

# YÁTRÁ OF ASSAM, BENGAL AND ORISSA : A STUDY

**Dr. Tridib Kr. Goswami\***

Yátrá of both Assam, Bengal and Orissa has an important landmark in the Cultural History of India. Whenever the term Yátrá, is brought for discussion the name Bengal comes with it. But in reality Bengal, alone, cannot claim for this term. The term Yátrá is also known as Yátrá-gán and there are evidences that this folk art-form was in practice both in Assam and in Orissa.<sup>1</sup>

There is a controversy among scholars regarding the term Yátrá. It is chiefly a 'Hindi-European' word, applied to mean 'Festival' or 'Travelling' indicates travelling from place to place. The popular Yátrás of the southern India and the north-eastern India are - Surya Yátrá, Ratha Yátrá, Rasa Yátrá, Doula Yátrá etc. Among the people of Bengal, there is a festival known as Yátrá which is performed by unmarried boys and girls.<sup>3</sup> We have another instance of Yátrá popular in Orissa among the common people, is known as sahi Yátrá.<sup>4</sup>

In the eastern part of Assam specially in Goalpara district this living performing folk art-form known as Yátrá is found prevalent.<sup>5</sup> The popular Yátrá of this region are - Gowalani Yátrá, Bhasan Yátrá, Manai Yátrá etc.<sup>6</sup>

The Yátrá, performance of Bengal has influence in the life of the people and has been accepted traditionally as a part and parcel of their life irrespective of caste and creed.<sup>7</sup> These Yátrás are Krishna Yátrá, Ram Yátrá, Nala Yátrá, Vidyasundar Yátrá, Chandi Yátrá, Bhasan Yátrá, Bishahara, Swadeshi Yátrá etc. Besides these, Maree Yátrá in Daxinatya and Gatre in Madras can be mentioned in this context.

Although, the word Yátrá is found in Sanskrit dictionary<sup>8</sup> but this is not found in any critical book where Sanskrit dramas have been discussed systematically<sup>9</sup>. So, it is doubtful whether the term is used to denote abhinaya or not. But in Assam, saint poet Sankaradeva, used the term for his first two dramas (Cihna- Yátrá, kalidaman-Yátrá) and Madhavadeva also used the term for the same purpose. (Nrisimha-Yátrá, Janma Yátrá).

A discussion of the development of the Yátrás of Assam, Bengal and Orissa is necessary to reflect the context and the purpose of them.

In Assam, once, Yátrá was a popular performing art-form and people from all starts considered it as source of entertainment.<sup>10</sup>

---

*\*Assistant Professor Department of English, Batadrava S.S.S. College, Assam, India  
Email: tridibgoswami7@gmail.com*

---

In Assam, Yátrá is also known as Chitrabhinaya; Tithiram Bayan of Barpeta can rightly be considered as the father of Yátrá in Assam. During 1860-65, he organized a Yátrá party and in organizing this party, he was influenced by the Yátrá of West-Bengal. In this context, we can mention Yátrá parties of West- Bengal like Bholanath Opera and Sailabala opera. In 1870 Jayadeva Sarmah of Nalbari (Mugkuchi village) established the first commercial Yátrá party in Assam. It is also known that the pandas of Kamakhya, in 1875 invited Gopal Ostad, an expert of the performing art-form of Bengal to Assam and he instructed the young people of Kamakhya regarding abhinaya. They performed Yátrá like Mar Ashibad, Nite Aci and it is told that Yátrá in Assam, in the true sense, started from Kamakhya<sup>11</sup>.

During 1890's another Yátrá party emerged in Assam and it was choukhin Yátrá Dol, Before beginning of the 20th century, we find different Yátrá parties in the districts of Assam. Those important Yátrá parties of Assam are – Dubapara Baruwani Yátrá party, Dahikata Yátrá party, Bhojmala Yátrá party, Lalabari Yátrá party, Pipalibari Yátrá dol, Maruwa Yátrá dol, Sabhagondha, Sanaton opera party, Suradevi Natya Sangha, SilaKalika opera party, Daxin Ganakgari opera party, kahinoor opera party etc.<sup>12</sup>

In the History of Yátrá in Assam, the year 1923 can be

considered as the milestone. Creating a new environment to the Yátrá

performance in Assam, revolutionary artist Brajanath Sarma faced

criticism from the contemporary society. But neglecting all kinds of criticism imposed upon him, he acquired knowledge of dancing, singing, instruments, abhinaya and stage-direction. Personalities like Ahindra Choudhury and Hishikesh Mukharjee helped him in this context.<sup>13</sup>

In 1925, Rupknowar Jyotiprasad Agarwala also started a

movement of Yátrá specially with his new concept of stage. But truly speaking, it was Brajanath Sarma who brought a revolutionary change in the Yátrá performance of Assam. His Silakalika opera party (1923) is well known for the Yátrás like Ranapratap and Baji-Rao which were originally staged in West Bengal. In 1924, Sarma established another Yátrá party i.e., Daxin Ganakgari Opera party. This party continued its Yátrá performance successfully for a long period of five years. The another well-known Yátrá party, Assam Kohinoor party has a significant place in the Cultural History of Assam for the step taken by it in staging Assamese plays with all the colours of Yátrá performance. Those Assamese plays are - Hindubeer, Nagaknowar, Moranjiyari, Ranjeet Singha, Barjita<sup>14</sup> From 1921 to 1934, Sarma contributed a significant contribution to the Yátrá performance of Assam. He tried to expose all his experiences and learnings through the dramas staged under Yátrá performance. In the year 1934, Megaphone company of Calcutta recorded Patita and Barjitta which were sung by Bhupen Hazarika<sup>15</sup>. During that time, the revolutionary artist, Bishnu Rabha also recorded the songs of the palas like Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva at Calcutta<sup>16</sup> and Bhupen Hazarika sang the Pala songs of Sonitknowari, Jaymati and Beula while he was only eleven years old and these songs were recorded by Cenola Company.<sup>17</sup>

Co-acting in Yátrá-performance was started in 1930 . And in 1933 a few girls were invited and instructed by Bipin Barua, Krishna Sarma, Purandar Talukdar and Braja Sarma. These girls, who came forward with courage were Sarbeshwari Das, Golapi Das, Phuleswari

Das, Sailya Bala Devi, Binoda Gogoi and Labanaya Das.<sup>18</sup>

The dramas performed under Yátrá performance were ShriRamchandra, Harichandra, Kounaj Knowari, Gada knowar, Raktanican, Ashrusagar, Madan- Basanta, Leela kanika, Abhimainyu Vadha, Symanta-Haran, Baji-Rao, Kalapahar, Vijoy-Basanta, Lalitaditya, Moran Jiyarce, Panipath , Nagaknowar, Sibaji, Ranjeet Singha, Ban-Raja, etc.

It is observed that the Yátrá of Assam performed chiefly on the mythological and historical themes. Emergence of woman actress is an important milestone in the development and growth of the Yátrá-performance of Assam. In the beginning there was no provision of stage. Yátrá was performed in a open place and this place was surrounded by the audience and to separate the audience from the stage, i.e., the open ground, a line of bamboo sticks was employed.<sup>19</sup> In some places mounted-soil was considered as the stage of Yátrá-performance. As there were no electricity and microphone, as such the performers delivered their speech loudly so that the audience could listen.

During the time of Yátrá-performance in Assam, most of the performers were cultivators. So, after completion of their day-long work, at the evening they started their walk for a particular place where, they used to perform Yátrá.<sup>20</sup> This Yátrá-performance began at 10 p.m. and continued upto dawn. As the Yátrá parties were not commercial, they had not received a single penny. And sometimes they were offered money from the audience, which was a very rare case.

Among the Muslim community people of Assam, Manai Yátrá is very popular. In this Yátrá, we notice that Sultan Badshah, the father of Manai, became a phaquir under the influence of a Darvesh.<sup>21</sup> The pieces of good advice given to Manai by his father are the themes of Manai Yátrá.

máo baro dhan re manái máo baro dhan  
jár ghare máo náí tár nisphal jiban.  
dai mithá dudha mithá áro mithá nani  
tár caite adhik mithá máo hana janani  
o bachá manái re:

ek karath bheje máyer guye ár mute  
ar ek karath bhejey máyer magh másiyá site.  
máoyer pendaoner ácal khán cháilar gáot diyá  
cáripor ráthi poáy máo tuser águn niyá<sup>22</sup>.

i.e., mother is the most precious wealth in one's life. Fruitless is the life of a person who does not have mother. Mother is sweeter than any of the sweet things-curd, milk, butter etc. While her child's excreta soaks a part of her body, the other parts get wet with the winter dew drops.

Mother protects her child by wrapping the tender body of the child with her own cloth while spending the night sitting by the side of the fire made of husk dust.

Both in Assam and West Bengal Yátrá-performance<sup>23</sup> is performed keeping connection with the religious festivals like Durgapuja, Saraswati puja, Laxmi puja, Basanti puja, Yagadhartipuja, Bisvakarma puja etc. In spite of these festivals, in some annual festivals, some family invite Yátrá-party to perform Yátrá for the purpose of entertainment and to ventilate religious feelings. In West Bengal, scholars are not of one opinion regarding the term Yátrá. A few of them want to comment that singing and dancing of the ancient religious festivals was considered as Yátrá. This word was applied before 400 BC by Koutilya. According to another group of scholars the word Yátrá is still applied in West Bengal to denote a particular performing art.<sup>24</sup>

The exact date of the emergence of Yátrá in West Bengal is not known. The year 1820 is roughly estimated as the beginning of Yátrá in West Bengal. The Yátrá parties in West Bengal was named as Sokher Yátrá or Natua-Yátrá. Another group opines that since the time of Chaitanyadeva to 1842, ancient plays like Kaliadaman Kamasa Vadha were performed in West Bengal as Yátrá.<sup>25</sup>

During the time of the Bhakti movement of West Bengal, devotees went singing and dancing in processions. They sang in temple courtyards, narrating the events of their patron God's life, and expressed their devotion with frenzied acting. The collective singing amidst the clang of gongs and fumes of tin cense produced a mass hypnosis and sent these singers into an acting trance. This singing with dramatic elements gradually came to be known as Yátrá, which means 'to go in a procession'.<sup>26</sup>

Once Yátrá was an indispensable part of the people of West Bengal and in the Cultural History of West Bengal, it occupies a significant place. Yátrá is not only the source of entertainment for the common people of West Bengal but it also transfers messages from generation to generation for living a better life.

Yátrá or Yátrá-gán is also known as Doler-gán<sup>27</sup> and it is, strictly speaking, a step in the development of theatre before the modern mobile theatre. Yátrás found frequently performed in West Bengal are Nimai Sainyas, Vawal Sainasha, Sagar-vasa, Sati-ma-Rupban, Arun Santi, Beder Meye Jotshna etc.<sup>28</sup>

The Yátrá of Bengal expresses Patriotic fervor, historic refinement, and explosive nationalism with an interlacing of the Vaishnava cult. Yátrá actors in Bengal are a bigger draw than modern professional actors. A good yatra company generally has a salaried staff of 15,000 rupees per month and performs without a microphone before an audience of three to five thousand people. The Yátrá, in its production method, in its use of stage areas, movement, speed, and the oak like stance of its actors, paradoxically looks more modern in terms of theatrical aesthetics than the realistic 'Modern' play.<sup>29</sup>

In the development of Yátrá in Bengal, the important names whom we must remember are - Sada shiva Buddhimanta Khan, Phani Bhushan Bidya Binod, Chandra Sekhar, Sreedan Das, Subol Das, Badan Adhikari and Sisuram Adhikari, a brahmin by caste who brought overall perfection to the Yátrá-performance of Bengal.<sup>30</sup>

### ***The Challenge***

In 18th century, while Bengal was completely under the East-India company, Yátrá parties gave entertainment to the British rulers in some festive occasions like the Ratha puja, Durga puja, Bishwakarma puja etc. In 19th century Yátrá became more secular in Bengal and themes performed were mostly taken from the contemporary world. In 20th century, new changes have been marked in the Yátrá-performance of Bengal. These yatras were composed in verse form and gradually it took turn to the prose form.<sup>31</sup>

The actors spoke improvised dialogue scenes of humour and the life of the lower strata were in spicy prose. Still music and song dominated. There were easily fifty to sixty songs in a Yátrá, which started in the afternoon and lasted till sunrise. Among the famous nineteenth century Yatra-walas was Braja Mohan Roy, who formed his Yatra troupe in 1872 and died four years later at the age of forty five, leaving behind a number of successful plays, including Ram Abhiseka (King Rama's Coronation). Another famous Yatra-wala of the period was the play-right Motilal Roy<sup>32</sup>, who introduced new energy

into the acting style during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Roy toured Bengal with his Yatra troupe carrying forward the tradition.<sup>33</sup> In the modern age of science and Technology, it is seen in Bengal that Yátrá-gán suffers a setback but Yátrá can never die and must survive with its all original colours.

In Orissa, Yátrá art-form is equally popular as in Assam or in Bengal. Yatra in Orissa corresponds to folk theatre. It is the enactment of a play a full cast and comprises music, dance, acting, singing and dramatic conflict. Earlier, religious values were communicated to the masses through the powerful medium of Yatra. Today, the style of writing plays for Yatras has undergone changes. Yatra plays are now no longer limited to the mythological, historical or fantastic subjects; they include social themes to suit modern taste. Yatra is performed on a simple stage with the spectators surrounding it on all sides. The chorus<sup>34</sup> and the musicians take their position off stage. There are no stage properties except a single seat meant to serve various functions, such as a throne, a bed or a wayside bench.

The actors move in a very theatrical manner. They deliver their speeches in high-sounding words and have to be loud enough to catch the attention of the spectators seated on all sides. Consequently they adopt an exaggerated style and are heavily made up. Their costumes glitter, then swords flash and their words thunder to the accompaniment of the crashing cymbals. Sometimes the actors are able to depict subtle emotional moods like, love, sorrow, pathos, but the element of exaggeration is always present as they have to project themselves as larger than life figures. Yatra becomes a great source of entertainment because of its tuneful traditional music with simple melodic lines, dance sequences, songs, drama and humour. Taken as a whole, the Yatra of Orissa has always remained essentially an institution of learning for the people in general.<sup>35</sup>

While a discussion is made about the Yátrá of Orissa, Dhanu Yátrá must be mentioned which impact upon the people of Orissa is undoubtedly remarkable and a brief elaboration of that Yátrá is necessary at the present context. This is a colourful festival of Western Orissa, particularly at Bargarh town. Dhanu Yátrá relates to the episodes of Lord Krishna's visit to Mathura where king

### ***The Challenge***

Kansa, the tyrant, ruled over his subjects. The ceremony is colourfully observed at Bargarh where thousands of people assemble daily to witness the ceremony. The town of Bargarh becomes Mathura. The river Jira becomes Yamuna and the village Amapali on the other side of river becomes 'Gopa'. Different acts of the puranic descriptions are performed and spectators witness it with great joy.<sup>36</sup>

For the first time Yátrá parties (troupes) were formed in Orissa in 1878. But later, Yátrá parties were formed on professional lines. Pioneers of professional Oriya Yátrá were Jagannath Pani (1836-37), Gopal Das, Balakrishna Mohanty (1900-58), Govind Chandra Sur Deo (1884-1939), Krishna Prasad Basu (1896- 1968) and Baishnab pani (1882-1956). Baishnab Pani modernised and revolutionised the Yátrá form in Orissa. His contribution to the growth of mass culture as a way of popular entertainment, is immense. He introduced duet

dances and prose dialogues in blank verse and used techniques of Western Opera. These plays with their embellishments were also called

'Giti-nátya'. Modern Yatra parties have become very successful under the spell of cinematic imitations. Even modern plays are being adopted for staging yatra. Modern cinema has deeply influenced the form of Yátrá. There are duet dances. Songs in the present-day yatras are set to popular tunes mostly in imitation to cinema songs. Yátrá parties not only performed in rural areas, these theatre also being staged in small towns. It has become very popular and very lucrative business. More and more professional troupes are entering the field<sup>37</sup>.

It is worth mentioning that modern Oriya Yatra has virtually ousted the commercial theatre. Modern Oriya theatre, however, still lives due to pioneering efforts of amateur theatre groups. They are continuing their efforts to attract the audience with newer stage-plays. They deserve assistance and encouragement in this noble venture.

### ***Notes & References***

1. Bhagawati, Udoi. *Yátrár para Vhramananoi*. Guwahati : Baniprakash. P.3
2. Ibid.
3. Bhattaacharya, Asutush. *Bangla Natya Sahityar itihasha*. Calcutta : P.72.
4. Pattanayak Nityananda, Informant. 51. Baleswar. data collected on 03-11-08.
5. Datta, B.N. *A Study of the Folk Culture of the Goalpara Region of Assam*, University Publication Deptt. : G.U.
6. Bharali, Sailen. *Asomiya Lokanatyá Parampara*. Guwahati : Bani Prakash. 1992. P.44

7. Roy, Ashok. Informant. 62. Calcutta. data collected on. 07-05-04.
8. Yátrá means movement from one place to another place.
9. Sarma, Satyendra Nath. Op-cit. P.11.
10. The word was, for the first time, used in Arthasastra by Koutilya.
11. Chakrabarty, Manoj Kr. *Asomat yatrabinai aru biplavi Silpi Brajanath Sarma*, Nalbari : 2007. P.28.
12. Hazarika, Atul Ch. Op-cit. P.267-271
13. Hazarika, Atul Ch. Op-cit. P. 272
14. Ibid.
15. Nath, Rati Mohan. *Kala Ratna Bhupen Hazarika*. Nagaon : 1994. P.68.
16. Das, Jogesh. *Bishnu Prasad Rabhar Racana Samvar*(ed.). Jyoti Prakasan. 2008. P. 408-432.
17. Abahan. *Astam bacarar astam Sankhya*. P.960.
18. Hazarika, Atul Ch. Op-cit. P.275
19. Singraja, Baikuntha Nath. Informant. 65. Salmara. data collected on 27-01-04.
20. Bhattacharya, A. *Uttar Bangar Loka Sahitya O Sanskriti*. P.100-104.
21. Hussain, Ikramul. Informant. 42. Puranigudam. data collected on. 06-06-06.
22. Barma, Sukhbilas. *Bhawaiya Ethnomusicological Study*. Delhi : Vision Publishing House. P201-202
23. Sarma, S.N. Op-cit. P.12 & 13.
24. Raha, Kironmoy. *Bengali Theatre*. India : NBT. . P-9.

25. Bhattacharya, Asutosh. *Folklore of West-Bengal*. India : NBT. 2006. P. 166.
26. Gargi, Balwant. *Folk Theater of India*. New Delhi : Rupa & Co. 1991. P.14.
27. Chaudhury, Nirmal Kranti. Informant. 75. Near Calcutta University. data collected on 06-09-02.
28. Roy, Anuj Datta. Informant. 64. Garia. Calcutta data collected on. 21-03-09
29. Ibid.P.6.
30. Bhattacharya, Asutosh. Op-cit, P.169
31. Nag, Manabendra. Informant. 66. Siliguri. data collected on 09-04-06.
32. Roy, Matilal. is a contemporary of Girish Ghosh, the founder of the professional Bengali stage.
33. Gargi, Balwant. Op-cit, P.17.
34. Chorus is a group of Singers who sang songs in the ancient Greek plays.
35. Orissa Annual Reference Information and Public Relations Deptt. Govt. of Bhubaneswar : Orissa. 2006 P.95.
36. Senapati, Robindra Mohan. Op-cit, P.49
37. Senapati, Rabindra Mohan. Op-cit,P.37.