in the festivals attributed to the classical and indigenous deities. The paper highlights how these sacralities depend, in equal intensities, on the embodiment of sound (and their strategic silences), and also how such sonic operations are simultaneously divergent. These acoustic divergences precisely generate moods and dispositions towards on the one hand, an all-powerful orthodox goddess with whom the devotees have a subordinate relation, and in whose worship devotees also have hierarchical relations among themselves; and on the other hand, a non-classical peasant god, with whom all devotees share a relation of communal identity.

*Dhak* drummers (*dhakis*), who also make the drums they play, stretch the edges of the mango-wood percussion bodies with leather. Since they are associated with leather-work, considered essentially impure in the Hindu caste order, *dhakis* belong to the lowest, untouchable castes. And thus paradoxically, while *dhak* is the most critical ritual accompaniment in both the Bengali sacred festivals, *dhakis* are placed low in the hierarchized and classicized mother goddess worship. Yet at the same time, *dhakis* and their instrument sounds are organically enmeshed in the non-hierarchical, communitarian rural form of Shiva worship. Sound, caste, and ritual embodiment thus come together in the making of a regional tradition with alternate sacralities centering around prototypes of a classical and an indigenous deity.

My thoughts have resonance with Richard Wolf's (2014) work, which shows that South Asian percussion vocality, 'The Voice in the Drum', affects distinct sacred orders, sometimes carrying classical textual messages, irrespective of being literally understood by the drummer or listener, but which are ingrained as part of a regional tradition. While this is true for Durga's worship, which depends on high Sanskrit texts and rituals executed by the Brahmin priest, and in relation to whom the drummer and devotees are subordinate and distant, the case differs for Shiva. The Shiva puja *dhak* does not represent any authoritarian speech-form, but rather, a corporeally woven sonority consisting of men's caste-equal bodies and the *dhak* sounds, where roaring masculine shouts and drum rumblings together signify primal human sacrificial cries towards Shiva, their peasant god, praying to him to 'cool' down and heal personal agonies, climatic aridness, soil heat, and social sufferings.

Thus, the question about what constitutes religious belief in deities in non-Western contexts is being addressed here from the perspective of the embodied materiality of sensory experience. I argue that the cognitive sustenance of deity figurations (of both classical perfection and indigenous familiarity) depends intrinsically on bodies' sedimentation of visceral memories, in this case, aural ones, associated with different worship traditions. Shiva worship signifies a deep communitarian psychology with a primeval aspect, and Durga worship, of goddess classicism and caste hierarchy. Thus, Bengal's regional sacred cosmos represents a dual psychological axis constituted by a classical goddess and non-classical god, both vividly embedded in popular memory, through sheer physical and perceptive experiences of percussion acoustics, which enable their worship. Thus, the cognitive psychological basis of belief is precisely understood as affected by corporeal experiences of sound.

The ubiquitous sacrality of percussion and its particular effects in generating altered states of consciousness have been documented from over the world in anthropology (Harner 1982; Hart 1990). Rouget (1985) specifically contributed to these studies through a significant debate about the neurophysiological universality of percussion sounds vis-à-vis their contextual particularities in evoking possessed states in participant listeners. He argued that universal scientific laws cannot explain relations between music and trance, and that these relations are wholly structured through cultural understandings. I agree with Rouget's culturalist thrust, and show that essentially socially learned ways

of drum sounding and listening, in case of Durga puja and Gajan festival, create varied sacralities. However, I also suggest that these sacred affects are further strengthened by and phenomenologically entrenched in the devotional bodies through the exact materialities of the *dhak*'s distinct acoustics.

## 2. Dhak Sounds and Religious Belief in Popular Bengal

I had not analytically noted the dialectic of the celebratory and somber *dhak* sounds of Durga puja and Shiva worship, even though it has been a part of my cultural lifeworld since childhood, until I began fieldwork, about five years ago, with *dhakis* throughout rural West Bengal. The *dhak*, to an average urban Bengali, is the Durga puja's critical accompaniment, and thus my initial inquiries were only directed at the drum's relation with goddess worship. Over time, I had a most fascinating serendipitous discovery, however, when in many rural drummer households, especially in Bankura, Murshidabad, and Birbhum districts, I found two kinds of *dhaks*. First, a smaller-sized one whose leather bands on the leather surfaces are stretched more—and especially after the monsoon moisture dampens it—to produce a sharper and tuned rhythmic sound to be used in autumn's Durga puja. Second, there is a much bigger, hollower drum to be used in the springtime Shiva worship. This drum is not stretched, and with its textural sloppiness, it produces a very grave, floppy sound. Gradually, I came to understand that these *dhaks* have distinctly different textural acoustics and rhythms, aligning with the differing moods of urban Durga puja and the embodied, communitarian rural ritual-worship festival known as Gajan. In the former context, generally cognitively distracted audiences require fast-paced, striking rhythms and loud and high-pitched, imposing sounds to attract them to the *pandals*, as this suits their busy schedules in which a five-day celebratory break is welcome. In the latter ritual context, conducted by men who take stern vows of penance and austerity to worship the quintessential male god Shiva, a more slow-paced, rumbling, bold, entrancing drum roar best enables the possession of their bodies.

Further, village drummers emphasized that the *Gajan dhak* is the older, more authentic, non-classical, and local indigenous worship vessel, whose rumbling sounds are Shiva's favorite. They awaken Shiva from his yogic trance (Nicholas 2008, p. 60), enabling him to hear his peasant devotees' prayers for fertile lands, homes, and bodies after the scorching rural summers dry up their villages. The *dhak*'s sounds are imagined to mirror Shiva's small drum, *dambaru*, always held in his hand, which he sounds during his destructive cosmic dance, and which also brings fecund rains. Drummers also told me that they learn particular thunder-resembling rhythmic tones from gurus, which also have sensory sympathy with Shiva's serious ascetic mood and his meditative heartbeats. Indeed, the term *Gajan* may have been derived from the word, *garjan*, meaning a roaring, rumbling sound (ibid., p. 21), and thus there are constant synchronous imaginations connecting the drum, divinity, and community ritual. The *dhakis* playing the drum during *Gajan* are peasants, and the Bengali Shiva, is imagined as taking the form of a peasant god. Thus Shiva, his devotees, and drummers, constitute one non-hierarchical identitarian whole during *Gajan* festival. The hollow and grave drum sounds mark the immediacy of the felt religion, when devotees are said to 'become Shiva', the rumbles affecting their bodies in a series of possessed acts, painful rituals, and transformative ecstatic practices such as body piercings, hook swinging, dancing with corpses, etc. All of these elements are said to inculcate Shiva-like virtues of strength and tolerance. Contrarily, Durga puja is a classicized worship system with strict hierarchical rituals led by the Brahmin priest executing the defined successions of the goddess's worship, with the devotees being distant witnesses to the acts. The untouchable drummers, meanwhile, act essentially as background subjects, even though the sounds they produce are indispensable for the priest's ritually correct moods and the devotees' subservient affects towards the goddess.

Ethnographic categories invoked by drummers—which set the central analytical tone for the paper's sensory analysis—are the *gambhir* (solemn/intense/deep) sound of the *Gajan* drum, and its contrast with the *uccha/chora* (high-pitched/loud/speed) acoustic of

the Durga puja drum. The former enables a *communitas* (Turner 2002) based on identity with a non-classical god, and the latter, a hierarchical mood towards a triumphant, martial, classical goddess. Further, these terms capture, at a go, the entire organic ensemble of nature, performance, divinity, devotion, and affective experience by making simultaneous allusions to the drums' materiality, aesthetic strategies, and ethics of piety. For instance, the term *gambhir* concurrently implies a grave sound (materiality), its hollow and flappy surface (texture depending on construction techniques), long and difficult rhythms (performance styles learnt from gurus), lower tone (to be heard among participant devotees who have physically clustered together in an open rural space designated for the possession rituals), the intense summer (when the drum is played), the sounds resembling the cloud rumble (to invoke fertile rains, as also the serious mood of the mighty Shiva), and also the steady, unwavering, somber moral dispositions of the devotees (who themselves become like the peasant god), praying for their community welfare. Alternately, the term *chora* has significant implications for the urban worship festival, where devotees associate the drum sounds with furthering the ritual mood that the priest singularly and hierarchically invokes towards the classical goddess. Its rhythms are denser and faster (*ghono*), and arouse nervous excitement (*uttejona*).<sup>1</sup> Thus, a sonic binary is created between longer rhythmic styles and shorter and speedier beats, low versus high tones, playing for a community gathered together in a single place versus attracting people to a *pandal* from afar, a rural embodied practice of a slow trance versus a swift urban ecstasy for a volatile and low-attention audience, and the moods and practices towards an immediate god versus those for a high goddess.

My serendipitous realization about the sonic dialectic resonates effectively with Ralph Nicholas' 'serendipitous discovery' about two contrary observances (*Gajan* and Durga puja) in the Bengali ritual calendar, which together construct a specific form of 'regional culture in Indian civilization' (Nicholas 2008, p. 7; Nicholas 2013, pp. 41–42). This culture precisely mediates an orthodox and non-classical form of divinization through sacred sound production. *Gajan* essentially signifies fertilization and regeneration, ending an old year of dry heat to beckon a new hopeful fertile temporal order. This is embodied by mostly lower-caste peasant men of the soil, who perform intense austerities as prayers and offerings to their peasant god. This Shiva festival was originally associated with the pre-Aryan, non-Brahmanical deity, Dharma,<sup>2</sup> with an essentially lower-caste following. Even though later Brahmanical orders replaced Dharma with a combination of the classical Puranic god Shiva and a Bengali form of the peasant god, *Gajan*'s essential composition, rituals, and ontology remain strongly indigenous. In other words, *Gajan* is the quintessential non-classical festival of the popular folk worshipping a localized deity (Nicholas 2013, pp. 60–62). Nicholas contrasts this communitarian, non-hierarchical social order or 'preeminent ritual of the common people' with the classical form of Durga puja representing a 'sacrificial polity of a caste-based order', where ritual hierarchy is enacted (ibid., p. 6). Ostor (1980) also described the same devotional opposition of the festivals as pomp, ceremony, and hierarchy (in Durga puja) vis-à-vis simplicity, unity, and singularity (in *Gajan*).

The history of this condensed duality has not been neat, however, since all Bengali gods and goddesses, even orthodox ones, have been emotionalized, and fierce deities softened, or their worship reframed simply on love, through the 'balm of bhakti' popularized by the medieval devotional current of *Vaishnavism* (McDermott 2001b). Despite this, as I shall demonstrate in the next section, Durga essentially remained a classical goddess, while Shiva remained local. Similarly, despite the anti-hierarchical *Vaishnava* devotional wave, caste practices have survived through certain religious historical negotiations (see also van der Veer 1987). Almost all *dhakis*, like the majority of rural Bengal, are lower-caste *Vaishnavas* by initiation, and have deep communitarian reverence for Shiva's *Gajan*, this *Vaishnava* Shiva devotion embodying a rural continuum. And yet *dhakis* attend Durga puja festivities for the economic benefits that only cities can provide. Many *dhakis* told me that they enjoy playing in *Gajan* much more, as that is where their true devotion lies, and although very reverential towards the goddess too, they attend the urban festivities primarily

for money. Many *dhakis* also confessed that they are not always treated with respect in cities. *Dhakis* are thus clear about the distinctions among their initiation affiliations as *Vaishnavas*, their rural devotional lifeworld of *Gajan*, and the urban classicism of Durga puja.

However, Nicholas makes a further, stronger argument about the Bengali division between the autumn–spring cycle of classical–non classical worship. In Brahmanical imagination, autumn is the ‘night of the gods’, when deities ideally sleep and do not receive worship. While the ascetic demon Ravana performed Durga puja in the ideal season of spring (Ostor 1980, p. 18), the classical text, The Ramayana, however, describes how Lord Rama worshipped Durga in a fashion described as ‘untimely’ (*akaaal*), to defeat the demon Ravana; and moreover, Sanskrit narratives also describe the goddess’s killing of the buffalo demon, Mahisasura, as the triumph of good over evil. These narrative plots have combined in the vernacular regional milieu of Bengal, and served elite Hindu interests in claiming authority over first Mughal and then colonial rule, with their Rama-like autumnal worship of the classical goddess serving as the primary martial symbol (Guha-Thakurta 2015, p. 3). Bengali Durga puja thus became *akal bodhan* (untimely worship), with Durga’s overtly classicized representation as killing the demon, Mahisasura (ibid., p. 15). Nicholas powerfully suggests that the elite Brahmanical construction, although always uncomfortable with the alternative, popular, non-hierarchical, low-caste, communitarian *Gajan* worship, remained unsuccessful in displacing this strongest rural current, and labeled Durga’s worship time as *untimely*, suggesting thus that it is rightfully reserved for spring, the season that has been taken over by the non-classical Shiva (Nicholas 2013, pp. 41–42).

Hatcher similarly argues that the elite project of religious ‘reform’ was never complete, and thus our lens of studying folk culture must not be clouded by Sanskrit hegemonic efforts (2020, p. 8 cited in (De 2021, p. 49)). Bengal’s community consciousness, popular psyche, and religious ‘common sense’ thus holds together the contradictory unity of an autonomous sacrality which predates the arrival of Aryan culture and which engages peasant labor with nature through direct sense experience and a more ideological submission to classicized religiosity. This devotional dialectic has formed a resilient sacred ‘mentality’ over centuries (see Banerjee 2002, pp. 2–5; Chatterjee 1989, pp. 169–70).

However, both Ostor’s and Nicholas’s works have intricate details about the ritual processes in these two festivals, while my analytical focus is slightly different, centered on the basic enabling characteristic of both modes of sacrality, and which remains marginal in literature—the *dhak*’s sounds literally bringing to life the classical and non-classical deities, Durga and Shiva, and their devotional ensembles. While the drum’s sounds are mentioned as enhancing all ritual effects, their affects have only been considered as sacred backgrounds, and not sensory foregrounds.<sup>3</sup> The sounds, paradoxically, due to their essential ubiquity and centrality, have been analytically overlooked, and I seek to foreground them, to argue that they precisely make these polar religious deities and experiences simultaneously real for the Bengali populace. Through phenomenological descriptions of sounds, rituals, and psychophysical effects, I show how bodies, their synesthesia and kinesthesia, are tied to the drum’s tempos, patterns, textures and tonalities, as well as the personalities of the deities being propitiated through them (see Das n.d.; Jankowsky 2006). Using sound as the method to hear histories, I describe both kinds of enabling percussion acoustics: constituting complete synchrony among rhythms, bodies, and divinity in *Gajan*, where the *dhaki* is the most essential ritual collaborator; and on the other hand, a ritual aid in an orthodox process, where the *dhaki* is rendered subordinate, while the rhythms mark out a martial goddess and her submissive devotees. Along with the *dhak*’s sounds, its lower-caste producers, the *dhakis*, have also been taken for granted in literature. The touch of the untouchables, when converted to sacred sound, enables the precise meanings of these ritual festivals, and I thus attempt a serendipitous history of Bengali classical and non-classical religious lives through *dhak* sounds.

Drum sonic textures and beats thus make certain deity figures palpable and believable for devotees, and a part of their everyday social world. Visceral sounds of the drum not only enhance ritual meaning, but indeed form the enabling bedrock upon which both

classical and non-classical deity forms attain epistemic meaning. The same percussion instrument, through varied styles of making, playing, and being, thus has the efficacious power of engendering contrary devotional modes. While Bengal's religious history has been amply studied, I am adopting a new methodology of phenomenological deep listening (Becker 2004), to demonstrate that this religiopolitical history is always embodied (Wolf 2006), and even, 'ensounded' (Lorea 2022). I argue that when located in bodily sensory materialities, sounds sustain cultures and make 'belief' in deities an attainable experience. Thus, I make sounds the material prism to understand the pre-histories of an embodied religiosity of the indigenous people (Ferrari 2010), as well as a classical, urban, Brahmanical sacrality. This broad-stroke historical retelling is enabled by the drum itself, whose sounds remain and resound to recall and remind us of Bengal's multifaceted religious existence.

### 3. The Indigenous Shiva and Classical Durga

Bengal's complex religious history can be distilled into a polar axis of an orthodox, Brahmanical, autumnal worship of the mother goddess, Durga, and a localized, rural, non-Brahmanical spring-time worship of the peasant god, Shiva. This polarity has been constituted from within the 'heterodoxy' and 'eclecticism' of subaltern popular religion (Chatterjee 1989, pp. 186–89). Although both these sacred modes were inflected with the strong devotional currents of the medieval period, *bhakti* was classicized for Durga, while it remained communitarian and egalitarian among Shiva devotees. Also, while this duality has been a more-or-less continuous feature of the region's history, it was strengthened in the colonial period. I shall provide here a broad overview of this historical congealment, which shall help us understand through the rest of the paper how drum sounds bring these distinctive religiosities to life.

Durga's worship is essentially classical, since it is based on scriptural injunctions, textual (especially orthodox tantra) notions of an abstract philosophical goddess, and highly specific and caste-hierarchized rituals performed by priests (see McDaniel 2004, p. 9). Her invocations are mainly obtained from the *Devi Mahatmya* (Goddess's Glory) section of the 6th-century traditional text, *Markandeya Purana*, where she is deemed to be the protector goddess (Mahisasurmardini) who slays the demon (Mahisasur) (ibid., p. 210). While Durga is also adored as Bengal's daughter, Uma, it is her martial role which reigns supreme. On the other hand, agrarian rites towards Shiva, praying for health and harvest, have been popular in rural Bengal and performed annually by lower-caste millions for centuries (De 2021). In *Gajan*, the ritual enactments of possession, body piercings, fire play, and several other austerities symbolizing pain and regeneration are not always textually prescribed. Rather, they are learnt from earlier generations of the village's *Gajan sanniyasis* (men who temporarily become renouncers for a period of fifteen days, cultivate strict ascetic practices to both embody Shiva-ness and please him through their sacrificial enactments). The Shiva who is propitiated in rural Bengal is understood as both an ideal renouncer and a poor, hapless, vulnerable peasant. Thus, *Gajan's* Shiva is the serious, naked, knowledgeable mendicant, living and meditating in the cremation grounds, with no fixed abode, befriending ghosts and ghouls, begging like the Buddha, and the angry god who is responsible for cosmic destruction. These figurations also conceive him as a most vulnerable, fallible deity: a poor, lazy farmer and an irresponsible alcoholic and hemp smoker. This Shiva cannot provide for his family, begs for food, and is thus requested by his wife to attend carefully to his farming duties, though he eventually becomes an ideal Hindu householder (Ostor 1980, p. 21; Sen 1954, pp. 63–67, 239).

Between 950 CE and 1350 CE, non-Brahmanical tantric Buddhism was popular in Bengal, but from the 6th century, Brahmanism began to gradually recast religious practices (McDaniel 2004, p. 20). This was exemplified by Dharma, an 'unconscious' admixture in popular religion (Dasgupta 1946, p. 308) [of decaying tantric Buddhism, several indigenous practices, and Hindu beliefs, including about Yama, the death god (ibid., pp. 297–98)] who emerged as the 'general godhead' of all deity forms present since the 10th century (ibid., pp. 323–27). He was primarily worshipped by the lower classes, his rituals presided over

by lower-caste priests, and there are also instances of his devotees' persecution by caste Hindus (ibid., p. 305). Even into the 17th century, Brahmin priests would maintain distance from the deity and his festival for the fear of 'losing caste' (Sen 1954, p. 28). Dharma's most organic association was with Shiva, and later, his worship was further connected with the deity couple Shiva–Parvati (Dasgupta 1946, pp. 321–22; Sen 1954, p. 26). The theological values binding Dharma and Shiva are focused on the efficacy of asceticism in bringing about regeneration and rebirth (Nicholas 2008, p. 142). This finds expression in rural devotees' renunciate and sacrificial practices to pray to Dharma/Shiva for the fertile regeneration of their fields and homes. Thus, the present-day *Gajans* I observed, although dedicated to Shiva, are still sometimes called Dharma-Gajan. Also, the description I shall analyze below of a contemporary *Gajan* performance has fecund mixing of centuries-old popular indigenous elements of tantric practices, Buddhist-like begging rituals, Shiva–Parvati marriage commemorations, as well as death metaphors of Shiva's cremation ground, or Yama's intense death-mongering.

Both Durga and Shiva were personalized through the medieval Bengal devotional current of Vaishnavism. During the 14th–17th centuries, a literary genre known as *Man-galkavyas* developed (and in the 17th–18th centuries there were *Shibayan* poems<sup>4</sup>), which rendered the deities in humanized, immediate, and accessible forms. The all-powerful Shiva of the classical Puranas was peasantized (McDaniel 2004, p. 21), and the ascetic tantric thus also became economically and morally weak (McDermott 2001a, p. 6). Thus, there are songs describing Shiva and his wife fighting over mundane household matters and the endearing ways in which Shiva ploughed the rice fields (Banerjee 2002, p. 12; Sen 1954, pp. 68–71). Sen argued therefore that there were three distinct elements in rural Shiva's characterizations: the Pauranik serious form, the rustic attributes with distinct tantric features (such as Shiva's fetish for the cremation grounds and association with scary ghosts), and the familial aspects of his patriarchal role in the Hindu household (Sen 1954, p. 72; Bose 2018). The amalgamation of these features served the village peoples' need for a god who was protective yet believable—a god they could relate to immediately (Sen 1954, p. 67). In *Gajan* performances today, we find the embodiment of this multilayered Shiva. Essentially speaking, through his toil and leisure and his intensely nonconformist ways, the peasant Shiva is overarchingly a non-scriptural, autochthonous god (De 2021, p. 19).

However, although Durga/Uma too is dearly personalized,<sup>5</sup> the emotional *bhakti* in her case is innately tied to classical tantra, and the daughter Uma is overshadowed by the protector mother representing the Brahmanical supreme infinite consciousness (McDaniel 2004, p. 12). The loving daughter thus comes home exactly when the ten-armed classical martial goddess is worshipped (McDermott 2001a, p. 3). Tantras have been composed since the 6th century, with further proliferation during the 11th/12th centuries, and later, goddess Puranas were added to the Brahmanical corpus (Bordeaux 2019). These goddess tracts had Sanskritized vocabulary and Aryanized worship prescriptions (Sen 1954, pp. 250–51). Chakrabarti powerfully argues that significant tantras were also composed precisely when the devotional *Mangalkavyas* were being written, and the goddess Puranas (during the 8th–13th centuries) effectively tied tantras with Vedic rites, eventually rendering the goddess as the perfect fit with pan-Indian classical Brahmanical Hinduism (Chakrabarti 2001, pp. 185–88). The texts established a strong Brahmanical social order on local systems to construct the dominant expression of Bengal's regional goddess tradition. This ideological system classicized the original forms of the indigenous goddesses into an abstract philosophical power, and also defined Buddhism as its other (Chakrabarti 2001, pp. 1–35). The transfiguration of the goddess's non-Vedic attributes into an identifiable orthodox Brahmanical form culminated in the *Markandeya Purana's* section on *Devi Mahatmya* (ibid., p. 170). Durga puja rituals, then, essentially worship not the village goddess or Shiva's wife, but the independent, exalted, martial demon slayer (O'Flaherty 1986). The indigenous forms of Buddhism, as I have argued, could not, however, be erased, and remained strong through the figure of Dharma, who was later Hinduized as the *Gajan* Shiva. While Durga's martial aspects were superposed on earlier agrarian harvest rites

(McDermott 2011, p. 6), making her a hierarchical, non-localized, Sanskrit deity, Bengal's peasantized divinity was distilled as the rural, non-classical Shiva.

Drawing from these already existing cultural tendencies, the great divide in the religious modes of Durga puja/*Gajan* (strict binaries of urban/rural, classical/non-classical, hierarchical/communitarian sacralities), took place during the early modern and colonial periods. Against *Vaishnavism's* essentially anti-caste, egalitarian, and lenient devotional principles rampant in Bengal since the medieval period, figures such as the zamindar Krishnachandra Ray, in the 18th century, acting as the leader of the Hindu society, reinvigorated a classical taste in the goddess, and introduced rigid ritual hierarchical repertoires in her worship (Sen 1954, p. 621). From her earlier esoteric worship in homes, the goddess Kali, for instance, made a claim on the public ritual space, with the help of upper-caste elite aristocrats, who consolidated her theologically conservative rituals as an assertion of a Hindu orthodoxy representing mainstream Brahmanism against non-hierarchical popular religion (Bordeaux 2019). Similarly, Durga puja started being celebrated in the homes of upper-caste landowning zamindars during the 17th–18th centuries, first as a Hindu assertion in times of Islamic rule, and later in the 19th–20th centuries against colonial rule, with Durga emerging as their 'heroic' symbol of economic wealth, political power, and social status.<sup>6</sup> Up until the mid-19th century, Durga was reserved for the highest castes. Later, however, Durga puja became *sarbanjanin*, that is, for *all* sections of society, with her public autumnal worship becoming the greatest expression of urban social splendor and popular commercialized ritual but always essentially retaining the classical hierarchical tenor acquired over centuries (McDermott 2011, pp. 6–10, 93; Nicholas 2013, pp. 11–15). Durga's classicism thus combines an elite upper-caste urbanity with ritual Brahmanism.

On the other hand, in the colonial imagination, *Gajan* had been characterized as the quintessential lowly, popular, local, rural, primitive form of popular worship. Like other infamous practices such as *sati* and human sacrifice, ritual elements of *Gajan*, such as hook swinging and body piercings, came under severe colonial criticism and policing, and were essentially dismissed as mindless lower-caste activities (Banerjee 2002, p. 8; De 2021, p. 16; Oddie 1995). For the missionaries, *Gajan* was the Orient's 'barbarous devil worship' practiced by the 'most dissipated characters' of the lowest classes (De 2021, p. 47) like cobblers and corpse bearers (ibid., p. 46), and the festival's inebriated loudness, possessed states, and self-flagellations were diametrically opposed to what was considered acceptable behavior in the urban environment. Thus, 'the whole body of Hindus' could not 'be "charged" for the "absurdity" of the festival', according to missionaries (ibid.). Respectability thus gravitated towards Durga puja, while *Gajan* could never be replaced from popular consciousness, and remained at the other end of Bengal's sacred axis as a thriving, throbbing reminder of an embodied communitarian essence.

The devotional mood is thus common to both Durga and Shiva worship, but Durga emerges essentially as a classical Pauranic divinity, while rural, syncretic popular psychology retains a primeval aspect embodied by the Dharma/Shiva cult (see Dasgupta 1946, p. 348). Despite the upper caste, urban silencing or forgetting of *Gajan's* sacrality, it remains the strongest beat of Bengal's subaltern religious pulsation.

The *Vaishnava*-initiated peasants and lower-caste peasant drummers thus organically celebrate the deity Shiva, and their Shiva-*Vaishnava* rural continuum is evident in myths about the *dhak* (see below), while the same *dhakis* flock the city in autumn, to play for Durga puja. Their economic sustenance depends on the city's festival, where even if they are cultural outsiders, they have the assurance of substantive earnings to complement their otherwise meagre peasant wages.

Bengal's devotional dialectic of the classical goddess and indigenous god is brought to life by *dhakis'* detailed techniques of making and playing distinct drums, and I now turn to these embodied religious and sonic lifeworlds.

#### 4. Dhakis and the Dhaks

I carried out fieldwork among *dhakis* in several districts of West Bengal, including Kolkata, North 24 Parganas, Hooghly, Birbhum, Bankura, and Murshidabad. In their own reckoning, there are about 11,000–12,000 *dhakis* in contemporary Bengal. *Dhakis* belong to the lowest Bengali castes. They mostly have the Das surname, and trace their lineage to the caste ancestor Muchiram Das, a leatherworker (*muchhi* or *chormokar*), whose sons are remembered in association with leatherwork, canework, and becoming religious gurus. Contemporary *dhakis* continue in the same traditions of work, especially leatherwork, and make and play religious percussions such as the *dhak* and *mridanga* (a *Vaishnava* devotional instrument). In villages, they mostly practice farming as their chief means of sustenance, and in cities, canework and masonry. Das-s, like most lower-caste Bengali groups, are *Vaishnavas* by religious initiation, and though their orally transmitted poetry and myths about the *dhak* are used in the worship of tantric deities, Shiva and Durga, they also have interesting *Vaishnava* genealogical overlaps. Thus, *dhakis* repeated origin myths and poems about how the *Vaishnava* deity, Rama, had blessed a mango tree, with which the first *dhak* was made.<sup>7</sup> Again, Shiva, without the presence of an accompanying drum, is said to have lost his beats during the cosmic dance, when Muchiram, born from the *Vaishnava* godhead (Narayana's sweat) crafted the first drum. Others say that the drum's leather was borrowed from a Shiva-devotee buffalo's skin. The *dhak*'s body is itself referred to by *dhakis* as Hari's/Narayana's body, while the two bamboo/cane sticks (the left hand's thick one called *sheed*, and right hand's thin one, *kacha*) used to strike it are deemed as Shiva and Durga. Still others say that the *dhak* received its very aesthetics (*rasa*) from the sexual union of the *Vaishnava* deity consort, Radha-Krishna. Also, *dhakis* memorize beats through syllabic constructions which have metric congruences with the rhythms, and these mnemonic linguistic combinations, known as *bols*, are sometimes composed as couplets with both *Vaishnava* and *Shaivite* orientations, bringing to mind Krishna, *Vaishnava* saints, as well as Shiva.<sup>8</sup> The rural *dhak* worldview is thus an effective syncretic synthesis of a *Vaishnava-Shaivite* devotional spectrum.

The leatherworker *dhakis*, who also skin (*chhula*) dead animals, remember having met with severe caste-based disgust and untouchability (*asprishyata*), till the recent past. Up until about forty years ago, young village *dhakis* told me, their fathers would not be allowed to enter the temples they played for. Their own pujas during birth, death, and other ceremonies would be conducted by lower strata of Brahmins. Furthermore, they would be served separate food and water in people's homes or at temple entrances, given places to eat which were even separated from servants, asked to clean their own leftovers, and other castes would not even participate in their funerals. Ghosh (2001) also cites extreme cases of *dhakis* being served upper-caste food leftovers on soiled plates, like scavengers, during ceremonial feasts. Thus, while *dhak* sounds are indispensable enablers of sacred rituals, these acoustics are derived from the touch of *dhakis*, themselves considered untouchables. While their difficult labor (in constructing the drum through meticulous stages, bearing the heavy weight of the big vessels on shoulders, and playing them with sticks for several hours and days together) is used in the execution of strict sacramental procedures, they are themselves treated as the lowly leftovers of the ritual process (see also Sarbadhikary 2019). Similarly, the *dhaks* too are paradoxical entities: their sounds are derived as sacred, and yet they cannot be kept within temple altars of Durga puja.

However, the instrument's and instrumentalists' caste status are different during the Durga puja and *Gajan* celebrations. The former's classicism requires a strict hierarchy, while in the latter, the *dhaki* and *dhak* are central and organic parts of the ceremonial process. Spatially too, there are differences. In Durga puja, the priest is on a stage/altar, with the goddess set higher up from the audience/devotees and the *dhakis* in the background. By contrast, during *Gajan*, the *dhak*/*dhakis* are co-present in the same coeval space in the open rural fields, as the *Gajan* ritualists, all together cohabiting the village's Shiva-temple premises and surrounding turfs. Further, during Durga puja, as drummers repeatedly emphasized, they simply follow manual cues of the high priest to play strictly defined

beats befitting each stage of ritual proceeding, while *Gajan dhakis*, although also playing sequential beats to bring the peasant god to life, have many more spontaneous rhythming experiences too. Moreover, while the hierarchical Brahmin priest is the most important ritual agent in Durga puja, untouchable drummers, as the next sections shall show, can even *control* the *Gajan* enactments.

My fieldwork thus gravitated towards two particular *dhaki* clusters, renowned for their associations with Durga puja and *Gajan*, respectively. All *dhakis* have received their highly detailed and specialized instrument-crafting techniques and rhythm knowledge classified and meticulously sequenced according to worship stages, as oral knowledge, from their fathers and grandfathers, over several generations. Since they are not written down, these rhythms have many regional differences, and their ritual appropriateness, in both Durga puja and *Gajan*, is considered more important than strict aesthetic classicism. Therefore, rather than standardized musical rhythms, *dhaks* are known for generationally transmitted percussion styles, with ‘heterometric temporal organisations’ (Wolf 2019, pp. 314–15). These are used in both Durga puja and *Gajan*, but with distinct textures, frequencies, speeds, etc., according to the worship moods of the goddess Durga, and deity Shiva.

The significant difference recognized by contemporary *dhakis* is between slow and somber rhythm styles of drummers who are originally from West Bengal, and faster and high-pitched manners of those who migrated from Bangladesh. These styles have been subsequently associated with drummer clusters in the interior West Bengal districts, and Kolkata and North 24 Parganas (see Figure 1), respectively.



**Figure 1.** Cluster of shops selling *dhaks* in North 24 Parganas.

For the former, grave rhythm style, I was mostly referred to Murshidabad’s villages, in neighborhoods (*para*) known by drummers’ caste names, such as Muchipara, Daspara, Dhakipara, etc (see Figure 2). Drummers are categorically clear about the stark natures of these rhythming patterns: between the *chora bhava* (high tone/speedy beats) of the smaller-sized drums meant for urban Durga pujas (which those who migrated from Bangladesh specialize in), versus the *gombhir shobdo* (grave sound) of the bigger, rural, *Gajan* drums, learnt and played in interior villages. Drummers of both types, some having played the *dhak* for even over sixty years, have clear pride in their distinct practices. Thus, those in North 24 Parganas told me how district drummers playing in *Gajan* would not either be able to make or play the more toned Durga puja drums; while *Gajan* drummers routinely look down upon the quick-paced, unsteady, and ostentatious rhythm-structures meant for

inattentive urban devotees. The latter call their sounds *dheeme* (slow) and *shanto* (peaceful), meant for the sincere and steadfast rural devotion towards their local godhead, Shiva. However, the main difference that arises from the *dhaks*' narrative lifeworlds is between sounds as ritual aids in the hierarchical worship of a classical goddess, versus acoustics that form an embodied community with a general devotional populace of Shiva.



**Figure 2.** A *dhaki* and his grandson with *dhaks* in their home in Murshidabad.

Village drummers say that since the 1990s, with a huge commercial rise in the Durga puja market in Kolkata, they have started flocking to the city in autumn to earn extra money. Groups of about eight to ten *dhakis* play in each of the hundreds of temporary *pandals*. They then follow rhythm styles set by city drummers, while in villages they continue to play the *gambhir Gajan dhak*. *Gajan* thus preserves the sounds of the embodied rural pasts of an indigenous deity and his non-hierarchized devotees, while the aurality of Durga puja reinforces the psychology of the classical martial goddess. This dialectic is operationalized by *dhak* sounds in distinct ways. While *Gajan* celebrates an immersive and full-bodied involvement by devotees and drummers equally possessed by Shiva devotion and the ecstatic beats, Durga puja's classicism is engendered in particular ways. These include the sounds creating the exact mixed affects of the goddess's martial ascendance, and the devotees' sensoria of awe and affection towards her, a classical Brahmanical caste-hierarchy of drummers subordinately following the Brahmin priest's hand gestures to play particular beats which aid in the sustenance of the devotional mood among the priest and devotional collective, and their meticulous concentration on very specific ritual stages of playing the *dhak*,<sup>9</sup> rather than immersing in devotion. All these components ensure that the Sanskrit, orthodox ritual mood of Durga's dominance shines through.

It is particularly telling though, that the same percussion instrument enables the creation of these dual sensibilities. These acoustic memories and devotional differences created through them have been sedimented intensively, through centuries and generations, in drummers' and listeners' bodies. Material processes of constructing the *dhak* are also intrinsically connected with these divergent devotional soundscapes.

The *dhak* surface, about twenty-four inches in length, six-and-half feet in diameter, and as heavy as fifteen kilos, is made from the wood of mango trees, as its sound is considered 'sweet'. Wood, compared to earthen percussions, also ensures a more *gambhir* and louder sound. The cut wood, scraped and hollowed, and dried leather to be tied on the surfaces, are sent to the *dhak* maker by suppliers, while sometimes *dhakis* themselves process raw

leather, and make it fit for tying. The right mouth is narrower (about fifteen inches), and stretched with goat or calf skin, which is soft and gives greater resonance with low sound frequency. The left mouth is wider (about seventeen inches), stretched with flappier cow skin, and has a grave sound. There are about eighteen to twenty holes made on each leather surface, through which leather straps are pulled with equalized tension to tune the instrument, while ensuring a looser pull on the left side and tighter stretch on the right. A hole is punched on the left side to allow air passage, to ensure that the drum does not burst and that there is good feedback to the struck sounds on the right side. The hole and air passage also affect the grave tone, *dhakis* explained.

These basic principles of *dhak* making are further specified for Durga puja and *Gajan* drums. Thus, *Gajan dhaks* are bigger, almost twenty-six inches long, and lighter and hollower.<sup>10</sup> Durga puja *dhaks* are stretched much more on the right side. Sometimes the *Gajan dhaks*' left side is made further soft and grave-sounding by applying water. While Durga puja *dhaks* are necessarily stretched before being played in autumn, *Gajan dhaks* are deliberately left unstretched before spring. Indeed, if it stretches during the dry winters, water is used to pull down the left side's tone. These many processes are intended to ensure that the *Gajan dhak* is somber and heavy-sounding, to enable ritualists to become and stay possessed in passionately demanding Shiva devotion, or what they call Shiva-*jvor* (fever/heat). *Dhakis* added that the *phalgun* season's (spring) air also particularly aids in the *gambhir* tone. Village *dhakis* generally used several onomatopoeic phrases such as 'dhopdhope', 'gomgome' etc., to emphasize that the indigenous *Gajan dhak* and Shiva rituals, limited to their own village territories, are favored by them, compared to the 'tangtange', 'kyankyane', and 'korkosh' (shrill) sounds of the city people.

The textural and sonic materiality of the drums are thus in perfect rhythmic sync with the embodied sustenance of the two Bengali religious forms: of a classical divinity and a local, indigenous god. Also, it is by enabling sensory sedimentation of these distinct sounds of the very same percussion that people recognize, have knowledge about, remember, and maintain the region's devotional dialectic. The drums 'talk' (Wolf 2014, pp. 21–22) differently, and tell us of long and deep religious historical pasts echoing through their skins. Religious belief in a classical goddess and an indigenous god are thus simultaneously made possible through the intense experience of sacred percussion sounds.

### 5. The Classical Durga Puja and Dhak: Religious Belief through Hierarchy

The goddess Durga represents Bengal's classical sophisticated divinity, in distinctive ways. First, despite her intimate role as a homely daughter in the region's imagination, she ultimately emerges as the martial protectress, and her puja embodies an erudite blending of these aspects. Second, she serves Brahmanical elite histories, and her rituals demarcate the hierarchical roles of the superordinate priest and his Brahmanical voice, the subordinate devotees, and the marginal *dhakis*. These hierarchical relations are pulled together in an intense sonic triad. Thus, even amidst the general commercial extravaganza of fun and revelry during the Durga puja festivities, the goddess's religious supremacy and Brahmanical rituals together constitute her classical stature in Bengal's devotional milieu. The *dhak's* sounds (and silences) not only aid in the making of the goddess's classicism however, but indeed, enable it, I argue.

The Durga puja festival began as autumn rites among rural upper castes and later migrated to cities. It represents a perfected hierarchical caste order through its ritual universe (Nicholas 2013, pp. viii, 2–5). The goddess form worshipped is a combination of the Bengali indigenous Candi ('The Wrathful') of the medieval *Candi Mangalkavya*, and the Sanskrit goddess of the 5th–6th century text, Markandeya Purana (Nicholas 2008, p. 8; Nicholas 2013, p. 21). This *Purana's* chapters 81–93, collectively known as the 'Devi Mahatmya' (and popularly referred to in Bengal as 'Durgasaptasati' or 'Candi'), are the orthodox liturgical basis of the puja (Coburn 1986). Devi Mahatmya describes three episodes of Durga's martial encounter with different demons, and these correspond to the three major days of the festival. In the text, Durga emerges as the ultimate universal reality

and an independent goddess who draws upon the cosmic energies of all male gods, rather than being just a female divine consort. Her resultant martial form represents the classical Indian model of the king, the ‘victorious ruler’ (Coburn 1986, pp. 157–59; Ostor 1980, p. 19). Through her slaying of enemies, Durga’s protective benevolence appears as her essential classical characteristic, and the mythical episode of her killing the buffalo demon, Mahisasura, is the most famous among them. The martial form thus becomes a sustaining classical symbol, with Durga promising to return to save her devotees, whenever they are in distress (Ostor 1980, p. 20). Thus, despite Durga’s familial, domesticated form—as the daughter who is welcomed home for five days, and who is most sadly bid farewell to every year—her royal element is what receives ultimate cultural sanction (ibid., p. 21). McDaniel thus says that most goddess-idol faces appear detached and victorious, while Mahisasura depicts lust and aggression, and eventual fear of and submission to the transcendental, classical, female power (McDaniel 2004, p. 224).

Durga puja is celebrated on the Navaratra (nine nights) of the bright half of the autumn month (September/October), and its rituals follow strict Brahmanical texts. Durga’s statue is installed on the sixth day, the puja continues for five days, and peaks at the cusp of the eighth and ninth days (*sandhi*, literally meaning the liminal point). She is believed to have killed Mahisasura at this ritual moment, and she is said to appear before her sincere devotees then (like she did before Rama) as a most horrific yet protective goddess. She is then propitiated through an intensive worship regimen with sixteen items, and her farewell takes place on the tenth day (Guha-Thakurta 2015, p. 25; McDaniel 2004, pp. 223–28; McDermott 2011, p. 5; Nicholas 2013, p. 24; Ostor 1980, p. 83). In all, Durga puja rituals celebrate cosmic reconstruction and the triumph of virtue over vice, and depend heavily on Brahmanical Vedic tantric dogmas. These textual doctrines are given life through words (mantras), actions (ritual purifications), and hand gestures (*mudras*), known only by the male Brahmin priest (Ostor 1980, p. 57; Rodrigues 2003, pp. 11–18).

However, devotees believe that the complete reading of the *Candi* or *Devi Mahatmya* itself can bring religious merit equivalent to performing the entire Durga puja rituals (Nicholas 2008, p. 8). Thus, since the 1950s, the most popular Bengali radio program has been the pre-dawn two-hour-long recitation of Candi’s verses, on the new moon night of the month (*mahalaya*), by a renowned male vocalist stooped in devotion towards the classical goddess (Guha-Thakurta 2015, p. 12; McDermott 2011, p. 4). It is most remarkable, however, that *dhak* sounds appear in the entire audition for the first time at only the 55th minute, and for less than five seconds at that, after the narrative including Sanskrit mantras has fully described how the goddess has been adorned and worshipped, and after a demonstration of how her deeds and glory have been achieved. In other words, the *dhak* enters only when the mood has been otherwise set for her ritual worship. Thus, the *dhak* is given legitimacy only after the male Brahmanical voice (of the priest/narrator) has opened up the worship stage.

This elite tendency of privileging the Brahmanical voice and worship and subordinating the sounds produced by the untouchable castes is more organically woven into the ritual corpus, since *dhakis*, although absolutely essential to the Durga puja, have to simply follow the priest’s hand gestures in playing the drum. They are not aware of the rituals’ semantic meanings or techniques, and concentrate simply on their instrumental perfection, by playing for meticulously defined stages. Their concentration is focused on their percussion, while the sounds they produce both maintain the priest’s tenacious ritual attention, as well as enable a constancy in the religious atmosphere of the priest-devotee-god’s ecstatic exchange, sustained especially by the urgent yet regular acoustic patterns. The sonic paradox is absolutely ingrained in popular consciousness, which associates every ritual stage with *dhak* sounds, yet also knows that these acoustics are subordinate to the Brahmin voice and hands. That said, I argue that the *dhak* precisely enables Durga puja’s Brahmanical classicism by sounding appropriately during the ritual processes, and also remaining starkly silent when the priest utters the mantras. Sound and caste thus have complex relationships in the making of the classicized ritual. The *dhaki*’s constitutive role is

however implicitly acknowledged, since as per textual prescription itself, he is gifted the goddess's precious sari on the last day, while the priest receives everything else belonging to her (Rodrigues 2003). Thus, I foreground the *dhak* as an *enabler* of a classical ritual. While Bengal's religious history has been amply studied as a textual domain, its sensory dimensions are still in need of analytical exploration.

*Dhakis* have purely embodied received memories of what beats need to be played for what ritual, and they execute these with detached perfection. They often told me that these beats have now 'mixed with their blood'. These habituated repetitions of hyper-differentiated stages especially constitute the community elders' pride, and embody their subservient devotion to the Brahmin priest and the stringently defined beat rules, in contrast to *Gajan dhakis'* immersive and more spontaneous communitarian participation. The priest follows texts, and *dhakis* follow the priest's hands, they explained. The drum sounds mark the exact chronological sequence of ritual acts, and temporal precision is an important component of Brahmanical Vedic-tantric methods.

*Dhakis* ubiquitously told me that with no comprehension of mantras or how Durga puja rituals are performed, they simply observe his gestural-movements while standing below the dais on which the priest worships the goddess. When he rings the bell at the end of a ritual cycle, they immediately know that they need to switch to the next beat pattern. There are also other critical cues. One such example is when the priest, who sits during all other stages, stands during the significant lamp-offering (*arati*). Another such example is when he touches a hibiscus flower on the goddess's chest, letting *dhakis* know that the goddess's life-imparting ceremony (*pran-pratishtha*) is taking place. Similarly, there are particular beats for when the priest picks up a five-mouthed lamp (*pancha-pradip*), the camphor vessel (*karpurdani*), incense (*dhup*), conch (*shankh*), flowers (*phul*), sari (*kapor*), hand fan (*pakha*), conch which holds water (*jol-shankha*), and a particular ritual brush (*chamor*). The ritual cycle for each item is marked by a drum beat, which ends with a rounded calculation (*tehaai*). Apart from the *arati* and sight-imparting (*chokkhu daan*) ceremonies, *dhakis* play in a style of *aarai kathir bajna* ( $2\frac{1}{2}$  metrics, which some memorize through the syllables, *jhyang jhyang ta*), for instance, when the goddess is bathed. Also, while their beats aid in the priest maintaining his particularized moods for every ritual, during *arati* (which lasts for approximately an hour every morning and evening), the drum beats also attain a relative spontaneous ecstasy. At first, the *arati* rhythms are slow, so that *dhakis* can sustain the hourlong energy, and then speed up and intensify with the peak reached when the *chamor* is shown to Durga.<sup>11</sup> The priest then oftentimes succumbs to the rhythmic trance, dances along with the beats, and attains a distinct meditative transportation along with the listener-spectators.

Although *dhakis* simply follow inherited traditions and rhythm rules without immediately connecting to the liturgical corpus, the phenomenology of their beats (and strategic silences) has deep impact on the priest and devotees in the making of the orthodox ritual, and so I shall describe the exact affects generated during significant puja stages. The entire frame of reference for understanding religious belief in this context is thus sensory. The *dhakis'* and priests' visceral explanations (see Figure 3), and my own very close observations over several decades and empathetic bodily analyses, together narrativize the sonic affects in the construction of the classical goddess.<sup>12</sup>



**Figure 3.** A *dhaki* at his home in North 24 Parganas demonstrating Durga Puja's typical beats.

The *dhaki* starts playing from the wee hours in slow and soft rhythms, waking people gently from their sleep, who then know that the morning puja has started in the *pandal*. The *agomoni* (welcome) beats then become fast, arranged in quick temporal successions, and have an urgent impact of *ghoshona* or announcement about the goddess's invocation. The happy welcoming rhythms manage to be essentially serious in temper, nonetheless, by being followed for a substantial amount of time by a slow, serene, tempo. Thus, the audience is not allowed to forget that Durga is at war. Then the beats pick up again, and the priest gets busy setting Durga up for the coming days of sacred battle between good and evil.

The eighth day, when Durga shall kill Mahisasura, is marked by a special *pushpanjali* (flower offering) by regular devotees. They gather in the *pandal*, when the priest famously reads out *slokas* and mantras from the *Devi Mahatmya* / *Candi* in the microphone, and the devotees repeat after him. Like the radio *mahalaya* program, this ritual is starkly marked by the absence of any *dhak* sound, and even *dhakis* for that matter. Thus, the Brahmanical voice takes over, and the *dhak's* strategic silence vis-à-vis his erudite locution ensures that devotees concentrate exclusively on listening to Durga's exploits and feats. This also ensures their mantric submission to her, all under the mediation of the Brahmin priest.

This textual initiation comes of use during the forty-eight minute ritual enactment of *sandhi puja*, when Durga is believed to slay the demon. The precise warring intensity is then represented overwhelmingly by the very passionate *dhak* beats, while *dhakis* however play from behind the audience, who stand before the dais to witness the priest's concerted puja. The *dhak* almost 'talks' at that moment, to represent Durga's bloody triumph, and the sounds generate in devotees a beautiful mix of fearful awe, hopeful anxiety about the impending battle between the goddess and demon, and submissive devotion to her violent demeanor. The instrument beats gradually unfold the various items with which the *arati* is performed, and the momentum intensifies in such a way that the devotees automatically get caught in a meditative gaze (*darshan*) fixed at the goddess's third eye, representing transcendental intuition. A characteristic rhythmic aspect during this time is the concentration-inducing and trance-sustaining middle tempo (*madhya-laya*), which is

very difficult to play continuously (as *dhakis* explained). This has the distinctive listening effect of a spontaneous ecstasy, held together, however, by the apparently contrary cognitive state of rapt attention.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the priest and audience both have a pleasurable sprightly feeling at this point, even though they are not dancing to the beats as they would with secular rhythms. The repetitive, quick, and intensive beats, accompanied by the nervous energy of a metallic beat-keeper (*knasha*), sustain the meditation. This is when devotees believe that the goddess comes especially to life, and I have seen many devotees cry or have goosebumps at this point, and while staring into the eyes of the triumphant goddess. Sometimes there is a break in the rhythm, when the *dhaki* observes what the priest is offering, changes the beats accordingly, and then swiftly adjusts the rhythms for the appropriate mood, which escalate again. *Sandhi puja's* underlying mood is of submission to the perfect ascendance of good over evil, and devotees are reminded that the classical goddess returns to protect them whenever there is moral danger.

*Sandhi puja's* particularly sacred mood was summarized by a famous elderly priest in Kolkata, who said,

‘The goddess possesses me at this point. My mantra and the *dhaki's jantra* (instrument) enable this, although my concentration is on the goddess, and his on the *dhak*. *Dhak* sounds generate simultaneous meditation (*dhyanmognota*) and addiction (*madokota*), and all my corporeal tantric energy-centers (*cakras*) feel ecstatically pierced. My body then vibrates, an infatuation (*ghor*) takes over, and I can see the text and its descriptions of the mother before me’.

The priest's narrative thus describes the experience of a most classicized ritual, in which there is a hierarchy of Brahmanical meditation and the ability to be possessed by the classical goddess, vis-à-vis the sensory agent (*dhaki*) of that process, albeit recognized as absolutely integral.

Throughout the *puja*, the *dhak's* sounds thus generate and maintain the opportune devotional meaning. The other very significant use of the *dhak* is during the *bisarjan* (farewell ceremony), on the tenth day. This is a paradoxical ritual moment, since while in the rest of Hindu India, the day is celebrated as Rama's victory over Ravana, in Bengal, it also marks the goddess's return to her husband's home. Thus, the event is marked as both hopeful and sad, and the drum beats accordingly. Its fast beats remind the devotees to prepare for an optimistic farewell, and they dance to the very peppy rhythms, typically shouting along: ‘*ashche bochor aabar hobe* (we shall celebrate again next year)’.<sup>14</sup> The speedy beats, reassuring that rightful victory always supersedes evil, are punctuated, however, by very slow, staggering ones, which have a lingering, resistant inertia, as if they do not want to progress, generating the incisive lament over the daughter leaving home. The slow beats also enable the devotees to go up to the tall idol on a ladder—the only opportunity to do so in the five days—and touch her, feed her the last sweets, etc. All the *dhak's* specialized rhythms, whether generating moods of sadness, awe, wonder, happiness, triumph, submission, or tension, however, are notably always played in *chora sur* (high tones), to attract and sustain urban attention, constantly for five days.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, *dhak's* sacred sounds and silences together generate Durga *puja's* Brahmanical ritualism. All the while, the *dhaki* remains in the background, through his untouchable subordination to the priest, his embodiment in relation to the priest's semantics, and his silence with respect to the Brahmin's locution. The only time that the *dhaki* comes to the forefront or center stage is when asked to play for sheer non-ritual entertainment. Thus, paradoxically, it is through the *dhakis'* categorical backgrounding and the *dhak* sounds' phenomenological supremacy that the Bengali classical goddess, the Brahmanical Durga and her orthodox worship, attain epistemic meaning.

## 6. The Indigenous Gajan and Dhak: Religious Belief through Organic Identity

*Dhak* sounds also evoke a distinctly rural devotion towards the local, indigenous, non-classical deity, Shiva. *Gajan* is said to have been performed, for the first time, by

Shiva's companions, the ghosts and ghouls of cremation grounds, who worshipped him in the most violent, loud ways, with rituals full of symbols of both death and regenerative fertility.<sup>16</sup> Shiva then joined the *Gajan*, and later described it to his consort, Parvati, who also wanted to be present in subsequent festivals (Ostor 1980, p. 30). Farmers also told me that since spring is a relatively fallow period—the end of the agrarian year cycle awaiting new crops in the next month—*Gajan* is performed both to pray for crop-enabling moisture, as well as for leisure (*abashar*).<sup>17</sup> In puranic myths again, the Shiva-devotee, King Ban, lost his limbs in a battle to Krishna, and in that pain-anguished state, loudly called out to Shiva, who placated his sufferings for a year in lieu of Ban's promise to perform self-flagellating penances during annual *Gajan* ceremonies from the next (*ibid.*, p. 31). Ban was also commanded by Shiva to worship him in the form of a wooden plank, and it is not a coincidence that the *dhak* is also carved out of wood, signifying the seamless relations between divinity, sound, and community ritual.

In fact, *Gajan* has remained a symbol of community worship, with rituals signifying rhythmic cycles of natural destruction and social renewal, where men of all castes undertake severe austerities, including painful bodily practices, mimicking the self-sacrificial rites of a literary prototype of the ideal Shiva devotee. *Gajan* is about singularity of community identity that arises when devotees attain Shiva-hood, or become 'divinelike creatures' (Ostor 1980, p. 28). That is, austere, serious mendicants who, like Shiva, can bear immense physical pains and then regain strength, reminding all folkmen about the inevitability of both death and revival. Song narratives about Shiva-Parvati marriage, symbolizing divine fertility, are also performed during *Gajan*. The primeval aspect of the rurality accentuated at the festival is thus marked by both the stark and simple bodily severities, and rustic familial associations. Taken together, *Gajan* now essentially stands for collective, communitarian, embodied worship performed by rural peasants, towards a god, also imagined to be the first peasant and praying to him for fertile earthly yields and progeny (Nicholas 2013, p. 2). The very significant symbol in the festival remains 'heat', which is in need of divine cooling or control. This includes the heat of *Chaitra* soil (the last month of the Bengali calendar), when the thirst is unbearable (Ostor 1980, p. 136), the severe heated *tapasya* of Shiva and his *sannyasis* (*tapasya*: asceticism, *tap* literally meaning the bodily heat of penance), king Ban's afflictions (also called *jvor*, hot fever), soothed by Shiva, and, finally, the ritualists' passionate excitement, to be controlled, pacified, and tempered by *dhak* sounds.

There are regional variations in *Gajan* rituals. Typically, the peasants who vow to pray to Shiva that year prepare their ascetic selves for about fifteen days or so before the last five *Gajan* days in the last Bengali month.<sup>18</sup> The vows are simply called *khatni* (labor). They shave their heads, eat a meal of boiled food, raw fruits, and milk, only once a day; bathe, eat, and sleep separately from non-ritualists, and practice sexual abstinence. During the festival, they stay in the village Shiva temple, and go begging to village homes. Irrespective of their usual lowest castes, they don the sacred thread during those five days, since they are akin to god then (Ostor 1980).<sup>19</sup> Since these are usually practices of renunciates (*sannyasis*), the ritualists are known as *Gajan sannyasis*.<sup>20</sup>

*Dhakis*, who are also peasants, prepare similarly in some Murshidabad villages I have worked in, and the sounds they produce are considered indistinguishable from the bodies of intense penance and prayer. *Gajan* is essentially a public, community worship par excellence, and does not recognize caste hierarchies (Ostor 1980, p. 99). Shiva too is imagined to be a peasant, and roaming in the cremation grounds, where the lowest Dom castes (to which *dhakis* belong) perform their funeral services (*ibid.*: 34, 106). Thus, when the *sannyasis* go door-to-door begging, they are accompanied by *dhakis* (Nicholas 2013, p. 84), and the temple food is also shared by all devotees and *dhakis* (Ostor 1980, p. 131). Further, upper-caste people touch the feet of lower-caste *Gajan sannyasis* as a mark of reverence (Maity 1989, p. 43). *Sannyasis* wear red loincloths and carry cane sticks (symbolizing Shiva), and it is further noteworthy that the *dhaki* castes are also engaged in cane work.

Devotees spoke of the general grim deathlike silence that overtakes the temple during those days. This is because devotees then singly meditate on the yogic ascetic mendicant,

Shiva, and when the only fitting sound acceptable and pleasing to Shiva is of the rumbling, roaring, praying *dhak*. Indeed, unlike in Durga puja, the *dhak* is also allowed inside the temples, and all *Gajan* rituals, unfailingly, are not only accompanied, but critically enabled by the percussion sounds. *Gajan*, stems from the root word, *garjan*, meaning loudness—shouting to awake Shiva from his yogic trance—and this volume is generated by the vociferous drum and the crying male voices, imagined to be the exact counterpart of the angry roar of the mythical god, Shiva, during cosmic destruction (Ostor 1980, p. 113). The god, devotee, *dhaki*, and his *dhak* are thus perfect substitutes in the celebration of primeval life and death, in this ancient civilizational form of festivity of the enmeshed peasantry.

Typical austere *Gajan* rituals include prostrating (see Figure 4) or dancing to the temple on one leg, cleaning the temple with one's hair, walking on a sharp knife, jumping on sharp knives from a height, rolling over the ground, falling into trances and dancing to the drum, firewalking, water rituals, piercing the body in various places like the ears, eyelids, forehead, back, and tongue with iron rods, carrying burning coal, falling on thorns, hook swinging, and getting possessed by the thoughts of Shiva–Parvati union. In addition, village women also pray for general fertility (Maity 1989, p. 43; Ostor 1980, pp. 8–9, 30, 98–148; Sen 1914, pp. 156–61). Devotees believe that these atonements make a mark on Shiva's body too, and Shiva then empathetically responds to his earnest devotees. This again embodies the extreme corporeal sense of community that the peasants have with their god, rather than the hierarchical distance signaled between devotees and the goddess during Durga puja. The *dhak* sounds make a perfect fit to these intense practices to 'call' Shiva's attention with insistence.

Literature on *Gajan* habitually but unmindfully describes the drum sounds as integral to the performances and even mentions the very distinct rhythms played during the different rituals (see Maity 1989, p. 44; Ostor 1980, p. 106). Thus, for the entire period of the five intense days and nights, the *dhakis* live with the devotees in the temple, and devotees are 'called to' their various timely duties by the drummer (Ostor 1980, p. 106). Processions are led by drummers (*ibid.*, p. 121). Devotees rock and sway to the beats, respond slowly, then fast, become violently spasmodic, and even lose consciousness while listening to the resonant, escalating, and ebbing *dhak* beats during their possession ceremonies (Nicholas 2013, p. 80; Ostor 1980, pp. 108, 129). Devotees also derive strength from the solid, confident drum beats when performing strenuous tasks such as pulling large trees (Nicholas 2013, p. 96). The *dhak* rhythms match up to and indeed foretell the theatrics of devotees' slow, steady, then wavering, dancing steps of trance, ecstasy, and surrender (*ibid.*, p. 112), and the drum sounds 'victorious' when a particular ritual ends (*ibid.*, p. 108).

Indeed, it may be strongly argued that the belief in Shiva's powers of asceticism, fertile boons, and community regeneration are innately embodied by, ingrained in, and enabled sympathetically in devotees' bodies, by the *dhak* itself. This is phenomenologically nurtured by the nature of *dhak* sounds, including its volume, texture, and rhythms. Thus, its loudness and somber texture are imagined to 'wake' Shiva and turn his yogic gaze upon the peasant devotees. Its peculiar middle tempo (*madhyalay*) is particularly favorable for the devotees' controlled but spontaneous possession exhibited in head and leg swinging. Its distinct muffled drone, which suppresses all other ambient sounds, induces the sharp concentration that is required to withstand various painful inflictions. Meanwhile, its general graveness, volume, and constancy announces to the entire village that particular rituals are ongoing, while maintaining the insistent ascetic sternness and severity of the devotees throughout. Simultaneously, the combination of graveness, volume, and constancy help the *dhaki* to attain the difficult balance between being immersed in the ontology of the ritual, while continuing to strike the right beats and rhythm crescendos, all the while carrying the very heavy instrument of about fifteen kilos on a single shoulder.



**Figure 4.** (a,b): Murshidabad villagers prostrating to the sound of *dhak* beats.

While *Gajan* rituals have been amply explored, these deep phenomenological aspects of *dhak* sounds in the generation of religious belief have not been foregrounded. I shall now describe certain *Gajan* events, as I have observed them closely, with a goal of emphasizing the absolutely fundamental and even *controlling* role the drum plays in the constitution of Shiva devotion. Unlike in other medieval literary genres, the *Dharmamangalkavya*, whose descriptions come close to *Gajan* rituals, depict devotees' death-like or self-immolatory practices, although eventually they regain their lives. Thus, *Gajan* is deeply associated with symbols of primordial death (and life), and its loud cries, inflictions, minimalism, and possessed dances wearing masks of the terrific deities, such as Kali and Shiva in the cremation ground, mostly evoke fear, despite the lighter moments of song and theatre about Shiva–Parvati marriage, etc.<sup>21</sup> Fabrizio M. Ferrari offers a very different interpretation about *Gajan*'s primevalism. He understands the rituals as ancestral worship of the feminine earth and its regenerative life cycle, where peasant men, unconsciously acknowledging both their debt to and guilt of consistent inflictions upon her through ploughing, etc., ritually embody her femininity and express their sense of ritual crises through possession (Ferrari 2010, pp. 1–9). I only borrow from Ferrari's analyses the dimension of primevalism of the earth, unconscious, and culture, and I argue that while *Gajan*'s primitivity has been repressed in urban memory and history (which predominantly understands devotion as the hierarchical Durga puja), *Gajan*'s original nature continues to retain its bold life in the

villages. However, my main emphasis is on the distinct primal embodiments invoked by *dhak*'s sounds in the ritual bodies that it affects and controls. As Becker (2004) argues using both neuroscientific and biological explanations, the deep emotions one experiences while listening to music are similar to the trancing episodes within religious contexts, while in case of *Gajan*, the sensory epistemology of religion and rhythm are co-constitutive.

Ferrari describes how many *Gajans* end with *mara khela*, 'dance of the dead', when the *sannyasis* play with human corpses and skulls, finally being reintegrated into society the next day through purificatory rituals following this most transgressive ritual height (Ferrari 2010, p. 19). These dances have not been written about extensively. In a particular village, Majlishpur, in Murshidabad district, I saw the festivities during what they call *shakun naach* (vulture dance), where the primal tropes of death, cannibalism, and mastery of fear are brought to potent life by the throbbing and stringent *dhak* acoustic rhythms. I shall now describe the *shakun naach* and fire rituals of Majlishpur (see Figure 5), highlighting the *dhak*'s constitutive and animate role therein, and its synchronous identity with the devotees and the most indigenous Shiva.



**Figure 5.** Fire rituals being performed to *dhak* sounds.

About fifty to a hundred devotees can become *Gajan sannyasis* in a particular temple annually, although in April 2022, around ten men were assembled in Majlishpur Shiva temple. Before *Gajan* every year, *dhakis* play a smaller leather-drum made by them, known as *dheri*, throughout the village, inviting willing devotees to become *sannyasis*. Village elders then choose from among them based on their physical strength and mental steadfastness to be able to perform the stern rituals. Villagers literally call *Gajan* a *smasanbhumii* (cremation ground) and the rituals, accordingly, *smasani-puja*, signaling the metaphors of deathlike heat eventually transformed to cool regenerative life. In all ritual instances, the faith and performance of devotees becoming god are enabled by the primitive *dhak* sounds bearing immediate relations with their highly sensitive bodies. This is quite unlike in Durga puja, where the sounds mediate devotion through essential hierarchical distances between the goddess, priest, devotees, and *dhaki*.

On the fourth day of the *Gajan* festival, Majlishpur celebrates *ban-phora* (piercing with iron rods) and *hom* or fire rituals, directly signifying *Gajan* heat. I saw how *sannyasis* rowed up, and a village elder, whose hands have been trained generationally, pierced their foreheads with a burning iron rod. He desensitized the skin by rubbing strategically on it, folded it in places, and then sliced it with extreme deftness. Not a single facial muscle of the devotees moved, and villagers told me that is because their fasting and austere bodies were blessed by Shiva precisely not to feel any pain. They said that this is also thus a test of

whether they have become Shiva-like—that is, detached and tolerant. After the piercing was over, fire lamps were placed on those rods (see Figure 6), and devotees danced around the temple to *dhak* beats, holding up those lights.<sup>22</sup> All the while, young boys and men stood around and watched the ritual, expressing constant amazement and the desire to become *sannyasis* next year.



**Figure 6.** Skin piercing with iron rods and fire lamps placed on them.

The rituals are controlled and sustained singularly by the constant *dhak* sounds. Devotees added that ritually disciplined bodies respond better to the drum, and then they automatically realize Shiva-ness. In Majlishpur, the *dhakis* have been playing for several generations in *Gajan*. The *dhak's* rhythmic urgency and regulated constancy generate a series of phenomenological responses. These include intense concentration in the person piercing and not letting him relax during the critical challenging practice. These also include helping the *sannyasi* ward off fear, by rather keeping him focused in one place and singularly attentive to the task-at-hand, while also being propelled to action through listening to the equally distributed and progressive beats, and further, enabling the intense and seamless immersion in the sounds and rituals of everyone present at that time.

During *Gajan* dances, in addition to the general angry and grave Shiva-like tone, the resonant drum also makes very bold and abrupt strikes, which helps ritualists take long jumps ending with sudden landings. Indeed, the very slow, difficult, elongated, and distinctly stark endings (*gambhir bajna*) make the *dhak's* beats arrhythmic at times, giving it a matter-of-fact, dry feel, which has sensory resemblance with the hemp-induced head, leg, and hand movements of tranced *sannyasis*. In fact, *Gajan* specialists call the weed addiction *shukno nesh* (dry trance), and the dry *dhak* beats, with a fine balance between steady controlled movement and a slow, light drowsy swirl, are similar to the devotees' possessed states then. These dry beats play especially when *sannyasis* perform a ritual of picking weed leaves, dedicating them to Shiva, and then consuming them.

The *Gajan dhak* does not always induce usual emotions of happiness, sadness, or even the entertaining ecstasy of Durga puja, but rather instigates a steady affective drone, beating with the ritual bodies soaked in an addicted, unmoving, possessed devotion. Again, the *dhak* plays in much more confident, strong, and repetitive beats, when *sannyasis* bang their feet and shout Shiva's names, calling out to him in agony, remorse, and hope. The *dhak* plays in fast rhythms during hook swinging and long, dragging beats when a

ritual is enacted about Parvati leaving Shiva, and later returning to him. And on the last day of *Gajan*, when devotees bathe and go to eat, *dhakis* strike on the hollow left side, and the drum plays in a notably heavy *gurgurgur* ... (or *dhupdhupdhupdhup* ...) tone, resembling the sounds of rumbling monsoon clouds and Shiva's *dambaru* drum. This is said to invite the rains, and devotees later spread seeds in the village fields. Thus, unlike Durga puja's *dhak*, which abides by strict scriptural rules by literally following the priest's knowledgeable hand and the mantric voice of hierarchy, the *Gajan dhak* is completely immersive, engendering a unified consciousness tying intense devotional bodies, divinity, sound, nature, and community. Devotees thus routinely refer to the *Gajan's shuddho* (pure) *dhak*, this 'purity' implying its sonic organic immersion (Helmreich 2007).

This rhetoric of *shuddhota* (purity) is most fully embodied when a trained tantric fetches a human skull, and *sannyasis* dance around and with it to *dhak* sounds. In Majlishpur, this characteristically happens on the third night. Villagers have significant orally transmitted myths, proverbs, and poems, explaining and sacralizing this event. Thus, they narrated to me how the epical warrior, Arjuna, once beheaded an enemy prince, and the cut head miraculously continued to chant the names of the *Vaishnava* god, Rama. Shiva was most taken by this devotion, and since then, severed heads have been used in *Gajan* rituals.<sup>23</sup>

This death-mongering ritual evokes great fear in onlookers and recounters. I once joined about five or six drummers, in an intense conversation in the house of an elderly *dhaki* of seventy-five years. The *dhaki* lives in Jojan, a Murshidabad village, in a neighborhood alternately called Bayenpara (percussionists' hamlet), Muchipara (leatherworkers' hamlet), and Daspara (Das: *dhakis*' surname). Using a most telling phrase, they were telling me how *Gajan sannyasis* go 'spring mad' (*choit paagol*) for a month before *Gajan*, looking for fresh dead bodies to perform rituals with. The '*smasan* (cremation ground) then gets to their heads', they said, and *sannyasis* cannot be cooled till they find a body. Even closely known villagers cannot be recognized then, they explained with fear, due to their un placatable death-heat and passion. They snatch bodies from funeral processions, and more usually collect them from river banks, where dead bodies which are considered unfit to be burnt by the Hindu order (such as that of children, derelict bodies), are found. They keep the body fresh with turmeric and oil, among other substances, and on *Gajan* night, assume horrific inebriated forms. They then do a *bhoutik naach* (ghostly dance) around the dead bodies, accompanied by slow, gradually ascending, and fearfully grave *dhak* sounds. One of them recollected how about a decade ago he had witnessed a ten-year-old boy's dead body being used for the purpose. Everyone agreed that they feel petrified to go before these ritualists who take on most embodied forms of Shiva's terrifying cremation ground companions. Sometimes the entire dead body is ritually used, and at other times, cut heads are brought. Over the last four or five years, the practice has changed, they said, and eight to ten old skulls are now kept in the Rudradeva (angry form of Shiva) temple in the area, to be reused during *Gajan*.

Everyone unequivocally agreed, however, that not only are *dhak* sounds indispensable during these practices, but in fact they enable them. The *dhaki* has to equally understand and corporeally empathize with very stark practices such as, biting on the skull with teeth while dancing to the beats. One *Gajan sannyasi*, who has been performing *mara khela*, or dancing with the dead body/skull for thirty-five years and who singly takes on the responsibility to lead two hundred or more *sannyasis* during *Gajan* performances, said the following in reference to his preferred *dhaki* in that room,

'If he (*dhaki*) does not realize what I am doing, he will not be able to play. And it is deeply reciprocal, our bodily energies exchange. If he is unable to play the beats with passion and correctness, I shall not get the right mood. And if that happens, none can save him: I am Shiva-like then, you see, very angry, and I shall beat him. But he is the only one who also has control over me. Sometimes, he continues to beat the drum intensely and constantly, and I get tremendous, almost unhuman energy, say, to jump in a squatting position, for five rounds of a huge field! If he (*dhaki*) beats rightly, our mutual ecstasy (*unmadona*) is unmatched'.

A popular poem narrated by *Gajan* devotees thus goes, '*Dhak bajao re bhai, ar bajao knashi, Binoy kore bajao re bhai, amod kore nachi!*' ('Play the *dhak* and *knashi* [metallic beat-keeper which accompanies the *dhak*], play with humility, and let me dance in ecstasy!').

A particular narrative retelling brings the *dhak*'s supremacy in ritual practice most vividly to life. Jojan's elderly *dhaki* recollected a *bibhotso* (frightful) incident that took place in a nearby village, Mohogram. He had been invited to play for a *Gajan* song performance. He suddenly saw that about twenty ritualists had brought a dead body of a middle-aged woman, which Das described as 'most dreadful' (*bhoyaboho*); she had long hair flowing to her knees, the body had decomposed, and it was smelling atrocious. The men had fallen all over the corpse, and lay upon it, biting at parts. The understanding among villagers is that these ritualists embody cremation ground vultures (*shokun*), and the *dhak* then needs to take complete control, and play the *bishel bajna* (poisonous beats) or *udun bajna* (beats for flying). The ritualists then respond to the jumpy rhythms with their bodies and eventually 'fly off' from the dead body. However, the two *dhakis* who were present there were inexperienced, and thus their beats were not causing the right physical reactions. The men were tired of this sonic ritual misdemeanor, and started hitting the *dhakis*, when villagers present there spotted Jojan's veteran drummer and urged him to intervene and save the situation with his drum. In his own words, he was finally able to 'give a jolt (*dhakka*) to these men' with his strong, bold, and confident *udun bajna*, like 'hitting stones at birds', and they 'flew off' (jumped with a stride) to a nearby spot, still possessed, but in quieter trance. In fact, despite his distinct fear, he explained that the *Gajan dhaki* also embodies similar moods of somber graveness and a daring embracing of death befitting Shiva himself, who wanders about among dead bodies in the cremation ground. The drummer and devotees get embroiled in the rumbling sounds of both fear and its eventual mastery, and the experienced drummer admitted that even *dhakis* (and indeed all 'non-Aryans'), desperately wait for spring to arrive.<sup>24</sup> He added that it is the *dhaki*'s 'responsibility' to finally bring the death-maddened devotees back to their senses. He further declared with confidence that a knowledgeable *dhaki* can make each ritualist dance like a vulture for as long as he beats the drum, tiring him out while also enhancing his trance.

In the *mara khela* episode of April 2022, I witnessed the ritualists enact the *shokun-naach* or *gidni-naach*, that is, the vultures' preying fights. This occurred over a skull wrapped in a red cloth placed in the center on the ground, around which they sat in vulture-like postures. Their faces were grim, and they slyly looked at each other and the skull, sometimes sticking out their tongues like snakes do upon spotting their prey, while the *dhak* kept beating very slowly and heavily all the while. Then one by one they stood up, spread their arms like wings, and danced around the skull, sluggishly, till the *dhak* kept rumbling. Then to a cue of a two-and-a-half *dhak* beat, the ending of which sounded like a fast and urgent *gurgurgurgur*, the particular dancer fell flat on the ground, like an injured bird. Then as all the vultures completed their rounds of performance, they huddled together, vying for the skull, and as one danced holding the skull in his mouth while in a squatting posture, another quickly came and snatched it away with his teeth. Locals refer to this as the *chinimini khela* (snatching game). All the while, the *dhak* beats held the very difficult and tense performance together, and viscerally controlled the ritualists' sheer physical dexterity and religious affect.

The *dhak* aurality thus has complete control over *Gajan*'s embodied rituals, and its sounds constitute a seamless beating synchrony with ritual bodies and the indigenous divinity they collectively and equally personify. As a *Gajan* devotee aptly and summarily said, '*Dhak-tai shob*' ('The *dhak* is everything').

## 7. Conclusions

Religious belief in non-Western contexts may be both firmly scriptural (towards classical deities) and more immediate and spontaneous (towards non-classical gods). In both instances, these beliefs are constituted and sustained through long-term habit formations concerning the precise nature of devotions towards these deities. Further, these devotional

habits become more ingrained, or sediment more effectively in cultures and bodies, when they are intensely sensory in nature. In this process, aurality and the body's responses to sonic affect play a most significant role.

I have argued in this paper that the sacred Bengali drum, *dhak*, through very discrete construction and performance techniques, embodies distinct materialities, sonic textures, and rhythms learnt through several hereditary generations, so as to affect divergent religious beliefs and practices, aimed towards the classical goddess, Durga, worshipped mostly in the cities, and the indigenous god, Shiva, divinized in Bengal's villages. The precisely defined grammatical stages of Durga's worship are based on Brahmanical scriptures and strict rules of ritual and caste hierarchy, which the lower caste *dhaki* brings to life by remaining strategically silent in relation to the Brahmin priest's voice during important ritual stages. He also does this by sounding appropriately through the most nuanced gradations of ritual phases, following the priest's coordinated Brahmanical manual cues. Further, throughout Durga puja, the *dhak* plays in fast rhythms and high tones to attract the urban devotees. Alternately, the worship of the indigenous male god is essentially communitarian, with devotees, *dhakis*, and their even their god, hailing from peasant-castes. Here, Gajan's intensely embodied rituals of pain, placation, death, life, renunciation, and fertility are brought to life by much graver, slower, difficult, and thoughtful *dhak* rhythms, myths, and affective sonic experiences. In both cases, I argue that these rumbling acoustics not only aid in, but indeed enable the sensory motivations and establish a corporeal bedrock upon which religious beliefs in two distinct deities, classical and non-classical, Sanskritic and local, Brahmanical and indigenous, are constructed and sustained over centuries. The aural phenomenologies of the same percussion, through different techniques, are thus able to foster two contrary religiosities, which form the devotional polar axis of Bengal's popular religion.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> A *dhaki* gave instances of typical village and city *bols* (syllabic representations of numerical metric arrangements of *dhak* beats) to demonstrate the difference between slow/somber and fast-paced rhythms. A structure of the former, he said, is: *Jhyang chananachan tanak tan chananachan ja jhyang ja jhyang, nak chananachan nak chananachan*, and of the city: *tra jhyang tra jhyang tra jhyang tra jhyang tak jhanajhana tak gurgurgurgurrrrr, tra jhyang tra jhyang ta chananachan ta chan ta chan chananachan tak*.
- <sup>2</sup> Dharma or Dharmathakur is propitiated as a village god of death, with mixed Hindu/Buddhist origins.
- <sup>3</sup> Even detailed works on Durga puja mostly understand the *dhak* through its enhancing role, or as a performative addition to the festival (see Guha-Thakurta 2015, pp. 71–73, 140, 339, 347; Rodrigues 2003, p. 295). Ostor's (1980) work on Durga puja and Gajan rituals hardly mentions the *dhak*. However, there are instances of literary mentions, for instance, of how Durga's mother hears the farewell tone of drum sounds, and is intensely saddened to realize that her daughter would be leaving the next day (McDaniel 2004, p. 169; McDermott 2011, p. 82). There are mythical narratives about how the 18th century Hindu zamindar, Krishnachandra Ray, while returning home on a boat after being released from the prison of the Islamic ruler, hears the farewell *dhak* and laments how he missed Durga's puja that year (McDaniel 2004, p. 220), etc. Some scholars have, however, mentioned the *dhak*'s centrality in Gajan (Dasgupta 1946, p. 324). Yet, despite its intrinsic role in devotional affectivity, the drum sounds themselves have remained a conceptual oversight.
- <sup>4</sup> These poems mostly narrate stories of Shiva's rural life (De 2021, pp. 16, 19–20).
- <sup>5</sup> For instance, there are songs about her plights on marrying the poor and indolent Shiva (McDermott 2011, pp. 78–84; Sen 1954, pp. 251–54), and 18th century compositions about her annual homecoming and desperately sad farewell. (McDermott 2011, p. 78).
- <sup>6</sup> See also Sarkar (2017) for a discussion of how Durga carries 'heroic' symbolisms.
- <sup>7</sup> The *dhak* is also said to have been played for Shiva, in Ravana's court.
- <sup>8</sup> For instance: *Shiva Shiva Bholanath* (Shiva's names), *Agradvipera Gopinath* (form of Krishna), *Bolo bhai Nitaai Nitaai* (Vaishnava saint), *bolo bhai Chaitanya* (Vaishnava saint); or, *Dhak-e koy Krishna katha*, *Dhak-e koy Krishna katha* (The *dhak* speaks of Krishna).

- 9 Drummers learn distinct beats to welcome Durga (*ahoban*), appoint her (*boron*), and to aid in various worship procedures of inauguration (*bodhan*), infusing life (*pran pratishtha*), invoking the goddess's sight (*chokkhu daan*), offering of lamps and other worship items (*arati*), bathing (*snan*), offering food (*bhog*), generic sacrifice (*yagna*), animal sacrifice (*bali*), and farewell (*bisarjan*). While devotees mostly do not hear or understand the Brahmanical mantras uttered by the priest, the precise rhythm beats are often associated by them, through received aural memory, with the rituals then being enacted by the priest.
- 10 Some *dhakis* remember how their grandfathers' drums were even bigger, since they did not travel to cities, and played only in their own villages.
- 11 Some *dhakis* explained that in villages, Durga's *arati* (and its beats) is marked into four further stages: *arati*, *sarati*, *bharati*, *amabati*.
- 12 *Dhakis* also shared the exact *bols* of ritual stages with me. Thus, a Murshidabad *dhaki* explained that when the goddess first arrives, they play: *dhyān dhyānak dhyān dhyān dhyān dhyānak dhyān nakdhyānage nakdhyānage dhyān*; when she is invoked: *dhyān dhyānak dhyān dhyāaaaaarr, tyanak tyan tyaaaaarr tyan tyan tyan tyanak tyan*; when the priest begins puja: *jhin jhin jhin dhinak jhin jhin dhinak jhin tinak tin tin tinak tin tyn*; during animal sacrifice: *dhyāng dhyān dhyāng dhyāng nak dhyāng dhyāng dhyāng*; during *arati*: *ja ja ja ja jhing ja ja ja jhing, jhinak jhing jhing*; and during farewell: *dhyānak dhyān ting nakey nakey tinak ting*; etc. These *bols* have regional variations, however. A North 24 Parganas *dhaki* narrated the welcoming beats as: *ta dhin ta dhin ta dhin ta dhin, tak dhinadhin dhin, tak te na dhidhin natin natin nak ta natin nak ta natin nak natin, ta kete ta kete*; the *arati* beats as: *dhik dhinata nak tey dhidhin, dhik dhinata nak tey dhidhin, ta kete tak dhinadhin ta krrrrrrrr, dhik dhinata dhinata dhinata taketey dhidhin*; and the farewell beats as: *dhi dhi nadhi dhina tak, dhi dhi nadhi dhina tak, dhi dhi nadhi dhina tete tak, dhina dhina dhin tak, tina tete nak tina, tete nak tina dha gurrrrrr gurrrrrrrr, dhin ta dhin ta dhina . . .*
- 13 This is reminiscent of Shiva's cosmic dance to *dhak* sounds, at once spontaneous and controlled.
- 14 A popular contemporary Bengali film song also says: *Dhak-er tale komor dole khushi te nache mon, aj baja knashor joma ashor, thakbe ma ar kotokkhon* ('As all waists sway to the beats of the *dhak*, play the accompanying *knasha* and warm up the festivities, since the mother won't stay for long').
- 15 Over the last decade or more, Durga puja's decorations, music (especially songs and instrumental tunes blasting from microphones), and *dhak* rhythms, have also started adapting to contemporary aesthetic influences, for instance, of regional and Bollywood films. Sometimes these tunes and rhythms are also evidently western. Such adaptations simply intend to entertain the urban public for the five days of the city's celebrations.
- 16 The *Gajan* god is interchangeably Shiva, Dharma, as well as Shani, the death god.
- 17 In other myths recollected by peasants, Shiva once left home angry, after fighting with his wife, Parvati. She then asked his companions to sing and dance, since Shiva is most fond of aesthetic entertainment, and would surely thus return to join the celebrations. This incident is believed to have given birth to *Gajan*.
- 18 Sometimes devotees take vows to perform *Gajan* for several years together, and I know a few men who have been ritualists for decades.
- 19 *Sannyasis* said that they call the thread *babar prasad*, Shiva's gift.
- 20 During *Gajan*, women also pray to Shiva for fertility. However, the main participants, especially those who observe temporary vows of celibacy and become *sannyasis* (renouncers) and *Gajan* specialists, are overwhelmingly men. Again, while men of all castes are allowed to become *Gajan sannyasis*, mostly lower-caste men undertake the austerities. In any case, villagers repeatedly told me that despite possible caste differences, Shiva devotees' bodies are considered equal during *Gajan*, and given Brahmanical sacred threads for the five days of worship.
- 21 In Murshidabad, for instance, these songs are locally known as *shaajle gaan* (see also Nicholas 2013, p. 11). The Shiva-song tradition based on familial thematics has been popular since the eighteenth century (Sen 1914, pp. 137–55).
- 22 The typical slow ascending beats during *sannyasi* dances were narrated to me as: *jhing na jhing na jha jha, jhing na jhing na jha jha*. With more speed, the *dhak* loudly says: *jhing jhing kana, jhing jhing kana, jhing jhing kana, jhing jhing kana, jhijhung jhijhung jhing jhing, jhing jhing kana, jhing jhing kana, jha jha je jhe, ja jha jha jha dhei dhei dhei dhei, terekete jhing*.
- 23 A poem describing the skull-based ritual says: *Ki chhol gaibo goshai, chhole ache sthan, enechi Vaishnava-er matha, ache bartaman* ('What song shall I sing for you to explain the ritual, I have brought a *Vaishnava*'s head, and it is present right here'). Villagers also narrated and explained the meaning of a very long *Gajan* poem-song describing how fresh heads (referred to as *phul*, or flowers dedicated to Shiva's worship) are collected from the cremation ground or banks of the river Ganga (referred to as branches), and how, after the heads are blessed by goddess Kali, the devotees play with them in great joy.
- 24 The term *anarya* (non-Aryans) is thus an interesting emic usage among villagers.

## References

- Banerjee, Sumanta. 2002. *Logic in a Popular Form: Essays on Popular Religion in Bengal*. Calcutta: Seagull Books.
- Beck, Guy L. 1993. *Sonic Theology: Hinduism and Sacred Sound*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.
- Becker, Judith. 2004. *Deep Listeners: Music, Emotion and Trancing*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Bordeaux, Joel. 2019. Blood in the Mainstream: Kali Puja and Tantric Orthodoxy in Early Modern Bengal. *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 23: 151–64. [CrossRef]

- Bose, Mandakranta. 2018. *The Oxford History of Hinduism: The Goddess*. Oxford: University Press.
- Chakrabarti, Kunal. 2001. *Religious Process: The Puranas and the Making of a Regional Tradition*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Chatterjee, Partha. 1989. Caste and Subaltern Consciousness. In *Subaltern Studies V*. Edited by Ranajit Guha. Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 169–209.
- Coburn, Thomas B. 1986. Consort of None, Sakti of All: The Vision of the Devi-Mahatmya. In *The Divine Consort: Radha and the Goddesses of India*. Edited by John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff. Boston: Beacon Press, pp. 153–65.
- Das, Utsaleena. n.d. Endurance, Aesthetics, and the Everyday: Chhou in Purulia. Ph.D. thesis, Presidency University, Kolkata, India. unpublished.
- Dasgupta, Shashibhushan. 1946. *Obscure Religious Cults as Background of Bengali Literature*. Calcutta: University of Calcutta.
- De, Aniket. 2021. *The Boundary of Laughter: Popular Performances across Borders in South Asia*. Oxford: University Press.
- Ferrari, Fabrizio M. 2010. *Guilty Males and Proud Females: Negotiating Genders in a Bengali Festival*. Calcutta: Seagull Books.
- Ghosh, Anjan. 2001. Caste Out in West Bengal. Available online: <https://www.india-seminar.com/2001/508/508%20anjan%20ghosh.htm> (accessed on 20 June 2022).
- Guha-Thakurta, Tapati. 2015. *In the Name of the Goddess: The Durga Pujas of Contemporary Kolkata*. Delhi: Primus Books.
- Harner, Michael J. 1982. *The Way of the Shaman*. Toronto: Bantam Books.
- Hart, Mickey. 1990. *Drumming at the Edge of Magic: A Journey into the Spirit of Percussion*. San Francisco: Harper.
- Helmreich, Steven. 2007. An Anthropologist Underwater: Immersive Soundscapes, Submarine Cyborgs, and Transductive Ethnography. *American Ethnologist* 34: 621–41. [CrossRef]
- Jankowsky, Richard C. 2006. Black Spirits, White Saints: Music, Spirit Possession, and Sub-Saharan in Tunisia. *Ethnomusicology* 50: 373–410.
- Lorea, Carola. 2022. Sonic matters: Singing as method and the epistemology of singing across Bengali esoteric lineages. *American Anthropologist* 1–14. [CrossRef]
- Maity, Pradyot Kumar. 1989. *Some Aspects of Indian Culture*. Calcutta: Purbardi Prakashani.
- McDaniel, June. 2004. *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls: Popular Goddess Worship in West Bengal*. Oxford: University Press.
- McDermott, Rachel Fell. 2001a. *Singing to the Goddess: Poems to Kali and Uma from Bengal*. Oxford: University Press.
- McDermott, Rachel Fell. 2001b. *Mother of My Heart, Daughter of My Dreams: Kali and Uma in the Devotional Poetry of Bengal*. Oxford: University Press.
- McDermott, Rachel Fell. 2011. *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal: The Fortunes of Hindu Festivals*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Nicholas, Ralph W. 2008. *Rites of Spring: Gajan in Village Bengal*. New Delhi: Chronicle Books.
- Nicholas, Ralph W. 2013. *Night of the Gods: Durga Puja and the Legitimation of Power in Rural Bengal*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan.
- O’Flaherty, Wendy Doniger. 1986. The Shifting Balance of Power in the Marriage of Siva and Parvati. In *The Divine Consort: Radha and the Goddesses of India*. Edited by John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff. Boston: Beacon Press, pp. 129–43.
- Oddie, Geoffrey A. 1995. *Popular Religion, Elites and Reform: Hook-Swinging and Its Prohibition in Colonial India, 1800–1894*. New Delhi: Manohar.
- Ostor, Akos. 1980. *The Play of the Gods: Locality, Ideology, Structure, and Time in the Festivals of a Bengali Town*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rodrigues, Hillary. 2003. *Ritual Worship of the Great Goddess: The Liturgy of the Durga Puja with Interpretations*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Rouget, Gilbert. 1985. *Music and Trance: A Theory of the Relations between Music and Possession*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Sarbadhikary, Sukanya. 2019. Touch, Untouch, and the Depositions of Ucchishta. *Economic and Political Weekly* 54: 15–17.
- Sarkar, Bihani. 2017. *Heroic Shaktism: The Cult of Durga in Ancient Indian Kingship*. Oxford: University Press.
- Sen, Dinesh Chandra. 1914. *Vangiya Sahitya Parichaya or Selections from the Bengali Literature from the Earliest Times to the Middle of the Nineteenth Century, Part I*. Calcutta: University of Calcutta.
- Sen, Dinesh Chandra. 1954. *History of Bengali Language and Literature*. Calcutta: University of Calcutta.
- Turner, Victor. 2002. Liminality and Communitas. In *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion: Wiley-Blackwell Anthologies in Social and Cultural Anthropology*. Edited by Michael Lambek. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, pp. 326–40.
- van der Veer, Peter. 1987. Taming the Ascetic: Devotionalism in a Hindu Monastic Order. *Man* 22: 680–95. [CrossRef]
- Wolf, Richard K. 2006. The Poetics of “Sufi” Practice: Drumming, Dancing and Complex Agency at Mado Lal Husain and Beyond. *American Ethnologist* 33: 246–68. [CrossRef]
- Wolf, Richard K. 2014. *The Voice in the Drum: Music, Language, and Emotion in Islamicate South Asia*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.
- Wolf, Richard K. 2019. “Rhythm”, “Beat”, and “Freedom” in South Asian Musical Traditions. In *Thought and Play in Musical Rhythm: Asian, African, and Euro-American Perspectives*. Edited by Richard K. Wolf, Stephen Blum and Christopher Hasty. Oxford: University Press, pp. 314–36.