



KATHOPOKATHAN - ATIT O BARTAMAN

DOUBLE-BLIND PEER-REVIEWED JOURNAL

Website – kathopokathan.in Email - kathopokathanjournal@gmail.com

Volume : 02, Issue :01, (January - June) 2025

Published On 28th March 2025

The Rise of Female Performers and the Decline of the ‘Male Queen’ Tradition: Reimagining Gender Roles in Bengali Jatra

Sarthak Laha

Doctoral Fellow

School of Women’s Studies, Jadavpur University

Abstract: The research aims to present a nuanced and intersectional reading of the lived realities of women actresses in *Jatra Pala*, highlighting the structural inequalities they navigate while also acknowledging their resistance and resilience within a patriarchal cultural structure as in other areas of Bengali culture, the female roles in the *Jatra* stage were mainly played by male actors, who were called ‘male queens’ or ‘female impersonators.’ The participation of female actors is a significant evolution in the history of the journey of *Jatra*. In this context, the rise of Jyotsna Dutta as the first female actor and her transition from a refugee to a journey of ‘*jatra samragnee*’ or ‘Empress of *jatra*’ is a paradigm shift. In the field of opera, since the 1960s, actresses such as Jyotsna Dutta, Tararani Pal, Chitra Mallick, Firozabala, Jayshree Mukherjee, Chanda Chatterjee, Bina Dasgupta, Bela Sarkar, Lata Desai, Mahua Bhattacharya, and Kakoli Choudhury, Champa Halder have played the leading female roles and taken the medium to new heights. However, the advent of female actors in the amateur journey or *Sakher Jatra* of rural Bengal happened relatively late. This article mainly analyses the evolution of performance in the professional journey and the history of the place and participation of these female actors. Drawing on a rich corpus of visual and textual sources like *jatra* posters, *jatra* scripts, interviews, first-hand testimonies from the actresses and archival materials, this work will seek to provide a feminist analysis of the lives, struggles, and agencies of women actors of the *Jatra* industry. In this regard, the main role has been played by the literature and newspaper elements such as *Jatra Loka*, *Jatra Jagat*, *Jugantar*, *Anandalok*, *Jatra Academy Patrika*, etc. The article attempts to explain the gendered politics of travel, the creative role of women, and the traditional dominance of men from the perspective of feminist research methods.

Key Words: *Jatrapala*, *Peshadari Jatra*, *Sakher Jatra*, Female Impersonator, Gender and Performance, Gender Politics, Feminism.

To analyse the issue of gender-politics and performance in the journey, it can be said that the journey was not only a means of entertainment, but traditionally the journey was male-dominated. The presence of female performers was socially unacceptable, which is a major example of gender discrimination. However, the entry of actresses like Jyotsna Dutta in the journey from the 1960s broke that traditional image. The participation of women on the stage of the journey and the role of men in the role of women exposes the gender politics in this medium. Based on the theory of Gender and Performance, this article analyses the process of

transition of female actresses from male queens in Bengal and the evolution of gender politics through it. *Jatra* originated from the performance of religious narratives in the 15-16th centuries, which in turn incorporated social and political themes. The theory of gender and performance is influenced by Judith Butler's "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution." According to Butler, gender is a social construct; gender is not a biological fact, but a performative act, repeated over and over again, and constructed according to cultural norms.¹ The role of women (such as disguised women or male queens) and the promotion of patriarchal morality by men in the field of procession are relevant examples of this performative concept. In the context of the journey, men playing women is a cultural performative act that establishes gender identity and the dominance of patriarchy. Bishnupriya Dutta and Urmimala Sarkar Munshi's "Engendering Performance: Indian Women Performers in Search of an Identity"² (2010) and Judith Butler's "Gender Trouble"³ (1990) deeply analyse the social construction of gender and the concept of performance. While Munshi discusses patriarchal structures and the position of the female performer, Butler highlights the possibility of the social establishment and breakdown of gender identity in her performative gender theory. Sudipta Chatterjee's "The Colonial Staged: Theatre in Colonial Calcutta"⁴ (2007) discusses the role of women and the development of patriarchal morality during the colonial era, which is very relevant in the social context of *Jatragaan*. In addition, Nandi Bhatia analyses the impact of patriarchal resistance and culture on women's theatre practice in the book "Performing Women / Performing Womanhood: Theatre, Politics, and Dissent in North India"⁵ (2009), which also provides important information on the role of patriarchal structures and women's resistance in performance. In the light of these literatures, it is theoretically possible to conceive of patriarchal control through the representation of female characters and their performance in the *Jatras*. Although research on *jatragaan* is available, research on gender-politics and performance is a bit vague, so this is an attempt.

In many cultural mediums, the participation of women in acting was not found in that sense before the 19th century. Researcher Jiwan Pani has said in "The Female Impersonator in Traditional Indian Theatre" that in Bengal from the 15th or 16th century, male and female roles began to be played in the drama.⁶ We can speak of Chaitanya Deva as the first notable 'male queen' of Bengal. We get to know about '*Gundikajatra*' in the play 'Chaitanya Chandrodaya' of poet Karanpur. In the journey organized on the occasion of 'Rukmini Dwadashivrat' in the courtyard of Chandrashekhara Acharya, Sri Chaitanya himself played the role of Radha.⁷

In professional marching troupes, various ‘Male queens’ have ruled the roost for more than a century. At one time the key to the popularity of *Jatra* was tied in the hands of Chittarani, Putularani, Nitairani, Rakhalarani, Bablirani etc. These actors have brought a rare feminine charm to the women-less journey. The women-characters of the last generation, such as Chaplrani and Vimalrani, have acted in the central female roles for a long time even after the arrival of the actresses in the journey. Of the troupes, it was Natta’ company that ultimately sustained the male actors. Probably by ‘76/77, commercial interests forced the Natta Company to cancel the *Benneputuls*.⁸ Of course, the decision of Natta’s then leading lady, Chaplrani, to give up acting may have accelerated the company’s decision. Because Chapalrani did not make the mistake of realizing that the *Benneputuls*, who were gradually losing their attraction, would inevitably one day be in the group of the banished. It was not possible for him to be willing to lose to time the honour, the pride with which he had one day made the journey. However, after this, some actors played female roles in some of the *Jatra* troupes, along with the actresses, especially those for whom the journey was the only means of livelihood. Of these, Bimalrani is perhaps the last female character actor to have performed in a professional troupe until 1982.⁹ Funny stories about those who are lost today have been developed in the *Jatra* community, which have become legends today. That is why the Empress of *Jatra* unhesitatingly acknowledged them and said, “Honestly, now we girls act, sing, but then we are very dim to the men who used to play the role of women and sing.”¹⁰ The pair of Bangla Shatadal Rani and Swapnakumar was like the pair of Uttam-Suchitra. Again, Babli Rani used to wear such beautiful saris that the brides of the household used to call her and ask about the art and technique of wearing her saris.¹¹ The names found from the pages of history are: Durga Rani, Rebati Rani, Khetra Rani, Sulakshana Rani, Shibu Rani, Kamal Rani, Jatin Rani, Rakhali Rani, Chhabi Rani, Babli Rani, Chapal Rani, Madhu Rani, Satadal Rani, Kshitish Rani, Shishir Rani, Banaphool, Phani Rani, Upen Rani, Nitai Rani, Binod Rani, Vibhuti Rani, Ranjan Rani, Suvarna Rani, Haripada Rani, Harigopal Rani, Putul Rani, Mrityunjay Rani, 2nd Phani Rani, Kanchan Rani, Bimal Rani, Subrata Rani, Togor, Prajapati, Dinesh Rani, Santosh Rani, Janardhan Rani etc.¹²

The emergence of Jyotsna Dutta as the first female actor in a culture where male dominance is seen from the very beginning was really challenging because many peddlers, artists, and character actors could not recognize this arrival of girls. Kshitish Rani said in words, ‘Today the *jatra* has lost its tradition and charm.’¹³ In an article published in the magazine *Jugantor* in September 1967, Pala Emperor or Pala Samrat Brajendrakumar Dey lamented and criticized the arrival of female actors. In the same vein, Kshitish Rani said, “The day

Bibhutorani Golkarani, Upenrani, Nitairani, Hari Rani, Subala Nandarani, Jatinarani, Chitravani, Chapalarani, Kanchanrani, Rebatirani, Durga Rani, Bablirani, etc., departed, the fervour of the performance was reduced.”¹⁴ Tapan Kumar, the great hero of the *jatra*, once remarked, “In the *jatra*, the boys used to dress up as girls. It could not be understood; they imbibed the voice expression, the innate nature of women...”.¹⁵ In an article quoted, “In today’s *jatra*, women are joining troupes. According to many veterans of the art, this is eroding *jatra*’s time-honoured traditions and dignity. But why did this trend emerge? The only reason can be the sharp increase in the number of practicing troupes and the resultant loss of principles... This commercialism has led *jatra* troupes to sacrifice their artistic principles.”¹⁶ However, the actress has refuted such reports. In particular, Jyotsna Dutta, Chhabi Roy, Bela Sarkar, and Firozabala wrote a protest article in ‘*Jatrar Jatra*’ that was published as ‘*Jatra Avinetrider Pratibad*’ or ‘Protest of Jatra Actresses.’¹⁷

From being a refugee in her family life to being an artist and playing the role of a female character as a subordinate in a male dominated industry at work or profession, Jyotsna Dutta has created a milestone in the professional journey of Bengal. Because of this Jyotsna Datta herself became a movement. The movement gave a good start to the acting career of women actresses. In the long journey of Jyotsna Dutta, she has acted in many operas in different parts of her life with Swapan Kumar or Tapan Kumar or Gurudas Dhara being her hero. Sometimes Kakanbai, sometimes Sonai, sometimes Rani Laxmibai, sometimes Binodini, sometimes Pagli, the variety of her acting is remarkable. Swapan Kumar wrote in his assessment, ‘Jyotsna is a history... If Kanan Devi is the mother of cinema, if Sarayubala Devi is the mother of theatre, then there is no doubt that Jyotsna Dutta is the mother of a *jatra*. I think in some cases Jyotsna’s contribution is more.’¹⁸ His superhit plays such as *Pashaner Meye*, *Chand Sultana*, *Sonai Dighi*, *Mahua*, *Meerabai*, *Binoy Badal Dinesh*, *Kavi*, *Nati Binodini*, *Mother India*, *Rami Chandidas*, *Sachimata Go*, etc. catapulted him to the pinnacle of popularity.¹⁹ His association with famous troupes like *Satyambara Opera* and *Nabaranjan Opera*, *Shilpi Tirtha*, *Gitanjali Opera* and the impact of his performances brought about a paradigm shift in the art of travel in Bengal. Not only did Jyotsna continue to act, but she, along with Gurudas Dhara, found a separate group called *Gitanjali Opera* in 1393, where she acted as an actress as well as a director. At one time he and Veena Ghosh formed the *Jatra Abhinetri Parishad*, later becoming the president of the *Jatra Prahari*, an association of *Jatra* artists.²⁰ A renowned *Jatra* researcher Prabhat Kumar Das, therefore, says, though the association of women has been observed in the past history of the *jatra*, Jyotsna was the first woman, who paved the way for the regular entry of women in the modern era in a gradual and permanent manner. However,

within a culture like *Jatra*, his life has also been accompanied by mischief, deceit, etc. In the last life, sadness-poverty may have become a companion, or in a subordinate industry like *jatra*, no one wants to keep searching at the end of the acting career. The journey of a person's life can be seen in the life story of Jyotsna Dutta. It is written in *Kalantar* magazine, 'The Jyotsna Dutta who has won one day after another... That Jyotsna Datta is bed-ridden with disease today...'.²¹ Many actresses like Bina Dasgupta, Chanda Chatterjee, Bela Sarkar, Lata Desai, Mahua Bhattacharjee, Barnali Banerjee, and Kakoli Choudhury have followed in her footsteps.

The transition from male queens to female actresses on the stage is the result of a long social, cultural, and political process. It broke the shackles of patriarchy and brought recognition to women's creativity. However, the role of women is still limited. To continue this change, more discussion is needed on the role of women in cultural practices. However one thing that needs to be noted is that although professional *Jatra* or *Peshadari Jatra* has brought glamour and commercial success, rural Amateur *Jatra* or *Sakher Jatra* is slowly disappearing. In the language of Rabindranath Tagore, '*Jatra Gana*' was like digging sand and water in the dry Ganges. A few hours into his period, the people on the street suddenly arrived, filled with thirst.²² But today, perhaps, other means of quenching the thirst have come up, which is why *jatra-gana* is today endangered, especially *sakher jatra* in rural Bengal. At present, television, internet, social media (Facebook, WhatsApp), etc. have reduced the prevalence of *jatra*. Digitalization has happened in the field of knowledge, as well as in travel; but in that, somewhere in the scent of the original soil, the sound of despair can be heard. At the same time, economic problems and the lack of resources necessary for performance are calling into question the very existence of rural travel. *Jatra* is not just a means of entertainment, it is a part of Bengali tradition. Therefore, we must take responsibility for the resurrection of the journey. To keep the hobby journey alive, rural initiatives, government patronage and modern technology are needed. In the era of 'Age of Scrolls', folk mediums like *jatra* have to be revived through new presentations, so that the new generation can also enjoy it.

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