Re-presenting Folk Theatre: The *Jatra* of Bengal

**Somdatta Mandal**

As part of the folk tradition, the *jatra* of Bengal has always been looked upon as a poor cousin of the theatre, run commercially mainly in the rural areas of West Bengal and Bangladesh. Jatras are usually epic four hour long performances featuring loud music, harsh lighting and dramatic props played on giant outdoor stages. Etymologically, the definition of jatra literally means ‘journey’ and the itinerant nature of this performing art is part of its tradition. In the early days jatras were performed in villages during Hindu pujas and festivals where men dressed up as women and even danced on stage. Most of the *palas* (as the performances are termed even now) comprised of stories from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. They began primarily with songs and later dialogue was added to bring in newness. Gradually crude humour and obscenity also started creeping in and instead of praising the benefaction of the gods and the goddesses, it was slowly replaced by human stories.

From the very beginning, the performers in the *jatra* were all male. In the Krishna Jatras, the stories related to the life and times of Lord Krishna and here too young boys dressed up as girls. Thus female impersonation is an inherent part of the *jatra* tradition. In the early 16th century it is said that Sri Chaitanya Dev himself performed in *Krishnaleela*. It is found in the Adi Leela of *Chaitanya Charitamrita* that Adwaitya Acharya had himself performed as Sri Krishna and Sri Chaitanya had performed in the dual role of Sri Radha and Rukmini. One of the main reasons for having men perform in women’s roles in the *jatra* is due to the peripatetic nature of the performance. Travelling from place to place in remote rural areas it was logistically easier for men to travel and perform on open stages. Also, women in conservative society were confined in the *andarmahal*. Not that there were no women at all – there were a few all women troupes – but in general the conservative Bengali society was still not willing to let its womenfolk into the performing arena – so prostitutes, fallen women usually came to perform on stage. The other reason for the absence of women was of course technical. In the early days of the *jatra*, right up to the early 1960s, all performances were held without the use of a microphone in the open stage. In most *jatra* performances where the audience strength would be somewhere from ten to fifteen thousand, the feeble voice of a woman performer was insufficient and men had to deliver the dialogue or songs with more strength in their voice.
Originally the *jatra* had only the themes of Radha and Krishna, today *jatras* are written and performed by writers and dramatists of rural and urban centres. At present, *jatra* has also been modernized to feature modern crisis through modern stories, bearing close resemblance to television soaps and serials and popular commercial films. According to the demand of the age, the budget and production of the *jatra* in present times has undergone a profound change. Big *jatra* productions have budgets crossing one lakh rupees but in most cases the invested money is recovered from performances in rural areas. Since the early nineties the lure of the lucre has drawn a lot of commercial Bengali cinema and theatre actors (including villains and starlets from Bollywood) to perform in the *jatra* – thus erasing the rural/urban divide to a great extent.

Though both the *jatra* and the theatre are performing arts, the simplicity and the rusticity of the former cannot be overlooked. The long neglect of this special art form was probably due to its highly stylized performance, strong tone in dialogue delivery and even exaggeration in physical gestures. The targeted audience was also different. Each country’s theatrical tradition has evolved from its folk forms but the only exception is Bengal. As a grassroots level performative art, the *jatra* is very popular in all small district towns in Bengal and interestingly enough, its popularity even in cities like Kolkata is on the rise.

Apart from the *jatra* usually being performed in villages, jute mills, and in colliery areas, the city-bred people usually watched the performances in the homes of rich zamindars during Durga puja. In fact, holding *jatra* performances during the Durga Puja celebrations in various reputed households in Kolkata has been as old as the existence of the city itself. For example, one of the oldest and lavish pujas was held at Sovabazaar Rajbari whose scion Raja Nabakrishna Deb began in 1757 (a puja that saw Lord Clive as a child) and enters into its 252\textsuperscript{nd} year in 2009. Some of the grandeur has eroded over the years but the puja even now draws thousands of visitors from across the city. Amalkrishna Deb, one of the present descendants of the family, reminisces about the puja and *jatra* performances:

That was in the year 1940. I was five or six years old then but clearly remember the incident. During those days it was mandatory to have *jatra* palas performed in the *thakurbari* for the four days of Durga Puja. The grandfathers would sit in the front row; then the fathers and uncles; the brothers in the last row, and we kids would sit with our mothers either in the verandah or on the windowsill. That year *Marjina Abdallah pala* was being
performed. Babli Rani was acting in the role of Marjina. Though he was a man, he looked exceedingly beautiful as a woman and also danced extraordinarily. At the very beginning of the pala there was a dance by Marjina. As soon as the dance was over, grandpa stood up and said, ‘encore’.

The trend of female roles being performed by men even in the city of Calcutta continued till the 1950s. In 1954 a travelling jatra group called Babul Opera was formed in Bangladesh and it was the first time in East Bengal that they showed courage by employing both male and female performers at the same time. The second group that performed with both male and female artists was Basanti Opera of Shahzadpur. From roughly 1962 onwards the need for contemporary themes in jatra began to be felt more strongly. With the introduction of microphones, tape recorders, foreign musical instruments, revolutionary/social themes started replacing the earlier historical/religious palas. But more significantly, this was the beginning of a more radical change when women started playing female roles on stage thus heralding the demise of the ‘mustachioed rani’s’. At present the jatra has been modernized to feature modern crisis through modern stories, bearing close resemblance to television soaps and serials and popular commercial films. The publication of names of commercial sponsors in the newspaper advertisements of contemporary jatra also signals that the folk theatre is doing well, although in a change of form and content.

A close survey of the titles of jatra being performed over the last few years in Bengal alone has revealed an amazing fact. Without taking into consideration the sets, costume designs, cyclorama, playback music, dance numbers or anything else for that matter, it shows that more than 90% of them have women in central roles and titles. These range from women in stereotypical roles as mother, daughter, wife, lover and the vamp (the other). Often they are portrayed in extremes – either deified or demonized. A simple glance at the titles of jatra produced for the last year and a half shows how women dominate the scene. Among the total 80 titles I surveyed during this period, 68 were related to women; 7 had contemporary issues; 2 dealt with general themes; and 3 had religious/mythological titles. Of the 68 productions with women in title roles, 18 dealt in general with women and social issues, 34 with women as wife; 4 with women as mothers and 11 dealt with the woman as the lover or the vamp. The

1 Each year the Jatra season begins in July (on the auspicious day of the Ratha-Yatra or Chariot Festival) and ends around February/March. The companies travel around the state performing almost every night. The rest of the year they rehearse new productions and the performers even shift contracts from one company to another.
titles of each of these palas are very catchy and often onomatopoeic. For instance we hear of
titles like Sangsar Sukhe Hoye Romonir Guney (The family is happy through female
attributes), Nari Ami Khelna Noi (I am a woman and not a toy), Ei Ghar Ei Sangsar (This
house, this family), Sapne Dehka Sukher Sansar (The happy family of my dreams), all
primarily operate on the word ‘sangsar’ – the family, the household, the home and the hearth.
Again, titles like Godhulilagne Mala Badal (Exchanging of garlands at dusk), Bonpolashir
Notun Bou (The new bride of Bonpolashi village), Palkite Bou Chole Jaye (The bride goes
away in a palanquin), Buro Khokar Kochi Bou (A young bride for an old boy), Ashol Sindur
Nokol Bou (Real sindoor but false bride), all focus on the married status of the woman.
Sometimes the bride becomes revolting, Bidrohini Bourani (The revolting daughter in-law)
or Aami Bodhu Hote Ashini (I have not come to be a bride) and it does not take long for her
to become a domineering/dominating woman, perfectly fit for modern times – Bashorgorey
Bonnhisikha (A firebrand woman in the wedding night), Bidrohini Bourani (The revolting
daughter in-law) or Aami Bodhu Hote Ashini (I have not come to be a bride). So the bride
opens her veil, Ghomta Khola Gaayer Bodhu (The village bride without her veil), denies her
lowly status – Maatir Ghorey Poter Bibi (A poster wife in a mud hut), takes the ‘sangsar’
under her control – Lakshmir Haatey Trishul (The trident in the hands of Lakshmi), Roga
Swamir Daroga Bou (The matronly wife of a lean husband), Kaacher Ghore Lohar Bou (An
iron wife in a glass house), Pagla Swamir Khooni Bou (The killer wife of a lunatic husband)
and even revolts as a daughter in law– Bahurupi Putrobodhu (The chameleon daughter-in-
law) or Bidrohini Putrabadhu (The revolting daughter-in-law). The husband, often a cuckold,
has to then either declare, Aamar Bou Shob Janey (My wife knows everything), or lament on
her indigestible quality, Bou Enechi Boono Ol (I have brought a wife like a wild tuber).2 The
family takes pride that they have a Sikshita Bouma (An educated daughter-in-law) or realize
her worth as Boumar Daam Cheler Shoman (The value of a daughter-in-law is the same as
the son). In a reversal of the dominating mother-in-law image we even find one pala called
Bouma Anno Bhiksha Dao (Daughter in law, give us some food!) Like all Indian women the
now hardened wife turns into a mother. She has a stern exterior concealing her soft heart --
Baire Baghini, Antarey Jononi (A tigress outside but a mother inside) or Momotamoyeer
Mostaan Cheley (The disreputable son of a doting mother). Interestingly enough the

2 The ole, or a large tuber is a delicacy for Bengali household cuisine if cooked in the proper way. Sometimes a
wild variety of this causes immense inflammation and itching in the throat. Here the daughter-in-law is
compared to this second category of wild tuber – very hard to digest.
stereotype torturer figure that the mother-in-law entails in the Indian psyche probably accounts for only one production to have a mother-in-law in the title is *Sashuri No.1* (Mother-in law no.1).

A few productions also dwell on love – *Ogo Amaar Praner Bodhu* (O my sweetheart wife), *Bhalobasha Ki Aage Bujhini* (I did not know earlier what love meant), *Bhalobasha ki Aparadh?* (Is loving a crime?) *Bhalobasha Keno Eto Asohay* (Why is love so helpless) and this slowly moves the focus from the wife as the protagonist to the ‘other’ woman, either a lover or a vamp. Productions like *Moyna Bolo Tumi Krishna Radhe* (Mynah, sing of Krishna and Radha), *Golemaaley Pirit Korona* (Don’t make love in times of confusion), *Nishidhha Premer Parinaam* (The fate of forbidden love) are also supplemented with Bollywood-like titles, *Chameli 420*, *Teri Meherbaniyan* (Your Munificence), *Sandhyaraater Lal Pari* (The red fairy of night), *Ruper Raani Swapner Raja* (The beauty queen and the dream king), *Rang De Basanti*, *Aami Ful Ganyer Fuleshwari* (I am Fuleshwari from Ful village), *Aami Sandhyadiper Sikha* (I am the evening flame), *Chander Priya Chandramukhi* (Chandramukhi, the lover of the moon), *Lalmaatir Doshi Meye* (The naughty girl from the land of red earth), *Moila Samajer Meye* (Daughter of the dirty society). All these productions juxtapose the sexual/sensual femme fatale figure with that of the wifely/motherly image but as the statistics reveal they are much less in number.

In most productions the homely *sati-sadhwi* wife (usually dressed in a traditional sari) is very carefully juxtaposed with a ‘modern’ woman (dressed in western clothes) who is usually the vamp, the dancer or maybe the villain. This is a continuation of the ‘*Purab aur Paschim*’ binary made popular by Saira Banu in the 1960’s film of the same name. Apart from the dress codes, the dominant ideology of a good all-enduring wife is constantly reinforced and re-enforced through cultural markers like the sindoor, the tolerance, the sacrifice and the firmness of her character.

The *jatra* industry is always very active in picking up themes related to contemporary affairs. Within ten days of Benazir Bhutto’s death we found a jatra pala based on her life story, the guillotine of Dhanajoy, that created a lot of debate in Bengali society about its relevance also found instant replication on the jatra stage. And when the prime issue last season was the celebration of the most powerful woman (‘meye’) in Bengal now, it is no wonder that already ten *palas* had been composed in 2011 on Mamata Banerjee, the present Chief Minister with her popular slogan, ‘Ma, mati, manush’ (mother, soil and the people). So we have *Banglar*
Before concluding three things need to be mentioned. First, though the imaginative and often onomatopoeic nature of these titles is lost in translation, they reiterate several socio-cultural issues of our contemporary society and challenge our belief that all formulas come with an inbuilt expiry date. The second factor is that each of these jatra productions keep in mind the commercial viability and introduce song and dance sequences even in productions that have serious social issues to critique. If not directly related to the plot, these Bollywood-like song and dance numbers engaging young starlets (and most of the time mentioned separately in the advertisement), guarantee larger ticket sales and provided the entertainment quotient of the performance. Thirdly, evaluated from the perspective of culture studies, however much the city-bred individual might snicker at the titles, the charm, the attraction, the high-budget production (with many film stars and starlets performing in lead roles) – the circulation, reception, and preservation of the jatra are indeed crucial to the formation of ‘modern’ or ‘national’ memory. A visit to the Mcdonald’s and the multiplexes in urban Bengal is enough to gauge the change in contemporary society. But how can we measure the social change that is sweeping through rural Bengal? Entertainment in the agrarian belt, in spite of the easy accessibility to television soaps and serials, has not diminished the charm and attraction of the jatra performance. In fact as a recent newspaper report also highlighted, even urban people are gathering in large numbers to see jatras. So though we have women replicating the gyrating dancers of Bollywood culture even in a down-to-earth social drama set in Bengal, the thrust area of each tale will revolve around a stereotypical Bengali (Indian) woman, both critiquing and entertaining us. Jatra is alive and thriving in its own popularity and it would be wrong to consider it as a devalued cultural form, inferior in taste. It is part of the socially accepted forms of normative behaviour and as
the popularity charts and ratings prove, it is still the best medium to voice contemporary social issues.

**Bio-Note**

**Somdatta Mandal** is Professor of English at Visva-Bharati University, Santiniketan, West Bengal. Her areas of interest are contemporary fiction, film and culture studies, Diaspora studies and translation. A recipient of several prestigious awards and fellowships, she has been published widely both nationally and internationally. She has written three academic books and edited and co-edited fifteen books and journals. She has also received a Sahitya Akademi award for translating short fiction.