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 Govinda 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 Mosharrat 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
jatras of Bangladesh are "Jarina
Surdari", "Gunai Bibi", "Rupban
and King Rahim", "King
Sirajuddowlal", "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 jatras 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
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.

Inspite 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 entreprenuers 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.