Understanding the Performance Space of Jatra

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Abstract

The paper explains and analyses the concept of performance space in the context of Jatra. It tries to observe the performance pattern of Jatra in Bengal, which went through a transitional phase considering Bengal's colonial past. In the process, the paper tries to bridge a theoretical gap found in the performance tradition of Jatra in Bengal. The theorisation of such an indigenous performance tradition brings it into the limelight, where the discursive idea of research in practice finds its due importance in the contemporary scenario of performance. It establishes Jatra as a performative tradition which stands as an independent body of performance with its own tradition and transitional phases. It nuances on the concept of subconscious colonialism which had affected the form and structure of this living performative art form of Bengal.

Keywords: Jatra, performance space, ritual, theatre, proscenium

Introduction

Jatra, which was performed all over Bengal, had two kinds if the post-independence period of Jatra phase is considered; one that originated in cities and the other that was rooted in a specific locality. The subject matter was supposed to be conveyed through well-known songs and ballads with the element of drama in it. The popular enactment of Jatra consisted of the tales which ranged from love and tragedy to the ones which concerned the realm of social and ethical. Jatra had many names to it depending on the region in which it is played. It is to be noted that indigenous Jatra performances were very common in the provinces of Bengal. For instance, 'Palatia Jatra' that was well known for its presentation of traditional fairy tales and moral stories was specific to Jalpaiguri and Cooch Bihar, the northern part of Bengal. This specific enactment was different from the mainstream Jatra performances which was usually concerned with historical or mythological themes. Similarly, in Birbhum and Burdwan, 'Letor Pala' was popular, in which the songs during the enactment never changed; however, the dialogue was constantly improvised by the actors. In regions like Dinhata, Matalha, Balarampur, Bhogramguri, and other regions of Bihar district, 'Kushan Jatra' was very popular, in which the songs were grounded in the region which was accompanied by traditional musical instruments[1]. It is significant to note that people like Utpal Dutt and other dramatists who had accommodated Jatra traditions in their writings were not following the typical traditional ethnic folk plays but were trying to make a fusion of the indigenous Jatra with more refined and complex urban dramas and those had been produced by the proficient Jatra companies based in Calcutta. The first Jatra play that was produced in the city was on the proscenium stage, of course, without the settings required in the urban plays like curtain and wings. Here, the musicians took their places on both sides of the platform, and the actors would be louder than in the other plays, and this structure is still prevalent in the urban space of Jatra performance. The duration of the modern Jatra plays has been significantly reduced to three hours or less. It is to observe that in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, the supposed obscenity and vulgarity had led to a decrease in the number of people watching it—especially the middle-

class Bhadralok (gentleman). As a result, the patronage which Jatra got from this class was lost. This was not different in the cities where the elite sponsored Jatra performances in their private spaces, like courtyards, to segregate themselves from the lower classes. This led the educated Bengalis to dissociate themselves from the fusion of folk cultural heritage and urban expressions. The lack of refinement in the expressions of Jatra performances led the people to criticize the modern fusion experiment or the theatrical form of Jatra. Gradually, the places of the performances became the target sites of attack, considering it as a sub-standard performative form in comparison to the urban proscenium setting of western theatre in Bengal.

Jatra: A Living Performative Art Form of Bengal

Bengal has practiced Jatra as its main performative tradition for numerous centuries. Jatra as a ritual performance represents the act of moving forward in a ceremonial procession. The first performances of Jatra exist without any historical documentation. Traditional Bengali culture includes Jatra as an established practice throughout Bengal's historical development. Jatra was popularized in the fifteenth century when the Bhakti movement had spread throughout Bengal. During the Bhakti movement, this performative tradition of Jatra evolved into a form which presented stories of divinity and mostly emphasized on the spiritual connection of the devotee's life through intense dramatic performances. The musical performances in Jatra style featured group singing and gong rhythms, which created a trance-like state among both the performers and audience members. At this stage, Jatra was a kind of ritual and emphasized more on the efficacy of the performance than the entertainment factor. But efficacy and entertainment exist on different ends of the same spectrum; they are the poles of a continuum[2]. In this context of Jatra as a ritual, the performer for example Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, during Rath Jatra (Rath Yatra), was said to be possessed, in a trance but in the later phases of Jatra performances when a performer enacted Chaitanya Mahaprabhu as a mode of entertainment or a performing art, in another performance space, the performer would be aware of his self; he would be in control of his senses as an actor[3].

A performance receives its classification as either ritual or theatre based on how it functions within its specific context. A performance receives its name based on its performance space, method of execution, receptivity of the audience, environment of the performance space, and its intended use. The primary factor that decides whether a performance functions as a ritual or not is its purpose[4]. The performance achieves its purpose through the qualities of efficacy which include the performer becoming a link to transcendent others (in case of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu during Rath Jatra, his followers), the timeless time of the eternal present, the trance effect with the transformation of self, the physical and mental participation of audience, the faith of the audience without criticism and the collective creativity makes the performance a ritual. The performance serves its main purpose to entertain and display beauty and provide enjoyment, and pass time. This performance functions as entertainment. The entertainment elements in these performances exist in different shades because street plays and political theatres display some ritualistic qualities through audience engagement, yet they remain non-ritual performances. Therefore, all performances contain elements of both efficacy and entertainment. Considering Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's Jatra from a performer's perspective reveals that the ritual nature of Jatra transforms the performer, while the entertainment aspect of Jatra allows the performer to escape his daily reality through preparation and warm-up activities before performing. After performing, he cools down and re-enters the ordinary life. He has been transported—taken somewhere—not transformed or permanently changed. Jatra as a traditional rural Bengali entertainment form experienced multiple shifts in its evolution during its historical

development. During the sixteenth through eighteenth century, people enjoyed various forms of dramatic singing and expressive acting, which included Jhumur (duet songs with dance and dialogue) and Panchali (solo actor-singer performance) and Kathakata (one actor telling religious stories) and Kirtan (devotional singing), and Kabigan (recitation). The various performing arts were incorporated in the Jatra form. Traditional stories based on mythologies and divine life evolved into new themes that focus on human emotions and social problems. During the beginning of the nineteenth century, Jatra underwent transformations that affected both its content and artistic style. Jatra introduced themes about love which entailed erotic stories and historical romances as well as mythological heroes, saints, legendary robbers, and social reformers.

During the Indian independence movement, the playwrights began to infuse political elements into their stage productions. The political dimension of Jatra was popularly discovered by Mukunda Das during the 1930s. Jatra became his new theatrical structure when he understood that dramatic storytelling did not always need to draw from epics or puranas. Through Jatra's structure, Das used its operating conventions alongside melodramatic gestures and hypnotic songs to spread nationalistic messages to villagers. The Jatra structure showed sufficient adaptability to integrate modern themes and present-day linguistic elements. Jatra emerged from the religious environment dominated by various dictates of the Bhakti movement and evolved into a morally didactic content before becoming secular when it was conceived as a parallel to the urban proscenium theaters during the Bengal Renaissance[5]. The form survived numerous social changes throughout two centuries because of its ability to change and respond to societal transformations while maintaining its identity. The form survived this extensive period of social transformation because it showed flexibility and social adaptability, which made it both vital and successful. The twentieth century brought about a complete transformation of Jatra, both in terms of its structure and its content, as the medium adopted strong political and ideological characteristics. Jatra shifted from rural Bengal to urban areas, which led to structural changes in the format, and the performance duration expanded to two or three hours. The performance received a theatrical makeover, which removed its exaggerated features to achieve a theatrical appearance[6]. However, Jatra remains the medium of masses entrainment till date.

Jatra: Form and Structure

Jatra transitioned from being a sacred ritual to an entertainment format through its evolution into a theatrical artistic practice, which went through a transformative period that can be theorized as a liminal phase[7]. The two main accomplishments of a ritual during its liminal phase include an aspect that involves putting participants into a state of absolute nothingness that makes them highly receptive to change. At this juncture, performers lose their social identities and positions when they move into a transitional zone that separates them from their previous selves before reshaping themselves into new social identities. They remain powerless and without any recognizable identity during this moment of transitional period. During the liminal phase, performers receive their new identities and gain access to their freshly acquired powers. The ritual of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's Jatra underwent modifications throughout numerous centuries. The musicals and dancing and singing elements of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's Jatra remained constant while its performative style underwent modifications throughout the centuries. The ritual which once transformed the performer into a different person evolved into a performative art form requiring the performer to be transported into the performance area. The transitional phase of Jatra functions as its liminal stage. Victor Turner observed that traditional cultures operate differently than modern cultures. The arts and

entertainment and recreational activities took over the functions of ritual after industrialization introduced labor division. Turner defined the term 'liminoid' to describe symbolic actions that resembled rituals in leisure activities. The liminoid phase encompasses the arts and popular entertainment aspects that the transformation phase of rituals includes. People engage in liminoid activities by choice, whereas liminal rites demand compulsory participation. Jatra transitioned from its original liminal rite status into a ritual-like symbolic action which occurred in leisure activities within this framework.

Rituals consist of both structural elements and functional aspects as well as powerful life-changing experiences. The demands of everyday life no longer bind individuals who experience the liminal state. During this state, they unite with their companions as social and individual distinctions disappear. People are uplifted, swept away, taken over. Turner defined the process of breaking free from regular existence as 'anti-structure' and described ritual bonding as 'communitas'[8]. During the procession, followers of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu formed a communitas that eliminated all social differences while creating a non-rational egalitarian group. The transformation of the performance space of Jatra across the centuries led to the liminoid transformation of the same performance. Jatra evolved from a liminal rite into a liminoid form because it underwent a transition that transformed it into a performing art. Political ideologies were introduced to Jatra through the efforts of Mukunda Das during India's struggle for freedom, which added political content to the performance. Jatra performance spaces evolved as society required different approaches to address its needs throughout history.

Addressing the Masses

Considering Jatra's history, the performance tradition has witnessed the influence of layered meanings of partition as Bengal was divided in post-independent India. So, the living performance tradition carries the traditions of the undivided Bengal, as it has been the most popular form of performance over the centuries, even before the advent of the proscenium stage in Bengal. The primary reason for its survival has been its receptive prowess. Commenting on Jatra, Utpal Dutt had stated that a Jatra performer who has been performing for more than thirty years in a particular field of performance knows very well how the director wants the script to be presented. The experienced performer quickly understands the director's intentions and adapts according to the character he has to enact for the play. Utpal Dutt had observed that the experienced performers during the first phase of rehearsal would sit and listen to the director delivering the dialogue and how he is positioning himself in the performance space because the performance space of Jatra is different from that of a proscenium stage. The spectators during Dutt's contemporary period of Jatra performances used to sit on all three sides of the performance space. So, while delivering dialogues, the performer should have the required training of facing the spectators so that they do not feel misplaced in the setting in which they are sitting. The multi-directional positioning of the performer while delivering a dialogue is very important. Utpal Dutt would learn in detail all these aspects of Jatra performances while presenting his script in the first phase of the rehearsals from the experienced performers like Panchu Sen and Bijan Mukherjee. In an account, during the rehearsal phase of "Rifle", Dutt once commented about Panchu Sen advising him to specifically retain a dialogue in the performance as he knew his audience so well. It should be noted here that performers like Panchu Sen took into account the reaction of the spectators of Jatra and they always kept a space open for 'reaction' more than 'action'. When a performance is meant for the mass, then their mentality and understanding should also be taken into account. It is not a one-way communication process. In a Jatra performance, the spectators are allowed to react and the performers are encouraged or discouraged in the performance space itself according to the

likes and dislikes of the spectators. So, while performing Jatra, the performer has to be cautious about the reaction he is receiving from the spectator's end. The traditional form of Jatra is different from that of its representation in the proscenium setting. In the indigenous form, the spectator wants to cry, laugh, become angry, and be afraid of the character; the spectators are compassionate about the performance being put up in front of them. Jatra performance has been one such indigenous form of performance which gives the spectators these feelings of joy, sorrow, and anger. The spectators are in union with the characters being portrayed in the performance space. They cry and laugh with the performers present in front of them. There is a difference between the terms 'spectator' and 'observer.' A spectator might just watch a performance and not analyse it, but an observer after watching the performance or while watching the performance will analyse it. In case of Jatra, the audience works more as a spectator than an observer.

It is evident that from the early phases of Jatra, more importance was given to dancing and singing, which was predominantly known as 'Palagaan'. In fact, the acting style was completely dependent on dance and music as the indigenous performance tradition of Bengal considers a staged performance as an amalgamation of acting, singing, and dancing. One such form of singing was Joorigaan. It was introduced in the nineteenth century by Madanmohan Chattopadhyay and popularized by Motilal Roy in Jatra. The assemblage of musicians along with the singers involved in the performances used to sit in groups on all four sides of the stage. The songsters were of two types—a group of 'Joori-singers' and another group of 'Chokra-singers'. These two groups of singers divided themselves into subgroups and positioned themselves on all four sides of the stage. Sometimes along with these groups, there used to be the 'Ekene-singer'. Joorigaan was usually sung in the form of classical ragas, which were considered to be of the higher quality of music, and the Chokra-singers used to sing the love songs or the devotional, humorous songs, which were not in tune with the ragas, and the Ekene-singer used to sing accompanied by a violin in the background. Sometimes the Chokra-singers used to leave a song at 'Tara' and the Joori would pick it up at 'Mudara', leading the song to 'Udara', and then the 'Ekene'-singer would conclude the song singing alone[9]. Sometimes, to bring in a variety in these performances, one of the performers would deliver his dialogue in prosaic form, and the other would reply to it by singing.

Simultaneously with the advent of the proscenium stage setting in Bengal, the use of lighting effects and colouring the backdrop with sequential theatrical scenery, the concept of scene changes with these modern properties started being the glamour of the show for the audience, as they were more attracted towards the properties than the primary human performance. Moreover, the intervals between the scenes are well accepted by the audience, which helps in switching over to the next scene. Along with the acting skills, these 'theatrical properties' or 'props' help in expressing the emotions of the scene on stage. But in a Jatra performance, these scopes are not there. If compared with the proscenium setting, it can be considered that the dresses were the theatrical scenery, which expressed the backdrop of the scene to some extent, and the presence of Joori manifested the emotional requirements of the scene. This is how the songs used to dominate a Jatra performance and Motilal Roy had first introduced the professional 'Joori-Jatra' with "Nabadwip Banga Geetabhinay Sampraday" on November 23, 1873. The head office was situated in a three-storied building at 27, Ahiritola Street. Before Motilal Roy, no Jatra troop had this system of monthly salary for its actors, musicians, and employees. His Jatra group had eight to ten Joorigaan-singers and twenty to twenty-five Chokra-singers. There were four to five violin players. The Joorigaan singers wore long black gowns and some of them wore white 'pajamas' (slacks or casual trousers) and embroidered shirts made of silk. The Chokra-singers wore velvet coat and trousers with a cap on their head on which the name of their producer was written[10].

Bengali theatre as a means of private entertainment began in the early nineteenth century in Bengal. Gradually, with the advancement of theatre in Bengal in the early twentieth century, the urban audience got more attracted towards theatre and to draw the attention of these theatre lovers, Jatra started giving away its traditional form of folk music. Joorigaan and Chokrar-gaan lost its significance as the time limit of a Jatra performance was reduced. So, the number of songs performed in it was also reduced. Instead of the Puranic and the devotional humorous palagaan, historical palagaan used to be performed more, in which the scope of Joorigaan and Chokrar-gaan was diminished. Motilal Roy's son, Bhupendranarayan Roy, tried to revive the Joorigaan performances in Jatra but the audience did not accept it. In 1925, during Bhupendranarayan's Jatra performance in Howrah, the spectators became impatient as soon as the Joorigaan started in the Jatra performance. The audience forcefully stopped the performance in the middle of the show. Motilal Roy's establishment, "Nabadwip Banga Geetabhinay Sampraday" was closed down in 1933. During the early 'theatrical-Jatra' period, there were still some Jatra organizations left who tried to use Joorigaan, for instance, Sashibhusan Adhikary had a group of eight Joorigaan-singers and sixteen Chokra-singers and he himself was the fiddle player. Moreover, along with Joorigaan and Chokrar-gaan, there was Bibeker-gaan (song of the conscience) also. But as Jatra started transforming itself with the theatrical interventions, the traditional form of musicals lost its magnitude. Sourindramohan Chattopadhyay in his article 'Bhalo Jatra-natoker Obhab keno?' (Why is there a dearth of good Jatra?) writes that the dialogue of a Jatra performance should depend on the theme (social, historical or mythical), character (king, minister, educated, or illiterate person), and the emotional requirement of the scene[11]. But nowadays, this blend is not executed due to the lack of properly trained actors or good scripts. As a result of which the quality of the performances sometimes is not refined. Abanindranath Tagore's grandson Mohanlal Gangopadhyay, on account of his grandfather's Jatrapala, had written that a spectacle was created without any theatrical scenery, footlight, or spotlight. Without having any of this modern equipment, everything was expressed through a garland of words, songs, and acting weaved together to deliver one scene after the other[12].

From the account, it can be reviewed that how a Jatrapala used to be performed. The calculated blend of music, prose, and lyrics makes a Jatra performance perfect. Therefore, it is imprecise to say that Jatra is melodramatic with its musical performances. Rather, the traditional forms of folk music like Joorigaan had once given it a new dimension, which attracted the masses but the lack of trained Jatra performers led to its less refined execution, resulting in a more proscenium-centric performance. Jatra cannot be a replacement of commercial films as the urban critic labels it. It has its own form and structure, which has changed with time. Jatra has been subjected to cultural impositions, which has produced the theatrical-form Jatra catering to the industrialised model of entertainment. But Jatra still remains a living performative art form of Bengal with its theatrical and other forms of performance. Nevertheless, government institutes like 'Paschimbanga Jatra Academy' and its continuous workshops in Calcutta prove its cultural worth in Bengal as a whole community of Jatra workers across the state survives depending on this indigenous form of entertainment. Therefore, considering Jatra as an independent body of performance and not labelling it as an alternate form of entertainment finds its importance in the contemporary cultural and socio-political scenario of Bengal.

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[1] Gaurishankar Bhattacharya. Bangla Loknatya Samiksha (A Survey of Bengali Folk plays), Calcutta, Rabindrabharati Universitry, 1972. P. 558-560

[2] Richard Schechner. 'The efficacy-entertainment dyad,' Performance Studies: An Introduction, Routledge, 2003, p.79

[3]Rath Jatra - the term particularly refers to a procession which is held mainly in Odisha, Jharkhand and other East Indian states. It is a festival in which during the procession a chariot with deities Jagannath, Balaram and Subhadra are carried in a wooden chariot called Rath. It attracts thousands of pilgrims who join the procession each year.

[4] Richard Schechner. 'Ritual', Performance Studies: An Introduction, Routledge, 2003, p.52-88

[5]The Bengal Renaissance was a cultural, social and artistic movement in Bengal which with Raja Ram Mohan Roy in the nineteenth century. Sumit Sarkar in "Calcutta and the Bengal Renaissance" (Sukanta Chaudhury, ed. Calcutta,The Lving City, Oxford University Press, 1995, p.95) writes that the nineteenth-century Bengal was a unique blend of religious and social reformers, scholars, literary giants, journalists, patriotic orators and scientists, all merging to form the image of a renaissance, and marked the transition from the 'medieval' to the 'modern.'

[6]By 'theatrical', the western proscenium setting of the performance space which the English educated urban audience got more involved with in contrast to a Jatra performance is referred here.

[7]Richard Schechner. 'Rituals as liminal performances', Performance Theory: An Introduction, p.66

[8]Richard Schechner, 'Communitas and anti-structure', Performance Theory: An Introduction, p.70

[9] Tara, Mudara and Udara are the three rhythms of music

[10] Rabin Bandyopadhyay, "Jatrae Joorigaan." Yatra Akademi Patrika, 2005, Vol.1, pp.15-22

[11] Sourindramohan Chattopadhyay, "Bhalo Jatra-natoker obhab keno?" Yatra Akademi Patrika,2010, Vol.5, pp. 136-142

[12] Dakshiner Baranda (The south facing Verandah). Ananda Publishers, 2014

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