

SACRED TO SECULAR: JATRAN CONTEMPORARY BENGAL

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Abstract

No such folk form has changed so much in its form, function and manner as Jatra has changed in time. Originated in the Puranic period and nourished by the *Bhakti* cult of the Eastern India, Jatra was once considered to be a holy ritual where mass was led by the performative circumstances of lives and miracles of Gods and Goddesses. From Sakti & Krishna Jatra to modern secular Jatra, from bamboo flute and *dhol* to modern orchestra and from the lyrical song to thundering melodrama—with time Jatra has undergone a radical transition along with the socio-political and cultural drift. Nowadays Jatra has become a major entertainment industry in rural Bengal. Influenced by the proscenium theatre, it has brought blazing lights, ticket system and proscenium format. In age of Television and Cinema, Jatra has introduced high fashionable costume, popular Television artists, motor driven revolving cyclorama stage, retelling of stories of popular Bollywood and Tollywood movies. Even the mode of advertisements have also changed with the time. Sometimes Jatra also takes contemporary theme of acceptability of empowerment of woman. Contemporary Jatra help us to realize how the language of the mass imagination has changed over the recent years. This paper seeks to trace how *Jatra* has encountered the cultural politics and populism.

Key Words: Jatra, holy, entertainment industry, cultural politics

Jatra is the popular dramatic performance which has been prevalent in Bengal (including Bangladesh), Odisha and Assam. The word Jatra is derived from the word 'ya' – means to go, thus Jatra means a 'cavalcade' or a 'procession' in the honour of the God or Goddess; it is believed that as West performative tradition was originated in Dionysian cult, Jatra also was originated in ceremonious ritual. The use of the term, Jatra can be found in Bharata's *Natya Sastra*, and Bhavabhuti's *Malati Madhava*, etc. There were several popular performative traditions like *Kavi Gaan*, *Panchali*, *Kirtan* and *Kathakata* which grew independently along with the parallel development of the elite Sanskrit theatre in the medieval ages. Jatra in the late medieval age grew out of the confluence of these popular performative genres. Perhaps, this may be the reason why there is no general agreement on the origin of Jatra. While E. P. Horwitz believed Jatra to be a Vedic phenomenon, M.L. Varadpande held Jatra as a performative tradition of the Puranic Age. But in Bengal, Jatra as a distinct dramatic presentation had begun to take its shape

with the worship of Shakti cult in ChandiJatra. It dealt with the Great War between the demons and the Goddess, Chandi. Later, when the Eastern India was swiped by the wave of Vaishnavism during 16th century, a new kind of folk performance called Krishna Jatra became predominant in popular imagination. It is said that Chaitanya Dev after returning from Gaya in 1506 played the role of Rukmini in *Rukmini Haran (The Abduction of Rukmini)* at the house of Chandra Sekhar. Krishna Jatra deals with the Lila of Lord Krishna, characterized by heroism, devotion, melodious songs and demonstration accompanied by folk music. They mesmerized the audience so much that every performance on Krishna's life came to be known as Krishna Jatra or popularly called as 'KestoJatra' and during the Muslim period in Bengal Province, the evidences of writing and performing Krishna Jatra were abundant.

Towards the end of the Muslim rule, in the new form, Amateur Jatra, the divine love and devotion slowly yielded to secular theme dealing with human love and attraction and thereby Jatra began to lose its glory; even *KestoJatra* was performed in the different style altogether. As much Amateur Jatra desecrated the performative cult as the colonial enterprise contributed towards the rapid decline of Jatra in the 18th & 19th century. When the British came with their capitalist mode of urban entertainment called theatre, once devotional Jatra suddenly became a low form of performance; and imported theatre, Shakespeare and proscenium stage became the discourse of high culture. An Anglo-Indian journal named *Calcutta Review* (1851) projected their impression about native theatrical amusement as the following:

India in her high and palmystate had also a dramatic literature of her own and scenic representations to gratify the people....We shall proceed to make a remark or two on the state of the drama as it now exists among the Bengalis. Of the representations called jatras we dare not give here a detailed description. They are wretched from the commencement to the Fifth Act. The plots are very often the amours of Krishna, or the love of Vidya and Sundar. In the representation of Krishna-jatras, boys arrayed in the habits of Sakhies and Gopinis (milk-maids) cut the principal figures on the stage. It would require the pencil of a master-painter to portray these fairies of the Bengali stage. The sooty complexion, their coal black cheeks, their haggard eyes, their long extended arms, their gaping mouths and their puerile attire excite disgust. Their external deformity is rivalled by their discordant voices, for the screechings of the night-owls, the howlings of the jackals and barking of the dogs that bay the moon are harmony itself compared with their horrid yells. Their dances are in strict accordance with the other accessories. In the evolutions of the hands and feet dignified with the name of dancing, they imitate all posture and gestures calculated to soil the mind and pollute the fancy. (Dasgupta, 136)

But the British had their own aim in their enterprise of cultural colonialism. They created a class of mimic man called *Babu* and wanted the 'native' to be distant from the popular culture, thereby uprooting people from their identity, so they could strengthen their colonial enterprise. It can be said the British were quite successful in their endeavor. Because during this time Jatra received heavy criticism of being lewd, low and insipid among the so-called guardians of the high culture. Some people called Jatra as 'Apaya' or 'inauspicious' (instead of *Opera*) in sarcastic malapropism. Pandit Ram Narayan Tarkaratna, during the composition of *Ratnaboli* (1857), said "Everyone who has been acquainted with the incomparable beauty and wealth of English and Sanskrit Dramas, has grown disgusted with despicable *Jatras*" (Dasgupta 135) Ultimately Jatra succumbed before this colonial discourse of high and low culture. The rapid growth of

urban culture and taste had appropriated and expropriated Jatra to give way to British theatre which became a 'native' form of entertainment and education. Since then, Jatra has been living in the fringes of our social periphery with an identity of being 'gross rural entertainment'.

During the late 19th and early 20th century, the theme and stylization had changed so much that it could no longer be differentiated from the urban theatre. The modern Jatra in terms of secularization, stylization and representation owed much to the popular jatrwright of 19th century, Motilal Roy. He changed the old style of acting and costume and gave rural people a taste of grandeur in performance. Under the leadership of Roy, acting came out of devotional meekness and became stylized, demonstrative and expressive in nature. Roy tried to bridge the gaps between an actor's internal realization of emotion and stage representation of it, so he advocated emotionally charged performance in his mythical operas like *Kaliyadaman*, *Vastra Haran* and *Brajalila*. In spite of the attempts to merge rural dramatic performance with the imported urban theatre, there were several distinguished affairs like the use of *jurigaan*, instruments, song to change the scene, thundering acting, stock characters (Vivek, Narad, Niyati, etc.) which established Jatra as a distinct dramatic presentation by virtue of its own.

During the last fifty years, the culture of rural Bengal witnessed a sea change; media, music, liberalization and westernization influenced the popular rural socio-political and cultural behaviorism quite profoundly. Along with this changing panorama Jatra slowly shifted from its traditional performative pattern to fit into the popular taste. Now in the mosaic of the several cultural confluences, Jatra operas in terms of thematic pattern, songs compositions, dialogue structure, organizational approach, political aim and (re)presenting woman on the stage changed so much that its performative circumstances became a new hybrid genre; there is no sharp cultural and conceptual frontiers between tradition and modernity, low and high culture, rural and urban, art and industry and entertainment and education.

In terms of thematic demarcation Jatra got categorized into social (*Samajik Pala*), historical (*Otihasik Pala*), and mythical (*Puranic Pala*) and came into the public discretion for the first time in 1940's. The cultural taste of rural Bengal in the first few decades of second half of 20th century was captured by the jatrwright (*palakaar*) like Brajen De, Phanibhushan Bidyabinod, Utpal Dutt, Sombhu Bag, Bhairab Ganguly, etc. Phanibhushan Bidyabinod was not only a great artist but he also wrote Jatra like *Mayer Desh*, *Ramanuj*, *Rup Sadhana Or Sapurer Meye* which aimed at educating the mass regarding the moral values, secularism and nationalism etc.

Brajen De (1907 – 1976) in his initial days experimented with the Mythical opera following the contemporary trend. In *Lila Basan* (1936), *Bharat Biday* (1942), *Sarathi Prabirarjun* (1952) he retold and reconstructed the tradition mythical figure from an iconoclastic view; In his social operas, Brajen De had always tried to give a social message as Phanibhushan did. In his *Chander Meye* (1936) *Bangali* (1946) *Rami Chandidas* (1961) *Ujanir Chor* (1946) the messages of communal harmony, the empowerment of the downtrodden were in focus. In his *Sonai Dighi* (1959), *Noti Binodini* (1973) De advocated the empowerment of woman among the mass.

Due to the wave of communism in 1960's-70's, Jatra became a powerful instrument to mobilize the political participation among the rural Bengali people. Utpal Dutt (1929 – 1993), Sombhu Bag (1936 – 2002), Sourindra Mohan Chattapadhaya (1900 – 1998) tried to wake the mass from their political hibernation. Among all of them, Sombhu Bag was the flag bearer; he wrote *Hitler* (1967) *Ghum Bangar Gan* (1967) *Raktakta Africa* (1971) *Lenin* (1969) *Dak Diye Jai* (1972). His choice of theme suggests that he mainly tried to inform the mass about the political

struggle of common people. Sourindra Mohan Chattapadhyabrought the social consciousness in this folk theatre. Political Jatra of Bag, Dutt andChattapadhyawere the instrument of changing political consciousness among the mass in west Bengal and ultimately paved the way for Communist Party of India Fto gain power in 1977. Recently the right-wing politics uses Jatra too. In 2011, West Bengal experienced the rise of Mamata Banerjee in power overthrowing the long regime of the Left Party. Her political struggle from her movement at Hazra Crossing to Singur and Nadigram is faithfully obliged in the recent operas like *BanglarKhomotayEbar Mamata* (2011) and *Ekaler Durga* (2012). Thus, for both political wing – the Left and Right, Jatra is a powerful medium to reach the rural people in Bengal.

From 70's BhairabGanguly, Satya Prakash Dutta, Sailesh Guha Neogi took the charge of *Jatra* writing. Among all of them, BhairabGanguly (1934 – 1998) contributed much towards the liberalization of themes of *Jatra*. His early operas like *RakteRangaDhan* (1963), *EkPaysa* (1967), *Ma Mati Manus* (1974) *BarnaParichay* (1975) *AchalPaysa* (1977), *GhumNei* (1978) contained a voice of revolutionary spirit in accordance with Marxist view of socio-political oppression. But later with the change of his ideological schemata, BhairabGanguly changed his attitude. His later *jatraGandhari Janani* (1983), *BhagabanBabu* (1984), *KoliYugerBou* (1985), *ThanayJachheChhotoBou* (1992) followed populist ideologies because of the choice of the spicy theme, use of colloquial language and proverbs. BhairabGanguly set the tune for the populist *jatra* which aimed to reap commercial benefit for the producers, actors and organizers. During the last decades of the 20th century, producers began to control *Jatra*; they represent and even sometimes create the 'culture' of the rural Bengal.

In the meantime, the rural Bengali imagination got the taste of silver screen; the legendary Bengali actor Uttam Kumar began to mesmerize the audience with his elegant grace and presence and *Jatrawrights* begin to imitate hishitnumbers. Swapan Kumar took all the popular cinema of Uttam Kumar on the *Jatra* stage. He staged *Saptapadi*, (Adaptation BiruMukhopadhaya) *Sanyasi Raja* (adaptation Satya Pakash Dutta) *Stree*(by Kunal Mukhapadhay). Neogi staged Satyajit Ray's *GupiGayanBaghaBayen* for the first time in 1978. Nowadays, story of popular Bengali movies and tele-serials are enacted on the open stage.

In the stylization of 70's and 80's *Jatra*, the traditional lyrical dialogue was replaced by local dialect; the number of songs were reduced and electric lights replaced the kerosene lights. Organizers began to levy entry fees ranging from rupees 50/- to 200/- per entry for the audience, and *jatra* became a rural entertainment industry. Then in 1990s, several TV and cinema artists from Tollywood and Bollywood took their entries in *Jatra*. The intrusion of the Tollywood actors has created a brand value and hierarchy among the Banner (producing agency) namely Mega Star, Super Star and Star. Now the original *jatra* actors are marginalized by the organizers because these Tollywood actors are considered as the crowd puller. The theme, plot, message organizers are now being sidelined by the actors and their star value. Usually, the local clubs organized *jatra* in their areas and spend around 85 thousand to 5 lacs per show depending on the star value of the banner. Along with the change of organizational approach, the modern electronic gadgets like tape recorder, stereophonic sound, western dance troop now accompany this folk form.

Fortunately, the rural vote-bank has invited quite an amount of attention to this 'marginalized' folk art. Various government initiatives are being taken to revive the 'Jatra industry'. For example, permanent Jatra stages have been set in Kolkata, pensions and honorariums are being allotted to renowned Jatra figures, workshops are being conducted for the beginners, and week-long Jatra Festivals are being held for the urban audience. Also, archiving

programs are held so that Jatra plays are made available on the digital mediums like Youtube. All these initiatives are certainly welcoming and encouraging for the Jatra world. But problem remains with the ever-changing government policies and their execution. Another grass-root problem is that these government bodies keep their eyes in Chitpur(Kolkata) companies. It is true that Chitpur is the Jatra hub of Bengal and it alone inhabits 300 professional Jatracompanies. Other sub-urban and rural parts of Bengal occupy over 500 amateur and professional groups. Presently, Jatra artists and artisan range above 1 lakh population who depend solely in this industry as a livelihood. Beside these numbers there are part-time performers in rural areas who work either as farmers or manual labourers in the non-Jatra season.

Jatra is not simply a ‘folk art-form’ anymore. It has multifarious significance in reading the country’s culture, history and politics. Jatra has the strongest potential of mobility in terms of capacity building and ability to bring forth public’s demand. It operates within the society in bringing forth the public need and sometimes reaching the government policies to the public. As a folk form, Jatra has the strongest potential of mobility in terms of capacity building and ability to bring forth public’s demand. It operates within the society in bringing forth the public need and sometimes reaching the government policies to the public. Typically, Jatra does not idealize any common theme or some singular schemata. But the manifold subjects encompass a wide range of social, cultural, religious and political issues. While social dramas sometimes comment on the idiosyncrasies of the tangible norms, mythical operas retell and reconstructs the tradition mythical figure from an iconoclastic view as a part of its cultural mission. Moreover, it aims at educating the mass regarding the moral values, secularism and nationalism etc. and open to several other reformatory issues. Catering to the needs of time, the choice of themes suggests informing the mass about the history of political struggle and class struggle in India. Lately, certain rampant national movements like “Gender Sensitization”, “Swachh Bharat Abhiyan”, “Beti Bachao Beti Pado”, “Stop Acid Attack”, etc. are well conceived themes of Jatra.

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