



থ্যেপিয়ান
THESPIAN
An International Refereed journal
ISSN 2321-4805

THESPIAN

MAGAZINE

An International Refereed Journal of Inter-disciplinary
Studies

Santiniketan, West Bengal, India

DAUL A Theatre Group©2013-23

Title: About the Origin of Jatra [*Jatrar Udbhab Bishoiye*]

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DOI: <https://doi.org/.....>

Yr. 11, Issue 17-22, 2023

Autumn Edition
September-October



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THE SPIAN
An International Refereed journal
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About the Origin of Jatra

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There is a conflict between the truth made by history and the true history. History can sometimes be enshrouded by the tradition of culture and belief. That condition of being shrouded gradually turns into truth and the tradition of true history becomes lonely, empty, and a deserted one.

Though so many traditional misconceptions regarding the genesis of Bengali Jatra have become historical truth it should not be considered a true history.

A popular belief regarding the origin of Bengali Jatra among the scholars is that it had originated about a thousand years ago. They used to consider the word 'Jatra' as undoubted and unequivocal art among the Bengali theatre. Some foreign critics have successfully implanted that belief very firmly.

Some even considered *Gitgobinda* by Joydeb as the oldest example of Krishna Jatra. For the writers of semi-treatises and the researchers famous for annotations, the beginning of the history of Bengali theatre is nothing but the origin and gradual development of Jatra. They do not even want to look back at the various ups and downs in the aesthetics of Bengali Art for a thousand years.

In the thousand years' history of theatre as a genre, there was no reference to Jatra as



a particular artistic tradition before the Eighteenth-century. In the sixteenth century, the word Jatra was used in the special sense of 'Krishna Jatra' - (Life of Lord Krishna).

Shrichaitanyabhagabat by Brindaban Das has the use of Jatra at least twice, meaning following the procession for the celebration of the birthday of Lord Krishna as:

Day-night procession by chanting the names of Krishna

Who doesn't know the purpose of this.

The appropriate meaning of this would be - singing the glory of the Lord on the occasion of the birthday of Krishna. In the eleventh chapter of this biographical lyric the description is:

Songs of Shashthi¹ begins after the music of Jatra

Lord Jagannath puts on new clothes.

This is also the name of the entire festival honouring the Lunar birthday of Krishna.

Chaitanyamangal by Jayananda has this reference:

Birthday celebration Jatra of Krishna is in Bhadra² in Nilachal³

Birthday of clever Krishna has been recorded in this year.

Then the biographer provides a detailed description of the enactment. Gods have brought actors from heaven; enactment of *Bhagabatpuran* along with various programmes on the occasion of Jatra is also presented. At the end:

Up to this Jatra about the Birthday presented in Nilachal

Gods have returned to heaven in their curious chariots.



In *Kaliyadaman* by the introducer of Ankiya drama in Assam, Shankar Deb, has the reference of the word –

Understand the significance of Jatra (journey) of Lord Krishna to slaughter
Kali[nag]

In a different way,

The significance of the Jatra Kalidaman⁴ Leela . . .

Where ever the travelling tour of Kaliadaman Leela takes place

Will do it with curiosity and carefully watch it and listen to it.

Here the word Jatra is not used as a play but a journey of Krishna from one place to another. There are more references which cannot be accommodated in this short essay.

In the Middle Age, the "Leela"⁵ plays were considered as part of the various ceremonials of the Jatra for Krishna's birthday celebration. The detailed descriptions of plays enacted by Chaitanyadeb in the *Srichaitanyabhagabat* by Brindaban Das, *Chaitanyamangal* by Lochan Das and *Chaitanyamangal* by Jayananda are actually "Leela" plays. Those plays were presented in two ways - formal and informal. It used to be enacted in the formal setting of Krishna Jatra or the Jatra to celebrate the birthday of Krishna. During the Middle Age, all "Leela" plays were character-based. (The root of Ankiya plays in Assam are also "Leela" plays and it is the result of Bhakti philosophy of Bengal.) The meaning of the word Jatra had begun to be reduced from the middle of Eighteenth-century and from the early period of Nineteenth-century Jatra began to be known as plays. At the beginning of the Nineteenth-



century, only the *Kaliyadaman* Jatra of Lord Krishna was considered as Jatra. Though "Leela" plays were the initiator of Jatra, "Leela" as an aesthetic practice has not come to an end completely. Ramleela and various other "Leela" plays about Lord Krishna are still there.

Acharya Shashibhushan once understood the truth that what we usually consider as Jatra is not any kind of complete tradition of drama. When various small traditions of acting accumulated in one tradition depending on the taste of common people are known as Jatra. It must also be known that the influence of European theatre on what we perceive as the particularities of contemporary Jatra is no less. Yet, continuing tradition of "Leela" plays are still shining in its own glory.

The ideas that are expressed about the Jatra in the history of Bengali theatre reflect a nationalist spirit and self-pride of the colonised Bengali people. That spirit as part of the history is totally acceptable, but true history cannot bear the responsibilities of that self-pride. It should be measured differently from the truth made by History.



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Notes (By Translator)

1. Song honouring goddess *Shasthi*. It is sung in particular tune, somewhat similar to chanting.
2. Bengali month, from mid-August to mid-September.
3. Pilgrimage site of Lord *Jagannath*, probably Puri, Orisha.
4. A legend about Lord Krishna where He bravely killed the monstrous snake named *Kalinag*.
5. Frolic playful plays having religious connotation.