

Jatra A Traditional Theatre of Bangladesh

BY SAYEED AHMAD



the several traditional theatrical arts of Bangladesh, jatra is perhaps the most exciting, colourful and durable.

Some experts hold that some forms of dance, drama and music which could be termed as a precursor of jatra can be seen in the Dravidian culture of the sub-continent 3,000 years before Christ. Later with the arrival of the Aryans the two cultures helped shape jatra's spiritual qualities on the one hand and entertainment value on the other.

Famous Chinese historian and traveller Faxien chronicled in the 5th century his impression of the jatra of Bengal. The great poet Jayadeva of the 10th century wrote the famous Gita Goviorda which can be taken as a Natyageeti (dance drama). Later on the poet Chandidas wrote many spiritual poems which were enacted before devotees. We come across the contribution of Chaitanya Deva of the 16th century who not only wrote pieces which were enacted but who also appeared in the female role of Radhika, a consort of Lord Krishna. It was a virile period for Jatra activity.

During the 17th century there was greater participation of the masses in

the country due to the economic prosperity. The 18th century was a lean period. We find only a handful of writers and performers labouring under difficult social and economic conditions. We can remember only Rai Sunakar Bhart Chandra whose writing garnered some popularity.

The British came to the Sub-continent in the late 18th century. In the 19th century Mir Mosharrif Hussain wrote the landmark "Behula". This was played in dance-drama form. The colonial government then caused much harm to the tradition by trying to inject its own art form in the conquered country. Jatra was naturally affected by the British theatrical tradition. But

fortunately there were some local creative giants who turned the table in their favour. The disadvantage was changed to jatra's advantage. As a result there were interesting changes in the subject matter and the techniques of presentation during the last two hundred years. Jatra in the old days used more religious subject matter. It gradually gave way to historical kings and queens and later to ordinary social events. In 1849, in the drama "Nanda Bidaya" for the first time women appeared in female roles.

In the present day we find more variety of subject matter. There are portrayals of the madness of Hitler

to an ordinary labourer's family problems. Some of the popular jattras of Bangladesh are "Jarina Surdari", "Gunai Bibi", "Rupban and King Rahim", "King Sirajuddowla", "From a Dismal Lane to an Illuminated Street" and "Poet Michel Madhusudan". Let me mention names of a few celebrated male performers, M.A. Hamid, P. Roy and late the Amalendu Biswas and amongst the female artists Jahanara Begum, Manjushri Mukherjee and Jyotsna Biswas.

The jatra stage is a rectangular one on a raised platform of 6 to 8 feet high. Located in the open air, three sides are covered. An elaborate system of make-up is evident in the mythological or historical play while expensive costumes are worn in both types of play. Colour of the costume, size of the sword, pattern of hair style often denotes the social position or the inner quality of the character. Usually, performances begin at 11 p.m. and last till sunrise. In the days gone by I had seen jattras go on for 48 or 72 hours.

Let me state the order of a jatra performance. A group will first appear to consecrate the place where the jatra is being staged. Next another group will pay homage to God. They will sing to the accompaniment of percussions and stringed instruments. Then the character Nadi will sing further eulogy in a particular mudra (gesture). Thereafter Sutradhar will

recite verses of praise and shower garlands. He will sing and dance and will also give commentaries to the problems and characters of the play. He will then request the dancers (who had been waiting outside) to come on stage, to offer their homage to the king, the courtiers and eminent personalities. The dancers sing to the accompaniment of music. And of course there will be intermittent appearances of clowns. There is another important character. He is



IN THE MAKE-UP ROOM. PERFORMERS DO THEIR OWN MAKE-UP. MR. AMALENDU BISWAS IS AT THE EXTREME RIGHT.

Vivek, or Conscience. He analyzes the evil designs of the minister against the gentle king or a dishonest friend against the passionate handsome lover. He helps to build up the sentiment of the spectators while singing on stage or off stage.

In Bangladesh there are nearly 150 jatra companies and they are all privately owned and therefore they have to face continuous financial and social hazards. In order to run a company they have to borrow substantial amounts from the village money lender or a bank at a high

rate of interest. The performance season is limited to the dry period only when villagers can easily come to see the open air shows. In the rainy season it is difficult to perform. If Nature is gentle they can hope for some profit otherwise loss will be great. Government and businessmen do not show much enthusiasm for financial support. On the contrary these jatra companies have to obtain a performance licence on payment of fees and permission from the local administrative authority before they can play in a village. Bad elements of the village who would like to see vulgar dances even if they are irrelevant to the play create problems.

In spite of great hardships and hazards, some of the jatra companies have made great strides in not only in keeping the tradition of several hundred years but also in innovating with the passage of time. Festivals are sponsored by the government and entrepreneurs in cities and villages of Bangladesh. In the old days they used to get patronage and financial support from kings and landlords. It is expected in time the government in particular and business organizations in general will come forward to support the Jatra artists, to provide good theatre for the millions of people and above all to keep the tradition alive.