

JATRA— REGIONAL DRAMA OF BENGAL

By

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A scene from Jatra 'Ramprasad'

“Even the Vedic Age knew Jatras, a memorable heirloom of Aryan antiquity. The gods of the Rigveda were hymned in choral processions. Some of the Sam Veda hymns re-echo the rude mirth of the primitive Jatra Dances”,—writes Mr. E. P. Hornwitz in his book *‘The Indian Theatre’*.

As in ancient Greece drama arose out of the worship of Bacchus, the Jatra which was in existence from a long time, sprang up from some religious festivals. In Bharata’s *‘Natya-*

shastra’ and Bhavabhuti’s *‘Malati Madhava’* the term ‘Jatra’ has been mentioned. From the journeys of Jagannath, as Snan Jatra, Ratha Jatra, Punar Jatra, the term Jatra might have been, derived. (H.N. Das Gupta—the Indian Stage).

Sri Chaitanya was not a man, but an epoch. As fungus spreads chaotic from its bed, religion, literature and even drama took most vigorous shape with the touch of electrifying personality of Sri Chaitanya. It is extremely

difficult to get a connected history of Jatra from the very beginning till now. The performance in which Gaurangadeva himself took part, i.e., 'Badu 'Chandidas' Srikishna Kirtan may be designated as an example of old Jatra form.

Sakti Jatras

At the very first stage of Jatra performances, Sakti Jatras were played throughout Bengal. After that Krishna Jatra dominated the field and swept the other things away. It came into being after the rise of Vaishnavism in the country. Chiefly by virtue of its rich devotional tune, lyrical and emotional beauty Krishna Jatra became forerunner of pre-modern Jatras.

After Chaitanya-phase in Bengal, there came a most decadent and impotent era in the field of literature and drama. Stupid vulgarity paved its way through the so called 'popular' songs, 'Kavi' songs 'Ankhrari', 'Half-Ankhrari', etc. Indecent and low tastes first caused a feeling of repulsion in the minds of cultured people towards the Jatras, and then with the spread of education people grew fond of new pastimes and recreations. There were a few distinct features in ancient Jatras, and some of those features make passages even in modern Jatras. It was a main motive of Jatras to sweep popular sentiment by emotion and lyric So, naturally music took a very prominent part in any performance of Jatra*. 'Niyati' or 'Nemesis' was one of the common characters in all the Jatras. So was 'Viveka' or conscience. There was ample scope for very interesting debates on the questions of religion and morality. Jatras were usually performed throughout the year. Almost all the players were singers and women were never taken in the performances. The plays were generally mythological. Jatras were presented under the open sky.

Modern Jatra

With the advancement of theatre, a new type of Jatra has been originated. It has rejected some characteristics of old Jatra form and introduced some new features to make it enough modern. In a modern Jatra there is a variety of dress and costumes, elegant language and other imposing things. Formerly there was profusion of songs in the Jatra, but in the

present-day Jatra there is much to see and consequently there is dearth of songs and poetry. It is still performed under the open blue sky and the idea of open air theatre emerges greatly from it.

Generally, the audience, who even number five thousands or more sit all around the place where it is performed. The players cut a passage through them to make exit or entrance.

Now-a-days social, mythological and historical Jatras are played. In Cooch-Bihar there exists a type of Jatra named 'Bisha-hari', which tells the story of 'Manasha-Mangal'. There are innumerable 'Bisha-hari' parties in Cooch-Bihar. In North-Bengal there is another popular form of Jatra known as 'Kushan'.

Jatra Parties

In the modern days, Jatras are again regaining their lost fields. These are played throughout the year. Many Jatra parties, namely Nav-ranjan Opera, Ranjan Opera, Natta Company, Arya Opera, Ganesh Opera, Provash Opera, Satyamber Opera, Chandi Opera, Calcutta Opera, Vandani Opera, etc., have already earned a big reputation in this show-business.

Among the playwrights of Jatra, Shri Phani Bhushan Vidyavinoda (also an actor), Brojendra Kumar Dey, M.A., B.T., Nanda-Gopal Choudury, etc., are prominent. Economically, Jatra parties are well-set. Prominent actors are highly paid. An actor named Shri Phani Motilal draws Rs. 2,200/- per month. Many actors from film and stage are taking Jatra performances as their part-time job. Generally these parties are not seasonal, but permanent. Unlike the past, in many modern Jatra-teams, women are taken. But still with the respectable parties it is a convention to exclude female artistes.

Duration of a Jatra is from three to four hours. It is played only at night. No question of settings comes in Jatra. There is no special illumination done except Hazac, lantern or electric-light which only make the actors visible. Still Indian instruments are used in these performances. Reaction of the performances are encouraging. Although it has lost much of its past sweetness and originality, still the revival of Jatra should be highly welcomed.

*After every scene chorous songs were presented as light entertainer, which also gave the connecting link to the story.