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Re-Visiting The Theatrical Performances Of Bengal: An Evolution From The Folk Traditions To Contemporary Practices

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ABSTRACT: Bengali folk traditions can be rightly called the precursors of modern Bengali theatre. The very idea of 'performance' in the public domain arises from ancient practices of community participation in religious or ritualistic activities. This is how the concept of modern theatre in Bengal steadily evolved with time from a more religious bent to a secular one. This paper attempts to examine Bengali rural/folk traditions of performance as seeds of contemporary theatre in roughly three ways: first, by peeping into the religious traditions of the rural people of Bengal; second, by connecting these ritualistic strands together to see how they gave way to the advent of dramatic traditions and finally by making comparisons with the English theatre traditions to find similarities between the two theatrical cultures as well as understanding the influence of the British in bringing about modernization in Bengali Theatre.

Keywords: Traditional Bengali theatre, Bengali folk traditions and performances, Ritualistic practices, Community life, British influences, Religious traditions, Palagan, Geetikabya, Panchali, Jatragan, Modern Bengali Theatre

Theatrical practices of ancient Bengal have their origins deeply embedded in the folk traditions of rural Bengal, which later developed into a much concrete and recognized source of entertainment. In ancient times, drama basically referred to performances mostly in the form of songs, poetry, expression, and dances. The performers recited passages or delivered dialogues straight from memory, so they did not require any written script. As a result, no written texts were available for

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such performances. Usually all the elements mentioned above were put together in a single performance which then took a dramatic shape. It is interesting to note here that in later times when the plays were written down, not much could be preserved due to several reasons and therefore what remains is very little that could be gathered. It has been found out that the writer who wrote the script did not share his copy with anyone in the group. He instead would recite the whole script to the rest of the group members. Since there was no concept of copyright or playwright, writers found it necessary to keep their scripts secure in their own ways. However, even after careful handling, much matter was lost and very little could be retrieved. The script, after the death of the writer, was handed over to his successor but mis-handling was common and so most of the times the copy was destroyed.

The present evidences and status of Bengali theatre give way to its past, its origins and development. Also, as much of the tradition is lost, many gaps have been created leading to broken links between past and present. Some of the fillings had to be guessed while some others have been fed by drawing parallels between the origins of European drama and Bengali drama as the former provides important strands to the history of the development of Bengali theatre since there exists many similar traditions in both the cases. The roots of Bengali drama could be derived from a series of historical, religious, social and literary events that took place independently at different stages but gradually got associated with dramatic performances:

- The origins of Bengali drama, like in most other cases, go back to the activities associated with ritualistic practices of the local people. To be precise, ancient Bengali theatre evolved from "Shivotsav" and related festivities prevalent in ancient times like "Gambhira", "Gajanotsav" of

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Chadak, "Bhairav Jatra" and "Matsyendranath Jatra" of Nepal, and "Bhairav" and "Ganpati" puja of South India.

- "Palagan" contributed to the making of dramatic performances.
- The poetry and presentation of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, where acting references are found in abundance.
- The Sanskrit plays or Bhakti plays which were written in Bengal.
- Bengali dramatic texts of the middle ages collected from Nepal.
- The "Jatra" performances of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.
- Ancient poems, songs and recitations, though mostly broken and lost.
- Bengali plays adapted from the Sanskrit originals like "Chandi" plays of Bharatchandra, "Chitrayagna" by Vidyanath Bachaspati and others.

Starting with the ritualistic activities associated with the worship of gods, one can find striking similarities between the practices involved in the worship of Dionysius in Greece and that of Lord Shiva in Bengal. The worship of Dionysius, his marriage, his procession, the satyrs (half-man, half-goat) present in the procession bear resemblance with the worship of Lord Shiva, his worship, marriage ceremony, and the presence of 'kinnars' (half-man, half-horse). Just as in case of the English 'mystery' plays which revolved around Christ and his life events, and even the ancient Greek plays which, in their initial stages, boasted of Gods and their ways, theatrical performances in Bengal too, in the very beginning, were based on the numerous exploits of Gods. This is how "Palagan" came into being, which composed of expressions and songs celebrating God's exploits.

The performers played the roles of characters involved in a particular scene and often wore masks of the characters they enacted. "Palagan" initially consisted of only songs; gradually poetry and

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other verses were incorporated into it. As the portions of verse increased, conversations were further added and slowly drama emerged from them. Like the 'mysteries', "Palagan" too started as praising songs of God and then like the 'moralities', it later included the lives of common men.

In Bengal, the earliest evidence of "Palagan" couldn't be found; the only one that could be retrieved was *Shunyapuran* written by Ramai Pandit (b. end of tenth century, Dharmapal II era). Buddhism at this time was at its peak. The Buddhist God 'Dharmathakur' was now worshipped by people in place of Shiva and 'Shivotsav' was replaced by 'Gambhira' or 'Gajan' of 'Dharmathakur'. There was no change in the season or time of worship, it remained same as 'Shivotsav'. 'Dharmathakur' was worshipped the same way as Lord Shiva and the worshippers appeased and praised Him to fulfil their wishes. In *Shunyapuran*, Lord Shiva is portrayed as a great follower of 'Dharmathakur' and so while worshippingShiva's idol was also kept alongside 'Dharmathakur'. Similarly, during the Vaishnav era, Shiva became a great Vaishnava; He was also the God of farmers, He was a seen as a farmer in *Shunyapuran*.

The content of "Palagan" keeps changing with time, excessive handling and editing by scholars have affected their originality in some way or the other.One such example would be that of the *Suryamangal Gaan* which sings of the Sun God. It was handled many times which made it more descriptive with dialogues and multiple plots. The song of this "Palagan" describes the Sun's journey on boat, his marriage with 'Gauri' and their way back on boat. During the entire journey, Sun's prolonged conversation with Gauri who seems very depressed brings out the dramatic elements contained in the song. With dramatic elements originating from such ancient verses, the range of stories became wider which was now not only confined to the praises of Gods but even included and made references to events from the lives of common people. The *SuryamangalGeeti*

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was sung in praise of the Gods, it boasted of the exploits of Gods and Goddesses. However, in reality, under the guise of glorifying Gods it sketches the story of the existing society and the lives of the people, especially farmers, living in it. People, as a result, could easily relate themselves to such performances and this is how drama began to portray real life gradually.

More such compositions, locally called 'palligeeti', were there but several of them are now lost. The famous *Mangalkabya* is made from some of these 'palligeeti' and is labelled as "Geetikabya". *Mangalkabya* is filled with dramatic characters and incidents, mostly relating stories of divine intervention in the lives of common folks during a time of utter upheaval. Some of the very well-known stories include *Chand Saudagar, Behula, Kalketu* and others. There is also mention of *Shibayan Kabya*, another "Geetikabya", which hails Shiva as God. It has a scholarly touch though as it's derived from Sanskrit and other important scholarly sources.

Overall, "Geetikabya" comprises stories of farmers and exploits of Gods collected from several sources. Most of these stories are full of action and animation, they contain dialogues and several plots too. This way they can be taken as precursors of Bengali drama. These compositions appealed to the mass chiefly because the stories had Gods as important characters and anything divine hada very significant impact on the minds ofhigh-class Hindus. This fact becomes clearer in the following instance. The Muslim writers who came up in the middle ages also wrote many "Palagan" and "Geetikabya" on romantic love stories but with no mention of God (Hindu Gods) or anything divine in them, especially those of Daulat Kaji and Alwal in the seventeenth century which hardly glorifies the Hindu ideology of god worship. As a result, these compositions did not appeal to the high-class Hindu mass possibly because they did not make any mention of Brahmans or God's divine powers and also because they mainly sung of love and lives of the lower-class people.

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Hence, while religious drama made its way very easily among the people, there was hardly any development in romantic or family drama in Bengali at the time.

Most of the times, portions from the epics (the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*), *Mangalkabya*, "Palagan" and other such sacred compositions were sung as stories to the listeners, and were popularly known as "Panchali". In its original sense and earlier practice, "Panchali" had five parts namely,

- 'Pa-chali', i.e. song sung during walking or moving from one place to another.
- 'Bhab-kali', i.e. expressions using songs and rhythm.
- 'Nachadi'. i.e. rhymes or songs in rhythm while dancing.
- 'Baithaki', i.e. sitting and singing higher "raag"/"ragini".
- 'Danra-kabi', i.e. group song in standing posture.

The smaller verses could be sung and performed by a single person while in case of longer verses, all these parts could not be performed solely by the chief singer. Hence, slowly, each of these portions was assigned to separate performers, except 'Bhabkali', the most important part, which was performed by the lead singer himself and not assigned to anyone else.

Here again we find good similarity with ancient Greek and Middle English drama. In the beginning in Greek drama, plays contained only one actor, which was later altered by writers like Aeschylus and Sophocles who started increasing the number of actors according to the duration of the plays as well as the number of characters included and their individual development. Even in English plays of the Middle Ages, the number of actors changed from one or two churchmen to bigger numbers of

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common men as plays began to shift from inside the premises of the church to outside the church building due to a significant rise in the number of viewers.

In Bengali drama too, the shift from "Palagan" to "Jatragan" took place somewhat in the same way. The complete recitation in a "Palagan" was itself extremely tiring and moreover it consisted of more than one character, so it was easier if they carried out the recitation with more actors. Gradually the number of actors increased from one to many according to the requirements of the performance. This way "Palagan" changed to "Jatragan". Much later with the flow of time, "Jatragan" took the shape of present-day drama when, in order to please the audience, more stories, conversations and acting were also incorporated into the verses. Some of the early Bengali plays collected from Nepal testify to this fact because the early scripts found show more of songs and verses and very little prose content in them. The prose portion was not written down as they could be easily memorised and remembered. Later on, with the increase in prose content, the plays had more portions of prose than songs and so had to be memorised properly before deliverance, hence writing of scripts emerged.

An interesting feature in such compositions was even when they were infused with heavy prose passages, they were never actually devoid of songs. This was especially due to the fact that the Bengali mass was very fond of music and the public demand for music always kept the practice alive in almost all forms of performative arts. This was, however, not the case in early English plays (the mysteries and the miracles). But again, another similarity can be drawn between the two cultures with respect to drama. The comic scenes and characters in the Middle English plays also had their counterparts in Bengali "Jatrapala", which include some recurring characters like 'Kansa', 'Jotila', 'Kutila', 'Hanuman' and others. The festive dramas like "Gambhira" and others were often interspersed with comic scenes wherein the comic characters used to play several tricks to entertain

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the audience and break the monotony of the original plot. Apart from that, these scenes also served as important commentaries on the prevalent social situation.

Coming to the idea of building up stage to present performances, the scenario in Bengal was quite different from that of other places. In ancient European societies, especially in Greece and Rome, common people had the privilege to sit and watch performances because the government would arrange for special places like 'amphitheatre' (Rome) where people could gather and watch plays or other performances. Activities during festivals were also arranged at large for the public which required venues, also taken care of by the government. Quite contrary to the European picture, Bengal hardly had any such idea of building a concrete stage for carrying out shows for the public.

Bengal mostly consisted of villages brought together under the supervision of an administrator. The rural people had nothing to do with the administration and even the head was not accessible to the commoners except at times for collecting taxes. The festivals and activities associated with the villages were mostly celebrated by individual groups/communities and not arranged by the ruler or the governing body. Hence, no particular venue was built for carrying out performances, they could take place anywhere in open spaces. The absence of stage, however, did not cause any in convenience for the viewers as no distinction was made among the audience. Anyone willing to watch the performances could do so without any hesitation. "Jatra", therefore, had no fixed stage for performance.

With time, as the number of actors increased, more space was required for enactment of scenes. Soon problems cropped regarding the sitting arrangement of the audience who, by this time, thronged the shows in large numbers. All this taken together demanded requirement of a concrete

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stage. In "Jatra", the area for enactment and audience was the same, which means the audience used to sit and stand right around the acting space. The farthest area occupied by the audience was a good distance away from the acting space, due to which dialogues were almost inaudible to the audience, whereas music and dance were comparatively audible and vibrant. This is the reason why "Jatra" had more of songs and dance movements than conversations, which made it a loud and attractive dramatic form enjoyed immensely by village folks. Singers performed in groups who walked around and sang together, acting in between by strolling up and down the performing area. Dialogues, though little in content, were spoken in high pitch so that they could be heard clearly by the audience.

After the coming of the British and the introduction of formal education along with the building of cities like Calcutta and the rise of the educated middle class, "Jatra" somehow lost its rural charm and was looked down upon as low art by many. Though a lot has changed over time, "Jatra" has survived the onslaughts of time amidst the development of modern theatre by bringing about alterations in its presentation and continues to retain its position in the world of contemporary theatre as a significant form of extant folk drama.

Bengali drama evolved from the traditional folk practices and performances representative of the rural communities of Bengal. In its early stages, theatrical performances were not identified as separate sources of entertainment, and hence did not have any modernist setting or audience. Instead, these performances were largely the cultural manifestations of community life rich in functional values, carried out occasionally in groups for a healthy and blissful social existence. Being a part of the religious festivities within communities, these practices were often ritualistic in nature wherein individuals formed 'groups', participated in processions and indulged in dance, songs, dialogues and worship. What began as a religious and collective community effort slowly

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paved the way for modern Bengali theatre. Much like the English drama itself that, with time, gave up on the religious flavours to suit the demands of a more contemporary audience, Bengali drama too, after the coming of the British, turned more secular in nature as it gradually shifted from the interiors of community life into the more spacious terrains of modern human life.

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