

Das and “Swadeshi” Jatra: Making Jatra Political in Bengal

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Abstract

*Amrita Bazaar Patrika*¹, the popular vernacular daily of Bengal reviewed the performance of Mukunda Das’s Swadeshi Jatra Party as an appropriate expression of the Swadeshi cult. In this paper, I shall attempt to discuss how Mukunda Das, often known as the Charan Kavi, revived Jatra, the popular but severely criticised folk form in twentieth century Bengal. This paper will further elucidate how Mukunda Das made jatra a voice of the Swadeshi movement by giving Jatra the political colouring. It has been observed that jatra, most popular form of theatre, stayed outside the arena of the cultural sphere of Bengal as crude, raising questions whether this form of mass entertainment possesses any social value or has the potential to contribute significantly in the formation of the political consciousness of the nation. The breakthrough in revolutionising jatra happened due to the attempts of Mukunda Das and his troupe, the Swadeshi jatra Party. This paper aims to focus how Mukunda Das revived jatra as a significant voice to talk about issues such as colonial exploitation, feudalism, oppression of the caste system, and the nationwide anti-colonial movement. The paper purports to discuss how jatra, the folk form finally attained the political status to fulfil nationalistic aspirations with the help of Mukunda Das’s Swadeshi jatra.

Keywords: jatra, Mukunda Das, Swadeshi Jatra Party, twentieth century Bengal, Swadeshi movement, political

On July 19th, 1905, the British Government announced “the scheme to organize new province called Eastern Bengal and Assam conglomerating Chittagong, Dacca and Rajshahi division, Hill Tippera, Madras and Assam” (Sarkar 12). The declaration came on 1st September and the Partition of Bengal on October 16th, 1905. The decision of Bengal partition aggravated the anti-agitation emotions, initiated the Swadeshi movement “to annul the plan of partition by developing a national identity imbued with a sense of economic and political self-sufficiency” (Pandit 122). The anti-partition agitation and the subsequent Swadeshi movement when “public sphere became the arena of conducting politics” (122) called for the participation of the cultural sphere of Bengal as an important medium for expressing and disseminating the idea of the nation and national identity. The beginning of twentieth century Bengal witnessed, on one hand, how the English educated class began to make their presence felt in the social and political space of Bengal by legitimizing the intellectual idea of nationhood. On the other

hand, they started looking for the cultural medium for expressing and disseminating their idea of nationhood to the common people. At this juncture, jatra began to emerge as an important medium to communicate political thoughts of the Swadeshi meetings. Mimasha Pandit rightly mentioned the opinion of Aswini Kumar Dutta in this regard, “if the political ideas of the intellectuals were presented before the people through jatra rather than speeches then their dissemination would have been more effective” (Pandit 25). Jatra with its immense popularity and power to influence the mass became a substitute for the Swadeshi meetings because of its ability to hold “more charm for them than hours of platform speaking” (Pandit 122). *Mukti Kon Pathe*, an important literary account of the Swadeshi movement discussed the relevance of jatra during the Swadeshi movement “what really concerned the nationalist leaders, and the colonial government, was the effect it had the power to influence on public mind” (122). Utpal Dutt was right to state that,

The Jatra has always been not just theatre or entertainment but a school, a court of justice and a political meeting—everything. As the great anti-imperialistic struggle in India began, Jatra immediately changed its character, because it had to be with the people, in the people and among the people constantly. And when the struggle reached its peak, especially in the 1920s and 30s, with the so-called terrorist movements in Bengal, Jatra changed from religious to secular subjects almost overnight and we had historical and political plays. (Dutt 155-6)

Jatra² in West Bengal, as defined by Kironmoy Raha in *Bengali Theatre*, “had its origin in the ritualistic musical processions that formed part of religious festivals in which the deity was carried from one place to another” (Raha 5). Dealing essentially with Hindu mythological themes, jatra palas in Bengal seemed an unlikely form of art to deliver political ideas to the public. Jatra was generally categorised as a medium of entertainment, submerged into the world of gods and goddesses. The emergence of the Bengal Renaissance³ further embittered the attitude towards jatra. Towards the end of eighteenth century, Bengal witnessed the effect of the Renaissance with its quest to form cultural identity. The cultural front of eighteenth century Bengal motivated by the “high brow” professional public theatre and patronised by the social elites, felt the “urge to demarcate themselves from the lower orders prompted the new bhadrakal converts to Western education to dissociate themselves from the urban folk culture” (Banerjee 153). Under the influence of the movement, the English educated intellectuals began viewing jatra as “coarse and vulgar” and championed “the colonial import”, the proscenium theatre, as “sophisticated and refined” (Ahasanuzzman 26). This apprehension of the English educated Bengali class towards jatra, was perhaps an expression towards, what termed by Andreas Huyssen as “modernism’s ‘anxiety of contamination’ by mass culture” (Huyssen vii). The high culture, invented by the Orientalist rulers and intensified by its native subjects “decreed expressions of popular culture as degenerate and licentious; it did not fit in with the emerging definitions of high Hindu culture that the native literati had begun to pride itself on” (Chatterjee 120). Both the British government and the educated Bengali gentry feared the contamination by the mass culture. They believed in what John Carey stated in *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, “it seemed that the masses were not merely degraded and threatening but also not fully alive. A common allegation is that they lack souls” (Carey 10). In this context, Sudipto Chatterjee in his celebrated book *The Colonial Staged: Theatre in Colonial Calcutta* had given reference of the Bengali journal *Somprakash* in 1862 criticising jatra as “a

perversion of the ideal [theatrical forms] of the ancient times”. The article elaborated why jatra was not given a status of “high art” as “there is no attention given to the differences between the appearance, costume, speech and behaviour of different characters” (Chatterjee 120). Sumanta Banerjee in *The Parlour and The Streets* discussed how the “newly acquired financial status and educational position” influenced the cultural choices of the bhadrakalok community. They were looking for cultural forms that were “distinct” which could only be achieved by eliminating the forms of popular culture such as jatra “which used to be a part of the common literary and musical heritage of the Bengalis”. This attitude was a reflection of their “urge to determine themselves from the lower orders prompted the new bhadrakalok converts to Western education to dissociate themselves from the urban folk culture” (Banerjee 121).

With the rise of the secular way of life and the traditional attitude to caste gradually disintegrating in nineteenth century, jatra had begun to take a more generalised form. Attempts were made by various groups of jatra enthusiasts, authors, and theatre personalities to revive jatra by “introducing loose four or five act division, dialogues in prose and a wider range of subjects” (Raha 8). Despite the changes in the themes and form, jatra gradually lost its ground in the cultural sphere of Bengal. *Bidya Sundar* and palas of the similar nature retained popularity among the common people, however within the sophisticated class jatra continued to be treated as “an object of censure in the eyes of the social leaders who patronized the new—and to them vastly superior—form of entertainment and art—the theatre” (8). Exceptions were certainly present as in 1867 Girish Chandra Ghosh performed Michael Madhusudan Datta’s *Sharmishtha* by amalgamating elements of *jatra* with the theatre. Ghosh had formed a jatra troupe at Baghbazar named the *Baghbazar Amateur Theatre* with stalwarts like “Nagendra Lal Bandyopadhyay, Dharmadas Sur and Radhamadhab Kar” who “deliberately chose Datta’s style of Western-style play, performing it in the *Jatra* style, a style earlier abhorred by both the British as well as the babus” (Chatterjee 119). Questions were obviously raised as to the reasons behind diffusing what was considered as ‘low art’ jatra with the ‘high art’ of theatre. Utpal Dutt analysed the reasons for the unique combination as not to reinvent the form of jatra but to gain mastery over the form of theatre. In order to master the technique of theatre production, to make the theatre more “refined” to express human life and conflicts, Girish Ghosh “wanted to infuse it with whatever was lively and powerful” (119). But the interesting aspect of his observation was that he thought of jatra as lively, possessing the potential to incorporate the sensations of human life.

[Girish] wanted an amalgam of theatre and [jatra]; all his life he sought to master the technique of theatre: its five-act-drama-structure, its refined human conflict, its sophisticated suspense and catharsis, but he wanted to infuse it with whatever was lively and powerful in the traditional[jatra]. Above all, he wanted the ‘public’ in his theatre, a public he knew so well and could tell unerringly what pleased it and what did not. (Chatterjee 125)

Dutt’s words, though shed some light on the discussion surrounding the hybrid theatre repertoire of Girish Ghosh, incorporating jatra with the theatre, his words were more of a testimony towards Ghosh’s genius. Dutt did not extend his argument towards offering a significant discussion on the importance and relevance of jatra. It was later in the book *On Theatre*, where Dutt had finally stated that “the jatra is a living form. It continues to

grow. It changes because it is living thing, and it reflects the aspirations of the people” (Dutt 155). Dutt’s words further resonated with Balwant Gargi’s point that jatra “underwent changes in every period” (Gargi 17), to cater to the needs of the contemporary society. Gargi noted that “As political consciousness grew, Jatra writers gave political colouring to their palas. Mythological stories, fights between Good and Evil, symbolised the Indian masses and the British” (15-16). Dutt’s idea of jatra as a living, breathing entity, which had been thematically transformed to talk about the struggle of the people against the imperialist rulers somewhat first came into existence during the anti-partition Swadeshi movement. The intellectuals wanted to form a unified idea of the nation as opposed to the colonial concept of the partitioned Bengal. They wanted a mass medium that would express the Swadeshi ideologies while entertaining the common people. The middle-class theatre going audience finally understanding the potential of jatra started visiting the jatra performances. This new sect of jatra audience significantly changed the way jatra was staged as “they transported some techniques of jatra to theatre, in reverse, they also infused some characteristics of the theatre into jatra performances” (Pandit 26). Jatra, attaining this new hybrid form, became an ideal and “effective means of spreading seditious feelings” (Guha-Thakurta 8). With the new-found hybrid nature, along with the popular mythical stories new historical themes became part of the Bengali jatra repertoire.

Swadeshi jatra had to perform complex set of responsibilities, catering to the taste of the audience while influencing them with the swadeshi ideals. Due to the communicative agency and immense popularity of the form, swadeshi jatra performed palas based on mythological or historical themes to serve the taste of the *jatrar darshak*, but “accommodated in its framework political, economic, and social topics, surreptitiously” (Pandit 24). The new form of jatra performances developed a unique “performative mechanism that could balance both side by side, with ease” (24). It was Mukunda Das who successfully explored the political possibilities of jatra. Mukunda Das, inspired by the stalwart Motilal Roy, performed the kind of jatra pala that expressed the swadeshi thoughts. Rustom Bharucha in his book *Rehearsals of Revolution: The Political Theatre of Bengal* began his discussion on the political nature of jatra with Mukunda Das. For Bharucha, Mukunda Das “was the first artist in Bengal to realize that the *jatra* did not have to rely on traditional subjects based on stories from the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, and the *Puranas*. He also realized that jatra had languished since nineteenth century because it had retained a sacrosanct aura despite the loss of its religious significance” (Bharucha 90). Bharucha further commented that Mukunda Das rejected the “aura” of jatra to make it a vehicle for preaching nationalism. Mukunda Das transformed jatra into a political dialogue but retained the spontaneity of speech. Das’s Swadeshi jatra “was heaved with a stupendous responsibility to consider the taste, likings and dislikings of the public/audience while trying to influence them” (Pandit 26). Close attention to these details ensured that “the ideas showcased by the jatra performances had a positive impact on the process of opinion formation and left a deep imprint on it” (26). The interesting aspect of Mukunda Das’s jatra troupe was its ability to question the contemporary issues while retaining the mythological colour. Utpal Dutt evaluated this aspect of Mukunda Das’s jatra in the final section of his book *On Theatre* entitled “the Jatra and its relevance” where Dutt discussed how jatra during the Swadeshi movement and the subsequent boycott agitation retained its mythological flavour, only the actors behaved differently, presented their dialogues with nationalist fervour -

Instead of the 'good' embodied in Arjun, we had it embodied in the Bengali revolutionary holding a pistol. Instead of the *asur* painted in black, we had the British imperialists. So that although the play was supposed to be reflecting modern themes, the pattern was that of a myth with very disparate roles assigned to each character" (Dutt 156).

Utpal Dutt did not mention the palas by Mukunda Das and his intervention with the form and techniques of jatra, but if we look at the historiography of jatra as political medium, one can trace how in Mukunda Das's jatra the "topical political figures and situations gradually crept into the mythological framework of the jatra. The gods and goddesses became freedom fighters and patriots. The devils and villains were transformed into members of the ruling class" (Bharucha 90). *Matripuja*, the mythological pala of Gagan Chandra Sutradhar, Bhushan Chandra Das, and the skit of Mukunda Das enjoyed immense popularity and relevance because of the portrayal of Bhagabati, who assumed the role of a goddess along with "the form of a slayer for protecting the weak, nonetheless, remains the mother of all, the weak, and the corrupt" (Pandit 27). In *Durgasur*, "the primordial force was equated with a divine warrior mother, the protector" (27). Such palas were severely censored by the British government due to their suggestive allusion. Mukunda Das had radically transformed the content and form of the jatra performances to embrace the spontaneity of the jatra to form a framework "that placed *swadhinata* (freedom) against *paradhinata* (subjection), and used this larger juxtaposition as a larger context to portray the battle between the opposing moral orders" (Pandit 147). Mimasha Pandit in the article "Swadeshi Jatra Performances in Bengal (1905-1911): Locating the Ground for Engendering A Nuanced National Identity in South Asia" mentioned the anonymous work *Mukti Kon Patha* that noted how "*jatra* was a form of communication that could act as a substitute of swadeshi meetings" (Pandit 122). The idea behind such jatra palas was to invoke on one hand "the idea of *swadesh*" on the other hand disseminating "the idea of *swadhinata*" (123). Mukunda Das's Swadeshi jatra invoked "alongside an idea of ingenuity", a kind of oneness, "supported by separation or breaking free from an external or foreign force antithetic to this oneness" (123) -

The gamut of ideas, brought together by the communicative mechanism of *jatra*, tried to arouse a sense of indigeneity amongst the public. But the sense of 'self' was a communicated idea disseminated by jatra performances among the people (123).

In order to form national identity, it was important for the intellectuals to arrange the jatra performances in a manner to create "a rendezvous between the ideas of the intellectuals and popular emotion" (123). The relevance of Mukunda Das's Swadeshi jatra lied in the understanding of popular emotion as a combination of "the complex set of root metaphors and practices" (123) that defined the popular existence. The emotions expressed through Mukunda Das's jatra not only influenced the political thoughts but also directed the social actions of the mass. The intellectuals used this popular emotion by moulding the "root metaphors and practices" (123) with nationalist ideologies to gain hegemony -

Jatra communication, therefore, served as public space where performance was used to make the Bengalis who came to witness the performance understand the ideas, discover a concord between it and their world believes, internalize the

product that emerged from this concord and transform it into a part of their mentality. (123)

The swadeshi jatra became one of the “effective means of spreading seditious feelings” (Chatterjee 144). The palas that were performed during the Swadeshi movement throughout Bengal and Assam inspired the masses to direct their understanding towards an imagined idea of unified nation. It was the spontaneity of the jatra form that made the dissemination of the nationalist ideologies possible. Pandit in “Contextualizing the Text: Middle Space and Meaning Making in Jatra Palas” discussed how the form of jatra allowed the necessary interventions, as the characteristics of the Swadeshi jatra possessed the “ability to develop, to add, precisely, to extemporise. The jatra palas or the text of jatra, therefore, had to be of such nature that it could accommodate modifications. Likewise, the pala *Matripuja* was modified into various forms during the swadeshi era” (124). The popularity of the pala *Matripuja* became a matter of great concern for the British officials as they started reading into the lines. The female figure of *Matripuja*, Bhagabati was a combined form of Kali, Chamunda, and Chandika. To protect her world from the oppression of the asuras, Bhagabati assumed the role of the protector. In the words of Bhagabati, she was, “*ranarangini asuranashini ma*”⁴ [the dancer of battles, and the slayer of demons, the mother of the weak] (Gangopadhyay 266) Bhagabati was “*svyam matrirupuni*” (266) the Mother protector. Here she became a symbol of the warrior mother slaying the foreign demon to save her children from oppression. The swadeshi jatra palas, though retained the mythological fervour of the past, finally modified the mythical themes in such a manner that the jatras became the voice of the anti-partition movement. The result was revolutionary. The British Raj who abhorred the jatra as a crude form of entertainment, especially catering to the creative needs of the lower, illiterate class, has suddenly started viewing the jatra performances in a different light. The imperialist rulers started to raise objections against performances such as *Birita Sanhar* and *Mayabati*. The Raj started to fear the spontaneity of the jatras, its ability to “develop, to add, precisely, to extemporise” (Pandit 124). Not only the mythological palas, but the swadeshi palas based on the historical themes were also questioned by the British government -

Under the influence of *kal* (age/time) and *ruchi* (opinion/taste) jatras began to introduce historical themes and characters in the constitution of the palas. One such pala was Haradhan Roy’s pala Padmini narrating the historical fall of Chittor under the advances of Allaudin Khalji... Haripada Chatterjee transformed the battle of Chittor into an ethical battle fought at the behest of Padmini who was at once portrayed as a historical character and at the other time as a mythical figure or as a counterpart of the Primordial force. History in this treatment attained mythical proportion. The intermixture of history and myth probably rendered the narrative open to varied interpretations. (124-5)

This open-endedness of the swadeshi jatras often led to varied interpretations from the audience and discomfort for the British government. The discomfort was due to the ability of the jatra performance to incorporate indefinite options as far as the meaning of the performance was concerned. The government became very severe towards such performances “because that enabled the intention and interpretation nexus of jatra pala to travel between two time frames-that of the play and that of the reader/public/ audience” (126). The authority started to impose restrictions on the performance of the palas that

they think have any elements of “political situation of India of to-day” (126). The performance of *Matripuja* was one such example where the performance was strictly prohibited because of the presence of common names such as Aswini, Surendra etc. viewed as an attempt to connect myth and reality. The reason that the foreign rulers were so severe towards the performances of the open-ended jatra palas was the ability to make connection between the worlds of myth and reality and most important of the profound impression the performances had on the audience -

Mukunda Das adapted the pala *Matripuja* by Kunja Behari Gangopadhyay in his famous pala having the same name. The original pala was based on a mythological theme that narrated a battle between the Gods and the demons. But the technique of performance, inherent in a jatra performance, invoked a feeling of excitement among the audiences. Most of the jatra performances of the age excited such adrenalin rush in the audiences, making them shout, or express themselves in some other audible or visible manner. During a performance of Mukunda Das, held in Jessore, women audiences were reported to have broken their English made glass bangles, in a fit of excitement. (127)

The women who broke their glass bangles in a cathartic response after the performance of *Matripuja* was a result of the distinction that was drawn clearly “between ‘our’ swadeshi and ‘their’ foreign-made goods. Such a moral ordering boosted the dissemination of the notion of ‘economic swadeshism’” (Pandit 151). Such a reaction was the result of the un-natural setting of the swadeshi jatra. The audience was given a performance to observe that is without any conclusion, a pala literally historical/mythological, but figuratively political. While observing the historical/political events being unfolded in front of them, the audience felt that they were not the mere spectators but very much present within the performance, as they “witnessed the particular scene as a part of it and interpreted it in a moment of flux where both the times, time of the narrative and the time of the audience, collapsed into a whole” (128). By breaking the barrier between the world of the narrative and the world of the audience, Mukunda Das’s Swadeshi jatra attempted to bring the two worlds in “one place, together, making the audience feel more involved in the performance, hence, more excited” (129). Swadeshi Jatra with their jatra performances offered the audience with the knowledge of a new stage, where they had the liberty to analyse the ideas presented before them, form the meaning as per their understanding “express their opinion and internalize it.” (Pandit 37)

Mukunda Das’ swadeshi jatra had created a space of its own, where the audience and actors can come to the in-between space, between the two worlds of the narrative and that of the performance. The audience standing in the in-between space could see the possibility of attaining a mor powerful plane “one that was free of the prying surveillance of the Raj and the ever-assertive hold of the ideas of the nationalist leaders” (Pandit 133).

Notes

¹Amrita Bazaar Patrika, 18th April, 1907.

²Jatra, the most popular traditional theatre—form in the eastern part of the subcontinent, is not so old as to possess a myth for an origin, as, say, the Sanskrit or classical Indian theatre does... The least controversial that could be said about its beginning and early evolution is that it may have sprung from an ancient form of folk-drama but prior to the emergence of the Chaitanya movement in sixteenth century Bengal, jatra could not boast of any definite shape. It probably existed in the form of loose song-and-dance sequences, very provisional in character, without any pretensions of “plot” or structure. The earliest jatra plays (*palas* in Bengali) that have come down to us dated only from the late eighteenth century. There must have been earlier compositions which are long extinct. It is certain that the earliest *palas*, very much a part of the oral literary tradition of pre-British Bengal, were never written down and so were gradually lost to us. So, for all practical purposes, it is only from the sixteenth century onwards that the nebulous folk-theatre of Bengal started taking a somewhat tangible shape in the form of Jatra. Around the sixteenth century, Jatra became the most popular entertainment, having pushed the musical narration-cum-puppet dance to the background. Chaitanya (1486-1533) and his associates, astute propagandists as they were, were the first to employ the performing arts (dance, music, play-acting) for the furthermore of their faith. But this fact alone cannot positively affirm what has been called the Krishnite origin of Jatra. It is more likely that Shaivite, Sakta, and other sects also tried to exploit and mold this popular theatre-form for their own sectarian benefit, but were not as successful as the Vaishnavas were. One thing is clear: no jatra play which had the feeblest claim to structure before there arose structured narratives in the Bengali literature...The earliest jatra *palas* were composed on the same principles, structural or otherwise, as those of the *mangal-kavyas* (Sarkar 1). The early nineteenth-century degeneration of Jatra was caused mainly by the wealthy amateurs, the progenies of the Calcutta “Babus,” who were seekers of cheap and gross entertainment rather than men with a mission. So, before the public theatre was finally in, Jatra fell out of favour with the educated city audience. Several writers around the middle of the last century bitterly complain about the banality, coarseness and vulgarity that Jatra has fallen prey to, and were eager for a change. Playwrights like Ramnarayan Tarakratna (1822-1866), who in spite of his lack of western education was surprisingly well advanced for his time, supports western-type plays as fit vehicles for educated playwrights and rejects the Jatra as a model for the new Bengali playwright. Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-1873) laments the degeneration of tastes that the Bengali audience demonstrates in its choice of theatrical entertainment, i.e. Jatra. Therefore, the establishment of public stage and production of Western-type plays ushered in a change of taste which was long overdue and Jatra was almost banished from Calcutta. However, it left its memory in the operatic stage plays which attained some popular success on the Calcutta stages during the second half of the nineteenth century, but by itself it was never accepted with much enthusiasm by the educated or elite audience. Eventually Jatra became the fostering of its only constant patron, the rural audience.

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³The period between 1795 and the end of the nineteenth century is named as “Bengal Renaissance” by Rammohan Roy because within this time Bengal has gone through significant, radical changes after the Islamic rule..

⁴Kunja Behari Gangopadhyay, *Matripuja ba Svargoddhar*, p.266.

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