



Рана МД Масуд, Аспирант,
«Российского государственного университета
им. А. Н. Косыгина», г. Москва
Rana MD Masud, Graduate student,
Russian State University named after A. N. Kosygin

Казакова Наталья Юрьевна, Д. иск., Проф.
Заведующая кафедры Системного Дизайна ФГБОУ ВО «Российского
государственного университета им. А. Н. Косыгина», г. Москва

A STUDY ON UNIQUE DESIGN ASPECTS OF TRADITIONAL BANGLADESHI THEATRICAL PERFORMANCE “JATRA”

Abstract. The south Asian largely populated not so big country Bangladesh has been an origin space of many traditional cultural artistic and aesthetic performances. Since the history of the indigenous performances in this land has been running from thousands of years but most of them has been vanished completely in the flow of modern social changes. But some indigenous theatrical performances managed to exist by adopting the changes and still holding the mass popularity and relevance of its existence. Jatra is one of the significant among all.

Keywords: Theater, Jatra, Bangladesh, Stage, Traditional, Performance.

Introduction

The word Jatra comes from the root ‘ya’ that means ‘to go’. Therefore, Jatra means, in the first place – ‘a going’, ‘a departing’. For example, ‘Usha-jatra’ means leaving home at the earliest dawn; ‘maha-jatra’ means the great departure i.e., death. Secondly, Jatra means a march, procession. For example, ‘Dola-jatra’, ‘Jonmashtami-jatra’, and ‘Rasa-jatra’. These three are religious processions in connection with the



history of the popular god Krisna. These processions take place three times every year, in spring, rainy season, and autumn. Thirdly, Jatra means a species of popular dramatical representation.

Jatra performances in contemporary Bangladesh

As a whole, widely known and hugely popular Jatra is an entirely secular performance genre of Bangladesh. The Jatra performance is a valuable resource of the folk-culture of Bangladesh for a long. At present, Jatra has started getting official patronization. In the context of development and the manifestation of culture, the Ministry of Culture of the Government of Bangladesh has published 'Jatra art development policies 2012' in the form of a gazette to develop, prevent decay, create and expand the artistic environment and incorporate this genre in contemporary art and culture. Bangladesh Art Academy has taken a role in the development of Jatra Art and all concerned persons. The academy organizes annual Jatra festivals, training workshops for Jatra performers, arranging seminars and symposiums, taking initiatives to connect various scholars related to culture with Jatra companies from across the country, and at the same time awarding Jatra performers for their significant contribution.

Formation of a jatra troupe

Jatra performances are held mainly in the dry season. The performance season of the professional Jatra troupe usually begins with Дурга-пуджа or Кали-пуджа and ends in the mid-April. Generally, people from both the Muslim and the Hindu communities can be members of the Jatra troupe and spectators from all communities can enjoy the Jatra performances. Entirely professional and itinerant Jatra troupes mainly perform Jatra performances. A professional Jatra troupe travels to various remote villages or small towns to perform. Customarily, a local sponsor group, known as the 'Наяк Парти, which organizes the Jatra performances commercially, invites the Jatra troupe to perform usually six to twelve nights. They pay more or less



BDT 5,000 to BDT 10,000 per night guaranteed fee for the Jatra troupe and admit spectators on sale of tickets. In all these performances, the spectators have to pay the entrance fee and enjoy the Jatra. Occasionally, the organizing committee of the Puja festival raises funds to sponsor shows by professional troupes. In this case, spectators do not have to pay any entrance fee. In some cases, a famous actor or actress owns a Jatra troupe. In that case, he/she may be the director as well as the actor/actress. A manager assists the owner. His job is to talk to the potential performers before the rehearsal period and arrange a tour. A director, about 16 actors and 4/5 actresses are in a Jatra troupe. Under the leadership of the "harmonium master", there are 7 to 10 musicians who usually play the clarinet, the cornet, the trumpet, the violin, the 'dhol-khol', the baya tabla, the congo drums and the 'Mandira'. In the performances, 'harmonium master' plays harmonium and conducts music. His other job is to rehearse the vocal music of actors and actresses. Under the leadership of a male 'dance master', there are 8 to 10 female dancers-cum-singers trained in dance. He also performs comic dance numbers in the performances. A prompter and about three stagehands also belong to a Jatra troupe. The three stagehand's duties are to act in supernumerary roles, cooking for all members of the troupe and carrying out odd jobs are among the various responsibilities. Jatra troupe usually have almost nine-month (mid-July to mid-April) contracts with performers. The first three months of this agreement and the first few days of the month of Kartika in the Bengali calendar are spent on organizing and rehearsing. For the rest of the months, the Jatra troupes travel to different villages and towns to perform the Jatra.

Apart from professionals, various amateur groups also perform Jatra. In most cases, people from the Hindu community in villages perform Jatra for various puja festivals. In some cases, people from the Muslim community also perform Jatra in unspecified evenings during the dry season. Enthusiastic individuals of the village funded this amateur Jatra performance. Amateurs hire musicians and female actresses for the show. Except for the hired performers, no one takes money in these shows. In most cases, spectators do not have to pay for a ticket for the performance of amateurs.



The roofing usually of corrugated iron sheets with a canopy hung under the corrugated sheets. Electric lamps or "Petromax" lanterns usually suspending on horizontal poles tied to vertical corner poles. Spectators sit on all four sides around the performance space or three sides (leaving the ramp side free), quite often, with a separate section reserved for female spectators. The seating options range from chairs for the more expensive ones and hay-strewn ground for the low-cost ticket holders. A temporary boundary wall enclosed the entire auditorium area (some 120 feet to 180 feet on a side) for performances held by ticket sales. Some form of awning has provided for covering the entire auditorium area.

Design Elements

Three elements of performance are engaged in composing the main body of a Jatra performance. These are as follows: dialogic performance in prose, dialogic performance in lyric and song-and-dance numbers. A considerable part of a Jatra text is the prose dialogue of the characters. Thus, 'dialogic performance in prose' is the performance using prose dialogues only. The style of performance is dynamic and very charged. But keep in mind that performing by unskilled and inexperienced actors, the practice can be seemed melodramatic. Performers use a lot of movement during their performances so that the surrounding spectators can see their faces. 'The delivery of dialogue is powerful, often tending to be rhetorical with the less experienced' says Syed Jamil Ahmed. In some emotionally charged moments of the script, the performers sing some of the characters' dialogues - this is the 'dialogic performance in lyric'. This time the performers do not use any dance movement, but they move according to the song's rhythm. Uncommon to the above, in some of the court scenes, specific dance movements in song-and-dance numbers to be performed by the danseuse. Female dancers perform isolated 'song-and-dance numbers' before the main body of the performance begins and at intervals between two acts. In some cases, comic characters Shan serve comical song-and-dance numbers. These 'highly sensuous' dance numbers are often lead Jatra performances accused to be 'vulgar' and 'immoral'.



Performance Conventions

There are some definite and peremptory activities before a Jatra performance begins. Usually, a Jatra performance begins around eleven in the evening. About two hours before the Jatra performance begins, a bell rings to warn everyone, including the performers. The musical instruments are placed on the performance spaces designated for the musicians while the first bell rings. All the members assemble in the greenroom for singing a prayer immediately after the bell. After the prayer, the performers begin to put on make-up and costumes. The second bell rings after about an hour from the first bell. The musicians begin to play the slow-paced 'opening concert'. It continues for half an hour to three-quarters of an hour and signals the spectators that the show is about to begin so that they gradually assemble in the auditorium. The tune of the 'opening concert' is the signature piece of all Jatra performances. The musicians take a break for about fifteen minutes, and then the third bell rings. Thereafter, a fast-paced 'concert' commences for a brief period. Immediately after the 'concert', a group of female choral singers shouts slogans from the greenroom that Bangladesh Zindabad. They stand in rows in the performance space to sing a patriotic song. This patriotic choral song was a post-1947 feature of Jatra performances in East Pakistan and replaced the earlier tradition of Hindu devotional songs of paying homage to Goddess Durga. The choral singers' exit and an hour-long 'variety show' begins incorporating song-and-dance numbers and brief comic interludes. The 'variety show' ends at near about midnight. The fourth and final bell rings. It indicates the proper beginning of the performance. The musicians play a fast-paced 'appear concert' for about three to five minutes. As soon as the concert is over, a unique Jatra performance normally of five acts and a length of four hours commences through the performers' dialogues. After each act or several scenes, the prompter rings a bell to signal the end. An interlude of song-and-dance numbers and/or farce are performed. Sometimes before the last scene, the 'Adhikari' or an actor announces the script's name to be performed the next night. Thus, the performance ends by day-break.



Performance Character Design

A Jatra performance is performed based on dramatic written text. The texts may be structured in acts or by scenes, composed mainly in prose and interspersed with a few lyrical passages. As we have already mentioned, derived from European dramaturgy, the fast-moving and eventful texts are structured on Gustav Freytag's widely known 'pyramid' of exposition-inciting incident-rising action-climax-falling action-resolution (and there are also some variations). Regarding content, scholars categorized the texts into three heads: Social, Historical, and Mythological. The Social texts derive the characters and the events from contemporary society and the conflict on issues that arise from values, principles, and ideals of family and social life, such as *Екти Пайша (Одна Копейка)*, *Ма Мати Мануш (Мама Земля Люди)*, *Шиндур Нийона Муче*, *Шонадангар Боу (Жена Шонаданги)*. In Historical texts, characters and events are from history. To project heroism, patriotism, nationalism, and communal harmony (especially of the Hindus and the Muslims), the historical characters and events are amalgamated with fictional nature in these texts. Such as *Тадж-Махал*, *Бейман Бидхата*, *Биджай Нишан*. Mythology and religious legends are the sources for the characters and the events used in the Mythological texts. In these texts, the characters and events project divine glory and seek to inspire devotional passion. Such as *Нимай Шанняяши*, *Рабан Бадх*, *Вашан Джатра*. Apart from these, The Biographical Texts and The Texts of Imaginary Tales are two other kinds of a few texts. The Biographical Texts include the biographies of important people of the recent past, such as Hitler, Napoleon, Lenin, Ho Chi Minh, and Madhusudan. The Texts of Imaginary Tales include the characters from the royalty and the peasantry and depict contemporary social problems, such as *Ракта Дие Кинлам (Приобретено Кровью – Acquired by Blood)*, *Джатра Холо Шуру (Путешествие началось – The Journey Has Begun)*, *Матир Прадип (Глиняная Лампа – The Clay Lamp, Лампа, Сделанная из Земли -A Lamp, Made of Soil)*, and *Ке Каде (Кто Плачет)*. Of all the five categories described above, the Social Texts are the most popular among contemporary spectators.



Conclusion

Jatra Pala's performances often address social and political issues. It addresses gender inequality, caste prejudice, corruption, and poverty. Jatra Pala's sarcasm, comedy, and drama may spark audience conversation, societal reflection, and even change. commonly shows historical and religious events. It spreads knowledge, morality, and ethics. Jatra Pala performances teach morals, culture, and social standards to children and adults. Jatra Pala has employed many artists, musicians, and technicians. It provides jobs, especially in rural regions where Jatra Pala is popular. Costume designers, scene builders, and instrument manufacturers also benefit from performances. Jatra Pala's influence on gender roles has been varied. It has allowed female artists to engage and display their ability, breaking gender preconceptions. However, Jatra Pala has sometimes portrayed women in traditional and objectifying ways, influencing gender relations and supporting patriarchal norms. Jatra Pala's services to society include entertainment, cultural preservation, social criticism, and economic growth. It has had many beneficial effects, but gender representation has to be addressed to make it more inclusive and progressive.

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