

Jatragaan in Bengal: A Study in Musical Traditions

Dr. Arpita Ghatak

ICSSR Post-Doctoral Fellow, Department of English, Kazi Nazrul University, Asansol (India)

ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History

Published Online: 15 July 2020

Keywords

Jatra, Jatragaan, Bengal, culture, musical tradition

*Corresponding Author

Email: [arpitaghatak23\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:arpitaghatak23[at]gmail.com)

ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to engage with the musical journey of Jatra until today. The archetypal Jatra consisted of high-pitched voice modulations with numerous songs which essentially embedded an auditory factor, eg. listening (to) Jatra (Jatra shona). Hence Jatra and gaan (song) are synonymous co-factors in any critical study. The extinction of Juri, Vivek, Niyati from the Jatra stage paved the way to the modern orchestra. With time, eventually the professional theatre (with proscenium setting) deeply affected the innate musicality in Jatra. The later decades of the 20th Century saw lesser number of song narratives and an extinction of Juri singers; especially, to create theatrical and climactic affectations, much emphasis was laid upon dialogues and prose narratives. Jatra that consisted of 40-45 songs and numerous other interspersed instrumental pieces saw a slow rejection among the masses. The songs rather hindered in between the dialogues and started taking a toll upon the patience of the audience. The present paper inquires the old conventions and evaluates their influence in modern Jatra.

1. Introduction

The archetypal Jatra consisted of high-pitched voice modulations with numerous songs which essentially embedded an auditory factor, e.g. listening (to) Jatra (Jatra Shona). With time the poetic Jatra grew more prosaic and got filled with dialogues and acrobats. Gradually the 'to be listened' Jatra turned 'to be seen'. With time, eventually, the professional theatre (with proscenium setting) deeply affected the innate musicality in Jatra. Till today, Jatra takes the name of 'opera' because of its once preoccupation with dance and music. With the advent of colonial modernity, urban reformists and critics found a similitude in Jatra with as many songs and spectacle, reconstructed parallelly to the Victorian melodrama, i.e., Opera; hence it received the title Opera (Dutt & Munsii, 151).

Jatra has ever lived through its music. The Jatra songs have been sung by local people for years and over, thus retaining them in the cultural memory of Bengal. Although, few Jatratala have existed till date, significant Jatrarights/musicians have found their places in the annals of Bengal's music, eg. Paramananda (1733–1823), Govinda Adhikary (1798–1870), Krishnakamal Goswami (1810–1887), Brajamohan Roy (1831–1876), Nilkantha Mukhopadhyay (1841–1911), Madanmohan Chattopadhyay and Mukundadas (1878–1934). Bengal had numerous musical traditions which gradually found a place in Jatra. Among them, Letogaan, Bhadugaan, Kabigaan, Kirtan, Kathakatha are most significant.

The present chapter seeks to engage with this musical journey of Jatra. It should be noted that, because of Jatra's marginal stature, very few records and documents are available till date. Names of Jatra associates, years of compositions or the first production of Jatratala have been given wherever they have been available in the process of this research. But in most cases, there has been a paucity of records.

2. Kabigaan

The second half of the Nineteenth Century saw the predominant and populist forms like *Khemta* (lewd dancing moves) and *Kabigaan*. In the context of other existing musical forms in Bengal, it is pertinent to understand *Kabigaan* and its popularity among the common mass. *Kabigaan* were musical duels between two singers or groups which were highly competitive and often involved personal attacks, filled with malice, carnal anecdotes and lewd commentary over the singer's lives. It had an intense theatricality with an open space in the middle of a gathering, with people whistling and encouraging the gladiator-like singers to attack each other more viciously. In the end, the winning person or party were felicitated by the *zamindar* or local head. This popular rural entertainment found a visible entry into Jatra and marred the early spiritual spirit in Jatragaan.

3. Juri

To combat this religious-cultural shift, Jatra reformist Madanmohan Chattopadhyay of Chandannagar, Hooghly did try to restructure the music and songs. He composed songs based on human emotions and Indian classical notes. Also, to break the monotony of musical structure and notes, he introduced a set of chorus singers, namely the *Juri* singers. These *Juri* included a group of trained singers who were adept in folk and Classical music – adult singers for male characters and young singers for women characters. Chattopadhyay set an amateur Jatra group which turned to be a professional in due course of time and popularity. He himself wrote plays (*pala*) for his group with brilliant music compositions, namely *Pralhad Charitra*, *Dhruv Charatitra*, *Durga Mangal*, *Gangabhakti Tarangini*, *Ram Banabas*, *Harischandra Pala*, etc. These *pala* have lost their existence in time, but their songs remained till date; interestingly, this suggests that *pala* were popular since their songs existed orally over the years.

The early Twentieth Century *Jatra* reformists Motilal Roy and Brajamohan Roy brought a revolution with their excellent musical compositions and skillful *Juri* singers; also, every character in their *pala* would necessarily sing to communicate their emotion. Durgadas Lahiri's 1905 collection named *Bangalir Gaan* gives an idea of contemporary music and lyricists (Das,10). Along with Madanmohan Chattopadhyay's songs other famous lyricists like Nilkantha Mukhopadhyay (1841-1911), Brajamohan Roy (1831-1876), Rasiklal Chakraborty (1263 b.), Mukunda Das (1878-1934), etc. Songs from other Krishna *Jatra* also found their place in Lahiri's book, which proves the popularity of not only the songs but the *pala* as well. Kirtan and Tukko played a vital role in these *pala*.

4. Tukko

Parmananda Adhikary brought an innovative style in *Jatra* songs in the form of rhyming couplets. This style was called *Tukko*, where the last part had a resolution to the entire couplet. It brought a fulfilling sense in the ears of the audience and made itself easy to remember so that they return to their homes with the songs. Later, Badan Adhikary and Gobinda Adhikary gave momentum to this *Tukko* form and immortalized it in the annals of Bengali literature.

Other lyricists who revived *Jatra* songs from lewdness were Shishuram, Parmananda (1733-1823), Sridam and Subal the twin brothers, Gobinda Adhikary (1798-1870), Krishnakamal Goswami (1810-1887) and others. The title Adhikary was bestowed upon each of them because they were owners of *Jatra* troops. Parmananda Adhikary brought an innovative style in *Jatra* songs in the form of rhyming couplets. This style was called *Tukko*, where the last part had a resolution to the entire couplet. It brought a fulfilling sense in the ears of the audience and made itself easy to remember so that they return to their homes with the songs. Later, Badan Adhikary and Gobinda Adhikary gave momentum to this *Tukko* form and immortalized it in the annals of Bengali literature.

5. Ekane Gayak (solo singers)

Motilal Roy's (1843 - 1908) *Jatra* group "*Nabadweep Banga Geetabhinay Sampraday*" was the most popular and spectacular among his contemporaries. Critic Hansanarayan Bhattacharya has researched on Motilal Roy's life and *Jatrapala* for over a period of decade. In his *Jatragane Motilal Roy O Tnahar Sampraday* (2018), he observed:

His group would consist of 125-150 people. Among them were 8-10 *Juri* singers, 25-30 young singers (*balak*) 4-5 violin players and other instrumental artists. Each would wear dazzling velvet clothes with glittering buttons all over their *Alkhalla* (loose long shirts), the young boys would also wear caps where the name of 'Motilal Roy' would be inscribed in big letters. (Bhattacharya 11).

While the *Juri* were trained singers, the boy-singers were less adept in music and sang mostly religious or amorous songs. They too moved on the stage facing the audience like the *Juri* singers, which was quite a spectacle. Sometimes, one of them would come forward and take over as a solo-singer or sing from the background to add emotion to the scene.

6. Uktigeeti

Uktigeeti existed for quite sometimes, even after the *Juri* songs were extinct. *Uktigeeti* (statement) songs were sung by a solo artist, preferably the lead characters with elaborate expression. The *Jatra* actors, therefore, needed to be singers as well.

7. Sakhi Dal (dancing girls)

The girl dancers would fill in the 'scene changing' period. These innovations suggest that Motilal Roy was deeply moved by the Calcutta Theatre Houses and tried a few of the proscenium/stage-acting maneuver in *Jatra*. Another *Jatra* personnel who was greatly affected by the Calcutta Theatre was Motilal Roy's contemporary Brajamohan Roy. He is remembered for beautiful musical compositions, and every character in his plays would necessarily sing to communicate their emotion.

Eventually, many such changes occur in the trends of *Jatra* performance over time. Professional theatre (with proscenium setting) deeply affected the innate musicality in *Jatra*. To create theatrical and climactic affectations, much emphasis was being laid upon dialogues and prose narratives. Such a situation demanded a lesser number of song narratives and extinction of *Juri* singers. *Jatra* that consisted of 40-45 songs and numerous other interspersed instrumental pieces saw rejection among the masses. The songs somewhat hindered in between the dialogues and started taking a toll upon the patience of the audience. Moreover, the professional *Juri* singers would be far too trained and old with respect to the taste of the audience. (Das 12).

8. Vivek

With the extinction of *Juri* songs and singers, the musical feature of *Jatra* found an exit in a quasi-normal male character called *Vivek* (conscience). This unique white or saffron-clad lead-singer had been present in different forms in different plays. The first-ever documented *Vivek* had shown up in the first half of 20th Century by Ahibhushan Bhattacharya's (?-1910) *pala Surath Udhar* (1903) at the Santra Company as the character of Dibadas or *Bhakta Unmaad*. The essence of the character *Vivek* had been rooted with a philosophical edge and had provided a clear indication of a moral conscience among the audience. It had been a powerful medium for the audience to investigate the *pala* more righteously and feel the *Rasa* optimally. Motilal Roy had explored this character as a supernatural phenomenon called *Narad*. Much like the mythical *Narad*, he was a semi-human spirit who was omniscient and omnipotent but grounded in the reality of the play. He was a person who did most of the singing in the play, an element that attracted playwrights like Utpal Dutt (1929-1993) in his plays like *Rifle* (1968), *Sanyasir Tarabari* (1972). This trend existed in *Jatra* over sixty to seventy years and presently have disappeared.

9. Niyati

Niyati might be called as the female version of *Vivek*. Unlike the well-dressed *Vivek*, *Niyati* used to be portrayed as a veiled and mysterious woman often wearing black or red saree. She would either play the Good Angel or a compassionate

wailer. Sometimes she is even named "Bhagya Devi" (the Goddess of Luck).

10. The Post-independence Scenario:

In a speech, "Jatragaan: Amar Baktabya" *Jatra* musician Mahendra Dutta opines that the first two decades of Twentieth Century saw an upsurge in *Jatra* songs.

Jatra has to be sung the entire night. Naturally, there has to be a lot of songs. Whether they fit (with the theme, pace or emotion), one has to put together songs and sing them. (Das 9)

Each performance would last for approximately 14 hours with 40 actors, 35-40 songs including *Juri* songs, *Rishibalak's gaan*, *Jharudarganer gaan*, *Vivek* and the solo singers. The later decades of the 20th Century saw a lesser number of song narratives and extinction of *Juri* singers that was intrinsic to this rural art form. To create theatrical and climactic affectations, much emphasis was being laid upon dialogues and prose narratives.

Until the beginning of the twentieth century, the written text of a *Jatra* was in song and verse. In actual production, the Adhikari (Stage Manager) introduced prose bits. The actors spoke improvised dialogue. Scenes of humor and the life of the lower strata were in spicy prose. Still music and song dominated. There were easily fifty to sixty songs in a *Jatra*, which started in the afternoon and lasted till sunrise. Among the famous nineteenth-century *Jatrawalas* was Brajamohan Roy, who formed his *Jatra* troupe in 1872 and died four years later at the age of forty-five, leaving behind a number of successful plays, including 'Ramabhishek' ("King Rama's Coronation") ... Today a *Jatra pala*, lasting four hours, consists of action-packed dialogue with only six to eight songs. Still it retains its musical character. People wait for the songs, which in their popularity compete with those from films. Among the people the form retains its name, "jatragaan," which means "musical *jatra*." When a Bengali goes to see a performance, he says that he is going to "listen to" a *Jatra*. The actor who delivers monumental prose speeches says that he is going to "sing a *Jatra*" ... The main play is preceded by preliminaries. The musicians sitting on opposite sides of the *asar* start with a classical evening melody - *shyam kalyan*, *Bihag*, or *poorbi*. This orchestral piece, longer than the one that follows, is the "first concert." After a few minutes the musicians start the "second concert," a light, tripping melody which warns the actors and the audience that the play is about to begin. A quick musical flourish ends the concert, and a group of boys dressed like girls streams in from the gangway and begins to dance. If the actors are still busy making up, the group dance is followed by a solo dance. (Gargi 1)

Such a situation demanded a lesser number of song narratives and annihilation of *Jurigaan* culture. *Jatra* consisted of 40-45 songs and numerous other interspersed instrumental pieces saw a rejection among the mass over time. The songs

somewhat hindered in between the dialogues and started taking a toll upon the patience of the audience.

By the turn of the 1940s, this scenario changed a bit. With the absence of trained singers, the *Jatra* songs became burdening to the *pala* itself. Bholanath Kabyashastri started reducing the overburdened number of songs in *Jatra*. Brajendrakumar De did try to reform the musical tradition by decreasing the number of songs down from 40/50 to 12-13, and the *pala* became of moderate length (3-4 hours). However, he never wished to erase the convention of *Jatragaan* musicality. Instead he put songs to lead to the mobility of the plot or intensify an emotion. For example, in *Bidrohi Nazrul* (1974), he introduced a good number of 13 songs, mostly written Nazrul himself. In *Kalankini Rai* (1972), he introduced 17 songs with mixed genres, eg. *Shyama sangeet*, *Kirtan*, etc. both well-known and self-composed. Unlike the previous custom, the audience could not take a break between the songs anymore.

By 1950s elements in *Jatra* songs came mainly from the Hindusthani Classical genre and Bengali folk—*Tappa*, *Kirtan*, etc. Ragas like *Malkosh*, *Darbari Kanara*, *Shiv Ranjani*, *Sohini*, *Yaman*, *Bhairavi*, etc. were used amply based on the moods of the dramatic situation. Although the songs had to be easy on tune and lyrics. Sequential songs stepped into *Jatra* – *Rabindrasangeet*, *Nazrulgeeti*, *Dwinjendrageeti Atulprasadi* songs adorned the dialogues parallelly along with songs written by the palawrights.

Earlier there had been 40-45 songs in a *pala*. Flute players stood up to showcase their talents in between the dialogues. One can imagine the situation of the actors on stage! In such an *asar* (arena), once Sabitri Satyaban *pala* was being performed. While Sabitri was wailing over her husband's dead body, and *Yama* was pledging her to return, the *Juri* singers entered the stage. After half an hour's singing, Sabitri's emotions were ruined. She exasperated her feeling to *Yama*, "O Dharmaraj! Please leave my husband and take these *Juriwalas* along with you" (Das 12)

Thus, the lyrical *Jatra* found an exit into theatrical *Jatra* over time. The prose narratives became engaging for those audiences who could hardly understand the rhetoric of lyrical narrative. However, the prosaic dialogues were still replaced by songs, only selectively. In this phase, the author/palawright was the lyricist. He would organically weave prose and poetry (song) into a *Jatra* script. Successful palawright/lyricist had been— Brajen De (1907-1976), Bhairab Ganguly (1934-1998), Asit Bandopadhyay (1934-?), Sunil Choudhury (b. 1953) and Nirmal Mukherjee (b. 1942).

In the 1970s, singer-actors came into *Jatra*. The intricate Classical elements in *Jatra* songs that could only be sung by trained artists had to be lowered down into something comfortable and manageable for these new singer-actors. In this phase, *Jatra* became a teamwork where every character had to sing. The music composition was equipped with traditional instruments like Flute, Harmonium, Cornet, Clarinet, Violin, *Tabla*, etc. and newly emergent electronic guitar. A new sect of lyricists joined the *Jatra* world, who were Mahendra Dutta, Tinkari Bhattacharya, and Amiya Bhattacharya are such

Jatragaan adept to these instruments and different music genres. Sunilbaran (1931-?), Samarendra Ghosh, writers who composed hundreds of songs every year for most of the Chitpur *Jatra* groups.

11. Contemporary *Jatragaan*

Following the cinematic trend, new terms floated into *Jatra*, eg. 'the Director', 'Producer' 'Musician' (music director), 'background music', 'musical arrangement', and became significant markers for the *pala* or palawrights. Prominent musicians had been Durga Sen, Panchanan Mitra, Gopal Mallik, Pasupati Bhattacharya, Prasanta Bhattacharya, Raghunath Das, Ramkumar Chattopadhyay. Later film-playback singers like Bhupen Hazarika, Manna De, Manabendra Mukhopadhyay, and Ajay Das adorned the annals of *Jatra* music. Further, directors like Utpal Dutt, Sailesh Guhaneogi, Bhairab Ganguly, Nirmal Mukherjee, Shambhu Bag, Amar Ghosh and later Anal Chakraborty and Utpal Ray brought a sea change in the musical arrangements in *Jatra*.

The traditional instruments that were used in *Jatra* eg., Cornet, Clarinet, Harmonium, Violin, Sitar, Shehnai, Flute, *Tabla*, etc. gave way to electronic instruments like Guitar, Keyboard, Saxophone, Octo-pad, Jazz sets and Congo. By the 1980s the songs grew even more spasmodic. One of the many reasons could be the emergence of transistor radios and Television in Bengali households. Social operas and Cinematic adaptations demanded an unconventional concert that could prelude and interlude in between the performance. These instruments somewhat successfully combine the Western metronyms with Indian Classics to emanate the mood or *Rasa* in *pala*. Notable musicians in this transit had been Prashanta Bhattacharya, Raghunath Das, Sunilbaran, Samarendra Ghosh, Ujjal Biswas and Swapan Pakrashi who kept the original compositions in *Jatra* till the 1990s and early Twenty-first Century.

There have been critical reasons for a rapid downfall to *Jatra's* popularity in the post-2000 era. Firstly, the advent of *Samajik* (social) *pala* saw a necessity to build a gap between the common men and the men playing "the common men". Secondly, popularity and stardom also added wind to it. The essence of traditional *Jatra* lost its way to immediate success and monetary benefits. Thirdly, the remaking of hit cinemas in *Jatra* further distanced the audience from the actors and themes. Fourthly, the encroachment of technology and recorded music caused a total abasement to the actor-audience connection. The live musicians in concerts would interact with the audience with zeal and performance. Too much dependence on technology has shattered the faith and solidarity among the audience, eventually proving to be the last bolt to its grave.

[Acknowledgement: This research paper is part of a Post-Doctoral Project funded by ICSSR, New Delhi.]

References

- [1]. Bhattacharya, Hansanarayan. *Jatragane Motilal Roy O Tnahar Sampraday*. Suprakash, 2018.
- [2]. Das, Pravat Kumar. compiled and edited. *Bangla Jatrapalar Gan*. Sahitya Academy, 2014.
- [3]. Dutt, Bishnupriya & Urmimala Sarkar Munsu. *Engendering Performance: Indian Women Performers in Search of an Identity*, SAGE Publishing India, 2010.
- [4]. Gargi, Balwant. "Jatra: Folk Theatre of Bengal" <http://www.yakshagana.com/re-apr02-1.htm>, Accessed 14 Jan 2019.
- [5]. Paschimbanga Jatra Academy. *Yatra Akademi Patrika*, Vol. 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7
- [6]. Pathak, Amarnath. *Bisoi: Yatra Theatre*. Kolkata: Anyay, 2016.

The star cast productions, economic inflation, competitive market and new *Jatra* industry have gradually strangled the innate musical tradition in *Jatra*. *Jatra* now relies more over ready-made compositions in Hindi, Bengali or Filmy music while losing originality. Moreover, original composition has to pass through the Director, lyricist, musician, singer-actor and instrumentalists to be arranged, which is a complicated process. Sometimes, the untrained singer-actors fail to do justice even to well-known compositions. Thus, the audience loses interest in the entire singing performance, since they have hardly anything to cater to the contemporary World.

12. Conclusion

In reference to this discussion on the musical journey of *Jatra*, it is pertinent to understand the present condition of Bengali music at large. Original musical compositions in contemporary Bengal, have rarely found popularity on any medium among today's audience. This idea can be supplemented by the current 'reality shows' on Television, where the Talent Hunt participants linger more on Hindi songs rather than new Bengali compositions. A pan-Indian urban culture can be witnessed in today's *Jatra*. Hence, to summarize, it can be said that,

1. *Jatra* is an interactive 'living art'. The audience reaction and rejection can both be identified during the performance. Hence, *Jatra* needs to accommodate popular taste.
2. Songs that were once integral to *Jatra* have catered to different needs in different times—nationalist upheaval, communal harmony, comic relief, and intensifying emotions.
3. The 1990s saw a trend of playback (pre-recorded) singing in *Jatra* which duly ended in rejection among the mass; live music, songs and dance performance are still its integral part.
4. Popular Bengali/Hindi songs are sung in contemporary *Jatra* so that the audience can identify and connect to the live performance. Sometimes, they are even accompanied by actor-dancers or trained ballet troupes.
5. Not many instruments are used in present-day *Jatra*, except the Octo-pad and Keyboard.
6. Two long orchestra/concert tracks (for 10-15 mins) are played at the prelude and interlude of a *Jatra* performance. These are time-markers for the audience, first to gather and the second, for a recess.