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Resistance to Power: Subversive Elements in the Folk Performances of Medinipur, Bankura and Purulia

Mir Ahammad Ali, Vidyasagar University, India

Mir Mahammad Ali, Ravenshaw University, Cuttuck, Odisha, India

Abstract

Under the broad domain of Performance Studies, the study of Bengali folk performances, specifically the folk dramas of West Bengal is dynamic and divergent. The folk performances of Bengal like the other folk performances in India are generally created and performed by the preliterate, illiterate or semi-literate people of rural areas and passed down orally from one generation to the other. These performances blended in with ritualistic observances are chiefly meant for the amusement and mere entertainment for the rural village folks. But it is also evident that behind their mere enjoyment, their long inert cry of being deprived and victimized can be detected in a number of folk performances. In such performances like *Pata-Pala*, *Lalita-Sabar*, *Bhnar-Jatra* or *Sasthi Mangal* of Medinipur, *Manasa Mangal* of Purulia or *Jhapan* of Bankura, the performers not only hint that they are being oppressed and ill-treated by the dominant power system of the society, a solemn voice of resistance to that oppressive and dominant discourse of its time in these performances. This paper aims to focus on such specific folk performances of three selected districts of West Bengal (Medinipur, Purulia and Bankura) where the subversive elements in these folk performances serve as resistance to power of the colonial, imperial or zamindari system.

Keywords: Performance Studies, Folk Performances, ritualistic, resistance, power, discourse, subversive, colonial, imperial, zamindari

I

“Power is everywhere: not that it engulfs everything, but it comes from everywhere.”

Michel Foucault

A careful study of the existing folk performances of Bengal reveals that these various folk art forms comprise different elements of performing arts like songs, dances, music, different masks, action etc. Again, the large body of various folk dramatic forms of Bengal is found diversely in different districts of West Bengal. Some of the most popular yet endangered folk dramatic forms are:

<i>Jatra (Yatra)</i>	All over West Bengal
<i>Patua-Pala</i>	Primarily in Medinipur (West Midnapore), Kalighat (Kolkata)
<i>Sitala Mangal</i>	Medinipur
<i>Sasthi Mangal</i>	Medinipur
<i>Lalita Sabar Pala</i>	Medinipur
<i>Krishna Yatra</i>	Medinipur
<i>Churiya-Churiyanir Pala</i>	Medinipur

<i>Bhnar Jatra (Yatra)</i>	Medinipur, Hoogly, Bankura, Burdwan, North and South 24 Parganas
<i>Jugi Pala (Yogi Pala)</i>	Medinipur
<i>Manasa Mangal</i>	Purulia and Medinipur
<i>Jhapan, Manasa Bhasan</i>	Bankura
<i>Gambhira, Alkap, Domni</i>	Malda
<i>Bolan</i>	Burdwan and Malda
<i>Chor-Churni</i>	Jalpaiguri
<i>Palatiya</i>	Jalpaiguri
<i>Bana Bibir Pala</i>	South 24 Parganas

Thomas A. Green (1978) in "Toward a Definition of Folk Drama" very insightfully observes:

...virtually all behavior is susceptible to being designated "drama." A less extreme, but still unsound, line of reasoning operates homologically. In general, this argument maintains that *forms such as ritual, festival, pageant*, or even baseball which utilize the means of dramatic art (costuming, distinct playing areas, "scripting," and the like) should be *categorized as folk drama* (p. 844). [Emphases ours]

Taking this abovementioned rationale that drama comprising "forms such as ritual, festival, pageant" that "utilize the means of dramatic art" is no less evident in Indian folk dramas and more specifically in the folk dramas of West Bengal. The folk performances of Bengal also comprise songs, acting, music, dialogue, facial posture, dance, mask and so on.

What make these indigenous folk performances as 'dramatic' is 'action' and the element of conflict and numerous forms of folk brawl, be it implicit or explicit. Examples can be seen in *Patua-Pala* (chiefly found in Medinipur and Kalighat area in Kolkata) in *patas* like *Ganga-Durgar Jhagra* (The Quarrel between Ganga and Durga) where the element of conflict is found between goddesses Ganga and Durga to win over Lord Shiva. Again in another performance called *Behula Bhasan*, alternatively known as *Manasa Mangal* (Benediction of Manasa), Behula's sole struggle in winning her husband's life back against the wretched predestination is full of dramatic actions which evoke empathy in the audience. On the other hand, *Bolan*, a popular form of dramatic performance in Burdwan and Malda, performed by Shaivites shows a ritualistic amalgam of goddess Shaktism, Shaivism and Vaishnavism. While the large body of performances is ritualistic in origin, others deal with heroic legends, mythological stories and folk tales of love and tragedy as can be seen in *Sitala Mangal*, *Sasthi Mangal*, *Krishna Yatra*, *Bolan Yatra*, *Churiya-Churiyanir Pala* of Medinipur or *Gambhira* and *Domni* of Malda district, *Banabibir Pala* in Sundarban area or puppetry in different parts of Bengal.

An audience who is restricted in watching English drama or Modern Bengali theatre (Kolkata city based) only shall find it difficult in understanding and enjoying these folk plays. Rather than the austere division of acts and scenes, these folk plays are usually opened up with a ritualistic invocation (known as *Bandana*) to different deities of Hindu cult like Saraswati, Krishna or Vishnu. Though some of these performances were sometimes patronized by influential *zamindars*, almost all the performances are chiefly performed for the targeted rural masses in a huge gathering. These folk performances can be seen as a voice of and voice for the common people.

The true naked face of the society with its binaries between the rich and the poor, the oppressor and the oppressed, the powerful and the powerless, between the master and the slave is craftily presented in these performances. Again, in some performances like *Bhanr Yatra*, the insolent mien of the zamindar as despotic bully can be seen. But it is also true that wherever there is an exercise of power, it coexists with the subversion or resistance to that dominant power. In some of the performances like *Bhnanr Yatra*, the cruel exercise of power of the powerful are not only being challenged but also subverted and thwarted by the comic yet substantive buffoonery of the *Bhnanr* (Jester) in a carnivalesque manner. Ushaprasanna Mukherjee (1987) in *Bharater Loknatya (Folk Dramas of India)* observes the important aspect of folk drama:

Mere delight/entertainment of the masses is not the only objective of the folk drama. Protest against the prevalent injustice, wrong-doings, exploitation and extortion is the prime task of the folk drama. (p. 9)

This can be detected in a number of folk performances of Bengal. For example, Mukherjee (1987) writes:

Gambhira, a distinguished type of folk drama served as a tool of protest against the British ruler in the British colonial period. (p. 9)

There are many folk forms in Bengal where the subversive elements against the British colonial authority can be found. A good example of this can be seen in a particular *Patua-Pala* from Medinipur called *Shaib Pat* (Scroll painting about the Story of the British Raj). In her 'Introduction' to the book *Patuas and Patua Art in Bengal* (edited by David J. McCutcheon and Suhrid K. Bhowmik), Jill Parvin (1999) mentions that:

Bhowmik pays tribute to McCutcheon's ever sympathetic appreciation of the Bengal he himself loves so much. For most people who met him there was a feeling that this was no mere academic, this was someone in vital contact with life. Just before his death he wrote from England about the genocide going on in what was then East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. His interest in collecting examples of the *Sahib Pat [Engrejer pat]* which depicts the oppressive behaviour of the British in the days of the Raj is a further indication of this need to be at the heart of things (p. v).

This particular *pata* depicts the subaltern history of the first tribal revolt known as Chuar Rebellion in the Medinipur and Bankura districts of West Bengal against the excessive taxation, oppressive demands and economic distress caused by the East India Company. This scroll painting very acutely presents how under the banner of Trade Act the native weaker sections of the society were being exploited and extorted by the British Raj. This *pata* also presents the subsequent uprising of the native people. This *pata* can be looked upon as a tool of resistance as it presents the subversive elements of threat and resistance against the dominant colonial power of the British regime. As a result, such kinds of *patas* were proscribed at the time of the Freedom Movement in Medinipur and famous *patua* artists like Late Rajani Chitrakar and others of Medinipur (who took a leading role) were being branded as "terrorist freedom fighters" (McCutcheon & Bhowmik 88) and subsequently were persecuted. In this *pata* history and art go hand in hand. This *pata* basically narrates the story of revolt by the two leaders, Jugal and Kishore and their persecution by the British officials. This is one of the few *patas* that is written in prose and the narrative song describes their fates in the judgement:

Now the judgement of all these thieves is taking place. Where? Calcutta High Court. Behind a screen, the Sahib's wives are enjoying the fun. Let's see what judgement the sahibs make on the thieves.

The sahibs make this judgement. Some will be impaled, some will be hanged some will be sent to Daymal, others to *Harinbari*, some will be placed under close observation, some will be eaten up by greyhounds, others by tigers – these were the judgement on the thieves.

Jugal and *Kishor* were the leaders of eighteen kahans of dacoits. To the beating of drums, they hung the two brothers from a scaffold at Chatraganj-Naldanga Patharghat (p. 90).

It is true that this particular *pata* had several versions and it is nearly impossible to identify and locate the original one. Another interesting fact that can be noted is that the mastery, witticism and subtlety with which the *Patuas* (scroll painters) present such *patas* that these hardly put them in direct charge of any criminal offence. At this juncture, McCutcheon and Bhowmik's (1999) insightful observation can be cited that:

Some pictures were capable of various interpretations so that the government could not assign blame to the *Patuas* although they were inciting the people to stand up for freedom against the British Raj (p. 89).

There are several other folk art forms which allegorically present the deplorable condition of the rural masses, how they are tormented and tyrannized. One such example is again a *Patua-Pala* centered on a social issue called *Maacher Biye* (Marriage of the Fish) in which diverse pictures of the submarine world and the descriptions of its ecological cycle are craftily presented in a fable like fashion. On a particular occasion of the marriage of *Darriyan Maachh* (Dariyan Fish), all the other fishes of the same pond accompany him in this joyful marital procession. At that time the other fishes are performing diverse activities like the playing of the *tabla* by *Koi* fish, playing of the harmonium by *Katla* fish, playing of the flute by *Soal* fish and so on. As the ecstatic procession comes to an end they face a severe crisis because of the sudden threat of being devoured by a large *Boal* fish. If we closely scrutinize we can find that the very idea of *Maatsonay* emerges from this fable like representation of this *pata*. Just as the *Boal* fish threatens and wants to devour all the other less powerful fishes of the pond, in human society such situation is always evident.



Figure 1: Rani Chitrakar presenting the pata 'Macher Biye'(Marriage of Fish)

This *Maatsonay* again may hint at the gradual eroding of their art and culture in this 21st century. In this post-digital age due to the emergence and wide-spread popularity of digital media and other forms of popular entertainments, their folk art forms have been marginalized and the fear of extinction of their art is real to the folk artists and artisans. So, 'resistance', as it has been argued can be seen not only in terms of the theme, but also regarding the survival of this folk art form itself. In review of Frank J. Korom's book *Village of Painters, Narrative Scrolls from West Bengal*, Scott Rothstein (2007) elaborates this point further:

For generations, Chitrakars enjoyed a secure, *yet marginal place in West Bengal society*. But modernity has challenged the Chitrakars' world. How can a Patua with only a painted paper scroll and a song compete with television or the latest Bollywood film extravaganza? (p. 131)

Ironically here art is appropriated by power-structure operating in the society.

II

In his *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, Jan Kott (1965) writes:

The Fool does not follow any ideology. He rejects all appearances, of law, justice, moral order. He sees brute force, cruelty and lust. He has no illusions and does not seek consolation in the existence of natural or supernatural order, which provides for the punishment of evil and the reward of good (p. 137).

Kott's analysis about the character/characteristics of a fool is largely based and focused on Lear's Fool. But Kott's explanation of Fools in general and Shakespearean Fools in particular may be applied and extended to the stock character of fool/jester/clown in some Bengali folk performances as well. One such example of such kind is obviously *Bhnar Jatra* (Yatra of a Jester) which was popular once in many districts of West Bengal like Bankura, Medinipur, Hoogly, Howrah, Nadia, Burdwan, Murshidabad and both North and South 24 Pargana but now this performance survives only in two districts, Medinipur and in some villages of Hoogly. Primarily a part of the orature, this performance is chiefly meant for amusement and entertainment for the rural masses. But behind the veil of mere enjoyment and buffoonery, acute social criticism of the oppression, exploitation and extortion of the rural folks by the powerful oppressors can be seen. In one such performance called *Biye Pagla Buro*⁷ (Marriage of a Crazy Old Man) we find the picture of a wicked, cruel and unscrupulous master zamindar who enters the stage with the words:

Money, money, money! Is it a fruit that hangs from the tree and you go and just pick it up? Everyone wants money from me. I have to check the amounts that people borrowed from me. Gour Maji lends five hundred rupees from me which now turns into five thousand five hundred ninety five with interest. If I can catch him once, I will cane him until his skin is stripped off. (Samaddar 2009, p. 131, translated by the present authors)

When the *Bhnar* (clown), the father of Gobinda begs the zamindar to lend him some money for the marriage of his son, the zamindar ruthlessly rejects the plea of the poor wretched and gets him out from his house. But when the wife of that *Bhnar* (who had been the zamindar's ex-beloved) goes for lending money the zamindar agrees to give her all the money asked for instantly even more than that only in exchange of an illicit affair. And as the two engages in an illicit love-affair, the clown without their knowledge comments from the aside in the form of social-satire and reveals the audience about the evils, follies and wrongdoings of the powerful of that time. One such example can be cited when the *Bhnar* faces the zamindar for the first time on

the stage and the zamindar enquired about their condition, the clown very subtly but ironically reveals their miserable plight:

Zamindar: Is everything all right?

Bhnar: Why not sir! When benevolent person like you live in this village, how can we be unhappy at all? You are respected and admired by all in our village. So, we are truly in a blissful state and in an extremely happy condition. (Samaddar 2009, translated by the present authors)



Figure 2: Zamindar and Bhnar in “Bhnar Jatra”

Again, when the wife of the Bhnar appears before the zamindar sweating and the zamindar continues to wipe her sweat, from aside the voice of the Bhnar can be heard:

Bhnar: My goodness! This lewd zamindar who sucks the blood of millions, is now wiping the sweats of my wife. (Samaddar 2009, translated by the present authors)

So, such comments in the form of jokes, pastiche, parody, irony or satire of which the audience are completely aware of can be seen as the subversive elements in such performances. It is true that the gesture, body language, movements on the stage, dialogues, actions and physiognomy of the Bhnar undoubtedly evoke comic laughter among the audience (which is obviously the prime objective of Bhnar Jatra) but behind this humorous buffoonery, the subversive elements within the performance present a threat to that dominant force. That’s why Ranajit Kumar Samaddar (2009) also puts forth the same view that:

Definitely, the Bhanar Yatra reflects the society very clearly. Although the main performance is presented in a comic way, its objective is to hold up a mirror to the society.

III

In her book *Michel Foucault*, Sara Mills explains:

He [Michel Foucault] argues in an article entitled ‘Truth and power’ that ‘the State, for all the omnipotence of its apparatuses, is far from being able to occupy the whole field of actual power relations’. Thus, relations between parents and children, lovers, employers and employees – in short, all relations between people – are power relations. In each

interaction *power is negotiated* and one's position in a hierarchy is *established*, however flexible, changing and ill-defined that hierarchy is (Mills 49). [Emphasis mine]

In the present discussion of the folk performances of Bengal especially based on *Mangal-Kavyas* (Poems of Benediction) this notion of “negotiation” of power and the eventual “establishment” of “one’s position” in that power hierarchy can be observed. Almost in the entire Medinipur district (both East and West Midnapur), perhaps the most popular folk performance that survives even to this day is no doubt, folk dramas based on the *Mangal-Kavyas* about the indigenous deities of rural Bengal like *Sasthi Mangal*, *Sitala Mangal*, *Chandi-Mangal* and *Manasa Mangal*. Each folk drama has several other alternative names based upon specific locale and context. But one thing that is common in all these *Mangal Kavyas* is that each posits a sort of threat to the dominant, traditional and fixed power structure and subverts the established one. A potent, emerging feminist tone of the female deities can be heard, which challenges the age-old conventional patriarchal power system. This resistance subsequently threatens and subverts the traditional fixed way of worshipping ‘male gods’ only and establishes the worshipping of female goddesses also in this land. One such example is *Sasthi Mangal* (Benediction of *Sasthi*) which is alternately known as *Bandi Theke Mukti* (Release From Prison/ Freedom from Captivity), where the goddess *Sasthi* decides to persuade King Jayasingha, a complete Shaivite to worship her (instead of worshipping Shiva) and establish her adoration in this mortal land. But Jayasingha does not agree to this proposal and a conflict arises and a crisis follows only to be resolved finally with establishment of the worship of *Sasthi* in this land by the repentant King Jayasingha. Bimala, the youngest wife of the king played an important role in praying, worshipping, and asking for help from *Sasthi* to persuade her husband to worship the goddess. The chief concern that revolves around the entire drama is to establish *Sitala’s* worship altering the traditional worshipping of Shiva. So, here again the example of conflict and contest can be seen and the male dominant power is being contested, combated and finally obstructed and hindered. In some female characters the pathetic condition of women in general is reported:

Kaya: The life of a woman is a life of deprivation. They are always subjected to others’ (male) domination. (Jana 2002, p. 21. Translated by the present authors)

The contestation of power hierarchy and the “resistance” to the dominant power is also evident in some other folk dramas based on other *Mangal Kavyas*. Typically in a similar fashion, goddess *Sitala* of the *Sitala Mangal* wants to establish her worship in this land and that’s why she descends on earth from heaven in order to persuade King Virat, who is again a devout worshipper of Shiva. Actions and counter-actions follow but the goddess hardly succeeds in persuading either King Virat or the boatman Nimai to worship her instead of Shiva. In utter rage she even kills four children of King Virat and seven children of the boatman Nimai. Until the goddess *Sitala* curses the land of King Virat with deadly disease and turns it into a barren waste land, King Virat does not worship the goddess. And finally, only to avoid this wretched predicament of himself and his subjects, he agrees to worship *Sitala*. In *Chandi-Mangal* (Benediction of *Chandi*) also the deep earnest cry of *Kullana* before her husband *Dhanapati* (a devout Shaivite) to establish the worship of the goddess *Chandi* can be heard. At one moment when *Dhanapati* kicks the worshipping *ghat* (vessel) of *Chandi*, *Khullana* begs her husband in grief

Khullana: As you have kicked the vessel of the mother goddess, better you kick me, beat me, slap me so that all the expectations and hopes of mine are destroyed. What’s the worth of my life? It is better to die. I have worshipped Maa *Chandi* truly. (Jana 2002, p. 57. Translated by the present authors)

But after a series of misfortunes that he encounters in Sinhala, the proud Dhanpati finally begins to worship Chandi only after being compelled to realize that Chandi and Shiva are the same.

These Hindu deities are worshipped mainly by the indigenous rural folks of Bengal from lower castes and a constant caste division prevails with the higher caste worshippers and their gods from 'higher' rank. Chandi's or Sasthi's striving to establish their worships against the dominant discursive "power" of *Shaiva* cult is itself can be seen as a sort of "resistance" to the dominant power structure of its time.

The most popular of all Mangal-Kavyas is obviously *Manasa-Mangal* (Benediction of Manasa). In the districts of Medinipur and Purulia this folk drama is performed at a regular basis in various ritualistic occasions. But the interesting thing about this folk drama is that it has two alternate versions; one that is found in Medinipur district is chiefly performed by the people of Vaishnava cult, and the other version of Purulia is performed by the members of Kharia Sabar community of Purulia. The popular story of this performance is described by Sukumar Sen (2006):

The story of Manasa which clearly indicates the way in which various legends and myths were integrated comprises three parts: (i) the birth of the goddess, her conflict and reconciliation with Candi and her marriage to Jaratkaru; (ii) *Manasa's quest for human worship*, taxing first cowherd boys, then a Muslim farmer and then a fisherman family; (iii) finally the *recognition of her divinity* by Cando the merchant prince. The last part contains the most popular episode, the story of Behula which was grafted partly from folk-lore and partly from old indigenous mythology (p. 46). [Emphases ours]

Manasa's "quest for human worship" is at the heart of this folk drama. The traditional plot revolves round how a 'female' goddess can have the worship of the masses where already Shaiva cult predominates. Establishing Manasa's worship is itself a kind of contestation of power hierarchy and resistance to the patriarchal worshipping of the male gods. The well-known episode of "Behula-Lakhindar" reveals the rigid domination that the patriarchal society designs against the female figures, be it the goddess or Behula, the epitome of virtue. In a sense, Behula is the most interesting character because although she is born and brought up in a male-dominated society, time and again she raises the voice (though implicit and mild) against the dominant patriarchy and also questions their traditional role. And her audacious risk taking act of bringing back the life of her dead husband against the wretched predestination itself deviates from the traditional role attributed to women. What she wants to do, nobody (among the male also) dares to think. Her character defies the norm and her words act as a kind of resistance to the traditional role attributed to her by patriarchy. This is evident when she takes leave from her father-in-law to bring back the life of the dead Lakhindar from heaven she says:

Behula: Listen father-in-law, I pray touching your feet. Please arrange a raft soon. I won't burn him [dead body of Lakhindar] in pyre, nor do I float him in the water. If the Bishohari [Destroyer of poison] grants the life of my dead husband, only then I will return to this earth. (Jana 2002, p. 65. Translated by the present authors)

On the other hand, the goddess Manasa faces extreme crisis as she fails to persuade Chand Sadagar, an extreme Shaivite to worship her. Not only that Chand Sadagar refuses to worship Manasa and consider her as a deity, but also he insults her and makes fun of the goddess. In sheer rage she kills all the seven sons of Chand Sadagar and his youngest son Lakhindar as well. Towards the end of this drama, Chand agrees to worship Manasa though unwittingly with his left hand only (as his right hand is reserved to worship Shiva only) to get back everything that he has lost. So, there is a strong contesting of power between the two powerful forces: Chand Sadagar as

a powerful 'human', worshipper of Shiva and on the other, Manasa, a goddess from Heaven. But behind this mere conflict there lies at the same time an implicit indication of cast-division between Brahminical and non-Brahminical sections (which can be traced back to the Buddhist sections of Bengal). It is very clear that Chand worships Shiva, who is actually a non-Aryan god but was elevated to that stature over time, whereas Manasa is surely a non-Aryan indigenous goddess. To establish Manasa's worship in this land is itself suggests/indicates the victory of an indigenous deity of a non-Brahminical deity over an elevated Brahminical one. Sukumar Sen (2006) writes:

The next and final objective of Manasa was to obtain recognition from the *upper class people*, especially from the rich merchant community. Cando the headman of the merchants was a staunch devotee of Shiva. He possessed Supreme knowledge, and Siva had rewarded him with a matted lock from his own head and a scarf. The possession of these things made Cando a formidable rival to any god. Manasa desired that Cando would worship her. But she could not approach him directly (p. 48). [Emphasis ours]

Behula's winning of her dead husband Lakhindar's life back against the wretched predestination designed by the goddess Manasa hints at the defeat of Manasa which suggests the sole victory of the power of human love against the utter rage of goddess. The challenging power of Manasa is being altered and defeated only with the love of human (Behula), which compels the goddess even to surrender.

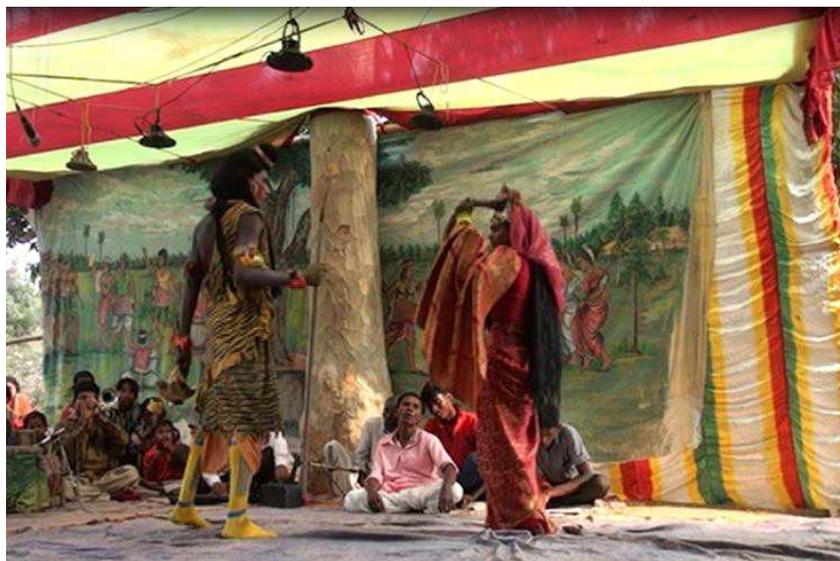


Figure 3: Manasa stung Shiva with venom in "Manasa Mangal" of Purulia

Another alternate version of the same folk drama *Manasa Mangal* can be found in the Purulia district chiefly performed by the *Oraon* tribe and *Kharia Sabar* tribe. Here we see a direct encounter between Shiva and Manasa and the contestation of power politics between them and this performance hardly has any episode of "Behula-Lakhindar". In a picaresque fashion, the initial appearance of Shiva presents him as a vagabond, itinerant rogue who constantly engages in making love with the goddess Ganga in spite of the repeated abuses and threats from Durga, another wife of Shiva. From the very beginning the contest of holding power between Durga and Ganga is seen as who is to win over Shiva completely. Action follows and when Narad and Shiva finally encounter the goddess Manasa (originally Shiva's daughter in some versions) near the lake of heaven's garden, Shiva (who is famous for his *leela*) unknowingly tries to woo Manasa. In spite

of her repeated proclamation to convince Shiva that she is Padmavati and Shiva is his father, Shiva passionately wants to enjoy her youthful beauty. In utter rage, Manasa finally stings Shiva and Shiva dies at once. At her father's death Manasa breaks down in tears and after that and the scenes that follow with the help of Narayana and the sage Kashyap, Shiva gets back to his life as a result of Manasa's prayer to Narayana. And this is the moment when Shiva gives due acceptance and respect to Manasa as his daughter and decides to accompany her to the earth to establish the worship of Manasa. So, here once again we can see the transfer of power with the gradual decreasing of Shiva's (the god of gods) importance and the emergence of a new power structure that is headed by Manasa.

Shiva then enters his house with Manasa hiding in his bag. On the other hand, with the encouragement of Narad, both Ganga and Durga feel curious to know what is there in Shiva's bag. And when Durga finally opens the bag in Shiva's absence, she finds the beautiful Manasa and not knowing anything she repeatedly beats Manasa. In spite of her continual pleading and address of Manasa to Durga as mother, Durga continues to beat Manasa without even paying heed to Ganga's firm request. As the situation deteriorates Manasa finally stings Durga and Durga dies instantly. As Shiva appears and requests Manasa to bring her life back, she agrees to get her life back. As it was promised Durga finally gets back her life and accepts Manasa as her daughter and soon Manasa's marriage with the sage Jaratkaru follows which even does not last too long. The drama ends with the scene where Manasa being alone on the stage and deserted by all (husband and son) weeps bitterly and gets consolation from Shiva, Durga and Ganga who all advise her to descend on earth with her female consort 'Neta' finally to establish her worship on the earth among the mortals.

So, it can be argued that if the popular version of "Manasa Mangal" is found in Medinipur, the above described alternate version of "Manasa Mangal" that can be considered as a prequel, is found in Purulia. In both cases we see the contestation of power hierarchy and resistance to the dominant power of its time. If in the prequel version of Purulia, Manasa resisted the dominant power of Shiva and other gods to establish her worship, in the popular version of Medinipur, Manasa is seen to contest and resist the predominant power of Chand Sadagar, the profound Shivaite.

IV

Another popular folk performance that deserves mention is *Jhapan* of Bankura district. *Jhapan Utsav* or *Jhapan Mela* is a very popular festival celebrated in Bishnupur, Bankura in honour of the serpent deity Manasa. Held on the last day of the Bengali month of Sravan (mid August as per the Georgian calendar) and chiefly performed by the tribal people of Bankura, the entire performance is celebrated with snake shows in honour of Manasa. Performers from tribal community present the snake-show before a large gathering in front of the idol of goddess Manasa chanting mantras (hymns), occasional songs, playing music and several magic tricks which make their performance very spectacular. *Jhapan* had its origin in the 17th century when the ruling King Bir Hambir Malla was returning from a battle after defeating the Huns, this snake show *Jhapan* was performed before him as a kind of greeting with rejoice from the tribal people of Bishnupur. The tradition remains almost constant to this day. An idol of Manasa is carried from Shankari Para to the fair ground with the associated performances of snake shows. On the ground in front of a large gathering of audience, the *Jhapanias* (snake charmers) perform with different types of snakes mainly cobra, python, vipers, vines, rat snakes, water snakes and others by lulling, hypnotizing, swinging, and even kissing the heads and tongue of these reptiles. Behind this external magical trick there lies a significant tradition which the snake charmers carry. Manasa, according to

Hindu mythology is both a goddess of serpent (snake) and also of fertility and of harvest. In such agricultural society when the common village folks go to the field in order to harvest the abundant crops, Devi Manasa as Bishahari (the destroyer of poison) saves them from snake bites, as per their traditional belief. So, where on the one hand, this cult/rite can be seen as a form of nature worship, one the other, it shows the harmonious living of human beings with animal.



Figure 4: “Jhapan”, a popular folk performance in Bishnupur, Bankura

The mastery with which the snake charmers handle these venomous snakes can be perceived as an exhibition of power. The act of controlling the snake in the snake show may be looked upon as a performance that challenges the traditional dominant Hinduism also. Manasa, being an indigenous deity (or tribal goddess in this context) is being worshipped in this *Jhapan* just only after a few months after the *Shiber Gajan* (Songs in honour of Shiva) each year. This conflict between Shiva and Manasa again can be detected in so many *Jhapan* songs dedicated to goddess Manasa. Again these two performances can be analyzed in terms of caste-division as well. Where the *Shiver Gajan* is performed by the upper caste people of Hindu society to worship Lord Shiva, *Jhapan* is performed mainly by the tribal people of Bankura as a sort of reverence to the snake goddess. So, here once we find the contesting power and resistance to the dominant power hierarchy. In terms of the handling of venomous snakes by the snake charmers also, we can see that in spite of kissing the reptile on its tongue, the snake does not bite or strike back. This puts a challenge to the western medical science which operates ruthlessly to marginalize and deny any credit to the indigenous medical practices. This folk performance is itself going under severe crisis. Despite of its wide-ranging popularity that attracts numerous tourists from all over the world (both from India and abroad) there is a recent official ban from the government on this performance as there is penal action against such types of snake shows. In *The Times of India* Subhro Niyogi (2015) reported about “Jhapan” with under the title “Illegal snake shows stopped at 400-year-old Jhapan fair”:

A nearly four centuries-old barbaric practice of maiming snakes after they were defanged for public shows at an annual fair in Bankura has finally been stopped this year. Acting on a pre-emptive complaint from a wildlife activist, the forest department warned fair organizers of a crackdown that proved to be a successful deterrent.

This long tradition of snake show is going under a severe crisis because of the official ban and the performers are striving to continue their rich long cultural legacy. The “four centuries-old”

practice of snake-show is now being considered as “barbaric” because of the practice of maiming the snakes. Is there any possibility to continue this popular performance in some other alternate ways? This question haunts the performers and the intellectuals as well. It is an irony that animal shows or exhibition can be hosted permanently in government zoos in ‘scientific’ manner, indigenous traditions are being wiped out in the name of wild life safety. This too leads us the questions of magic of power in the society.

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Mir Ahammad Ali is an independent researcher, DRS Project Fellow in the Dept. of English, Vidyasagar University, formerly Research Assistant in a UGC Major Research Project in the Department of English, Vidyasagar University.

Mir Mahammad Ali is a Research Scholar at Ravenshaw University, Cuttuck, Odisha
