

## JATRA — a Living Tradition

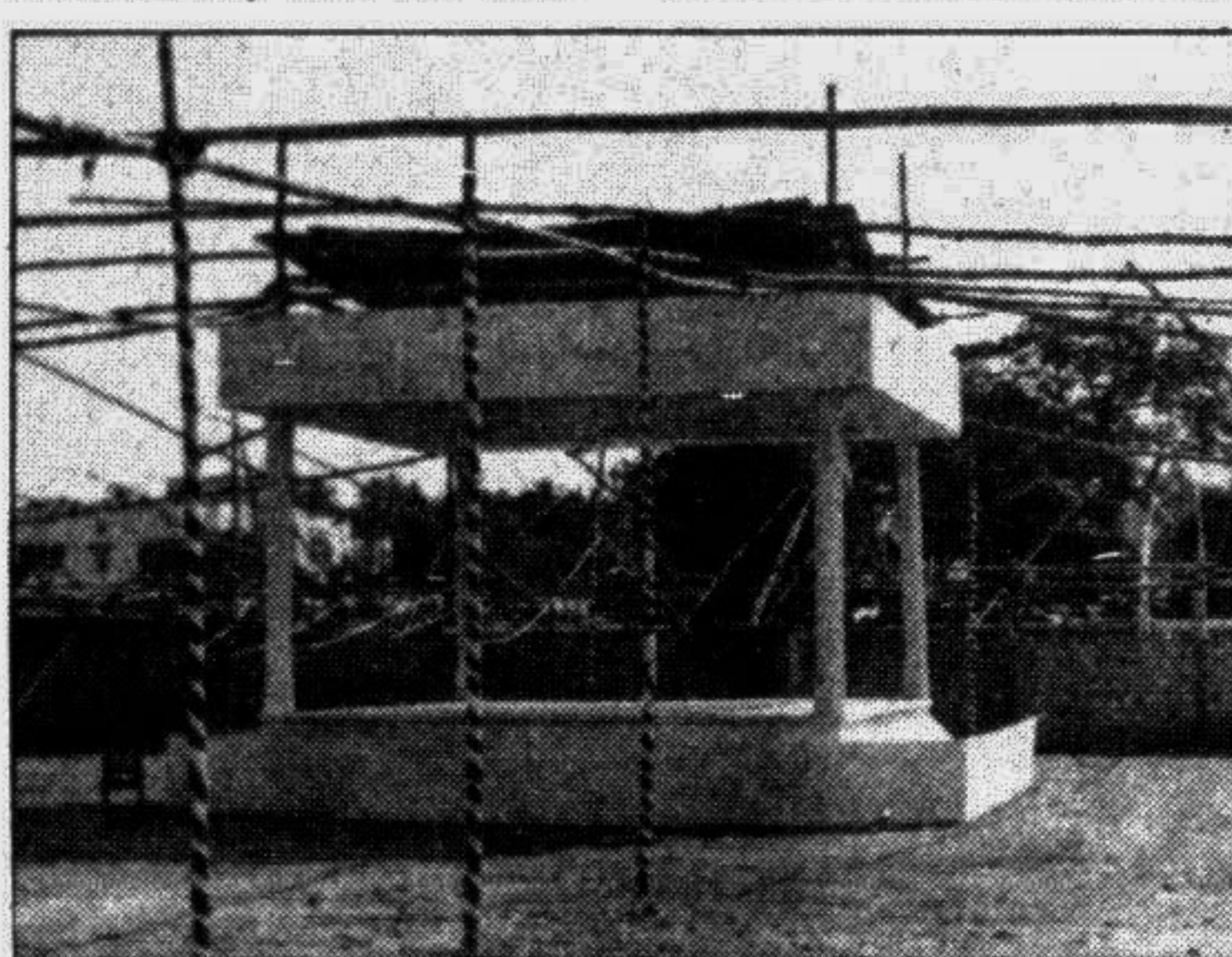
by Sayeed Ahmad

Some people say that this is a period of resurgence of Jatra while some others lament witnessing its slow death. I have a feeling that in the field of culture, Jatra has once again become an important factor to warrant serious attention from so many quarters.



Famous actor Late Amlendu Biswas in the role of King Jahandar Shah in 1985. He passed away in 1987.

RECENTLY a 17-day festival of Jatra starting from 4 to 19 January was held at the Shilpakala Academy premises. Out of 26 entries the selection committee chose 15 companies for the performance. National Award was given in various disciplines of Jatra. A 15-day long Jatra 'acting' workshop will be conducted in June and a 3-day seminar will be held in July in Dhaka. To mount this festival the Academy built a separate stage, in conformity with the tradi-



The traditional Jatra stage at the Shilpakala Academy.

tional stage of Jatra. A major thrust was provided by the financial assistance of Ford Foundation who had never before been associated with any big culture event like a national dance, or music festival. Therefore this was very timely and commendable. Seeing the success of the festival, I am sure, other international agencies will extend similar assistance in the future.

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I remember, as a child, in the mid-30's in Dhaka, Jatra used to be staged in different 'mohallas' and in the 'maidans' of wealthy Zamindars during the winter season. Jatra used to commence usually a little before midnight and end the next morning. In olden days Jatra was sometimes performed say for two days, with intermittent breaks. In the National Festival at Shilpakala Academy the performance began at 6.30 pm sharp and finished at 9.30 pm (a great difference from the uncertain timings of Jatra held in various parts of the city like Kamalapur, Mohammadpur, Mohakhali etc) thus providing the spectators an evening of condensed entertainment.

It is felt that due to the change habit of the city dwellers and their work commitment, it is not possible for them to keep awake through the night of the cold winter. Purists of course will have enough complaints, but practical minded people have their own requirements. I recollect enjoying in 1963, at the opulent and colourful Kabuki-Za Theatre in Tokyo, the stunning performance of the great actor Sawamura. The performance, with only one intermission, stretched to six hours. Today, famous Kabuki actor Ennosuke Ichikawa II is in the list of the Living National Treasure. What honour a nation can bestow to its great artists.

We often hear, and with some good reason, that the present day Jatra is but a shadow of what it used to be fifty years ago in East Bengal. They stress that the quality of acting has gone down, the singers are not that gifted, the voice quality of players is painfully weak. Most of the performers are not audible beyond the first ten rows unless helped by overhead micro-

phones. The less said, about the dances, the better. The musicians have incorporated film tunes without discrimination. The stunning voice of Bibek symbolising conscience and accomplishing the task of a Greet chorus has turned into a croaky splinter. Bibek used to come and enter the stage bringing all action to a halt. He used to sing and make dramatic gestures while the actors would gently move from one part of the stage to another or be transfixed. (It was not an uncommon sight to see a king get up from his throne to puff cigarette for a while). In the early stages Bibek used to delineate his songs in an abstract manner but in the 1920's this character started expressing in concrete terms. The introduction of women on the stage was another important change, for in the earlier period all female roles were performed by men, a situation similar with Kabuki of Japan and Beijing Opera of China.

From that time it became an all-male cast show, completely changing the character from the Okuni performances. A female impersonator now was a highly rated actor (known as Onnagata). This ban was removed after 250 years, yet excellence of male dominated performance continues even today. Male actors were so convincing and stunning in the role of women that even though opportunity was provided yet no woman went forward to take the stage. Kabuki, during the course of its evolution, has drawn freely from the art of Bunraku, Noh plays and Kyogen (a comic dialogue theatre whose subject matter is satire on social life).

Kabuki's main attraction was the superb acting of the



Swapan Debnath, adjudged best actor at the festival.

actors, reducing the literary value of the play to insignificance. The spectacular success of Kabuki during the late 17th century went into decline, which lasted till the middle of the 18th century. Though the immediate cause of the decline was the rising influence of the Puppet Theatre. The great master Chikamatsu (popularly known as the Shakespeare of Japan) left Kabuki in disgust to find more freedom and creative atmosphere in Puppet Theatre. In order to make Kabuki more attractive and acceptable, the producers adopted nearly all the puppet (Bunraku) plays in their repertoire in course of time. Thus Kabuki born in the 16th century gradually incorporated parts of nearly all preceding theatre forms of Japan.

During the 19th century Japan saw a decline of feudal system and the rise of western influence, the effect of which was reflected on the Kabuki stage also. Now the Samurai got dressed in western clothes, women changed their hair styles and put on hats like European actresses. A number of works of Shakespeare, Chekov, Ibsen etc started appearing on the Japanese stage. In the late 19th century Kabuki's main supporter was the business class and it is due to their financial influence we see a change in the theme of

the glory of Kabuki, gradually back on the stage.

The acting style, in Kabuki is fascinating to watch. They have an ancient 'model' style to follow, which is why acting often appears exaggerated and declamatory. But a very gifted actor is able to bring out of this formalised structure an abstract essence. Formalization is characteristic of the vocal aspect of Kabuki acting. Even in the essentially realistic domestic play, the principle of speaking is not that of naturalism but of idealised elocution.

Long monologues have a fascinating cadence, half way between singing and ordinary conversation. This is even more pronounced when dialogues and monologues are recited to the accompaniment of music. This renders the coinciding action on the stage even more rhythmic with movement, assuming an appearance more like a modified form of dancing. The sets, costumes and the make-up are the fruits of years of experimentation. Music, dance and action are the essential elements of Kabuki.

In the olden days Kabuki performances were held between sunrise and sunset, because the government, fearing the outbreak of accidental fire, prohibited programmes after dark. From the Meiji period around 1868, the use of gaslight permitted both afternoon and evening performances.

We have seen how Kabuki has assimilated, changed, given rise to new tenets through the passage of time. It is the gifted actors, musicians, directors and above all the public who deserve the laurel.

In our understanding of the Jatra traditions we know that there had been many assimilation enroute, but there are some who cannot digest these changes, the reason being, maybe, the essence of tradition to them is to remain pure, unalloyed. A living art has an inherent quality to innovate, incorporate and redefine. "Livingness" life in 'movement', in experimentation!

In the recent Jatra festival we had the good fortune of enjoying the different styles of Swapan Debnath, Ashok Kumar Ghosh, Victor Daniel, Sultan Salim and M A Siraj. Undoubtedly, they are all fully aware of the traditional style of declamation, but one can decipher a distinct difference in their approaches to acting. When an actor is performing a social contemporary theme he may find it difficult to raise his voice, throw out his arms about and swing the shoulders freely than if he were performing the role of Emperor Akbar the Great or Vikramaditya. Another interesting factor of the declamation is that in a so-

Thus in order to signify nobility the actors have to pronounce the words in upper-class fashion. Even the voice has to be made different, not a full throated natural voice but an ejaculation from a compressed stomach and taut vocal chord. Many of our present day actors are following the method taught to them by their gurus but undoubtedly a lot of variations are audible now, which some people attribute to borrowing from films or TV.



Victor Daniel, an eminent actor, in a criminal mood.

As in Kabuki so also in Jatra the 'exits' and 'entrances' of the players are highly stylised. We see an electrifying moment in which the last declamatory dialogue is delivered with considerable precision, weight and clarity creating marvellous dramatic impact.

In China a similar traditional art form is known as Beijing Opera. This theatrical form evolved (from several types of older local operas) in Beijing (Peking), some two

personality of the role. In fact a Beijing Opera stage resemble a wonderland, full of eye-catching spectacles. The vocal part of the opera consists of both spoken and singing declamations. The spoken parts are again divided into "rhyme" part and "Beijing dialect" part. The rhyme part has an accent close to the dialects of Hubei and Anhui provinces. The Beijing dialect part, also with rhymes, is closer to the colloquial language spoken in Beijing.

The voice of the actors

comes from a squeezed or compressed throat and a nasal twang. The dialogues are thrown at a high pitch and gradually rise in crescendo as in Jatra. The wind, stringed and percussion instruments are used in Beijing Opera, the main instrument being the Beijing fiddle.

This genre of opera through the chequered period of its history had many ups and downs. Sometimes it received generous patronage of both

That is why throughout the history of Chinese Classical theatre, men all along played the female role, right upto the close of the Qing Dynasty. The 1920's and three decades that followed came to be known as the "Golden Age of Female Role". Mr Mei Lanfang is acknowledged indisputably to have been the best female impersonator of all. He is an example of what an outstanding actor, director, visualiser can do to a folk opera. He lifted Beijing Opera to a new height of refinement and respectability. Artists gained social recognition at home and international admiration abroad.

Let me narrate Mei Lanfang's trip to Moscow and Leningrad in 1935. He made a great success of his tour while always being surrounded by theatre personalities like Stanislavsky, Meyerhold, Eisenstein and writers like Maxim Gorky and Tolstoy. There is no doubt that Brecht borrowed a lot from Chinese Opera and thus improved his concept of "alienation". Brecht was present at the masters of Art Club in Moscow where Mr Mei performed one evening. He commented, "Is there any actor in the west (with the exception of one or two comedians) who can, like Mei Lanfang, in an evening dress, perform the essentials of his stagecraft before a group of professionals without any special lighting device? He is indeed Master of Masters."

Tagore paid him a tribute after seeing his performance in 1924 in Peking. He wrote a poem in Bengali on a silk fan with a Chinese brush and immediately rendered an English translation for them to enjoy:

You are veiled my beloved,  
In a language I don't know,  
As a hill that appears like a cloud  
Behind its mask of mist.



A scene from the Beijing Opera's King of Heaven.

hundred years ago. It was during the Qing Court (which held sway from 1644 until 1911) that is steadily developed to become the most popular type of entertainment which includes spoken parts, acting, singing, dancing and acrobatics. An actor had to be very gifted and endowed with versatility. Physical fitness of our Jatra performers may at times be questioned but not so of their Chinese counterparts. A Beijing Opera heroine must be good looking when appearing in make-up. She must be of pleasing physical proportions, with expressive eyes and eyebrows, and a rich variety of facial expressions. A performer is required to undergo at least ten years strenuous training before appearing on the stage.

Peking or Beijing Opera was originally staged in the open air in difficult weather condition which warranted use of excessively heavy make-up, using thick paint and bright colours. The most difficult parts of the make-up are the lines and designs on the face, signifying particular character. When applying make-up the first step is to lift the eyebrows to give the performer a dignified impressive appearance. In all the three Asian countries folk artists put their own make-up themselves. The costumes are styled on those of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). There are very strict rules as to which costume should be worn by whom, depending on the status and per-

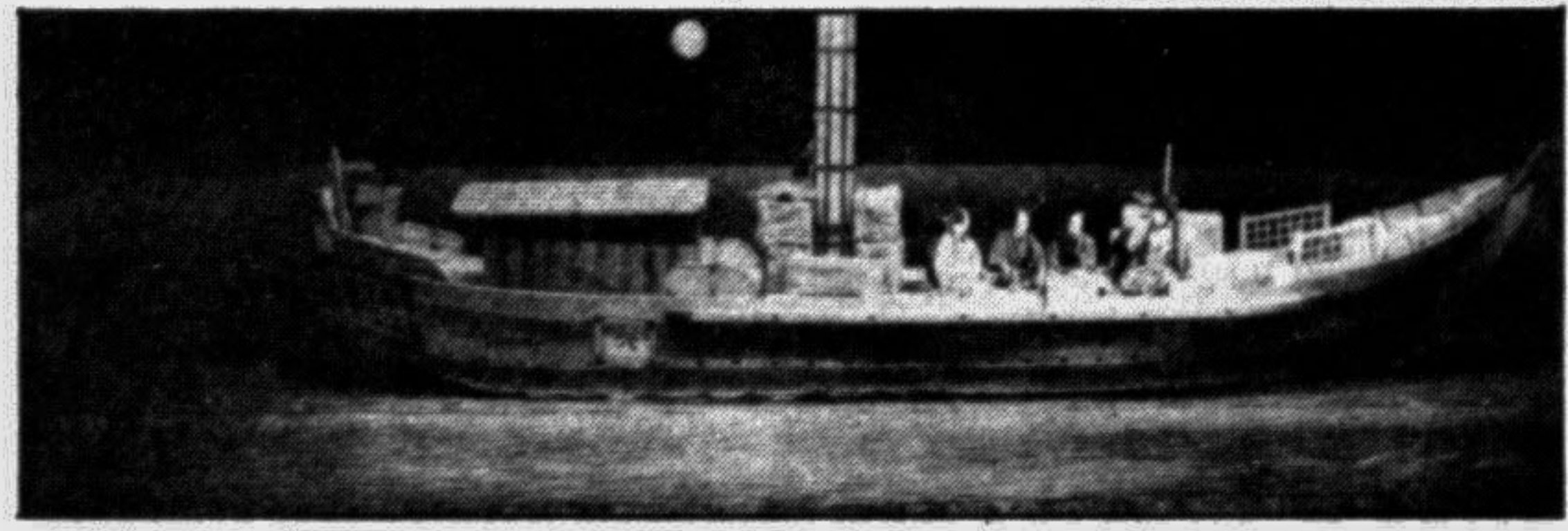
public and rulers, and at times it suffered from gross indifference by both. Even then the inner strength of the art form was so strong and genuine that it moved through the centuries to reach a point of remarkable excellence. Like Jatra, Beijing Opera lays tremendous stress on conventionality (though experiments and innovations have indeed taken place). More than 2,000 years of feudalism forced women in China to observe a special code of conduct, a time honoured tradition, to confine themselves to their living quarters only.

I had the privilege of knowing Mei Lanfang's son (Mr Mei Baoyue) and daughter (Mei Baofu) both connected with the Beijing Opera, when I visited their house in Beijing in 1989. Some of the artefacts given to the great master and also this particular fan were shown to me enclosed in a beautiful box, in the museum named after him, which had not yet been readied for public opening.

In 1991, again in Beijing, I witnessed Mei Baoyue perform the role of the heroine in the famous opera "Snow in mid-



Mei Baoyue, son of Mei Lanfang seen with the author.



A Kabuki stage set.

Okuni, who was originally a priestess at Izumo shrine. She organised this song-and-dance troupe in 1603 to raise funds for the shrine. Her performance in Kyoto gained hearty support of the populace. Originally Kabuki had dance, song and comic pieces. But after a while the performance started deteriorating exhibiting more of sex and indecent dances. In 1629 the authorities were forced to issue orders banning the appearance of women on the stage. Kabuki companies changed their strategy and brought in boys of tenderness to dance and sing on the stage. Male actors cut their forelock to appear as women. Even this arrangement was not a satisfactory one as the companies became gradually centres of child abuse and sex dens. To establish a strict discipline Tokugawa Shogunate, in 1652, ordered a ban on the participation of boys on the stage.



A cart pulling scene on Kabuki stage.

Kabuki plays, namely the victory of ordinary masses over the landed aristocracy. The element of humanism and slogans against the oppressor made Kabuki extremely popular and provided a platform for social reaction. Meanwhile the western influence had started to wane, thus bringing

cial drama the vowels are given adequate weightage. But when they move to historical plays the actors tend to shorten the length of the vowel as if chewing the words. If the character belongs to Royalty then the actor's elocution becomes somewhat constricted and compressed.

summer", an immortal work of 13 Century playwright Guan Hanqing. The climax of the play comes when the heroine is beheaded by the crafty yet irresponsible executioner. The heroine had prayed to God that if she was innocent and chaste then at the precise moment of her execution the white flag flying on the pole would become red with her blood and though this was the month of summer, snow would fall from heaven. A stunning effect, was achieved with the use of modern technique, by creating showfall and a blood-red flag at the precise moment of the heroine's execution!

In our brief survey of the different types of folk theatre art forms of three countries of the Asian region we find striking resemblances in their history of development. To start with, plays were mainly mythological or morality plays which achieved expansion by incorporating social themes and later political themes. Jatra draws easily from the environmental situation. It is not merely an entertainment platform. Rather it is more like a school or court of justice and a platform for mirroring public opinion. Sometimes it is seen that at the height of a crisis situation of the story the Good Character beseeches the public to tell him if the Bad Man should be punished or not. The excitement generated and the responses thrown back to the stage enlivens the entire auditorium. It is this two-way participatory performance that gives Jatra its characteristic strength.

In Jatra, the 'Hero' is the Kingpin, who is endowed with robust physique, big eyes, long limbs and powerful voice. His style of acting is basically declamatory. He has to express his dialogues clearly, breaking the sentence in segment of words, forming a neat pattern, say, a combination of 3 or 4 words at a time. At the end of the line he pauses to take a short breath. They have known of some gifted actors who have gone on with several lines of the dialogue with beautiful punctuation and rhythm, for nearly two minutes or so. Breath control, an essential element in mastery, can be better appreciated when the actor starts from say Ma (Fa) gradually building up to Pa (So), Dha (La), Ni (Ti), Sa (Do) and even beyond.

I remember an incident while witnessing Jatra at Natore in 1978. The 'pandal' was full to the brim and the play was 'Lalon Fakir'. I was in the company of respected college teachers and Government officials, seated very close to the platform. The sequence was Lalon having a serious argument with his mother. This handsome, robust and deep voiced Lalon was bent upon leaving his village to visit the holy shrines in far away places to gain spiritual comfort. Suddenly we realised that there was a great commotion going on at the far end of the 'pandal' where spectators were sitting on the ground, in a highly uncomfortable position, badly squeezed. They were pushing and shoving, falling and rising like a wave. We could hardly hear the dialogue, the audience was greatly distracted. Right then something stunning happened. 'Lalon Fakir' moved away from his mother, raised his arms like a Moghul Emperor and thundered at the far-end audience, "Stop that commotion. Be quiet. Please behave. Sit down. Silence fell on the audience. 'Lalon' retraced his path majestically and with the accompaniment of music started his

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