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Bengali *Jatra*: Change, Continuity and Reinvention of Folk Theatre in the Age of Globalization

Amit Kayal

Abstract

Bengali Jatra is a regional form of 'folk' theatre, developed in Bengal (now West Bengal). There have been many manifestation not only in our state but also in the neighbouring state of Odisha, Assam, Manipur, Tripura, Bihar and Bangladesh. The development of Jatra simultaneously happened in each of this region from pre- colonial to post- colonial times. Bengalis become the reference group in the development of Jatra literature and culture in other region because of its greater Bengal phenomena in pre- colonial period. Jatra, the most popular traditional theatre form in the eastern part of India, especially in Bengal, Odisha and Assam. Jatra is a musical procession where a deity is carried out from one place to another. But its early history, which has been variously linked to the Rig-Vedic rituals, classical Indian theatre, and tribal festivals; can hardly be called well documented. Jatra probably existed in the form of loose song-and-dance sequences, very provisional in character, without any pretensions of "plot" or structure. The earliest Jatra plays, (Palas in Bengali) that have come to us only from the late 18th century. Earlier compositions of this form are long extinct. It is certain, that the earliest Jatra Palas, are very much a part of the oral literary tradition of pre- colonial Bengal, were never written down and therefore lost to us gradually. So, for all practical purposes, it is only from the 16th century onwards that the popular folk theatre of Bengal started taking a somewhat tangible shape in the form of Jatra (Sarkar, 1975). Jatra was not dealing with the books, epics or other forms of printing and written materials previously. It is their 'voice', which was narrated, changed in a various forms, depends on area to area, but moralistic tone were remain same. 'Bibek' (conscience) is very important in this form of folk culture, as it is always create some kind of conscience, morality and ethics through the characters, emphasized by Jashodhara Sen (2008), a theatre scholar. 'Niyati' (destiny) is also another character that plays crucial role in Jatra culture from its inception (Chatterji, 2014). For this, people themselves enmeshed with the actor as one who play the role of Krishna or Radha and crying in pain with them instantly in the field, which is so fascinating and significant mark of this folk culture of Bengal. Traditionally, Jatra often told mythological stories that reflect the aspirations of the audience. The mythological hero in the Jatra took its proper shape on the audience's emotional identification. Jatra is a living form within the masses, still very popular, impactful and always transforming. It incorporates many themes like- historical, socio- political, economic changes, direct political propaganda and many more from the colonial times onwards. To many scholars and artists, Jatra goes beyond theatre and it plays concept of life, a way of life. Because Jatra is so popular, it is an excellent medium for making people's 'Voice' or narratives. My major sociological concerns with this study, is how did Jatra of Bengal transform into a commercialized 'mass' theatre from 'folk' theatre and how this popular theatre form has been created and reinvented through the long journey from pre-colonial period to the age of Globalization?

Keywords: Bengali Jatra, Vaishnavism, Folk Theatre, Commercialized Mass, Globalization.

Amit Kayal, M.Phil. Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi, India

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1. Jatra: Seasons, Plot and Time

The Jatra season rounds between September and late May or early June, since this is the period which has no fear of rain and dwellers certainly do their job. The season really gets started from the Puja festivals, which roughly coincide with the harvesting time in rural Bengal. In the village areas, the peak season begins after the harvesting is over. First, there are religious festivals like Durga Puja (late September, early October), Kali Puja (held about three weeks after Durga Puja), etc., which fall within the normal Jatra season. Ratha Jatra, the chariot festival, and Manasa Puja, the worship of the serpent goddess, are held in late July or early August, but these nevertheless are fit occasions for a Jatra (Sarkar, 1975: 104-106).

Jatra is a theatre in the round, and it is very loud. Everything is influenced by visibility and audibility. Jatra Palas are frequently performed in villages without electricity. The hajak lamps which are used, don't give much light; but the actors have to make themselves visible to a large audience, so the make-up is heavy and the costumes are very colourful. Jatra Palas had to rely mostly on songs previously. It is much easier to perform a song than speech and continuous acting, which would be very strenuous in a play, lasting until midnight from early afternoon (Gunawardana and Dutt, 1971: 230; Patgiri, 2019: 40). Jatra fairs and festivals are still very popular. As Jatra is synonymous with festivals and also originated from religious processions, it continues to be performed during local festivals and annual fairs.

There is a demand to organize Jatra in every Puja- Parbon (season) in almost every major village in Bengal. Festivals are the time for professional Jatra troupes to make a profit. Thereby, they recover the losses they face during the non-festive season when they get smaller audiences, face adverse climatic conditions and so on. Fairs and festivals like- Manasa Puja, Durga Puja, Sitala Puja, Baruni Mela, Poush Mela, and Janmashtami usually take major Jatra parties to perform.

2. Jatra and Vaishnavism

Jatra has its roots in Gaudiya Vaishnavism, or Bengali Vaishnavism, a religious philosophy, initiated by Sri Chaitanya. It originated toward the beginning of the sixteenth century. The movement gave birth to a religious community or tradition of Gaudiya Vaishnava. The term Gaudiya refers to the specific Bengali provenance of "Gauda" a historical-geographical area shared between Bangladesh and West Bengal, India. At present, most of the ruins of Gauda are in the Malda district of West Bengal. The foundation of this religious tradition is characterized by Krishna bhakti or an absolute devotion to the deity Krishna.

Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486-1533) and his associates, were the first to employ the performing arts (dance, music, play-acting) for the furtherance of their belief. But this fact alone cannot positively affirm what has been called the Krishnite origin of Jatra. The earliest extant Mangal Kavyas that have come down to us is a date from the 16th century. The earliest Jatra Palas were composed on the same principles, structural or otherwise, as those of the Mangal Kavya. These similarities are too obvious to be ignored and if our assumption is right, they make Jatra an audio-visual performing art of the essentially oral tradition of Mangal Kavya (Patgiri, 2019: 40). So, it is safe to conclude that the former cannot predate the latter.

Gargi Balwant, an eminent scholar said on this folk theatre, "Though the Jatra is equally popular in Orissa and the eastern parts of Bihar (two bordering states), it originated in Bengal" (Balwant, 1966: 11). Kapila Vatsyayan, another scholar in this field also says, "The origins of Oriya or Bengali Jatra are somewhat hazy and the discussion has been full of controversies and widely divergent views." Due to controversies in this matter, Vatsyayan has avoided pronouncing any decision. She has of course traced the origin of dance and drama in Orissa and as per her opinion, "Gita Govinda" — the famous romantic poetry of Jaydeva, provided the 'real foundations of poetic, musical and dramatic activity, for the purpose. Of course, she has admitted that dramatic performances gradually developed in the states of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, under the powerful impact of "Gita Govinda" (Vatsayan, 1980: 131-133). Theatre scholar M. L. Varadpande has traced the origin of Jatra play in 'Dev Jatra' mentioned in "Vishnu Dharmotter Purana." According to this Purana, the deity is taken in procession outside the temple and is followed by dance, music and dramatic dialogues. Subsequently, this has taken the shape of Jatra. He further adds: "Historically, the Jatra as a dramatic form, owes its existence to the Krishna Bhakti Cult of Bengal. The dramatic

poems such as Jayadev's *Gita Govinda* and Babu Chandidasa's *Krishna Kirtan* (15th century) set the background" (Varadpande, 1982: 33-34).

Thus, it has been proved by most of the scholars that Jatra originated from the annual religious festivals initially. "Gita Govinda" is at the root of 'Krishna Jatra' and this most popular medium of mass entertainment originated from it. Though most of the scholars like Keith Hansen, have accepted "Gita Govinda" as the primary source of Jatra. Sri Chaitanya, the religious saint of Bhakti Cult of Bengal, has been designated as the father of Krishna Jatra of Eastern India. For this, descriptions from "Chaitanya Bhagbata" written by Brindaban Das and "Chaitanya Charitamrita" by Krishna Das Kaviraj have ample references. It is said that after returning from Gaya in 1507 A.D., Sri Chaitanya Dev arranged a Jatra Pala called "Rukmini Haran" (Abduction of Rukmini) in the house of Chandra Sekhar, one of the Zamindar of Bengal, where he took the role of Rukmini. His followers acted in different roles. The performance was successful and was hailed by the audience. Ashutosh Bhattacharya, an eminent critic of Bengal, has accepted this to be the first Jatra Pala of Bengal (Bhattacharya, 1978: 30).

3. Jatra: Themes, Flavours and Personalities

In Indian folk performances, it is not the characters that play the central theme; it is the 'bhava' (emotions) and 'rasa' (flavors), that are experienced by the audience with the portrayal of various characters. The Indian folk performances do not act from the body, rather it deals with the mind (Chatterji, 2014: 3). Epics build narratives around a series of devotional tableaux that present themselves to the devotee. This not only blurs the line between devotion and entertainment but also involves dramatic techniques such as formulaic speech that prolong ritually significant moments but does not sit well with modern proscenium theatre.

Viewing a mythological play is itself an act of worship, and folk theatres like Jatra and Ankiya Naat with mythological themes are part of this aura. Therefore, apart from providing entertainment, the folk theatre also played a role in harnessing 'community' based sentiments (Chatterji, 2014: 9; Patgiti, 2019: 41). This is also a reason why folk forms of theatre have managed to survive even with the advent of modern Indian theatre, film, and television. The folk tradition as an alternative discourse of knowledge became primarily redundant to most aspects of social change that are characterized as modernization. However, despite this shrinkage in space for folk culture and the oral tradition in India, it retains its resilience in several areas of culture like graphic and plastic art forms, music and theatre (Singh, 2012: 162, Patgiri, 2019: 41).

Vijyalaxmy Shankar mentioned, that 'the initial aim of the folk theatre was to give the first impact with the sound and sight and slowly it opens the audience's mental eye for a message on morality' (Shankar, 1978: 40). The performances by the folk or the community is said to have far more spontaneous than the contemporary theatre. These folk dramas act as a channel between the actors and the audiences. They are performed in such a manner that it becomes appealing to the rural population as well as the urban. But in beginning, Jatra was designed for the rural people, which was simple in character, portrayed as 'Pala-gan'. It is generally considered that Jatra deals with religious and moral issues, but in reality, it also shows the socio-cultural and political issues, as Debayan Deb Barman shows us how the popular Jatras, natakas and theatre can be political (Deb Barman, 2014: 184).

The history of Jatra revolves around personalities, like Gopal Ure, Matilal Roy, or Mukunda Das, rather than types or forms. So in it, we find somewhat free and arbitrary use of terms, which

convey little that is meaningful to us. Appellations like “old” (Prachin) and “new” (Nutan) have been used in some places to describe Jatra, but the terms imply kinds rather than chronological change. The “old” Jatra represents palas that contain religious themes and were instructive and moralistic in tone, i.e., the ‘Bibek’ (conscience) and ‘Niyati’ (fate or destiny). The “old” Jatra was also marked by performances of professional troupes, which were mostly owned and managed by the chief singer or actor of the troupe. The “new” Jatra seems to be more secular than religious in content. It aims to entertain the spectators above everything else. It is more lyrical than strictly dramatic. The “new” Jatra also represents another version, originally performed by amateurs, called ‘Sakher Jatra’, which was formed mainly for their own amusement (Sarkar, 1975: 96-103).

Jatra is closer to the Bengali realistic theatre, but not quite. Regardless of experiencing transformations and ups and downs, Jatra continued to grow. The main reason for the survival of Jatra is that it is a powerful medium. This power resides in common rural audiences, although at present rural society is affected by urban society. Till today, reaching the common people is the primary purpose of Jatra. The language of Jatra is colloquial. Consequently, Jatra can effortlessly speak about complex and intimate topics to reach the common people. Jatra’s main theme is to enhance solidarity in society by concentrating on its members. Otherwise, Jatra is a powerful medium that can present a vantage point effectively and straightforwardly to the common people.

4. Globalization and Reception of Jatra:

To Storey (2013), Globalization is producing two contradictory effects, sameness and difference – that is, a sense that the world is becoming similar as it shrinks under the pressure of time–space compression, but also that it is characterized by increasing awareness of difference. What on the surface may look like the export of sameness always involves the global being articulated with the local, and in the process having to compromise with local culture and tradition. Moreover, the processes of sameness may provoke the articulation of difference. Globalization is making the world smaller, generating new forms of cultural ‘hybridity’, but also bringing into collision and conflict different ways of making the world mean. While some people may celebrate the opening up of new ‘global’ routes, other people may resist globalization in the name of ‘local’ roots. There is a great temptation to think of the ‘local’ as ‘authentic’ and the ‘global’ as an ‘inauthentic’ imposition. Storey (2003) advised, that we should be careful to avoid romanticizing the ‘local’ as the organic expression of a more “real” way of life. If we listen carefully, it is possible to hear in the debates on the impact of the ‘global’ on the ‘local’, echoes of earlier debates about folk culture being destroyed by industrialism and urbanism. It is as if the ‘local’ is an authentic folk culture and the ‘global’ is a homogenizing mass culture. But it is always more complicated than this: the ‘global’ is always part of the ‘local’; the ‘local’ is what resists the ‘global’. As Edward Said (1993) observes, “all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and un-monolithic.” (Said, 1993: xiv)

Globalization offers the possibility of cultural mixing on a scale never before known. This can of course produce resistance to difference, but it can also produce the fusing of different cultures and the making of new and exciting forms of cultural hybridity. Globalization is perhaps the final unwinding of the idea that for popular cultures to be truly authentic, they have to be organically grounded in and bounded by a locality. Globalized culture is undermining what had been a key aspect in intellectual discussions of folk culture, that is, being embedded in a particular space – the rural and separated by both time and space from the development of modern urban and industrial life, guaranteed “authenticity.” The movement of people and commodities around the globe, bringing the ‘global’ into the ‘local’, clearly challenges the idea that locality can fix the boundaries of a

culture. The nature of global cultures suggests we are witnessing a shift in how we see cultures, a shift from culture as “roots” to culture as “routes.” Although globalization changes or even destroys the conditions which had sustained previous modes of culture, it also supplies new resources for new forms of culture. To see this as a significant cultural development does not mean that we must first embrace the myth of folk culture and see the ‘local’ as having previously existed in isolation from other localities, global or otherwise. This is not a denial of difference but an insistence on seeing a difference within the context of a shared humanity. To live in both the ‘local’ and the ‘global’ and effectively share a “Glocalized” culture, would be a truly popular culture (Storey, 2003: 114-120).

Storey (2003) asserts that consumption is not that straightforward: the global commodities of the culture industries always encounter people situated in local cultures. Consumption, therefore, is always an encounter between the materiality of a cultural commodity and the cultural formation of a consumer, which takes place in a particular context. He quoted Ien Ang, ‘the global and the local should not be conceived as two distinct, separate and opposing realities, but as complexly articulated, mutually constitutive. Global forces only display their effectivity in particular localities; local realities today can no longer be thought of outside of the global sphere of influence, for better or for worse (Ang, 1996: 153, as cited in Storey, 2003).

Ang (1996) explains, culturally speaking, it is hard to distinguish here between the “foreign” and the “indigenous”, the “imperialist” and the “authentic”: what has emerged is a highly distinctive and economically viable hybrid cultural form; in which the “global” and the “local” are inextricably intertwined (Storey, 2010). In other words, what counts as “local” and therefore “authentic” is not fixed content, but is subject to change and modification timely.

Asian theatre, as a whole, is transforming, some forms are renewing themselves, and new ones are evolving as societies are going into transformations at all levels. Concurrently, with the growth of Western-inspired forms, indigenous theatres are either declining or breaking out of the framework; which traditionally identified them and moving towards the dramatic and presentational forms customarily associated with the West. The true pattern of Indian culture in all its facets can best be witnessed in the countryside. It is in its villages that the dramatic tradition of India in all its pristine glory and vitality remains preserved even to this day. It is these rural drama groups that require real encouragement. On the other hand, it is not until the city youth is fully exposed to the influence from folk traditions in theatre, that a truly Indian theatre, modern and universal in appeal and indigenous in form, can really be evolved. It must form, from a deep-rooted feeling that if the folk arts of India really represent Indian culture, then rehabilitating and strengthening them will perhaps help the process of evolution of the folk-art forms.

As we have seen in figure 3 and 4, the stage, techniques, instruments and also interfaces have been changed. The famous Tollywood actor now acting in the lead roles in the Jatra Pala for the commercialized cause and market economy. It is almost seen in all the Asian folk and indigenous theatre, art, dance, music and other forms. The contestations between local and global have been seen everywhere. I have discussed it more in the next section.

4.1. Hybridization of Jatra in Post-colonial Bengal

Colonial Bengal was a ‘hybrid’ political space, integrating its colonial survival with distinctive models of political and cultural exchange and progress. Jatra was not an exception. The form has gone through many shifts since its inception. Grounded in religion, identity, and culture, Jatra was arrogated by the Bhadrak, politicized and radicalized for the urban audiences by theatre activists,

and reinvented by Utpal Dutta, who valued Jatra's aesthetic and political potential to ascribe unstable colonial and post-colonial struggles to Bengal. The result of all this granted contemporary Jatra its 'hybrid' identity.

There was a certain amount of traditional Jatra aesthetics merged with new modes of stage and lighting designs catered to Jatra's new audience. The performative structure was ambivalent, opposing the Europeanist naturalism with larger than life, while embracing the proscenium-style stage configuration. Simultaneously, authoring stories specific to the Bengali culture through advanced technological equipment, such as microphones, synthesizers, and electronic drum pads. Therefore, the notion of ambivalence is key in the context of my study of Jatra which will also reveal Jatra's 'hybrid' identity in relation to its agency and authorship. Jatra espouses many of Bhabha's theories by gradually witnessing a series of economic, political, and social changes, Jatra became an all-encompassing performance form, exposing its hybrid and ambivalent identity, which is simultaneously introspective (Sen, 2019: 33-35).

Empirical evidence by which Jashodhara Sen asserts, that over the years, Jatra has achieved a hybridized performance form merging the attributes of traditional theatre with the techniques specific to the Europeanist model. She observed a performance titled *Karunamoyee Rani Rashmoni* (Compassionate Queen Rashmoni) produced by Sri Chaitanya Opera and directed by renowned Jatra performer and director Ruma Dasgupta during her fieldwork. Typically, in contemporary Jatra performances, the open-air theatre is structured like a proscenium arch- a temporary canopy over the stage, with the audience sitting at the front. The performance she viewed had a similar sitting arrangement. The musicians sat on two sides of the stage. Instead of playing traditional musical instruments, such as Dholak, Kartal, Tabla, Harmonium, Clarinet, and Banshi (flute), the musicians played an electronic synthesizer, electronic drum pads, and clarinet. Nonetheless, the melody enhanced the operatic and theatrical texture exclusive to Jatra. This performance is a great example of how Jatra acquired the Europeanist proscenium style, and therefore a hybrid identity (Sen, 2020: 97-100).

Reflecting upon Jatra's vulnerable position since the arrival of the public stage in colonial Kolkata, it becomes evident that on the one hand, the deconstruction of the open-air Jatra stage into the proscenium arch was a systematic transformation regulated by imperialist perception. On the other hand, the characteristic adjustments expanded and urbanized Jatra as a performance form in a way that matched the transformation of Bengali society under British governance. In this hierarchical social environment, the Anglicized babu class was hybridizing urban Bengali theatre by mimicking the colonial, proscenium style stage configuration, on the other hand through their newfound modern performance aesthetics, they restructured or "modernized" the traditional Jatra stage from an open-air to a proscenium style. In this scenario, transitioning from an open-air stage configuration to the proscenium arch restores the colonizer-colonized dichotomy embedded in the concept of progress introduced by the colonizers to enlighten the colonized, which in turn is responsible for the formation of the "native" hybrid and ambiguous identity. The reconstruction of Jatra by the Bhadrakol of colonial Kolkata contributed to its first hybrid and ambivalent identity formation ratified by the socio-economically virtuous class. This ambivalence also demonstrates the absence of a connection between the rural and the urban Bengali culture.

The babus are the urban Anglicized natives who misappropriated Jatra by projecting their own distorted understanding of the form, not as anticolonial and liberatory, and sacred and poetic, but a form that is subservient, profane, and exotic (Sen, 2020: 102-106).

During the last decades of the 20th century, producers began to control Jatra; they represent and even sometimes create the 'culture' of rural Bengal. Bhairab Ganguly's later Jatra-Gandhari

Janani (1983), Bhagaban Babu (1984), Koli Yuger Bou (1985), Thanay Jachhe Chhoto Bou (1992) followed populist ideologies because of the choice of the spicy theme, use of colloquial language and proverbs. Bhairab Ganguly set the tone for the populist Jatra which aimed to reap commercial benefits for the producers, actors and organizers. In the meantime, the rural Bengali imagination got the taste of the silver screen; the legendary Bengali actor Uttam Kumar began to mesmerize the audience with his elegant grace and presence and begin to imitate his hit numbers. Swapan Kumar took all the popular cinema of Uttam Kumar on the Jatra stage. He staged *Saptapadi*, (adapted by Biru Mukhopadhyaya) *Sanyasi Raja* (adapted by Satya Prakash Dutta), *Stree* (by Kunal Mukhopadhyay), etc. Nowadays, the story of popular Bengali movies and television serials is enacted on the open stage of Jatra. Also, in terms of accommodating the style of the 1970s and 1980s Jatra, the traditional lyrical dialogue was replaced by local dialect; the number of songs was 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 the 1990s, several TV and cinema artists from Tollywood and Bollywood took their entries in the Jatra. The inclusion of these Tollywood actors created a brand value and hierarchy among the Banner (producing agency) namely Mega Star, Super Star and Star. Original Jatra actors were marginalized by the organizers because these Tollywood actors are considered crowd pullers. The theme, plot, message, and organizers are now being sidelined by the actors and their star value. Usually, the local clubs organize Jatra in their areas and spend around 25 thousand to 5 lacs per show depending on the star value of the banner. Along with the change of organizational approach, modern electronic gadgets like a tape recorder, stereophonic sound, and Western dance troops now accompany this folk form (Ghatak, 2020: 192-194). We can see in Figures 7 and 8a&b, the Chitpur Jatra posters, where Tollywood actors are at the forefront.

These changes not only occur in the taste of the audience but also emphasizes ambivalence and 'hybridity' in the Jatra culture. Erin Mee noted that the ticket sales emphasized theatre as a commodity, making it available to a smaller, and wealthier, group of people (Mee, 1997: 1).

Habermas also makes this point about the music industry. In the 18th century European context, admission for payment turned the musical performance into a commodity (Habermas, 1962: 39). Inclusion of star casting, ticketing system, political propaganda, and organizational setup have transformed and invoked the folk form to recreate and reinvent within.

observe here, that the Jatra is evolving and does not promise a fixed identity. The continued survival of the form in the liminal spaces supports my statement. The hybrid space is an ambiguous and expressive space that activates a heterogeneous identity (not exclusive) necessary for the survival of a potentially progressive, political, and ever-adaptive form such as Jatra.

Therefore, 'hybridity' destroys the rural-urban dichotomy. The trajectory of the evolution of Jatra from the early 16th century until today, displays its persistence as a 'hybrid' form that is traditional yet modern in its construction.

4.2. Transition of Jatra in the Wake of Commercialization, Modernization and Urbanization

According to Pravat Kumar Das (2014), the socioeconomic status of Jatra actors has changed over the years. Some of them are not only respected in society for their work but also for their affluence. Now, Jatra actors also own their own Jatra companies. Although hopeful, Das also mentioned during our conversation that despite the growing popularity of Jatra, the form is experiencing a crisis due to increased commercialization, while competing with other, more commercially viable forms of entertainment. It was primarily for the folks from the rural communities and the common

people. For example, the farmers were the main Jatra audience. At this time, cinema and theatre were not available in rural society; thus, Jatra was the primary entertainment for them, even though there was no electricity in the villages in the 60s. Jatra's construction as a performance form was pragmatic considering the limitations. Because there was no electricity, *hajak* lamps were the only source of light for visibility. The lamps needed "breathing intervals" or needed to be refueled by pumping to increase the air pressure for the longer run, which would last for three hours. During those intervals, the machine-generated loud noise. During those specific moments, there would be a song-dance sequence and the orchestra would start playing the instruments to conceal the loud noise. This practice would help the audience to stay in the moment despite the loud noise and distraction. Those who consider Jatra to be undeveloped and unsophisticated, don't consider the skill and practicality of the presentational style of Jatra (Das, 2014: 49).

Historically in Bengal, most of the cultured men celebrated Jatra as a performance form. Rabindranath Tagore appreciated Jatra and therefore constructed a modern version of theatre inspired by Jatra's structural properties and aesthetics. Tagore envisioned a minimalistic stage like Jatra, which can be performed anytime at any place. At the time, there was already a professional theater in our country. This time around, Girish Chandra's friend Motilal Roy transformed Jatra much closer to the style of theater in an attempt to popularize Jatra. During this time, Jatra faced a huge shift. Since then, we noticed a number of favorable changes to Jatra. After going through so many transformations, today's Jatra is completely different. I believe that today's Jatra can be identified as a "modern" Jatra that eliminated all the characteristics of traditional Jatra and created an ambiguous and confusing state. Thus, this version has no connection with traditional Jatra (Das, 2014: 89-95).

Modern themes of Jatra in the rural side of Bengal now show the space of urbanization, where the creation of modern institutions like old age homes, orphanages, child care centers, etc. are very much evident. One can see the Jatra posters in Jatra locales like "*Bridhhashrome knadche ma baba*" (Mother and father crying in an old age home), "*Pother dhare akla sishu*" (A lonely child at the roadside), which is for resisting the urban culture of intolerance and features of modern institutions. We can see, that at the end of the day, the people of rural Bengal have no entertainment medium, and limited access to audio-visual equipment and the internet, participating in Jatra not only for entertainment means but also to envisage themselves within it. They also possess their ancestors' oral traditions of telling stories of many kinds through this medium. Through these oral narratives, they actually situate some sort of old mythical and religious stories; spontaneously the 'voice' of these masses established from the ages. These active plays are very much enmeshed with those people as they are envisioning themselves with these stories always from generation to generation. I want to argue here, we can see this changing scenario in Kolkata and suburbs areas, where from the 19th Century Bengali Bhadrakol were dismantling this raw theatre culture (raw here signifies open and mass-produced), because of their colonial education and thoughts possessed through the British Raj.

My argument is that the narratives passed down by oral transmission are termed 'folklore'. So, the 'Voice' of the masses, which was transmitted through Jatra culture for many generations, is a kind of folklore tradition; are now in some sort of cultural realm, especially at the heart of the city and suburban areas because of the continuous of defamation of Jatra culture from the 19th Century 'Bhadrakol' culture and later, in the stage of globalization, where technology, internet, information and communication change the mediation of narratives and themes in another form of entertainment. A vast market economy and cultural divide are happening in the wake of technological innovation

and the emergence of new media (social). Cultural capitalism is also another phenomenon, where capital is mitigated through cultural revivalism, happen since our independence.

4.3. Emergence of New Media and Potential Threat for the Folk Theatre

It is generally visible, that the production and distribution of Jatra are not limited to its live performances. It has now expanded to modern mass media. Jatra is disseminated through TV serials, YouTube, and CDs and given the hybrid cinematic form. Despite the long-run success of the Bengali film industry and TV serials, Jatra reaches out to a larger audience across the region. This cultural and political economy of Jatra fits into the proposition of Paul DiMaggio's cultural production systems, in which popular culture is generated through a distinct form of organization. It is a mixture of mass-cultural production and pluralistic systems, which is presenting similar kinds of materials to a wide range of audiences (DiMaggio, 2002: 160). To Bourdieu, there is a nexus between the political economy of this art form and the construction of the ideology of popular narratives. Pierre Bourdieu asserts, that such cultural reproduction is intimately linked with the process through which one can internalize the culture of their society, which plays in this stability (Bourdieu, 1993: 101).

Cultural Anthropologist Kees Epskamp asserts, that "the influence of the 'big media' such as TV and press increasingly threatens the cultural identity of large sections of Third World peoples and indigenous culture, partly because form and content of the programmes are imported from other and more dominant cultures" (Epskamp, 1984: 47).

One of the very significant threats to the Bengali folk theatre tradition has been the emergence of regional cinema produced in Bengal for local audiences have become more popular when television comes to everyone's attention as part of the dominant culture. One can see, that cinemas like 'Chaitanya Mahaprabhu', 'Baba Taraknath', 'Joy Ma Tara', 'Joy Santoshi Ma' etc. are all blockbusters at that time. So, the medium of television and cinema has been some way or other, take a good place instead of Jatra. Recently the trends of Bengali TV serials like 'Anthony Kobiyal', 'Sanyasi Raja', 'Mira', 'Bahkter Bhagoban Sri Krishna' are capturing the sense of imaginative ties with this kind of popular themes of Jatra have been shown as daily drama in the house. These transformations of the medium are very crucial to shifting the 'voice' of the masses through electronic media instead of folk culture, which is a significant threat. On another side, I must say, that TV serials and web series are a more continuous process of actor and spectator relationship. Therefore, Jatra in the place of serials and web series is not very popular in city and suburban areas. People create their bonding with all the characters not just once in the Jatra stage but gradually in everyday series of scenes.

Every day it is routinized ourselves to make these serials and web series important. But, the rural masses are enmeshed with the Jatra actors, their acts and overall with the Jatra parties. Jashodhara Sen (2019) emphasized, that apart from the peasants, the working-class people are more Jatra-prone and buy a ticket for long night entertainment. Sometimes they want shortened Jatra to be more precise because of their all-day long work and taking rest for the next day.

5. Challenges, Adaptation and Reinvention

Folk forms of theatre had managed to survive even when Indian theatre as a whole was changing. The assumption that the assimilation of the scientific worldview would lead to the demolition of traditional values and institutions is only partly correct. This assumption primarily affected the instrumental cultural forms, but could not make an impact on the fundamental values that individuals and societies cherished. However, Folk theatre has managed to survive even with the advent of modernization because of its adaptive quality.

Yogendra Singh (2012) argues, that traditional Indian institutions successfully adapted their traditional mode of thinking and institutional practices to bring them in tune with the demands of modernization. This is also a reason why folk forms of theatre have managed to survive even with the advent of modern Indian theatre, film, and television. The folk tradition as an alternative discourse of knowledge became primarily redundant to most aspects of social change that are characterized as modernization. Despite this shrinkage in space for folk culture and oral tradition in India, it retains its resilience in several areas of culture like graphic and plastic art forms, music and theatre (Patgiri, 2019: 39-41).

Modern Jatra has transformed much since then. It is a commercial venture, whose “mantra” is entertainment based on sentimental/ melodramatic episodes from social life, for which most often television and cinema stars get in for attracting audiences and for cash profits. Against this wave of commercialization and popular entertainment, the question arises here, is this form of folk theatre have any social value and contribute in any form to emancipatory impetus? How much it has been changed in its interface? Is it adapted to a new form? How can we locate it in this age of technological advancement, new media (social), and liberal democracy?

Utpal Dutta says, “The most important teachers of Jatra are the spectators. It is the Jatra actors who understand what the spectators want. Since they have to stand again and again before the spectators and pass the fire test, they become socially aware quite quickly.” He remarks that after he brought direct political themes into Jatra, many such plays were being written. Before this, Dutta says, “...the way in which politics was coming into Jatra, was a hesitant step as if it was shy. The Jatra writers were afraid of writing clearly about politics.”

Keeping in mind Jatra’s popular appeal and mass reach, Dutta remarks, “We don’t have another medium like the Jatra. It is much more powerful than the theatre, a medium which reaches out to much more people. Therefore, we should also keep on fighting [politically] with Jatra” (as cited in Saha, 2005: 245-246).

The potential of the Jatra as a form that can reach out to the people, especially in villages and small towns made Dutta realize that it could be used to propagate the political message of mass revolt, anti-colonial resistance, class struggle, etc. The Jatra and the street theatre remained engaged in the mission of building a “revolutionary theatre” that could represent to the masses the history and saga of people’s revolution from various parts of the world as well as India. His mission of inspiring and informing the masses and engage them in a political sphere that had engaged with the history of mass revolution. The political content of Utpal Dutta’s Jatra has added a new historic dimension to this enduring popular folk form of India and made it critically rich. Many Jatra Palas which have addressed contemporary historical/political issues like terrorism and Osama Bin Laden, the Iraq war, etc., are a follow up of Dutta’s realization of the form for political engagements, instead of limiting it to conventional religious/mythological content. Dutta’s complexity of art form and richness of text/content is hard to match and something amiss in contemporary Jatra (Deb Barman, 2014: 186-191).

We can see, that the South Asian performing arts in general have been changing as ‘authentic’ folk traditions are either declining or being revived as hybridized cultures in the age of modernity. Unlike many other practices and their patronage systems, Bengal Jatra has witnessed shifts and transformations in dramatic techniques, patronage and consumption patterns from the last century. The fusion of cinema, theatre and Jatra was successfully accomplished to produce a hybridized form in the post-Independence period. This is led to the Jatra as a regional ‘culture industry’. The transformations of Jatra from ‘Loknatya’ (folk theatre) to ‘Gananatya’ (mass theatre). The reproduction

and legitimization of gender inequalities, caste hierarchy and traditional power structures in everyday life is evident in popular narratives. Jatra absorbs new tastes and trends through constant de-codification of its conventions by patrons, performers and spectators, engaged in the process of reforming, preserving and revitalizing their own culture. It thereby creates new spectacles in the countryside by producing a cinematic-hybrid culture in terms of social relations and identities in contemporary society.

In the 21st century, traditions of Indian folk theatre have been facing continuous challenges of survival and loss. In South India, mythology-based performing arts like- Kathakali, Kutiyattam, Theyyam and Yakshagana still thrill their audiences, whereas in northern and eastern India, forms like- Lilas, Danda Natas, Leto, Tappa, Khyamta, Kheur, Kavigan are rapidly disappearing. Despite denigration from the urban intelligentsia as 'cheap entertainment', hundreds of modern Jatra companies have thrived since the 1990s in rural Bengal. The 'liveness' of the performances is a valued addition. Through social media like- Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp, Jatra can reach out to the vast rural masses.

6. Jatra: is it a 'Mass' Theatre or the Tool for Political Mobilization?

We can see, that the 'folk' culture in the modern age has come to be known as an industry of entertainment on a medium scale for its production and transmission in an expanded market structure. It is located socially and produced materially. The transformed version of Jatra is not an exception. The production and distribution of Jatra are located in a wider network of social relations that reconfigure the art form and its internal structure. Jatra, an artistic production, is consumed by a large audience and is mediated through the mechanisms of the capitalist market now. With their tendency to be revived and altered, these entertainers have a promising future. Demand for entertainment can lead to the creation of an industry. By responding to the social-cultural forces, it has expanded its cultural consumption, production and participation. After the abolition of the zamindari system and princely kingship for nearly two decades (1950- 60) Jatra parties were left either in penury or powerless. The Jatra poets became weaker and socially disconnected. The transition from sponsored patronage to the patronage of common masses through a ticketing system was executed by the new business class or the existing rich Jatra troupes who later took up other businesses. These developments took place due to a changing economic pattern. As the larger processes of state formation increased, the political independence and rapid commercialization of the economy in the state; the power of local elites and merchant class began to take up Jatra as a business activity (Chhotaray, 2013: 49). Businessman of fishing and fisheries of Sunderban area and the coal miners of Asansol and Raniganj area are very much invested their money in this art form. Kees Epskamp (1984) rightly observes, that the Jatra performances have an 'air of wealth', and recent demands of commercialization of it, enacted in urban theatres by professional groups. The same groups are invited into the area of rich landowners, who wish to add to the splendour of their celebrations and are willing to pay good money for it. This is a standing tradition now. However, this splendid form of popular folk theatre and its manner of production, distribution and consumption, invoke it to have immediate associations with the local elites. It is, as it were, influenced by the aura of the landlords.

Due to growing business interests, Jatra is changing its aesthetics by accommodating the contemporary taste of a popular class. We can see the historical transition in the field, from its amateur status, where the artists were rewarded and offered hospitality. This art form is dominated by the businessman now, who offers direct monetary exchange for a specific artwork. This resulted in the emergence of the specifically instituted artist. Some of the Jatra makers created their own

genres through realistic plays, modern dance and songs, technical innovations (stage machinery) and spectacles; followed by a number of commercial Jatra troupes in creating a space for the institutionalization and modernization of this art form. By recognizing Jatra as a powerful medium, Balakrishnan Hariharan (2008) suggests, that “maybe it is time that government wakes up to its potential, recognizes it as an industry and takes advantage of this medium for information, education and sensitization of society in its own enlightened self-interest.” Therefore, the collective urge for its status as an industry and its potential for social development is still a matter of concern. The Jatra association, however, is no longer interested in the issue of the status of the industry. Maybe, it is because of their inconsistent profit or no profit that results in the instabilities of their business. The proprietors are mostly dependent either on their personal business or on the profit, they make from Jatra business annually. However, the monetary success of Jatra cannot be the sole answer to its popularity and resilience. There is a nexus between the economics of the form and the construction of the ideology of the popular narratives. The emerging market of the Jatra industry coincided with the intention of modern playwrights to create Jatra plays with popular appeal in which tradition and modernity are portrayed as both dichotomy and continuity. The newly emergent hybridized Jatra serves the growing middle class well. The synthesis of cinematic technique and traditional play structure presents a combination of styles of film, television, modern theatre and the existing repertoire. Such resilient traditional performances rooted within human and social contexts animate the life worlds of societies, past and present, and transmit a gamut of meanings. The existing structures continue assimilation, acculturation and adaptation of new imported modes and values (Chhotaray, 2013: 49-50). In a similar way, Jatra as a highly mobile theatre form is moving between cities, small towns, and villages, containing extensive rural or folk elements; it fosters social solidarity and collective memory and imagination.

In a similar way, Jatra is an expression of the common Bengalis who produce, perform, mediate, enjoy, share their experience of the form and incorporate newness into it. The mediation between the performers and the spectators offers a space to communicate and accentuates the narratives through the performance. Jatra makers in a way produce ‘mass’ theatre to reinvent the tradition, supply excitement, pleasure and relief to its audiences like peasants and artisans after their long day of strenuous work; also produce narratives that have a strong resonance in social and cultural processes. To rejuvenate their audiences, Jatra parties include drama with songs, dances and comic interludes and many more things to cater to the need for total entertainment. Yogendra Singh (1973) asserts, that the transition from one stage to other would mark the growth of new forms of social structure and new levels of moral and cultural patterns takes place.

Patronized by Bengali Kings, zamindars and administrative officials, mythological Jatras appealed to a diverse audience and the form was eventually known as a theatre of the masses. Combining thrilling, suspenseful and action-based stories with modern techniques such as lights, sounds, music, record dances, multiple stages, etc., Jatra continues to have a spectacular level of success. Such live performances have been supplying amusement to its spectators, who have grown up with this folk-art form. The advent of modernity resulted from the adoption and incorporation of theatre and cinema techniques in Jatra and its fusion created a hybridized form. The reproduction of mythological tales in a secular story in the 21st century has entertained the audience and created a new urge in rural areas by producing a ‘hybrid’ culture. Rich businessmen and politicians seek to promote contemporary Jatra to gain social prestige and also propagate their ideologies (Chhotaray, 2013: 67-72).

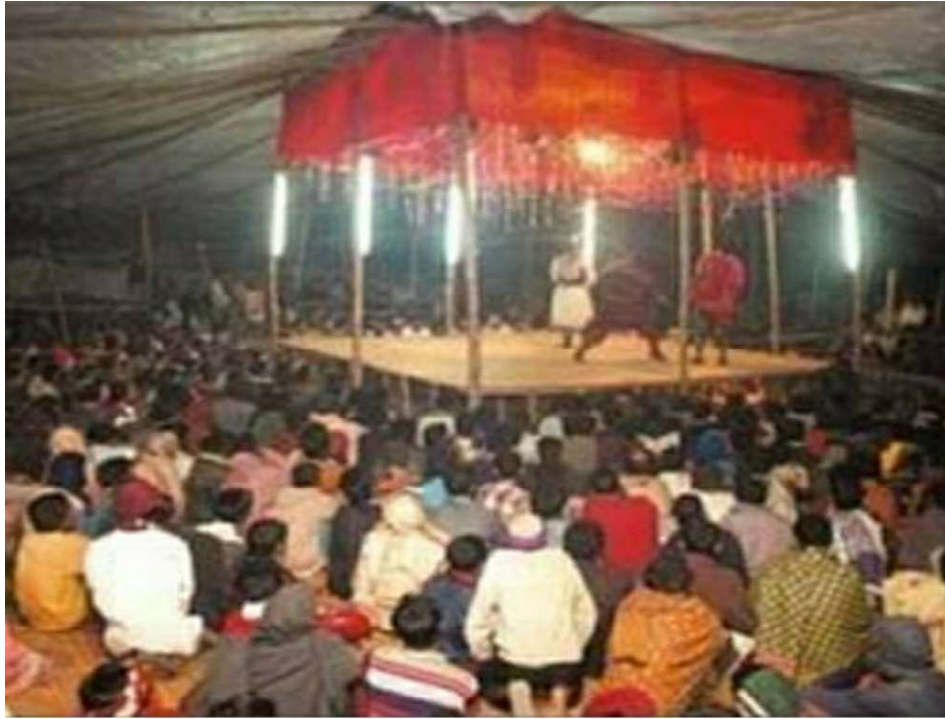


Fig. 1: Stage and overall scenario of Jatra Pala. (Source: www.youthkiawaaz.com)



Fig. 2: Staging the mythological Jatra Pala. (Source: www.anandabazar.com)



Fig. 3: Traditional Jatra, acted by Jatra parties. (Source: www.feminisminindia.com)



Fig. 4: Contemporary Jatra, acted by the Bengali film actors. (Source: www.Drexel.edu)



Fig. 7: Chitpur Jatra para (locales) in Kolkata. (Source: Arpita Ghatak, 2020)



Fig. 8a: Chitpur Jatra Posters in 2018-19. (Source: Arpita Ghatak, 2020)



Fig. 8b: Chitpur Jatra Posters in 2018-19. (Source: Arpita Ghatak, 2020)

HIGH-VOLTAGE THEATRE OF POLITICS		
Name of Jatra	Theme	Duration
Mamata-r Daake Dilli Cholo	How Mamata plans to occupy the corridors of power in Delhi	2hr 30min
Bhalo Manusher Bhat Nei	Demonetisation and how Mamata fought against the Narendra Modi govt	2hr 40 min
Banglar Khamutai Ebar Mamata	How Mamata Banerjee is the main power point of Bengal	3hr
Didi Tomar Jabab Nei	Mamata Banerjee's political career and development schemes	3hrs
Chapadanga-r Eou	How the voice of protesters is being muzzled	3hr

Fig. 9: Contemporary Political Jatras subjected upon present West Bengal C. M. Mamata Banerjee. (Source: www.m.timesofindia.com)



Fig. 10: Jatra poster of 'Banglar Khamutai Ebar Mamata', subjected upon present West Bengal C. M. Mamata Banerjee. (Source: www.m.timesofindia.com)

We can see, that the standing Government of West Bengal, ruled by Trinamool Congress doing the same since their upliftment victory. Several Jatras are performed in the rural side of Bengal to cater to their needs of vote politics and popular their many well-planned 'Prakalpa' (development schemes) in the need of political interest. Many Jatras are also present only to evoke the charismatic figure of Mamata Banerjee, presently Chief Minister of West Bengal and Supremo of Trinamool Congress. Jatras like- 'Mamatar Dake Dilli Cholo' depicts how Mamata plans to occupy the corridors of power in Delhi, 'Bhalo Manusher Bhat Nei', performs Demonetization and how Mamata fought against the Central Government, 'Banglar Khamatay Ebar Mamata', depicts how Mamata Banerjee is the main power point of Bengal, 'Didi Tomar Jabab Nei', performs Mamata Banerjee's political career and development schemes and many more performs every day in the rural areas of Bengal to foster the political ideologies of Trinamool Congress and Vision of Mamata Banerjee. It hardly talks about the factual truth of education and health sector facing tremendously in this Government and foreshadows these to the people by presenting this kind of performance. For reference see Figures 9 and 10.

Conclusion

Jatra, a self-contained and reinvented form of theatre, has transformed itself through modernization and commercialization. Old theatrical traditions were skillfully adapted to the modern world, revitalizing traditional theatre and entailed the need for radical changes in the processes of production, distribution and consumption. To Hansen (1992), the aesthetic transformation of Jatra from pre-colonial to colonial and post-colonial periods depicts a complex transition molded by social groups, changes in political and economic structures and altered the pre-modern cultural fabric for technological advancement. Jatra has been transformed from its classical 'folk' theatre identity into a 'mass' theatre by adopting modern techniques and technology with its traditional form. The changes are incorporated into and reinforced by the new market venturing economy in the production and consumption of contemporary Bengali Jatra.

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