

# Analytics of Subaltern Performance: Subversion and Solidarity in Bengali Jatra Pala Gaan

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## The Semiotics of Jatra Pala

The history of Indian culture and theatre is replete with instances of discrimination in the huge coterie of performances and the wide-ranging texts with inherent structural hierarchies prevalent in the form of caste, gender, ability, sexuality etc. These deeply embedded fault lines manifest themselves in the macro as well as the micro through everyday acts of gesture, struggle, resistance, labour, enactment, archive and acting. Multiple empirical inquiries form the thematic of a plenitude of performance cultures that exist on the margins of normative texts, institutions and theatrical practices. The quotidian performance arises out of labouring bodies that remain marginalised, undocumented and some yet to be discovered. The lived experience of the communities that enact their history and articulation on the peripheries of Indian society need a thorough assessment under the rubric of performance. In this context, it becomes relevant to look at the performance of Jatra as it reveals the beginnings, and evolution of the art of drama in Brahmanical Indian mythology, complete with its social and political implications.

The video in discussion starts with the entry of an actress with costume and make-up amidst a strong audience that is circling the temporary *Pandal* or the stage. The spectators are mostly middle-aged men along with a sparse presence of young boys. The analytics of the paper will build upon the digitised version of the performance. Digital mediation is critical to the paper since it prevents the disappearance of the performance traditions relegated to the margins of normative institutions of art and culture. Digitisation helps with the filming and reproduction of the performance as well. Here, the actor's body occupies the primary role accompanied by sonic and gestural elements complimented by varied musical instruments. The *Pala* or the tent encompasses a formalistic space, design and architectural process and instead brings in the undisciplined energy, rough composure and impromptu planning to the spatiality of the Jatra performance. It adorns the actor, narrative and performance with a certain flexibility and informality since access is made equitable. The sole prop in the entire performance is the garland held by the actress. Her oration and suggestive acting are choreographed as well as improvised as per the interaction with the space and the audience. The sole scene in the performance comes to an end with the entry of the male protagonist possibly signifying a trademark Jatra duet. The performance attempts to retain the traditional performance with no set, prop, or lightning and instead furthers its narrative through the open space. The duration of the entire video, dotted with humorous interludes, is six minutes and eight seconds. The video uploaded on the Old Bangla channel has a plethora of similar performances with the tagline, 'It's all about local entertainment'. The video in particular has amassed over 4.2 Million views so far since 2018.

The Jatra tradition soars during the October harvest month in Bengal. The title of this video, '*Romantic song of the heroine after falling in love title*', suggests love as the value of performativity in the narrative being evoked. However, since the performance is part of a living tradition, the meaning travels upon interaction with the spectators. In general, though, the idiomatic semblances of Jatra come from caste and gender hierarchies prevalent in the hegemonic Indian society. The performative

element in such acts of marginalised communities showcases an embodied system of indigenous knowledge production. These contemporary expressions of identity are sometimes incorporated in the other forms of Jatra that showcase the political narrative of social radicalism as well. Historically, a leading Jatra figure in the mid-19th century was Gopal Uday (1817-1857), who introduced a new style where dialogues were written in short verses along with songs that evoked emotions. Today's contemporary form was further developed by Utpal Dutt as well as many other unnamed and unrecorded local and rural artists. Herein, the Jatra Pala represents reality through a different framework of performance, consumption and assertion. It can be said that Jatra, through its formation, debate and interpretation gives birth to a multitude of socio-political imaginaries. Here, the protagonist of the Jatra performance embodies a public character that focuses on the construction of reality. In this process, Jatra reproduces the performance dynamics, power creation and dichotomies of the rural and urban. It is constantly transcending boundaries through a contestation between the ceremonies and rituals that remain institutionalised. Jatra herein contributes and generates the public and its perception regarding culture as it enables socio-political communications between the actor, audience and the space. Artistic creation, social reality and public stereotypes merge in Jatra. The terrain of Jatra performance is laden with correspondences, messages and symbols that unfold during the duration of the performance. The permeability of Jatra and the reflexivity thereof refer to a complex narrative of subversion and solidarity beyond any binary of native, non-native or a simple rural-urban tradition.

Jatra, apart from a ritualistic theatrical and performance tradition in various regions in the East of India including Bihar, Bengal and Uttar Pradesh, is also a socio-cultural tool for embedding a subversive form of solidarity amongst the marginalised communities. It developed into prominence in the eighteenth century as a devotional form of processual celebration. It later evolved into a marked site of the performance genre with its nuances. It incorporates a multiform of practices of dance, drama, art, masks and props as well as music and cinema while also encapsulating gestures, acting methods and acrobatics. There are both Indian and European instruments with devices that also record the performance for subsequent dissemination. The thematics of these performances range from subjects of love, labour, agriculture, ruse, enmity, festive celebrations, avenging death, etc. Jatra as a broad categorisation entails living traditions, ranging from ritual, storytelling, theatre, procession and festival. On average, every district has its dozen troops operating at the same time. Their songs borrow from folk songs as well as Hindi cinema songs and their regional adaptations. Musical modes get associated with feelings and regions. Newer formations and breakaway factions are also daily experiences with flexible membership, especially during the time of festival when the demand of witnessing a performance is at an all-time high. Its widespread practice, enjoyment and mass productions are exemplified by the continuously evolving nature of the performance. It is both a cultural as well as a political strategy due to its specific mainstreaming and normalising potential. These performances usually start at night and continue till the next day's dawn. The multi-layered performative aspects of Jatra raise several complex questions of not just theatre, performance and the body but also of space, access and leisure. The semiotics of such performances at best remain ambivalent, escaping any rigid or strict theoretical formulation, while also bordering on the contradictory at the same time. For instance, these low-budget plus short durational performances employ the use of makeshift stages and other cheaply available local equipment for the performance, yet they also retain their commercial output to increase profit and fame. Often the gestures are sensual yet the song or the theme of the Jatra could be devotional or moral. In effect, the issue is of redefining popular culture and its residue of grotesque and obscene and similar categories as located in a female or female-identifying body. The Jatra Pala tradition also asks us to analyse the performance from the perspective of the absence of engagement with caste as a critical rubric in the conceptualisation of the performance. While most of these performances take on a life of their own and produce a counterculture; their equalising cultural tendency needs to be analysed with newer methodological tools.

### Video, Violence and Virtuosity

On 3 April 2022, a group of Dalit men attending a Jatra performance were abused and assaulted by upper caste men in Harogeri village in Northern Karnataka.<sup>1</sup> The men from the oppressed caste wanted a performance to be staged on a popular Ambedkarite song from a local TV series; *Mahanayaka*. The upper caste men forced the singers and the dancers not to perform a Jatra on the alleged song. The incident is not an isolated one. Many such events take place every day in the sphere of the Jatra performance; indicating it as a site of not just performance, but also assertion, control and power. These performance traditions are the prominent modes of articulation of the lived experiences of the various communities across regions and cultures. Since most of such traditions exist in a non-institutionalised space devoid of a canon and formal membership rules and labour regulations, the event of their happening doesn't generate a wide response in an urban audience. The occurrence, performance and the event of the calamity all remain mostly limited to the periphery.

The category of Jatra can be further interrogated by looking at the location of the performance. Jatra embodies the histories and experiences of the subalterns on an immediate and intimate basis. The performance is produced through the subaltern's actions and is also simultaneously the witness to their actions. It is in the realm of folk performance that human activities get inscribed on the landscape. Therefore, performance cultures are located in a place that can be best described as a fusion of experience, imagination, and the actual location. Jatra has an undeniable strong connection to the actor through its affective and perforative relationship with the land. The production of Jatra embodies an intimate connection between personal agency, social identities, and the biography of a place. In the end, histories and memories inscribed on the land transform the Jatra experience into a landscape as well as the landscape too embodies histories and memories; signifying the transformative potential of the landscape in performance culture. The particular video in discussion below, enumerates a representational possibility that doesn't support caste hierarchies and Hindu ethno-nationalism as often witnessed in the performance of classical arts. The actors perform also as a way of continuing artistic traditions and maintaining a connection to their cultural heritage and marginalised forms apart from stressing on their expressions and articulation. The performance reinscribes a model of egalitarian performance free of the Brahmanical method of training and a lineage-based pedagogy or the revered Brahmanical *guru-shishya parampara*<sup>2</sup>. The performance renders a critique of the ongoing modes of entertainment where dance, music and theatre remain the exclusive property of only a select few.

As these performances also form a micro-network of broader cultural and performative trends, they ask each other significant questions about subaltern participation and presence. Their emergence as a cultural response to Brahmanical cleansing and codification of theatrical practices reflects on an ever-growing space to create, exchange, rehearse and further build on the Jatra repertoire. These structures seep through generations and professions and have withstood the onslaught of not just a digital incursion into the arts but also the covid-19 induced pandemic's constriction of any form of movement. Hence, the video in analysis and related performances must be seen as transcending the space of mere acting and performance and forming a political resistance act on a quotidian basis with their radical engagement. The Jatras emerge from the everyday lived experience of these actors and their communities, including their caste assertion and discrimination. Most of the actors work as labourers and migrants and dance on their own crafted narratives in the night. Hence, this leads to a reimagining of the Jatra pala gaan tradition through a caste and gender-based examination. For instance, over the course of time, men who donned the role of female impersonators who hailed from a lineage of Jatra tradition, have been replaced by female dancers. The reasons vary from providing the audiences with a sense of realism to issues of economic and social marginalisation as well as gender deprivation. All male troupes have further been broken down by entertainer communities whose prime profession remain acting and theatre. If these micro issues are interpolated as broader structural concepts governing the realm of subaltern performance, they reflect on a region's persistent economic and political impoverishment.

In this sense, Jatra becomes an idiom of our times where culture is not just high or low but also oppressive, or exclusive or liberating and emancipatory, and therefore replete with anomalies. As the neoliberal mediatised cultural forms of the 1990s continue to threaten the Jatra oeuvre, actors and managers are steadily infusing various elements of different cultural forms in order to broaden the spectrum of their performance. For instance, sometimes a live singer will accompany the dancer on stage or a live TV will showcase the performance to the audience along with an orchestra. Such practices point to a creative subaltern impulse that has been revitalising the Jatra genre and resisting at the same time. They also indicate a distinct aesthetic milieu that belongs fully to the marginalised sections without a defining class barrier. The constant politics of marginalisation of folk performances like Jatra, however, is not entirely new. Their history predates colonial intervention since the formation of aesthetic taste developed in close connection with the division of labour and the subsequent division of labourers. Such practices and performances often get subsumed under various culturally imposed categories. Jatra has been meted out with similar treatment in the mainstream theatrical appropriation of a multitude of folk forms. The complex trajectory of the history of Jatra as existing currently in the form of theatrical history and folklore or an oral form remains insufficiently documented or partially understood with no justice done to the positionality and the agency of the Jatra actors hailing from marginalised labouring communities. Neither the Western dramatic traditions nor the normative conventions of the Indian classical theatre have the required empiricism to understand the origin, development, proliferation and performance of the Jatra Pala gaan.

Herein, if we consider Bourdieu's approaches to cultural productions (since culture is a site of power and struggle), then we can assert that Jatra theatre goes beyond a means of entertainment to a cultural industry due to its contemporary businesslike approach, mass patronization, management system and employment criteria. Parallel to other entertainment media, the Jatra industry has become a multi-million rupees business. It is consumed by millions of audience members and mediated by market logic. In a similar vein, rampant issues of labour law violations have been reported through Jatra guilds and unions since the actors are hired on a contractual basis in most cases. The genealogy of the performance can be traced from the shifting contours of this art wherein topical Jatras are not new. Saddam Hussein, after his hanging, was the subject of many *Jatras*. *Phansir Manche Saddam* (Saddam at the Gallows) hailed the Iraqi leader as a martyr fighting for his country and nailed George Bush as the villain stifling the voice of justice. However, today the subject matter of Jatras ranges from the political to the quotidian, as well. The space that Jatra occupies is at the binary of centre and periphery. The intervention provided by such performances negates a Brahmanical conceptualisation as they generate their own emancipatory and counter effect and meaning, as well as a new methodology of deconstruction of aesthetics and a broadening of defining parameters. The particular video discussed above provides a glimpse into one such parameter of gender to understand larger significant issues. The actor through her dance and gesture is remarking about the complex role of gender in Indian performance traditions. As an audience removed from the cultural milieu of rural landscapes, an etymological understanding bordering on the uncouth would shape the viewing experience. However, this alternative style of performance raises a different set of questions as well about the social status of the actor, issues of participation and prestige, and artistic value et al. Jatra, therefore, is symbolic of culture being structured by caste and gender differences. In contemporary times, Jatra is seen as synonymous with an indigenous form of insignificant performance with vulgar and degenerate elements. 'Jatrawalis' and similar words are used in the manner of a foul vocabulary. Most analyses refuse to understand the deeper connections of Jatra to the sustenance of theatre while patrons and the State continuously make efforts to either cleanse Jatra, Sanskritise it or distance it from a 'modern form of contemporary Indian theatre'.

The rudimentary components of the practice, economy and proliferation of Indian theatre and performance are built on the grave of customary, folkloric and orature practices that had superseded the origins and codification of the *Natyasastra* and its resultant unyielding theoretical discourse.

Canonical readings and interpretations based on dramaturgical faithfulness to the text remain devoid of connotations of equality, access and visibility. Culture, and performance in the Indian subcontinent are broad yet contested canons with everyday fault lines of caste, class and gender et al. At the same time, there is also a lacuna regarding artisanal communities and their unique social practice and labour. The paper challenges the normative theoretical framework of aesthetics by positing who owns performance, theatre and labour. The conceptual analysis foregrounds the aesthetics of Jatra as reflecting graded inequalities and examines it through the prism of landscape and memory, materiality, affect and viscosity, digitality and performativity. The evolution of Jatra performance indicates a homegrown cultural nationalism sanitised of outside influences and lowly origins and having the authority of Brahmanical divine origin, rendering performance and theatre practices as a site of national heritage rather than a continuum of depository of lived experiences and subaltern history. Jatra, yet as an act and embodiment both has enlivened the rigid binary and debate of the classical and the folk for many decades now.

### Conclusion

Classical theatre has been majorly contested as a field whose theoretical as well as performative foundations rest on cultural erasure, negation and violence. However, there also exist manifold contesting narratives on theatrical treatises, their implementation and the percolation of social-cultural norms and ethos to contemporary times. The relationship of Jatra to the contemporary performative culture reflects how the performance enables an inclusive albeit non-linear conceptualisation, especially in the context of gender and caste. The major bulk of interpretations and engagement showcase the subaltern impulse of the performance genre with its constitutive elements of dance, movement, choreography, acting et al, as an ever-evolving repository of ruptured norms. Yet today most alternative dancers and actors are relegated to the category of folk and only see social and economic opportunities materialise in towns and villages. Another enforceable effect of the exclusion produced in modern theatre is the cementing of intra-community gender hierarchies where men reign supreme in the practice, convention and procedure of the form. Women often get debarred or criminalised by the State in such scenarios while marginalisation of other sexualities only keeps increasing. Such feudal equations in the field of Indian theatre and performance ensure denial of access, practice and assertion to marginalised communities that easily come to be priced out of the trends that they start. As performance becomes secondary and the identity of caste and gender becomes primary, performance enacts itself out through oppression, subjugation and exploitation. Performances and performers then indicate themselves as a marker of eliteness, sophistication in taste, of being art connoisseurs, as a symbol of status distinction and of having high cultural ethos, understanding and claim to capital. Therefore, the question of the marginalised bodies performing Brahmanical art forms of the greater tradition in the contemporary period is indeed one that has to be examined beyond the simplistic binaries of access and representation. The gendered-caste body of the performer has already been problematised in the field of academics but in the popular renditions across assembly halls, temple festivals and elite gatherings of art enthusiasts, the denial of the existence of caste-privileges, opportunities and articulation in terms of even gaining access to these stages remains a conspicuous reality. Such interstices between caste, performance and purity clearly show that the imprecise dichotomy of the old and the reformed forms as well as the crafted and maintained division between the classical and the folk do not take into account the vast coterie and excess of cultural labour and performances practices of non-Brahmin bodies. Their residual haptic, sonic, and aesthetic effects bask within strongly entrenched networks that continue to reflect, reproduce, and reify caste ideologies.

If performance stands for identity, then it also stands for the embodiment of oppressed identities, genres and struggles. While performance functions as an epistemic as well as an analytical tool there is an urgent requirement of new conceptual frameworks and anti-caste methodologies that grapple



with the asymmetrical complexities of theatre. The post-Independence theatre and performance historiography attaches a certain concrete value to mythologies that fortify the social locations of ruling caste communities. There are multiple quotidian classist and casteist proclivities inbuilt in the post-colonial Indian theatre scholarship as well. In furtherance of which many contemporary and modern performance traditions exclude the cultural labour performed by bodies on the lower rungs of a gendered and casteist society. There remains no idea on the artistic and aesthetic value and worth of the labour of these performing labouring bodies that remain maligned, marginalised and malevolent. The peculiarities that pertain to marginalised caste performance practices are viewed as provoking disgust, disturbance and disavowal. The urban and modern performance aims to exclude uncouth mannerisms usually associated with such peripheral bodies like loud talk, deep guffaws, suggestive sexual gestures, etc. The repugnance doesn't only rest here. The idealistic notions of feminine grace and beauty seep into the threshold of every performance. This socio-political audacity, driven by a Brahmanical impulse to curate and sanitise the space of performance and the genre of theatre operated with the fallacious historical assumption that the folk, is the prerogative of only the uncultured or the marginalised. The culture that is transmitted from one body to another through orature and non-Sanskrit rituals are neither archived nor canonised, leave aside museumization or a pedagogical engagement. These cultures remain insufficiently or inaccurately textualised or are documented in a binary through a cis-Savarna gaze that lacks the necessary empiricism to understand the lives, culture and lived experience of marginalised bodies. Folk performances like Jatra, Bidesia and Nautanki, et al. filled with subaltern norms, ethos and cultural references can therefore be said to be the antithesis of the Brahmanical performance culture. This denigration doesn't allow for solidarity, subversion or any semblance of an egalitarian performance regime.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Menasinakai, Sangamesh. "Dalits Attacked During Musical Night at Jatra." *The Times of India*, 6 Apr. 2022. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/hubballi/dalits-attacked-during-musical-night-at-jatra/articleshow/90673476.cms>

<sup>2</sup> The *guru-shishya parampara* translates to a teacher-disciple tradition of caste based pedagogy. The ancient teaching method rooted in lineage predominates the arts even today. It is an exclusive system with hierarchical membership and rigid rules.

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