

## From glory days to gloominess

With the change of time and taste Jatra does not attract city dwellers anymore

DURDANA GHAS

"Princess! If you leave me that's alright, but don't expect me to forget you," cried the visibly upset prince as the glittering princess flounced off the scene amid rippling tunes of cornet and clarinet.

This type of typical Jatra scenes are now rarely seen as staging of Jatrakala has gradually declined in the city due to lots of problems gripping the traditional theatre art and changes in people's taste.

There was a time when Jatra was a regular seasonal festival in Dhaka. Artists wearing dazzling outfits and glittery jewellery would mesmerise the people during winter and the Durga Puja festival.

Shows were arranged regularly in Badda, Kamalapur, Katsur, Kamrangirchar, Sutrapur, Kalabagan playground, and the open spaces around Manik Mia Avenue and Sher-e-Bangla Nagar.

"Even in 1970s there were at least two Jatra shows in the new part of Dhaka every winter. Jatra was entertainment to a big part of the city dwellers. To me it was like a festival," said Aziz, a regular Jatra viewer of that time.

The attraction of Jatra decreased in late 80s when television became a popular medium of entertainment. It became difficult to manage a few hours to watch Jatra when one can easily watch television at home.

With the change in people's taste Jatra groups found it hard to survive.

Some groups introduced indecent dances to attract cheap audience that damaged the traditional theatre to a great extent.

According to Jatra artistes and owners, one of the main reasons of declining trend of this art is the occasional restrictions imposed by successive governments that made it difficult to stage a show.

During the rule of BNP-Jamaat alliance it became difficult to take permission from the administration for staging a show, they said.

Often Jatra groups had to incur losses when they missed programme schedule for delay in getting permission.

In metropolitan cities permission is given by the police commissioner following clearance from the deputy police commissioner of the concerned area. In district level permission is granted by the deputy commissioner following clearance from the police super (SP).

"It is a long and complicated process. We have to secure permission after going through many tables," said Md Alamgir Hossain, proprietor,

Bishweshwari Natya Sangstha, a Jatra group of Dhaka.

To start a Jatra group a proprietor has to invest around four to five lakh taka.

"During Jatra season (starting from Durga Puja for the next six months) we have to sign contract with around 50 artistes. Each artiste usually takes Tk 8,000. We have to arrange their food and accommodation," Alamgir said.

"If we don't get the permission for a show we face financial loss. We have to pay the artistes because the contracts are already done," he added.

Despite being a popular traditional form of theatre, Jatra remains neglected.

"There is no permanent stage for Jatra in the country. We are never invited for trips abroad," Alamgir said, adding that the governments have never come forward to help the Jatra people financially.

Swapan Pandey, proprietor, Choitali Opera, Magura, said it takes a lot of money for the groups outside Dhaka to come and stage shows in the capital.

Besides collection of artistes, they have to spend at least Tk 15,000 a day on costume, make-up, music, refreshment, conveyance and rehearsal.

He said around 7/8 years ago they used to stage at least 9/10 nine shows in Dhaka every year. Later some unprofessional groups started arranging indecent dances and offering lower rates for viewers as their cost was lower than that of the professional groups. This trend gradually led to a decline in the professional group's trips to Dhaka.

"Now we stage around 3 shows in a year," he said.

Milon Kanti Dey, secretary general, Jatrashilpo Unnayan Parishad, the only organisation representing Jatra artistes in the country, said at present they do not face that much problem in getting permission for a show.

He said the caretaker government's attitude towards Jatra is favourable but still a strong government policy is needed to save this traditional theatre.

"There are around 20,300 Jatra artistes in the country and five lakh more are dependent on this profession indirectly. In Dhaka there are around 1,200 artistes in 52 groups and 9,600 people are dependent. Many of them are unable to maintain their families," Milon said.

A series of government circulars (from November 1, 1991 to January 31, 2005) imposing temporary ban on Jatra for a certain period hampered staging of shows for 1,014 days, causing a financial loss of around Tk 33.20 crore for the groups during the period, said sources at the



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Parishad.

During the rule of Awami League there was no ban on Jatra but there were administrative tangles.

"Due to a circular in December 2007 our problem of getting permission has resolved to some extent as now we need only the SP's clearance," Milon said adding that Jatra is still regulated by the Bengal Places of Public Amusement Act 1933 which has been withdrawn for theatre.

About the indecent dances he said that a taskforce, comprising cultural personalities and activists, should be formed under Shilpakala Academy in each district to monitor Jatra shows to stop this practice.

"As punishment the licence of that certain Jatra group can be postponed for the time being," he said.

Tapash Sarkar, secretary general, Lokonatyia Goshthi, said involving educated persons is vital for Jatra's survival.

"In West Bengal people are more interested to watch Jatra than watching cinema and drama. Then why won't it be possible here?" he added.

Abdur Rahim, another Jatra artiste and a lawyer by profession said that there is a common perception that Jatra is performed by lowly people.

"We have to change that view," he said, adding that Jatra and its artistes must get proper recognition and respect.

Golam Sarwar, deputy director, Shilpakala Academy, said, "We have a plan for making a permanent stage for Jatra. But right now we can't say when it would be possible, because we need money and space."

About keeping Jatra artistes out of trips abroad, he said foreign countries prefer dance troupes, musicians, magicians and singing groups to drama because those can be enjoyed by all beyond language barrier.

Besides, sending a drama or Jatra group abroad is much more expensive than a dance troupe as more people are needed to stage a drama.

"Most Jatra artistes are very naive and dedicated but they are the victims of a few non-artists blackening the image of the profession," he said.

"There is a dearth of talent and novelty as many of our good palakars (scriptwriters) have left for India. New faces are not coming," he said.

About the government policy on Jatra, Dr Zakir Hossain, deputy secretary of the cultural affairs ministry, said, "We have received a letter from the Jatra people in this respect. We will start the process of forming the policy soon."

## Mother of the theatre art

Niranjan Adhikary, professor, Department of Sanskrit, Dhaka University, and a veteran Jatra artiste, said that Jatra has played a vital role in forming traditional theatre art of Bengal.

In early times there was a rite in which people used to wear masks representing Shiva and Parvati. They used to travel from one place to another. Sometimes they used to act in front of a temple or at an open space or beside a street. From this the term 'Jatra' (Journey) came.

It later evolved to Nana-Nati (grandfather-grandson) form, where the grandson asks questions to his grandfather, saying 'Nana he'. It is called Gombhira in the northern region, said Prof Niranjan.

In the next stage the dialogues were formed on rhymes and songs. It was called Sri Krishna Kirtan in the Sultani period. It had three roles -- Radha, Krishna and an old matron who used to escort Radha when she was out. It was a bit more descriptive than before.

In later periods musical drama groups like the leto evolved where poet Kazi Nazrul Islam used to perform in his teens, said Prof Niranjan.

Gradually prose replaced songs and Jatra characters and dialogues evolved.

Prof Niranjan thinks the British period was the golden age of Jatra. A subjective change arrived during the period. Previously it was based on myths but then it started to address social and political crises. It played a strong role in Swadeshi movement.

"Jatra is like the root of the traditional Bengali theatre. At the beginning of modern theatre in Bengal there was a trend to follow the style of European theatre and proce-

nium stage where audience sits on one side," said Prof Niranjan.

"In recent times we have seen that modern theatre artistes are after the root of traditional Jatra form and some of them are working in arena stage like Jatra where audience sits on three sides," he added.

"Jatra can move side by side the modern theatre. We should not shun it because of its primitiveness but admire it for the same. We should be careful so that we do not lose this root. It will have to stand on its own feet. Its style of presentation, staging strategies are different," said Adhikari.

Saymon Zakaria, manuscript editor, Folklore Department, Bangla Academy, and a researcher of rural theatre said that one of the characteristics of Jatra is to elongate the words of the dialogues and highlight body language and parts of dialogues. It happens because Jatra is generally seen by thousands of people surrounding a small dais.

"It is over-dramatic but this is more acceptable to the general people," he said.

"To me real acting and real expressions is possible in Jatra only," said Roxana Parveen Rupa, a Jatra artiste and an advocate of Dhaka Bar.

Azad Abul Kalam, director of theatre group Prachyanat, said modern theatre was influenced by Jatra from the beginning.

"Traditional Jatra artistes are our forefathers in acting. The modern form of theatre practised by theatre groups in the city is very much influenced by Jatra especially when it comes to presentation," said Azad.

## City streets crammed full of vehicles

RIZANUZZAMAN LASKAR

Traffic on the capital's busiest thoroughfares has increased by around one-tenth in 2007 with about 120 thousand new motorised vehicles hitting the streets during the period.

The total number of motorised vehicles in the city now stands at a staggering 1.05 million crammed into some 220-kilometre road creating one of the highest traffic densities in the world.

The statistics are based on the number of vehicles registered with the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) that closely monitors the vehicles plying on the streets.

"Number of vehicles, especially private cars and motorbikes has been increasing in a staggering pace. Each year 20 to 30 percent new vehicles enter city streets and this rate is increasing every year," said an official at BRTA.

According to the statistics, the number of vehicles registered with BRTA was 80 thousand in 2006 and 65 thousand in the year before.

"Total number of vehicles registered in 2005 was around 65 thousand. The fact that it almost doubled in 2007 gives you an idea how rapidly the number is increasing," the official said.

The number of newly registered private cars in 2007 totalled to 12 thousand. Number of new motorbikes and microbuses was around 5 thousand and 85 thou-

sand respectively, sources said.

In tune with the trend, around five thousand private cars have already registered with the BRTA during the first three months of the current year. Around 50 to 60 vehicles are applying for registration on a daily basis, sources said.

This rapid increase in the number of vehicles along with poor road infrastructure makes Dhaka one of the most densely traffic congested cities in the world.

In his report, former teacher

from Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet) Md Asadullah Khan, says: "The total number of vehicles on the city road is now at least five times the number it was in 1990. The weight of freight moved through the city roads in recent times has jumped to at least 50 times in this period and the number of passengers has leap-frogged to 70 times."

"Both new and reconditioned vehicles have been cluttering up the city streets in alarming num-

bers. The gap between the number of vehicles and the road capacity in the city is widening with each passing day," said Jahangir Alam, an urban architect and former town planner at Rajuk.

Meanwhile, city dwellers are going through the ordeals of tailbacks during the peak hours of the day while town planners and government authorities, finding no solution to the unbearable sufferings, blame years of unplanned urbanisation for it.



STAR PHOTO

Tailbacks have become a regular feature in the city's streets as the road space is decreasing every day with unplanned rise in the number of vehicles.



Construction of a CNG re-fuelling station in a residential area at Bakhshi Bazar has become a cause of concern for the locals. Frequent incidents of cylinder burst are being reported these days at re-fuelling centres in the city. However, authorities are yet to take any step for the safety of the surrounding people.