

A brief history of Bengali Drama: Nineteenth and early Twentieth century

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ABSTRACT

A popular culture developed in Calcutta in the nineteenth century with the amalgamation of folk culture and urban patronage under a stylistic unity. One of the important expressions of popular culture that developed in Calcutta was the dramatic performance done through the medium of *jatra pala*, theatres and folk plays. The form of *jatra* originated from the ritual of songs and dance which formed part of the religious festivals in villages. A leading proponent of *jatra pala* during the mid- nineteenth century in Calcutta was Gopal Uday (1817-1857). He introduced *jatra pala* in a new style. He formed his own troupe and rewritten 'Vidya-Sundar'. During the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century, a number of *bhadraloks* set up *jatra* troupes, being influenced by the folk form of the art of *jatra*. There are evidences of the existence of women artists who used to act in *jatra*. In the first half of the twentieth century, *Swadeshi Jatra* became very much important. *Jatras* were performed not only for entertainment but also to make the people conscious of the British dominance over Indians. *Swadeshi Jatra pala* grew up and opened a novel chapter during the anti-partition movement in Bengal. Along with the *Jatra*, there was the prevalence of performance of stage-theatres in Calcutta. It was from the second half of the nineteenth century that the socio-economic conditions of Bengal and the essence of nationalism were reflected in the plays. The folk theatres also had important part in forming consciousness of the people against suppression, oppression and differentiations of the society. Apart from giving delight and entertainment to the people, the folk theatres became the platform for catering popular and non-formal education as well.

Keywords: Folk culture, Jatra-pala, Swadeshi Jatra pala, Stage-Theatres, Alkap

Folk is the voice of the common people. It is the spectrum of popular beliefs, feelings and outlook. The concept of the folk as an expression of popular expression is derived from the 'Maitrayee Upanishad', being propounded around third century BCE.¹ The folk culture is represented by dance, songs, dramas and other significant amusements. The philosophical concept of the folk culture is christened

1. Bhattacharya, Mihir.(ed). *Lokasruti* (in Bengali).Calcutta.1999.p.4

as 'Charbak' which is an important part of Indian philosophy. Madhabacharya reviews this as an inner voice of the common people. Haribhadra argues that folk culture denotes everything perceivable through sense organs.² In a word, folk culture can be said to be an attribute of the ideological trends of common people. In the nineteenth century the two main trends in Bengali culture were reflected by a host of folk songs, rituals, poetries, verse-plays which had developed through social and occupational customs of the labouring classes as well as through popular religious beliefs and secondly, by lyrics and songs of a Classical nature composed in Sanskrit or highly Sanskritized Bengali, patronized by the aristocrats of Bengal.³ However, a popular culture developed in Calcutta in the nineteenth century with the amalgamation of folk culture and urban patronage under a stylistic unity. One important expressions of popular culture that developed in Calcutta was the dramatic performance done through the medium of *jatra pala*, theatres and folk plays.

The form of *jatra* originated from the ritual of songs and dance which formed part of the religious festivals in villages. Dramatic elements in the compositions of these songs and dances like conversations among the various characters of the mythological stories on which they were based, and were given histrionic interpretations by the performers. *Jatras* were performed in a square or round area of flat ground with the audience, sitting all rounds. There were reserved entry or exit points, and the actors moved into the square from the midst of the audience. The chorus and the musicians had their places on one side of the acting area.⁴ In the *jatra pala* during the eighteenth century drums were the most popular instrument. Later the *tanpura* (Indian tambourines) and by the end of the nineteenth century many western instruments like *tabla*, harmonium became essential parts of *Jatra* orchestra.⁵

A leading proponent of *jatra pala* during the mid- nineteenth century in Calcutta was Gopal Uday (1817-1857). He introduced *Jatra pala* in a new style. He formed his own troupe and rewritten 'Vidya-Sundar'. In *jatra pala* dialogues were composed in short verse forms and the songs became very much popular. 'Gopal's songs became popular because of his ability to make the characters in the *jatra* narrate their loves and woes in the familiar terms of the social lives of the poor people. They could, thus, immediately touch a sympathetic chord in the minds of the audience'. Gopal also introduced a special type of dancing in his *Jatra pala*, popularly known as *Khemta* which was a 'jhonty dance' performed by men and

2 *Ibid.* p.5

3 Banerjee, Sumanta. *The Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture In the Nineteenth Century Calcutta*. Calcutta. p100

4 Mukhopadhyay, Harimohan. *Dashu Rayer Panchali* (in Bengali), Calcutta. pp.60-65

5 Banerjee, Sumanta. *op.cit.*, p.110

women.⁶

Keshey Dhoba also had a major role in the evolution of *Jatra pala* as a popular means of entertainments in the nineteenth century Calcutta.⁷ The comic relief which was provided in between the acting out of the main stories consisted of humorous songs and dances performed by the artists who were primarily manual labourers, serving the *bhadroloks*. These songs and dances performed by them were known as ‘jatra duets’ because the performers has duets like ‘dhoba-dhobani’ (washerman and washer-woman); ‘methor-methari’ (the sweeper and his wife). These characters performed in sarcastic play on the habits of the *babus*.⁸

Among other *jatra* troupes of the period, the well-known troupes were run by Gobindo Adhikari(1789-1870) and Lokenath Das who was known as Loko Dhoba as well as Boko and his brother Shadhu. Boko and Shadhu were Muslims and they staged the episodes of Ramayana.⁹

In the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century, a number of *bhadraloks* set up *jatra* troupes being influenced by the folk form of the *jatra*. Among them mention must be made to Sreenath Sen, Gurucharan Sen, Ramchand Mukhopadhyay and Swaroop Dutta. There are evidences of the existence of women artists who used to act in *jatra*. Motilal Roy and his sons Dharmanarayan and Bhupendranarayan used the platform of *Jatra* to make the people united against the British rule and made the people conscious of the fact that there was nothing so bitter than to live within shackles of the British. They put the dialogues of patriotism and nationalism in the mouth of chorus of the *Puranic* and mythological roles.¹⁰

The *jatra* themes of Motilal Roy influenced and inspired many *jatra* performers, especially Ashwini Kumar Dutta and Mukunda Das of Barisal. Mukunda Das who was a disciple of Ashwini Kumar Duta performed *Swadeshi Jatra pala*.¹¹ Being clad in very common dress, he emerged as a bard instilling nationalistic fervour among the people. He was an initiator of historical *jatra pala*. His songs became so popular, that even the Muslims were imbued with the spirit of nationalism.¹² But the important *jatra* troupes in nineteenth century Calcutta used young boys to act in the roles of female characters.¹³ The *jatra palas* of the nineteenth century revolved round episodes of the lives of Krishna and Radha, Shiva and Parvati and

6 *Ibid.*p.95

7 *Ibid.*p111.

8 *Ibid.*111

9 “Calcutta Review”.Vol.IX. No.XVIII.1848.p.248

10 *Ibid.*

11 “Parikatha”. 7(2) May.2005.pp.310-312

12 *Ibid.*

13 *Ibid.*

also in the theme of secular romance.

In the first half of the twentieth century, *Swadeshi Jatra* became very much important. *Jatras* were performed to make the people conscious of the British dominance over Indians. *Swadeshi Jatra pala* grew up and opened a novel chapter during the anti-partition movements in Bengal in 1905 with the hands of Motilal Roy. He went above all the existing trends of traditional *jatra* art and presented new technique of performance blended with firm, flexible and normalcy that it was liked by almost all the people of Bengal.¹⁴ From that time, *Jatra* became a stage for non-formal education. Mukunda Das was recognized as ‘popular agitator’ by the British and they abandoned and censored *jatras* of Mukunda Das. However, his ‘Matri puja’ was a master-piece of his national ideals and he rose to the epitome of popularity through his dramas.¹⁵

After Mukunda Das, Bhushan Chandra Das, Haripada Chattopadhyay and others became the pioneers of social and historical *jatras*. With them, *jatra* performance took a shift from *Puaranic* influences.¹⁶

Along with the *Jatra*, there was the prevalence of performance of stage-theatres in Calcutta. In the eighteenth century, theatre was confined to the European artists and Old Play House, Calcutta Theatre and Mrs. Bristo’s Private Theatre were the places where English dramas were performed. Bengali theatre first came into existence with the hands of a Russian adventurer Levedef and he established a theatre house called “Bengallie Theatre” where the first Bengali theatre was staged. The foremost aim of Levedef was the encouragement and usage of Bengali language in the field of entertainment. He translated English dramas into Bengali language. The artists were Bengalee and the theatre was done primarily for the common Bengali people. Moreover, Levedef also introduced the use of orchestra in the theatrical performance; especially the use of violin was noted. The two most important theatres that was staged by Levedef were the ‘Disguise’ and ‘Love is the best doctor’. These two Bengali comedies were translated from English drama.¹⁷

The early nineteenth century a few Sanskrit dramas were translated into Bengali like ‘Promodchandrodya’, translated into ‘Atmatattva Koumudi’ in 1822 and a comedy called ‘Koutuksarvassa’ in 1828. However, they were not staged.¹⁸

After Levedef, a few Bengali theatre-lovers staged theatres like Nabin Chandra

14 *Ibid*

15 *Ibid*

16 *Ibid*.

17 Bandopadhyay, Chittaranjan. (ed). *Dui Sataker Bangla Mudran-o-Pakasana*. Calcutta. 1981. Pp.199-203

18 *Ibid*

Basu staged 'Vidya- Sundar in 1835, Tara Charan Sikhdar did 'Vadrarjun'.¹⁹ It was from the second half of the nineteenth century that the socio-economic conditions of Bengal and the essence of nationalism were reflected in the plays. Michael Madhusudan Dutta was the first dramatist who consciously borrowed the western concept into his style of playwrightship and gave an indigenous flavour to those dramas. His plays were tragic and were based on conflicts. The style, diction, dialogues and characters were exuberant, sanskritized and mellifluous. Mention must be made to his play 'Sharmistha'.²⁰

His contemporary Dinabandhu Mitra projected the trajectory of social and contemporaneous issues with subtle humour. He protested against the British and could understand the sorrow and humiliation of the Indigo planters. His 'Neel Darpan' was an epoch making play in the history of Bengali drama.

Bengali theatre took a significant turn with the *Swadeshi* movement. A tendency to glorify the past became important to uplift Bengali temperament. Nalinikanto Sarkar hailed Khirodeprasad Bidyabinode in his book 'Shraddhaspadeshu'. He emphasized that the anti-partition movement brought a flood of emotion in entire Bengal and the Bengali theatre inbound the sentiment with the hands of Khirodeprasad Bidyabenode. His historical theatre 'Prapaditya' enamoured the people of that time. According to Aparesh Chandra Mukhopadhyay, it was a moment of pride to remember how 'Pratapaditya' held his sword against the mighty Mughals to save Jessore of Bengal.²¹

After 'Pratapaditya', 'Shivaji' was the Classic theatre produced and directed by Aparesh Chandra Mukhopadhyay.²² According to Ramapati Dutta in the field of Bengali theatre, this was the first nationalistic theatre in the true sense of the term. In 1903 when the British under the governor-generalship of Lord Curzon imposed 'Divide and Rule' policy to create separatism among the Hindus and Muslims, the Bengali theatres played a very significant role in the unification of the two communities. On 14th of August, 1903 edition Amrita Bazaar Patrika recognized the contribution of Bengali dramas. In this respect Amrita Bazaar Patrika wrote, "one of the most conspicuous, out of the many benefits we have received from the English nations is that resuscitation for us our own history and educating the children of the soil in it. 'Pratapaditya' and the ruins of his capital would probably have remained a myth but for the unflagging energy and thrust for research in borne in an English mind. Besides, the historical necessity for the purpose of the

19 *Ibid*

20 *Ibid*

21 "Parikatha". Vol.VII.No.II.May.2005.pp.309-311

22 *Ibid*

play the author has very ingeniously imagined certain characters, the introduction of which has shed a Divine halo on the whole drama”.²³

Having an inspiration from ‘Pratapaditya’, Harisadhan Mukhopadhyay directed a play, named ‘Aurangzeb’ where he tried to depict a uniform relation between the Hindus and Muslims. One of the most important directors of that time was Dwijendralal Roy. His play ‘Rana Pratap’ deserved special mention.²⁴

In fact, Khirodeprasad, D.L.Roy and Girish Chandra Ghosh were said to be the trio of *Swadeshi* theatres. Girish Chandra’s ‘Sirajuddowlla’ and ‘Shivaji’ were very important. In 1906, 26th April, Surandranath Banerjee wrote “Shivaji was an expression of the periodic efforts made by India at unification of her different parts..... We honour him because he was the last exponent of the great and glorious idea of a united India..... Chhatrapati was one of the best and most powerful dramas ever produced on the Indian stage”.

Thus, from the last decade of the nineteenth century making of theatres became profession than passion. The pioneer in the field was Girish Chandra Ghosh. His plays were perfect juxtaposition of religious and social themes. He was followed by Biharilal Chattopadhyay, Aparesh Chandra Mukhopadhyay, Amamrendranath Dutta and others. Along with these themes there were many dramatists who based their plays on the religious context and took their themes from the *Gita*, *Puranas* and other traditional, mythological and religious scriptures like Rajkrishna Roy, Mitilal Roy and others.²⁵

In the twentieth century, compositions stylization and presentations were more for the masses where Ibsenian style were more reflected than Shakespearean style like that of the style of Dwijendralal, Khirodeprasad and others.

It was Rabindranath who opened a new horizon in the field of drama. Sophistication, modernization, romanticism and emotion with a touch of boldness and protestation became the style of his dramatic presentation. It became more for the public tastes and requirements though we can perceive a change in people’s thoughts and vocabulary. After the World War II, theatrical performances were adopted for the presentation social genre. Poverty, hunger, unemployment and different problems were manifested. The diction is meant for the public and a new class division came into the scene. It was not between the aristocracies and *bhadraloks* and lower orders (*itorjan*) but between the ‘Haves’ and the ‘Have-nots’- the ruler and the ruled.²⁶

23 *Ibid*

24 *Ibid*

25 *Ibid*

26 Banerjee Sumanta, *op.cit.*, p.109-111

The folk theatres had important part to play in forming consciousness of the people against suppression, oppression and differentiations of the society. Apart from giving delight and entertainment to the people, the folk theatres became the platform for catering popular and non-formal education as well. Folk theatres were very much related with society and culture, since it emphasized upon an education for protesting against the wrong, folk theatres initiated a new backdrop in socio-cultural milieu. The folk theatres usually took recourse to humour and sarcasm for expression. Though not subtle, it is very much appropriate for the mass enjoyment and satisfaction. There are a few major instances of impact of folk theatres in rural Bengal.

In Dhamgan of Jalpaiguri district a folk play called ‘Vesteri’ was staged to make the people aware of the suppression of landlords or local zamindars. The government used to convert the extra pieces of land of the peasants in *khas* lands or crown lands. This system of land is known as ‘vest’. But the landlords deferred the governmental laws and took the possession of the lands illegally in the names of false persons. The peasants, thus, became poor and landless. They showed their agitations by means of folk theatres where they said that the fight should go on against the zamindars. We can derive a conclusion that the folk theatres reflected the prevalence of class divisions in the society.²⁷

The folk theatres also depicted the tale of harassment of women by the money lenders. The plays said about the differences between the strong and weak and also the troubles of the weak faced in the hands of the strong counter parts. In such play a village women became a symbol of truth and victory against the greedy and perverse money lenders. Moreover, the dowry system was another very important theme of folk theatre. The system of paying dowry in time of marriage is a curse and also a scar of the society. The ‘Bolan Song’ of *Rong Panchali* bore the hue and cry of a father. If the dowry was not paid in accordance to the demand, the daughter faced immense problem in her in-laws home. So, the folk theatres showed the tears of girl who experienced such torture due to societal and matrimonial system.

In Malda district folk theatres were organized to deal with discontent and dissatisfaction of the people due to communalism, partition, refugee problem, poverty and also because of differentiations in politico-social and economic spheres. Folk theaters also pointed out the importance of education and changes and mentality of young generations due to commercialization and development of market economy.²⁸

A revolutionary projection of folk theatres in Murshidabad and adjoining districts

27 Mazumdar, Manas. *Banglar Lokonaty Pratibad-Prabonata*(inBengali).Calcutta. 1999. p.265

28 *Ibid*.pp.266-267

of Malda, West Dinajpur, eastern part of Bihar like Sahebganj, Purnia, Dumka and Rajshahi districts of Bangladesh the performance of *Alkap* became important. *Alkap* meant to satisfy the thrust of entertainment, It was said that Bokanama of Maynakaysa village in Malda district was the founder of *Alkap*. And Maynakaysha, Shovapur, Bhutri diyana, Rahimpore, Rajmahal, Sijnipara, Pratapganj, Dhulyan, Jangipur, etc became the main centers of *Alkap* performances. In course of time the purview of *Alkap* extended into distant areas.²⁹

There are lots of debates regarding the actual meaning of *Alkap*. *Alkap* precisely means song used in *jatra pala* that are blended with sarcasm and wit against the establishment of the society.

Alkap had important features which emphasized upon the fact that *Alkap* was primarily oral and impromptu. The main theme of the play rested on extempore version of the group leader and thus, the dialogues were subject to change. In the plays the female characters were played by young lads. Emphasis was not given to dresses and make-up. The dialogues were subtle and dignified. The stage was circled by audience and the dialogue reflected the provincial usages in colloquial dialects.

A survey had determined that there were in total 137 *Alkap* artists. They were uneducated and illiterate, poor and landless. They worked as manual labours in the agricultural fields, caught fish and did menial services. Nevertheless the *Alkap* artists had a sense of fraternity. They belonged to lower order and always paid the respect to the older artists. But, in course of time, *Alkap* performance became unpopular due to the changes of livelihood and changes of tastes. Now the people preferred the *jatra* performed by trained artists from the city and the expert *Alkap* artists like Phool Chand, Sidhir Das, Mukhbool and others were reared to uplift and popularize the *Alkap* performances.³⁰

The nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century Bengal witnessed the co-existence of two sections of cultural beliefs and patterns, comprising of elitist cultural beliefs and patterns and the folk orders that primarily encompassed the cultural mores of the common people or of non-aristocratic lower orders. The folk culture of Bengal in the nineteenth and the twentieth century comprised of interesting experiments in poems, songs, the visual arts and *jatra* and theatres as a particular art form were displayed in ingenious and independent styles and were blended with traditional forms in order to satisfy the urban tastes and requirements.

It is observed that from the mid- nineteenth century onwards, the folk cultures were becoming more concerned in depicting the irrelevance of the religious myths of the past and were sarcastic towards the events of the surrounding presents.

29 Islam, Md. Nurul. *Bibartaman Loknatya: Alkap*. Calcutta. 1999. pp272-278.

30 *Ibid*.

The transition from the traditional mores to the new methods of social set ups became the main points of concentrations of the folk artists. They recognized the central issues of the time, like inequalities of classes, the division between the propertied classes and the under-privileged and even between the colonial rulers and the ruled. Thus, we find the voice of the multi-layered fabric of the society being projected by the thoughts and perceptions of the city's lower orders of the time as 'culture in silence'.

It must be asserted that the terms folk culture and popular culture are used interchangeably to describe the culture of Bengal. The two conjured to become a mass culture since the folk culture of Bengal was based on the socio-economic conditions of the region that became very much associated with the adaptability of the new generation of Bengali riches. The rural culture became gradually assimilated with a new urban milieu. With the urban and rural culture, there developed a new culture of Bengal that thrived upon the collective mind which was dependent upon the occupational life styles, attitudes and feelings.

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