

What a tremendous roar of thunder!
 What a dooms day!
 Why does the thunderbolt not strike my head?
 Oh time, devour me,
 Oh thunder, destroy this degenerate soul,
 Oh goddess of darkness—
 Why keep this villain alive in this world,
 Destroy him!



PHOTO: ARIFUR RAHMAN

Thus thunders the hero, his voice reaching far and wide, capturing the full attention of his audience. The language of *jatra*, a community drama entrenched in the very roots of Bangladesh, is so poetic, rhythmic, enchanting and dramatic that it exudes a power that is captivating, alluring even.

In its earliest form, *jatra* was a performance based on spirituality; later it brought in social and historical elements. Popular amongst the rural communities, *jatra* was an instrumental cultural form to fight the oppressions of the British regime. Back then it was used to promote the *svadeshi* movement, as can be witnessed from the *jatra pala Matri Puja* (1906), written by Mukunda Das, which was charged with anti-state sentiments. Das was eventually charged with sedition, imprisoned and fine Rs. 300, a huge sum back then. And yet he would sing:

“O ladies of Bengal,
 Do not use the mercerised bangle—
 Throw it on the ground,
 Wake up, wake up, hey ladies!”

In 1971, *jatra* was used to mobilise people. Many Bangladeshi refugees would collaborate with organisations in Kolkata during the Liberation War to put up *jatras*. Performances such as *I am not Mujib*, written by Monmotho Roy, *Sangrami Mujib* by Naresh

Jatra

WHEN ART FAILS ITS ARTISTES

NAZMUL AHSAN

established so that *jatra* performers can actually earn a substantial amount for their work. It is imperative that the artistes themselves form a guild that can ensure their subsistence. Perhaps it is also time for more research to be done on this art, as these studies can be used to transform the current *jatra* form to a tool for social mobilisation and change.

Qualitative change is also necessary, and accordingly, contemporary themes should be introduced when writing *jatra* palas to keep pace with the current times. Reportedly, it takes Tk. 20,000 to 30,000 to get permission to stage *jatra* performances. There is obvious corruption within law enforcement agencies, and as unscrupulous *jatra* owners seek to use obscenity to titillate their audience, they further promote corruption by giving in to the demands of the law enforcers.

According to Article 23 of our Constitution, “The state shall adopt measures to conserve cultural traditions and heritage of the people and to foster and improve the national language, literature and the arts that all sections of the people are afforded the opportunity to contribute towards act to participate in the enrichment of the national culture.” Preservation of *jatra* in its original form is thus not just a moral duty but an obligation for the state. And yet, when compared to other art forms, there is widespread discrimination, gender and wage disparity, lack of funding and gross neglect from the authorities. There are no training opportunities for *jatra* artistes and thus, there is no scope for further development of their art.

Like with many other art forms, religious fundamentalists are the major enemies of *jatra*. If we can recall, seven years ago, a group of extremists bombed a *jatra* pandal, raising vehement, vulgar slogans against this art form. Being an open air performance accessible

CULTURE

HERITAGE



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

At a time when it's all but impossible to organise large-scale events without corporate sponsorship, the Faculty of Fine Arts (FFA), popularly known as the Charukola, University of Dhaka, has been able to keep the *Mongol Shobhajatra* – a mass procession that welcomes the dawn of the Bengali New Year – free of commercial signage of big companies. Instead, the FFA raises funds by selling the artworks of following the day of the inauguration, which, this year, was on March 19. They also make some money by selling the giant replicas and masks from the procession throughout the year.

Professor Nisar Hossain, eminent artist and dean of the FFA, is one of the pioneers of the *Mongol Shobhajatra*. He informs that from the very beginning, the FFA has been aspiring to make the procession an event for the masses, free of financial assistance of commercial organisations. “Whenever money of a corporate sponsor is involved, the relationship inevitably becomes commercial. It then becomes difficult to maintain the true spirit of our cultural identity,” argues Hossain.

Initially, people didn't really understand what the *Mongol Shobhajatra* was, let alone buy the artwork and other items. “Despite that, we have never depended on corporate sponsors for funding. Rather, students would spare their pocket or lunch money and everyone would bring food from home while working to bring the arrangements together,” he says with a hint of pride.

Prominent artist and cartoonist Rafiqun Nabi, another pioneer of the *Mongol Shobhajatra*, also agrees with Hossain. “We avoid taking money from others so that we don't have to use advertisements, monograms or slogans which don't go with our objectives. Since

Artwork for Sale, Not the Shobhajatra

NILIMA JAHAN

It is a procession that is derived from our love for our culture and tradition, we always try to maintain the uniqueness of the FFA,” says Nabi.

Many buy these artworks, not only because they are made by the students themselves and are unique but also because they create public ownership to some degree. For example, when someone buys a small paper flower with Tk 100, or a small tiger mask for Tk 200, s/he can take pride in that their money eventually goes to support the whole event. This way, the *Mongol Shobhajatra* creates a platform for the masses to participate in the event in more ways than one. And, that very attribute of procession is one of many reasons behind it achieving UNESCO's proclamation of ‘an intangible cultural heritage of humanity’.

The 18th and 19th batch of Charukola were in charge of the preparations this year, but teachers, artists, and students – seniors and juniors – all worked together to create something worthy of the celebration of the first morning of the Bengali New Year. It is the collective effort they put into making the individual art pieces that make the whole process – and the *Shobhajatra* – so memorable.

“If we took money from others, we would not need to put in so much effort



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

for a whole gruelling month and there would be no engagement among teachers, students, artists and the public. Rather, the whole process would take a very small period of time and people would forget the whole thing, as if it were just like any ordinary event,” says Nisar Hossain.

Also, students feel inspired when they work in such close proximity of prominent artists and seniors. “You cannot imagine how blessed we feel that we are being able to learn so much from

our seniors,” says Tanjila Siddiqui, a master's student of the FFA.

One of the many underlying messages we can take from all the hard work that goes behind *Mongol Shobhajatra* is our need to ease dependence on the international community and corporations for commercial sponsorships. We should all come forward to do whatever we can, in our own little ways, to preserve and showcase the beauty of our culture, heritage and tradition. ■



PHOTOS: ARIFUR RAHMAN



Chakraborty and *Bangabandhu Mujibor* by Satya Prakash Dutta mostly inspired the Bangladeshis in Kolkata, uplifting their morale and keeping alive the spirit of liberation.

The long historical development of *jatra* is the pride of Bangladeshis. In rural areas, many aspiring actors take up this art form as their career. However, despite its historical relevance, *jatra* performers are facing an uncertain future.

Jatra owners are mostly wealthy influential men of the locality, who run a *jatra* troupe to earn as much profit as they can. It is alleged that many of the current *jatra* proprietors used black money to buy the troupes and have no taste or aesthetic sense. Today, *jatra* has gained notoriety, mostly for its crude language and obscene dance performances. It is thus natural that this art form is losing its popularity.

There are approximately 7,000 professional *jatra* artistes in Bangladesh. Even today, the genuine artistes

want to leave behind the legacy of *jatra* as an art form that can eventually become a credible industry for rural artistes. But that is becoming more and more difficult. *Jatra* performers do not even get paid properly. Most of the time, they are not even paid according to their agreements. According to Tapan Bagchi in *Bangladesher Jatra Shilpider Jiban o Jibika*, 10.9 percent *jatra* artistes and workers receive less than Tk. 1000, 47.8 percent artistes earn around Tk. 2000 or less, 18.5 percent artistes take home Tk. 3000 or less, and 15.2 percent artistes earn Tk. 4,000 or less. They thus either have to depend on their family for financial assistance or work in over 100 troupes over the year to make ends meet. There is also discrimination according to ‘grade’, with higher grade actors afforded special treatment, and better pay and facilities.

If *jatra* artistes continue to work under private ownership, they will never be able to make full use of their potential. That's why a cooperative needs to be

to all, *jatra* is especially vulnerable to fundamentalism and extremism. Yet, the government has not taken any concrete steps to protect *jatra* artistes and their means of livelihood.

Rural *jatra* artistes have dedicated themselves to *jatra* performances so passionately that they cannot think of accepting any alternative livelihood. And yet most of these artistes are so poor that they have no proper housing, food or health care facility, while their children cannot even attend school.

We cannot let this ancient art form crumble under these pressures that can be easily contained if the concerned authorities so wish. It is important for *jatra* to go back to its original people-oriented form if it were to sustain. But we, the nation, need to provide systematic support to return this art form to its original glory.

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