

The Jatrapala Theatrical Tradition of West Bengal: An Analytic Study on its Origin and Development

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Abstract

The Jatra was originally associated with the religious rituals, although certain forms of debates or speculations exist about the meaning of the root word 'jatra'. Having ritualistic connotation, 'jatra', was believed to be a musical procession where the deity was carried from one place to another; hence it is connected with the word journey or the state of a journey in Bengali. Scholars however believe that it had originated from some hymns of Vedas. P. Guha Thakurta in his book on Bengali drama quotes the German Indologist C.P.Horowitz as being of the opinion that 'even the vedic age knew Jatra, a venerable heirloom of Aryan antiquity' (Guha Thakurta). However Prof. A. B. Keith disagrees with the above mentioned viewpoint and opines that 'even the Vedic age knew Jatra which was a well known aspect in Bengal while the refined sacred vedic drama passed away without a direct descendant'. Some scholars trace the religious rituals of Jatra with the indigenous culture of certain tribes which inhabited the borderlands of Bengal. The combination of dramatic elements in the composition of Jatrapala was previously suggested in the religious texts of Geeta Govinda or Sri Krishna Kirtan. The Sri Krishna Kirtan became famous with the spread of Vaishnavism. It gained popularity with the rise of Vaisnavism where the compositions mainly comprised of the amorous relationship between Radha and Krishna. The love life of Radha and Krishna were expressed in certain jatras like Krishna Jatra, Ras Jatra, Jhulan Jatra etc. Sri Chaitanya, the saint and preacher of the great cult of Vaisnavism preached about this religious faith which seems to be as old as the history of Bengal. This particular paper, apart from highlighting on the origin and development of the theatrical tradition of West Bengal will meticulously present Jatra as a medium of instruction and expression for the rural masses.

Key words: Folk drama, performance, theatre and Bengali Culture

According to Merriam and Webster, a drama is defined as, "A composition in verse or prose intended to portray life or character or to tell a story through action and dialogue and designed for theatrical performance" (Merriam et al 1969: 252).

The eminent critic Vatsayan while giving his valuable insight regarding the substance of folk and traditional performances, says that, the word 'folk' implies a community which is integrally related to tribe, region or a rural group. The expressions of a group performance are far more spontaneous in nature than the contemporary theatre. His definition includes folk dramas as being 'the literary compositions which are designed for theatrical performances popular among communities, especially rural' (Vatsayan 1980: 2). Interesting enough, the concept of 'folk drama' provides relative emphasis on the distinct flavours of folk arts pertinent to different sects and communities. What makes the folk performances unique are its variety of content, stage crafts and musical modes. The socio-cultural aspect of a specific folk performance varies from one to another. Recent studies relating to this rural performance claims it to be a form of dynamic medium which tries to establish a proper communication channel between the actors and the spectators. The communication model specifies it to be a kind of active model that corresponds with the input of the audience. The vibrant traditions of India which have been prevalent from time immemorial have been reconstructed and reconstituted through the patterns of different presentations. The indigenous nature of these performances makes it more appealing to the rural masses that are unable to comprehend the erudite and aristocratic presentation of the contemporary or modern theatre. This stylised form of drama which has been in-

fluenced by the Indian classical theatre follows a simplistic methodology which initiates an active membership on the part of the receivers. The input of the drama is finely processed in the form of output which is enjoyed thoroughly by the rural people. The folk arts that are performed by the rural artists become a manifestation of the life of the people. Apart from giving philosophical and moral lessons, these folk presentations also preached about the socio-cultural and political issues. Certain popular dramatic modes became secular to cater to the taste of the people in general. The Indian folk dramas include a colourful medley 'of dance, song, dialogue, jesting, mime and acrobatics' (ibid) (Vatsayan 1980: 2)

Although folk dramas have their distinct individual regional flavour, yet the authentic source of these stories are taken from *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Puranas*, legends, folktales etc. It might also include certain forms of foreign romances which can delight the mindsets of the viewers. The consistent theme that pertains in most of the folk/rural presentation is the triumph of good over evil. Certain mythological dimensions are also added which help in understanding the cultural specificities of a regional group. Other significant aspects include 'elemental colour, costume, dance and music. The initial aim of the folk theatre, was to give the first impact with sound and sight and then slowly open the audience's mental eye for a message on morality' (Shankar 1978: 38)

Understanding Krishna Cult:

'Narayanam Namaskritya' (I bow before thee O Lord Krishna with deep reverence) is written as a form of invocation in the great Indian epic *Mahabharata* in its opening lines. Lord Krishna becomes the central deity on whom the entire epic is based. It is in *Mahabharata*, that an elaborate account of Krishna cult is presented for the first time. Historians have claimed that the divinity of Lord Krishna is as old as the Indus Valley Civilization. *Krishna Leela* as a form of religious subject has not only been significant form of study in *Bhagavat Puranas* but also in different forms of folk theatres (Varadapande 1982: 23). The colourful lores, legends and myths of Krishna have been manifested in several Buddhist, Jain and Brahmanical texts. Krishna becomes the perfect incarnation of honesty, love, beauty, virtue and justice in many folk narrations all over India. Being influenced from quite a few mythologies, the Krishna cult has diverse impact on Raas Leela, Krishna Leela as well as to the Jatrapala tradition of West Bengal. It is significant to note that Krishna's life and philosophy have been elaborated not only in *Mahabharata* but also in *Puranas*, specifically in *Vishnu*, *Harivamsha*, *Bhagavata* and *Brahmavaivada* while later became a part of Krishna cult (Chakravarty 1975: 55).

The Prodigious impact of the Krishna cult can be found in several religious literatures, Indian arts and culture. Historians have documented that since 12th C many Krishna Kavyas started emerging in

Sanskrit and other regional languages. The major form of Krishna Kavya is considered to be Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda*¹. The significant episode of 'Rasa Panchadhyayi' of *Bhagavata Purana* describes the amorous relationship of Krishna with different Gopis. These episodes have inspired many poets to write lyrics describing the diverse forms of love of Krishna. Vidyapati, the famous Maithili poet of 14th C, presented different padas on the love theme of Radha Krishna. Bengali poet Chandidasa also followed the divine love theme in his works. Krishna theme became an important subject for many folk poets in different parts of India. Marathi folk poets composed Lavani songs, in Gujarat it was the 15th C poet Narasi Mehata who explored this theme in his compositions. Mahaprabhu of West Bengal was known to be much influenced by the thoughts and philosophies of Krishna. The Krishna cult had immense impact on his life that spread the message of love and virtue. The eternal relationship of love between Radha and Krishna became a commonly explored theme in Indian Arts and Paintings which included different schools including Rajasthani, Gujarati, Basauli, Kangra, Mughal etc. (Varadapande 1982:9).

In several forms of festivities, the Leelas of Radha Krishna are enacted through the medium of dance, drama and music. An important story has been passed down through the generations which focus on the significance of theatrical events that are related to the Krishna cult. In the

‘Jaiminiyashvamedha parva’ of *Bhagavata Purana*, the emergence of this cult is described. Krishna who was adorned with the epithet ‘Natavar’, or actor enhanced the performance of the Leelas. According to Bharata’s *Natyashastra*, “Vishnu-Krishna is associated with the origin of four styles of dramatic representations known as vrittis. These vrittis are known as Bharati, Arabhati, Sattvati and Kaishiki- originated in the killing of the demons Madhu and Kaitabha, hence they are called ‘Devo Leela Samubhav’ “ (Bharatmuni 1978:29). This tradition of Krishna clearly makes him an embodiment of Indian Theatre. In the epic *Mahabharata*, it is claimed that Lord Krishna received special training on dramatic arts at the hermitage of Guru Sandipani. Therefore it becomes an obvious matter that the deity who himself is well trained in performing arts will enhance his cult with beautiful forms of artistic abilities. Therefore Krishna cult became a major form of influence and gave impetus to different performing arts. It became a means by which the Krishna faith was propagated. Certain religious beliefs were entrusted in the minds of the audiences by the preachers. It was believed that witnessing the plays or dramatic emancipation of Krishna Leela would lead to pure form of bliss or moksha.

Bharata says that ‘he who witnesses the dramatic performance will attain the same goal as masters of the Vedic path, performers of sacrifices or givers of gifts. Trivarga Sadhanam Natyam says the *Vish-*

nu Purana. A person who attends dramatic performances will attend the trivargas-dharma, artha and Kama’ (Bharatmuni 1978:80). Bengalis’ are known for their enthusiasm and involvement in the cultural activities in performing arts. It was during the 12th C, the court poet of Lakshaman Sena, Jayadeva wrote *Gita Govinda*. It was through *Gita Govinda*, that the Bengali community became interested in the rhythmic abilities of the performing arts. However, it was not until the 15th C that the Bengalis could situate themselves in the wide range of performances. In 15th C, the eminent religious leader Chaitanya Mahaprabhu tried to propagate the Krishna cult or Vaishnav cult through his outstanding performances which included music, dance and dramatic associations which were later termed as Jatra (Ahuja 2012: 89). It was during that time that the traditional folk forms of music, dance and theatre impressed the mindsets of the people which restrained the impact of the foreign culture in the minds. The evolving folk cultures added new dimensions in the performative skill across different regions of India. The traditional performances were closely associated with certain religious beliefs and rituals. ‘Rooted to the soil, traditional theatre in different parts of India has, down the ages been vital and vigorous enough to defy temporal or cultural conquests. For material they drew upon the inexhaustible storehouse of stories and legends, history and philosophy, religion and myths, hagiology and demonology provided by the two great epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* and by

the *Puranas*. Since these epics and *Puranas* have shaped and sustained the Hindu way of life, traditional theatre relying on them for subjects and themes has never lacked popular support' (Raha 1978: 86).

An eminent aspect of these specificities of Jatrapala had been Krishna Jatra which began during the medieval ages where this form of folk drama was known as 'Nata Gita' which meant dance accompanied by music. Those themes were basically based on *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. Interesting enough, less dramatic elements were used including dialogues. It was through music and dance that the subject was contextualised. The doctrines of Krishna faith and Krishna consciousness that were preached by Chaitanya influenced the life style and thought process of the entire Bengali community. Previously as a folk drama, it mainly concentrated on the love events of Radha and Krishna. Chaitanya himself being the custodian of this Bhakti Movement played the role of Rukmini (the devoted wife of Sri Krishna) which later became the primary embodiment of Jatra. This became the first instance of the performance of a folk drama in Bengal where the associates of Sri Chaitanya also played different roles. This specific form of Jatra was known as Krishna Jatra as it was enveloped with the life events of this great deity. With the evolution of different forms of Jatrapalas, this Krishna Jatra as a traditional art maintained its beauty and authenticity (Bhattacharya 1978: 30).

However with the onset of the Eighteenth century, the socio-political and religious Bengal suffered a huge change. With this change, the diversion from Vaishnav cult was taking place. Culturally it had varied impacts on the mindsets of the people. The thematic preoccupation regarding the easy form of Krishna Jatra changed from the amorous relationship of Krishna and Radha to secular and unorthodox topics. Rural drama or folk drama was mainly based on the episodes of the daily episodes of the daily life of the people. Interesting enough for the common folk, the common themes related to their lives fascinated them other than the Puranic episodes and other historical heroes. Although certain themes were always told from a religious perspective and included stories from *Mangal Kavyas* which preached different cults of Gods and Goddesses. Such forms of Jatrapalas were noted for its maintenance of standard tradition of the culture specific attributes of the Bengali community. The new form of drama that emerged during the 19th C in Bengal was known as 'Nala-Dmayanti Jatra' which was based on certain incidents and episodes of *Mahabharata* and was absolutely attached from the theme of Krishna Jatra. Another form of Jatra that gained popularity during that time period was known as 'Vidyasundar Jatra' that dealt with secular themes with the new evolvment of the thematic ideas, the mass of spectators gathered strength. People across different regions and communities started enjoying this form of drama which were later categorised as a rural form of entertainment.

Conclusion:

Detaching the themes from any religious sentiments encouraged the audience to get involved and participate fully in the performance. In a folk theatrical performance like Jatrapala, the communicative aspect becomes stronger when the spectators started decoding the messages of the performers. The two intrinsic levels of performance occur in a Jatrapala including 'transportation' and 'transformation'. Eminent performance theorist Richard Schechner had analysed the above mentioned context and explained it in relation with the semantic model of the actor and the spectators. This enactment or the role playing on the part of the actors helps them in integrating their identities. The folkloric interpretation of a community like Bengali not only becomes rich but also vast. The physical anthropology, musicology, myths and primitive psychology with the performing arts have time and again made the concepts illuminating. The Primitive culture and Folk religion of a particular community often produces diverse genres of study for the scholars. The folk performing arts become a manifestation of the ritualistic endeavours of the rural mass whose life seems untouched and uncontaminated by the modern ways of the world. The folk aspects reciprocates the simple lifestyles and thought processes of the people who resides in the rural sections of the society.

Discussing Jatrapala in an analytical way presents the readers and scholars a discursive study which re-reads a nearly

marginalised form like it through the lens of performance. Although much neglected, the present study has tried to trace the theatrical activities of the folk performances of West Bengal from a very grass root level. While reading and interpreting Jatrapala as a rural construct it can also be emphasised how a systematic format like this traditional approach can be thoroughly discussed or critically appreciated through the medium of modern theatrics. Jatrapala has been a product of cultural hybridity², as apart from religious and institutional practice, Jatrapala has taken the shape of a secular representation manifesting the cults, ethos and beliefs of a particular section of a society. Although it cannot be denied that Jatrapala performances originated as a form of 'ritual orientation' process.

Jatrapala as a specialised form of folk presentation is not an amateur activity as opined by the snobbish sections of West Bengal, on the very contrast, it tries to highlight and 'focus on mythology and popular worship and the almost extinct category of the female impersonators' (Dutt 2008: 18). In all probabilities and possibilities re-reading the analysis of a folk medium of entertainment for the general mass of people becomes a difficult task. The thought provoking aspects of folk theatres that give different dimensions of study by not limiting oneself to the performance studies is highly acclaimed one. Scholars and performance critics across the world have tried to read the performative aspect of theatre from

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an interdisciplinary origin. The interdisciplinary aspects however have led to an overwhelming reaction on the part of readers, critics, performers and spectators thereby providing an innovative approach or medium by which a folk performance like Jatrapala is revised, re-read, re-interpreted and re-analysed through different theoretical terms and aspects.

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Endnotes:

- 1 Gita Govinda is considered to be a religious text, which has been composed by the 2nd Century poet Jayadeva which essentially speaks about the life of Krishna and his relationship with the Gopinis in Vrindavan.
- 2 Although the approach of hybridity can be more related with the postcolonial concepts, yet the context of intermingling or interrelatedness between two different dimensions deserves special mention and along with it, the modification and re-modulation of all theatrical studies have enlisted them under the category of hybridity.