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The Ethno musicological Dimension of Jatrapala: A Cultural Perspective

Silpi Maitra

Assistant Professor of English,

Falakata College, Alipurduar

Research Scholar,

Department of Cultural and Creative Studies,

North-Eastern Hill University,

Shillong, Meghalaya.

Postal Address: Golden Towers 2, 2 Bhuban Mohan Roy Road, Kolkata-700008

Abstract

The significance of music in human society varies from a simple form of entertainment to educate the rural masses as a form of performing art that enraptures the minds of the people. Music as the major ingredient of any culture is manifested in a variety of forms. Studying folk music from the perspective of ethnomusicology will highlight the special features, tones, rhythms and consciousness of a particular community. The cultural context becomes the presiding factor in ethnomusicology. Being interdisciplinary, ethnomusicology can be related to different branches of study including cultural anthropology, performance studies, folklore, music as a broader area of study, etc. Jatrapala being a popular folk theatrical performance of West Bengal includes different variations of music. The very word 'Jatrapala' has a deep connotation related to music as 'pala' means song. Earlier the Jatrapala was also known as the 'Jatragaan'. The appeal of Jatrapala was more concerning the music than to the theatricality. The primary role of any performing art be it music, drama or

dance is to convey emotive feelings and cater to the aesthetic taste of the people in general. The present paper will examine and focus on the entire aspect of musicality in the performance of Jatrapala and its relevance in today's performative world.

Keywords: Ethnomusicology, Performance, Folk theatre and Culture

Introduction:

The term ethnomusicology is a varied one and has been identified with several terminologies earlier. The attitudes and orientations towards this field of music have changed since the 1880s. This musical concept was called 'musikologie', which transformed into 'comparative musicology', a term that was prevalent throughout the 1950s. The transition from the term 'ethnomusicology' to 'ethnomusicology' was a quick one. However, intellectuals came up with new suggestions including the

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terminologies like ‘cultural musicology’ and ‘sociomusicology’. Ethnomusicology earlier was only associated with folk music and primitive music but with time, it started discussing the ethnicity and diversity of music. The changes in the term have changed the conceptual origins of the term. In short, ethnomusicology is ‘the comprehensive analysis of music and musical culture of one society ‘essentially anthropological’ (Nettl 198: 4). In short, ethnomusicology is the study of music from a cultural context. If a study is conducted from the perspective of ethnomusicology then the basic concept of identity of a particular community is analysed. An ethnomusicological study aims to establish the developments of the musical pattern of a particular community. The preoccupation of identity becomes a major issue for the society of ethnomusicology as it is interdisciplinary and combines both the disciplines of musicology and anthropology.

A Comparative Analysis of Bengali Jatrपाल and Music:

A major form of the difference between modern-day Jatrपाल and primitive Jatra Gaan was that earlier people went to listen to Jatra Gaan which means songs of Jatrपाल and mainly audio notes became a significant attribute or an elemental feature in these performances. When the entire concept of professionalism enters the domain of theatre, Jatrपाल became a part of amateur production. The troupes also started to dismantle as the

performers started to choose an alternate profession to suffice their situations. Folk songs cannot be easily defined as music that is composed by folks in their styles and rhythms. It is something that goes beyond the simple definition. Closer scrutiny on this folk music reveals several other dimensions. One important is the role of an oral tradition that frames the structure of folk songs. As explained by Philip V. Bohlman, in his book *The Study of Folk Music in the Modern World (1988)*, have discussed the core of folk music and how oral tradition successfully becomes a part of it. He claims that “oral tradition is also a measure of a community’s sense of itself, its boundaries, and the shared values drawing it together. Folk music can be a repository for these values and a voice for their expression” (1988: 14). Amidst all the generalisations between the folk and tradition, Fannie H. Eckstorm and Phillips Barry have tried to give a concrete definition of folk song, “Despite all that has been argued to demonstrate to the contrary, it is a tradition that makes the folk-song a distinct genre, both as to text and music” (1932: 2). In fact with the growing scholarship on ethnomusicology, the text and context of folk music is becoming very important and yielding interesting studies. Nowadays to evoke special interest in the upcoming generations of theatricals and scholars, a collaborative approach is taken into consideration where along with the folk theatres, the essence and the communicability of music are presented.

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One of the major functions of any folk song is to evoke specific feelings of a group. The nuances, styles, way of performing it may vary from one community to another. This is only because the cultural specificities alter from one group to another. The reflection of the ideals, norms, behaviour and attitudes of a particular society is exhibited in folk songs. Under the genre of 'folk songs', various elements come forth including folk music, folk drama, folk instruments, folk ballads, folk tales etc. Folk music is inextricably related to the lives of the people as some of the songs deal with birth, childhood, courtship, love, marriage and death. Folk songs deal with the different stages of human life. Some folk songs are sung during the harvesting season when the minds of the people are filled with joy and happiness.

The three areas that this study intends to illuminate are how the folk songs of Bengal can be constructed as a performance through the dimension of culture, secondly, it will focus on the communicative aspect of this folk performing art and thirdly, how the Bengali folk songs can distinctly, theoretically and methodologically represent the ethno musicological aspects which is a key ingredient in folk theatres. Performance if defined is a mode of behaviour that is transmitted from the performer to the group of individuals sitting as spectators. The performative aspect of folk songs has different dimensions including cultural, aesthetic and communicative. Folk songs

should be classified as a piece of artistic presentation. Ethnomusicology is defined as 'a discipline that combines scientific and humanistic methods of research to study human musical communication' (Blacking 1973: 25). A.J. Ellis, a British philologist and physicist, claimed that any musical composition is a reflection of the cultural system and the various phenomena are bound together in the form of social activity. One of the important functions of ethnomusicology is to analyse how people can make perfect sense of any noted musical piece. While analysing a particular musical piece, in a very implied manner the culture is also cultivated because performances of any type become a direct replica of the culture of the specific community.

Scholars have tried to use the epithet 'value systems' and 'value judgements' while examining the components of culture. Cultural analysis of regional folk music tries to evaluate the behavioural systems of a group of people (Belshaw 1969). These days, however, the nature and context of music have undergone a drastic change. In the discipline of performance studies, the inclusion of music has lent a great diversity which includes the study of rhythm, sound, tone, pitch and voice. The transcription of oral folk music revises the axis of text-meaning-interpretation which surfaces as a theoretical context for the study. Performance results from the presentation of any performing art including music, dance, theatre etc. The important feature of

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the performance is the ‘liveliness’ that is associated with the presentation. The focus must be on the liveliness of the performance which generates an expectation from the presence of the performer. This can be easily applicable to the performer’s presentation of a musical piece. For the critic Erving Goffman, performance becomes a form of ‘everyday behaviour’, while Richard Schchener claimed that performance is a form of ‘restored behaviour’ (Allen and Jean Harvie 2006).

The collective or collaborative performance of Jatrapala of West Bengal is quite distinctive in its folk genre as it comprises varying elements like songs, dance, drama, mime and different forms of gesticulations both classical and modern. The interrelationship of musicality with dramatism had been a fantastic cultural phenomenon that has helped scholars and researchers to concentrate on the intertextual dimensions of this folk performance. Music has always been an integral development in the plot structure of folk performances like *Nautanki*, *Tamasha*, *Ramlila*, *Raslila*, *Yakshaghana*, *Pala*, *Ojhapali* etc. Folk performances are taken up as a measure by several indigenous communities to survive culturally. As a major aesthetic component, music has added glamour to every performance and its acceptability towards the audience. Jatrapala or Jatragaan was a relatively music-based performance that tentatively changed into a theatrics based genre with time. The modern audience seemed to be

relatively bored as the music or the different forms of folk songs used were outdated and did not cater to their cultural and creative tastes. The interdisciplinary approach towards music in Jatrapala changes as the receptivity of the audience transposed from one generation to the other.

Folksongs as defined by Arun Kumar Basu in his illuminating essay, “Folksongs of Bengal”, categorises folksongs into lyrical and subjective which reveals the intricate emotions and sentiments of the people. He describes the structure of the Bengali folk songs in the following manner: ‘The stanzaic form of a folksong is usually of four to six lines, known as *kali* or *tuk* in Bengal. The first part moves in a refrain. The musical pattern of a folksong generally consists of verse repetition. It often maintains the primitive pattern of tri-, tetra- and pentatonic scales (1981: 93). The first sincere effort to collect and restore folk songs were done by the noble laureate Rabindra Nath Tagore during the early 19th C. Tagore himself was inspired by the folk songs of Bengal and composed several songs based upon the folk tunes and which were used by him in his several dance dramas. It was during that time that the Bengali upper middle class started showing interest in folk music.

The collection and cultivation of Bengali folk songs have always been hazardous as specified by Syed Ali Ahsan, former Director of the Bengal Academy of Bangladesh:

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In our country folksongs are scarcely collected scientifically. We collect words only, not the tunes. As a result, we do not record the proper tune and pronunciation of the words. Half-educated collectors go to the villages, collect songs from the villages and present them in their own pronunciation and spelling, thus distorting the true flavour of the songs; and what remains is the dry sermons only. In order to properly evaluate folksongs it is imperative that tunes are correctly recorded along with the words (Chaudhuri 1969: 15).

The collection of folk songs and tunes from undivided Bengal would include a rich compendium of Bengali folk songs but a collection of data and fieldwork which is necessary for any scholar becomes very problematic due to several socio-political factors. The numerous variety of folk songs have diverse techniques and their way of performance differs from one to another. Although the geographical variations render different collaborative patterns yet it can be assumed that Bengali folk songs are related to the ethnocultural aspects of the Bengali community. If we specifically take into consideration of the folk tunes, then the *Bhatiali* songs form the basement of other songs in the eastern, north-eastern and northern parts of Bengal and on the other hand *Jhumur* (a form of folk song) is considered to be the base for other folk songs in the western areas of Bengal. The folk songs in their variegated forms have explored relevant studies based on theatrics which have presented interesting studies on Folklore and folk culture.

Next comes the majestic role that is played by folk musicians in folk music. Scholars have distinctively claimed the association of several musicians and not any specific person who can be categorised in this group. If folk song as a form of performing art is discussed then the participation of a particular group is taken into consideration. The basic characteristic feature of the folk musician is that of a tradition bearer. Within his song, the ethos and sentiments of the community are reflected. The concept of performance lies inherent in a typical piece of folk music. Regarding the performance of the folk musician, it can be said that “Each performance is the expressive act of an individual or a group of individuals, and that expressive act reflects the interrelation of the performer and the tradition” (1988: 73).

The most important accompaniment of folk songs is the folk instruments without which the study becomes incomplete. It is because of the folk instruments that the tune, rhythm and melody are methodically infused into the Bengali folk songs. With the help of instruments, the folk melodies of Bengal successfully portray the feelings and emotions of the people. The importance of folk instruments in folk music, dance and drama not only supports the performance but also helps in the ornamentation. It helps in the construction of perfect harmonic symmetry. The folk instruments enrich and attract the listeners to a greater extent. The folk instruments can be classified into four

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groups namely, the string instruments, the wind instruments, percussion instruments and struck instruments. The string instruments include *Ektara, Dotara, Gopi Yantra, Sarinda* and *Khamak or Anandlahari. Murali, Vanshi, Shehnai, Shankh and Singha* belong to the category of wind instruments. The percussion instruments include *Dhol, Dhak, Dholak, Khol, Dhamsa, Kada or Kadha, Madal* and *Khanjani* while *Kartal, Mandira, Kanshi, Ghanta and Ghungroo* belong to the category of struck instruments (Sharma 2004: 33).

The folk music of Bengal is considered to be very versatile as it vividly demonstrates the rhythm, melody, tempo and tonal patterns. It also provides a picturesque aspect as with the rhythm, the audience is transported to the places where the musical tones were developed. The design of these music patterns suits the demand and nature of the songs that are sung on different occasions. Manorama Sharma in her comprehensive study discusses in detail the rhythmic pattern that is usually followed in the Bengali folk songs:

The basic element of the rhythmic pattern is constituted of the time unit known as *matra* or *beat*. When several groups of time units combine in a bar, it is called *tala*, the rhythm. The combined units or groups are repeated continuously converting the music into a complete rhythmic form. The folk music of West Bengal is closely connected with folk verses that are sung or recited in tune.

The meter named *Payaar* appears to have influenced musical rhythm considerably. *Payaar* in Bengali versification unites 8+6 letters of timings generally arranged in two *matras* in each group. For example,

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
10 11 12 13 14

Ka si ra ma da sa ka he su
ne pu nya ba n

(Sharma 2004: 146)

If specific regions of West Bengal are taken into consideration then the districts of Hoogly, Howrah, Birbhum, Bardhaman, North-Bengal, Nadia, Twenty-Four Parganas and Murshidabad are the areas where the folk Songs are mostly practised. Some other forms of *kirtans* practised and spread all over the districts are *Jhumur, Bhadu, Tusu, Sakhi* which accompanied by instruments are sung on the occasion of *Bhadna* ritual. Some districts and regions of East Bengal where these folk songs are performed with much gaiety and exhilaration are Rangpur, Rajshahi, Bagura, Pabna, Dinajpur of East Bengal, Mymensing, Sylhet, Dacca, Barisal, Faridpur, Noakhali and Chittagong. The folk songs of Bengal is not region-specific because most of the folk songs are a combination of both East and West Bengal. The rich flavour of folk music is shared by both nations as the two-way encounter occurred with the influx of

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immigrants and refugees from the Eastern side during and after the partition of India in 1947. One important trait of these folk songs is that they are integrally connected with the harvesting season and also with many fertility cults. The rhythmical pattern becomes very important when we evaluate the basic structure of folk songs. This system of music evaluation or education was developed by Emile-Jacques-Dalcroze where this Swiss musician analysed how the gesticulations used by a performer helps in understanding the rhythms of the music. Body movements and Gestures when used by the musicians and the instrumentalists depict or reflect the intonations of the music. The way beats are used in Bengali folk music to depict taal or matra is very important and can be claimed as a euthymic pattern.

Conclusion:

A Study on a comprehensive topic like the folk songs of Bengal is always considered to be a difficult task for a scholar as several things are not included due to the lack of field surveys. Examining the structure, pattern, tonal variations and rhythms of folk songs of any region requires an extensive study on the various areas depicted above. Due to several socio-economic and political issues, a comparative study of the folk songs of both the East and West Bengal is not possible. However, a brief study on the Indian Folk Music and culture of Bengal has been conducted from the musicological aspects. An attempt has been made to study the

culture of the people of Bengal from the perspective of ethnomusicology. The existing body of theoretical and conceptual areas of study can make this broader area of study a fruitful affair. Therefore re-looking and revisiting all those domains of knowledge might be beneficial for a successive report on the folk music of Bengal. The relevance of folk music in the modern world becomes a major area of concern. With the influence of modern music like rock, pop, jazz, fusion and semi-classical music, listeners are losing their interest in the folk forms of music. If due measures are not taken by the local Government to preserve the ethnic gems, then with the onslaught of time, the folk heritage of Bengal will lose one of its vital ingredients.

The question can be raised that why a study should be conducted on folk songs from the perspective of ethnomusicology? Analysing the rich compendium of folk Bengali songs from the context of culture and re-reading the structure accordingly will present a new form of study. An attempt has been made to reconstruct the folk cultural aspect of the Bengali community by highlighting some of their treasured genres. This study has tried to show music as a part of the culture and as a part of social activity. Folk theatres are often considered to be a form of nonformal education as it educates the masses by implementing different forms of social messages which eradicate superstition from the root level. This particular paper successfully has tried to analyse the

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variations present in ethnomusicological dimensions concerning a popular folk theatre of West Bengal known as Jatrapala. However, to save this near the extinct form of folk theatrical performance, a certain amount of collaboration, cooperation and help from the Arts and Cultural Ministry is solicited.

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