

YATRA OF BENGAL

Dr. Asutosh Bhattacharyya

Of all the forms of folk-entertainment prevalent in Bengal, *Yatra* is the most popular even today with all sections of the people both urban and rural. Modern theatre, cinema and dance-drama in spite of their wide appeal have not been able to displace *Yatra* which has been growing in popularity. This is probably due to the fact that *Yatra* is based in rooted tradition and it has the ability to adjust itself in the ever-changing socio-cultural pattern of our life. The tradition is about a thousand years old and it has entered deep into the life of the people.

It is probable that as early as the 2nd century, Bharata wrote his *Natyasastra*, the first work on Indian dramatic art and stage-craft. Though he mainly devoted his work to the classical Indian drama, yet he mentions casually the existence of a form of popular drama which was in vogue among the common people during his time. It is not invariably that a folk form of drama develops into a classical form though it sometimes may so happen. It seems that a folk form of drama which existed during the time of Bharata developed independently without in any way being affected by the classical Sanskrit drama. After the invasion of Alexander the Great of ancient Greece, about two centuries prior to the birth of Christ, Indian drama, due to the influence of Greek drama likely got an impetus and ultimately developed into the classical form. According to some scholars the term *Yavanika* used in Indian stage-craft signifies alien influence in Indian stage and drama.

There are elements of drama in Vedic literature itself; they were not developed into a classic form, but they show marked resemblance to the folk drama that existed during the medieval ages in Bengal, as else-

where. For example, the forms of the dialogues between Yama and Yami, Sarama and Panis, Pururavas and Urvasi in the *Rigveda* have nothing to indicate that they ultimately developed into classical Indian drama though it is a fact that Kalidasa utilized the material of the dialogue between Pururavas and Urvasi in his dramatic work.

Folk Tradition

Folk drama developed on its own without either being merged in to the classical drama or in any way being influenced or displaced by it. Even during the period when classical Indian drama reached the highest state of development, folk drama was serving its own purpose among the unsophisticated masses in different parts of India. As a matter of fact, Indian classical drama, even that written by eminent dramatists like Kalidasa and Bhavabhuti was confined to a limited circle inasmuch as they were written in a language which had never been spoken in any part of India at any time. It was more a conventional form of written literature only, rather than an art of practical application. But folk drama, which must have originated at a very primitive stage of human culture on the basis of some magical belief or a religious festival, has maintained its popularity among the illiterate mass of people. In different parts of India it developed different characteristics owing to diverse socio-historical factors.

In the earliest specimens of the Bengali language dated according to some scholars, between the 7th century and the 9th century and by others between the 9th century and the 12th century mention has been made of a form of drama which must be folk in character. In the *Caryapada* which contain some mystic songs written by a section of persons professing a decaying form of Mahayana Buddhism, we get a reference to *Buddha Nataka*, or a drama on the life of the Lord Buddha. We do not know, however, what the actual form was in which it used to be staged in those days, but from a reference to certain musical instruments which were described as used on that occasion, it becomes apparent that it was a musical drama. It used to be performed in accompaniment to dance and music. From the study of the character and form of the folk drama of subsequent periods of Bengal, we can come to the conclusion that the drama mentioned in the *Caryapada* was almost of the same character. Though it must have been prevalent long before the poets of the *Caraya* made a record of it in literature, yet we can take their reference to it as authentic information about the existence of folk drama in a definite form during the period between the 7th century and the 12th century.

In the 12th century another remarkable work, the *Gita Govinda* the songs on Krishna or Govinda — was written by Jayadeva, a court-poet of the last Hindu King of Bengal, Lakshman Sen. It is written in Sanskrit but scholars are of the opinion that it was originally composed in the

vernacular language of that period and subsequently, due to the influence of the royal court which had been patronising Sanskrit literature instead of the vernacular tongue, it was rendered into Sanskrit. The work has not been written in an orthodox Sanskrit style, therefore the belief that it was composed originally in vernacular is generally confirmed. *Gita Govinda* is entirely in the form of a musical drama. It used to be performed in accompaniment to music and dance and these are the main characteristics of Bengali folk drama as we shall see hereafter. It is said that there was a dancing girl named Padmavati at the court of Lakshman Sen. The poet himself used to play musical instruments and Padmavati used to dance to the beatings of cymbals and drum. Afterwards they became husband and wife.

Dialogues of *Gita Govinda* are musical or lyric verses written in a very simple style unlike the classical style of Kalidasa. The narrative is loose due to constant interruption of musical interludes and lyrical expressions. We shall see that these were the main characteristics of Bengali folk drama until the late 19th century. Therefore, in the *Caryapada* though we receive only some indirect reference to folk drama, yet here in the *Gita Govinda*, we get it in somewhat definite and concrete form. Literary evidence of Bengali folk drama has since continued uninterrupted during the subsequent centuries.

Religious Trends

On the basis of the musical tradition of *Gita Govinda* of Jayadeva another remarkable work was written about two centuries later. It belonged to the early Middle-Bengali period and was written by the most popular poet of those days, Badu Chandidas. The work is known as *Sri Krishnakirtan*. The folk character is more apparent in it. Though it deals with some episodes of Sri Krishna, the hero of the *Srimad-Bhagavat Purana* and, to some extent, of the great Epic, the *Mahabharata* also, yet it does not contain the orthodox Hindu legends but has been based entirely on popular legends only. It is rustic, sometimes repugnant to the standard ideals of moral sense. The entire subject-matter has been presented here through musical dialogues of three characters only, Krishna, his beloved Radha and an old lady named Badai, who mediates between the two in their affairs of love. Now, this was the main characteristic of folk drama in the medieval ages. Within a century after the work *Sri Krishnakirtan* was written, there appeared in Bengal, Sri Chaitanya, the founder of Bengali Vaisnavism and he spread the names of Krishna and Radha who were the main object of his worship throughout the length and breadth of not only Bengal, but also far beyond its boundary.

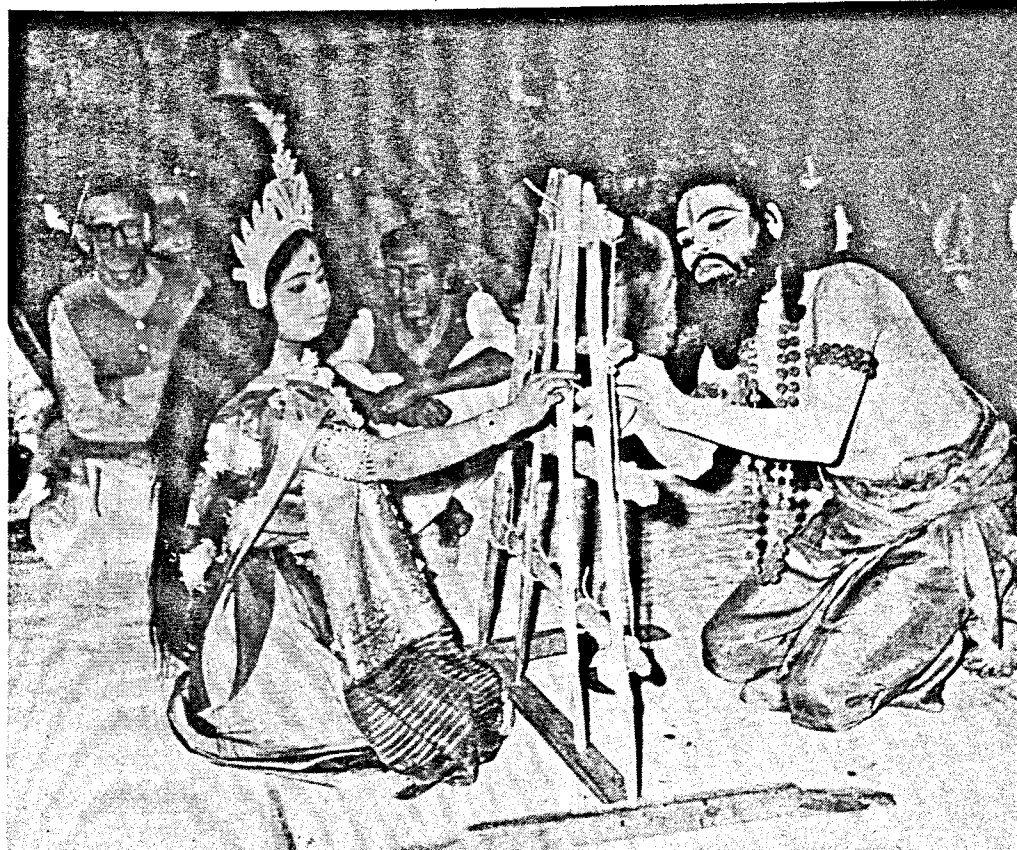
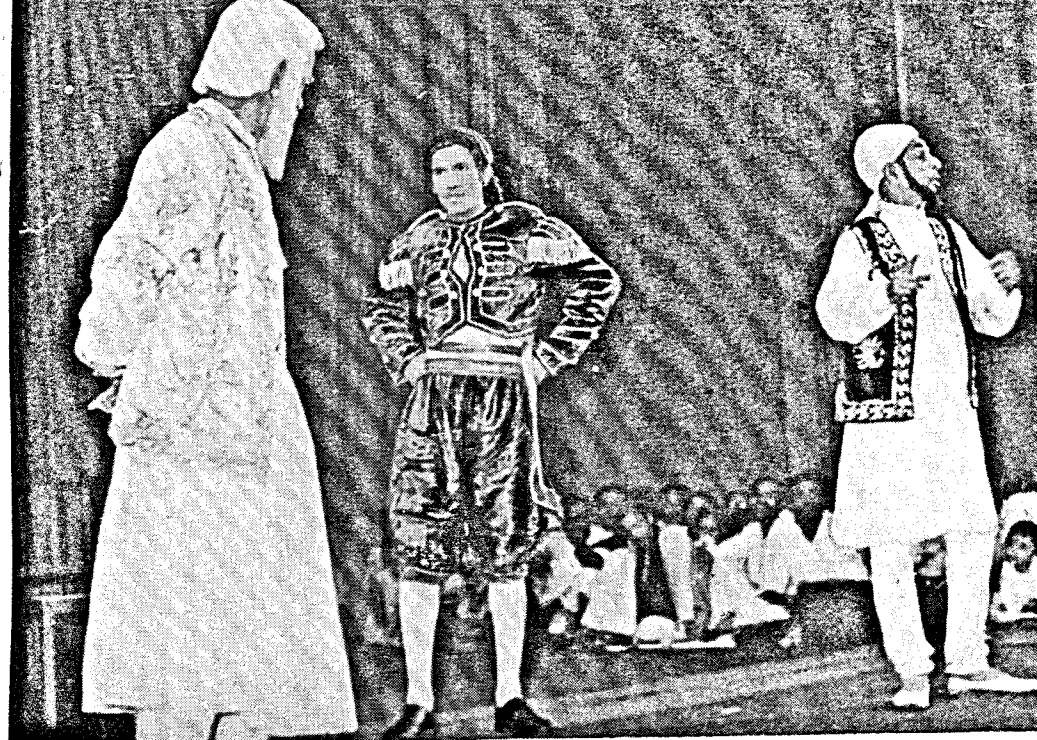
Tremendous influence was exercised on the social life of Bengal as a whole by the doctrines preached by the new religion of Chaitanya and also through folk drama since the theme of folk drama mainly centred around

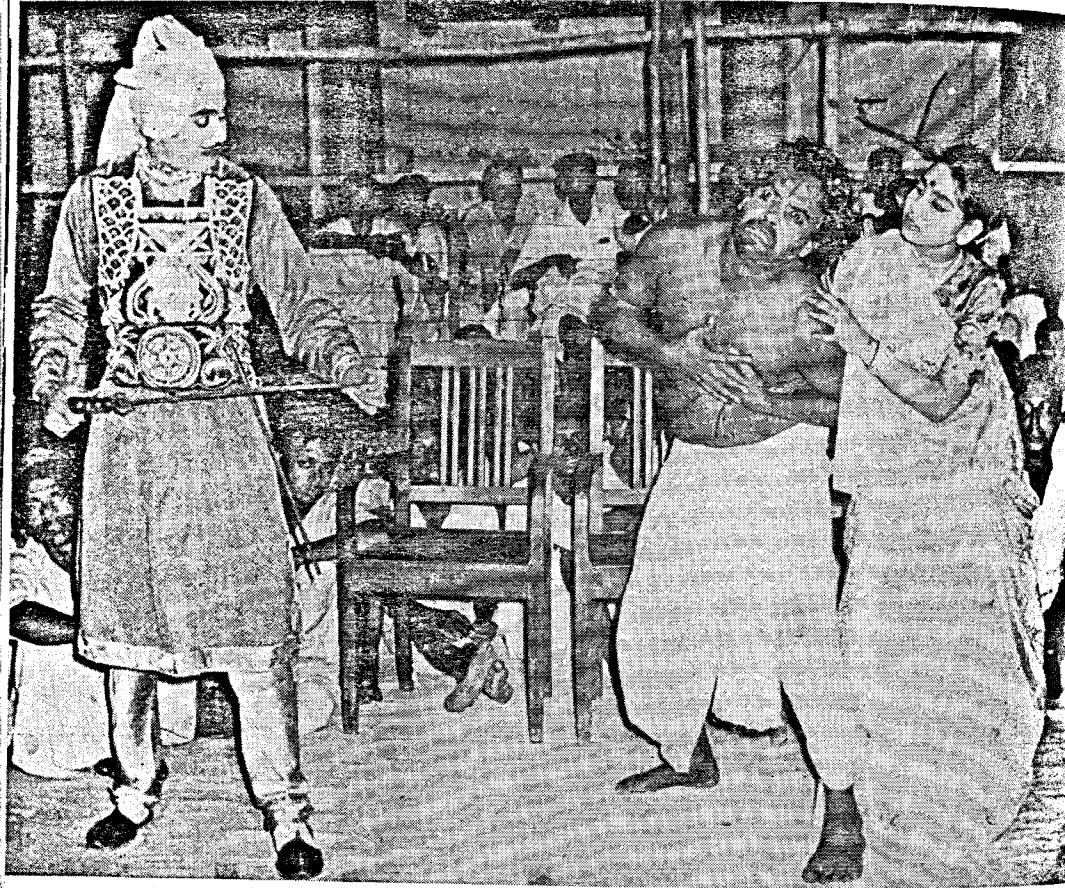
the legend of Radha and Krishna, alone. In a biography of Chaitanya, written by one of his followers, a very interesting account of Chaitanya's taking part personally in a dramatic performance of folk character has been given in some detail. This occurred during the first half of the 16th century before Chaitanya entered the ascetic life. In it Chaitanya himself played the role of Rukmini, the devoted wife of Sri Krishna and other disciples appeared in different roles, male and female, according to the suitability of their appearance and age. This is the first literary evidence of the performance of a folk drama, so far as Bengal is concerned. It is not, however, known by which term this performance was called, but from the account of the subsequent folk drama of Bengal we can come to the conclusion that it was known by no other name than *Krishna-yatra*, because it was a dramatic performance based on the legends of Krishna.

Now the derivation of the term *yatra* which is now-a-days used in the sense of folk drama in Bengal, has puzzled many minds. For it cannot be derived from Sanskrit in this sense. The term *yatra* in Sanskrit means 'journey' which has nothing to do with drama and dramatic performance either folk or sophisticated. But since the 18th century the word *yatra* in the sense of folk drama has been in use very widely. But in the medieval ages, it is not known by which term folk drama was known. During that period a term was generally used to mean a form of dance accompanied by music held on any auspicious occasion in our social life; it was known as *Nata-git* and not *yatra*. Literally the meaning of *Nata-git* is dance and song. But in the subsequent period in the *Krishna-yatras* we meet with songs only and not with dance. Therefore, it seems that *Natya-git* of medieval Bengal was yet another form of folk drama which ultimately either lost itself in *Krishna-yatra* or survived in some other form in popular tradition only.

As I have already stated, since the ascendancy of Bengal Vaisnavism, the legends of Krishna and Radha became the only theme of Bengali folk drama, and as such, they were known as *Krishna-yatras*. From the beginning of the 10th century the influence of Vaisnavism on the social life of Bengal began to decline, and besides Krishna legends other *Puranic*, secular and unorthodox matters entered into the subject-matter of *Yatra*. At the very beginning of the 19th century we get *Nala Damyanti Yatra* written on a theme from the *Mahabharata* which has no relationship with the legend of Krishna and Radha. During the same time another folk drama was also composed; it was known as *Vidyasundar Yatra*. It was not only independent of the Krishna legend, but secular in the full sense of the term. It

Illustrations: Page 33. Above: Historical theme from the British Period; below: Scene from Mythological play. P 34. Melodrama is characteristic of this form, above: a scene from "Abhisarika", below: biographical Yatra, "Pagal Thakur" based on the life of Ramakrishna Parmahansa.





was based on a secular love affair, and was devoid of sentiment of spiritual or religious devotion. Thus we find that from the beginning of the 19th century the subject-matter of Bengali *Yatra*, changed its usual course from religious to secular. With the break-down of the sectarian barrier, the *Yatra* became absolutely independent in form, technique and theme and new materials hitherto unknown had begun to enter into it.

Introduction of Tragedy

During the middle of the 19th century an attempt was made at revival of Hindu religious ideals on the basis of some reform needed for the age. The occasion was seized by the *Yatra* and themes preaching orthodox Hindu ideals borrowed from Hindu mythology or *Puranas* were presented on the occasion. By that time English education spread in this country and drama imitating Shakespearean tragedies were composed by a number of Bengali writers. Before the impact of English education there was no tragedy in *Yatra*. Each theme used to end happily. But from that period the themes of *Yatras* also began to end in tragedy. Though at the very outset the idea was revolting to Bengali lovers of *Yatra*, yet in a few years with further spread of English education, this was soon digested and naturalized.

A form of *Yatra* known as *Puranic Yatras* composed on the basis of themes derived from the *Mahabharata* the *Ramanaya*, the two great Indian epics, and the various major and minor *Puranas* appeared during that age. In 1872 a public stage was established in Calcutta. Mythological dramas preaching high ethical, moral and spiritual qualities in human life, were in great demand and used to be staged during that time in Calcutta. The contemporary *Yatra* generally drew inspiration from the Calcutta stage, and, therefore, when the mythological or *Puranic* dramas were being performed there, the *Yatras* also adopted identical themes and were successful in preaching the same ideals among the population of the country. The *Yatra* played the role of a moving theatre. During the latter half of the 19th century the ideas as preached by the *Yatra* exercised a tremendous influence on the life of the people of Bengal specially living in the rural areas. Traditional forms of narrative songs and music all came under the influence of the technique and form of *Yatra*. As a result the traditional narrative of the *Ramayana* was also to a very great extent transformed into *Yatra*, and it was known as the *Ram-yatra*. Other traditional narratives also had undergone similar change of form, and thus we find *Chandi Yatra* or the folk drama on the episode of popular Chandi; *Bhashan-yatra* or the folk drama on the narrative of the serpent goddess Manasa, so called, because *Bhashan* in Bengali means floating down the river. Inasmuch as the legend of Manasa describes the floating down of the body of Lakhindar with the heroine Behula in the river it is known as *Bhashan-yatra*.

The main characteristic of *Krishna-yatra* of the earlier period was that it was without any dance or prose dialogue. But in the 19th century when *Yatra* developed mostly a secular character of its own, dance played a very important role, and dialogue in prose and blank verse had also entered into it in imitation of the contemporary drama. *Vidyasundar-yatra* which was composed and performed during the early part of the 19th century was the first *Yatra* in Bengal to introduce dance on a very large scale. The subject matter which was a traditional one, and was based on one of the most popular love-episodes of medieval Bengal, remained almost obscure in the background and dances and songs of secular nature, only very faintly connected with the legend, occupied a prominent place in the performance. The technique was imitated in other mythological subjects also, because it was found to be the most popular one and could easily attract thousands of spectators, irrespective of caste and creed. Thus the *Puranic Yatra* also introduced dance and song on a very large scale not always through *Puranic* characters but also by secular characters having none or very little relationship with the mythological theme.

At the very beginning of the 19th century a very strong national movement was launched in Bengal, and the subject-matter of Bengal *Yatra* began to draw its inspiration from this movement. Hundreds of lives were sacrificed during that time in the struggle for freedom against the bondage of British rule. The *Yatra* in order to depict this struggle and to illustrate the sacrifice of the lives of men and women involved in it, searched after characters and incidents of identical subjects from the medieval history of India. During the medieval ages the Rajputs struggled hard against the invasion of Moghul imperialism, and this supplied adequate material to illustrate the people's sacrifice for the cause of the country. The contemporary *Yatra* as well as the Bengali drama utilized this material to illustrate concrete examples of patriotism. Thence the Bengali *Yatras* were written for sometime on patriotic themes only as such, were known as *Swadeshi-yatra* meaning folk drama based on themes of the national movement. At one time they preached bitter anti-British ideas and performances of such *Yatras* were banned by the British rulers. Notwithstanding opposition from the government, there were some parties who used to perform such *Yatras* in rural areas. They contributed to a very great extent in spreading the idea of nationalism among the illiterate masses of Bengal.

Principal writer of *Swadeshi-yatra* was Mukunda Das who used to compose and perform *Yatra* on patriotic themes in the rural areas. Due to inspiring dialogues and music, they became extremely popular among all sections of people throughout Bengal.

The national or *Swadeshi-yatra* did not last long for the main objective for which the national movement was launched, viz. the unifica-

tion of Bengal which was partitioned by Lord Curzon in 1905, was annulled by the pressure of public demand and the movement was abandoned. Yet emancipation from British rule was the next objective of the nation and preparations were being laid for launching a greater movement with that purpose in view. Therefore, the *Swadeshi-yatra* did not die out altogether, but changed its front only. By this time Mahatma Gandhi, the great national leader of India, had inaugurated his Non-cooperation Movement and Bengali *Yatras* were inspired afresh. Sacrifice and sufferings for the cause of the country were illustrated through characters from Indian history and legends and a new form of *Yatra* with lofty ideals before it, appeared during that period. But it must be remembered that by this time Bengali drama had advanced tremendously through the Calcutta theatre and literature. The contemporary *Yatra* could not remain any further absolutely free from their influence and it seemed that *Yatra* would be altogether lost to stage performances of Bengali drama. But *Yatra* had some peculiar characteristics which could not be sacrificed for the contemporary stage. Therefore, in spite of the very great influence of drama it still held its own and retained its character to a very great extent.

Social changes

In the meantime there was a thorough change in the social life of the country and Mahatma Gandhi's preaching for the removal of untouchability, abolition of caste system went a long way towards a change in social life practically throughout India. This aspect of life in Bengal was also depicted in the *Yatras* of this period. A new class of *Yatra* which can be known as social *Yatra* was written and performed. Instead of themes from mythology, history or legend, episodes of life of the common people by this time began to enter the themes of *Yatra*.

With the attainment of independence and the subsequent partition of Bengal in 1947, the professional *Yatra* parties got a very rude shock as far as their business was concerned. Although most of the professional parties had their headquarters in Calcutta, yet East Bengal offered them their main field of business. With the influx of the Hindus to West Bengal and subsequent imposition of a political barrier between the two parts of Bengal, the prospect of business in East Bengal for the professional *Yatra* parties was closed for ever. At one time it seemed that the *Yatra* would disappear from the cultural life of Bengal. But *Yatra* has its own vitality and a power of adjustment which is not commonly met with. By dint of these two factors, *Yatra* survived this great crisis and in the course of a few years it has not only recovered but also opened a new era in its life. It has now achieved a position which it could not attain in the course of its past one thousand years of existence.

In order to survive the onslaught on the one hand of the theatre and on the other hand of the cinema, modern *Yatra* has changed its form, and ideas to a very great extent, yet it has not sacrificed the vital elements which make *Yatra* a real *Yatra*. It is still an open-air performance without any stage settings. This makes it possible for a troupe to move about from place to place most easily. Religious and historical themes have now been abandoned, social and romantic themes of secular character have been taken up. Modern political ideology mainly advocating socialistic theories hitherto unknown in *Yatra* has entered into it. Even a subject like *Hitler* composed in the manner of the famous film 'Fall of Berlin', most creditably performed by a professional party, has been drawing thousands of spectators in the rural areas also. It must be admitted that with the spread of education and establishment of educational institutions in every corner of the country, the quality of the audience has improved, and therefore, irrational subject-matter cannot naturally find any place in performances meant for them.

A great departure in performance of modern *Yatra* has been made by introducing actresses. Originally males used to play all female roles. Though it was unrealistic yet there were certain advantages also. Because *Yatra* is performed always before a very large audience which surrounds the stage on all sides, therefore, a very loud voice is necessary to reach the farthest corner of the stage. A woman's voice cannot naturally serve this purpose. But from other considerations most of the professional *Yatra* parties have adopted this practice. There are some conservative parties also which have been continuing the old practice of female impersonation with no less success.

Another important departure in modern *Yatra* is that it has minimised the number of vocal songs — solo or chorus. Originally the songs were the main attraction of the *Yatras*. Group songs originally known as *juri* songs have long been abandoned because they failed to suit the changing taste of the age. In modern *Yatra* only some solo songs, sometimes sung by a traditional character representing some abstract ideas, have been retained. Prose and blank verse dialogue has taken the place of the songs in imitation of the theatres. Group dance of the *sakhis* (maidens) have been replaced by 'oriental dance' by individual artistes. The orchestra, consisting of indigenous and foreign instruments continues to be traditional, but the function of the concert has changed in modern times. Besides its traditional function it is now also used for giving sound or musical effects to stage actions in imitation of modern theatrical performances.

Varieties of subject-matters have now entered into *Yatra*. Themes having political and educational value instead of mythological and historical ones, are now preferred. Of late a biographical theme on Vidyasagar, the great social reformer of the last century has been extremely popular. The

life of Michael Madhusudan Dutta, an epic poet of the 19th century also has been drawing large audiences. I have already mentioned that the theme based on the last days of Hitler's life has also been highly popular in rural areas. Romantic and socio-political themes are the two main subjects which are highly appreciated to-day.