



dinga Chandu Showdagor.

We praise thee, o mother to the east / O mother, in the east is the *Bhanushwar* (sun-god)

[The sun at one end, but light all around/ To the south we praise thee, o mother

O mother to the sea of milk (* one of the seven seas described in the Hindu *Purana*)

PIECES of memories of my childhood kept coming into my mind on my way to Kawaljani village of Tangail to watch the performance of the *Shong-Khela*. I remembered how I disguised myself as a *Shong*, as a student of Class VII when I had dressed up as a chained restless monkey while my mother was the monkey trainer with the *dugdugi* (the small tabor played tilting it with one hand). Showing the tongue repeatedly, twitching the eye at intervals or jumping up and down were some of the gestures I performed. At that time it was the tradition to dress up as *Shong* (Joker) for wedding or circumcision ceremonies. I thought there would be a considerable difference between the *Shong Khela* we performed then and the performance of *Shang jatra* in Tangail where the performers through their jokes

around us

O mother, we place ourselves in the centre/ Please listen with your heart to this song

of the play of the clown/ We praise in heaven, o mother/O mother, to the gods of heaven

And to the feet of the *Manasha* (the Hindu snake-goddess)/ On this earthly world.]

This praise song is followed by the main presentation. In one of the stories, we see a son whose desire is to get married but being embarrassed fails to convey his wish to the father. He hesitates and falters in speech, but by no means can he tell his father about his heart's desire. Finally, the father realises his son's wish and sets out in search of a bride. But gets him married instead. A peculiar idea of a strange country has been referred here where the rules and customs are so odd! If a man goes to select a bride even



Father and son perform the jesters play (*shong-khela*)

and satires usually criticised the discrepancies or inconsistencies of human behaviour. Each show is played all through the night and either spontaneous or preplanned performance is presented.

The show in Kawaljani was held on the occasion of the *Chaitra shangkranti* (The last day of the Bengali year). It started with the humble apology of Master Haripad Sarkar for the errors they might make. Then started an instrumental on the harmonium, *dhol* (Instrument of percussion) and the *kortal* (cymbal) while the women spectators made the sound *Ulu* by the movement of the tongue. After this started the *Bondona* (praise song) by families. In this performance the female impersonator is known as the family. At first four families stood facing the east and in a slow rhythm started the *Bondona* like this :

Amra pubete bondona kori go Ma / Ma go pube Bhanushwar / Ak dikete uday Bhanu chowdike Alo

Amra Dakshine bandan kori go Ma / Ma go Kheer Nadi Shagor/ Jei shagore chalaye

The sea on which sails his boat, the *Chand Showdagor* .

Amra paschime bondona kori go Ma / Ma go Nabijir Rowjaye Taharo chorine janaye / hajaoro salam.

[We praise thee, o mother to the west / O mother to the mausoleum

of the Holy Prophet/ Devote on his feet / our salute in thousands.]

Amra Uttore bondona kori go Ma / Ma go Kailash porbot / Jeye porbot hawaye gole aey desher pathor.

Amra chowdike bondona kori go Ma / Ma go modhdhey korlam sthan /

Mon dia shonben shobai/ Shong-kheler gaan.

Amra shorgete bondona kori go Ma / Ma go shorger debgon/ Patale bondona kori Monoshor choron.

[To the north we praise thee, o mother /O mother to the Kailasa mountain

(* the mountain on the north of Himalaya which is the abode of Shiva according to Hindu belief)

The mountain whose wind can melt the rocks of this country/ O mother, we praise all

for someone else, then he has to take the chosen bride as his own wife. So, here the father has to marry the girl he had chosen for his son! Meanwhile, the son, waiting for the father, gets anxious and says to himself

: O father, you have been gone for two days ... why don't you return ...

At that moment the father comes back home along with his new bride. Looking back the son suddenly finds his father and seeing a new bride behind him becomes very happy. He thinks that his father has brought the new bride for him. And so the son steps forward towards the bride and says

: Father, I am so happy father

... : Don't be so happy ... show your respects ...

: Why?

: Cause this is your mother !

: What do you say? No, this is my wife ... and

: Well, this, this is not possible.

: No, no, no

: Hey, listen you don't know I had gone to see a bride for you ... the custom of that country you see the king has declared -



- the one who sees and approves the bride should marry that girl ...

: Alas, o father ... you have killed me ... my heart cannot bear such pain.

: What to do now?

: Alas, what have I done all those years to think you as my father. O dear, even if I had called the persons from our neighborhood as my father, they would have married me even five to ten times...

: What to do...

: Oh, why did you go to see

my bride! O dear father, I am through...

Watching the crazy behavior of the son, the new bride then speaks up

: It seems the boy is mad!

The father then tries to make the bride understand

: No, the boy is not crazy. He is now fit to get married and for the customs of your country I had to get married to you.

The son then again starts wailing and crying. Accusations to the father and consolations to the son follows in dialogues when at a stage the father and his new bride leaves and the son decides to get married by himself and so he sets off.

Finally he gets someone and marries her and brings her back to his own home. Entering through the doorway, he meets his father and tells him about his good luck.

: O father, I also have a good luck...

: Good luck ! Your mother has been crying all night for you!

: My mother cries .. What do you say? But father, I have brought...

: What have you brought?

The son indicates to the bride

following him .

: Look, whom have I brought.

Looking at the new bride behind his son, the father speaks out

: Well she looks like our mother ..

: Eh, what do you say?

Then the bride of the father comes forward to see the new bride whom the son has married and brought home. Looking at her cautiously she exclaims,

: Yes, yes - she is our mother.

The father being confirmed that this is his mother-in-law asks her about her well-being and also bows down to touch her feet in respect. The son then puts his feet forward and asks his father to touch his feet too.

: What about me?

: But you are my son!

: And the person you have bowed is also my wife, you have bowed to her and now you must bow to me.

Saying this the son explains how he had set out in search of a bride and then had found her and married her. But now it happens that his wife is actually the mother of his new mother, the bride that his father had

brought home. The son is adamant about getting proper respect from his father and his newly married wife, his new mother. It is because he is now the husband of a woman who is the mother of the bride , his father has married. He also demands that his father calls him his father in law instead of son. So the son says

: Wouldn't you call ... wouldn't you call me father-in-law ?

: How can I call you in that name ... aren't you my beloved son?

Now a strong and fatal answer comes to the son's mind

: Isn't there any justice in the country You can get married four-five times and now, when with my own power I get married and she is older than the one you have married, then .

The narration between the father and son ends here. Then two families who dance while singing sing a song introduce the troupe. While returning from Kawaljani village to Bhadra village after seeing this episode of the *Shong-Khela*, I began to think about the episode that is related with the *Horogouri Puja* because the performance was

based on *Horogouri Puja*. I realised about some of the discrepancies that exist in some people of our society which is also seen in the character of *Horie Shiva* (The third god of the Hindu Triad). Like in this episode, here, where the father gets himself married to a girl whom he had chosen for his son at first shows inconsistency of behaviour, there remains much more extreme inconsistency in case of *Shiva*. *Shiva* had felt passion seeing his own daughter *Padma* or *Manasa*. May be there is a silent tune of harmony between the inconsistent behavior of the gods and the inconsistencies that exist in our society, the explanation of which is still unknown to the performers of the *Shong-Khela*.

Story: SAYMON ZAKARIA
Translated by: ZAKIA RAHMAN, architect
Photographs: SAYMON ZAKARIA

