



JATRA PERFORMANCE TRADITIONS OF BENGAL AND SUBAL RANI: AN UNTOLD STORY OF A FEMALE IMPERSONATOR

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

The Jatra performance tradition has a long history. Since Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in the fifteenth century, the Krishna Jatra tradition has been popular. This form is the origin of the Jatra performance tradition in Bengal and Odisha. Initially, the form centred on purely religious subjects. Later on, secular subject matter and the lives of ordinary people were incorporated into this performance tradition. As time passed, the form and subject matter of this performance tradition changed enormously. In West Bengal, two separate trends of performance were simultaneously performed: one in city-based performances, which were mostly influenced by the theatrical tradition of the West in the metropolitan city of Kolkata, and the other, an alternative tradition, existed in the surrounding rural areas. These two performance traditions produced several productions or staged numerous productions, and the “palas” successfully enriched the Jatra tradition in Bengal and Odisha. At the same time, this “folk” Jatra form interacts with other forms in Bengal as well.

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Since 1795, when Lebedeff produced the first English play in Bengal, the National Theatre in Kolkata has been established. In 1831, the Hindu Theatre was established in Kolkata. In 1835, we saw the production of Bidyasundar. In 1835, women started to perform female roles in theatrical productions. However, in the Jatra tradition, women did not enter; only female impersonators played the female roles. Many female impersonators contributed to the Jatra performance tradition of Bengal, and they were well known to the audience, such as Kashi Mohini, Durga Rani, Jotin Rani, Chhabi Rani, Babli Rani, Satadal Rani, and Chapal Rani. Apart from these dazzling Ranis, Subal Rani was an extraordinary rural Jatra performer and impersonator. His journey of life and performance in the world of Jatra tradition has a long history. Here, my attempt is to analyse the struggles of his life, performance, and body movement. Additionally, another concern centres around the discussion of how the performance and the text intertwine with each other in the special posture of the body during the performance. Thus, the untold story of his struggle is a special concern of this article.

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The History of Female Impersonation in the Jatra Performance Tradition

The history of female impersonation in the Jatra performance tradition is rich and complex. Jatra, a traditional form of Bengali theatre, often features male actors portraying female characters. This practice has its roots in the cultural and social norms of the time when women were not allowed to perform on stage. The history of female impersonation has a long past. Since medieval times, we have been aware of the practice of female impersonation. In Krishna Jatra, boys dress up as girls to depict the life story and times of Sri Krishna. Therefore, female impersonation is an inherent part of the Jatra performance tradition. As the essayist Somdatta Mondal states in his essay titled ‘Male Ranis in Bengali Jatra,’ edited by Tutun Mukherjee, “in the early sixteenth century, it is said that Sri Chaitanya Dev performed krishnaleela. It is found in the *Adi Leela of Chaitanya Charitamrita* that Advaitya Acharya enacted the role of Sri Krishna, and Sri Chaitanya had performed the dual role of Sri Radha and Rukmini” (Mukherjee, 94). It is believed that with the spread of Vaishnavism, Jatra became popular and evolved as a performing practice and a medium of spiritual emancipation. “Chaitanya, himself an ardent lover of the form, popularised Jatra across the breadth and depth of Bengal and the adjoining states” (Mukherjee, 117). There are two reasons why men performed in female roles. First of all, it was generally easier for men to travel and perform on open stages in remote and rural areas. Secondly, the conservative Bengali society did not give permission for females to perform in rural areas. At that time, few women’s troupes participated, and those who did belonged to either prostitutes or “fallen women.” On the other hand, female impersonators are regarded as marginal artists in society. Though they are very skilled performers.

Female Impersonation and Bengali Stage: A Brief Overview

The female Impersonation in the Bengali stage and theatrical tradition has a long history. We must keep in mind that there are several groups and actors who performed on the stage of the Bengal performance tradition. The directors and practitioners are fully engaged in structuring the performances on the Bengal stage. We know that in 1795, Lefdev established the Bengal stage. He prepared the stage for performing plays in the style of Western drama. He produced the first English play in Bengali, which fulfilled two important goals. It was primarily city-based, and secondly, it was a Western import. Therefore, a great shift happened in the Jatra performance tradition of Bengal. Slowly, the main aim of the Jatra tradition, which was religious, changed to secular. Kapila Vatsyayan argues this point in his book titled *Traditional Indian Theatre: Multiple Streams*. Gradually, the Krishna jatra did not remain restricted to the prototype of the three characters of the Gita Govinda, i.e., Radha, Krishna, and Sakhi or to the Puranic stories.

Historical writing, social satire, and realism entered the arena and transformed the form from a devotional musical drama with lyrics, songs, and dance to spoken drama in prose with interspersed passages and interludes of music, rhythm, and movement. These new dramas ranged from the stories of Rama, Siva, and Kali to pure human romances. Rival groups representing the followers of particular deities or heroes presented plays simultaneously or sequentially. Mundane social drama, with marked realism, inclusive of violence, murder, and horror, also entered into the body of the existing form. By the early 19th century, there was already a flourishing tradition of Rama Jatra, Durga Jatra, Siva Jatra, and others in Bengal. Vidyasundara was one such romance of the 19th century that was popular in the Yatra tradition. (Vatsyayan, 138).

In 1831, the Hindu Theatre was established in Kolkata in the house of Prasanna Coomar Tagore. This was a significant event with a great impact on the Bengali performance tradition. This news was circulated in the Calcutta Journal in January 1832. In this theatrical tradition, women began to perform in 1835. However, it is important to note that women had not yet entered the world of Jatra performance tradition. In 1872, the National Theatre became more popular. It did a great job by introducing male actors to female roles. It has classic examples, such as the production of Nildarpan, dated 07 December 1872. In this play, the renowned actor Ardhendu Sekhar Mustafi played four roles, including a female character named "Sabitri." All theatres or playhouses are city-based, and the actors come from the elite, middle class, or lower middle class of society. However, my attempt is to delineate and bring to light the life story of an artist, Subal Rani, who is neither from an elite family nor a so-called city-based or urban-centric performer. He became a popular female impersonator in his time through the surrounding areas of his rural village named Kulia. It was the local audiences or village spectators who made him famous and kept him in their memory. There were several turns in his life, as well as shifts and changes in his profession. He led a life that was full of struggle. As Somdatta Mandal says in her essay, "Jatra tradition is remarkable in the history of performance. This 'peripheral' or 'marginal' rural artist made a significant contribution. Jatras are usually epic, four-hour-long performances played on giant outdoor stages with loud music, harsh lighting, and dramatic props" (Mukherjee 296).

Role of Subal Dasbairagya as a Female Impersonator in Jatra Performance in Birbhum District

Dijen Chakrabarty, a permanent resident of Mahadevpur village, was Subal Das Bairagya's first guru in the Jatra performance tradition. Dijen Chakrabarty was the leader of the amateur Jatra team from this village. Das Bairagya, also known as Subal Rani, was the first to play the female role in this Jatra troupe. The Pala performed was named "Chander Maya." He played the female character Jagadamba. He successfully enacted the female role and was appreciated by his team members as well as the audience. After this performance, he was greatly inspired by the team leader and the actors of the amateur party. Gradually, he began to dream of moving to Bolpur (a nearby town) for his performances. This was the first time in his life that he entered a professional Jatra party. It was a very vital period because, from his early childhood in the performance tradition of Jatra, he engaged himself in three different roles: he first played the role of an unmarried girl. Secondly, he enacted the role of a married woman. After a period of time, he also played the role of a mother. He acted with both 'Gopal Nagar Manasamata Natya Sangha' and 'Mahamaya Natya Sangha Opera' in Bolpur. It is important to keep in mind that, at that time, 'Shree Durga Opera' was very famous in Muluk village. This group was organised by Sakti Saha. This Jatra team consisted of numerous famous local personalities from the surrounding areas. These Jatra actors played their roles continuously, including Shambhu Mahara and Kasham Bhaya.

Subal Dasbairagya acted and spent the most beautiful time with them. He continued for almost fifteen to sixteen years in the world of Jatra performance tradition. He earned six rupees per night, and sometimes he earned more than six rupees. In the year 1953, he did not get a role daily on stage. At that moment, the market price was very low, and the value of money was very high. 'Ake cer' (1cer) rice was sold for twelve Anas, and the price of oil was 2.5 rupees per litre. Consequently, he played the role of a female in the 'Royal Binapani Opera'. He successfully portrayed female roles in Jatra performances from the age of twelve to twenty-two years. Here, referring to the time when the attraction for Jatra performances was most popular in rural areas. The Jatra performances were organised by local villagers on the occasions of Durga Puja, Kali Puja, Saraswati Puja, Dol Jatra, Gajan, Nabanno Utsab, etc. Later, he joined the "Gouranga Opera Party" of Bolpur town. Interestingly, at that time, he went to perform in Chara Dhankara village under the Asansol police station, District Burdwan. In this village, he played the role of a female character and stayed for more than one night.

This acting gained much popularity and brought fame to him. Since this performance, the role of female impersonator became a permanent part of his career. The expectations of the audience were gradually increasing day by day. He was becoming economically stable. He also played a role in "Munjuri Opera." He became a Bahurupi in the last years of his life because of his

poor economic condition. It was a transitional period when female characters were being introduced in local areas and rural village stages. Joshna Dutta was a very popular female artist at that time. It is interesting to note that she played the female role in “Sonai Deghi” Jatra Pala in the surrounding Bolpur town. The real female body was presented for the first time to the rural audience/spectators, and the participation of real female characters usually gained much more popularity. Slowly, the “place” and “space” of the female impersonator started to be occupied by “real flesh” and “blood” women actresses in the performance traditions of Bengali Jatra Pala. Joshna Dutta was a well-known name in the Jatra performance tradition. Dasbairgya was well aware of the female impersonators of that time, namely Babli Rani, Tutul Rani, Chabbi Rani, Santosh Rani, Shatadal Rani, Jotin Rani, etc. To a certain extent, he became the famous representative model of the female impersonator in this Jatra performance group. However, the earnings and their way of life, as well as their source of income, came under significant challenge. Thus, they started to suffer in both ways: they lost their jobs, and at the same time, they also experienced mental dissatisfaction. Generally, for the sake of existence, he took up the profession of Bahurupi. It also has a very interesting alternative history.

Becoming Subal Rani in Jatra Performance: A Glimpse of a Difficult Journey

The first appearance on stage as an actor, Subal Rani, was remarkably popular with the village audience. His low voice and effeminate nature gave him more opportunities to establish his permanent “female post” in the rural Jatra tradition. He became comfortable with the dialogues taken from Hindu Puranas and mythology. At the same time, the rigorous practice helped him in many ways to acquire knowledge of performance. In his early days of Jatra performance, he was paid six rupees per night. He did not go home every day to provide monetary support to his parents. His family was living in very poor conditions during those days. After receiving economic support from their son, the artist’s parents became very glad. Therefore, his parents managed the family’s expenditures smoothly. For the next fifteen years, Dasbairgya enacted female roles in various characters of this rural Jatra performance tradition. This history of Dasbairgya’s life is not well known to readers as well as to academics. However, this transition in his life is crucial for him. During this period, he practiced more and more and spent a lot of time acting. He performed on several stages in the adjoining areas of Bolpur town. The audience was the most powerful factor in the Jatra performance tradition. Thus, the expectations of the rural audience were successfully fulfilled by the performer. Similarly, the performance practice was ongoing in urban areas, which were based on a different dimension.

Female Impersonation, Performance Space, and the Notion of Gender: Critical Thinking

Subal Dasbairgya’s female impersonation is seen as endangering patriarchy by feminising and, therefore, emasculating and disempowering it, thereby destabilising the assiduously gendered power structure that patriarchy has built. It is very clear that the female impersonator Subal Dasbairgya represents an allegorised confrontation of the colonial and postcolonial constructions of gender. Similarly, the performances of Subal Dasbairgya raise questions about the sub-discursive politics of colonial gender constructions and his performative resistance to them. Dasbairgya’s transgender performance in the rural and semi-urban Jatra tradition, as well as the themes of Puranic myth and mythology, can also be co-opted to mark out a performative space. It is that space which allows the reader to interrogate strictly binary gender performativity. It is obvious that Dasbairgya will shift his profession from female impersonation in the Jatra performance tradition to becoming a Bahurupi artist for the sake of livelihood. Thus, social reality is vividly present in the journey of his life. It is considered that this is a crucial phase of the artist’s life.

It is interesting to note how a performance becomes a “text” and lends itself to reinterpretation in a different medium. As I have argued earlier, Jatra was a dance drama in medieval India. The themes and subject matter or storylines performed on stage were taken from either Indian epics or mythology. Most of the time, the theme of Krishna’s life from the “Bhagavata Puranas” was chosen. Similarly, the roles enacted by Subal Dasbairgya and characters like Sita were taken from the Ramayana, which created a new text with a thematic approach. The performance and the female role enacted by the artist did not create much confusion for the audience. The performer felt the essence of womanhood in the state of transvestism during the performance and differentiated the male attitudes throughout. Thus, it is far more difficult to play a female role in the Jatra tradition. The performer, on the one hand, plays the role of creator, and at the same time, he is also a performer. Dasbairgya successfully adjusted to the beautiful appearance on the Jatra stage. In this context, his performance does not provide space to problematize the body/mind duality regarding the notion of gender and sexuality in our Indian perception.

Nowadays, the notion of gender and sexuality has somehow relaxed. However, during Dasbairgya’s cross-dressing, performance, and acting in the rural Bengali stage, it was not so easy. Furthermore, it was a challenging act for the female impersonator. Thus, the female impersonator was not only a means of gross entertainment for the common masses but was also considered to have artistic quality. Above all, they enriched the Jatra performance tradition. The performance stage created a mutual space for both actors and spectators or audiences. More or less, they belonged to the same “lower class” communities of society. Significantly, the role of the actors entirely depended on the politics of the caste system, which was not a very easy-going process at that time. Thus, it became the story of an artist who, born as male, becomes a woman during the time span of a Jatra performance.

The role of Subal Dasbairgya as a female impersonator questions the binary codes of gender and the notions of sexuality. This transvestite performance by Subal Dasbairgya dismantles or challenges the rules and regulations set by society. It opens up to the reader multiple meanings of the “space” of the Jatra performance tradition by using the “domestic space.” Hence, it is not merely the story of a man or artist who plays a female role on the Jatra stage, but it is all about the life of an unrecognised female impersonator and his story of the “process of becoming.” More interestingly, it is the untold story of an eminent Jatra performer

and his life struggle on the path of the artistic world. On the other hand, it is an indirect release of female sexuality from patriarchal hegemony. From this point, it is very significant that it is a story of an unknown and unrecognised talent. It is a journey of an artist who is a renowned performer, mixed with feelings and suffering, at the same time, he was beyond the curtain.

Conclusion

The name of Subal Dasbairagya is unheard of and has not been widely discussed and studied. He is also a star of the Bengali stage who charmed audiences for many years. This actor represented the desired combination of beauty and talent. For years, this enthralled views across rural and semi-urban areas, portraying characters which dismantled the socially constructed gender bias. He has spent a period of time in his life performing silently. His Jatra performance was not recorded. In reality, he was a serious performer. He faced different kinds of harsh realities. His engagements with the art of performance tradition and its communication were not publicly established in the mainstream or domain of “academic performance discussion.” Thus, I have tried, in this paper, to fill the gaps and bring the untold story of Subal Dasbairagya’s life as an actor, performer, and individual into the light. Thus, the readers will have the chance to communicate or become aware of the real facts at multiple narrative levels. This approach will also focus on the way of life of the artist Subal Dasbairagya, aka Subal Rani, which, in reality, is still beyond the written history of the Jatra performance tradition.

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