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A Comparative Study of the Spirituality in Gitanjali and the Garo Traditional Poetic Form Dani

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Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore's Gitanjali is one of the finest expressions of Indian devotional poetry, blending personal spiritual experience with universal mysticism. Similarly, Harendra W. Marak's documentation of traditional Garo poetry, especially Dani Doka, highlights the deep spiritual dimensions of Garo indigenous life, especially during the Wangala festival. This paper explores the thematic parallels between Gitanjali and Dani Doka, focusing on three core spiritual insights: intimacy with God, reliance on divine grace, and the idea that God dwells among the poor and humble. Through this comparative study, the paper shows how different cultural and poetic traditions articulate a shared longing for the divine, rooted in everyday experience and ritual expression.

Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore an eminent poet, a great philosopher, a man of letters, musician, novelist, painter, dramatist and above all as a humanitarian his contributions have enriched the intellectual and cultural life of most of the countries in the world. He left an undeniable impression on the literary work with his masterpiece Gitanjali. The collection of poems in Gitanjali, filled with profound spiritual and philosophical insights captivated the readers worldwide but also earned him the Nobel Prize in 1913. Poetry has long served as a bridge between the human and the divine. In many cultures, poetic expression becomes the language of prayer, longing, and spiritual insight. Rabindranath Tagore's Gitanjali and the Garo traditional song *Dani Doka*, sung during the *Wangala* festival, both exemplify this union of poetry and spirituality.

Mala Chandrashekhar in her article, 'Where Poetry Meets Spirituality: Rabindranath Tagore's Gitanjali and its Nobel Triumph' mentions that "Tagore's influence as a poet and philosopher continues to reverberate in modern times. His poems continue to be studied, recited and admired for their timeless beauty and profound insights. Gitanjali remains a cherished gem in the world of literature reminding us the power of poetry to illuminate the human spirit." In the imagination of the poets, the unintelligible and abstract spiritual truth finds means of expression. "Imagination is the zone where religious faith and artistic creativity meet." Poems help spirituality and religion to express itself. Poetry helps to reveal the religion and mind, it can also bring out the spiritual insights, cultures from all over the world in any form. There are many similarities between other cultures and religion with Gitanjali's spiritual insights. Though Tagore's work stems from the cultural context of Bengal and philosophical Hinduism, and *Dani Doka* from Garo agrarian practices, both embody a deep sense of spiritual awareness and devotion. This paper compares the two traditions by focusing on three central themes: the intimacy between the devotee and

the divine, dependence on divine providence, and the belief that God is most present among the poor and humble. The aim is to uncover how both written and oral traditions use poetry to reflect and deepen spiritual consciousness.

Literature Review

Scholars have widely studied Gitanjali as a lyrical work of spiritual devotion. Tagore's poems draw on Upanishadic thought, the Bhakti tradition, and Brahmo Samaj theology. His spiritual vision is both deeply personal and universal, as highlighted by critics such as Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson. They emphasize how Gitanjali reframes Indian religious experience into a modern, introspective devotional language.

In contrast, Garo spiritual literature, especially *Dani Doka*, has been preserved primarily through oral traditions. Harendra W. Marak's A·chik Aganbewalrang documents how songs like Dani are embedded in Garo ritual life and cultural values. The song expresses gratitude to the deity Misi Saljong, who is believed to bestow prosperity and visit households in human form. While less studied academically, Garo oral poetry reveals a rich spiritual life where ritual, nature, and hospitality are intertwined.

Comparative literary studies such as those by K. Satchidanandan suggest that despite cultural differences, spiritual poetry across traditions often reflects similar existential concerns: the need for divine presence, the recognition of human limitation, and the sanctity of everyday life. This study extends that approach by placing Gitanjali and *Dani Doka* in conversation through shared themes of intimacy with God, trust in divine guidance, and reverence for the lowly.

Thematic Comparison

Intimacy with God

Tagore's poems are filled with longing for closeness with the divine. In Gitanjali, God is not merely a distant being, but a friend, a beloved, and an inner presence. This intimacy is portrayed as a spiritual desire for union and understanding. Similarly, *Dani Doka* reflects a deeply relational spirituality. In the Garo tradition, welcoming *Misi Saljong* into the home symbolizes openness to divine closeness. Both traditions suggest that God does not remain far away but seeks nearness, whether through silent prayer or ritual hospitality.

Harendra W. Marak's preface to the Garo translation of Gitanjali offers a culturally rooted interpretation of divine longing by drawing from familiar human relationships. His comparisons make Tagore's spiritual vision more accessible to Garo readers by linking the soul's search for God with emotional experiences found in everyday life.

In the first comparison, Marak speaks of a lover and his beloved separated by distance. The beloved waits anxiously, longing for his return. When he finally arrives, her sorrow turns into joy under his loving care. This emotional movement from absence to reunion reflects the spiritual condition of the human soul in its quest for the Divine. Just as the beloved yearns for the return of her lover, the soul longs for communion with God. The joy of reunion symbolizes spiritual fulfilment.

The second comparison involves a newly married couple. Soon after the wedding, the groom must travel, leaving the bride in loneliness. Her waiting is marked by sorrow and longing, but his return restores happiness and completeness. This image suggests that human beings are inseparable from God in essence, even if temporary distance is felt. The soul's loneliness without God mirrors the bride's loneliness without her husband. Reunion becomes a metaphor for restored spiritual harmony and divine intimacy.

The third comparison presents a contrast. A wife who does not care for her husband is absent when he returns home. This symbolizes those who neglect or ignore their relationship with God. Unlike the faithful beloved who waits with expectation, the unfaithful person is spiritually indifferent. In this way, Marak warns against losing awareness of the Divine presence. Spiritual neglect leads to missed opportunities for communion.

These three images together illuminate the deeper meaning of Tagore's devotional poetry. In Gitanjali, the relationship between the human soul and God is often expressed through love, longing, waiting, and reunion. Such emotions are not merely romantic; they are spiritual metaphors.

This interpretation is beautifully echoed in Verse 22:

"Oh my only friend, my best beloved, the gates are open in my house—do not pass by like a dream."

Here, the speaker invites the Divine into the innermost space of the self. The "open gates" symbolize readiness, surrender, and spiritual welcome. The plea that the beloved should not "pass by like a dream" reveals the fear of losing the Divine presence. It is a cry for lasting union rather than fleeting encounter.

Thus, Marak's comparisons deepen our understanding of divine quest in Gitanjali. They show that the longing for God is as intimate and intense as human love, and that spiritual fulfillment comes through faithfulness, waiting, and wholehearted welcome of the Divine.

In Bebera·ani Bimik (Sources of the belief), Llewellyn R. Marak presents a detailed account of traditional Garo belief systems, emphasizing the deep spiritual relationship between human life, nature and sacred objects. He explains that Garo cosmology recognizes the existence of numerous spiritual beings, each associated with particular roles, powers and influences over human welfare. According to Marak, these spiritual entices are believed to inhabit both natural and human-associated spaces. He mentioned about the dwelling places as, 'Those mites dwells in places like deep crevasse of rocks and hills where people do not frequent, in brooks and streams and nooks and corners of hillocks, treacherous terrains, sacred grooves and in whirlpools and lakes. The spirits also dwells in specially preserved and untouched properties by human like gongs, drums, shields, amulets, tongs, and also in gongs that are used during prayers and worship (rangmora, ranggachek) and in the kingpin of certain houses (rojot maljru). It is also believed that the spirits are present in the kingpost of the house, centre post (turuma) and in the hearth rake (onggare) of the place of cooking. Those benevolent spirits are the ones that blesses human and malevolent spirits sometimes brings about illnesses, malaise and maladies (Bebera·ani Bimik,1)

In traditional Garo belief, as reflected in accounts of creation and ancestral memory, the relationship between humanity and the Divine was once immediate and intimate. Human beings and the gods lived together, shared close companionship, and even intermarried. This early unity suggests a time when the boundary between the human and spiritual worlds was not yet divided. The sacred was not distant—it was woven into daily life.

However, this harmony did not remain unchanged. Complications and disorder arose between humans and divine beings, leading the Creator, *Tatara Rabuga*, to withdraw certain powers from humankind. As a result, people could still hear the voices of the gods, but they could no longer see them. This marks a turning point in Garo cosmology: The Divine became hidden, accessible through sound, intuition, and ritual, but no longer visible in direct form. The separation created a spiritual longing, while preserving a sense of divine nearness.

This belief is deeply expressed in *Katta Wal·tim* by Kroshnil D. Sangma. In this work, the figure who guides the ancestors when they cannot find their path is named:

"*Katchi Gando Gangipa Jugu kni Bikgipa"*

—"The one who leads, who carries the living bow and arrow, who clears the path for the ancestors."
This image presents the guide as both protector and pathfinder. The bow and arrow symbolize vigilance and the ability to confront dangers along the ancestral journey. Unlike a torch, which suggests light, the bow and arrow emphasize defence, courage, and preparedness. The guide is not merely showing the way; he is actively safeguarding the ancestors as they move forward.
In the context of Garo spirituality, this unseen figure becomes a powerful symbol of divine guardianship. Though invisible, he is present in action and authority. The ancestors hear his voice but cannot see him, reinforcing the belief that divine help often operates beyond human sight.
The belief that the gods could once hear and see everything also shaped moral conduct. Since the Divine presence was immediate and all-knowing, people lived with reverence and accountability. This explains the traditional Garo understanding that the forefathers did not tell lies. Truthfulness was not merely a social virtue—it was a sacred obligation before the ever-present Divine witness.
Thus, this narrative reveals three important dimensions of Garo spirituality: first, an original closeness between humanity and God; second, a later separation that transformed divine presence into unseen guidance; and third, an ethical life rooted in awareness of divine observation. The result is a worldview in which honesty, reverence, and trust are inseparable from spiritual belief. Even though God became unseen, the Divine remained near—heard in guidance, remembered in tradition, and reflected in righteous living.
The Divine is not only a guide but also a warrior-protector, ensuring safe passage through uncertain realms. The metaphor of the living bow and arrow reflects a spiritual force that is alive, alert, and ever ready to defend those under its care.

Reliance on God

In Gitanjali, the poet constantly surrenders his ego and appeals to divine mercy and strength. Tagore acknowledges human frailty and expresses a longing to be guided by God's will. Garo spirituality likewise acknowledges dependence on supernatural blessing. The entire ritual surrounding *Dani Doka* is an act of trust: a belief that the success of crops, the health of the family, and the peace of the land depend on divine favor. Both traditions understand life as something sustained not by human effort alone, but by divine grace.
The idea of reliance on God rather than on one's own limited understanding is a central spiritual principle in Gitanjali. Tagore repeatedly reminds the reader that human strength, pride, and self-dependence often lead to frustration, whereas surrender to the Divine brings freedom and fulfillment.
In Verse 9, Tagore sharply exposes the futility of self-reliance when detached from God:
"O fool, to try to carry thyself upon thy shoulders!
O beggar, to come to beg at thy own door!"
These striking metaphors reveal the absurdity of depending solely on oneself. To carry oneself upon one's own shoulders is impossible; to beg at one's own door is equally futile. Through these images, Tagore critiques human ego—the illusion that one can sustain life independently. The deeper lesson is that human beings are not self-sufficient; true strength lies in recognizing one's dependence on the Divine.
The verse continues:
"Leave all thy burdens on his hands who can bear all, and never look behind in regret."
Here, surrender becomes the pathway to peace. God is portrayed as the one capable of carrying every burden, unlike the fragile human self. Trusting in divine wisdom means releasing anxiety, regret, and the need for absolute control. Reliance on God is not weakness; it is spiritual maturity.

This theme is further enriched in Verse 8:
"Mother, it is no gain, thy bondage of finery,
If it keep one shut off from the healthful dust of the earth,
if it rob one of the right of entrance to the great fair of common human life."
In this verse, Tagore rejects artificial luxury and social pride. "Bondage of finery" symbolizes attachments that separate a person from authentic life and spiritual truth. If wealth, status, or self-importance distance one from the "healthful dust of the earth" and from ordinary human fellowship, then they become obstacles rather than blessings. The "great fair of common human life" represents participation in the shared experiences of humanity—humility, service, struggle, and connection. True spirituality requires openness to life as it is, not retreat into pride or exclusiveness.
Together, these verses teach that dependence on self alone leads to emptiness, while reliance on God brings inner freedom. They also warn that external adornment and worldly attachments can prevent genuine spiritual growth. The path to success, in Tagore's vision, lies in surrender, humility, and trust in the Divine presence that sustains all life. Thus, in Gitanjali, reliance on God is not passive resignation but active faith—a recognition that human understanding is limited, while divine wisdom alone can lead to wholeness.
The narratives of Ase and Malja in the Dani tradition provide a powerful illustration of what happens when individuals reject divine order and refuse to rely on or honour the source of blessing. Their deliberate absence from the sacred distribution of food and drink—symbolically served as mud-rice and yellow water-wine—was not a simple act of withdrawal, but an open rejection of communal participation and reverence toward Misi Saljong, the god of blessing and distribution.
By refusing to partake, Ase and Malja positioned themselves outside the sacred relationship between humanity and the Divine. Their irreverence resulted in defilement and desecration, leading to tragic consequences: Ase was killed by a tigress, and Malja was taken by a mermaid. Their fates are poetically narrated in balanced couplets, emphasizing both the inevitability and symmetry of divine justice. The repeated alternation in the lines deepens the sense of ritual seriousness and moral consequence.
"Due to this act they were defiled
And desecrated;
A tigress killed Ase,
A mermaid took Malja;
Ase got lost in Simepak,
Malja lingered till late in the evening in Benggolpak;
Ase got lost while cutting bamboo shoots,
Malja was delayed till late in the evening in a pool;
Ase disappeared in a small, isolated jungle.
Malja vanished in a knee deep pool." (Marak 1985,45-46)
The suffering extended beyond them to their wives, who bore the grief of their husbands' actions. This reflects the communal dimension of wrongdoing in indigenous belief systems—individual irreverence disrupts not only personal destiny but also family and social harmony.
This contrast establishes a clear moral structure in Dani: rejection of divine fellowship leads to destruction, while humility and hospitality lead to blessing. Yet there are important differences between Gitanjali and Dani in how they present this relationship with the Divine.

In Dani, divine justice is immediate, visible, and often communal. Actions against sacred order bring concrete consequences in this life—death, loss, or misfortune.

In Gitanjali, however, the consequences of failing to rely on God are more inward and spiritual. The danger is not physical destruction but emptiness, pride, and separation from truth. Tagore's focus is on the inner life of the soul—its longing, surrender, and awakening. Divine reward is not material abundance but spiritual fulfilment and freedom.

Thus, while both Dani and Gitanjali emphasize reverence toward the Divine, they differ in expression: Dani presents God as a communal, active force whose blessings and punishments shape earthly life. Gitanjali presents God as an intimate spiritual presence whose acceptance transforms the soul.

In essence, Dani teaches through narrative action and communal morality, while Gitanjali teaches through reflection and inner devotion. Both affirm that human destiny depends on one's relationship with the Divine—but one speaks through mythic consequence, the other through spiritual realization.

God Dwells Amongst the Poor

One of the most radical insights of Gitanjali is the claim that God is found not in temples, but among the poor. Tagore sees divine beauty in toil, suffering, and simplicity. This is echoed in Garo belief, where the divine may come not as a deity in grandeur, but as a stranger, a guest, or a hungry man. In both, humility and service to others become spiritual acts. This theme highlights a common ethical vision: the sacred is found not in elevated places, but in the lives of the humble.

The theme that God dwells among the poor is one of the most radical and profound spiritual insights in Gitanjali. It shifts spirituality away from ritual isolation and toward compassionate engagement with human suffering. The message is clear: love for God cannot remain abstract or confined to prayer alone; it must be expressed through love, service, and solidarity with the marginalized.

In Verse 11, Tagore challenges conventional religious practice:

"Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut?"

These opening lines criticize a spirituality that is detached from life. Rituals, prayers, and religious symbols become empty if they are performed in isolation from human reality. The "lonely dark corner of a temple" represents spiritual withdrawal—a faith that seeks God in separation rather than in service.

Tagore then overturns this expectation:

"Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee!"

This is a call to awakening. God is not confined within sacred walls or rituals. Divine presence must be sought in the living world, not in closed spaces of self-centered devotion.

The poem continues:

"He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the path-maker is breaking stones."

Here, God is identified with labourers—the poor, the struggling, the ones engaged in difficult and humble work. The tiller and the path-maker symbolize those whose lives are marked by hardship, yet whose labour sustains society. By locating God among them, Tagore sanctifies ordinary work and human suffering.

The next image deepens this idea:

"He is with them in sun and in shower, and his garment is covered with dust."

This portrays God as sharing in the conditions of the poor. The Divine is not distant or untouched but present within toil, discomfort, and endurance. The dust-covered garment symbolizes humility and solidarity. God participates in the struggles of the oppressed.

The final appeal is transformative:

"Put off thy holy mantle and even like him come down on the dusty soil!"

The "holy mantle" represents pride, religious superiority, and separation from common humanity. Tagore urges the devotee to remove these barriers and descend into the realities of everyday life. True spirituality requires action, not merely contemplation. It demands entering the world of suffering with humility and compassion. The deeper meaning of this verse is that human love for God is incomplete unless it extends to the poor. To understand their grief, share their burdens, and act in love toward them is the highest form of worship. Spiritual life is not escape from the world but participation in its pain and healing.

Thus, Verse 11 redefines devotion as ethical engagement. God dwells among the poor, and to serve them is to encounter the Divine. In Tagore's vision, compassion in action is not secondary to spirituality—it is its very essence.

The story of Ae and Ae Dikante reveals the blessings reserved for those who respond to the Divine with humility and sincerity. Though poor and destitute, they welcomed Misi Saljong—disguised in human form—with the little they had. Their offering of incense at the trauma (central post beside the hearth) symbolized devotion rooted in pure intention rather than material wealth. Pleased by their hospitality, Misi Saljong blessed them with grains, transforming their suffering into abundance. Blessings are equally tangible, such as grains, prosperity, and survival. The Divine often appears in embodied or disguised forms, interacting directly with people in mythic narratives.

The idea that God dwells among the poor finds a striking parallel in both Gitanjali and the Garo Dani tradition, especially in the story of Ae and Ae Dikante. Though these two literary-spiritual traditions emerge from very different cultural worlds, they converge on a shared truth: divine presence is most fully revealed not in wealth, status, or ritual grandeur, but in humility, sincerity, and compassion.

In Dani, Ae and Ae Dikante are portrayed as destitute widows with little to offer. Their poverty places them at the margins of society, yet it is precisely in their humble home that Misi Saljong, the god of blessing, chooses to dwell—disguised in human form as Saljong Racha Misi Gitel. Unlike those who reject or dishonor divine fellowship, Ae and Ae Dikante welcome the stranger with pure hearts. Though materially poor, they offer what they can: incense burned at the trauma, the sacred central post beside the hearth.

This act of hospitality becomes an act of worship. Their sincerity matters more than material abundance. Misi Saljong, pleased with their reverence and openness, blesses them with grains. The story reveals that divine grace is not reserved for the powerful, but is often bestowed upon the humble and the poor. In this sense, the poor become not merely recipients of blessing but privileged sites of divine encounter.

This resonates deeply with Tagore's vision in Verse 11 of Gitanjali:

"He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the path-maker is breaking stones."

Tagore insists that God is found among labourers, among those whose lives are marked by hardship. The Divine is not enclosed in temples but walks with those in sun and shower, clothed in dust. This is a spiritual democratization of God's presence: holiness is not restricted to sacred institutions but embedded in the struggles of ordinary people. When read together, the story of Ae and Ae Dikante and Tagore's verse reveal a profound commonality. Both traditions reject the idea that spiritual worth is tied to wealth or ritual privilege. Instead, they affirm that humility, hospitality, and openness to others are the true signs of devotion. Yet their expressions differ.

In Dani, God comes physically in disguise, testing human hearts through embodied encounter. The blessing is concrete—grains, sustenance, prosperity. The narrative is communal and mythic, emphasizing reciprocity between humans and divine beings. In Gitanjali, God is encountered through ethical

awakening. The blessing is inward—spiritual realization, compassion, and transformed consciousness. The focus is personal and reflective, emphasizing service as worship.

Thus, the comparative study of Gitanjali and Dani reveals both convergence and distinction:

Both affirm that God dwells among the humble and the poor.

Both value sincerity above material wealth.

Both teach that true spirituality is expressed in action—hospitality in Dani, service in Gitanjali.

Yet Dani presents divine-human relations through narrative myth and visible blessings, while Gitanjali frames them through inner realization and moral awakening.

In conclusion, Gitanjali and Dani—though rooted in different traditions—share a spiritual humanism that places the Divine in the midst of ordinary life. Whether in the humble hearth of Ae and Ae Dikante or in the dust-covered labourer of Tagore's verse, God is shown to dwell not in privilege, but in the spaces of struggle, humility, and love. Their comparative study demonstrates that across cultures, the deepest spirituality lies in recognizing the sacred within the least expected places—and in responding with compassion, reverence, and wholehearted welcome.

Methodology

This study follows a qualitative and comparative literary approach. Texts were selected from Gitanjali (English version by Tagore) and translated versions of *Dani Doka* as recorded by Harendra W. Marak. Key poems and song segments were analysed thematically, with attention to cultural, religious, and linguistic context.

The comparison was guided by three core spiritual themes: intimacy with God, divine reliance, and God among the poor. Interpretations of Gitanjali drew upon Tagore's philosophical background, while *Dani Doka* was understood within the Garo ritual framework of Wangala, cosmology, and community ethics. Limitations include the oral nature of Garo literature and the interpretive challenges of working with translated indigenous texts.

Conclusion

Despite their cultural, linguistic, and religious differences, Gitanjali and *Dani Doka* share a profound spiritual vision grounded in human experience. Tagore's introspective verses and the Garo community's ritual songs both explore how humans relate to the divine in daily life. The intimacy between God and the devotee, the trust in divine guidance, and the presence of the sacred among the humble are universal insights expressed differently through lyricism and ritual.

This comparative study not only reveals the richness of two distinct poetic traditions but also affirms that spirituality, in its many voices, seeks the same truth: that the divine is near, trustworthy, and most visible in moments of humility and love.

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