

THE LOST SOUL OF JATRA

Artists and their struggle for relevance

YSTIAQUE AHMED

Today, like many traditional art forms in Bangladesh, Jatra stands on the verge of extinction. What once echoed through open fields and village fairs is now fading into memory. Last December, the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy organised a month-long traditional Jatra (folk theatre) performance festival to celebrate and support artists striving to preserve the form. Yet such festivals and celebrations are too few and far between to create a lasting impact or bring meaningful change to the lives of these artists.

A theatre of the people

The word Jatra means “journey”, and the name fits well. Troupes travel from



PHOTO: COLLECTED

political messages became a powerful voice for the oppressed. Another major transformation came with the introduction of women performers, a revolution in its own right.

Modhurima Guha Neogi, in her study *“Jatrapala, the Foremost but a Diminishing Art of Bengali Culture,”* noted that women’s entry into Jatra was fraught with ridicule and prejudice. For a time, only sex workers dared to step onto the stage. Over the years, however, women from all social classes joined, reshaping the identity of the art form itself.

A golden era remembered

For those who lived through Jatra’s golden years, the memories remain vivid. “I’ve been with Jatra for forty-two years,” said N. A. Polash, Secretary of the Bangladesh Shilpa

Development Society. “When I started, every troupe had seventy or eighty people. We lived together like family.”

He recalled a time when lead actors earned nearly one lakh taka a month, and each performance generated substantial revenue. “Now,” he said, “a troupe barely has twenty-five people, and most of us have no work.” The decline, he explained, began slowly after the 1990s. “Back then, we didn’t have to beg for shows. Now, even getting permission to perform is a big hurdle.”

“We used to earn thirty to forty thousand taka a night,” Polash said. Today, most artists have taken up other jobs, running tea stalls, pulling rickshaws, or working as day labourers.

In many ways, Jatra has always lived on the edge—politically, socially, and legally. “We were chased by police,” Polash remembered. “They made laws to control us, to make sure we couldn’t perform freely. Those hurdles never really ended.”

The economics of decline

According to Md Haydar Ali, Assistant Director at the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy (BSA), the collapse of Jatra is rooted less in culture than in economics. “No funds mean no shows, and no shows mean no audience,” he said. “People aren’t disinterested; they just have nowhere to go to watch a decent play.”

Government support has dwindled over the years. In the 2011–12 fiscal year, the state donated twenty-one lakh taka to the sector. “Since then,” Polash said, “nothing. Some artists now receive allowances, but it’s barely enough to survive—around sixteen thousand taka a year for those over forty. Even that is uncertain.”

A theatre without a stage

For Badrul Alam Dulal, former Secretary of the Bangladesh Jatra Unnoyon Parishad, the crisis is deeply personal. His troupe, Ceaser’s Opera, now performs only occasionally. “The members run tea stalls or pull rickshaws,” he said. “We’ve become informal workers, and if we get a show, we all come together.”

The decline, Dulal explained, was both moral and economic. “It shifted away from family-oriented shows to attract more money. Dance sections were added, sometimes indecent ones.” That stigma has endured. Today, rehearsals are often conducted under the label of ‘drama’ rather than Jatra to avoid public ridicule. “The tragedy,” Dulal said, “is that Jatra used to be an art of pride. Now it’s treated like a scandal.”

Training has also nearly disappeared. “Young people aren’t learning the craft,” he said. “The Shilpakala Academy organises workshops once in a while, but it’s not enough. Without new artists, the art can’t continue.”

Bureaucracy has further worsened the situation. To receive allowances or register as a Jatra artist, performers must navigate layers of paperwork, quotas, and approvals. Many genuine artists are rejected, while others exploit the system by posing as performers.

A voice from the stage

Few understand the soul of Jatra better than Milon Kanti Dey, a veteran actor, director, and writer who received the Bangla Academy Literary Award in 2022. Speaking from his home in Chattogram while battling cancer, Dey reflected on his six-decade journey.

“Jatra and its artists suffered the most during the 1990s and 2000s,” he said. “The government banned us with one hand and praised us with the other by holding festivals. We ran in circles, trying to survive.”

Those festivals did bring brief recognition. “Thirty-eight of us received national awards,” Dey recalled. “But soon, people with nothing to do with Jatra were enlisted to collect allowances. Now the art is full of impostors. Real artists are invisible.”

For Dey, the decline is not only financial but spiritual. “We’ve lost the soul of Jatra. There is no patriotism, no creativity, no literariness. We perform Kolkatan scripts while living in Bangladesh. It breaks my heart.”

What was once an art of resistance has become a struggle for survival. Jatra was never meant for elites or critics; it belonged to the masses. It was their mirror, their protest, their joy. As Milon Kanti Dey put it, “If we can bring back the heart of Jatra, the people will come back too.”

Jatra and its artists have survived prejudice, censorship, and poverty. They stood on stage to speak for those without a voice. Today, their voices are fading. A festival here or a token award there will not revive the art.

Actors now take whatever work they can find. Jatra has become a side hustle rather than a calling. A tradition that once stood tall in our culture is quietly crumbling, its songs and painted faces disappearing in the rush of modern life.

Ystiaque Ahmed, is a journalist at *The Daily Star*. He can be reached at ystiaque1998@gmail.com.



PHOTO: COLLECTED

one district to another, performing on temporary open-air stages throughout the winter months. In its early days, Jatra drew heavily from myth and religion. By the late nineteenth century, however, scripts began to evolve. Social issues, political resistance, and rebellion increasingly came to dominate the stage.

During the colonial era, British authorities viewed these political undertones as a threat. As the struggle for independence neared its peak, Jatra’s social and



The little monarch of Madhabkunda

A rare winter vagrant claims a waterfall in northeastern Bangladesh

A male, Sada-Tupi Lal-Girdi White-capped Water Redstart (*Phoenicurus leucocephalus*).

REZA KHAN

The water of Madhabkunda does not simply fall—it sparkles.

It plunges from the heights in a silvery torrent, yet much of it hesitates below, lingering in shallow pools before resuming its restless journey downhill. As the water rushes onward, it gives birth to a chhara—a perennial hill stream fed year-round by the waterfall’s freshwater pulse. Massive boulders stand like ancient guardians, sheltering mosses, lichens, ferns, and stubborn little herbs. Wherever water spares a crack, a crevice, a damp ledge—or even a surprisingly dry niche—life claims its foothold.

These plants have not damaged the rocks; they have claimed them. Small colonies flourish in places that seem impossible to sustain life. Wherever plants exist, creepy-crawlies inevitably follow to feed on them, and the atmosphere around the waterfall was no exception.

Even the 61-metre plunge from the top of the waterfall fails to deter some resolute vegetation. Mosses and ferns cling calmly to the near-vertical rock face, growing along the very wall over which the hissing torrent descends. Water thunders, sprays, and roars—yet life persists quietly, insistently.

A sudden ruler of the falls

Amid this chaos of falling water, slippery stone, and stunted greenery, a sudden movement catches the eye.

A small bird darts across the rocks—fearless, confident, almost defiant. It pauses, stands upright, and flicks its tail.

In that instant, it is clear: this bird has declared himself the top boss of the waterfall.

From the mossy base to the wet rock wall, from sheltered ledges to hidden cracks behind the falling sheet of water, he moves with absolute freedom. He feeds wherever he pleases, snapping up insects and worms flushed out by spray and turbulence. At times,

he ventures behind the watery curtain itself, vanishing briefly into the shimmering veil, only to reappear moments later at a chosen vantage point—prey secured.

The bird is unmistakable.

A white-capped, reddish-black fellow—sharp-eyed, alert, endlessly active. His gleaming white crown contrasts starkly with dark rock, resembling a tiny Turkish fez perched proudly atop a crimson robe. Each flick of his tail flashes vermilion red edged with black, vivid against grey stone and silver water. Apart from the white cap, the head, neck, back, wings, throat, and breast are jet black, while the rest of the body glows deep red.

This is no ordinary resident bird.

An extraordinary visitor

He is a male, Sada-Tupi Lal-Girdi or White-capped Water Redstart (*Phoenicurus leucocephalus*), sometimes informally referred to as a “white-capped” redstart by birders because of his gaudy plumage. A rare winter migrant to Bangladesh’s hill regions, the species has fewer than a dozen confirmed national records over several decades.

To encounter one here, at Madhabkunda Waterfall in Moulvibazar, feels nothing short of extraordinary.

It is December. The air is crisp, temperatures hovering between 12 and 14 degrees Celsius. Cool mist rises from the waterfall, and the surrounding forest seems hushed—as if aware that something special is unfolding. The redstart moves effortlessly, perfectly at home in a place where water rules and stone resists.

News travels fast.

Soon, birdwatchers from across the country arrive—drawn by hurried phone calls and whispered excitement. They gather quietly, careful not to disturb the little monarch of the falls. Cameras click softly. Binoculars rise and lower. Smiles spread. For many, this is a

once-in-a-lifetime sighting.

The bird, however, remains indifferent to his fame.

He continues his patrol—darting, flicking, feeding—commanding his watery kingdom with confidence and grace. In that moment, Madhabkunda is no longer just a waterfall; it becomes a rare meeting point of migration, resilience, and chance. And I am fortunate enough to be there—to witness a tiny traveller from distant mountains briefly rule a roaring cascade in the hills of Bangladesh.

The White-capped Water Redstart: A rare vagrant

The bird observed at Madhabkunda is an adult male White-capped Water Redstart (*Phoenicurus leucocephalus*), a member of the Old-World flycatcher family (*Muscicapidae*)—a group known for insectivorous species adapted to diverse habitats.

How to identify it

Adult males are unmistakable:

- A bright white crown sharply contrasting with a deep rufous-red body
- Black face, throat, wings, and upperparts
- A bold black-and-red tail pattern, frequently flicked—a classic redstart behaviour
- Strong legs and an upright posture, ideal for hopping across wet, slippery rocks

Females and immature birds are much duller—brownish grey—and easily confused with other redstarts, making sightings of adult males especially valuable for documentation.

A specialist of water and stone

Unlike most redstarts, the White-capped Water Redstart is a highly specialised riparian species. It shows a strong preference for:

- Fast-flowing mountain streams
- Waterfalls and rocky gorges
- Moss-covered boulders and wet cliff faces

While these habitats define its core ecology, migrating individuals sometimes turn up in unexpected places—such as Thakurgaon,

Rajshahi or Panchagarh—far from typical hill-stream environments.

At Madhabkunda, the species exploits insects and other small invertebrates flushed out by flowing water or trapped among wet rocks and vegetation. Its habit of foraging behind falling water curtains—rarely witnessed but well documented—reflects remarkable adaptation to turbulent aquatic environments.

Where it comes from

The species breeds in high-altitude regions of Central and South Asia, including:

- The Himalayas (Nepal, Bhutan, northern India)
- Western and central China
- Mountain ranges of Central Asia

During winter, some individuals descend to lower elevations. A few wander far beyond their usual wintering range, occasionally reaching the eastern Himalayan foothills and adjoining hill tracts—bringing rare visitors to Bangladesh.

Status in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, the White-capped Water Redstart is an extremely rare winter vagrant:

- Records are very few—possibly fewer than half a dozen verified sightings
- Mostly confined to hill streams and waterfalls in the northeast and southeast
- Only isolated records exist from Thakurgaon, Rajshahi and Panchagarh outside hill districts
- Sightings are scattered across decades, with no evidence of regular wintering populations

Although globally listed as Least Concern, national mapping can be misleading. Disjunct records—from Thakurgaon, Rajshahi to Panchagarh, Madhabkunda, Bandarban, and Khagrachhari—are often connected into a single distribution polygon, giving an illusion of wide presence. In reality, the species occurs rarely and irregularly, not continuously across these areas, and it does not visit the country every year (IUCN 2015 Bangladesh

Red List Map)

The Madhabkunda sighting is therefore an important national record, involving a well-marked adult male observed over multiple days by numerous experienced birders.

Why it matters

This single bird tells a larger story:

- The ecological importance of intact hill-stream ecosystems
- The role of waterfalls as micro-refugia for specialised migrants
- The need to protect freshwater systems not only for fish and invertebrates, but also for highly specialised terrestrial birds

Such observations also highlight the growing value of citizen science and birdwatching networks, which allow rare records to be rapidly shared, verified, and preserved.

A conservation reminder

Though globally secure, the White-capped Water Redstart depends on clean, fast-flowing streams, making it vulnerable to:

- Water diversion and damming
 - Quarrying and rock extraction
 - Tourism-related disturbance and pollution
 - Infrastructural developments as authorities were seen building a huge wall on either side of the Chhara as a “protection” measure!
- Protecting sites like Madhabkunda Waterfall is therefore essential—not only for scenic beauty, but for maintaining the fragile ecological conditions that occasionally host some of the rarest visitors to our land.

Dr Reza Khan is a wildlife biologist and conservationist with over four decades of experience in wildlife research, zoo management, and biodiversity conservation in Bangladesh and the United Arab Emirates. He has worked extensively in wildlife rescue, sanctuary management, and community-based conservation initiatives.

PHOTO: REZA KHAN