ARBiT
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Observed on May 12, the International Day of Plant Health highlights the vital role plants play in sustaining life, food security and the global economy. Healthy plants provide 80% of the food we eat and produce the oxygen we breathe, yet they face growing threats from pests, diseases and climate change. The day encourages governments, farmers and citizens to adopt sustainable practices such as responsible trade, pest monitoring and biodiversity protection. By raising awareness about plant health, the initiative reminds us that protecting crops and green ecosystems is essential for preventing hunger, safeguarding livelihoods and building a more resilient and sustainable future.

राष्ट्रदूत
TUESDAY
12 May 2026
A-B

A devotee's face painted in the fierce colours of Mahakala, black, red and gold, as part of the Gajan ritual body art tradition.

Writer and Traveler Neeru Saluja with a young Gajan devotee, whose face has been painted as part of the ritual transformation.

A devotee sits quietly on the ground as an artist applies ritual face paint, preparing him for the Gajan procession.

WHEN THE VILLAGE ROARED AT THE SKY

Gajan in Bardhaman is a journey through Sheerpara, Sonapalashi and Krishnadevpur into Bengal's living rituals of Fire, Flesh and Faith. Among the Gajan Sanyasis of West Bengal, where iron pierces flesh, hooks lift men into the sky, and an ancient harvest cry outlasts everything the modern world cares to remember.

A devotee's shaved head bearing intricate painted markings and a single red tilak, part of the Gajan body art tradition.

A devotee in striking black and white Mahakala face paint, embodying the fierce and transcendent form of Shiva during Gajan.

A devotee in full costume and elaborate headdress, completely transformed into a deity for the Gajan street procession.

● Neeru Saluja
(Retired Professor and Traveler)

Seventy-two years on this earth, 101 countries have been worn into my passport, and still; still - West Bengal found a way to stop me cold. Sometimes, insomnia is a blessing. Late-night scrolling often leads me to unexpected journeys, and this time, it led me to rural West Bengal during Gajon. A painted face on Instagram pulled me in. A quick search, a message to a tour organiser, and within two days, I was on a flight to Kolkata and a drive to Bardhaman, curious and excited about a festival I barely knew but deeply wanted to witness.

I have skydived from twelve thousand feet over Melbourne. I swam in Lake Baikal. I can tell you, without the smallest exaggeration, that among my experiences across 101 countries, what I witnessed that night now stands as one of the most unforgettable additions to my memory.

I had come to see the Gajon festival, or Gajan as it is spelled, though in the darkness before dawn, with conch shells sounding and the heavy smell of incense and marigolds thick in the air, spelling felt very far away from anything that mattered. What matters at Gajon is the roar. The word itself, most scholars agree, comes from the Sanskrit word, *garjana*, meaning a roar or a cry, the sound the Sanyasis make as they offer their bodies and their pain to Lord Shiva. Alternatively, people say, Gajan is simply *ga* from *gram*, meaning village, and *jan* from *janasadharan*, meaning common people. A village festival. A festival of ordinary folk. Both meanings rang true that night, because what I heard was something between a roar and a prayer, and the men who made it were as ordinary as any farmer I have ever met, until they were not.

READY FOR THE PULSE OF BENGAL

Before I arrived, I wrote in my journal: "Ready to dive into a whirlwind of fire rituals, painted devotion, drums, and pure rural energy. This isn't just a festival, it's culture in motion, faith in action, and stories waiting at every turn. Can't wait to feel the pulse of Bengal up close and come back with memories that burn bright." Sitting here now, on the other side of it, I can only say: I had no idea.

THE BODY AS CANVAS: DEVOTION TURNED INTO ART

At the Gajon Festival, the body becomes a living canvas and devotion turns into art. Rituals are not merely performed here; they are painted, worn and lived. Tradition breathes through coloured faces and decorated skin. Here is a space where spirituality is expressed not in words but in striking, embodied artistry. In small, spotless villages like Sheerpara and Sonapalashi, I

> In Gajon body art, Mahakala is frequently rendered in stark black, white and red, emphasising time, death and transcendence rather than the more familiar ascetic or benevolent Shiva. The human body becomes a ritual canvas. Gajan is where the body becomes a canvas and tradition wears a modern face. There are two parallel vocabularies of the same devotion, one ancestral, one contemporary, and both are equally alive.

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APPEARANCE AND REALITY

In Gajon, across the remote villages of West Bengal, when young boys have their faces painted as part of the ritual, the act does not end with the paint. It extends into the pose. They do not merely wear the face. They perform it.

This is where appearance and reality braid together. Standing in the narrow lanes of Sonapalashi, watching a boy of, perhaps, twelve holds the stillness of a deity whilst a crowd pressed around him. I understood something I had not expected to understand. He was not pretending to be someone else. He was briefly becoming what the tradition asked him to be, and he knew he was being seen whilst doing so. The gaze of the village was part of the ritual. To be witnessed was to complete the transformation.

During Gajan, young men commonly embody Shiva in this dramatic, performative form as part of devotional folk ritual and street procession. The human body becomes a ritual canvas. Both are Gajan. Both are Bengal.

THE RITUALS

At the temple, the scene was unlike anything I have language for, and I have tried to find language for a great many things in a great many countries. Torches and oil lamps threw everything into gold and shadow. Perhaps, forty or fifty Sanyasis stood or sat in the courtyard, draped in red and saffron, their foreheads marked with ash and vermillion. And then I saw it: the man in front of me had a long iron rod pierced clean through his back. He was smiling. Not through gritted teeth, not with the tight, pained smile of someone enduring something. He was simply smiling, as if he had arrived somewhere he had been trying to reach for a very long time.

Others had rods through their cheeks. Some had needles threaded through the skin of their arms and chests. One man lay on a wooden frame to which large nails were fixed. He lay on the nails, his body spread open, eyes closed, lips moving. Researchers understand these piercing rituals as symbolic: the entry of life into earth, the tilling of soil, the seeding of the ground. Gajan maps the agricultural cycle of Bengal onto the human body. Pain is not punishment here; it is transformation. It is the body becoming the earth, becoming the prayer. After the piercing was complete, conducted with a ritual precision that I found both terrifying and deeply moving, the Sanyasis began to run. They ran in a circular procession through the village roads, from one temple to the next and back, through lanes where the entire village had gathered to watch and to touch their feet in reverence. Drums and cymbals and brass horns called *dhak* drove the rhythm, and the sound seemed to originate less from any instrument and more from the chest of the earth itself.

#TRAVELS AND TRADITIONS

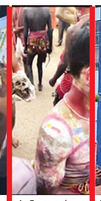
A Sanyasi adorned with flower garlands and ritual markings stands among the gathered crowd, his composure unbroken as the procession swells around him.

Smoke, incense and the press of hundreds fill a narrow village lane as the Gajan procession moves from one temple to the next, the entire village in motion.

A Sanyasi carries a human skull through the procession, his body covered in ash and colour, his expression utterly calm.

A Sanyasi is pulled upward as the Charak ritual begins, his body lifting slowly towards the sky above the gathered crowd.

A Sanyasi bends forward in preparation as the hooks are readied. Two metal hooks pierced clean through the skin of a Sanyasi's back.



A Sanyasi mid procession, painted and adorned, carrying the ritual objects of Gajan through the village lanes.

Metal rods pierced through the cheeks and lips of a Sanyasi who stands composed and still, his face a testament to a month of austerity.

A Sanyasi suspended high above the crowd from the Charak pole, swinging slowly in wide circles.

THE DANCE OF THE DEAD: NARAMUNDO KHELA

Nothing, however, prepared me for what came next. Because Gajon, in its most remote and ancient form, does not stop at the living.

Before dawn one morning, we went in search of the infamous skull dance. In near silence, young Sanyasis climbed trees and brought down hidden bundles. As they unwrapped them, the reality struck: human skulls, used as ritual objects. With drums beating, they danced through the village lanes, circling temples, the entire community watching in quiet participation. It was unsettling, intense and unforgettable.

Villagers in this part of West Bengal usher in their new year by parading and dancing with unearthed human skulls. The men who bring the skulls bring them from nearby burial grounds where most of the skulls have not been deceased for more than one or two months. Many still have visible facial hair and skin. The bodies are often buried because their families could not afford the cost of incineration and funeral pyres.

This is the Naramundo Khela, the Skull Game. It is dedicated to Lord Shiva, who is depicted with a snake around his neck, who presides over the cremation grounds, who is the lord of all that the living world prefers not to look at directly. As part of the festival, villagers carrying skulls and daggers dance to rhythmic drum beats, their bodies covered with white ash and spotted with red and green paint. They are not frightening to the village. They are, in a profound sense, the most honest people in the procession, the ones willing to carry what everyone else turns away from.

A large number of people gather around the fairground and watch. I watched too. I am not sure I have fully processed what I saw. But I know it was not grotesque in the way that word usually means. It was, in the oldest sense of the word, sacred.

THE WORLD'S HARDEST PUJA: CHARAK

The climax of Gajon, the moment towards which the whole month had been building, came later in Krishnadevpur: Charak Puja, perhaps, the most physically extreme devotional ritual anywhere in the Hindu world. This is closely linked with the Gajon festival tradition and involves dramatic rituals that must be witnessed to be believed.

In the open field at the edge of the village stood the Charak tree, which is not a tree at all but a tall, straight Gurjan trunk stripped off bark and branch, planted upright in the earth, twenty-five or thirty feet high, with a long horizontal beam balanced across its crown. From this beam hung ropes. And from the ropes would hang the men.

Hook swinging is exactly what it sounds like. Devotees, Sanyasis who have observed austerities for the entire month of Chaitra, are hooked through their skin and hung from the pole, rotating in a circle. They are suspended by nothing but their own skin and their faith in Shiva. Men, pierced with hooks through their backs, were hoisted onto the tall pole and swung in circles, blessing children held up to them by parents below as drums thundered and a fair buzzed all around them. Alongside this, other Sanyasis underwent body piercing: devotees pierced their bodies with rods, needles through cheeks, the full vocabulary of devotional endurance that Gajon has always spoken.

There was no spectacle of pain. Only devotion, endurance and collective faith. When I asked how it was possible, a local elder shrugged in the way that people who have grown up with miracles shrug. "Shiva holds them," he said simply. I watched three men swing in slow wide circles against a sky turning from pink to violet, their faces serene, their bodies loose, and I confess that I found every other explanation insufficient.

The crowd below wept, cheered and pressed forward. Old women held their palms together. Young men drummed without stopping. The Sanyasi on the rope did not cry out. He rotated slowly, arms spread, as if resting in a very unusual hammock, somewhere between this world and the next.

THE FAIR: THE OTHER FACE OF GAJON

And then, because Bengal always holds both things at once, twenty metres from the Charak pole in Krishnadevpur, a village fair was in full, glorious swing.

The festival is rooted in rural, agrarian communities. Local fairs selling handicrafts, sweets, and toys are central to the cultural experience. Stalls sold batasha, those crisp white sugar discs that melt instantly on the tongue, and jilapi, twisted into spirals and glistening with syrup. Toy vendors spread their wares on cloth: clay horses, painted birds, tin whistles. Handicrafts changed hands. Children ran between adult legs. The smell of frying dough mixed with incense. Somewhere, a loudspeaker played a film song.

This, too, is Gajon. The transcendent and the festive, the terrifying and the sweet, the ancient skull and the fresh jilapi, all of it in the same field, on the same evening, under the same open Bengal sky. I watched. I simply watched, and let it all wash over me; the colour, the noise, the smoke, the children, the drums still echoing somewhere in the distance. I am not sure I fully understood what I had seen across Sheerpara, Sonapalashi, and Krishnadevpur over those extraordinary days, but I was profoundly content.

> Gajan's origins are old enough that no one can date them precisely. Most historians place the festival's development in the medieval period, but its roots in the folk religion of Bengal reach back further still. The most compelling theory traces the festival to the tenth century CE, when Buddhism retreated from the Bengali mainstream. Buddhist monks, carrying Tantric disciplines that understood the body as a site of spiritual transformation through endurance, merged their practices with the existing Shaivite folk tradition.

A THOUSAND YEARS IN THE SOIL: THE HISTORY OF GAJON

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The result was Gajan: a synthesis of Shiva worship and ascetic bodily offering, born from the mingling of two great faiths in the red-clay villages of Bengal. The festival is also connected to Dharmathakur, the God of Fertility, worshipped by the agrarian and lower-caste communities of Bengal, making Gajan historically a festival of the margins, a spiritual space where those outside the Brahminical order could offer their bodies as prayer and receive, in return, the blessings of rain and harvest. At Gajan, the caste hierarchy dissolves. That, perhaps more than any ritual, is its most radical act.

WHAT I CARRIED HOME

This was not a performance for outsiders. This was a lived tradition, raw, physical and deeply rooted in belief. And all of it began with a sleepless night and a scroll.

I did not know when I picked up my phone that restless night, and let an algorithm lead me to a painted face on Instagram, that within two days, I would be standing in the lanes of Sheerpara watching a boy become a god, or crouching in the dark of Sonapalashi as young Sanyasis unwrapped bundles from the trees, or standing in a field in Krishnadevpur with my heart in my throat watching a man swing silently in a violet sky. Gajon stands alone. It borrows nothing from anywhere, resembles nothing I have encountered before, and asks nothing of you except that you show up and bear witness. It added something entirely its own to a life of 101 countries and this one was just a flight and a drive from home. That, at seventy-two, is the greatest gift a journey can give.

Sitting now in my Jaipur home, surrounded by the quiet accumulation of journeys, small keepsakes, fading tickets, fragments of places that once felt vast, I find myself returning, again and again, to those two days across three villages of Bardhaman. And yet, when I try to explain Gajon to those who visit, I always fall short. Some things you have to be standing in a field in the dark for, with drums going through your chest and the smell of marigolds in the air and a man swinging slowly in the violet sky above you, his face at peace in a way that makes you wonder if you have ever once in your life been truly at peace yourself.

What I can say is this: Gajan is not a spectacle. It is not performance. It is not the kind of thing that exists to be photographed or explained in a newspaper article by a retired professor from Rajasthan who happened to lose sleep one night and follow a painted face on Instagram all the way to rural Bengal. It is a village speaking directly to the sky, the same conversation it has been having for perhaps a thousand years, in the only language it has ever trusted: the language of the body, of sacrifice, of the roar that is also a prayer.

The word Gajan means both. A roar. And the people of the village. And both of those things were, that night, exactly the same.

I left Krishnadevpur the next morning, carrying nothing but memories. The Sanyasis had returned to their ordinary lives. The Charak tree stood alone in the empty field. And all of it, every painted face, every drum beat, every skull, every man swinging silently in the sky, had begun with a sleepless night and a scroll. And I walked to my car thinking: I believe everyone should follow the rhythm of their own heart. But occasionally, if you are very fortunate, you stumble upon a place where an entire village has been following the rhythm of something much older than any heart, and you are allowed, briefly, to hear it too.

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A drummer leads the Gajan procession, his dhak slung across his body, keeping the rhythm that drives the entire ritual forward.

A young boy painted entirely in blue embodies Lord Shiva, adorned with marigold garlands and beads, standing as a living deity in the village street.

A devotee in full white and black costume with an elaborate skeletal mask, representing the fearsome aspect of Shiva during the Gajan procession.

A village drummer beats his dhak with a wide smile, carried along by the energy and joy of the Gajan festival procession around him.

Young Sanyasis, with bodies smeared in red and white paint, move through the village lanes as part of the Gajan ritual procession.

A Sanyasi climbs a tree as part of the Naramundo Khela ritual, watched by the gathered village community below.

A young Sanyasi holds a human skull as a ritual object, his body painted and his expression calm, as the community gathers around him in quiet witness.

The Gajon Rural Festival of West Bengal, where living embodiments of devotion fill the village streets with colour, costume and ancient faith.

A young boy painted entirely in blue as Lord Shiva sits resting between rituals, his full costume and marigold garlands still intact, deity for a day.

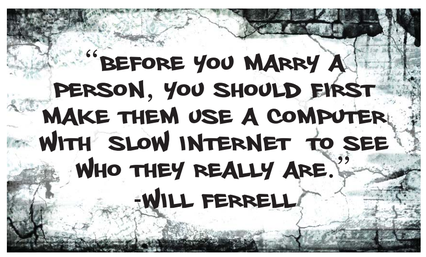
A painted Mahakala face mounted on the Charak pole, watching over the festival grounds as devotees gather below.

A devotee dressed as Lord Shiva stands alongside a companion carrying a human skull, two faces of the same ancient tradition meeting in one frame.

Two young Sanyasis in full Kali and Mahakala face paint pause between rituals, one scrolling through his phone, ancient devotion and modern life in the same moment.

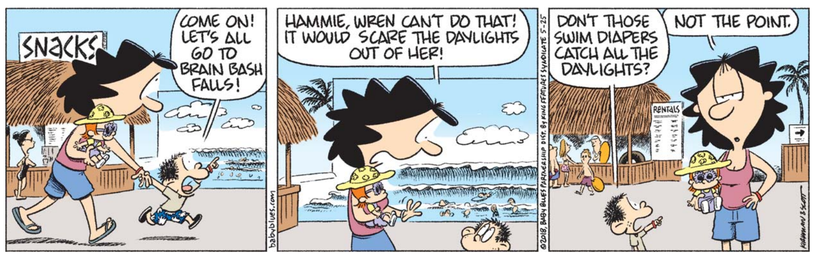
A young Sanyasi in red and white ritual face paint sits quietly beneath a tree, resting before the procession begins, somewhere between the ordinary and the divine.

THE WALL



BABY BLUES

By Rick Kirkman & Jerry Scott



ZITS

By Jerry Scott & Jim Borgman