SWADESHI JATRA[1] PERFORMANCES IN BENGAL (1905−1911): LOCATING THE GROUND FOR ENGENDERING A NUANCED NATIONAL IDENTITY IN SOUTH ASIA

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Abstract. *Historiography of swadeshi performances of Bengal, since the publication of Sumit Sarkar's seminal and voluminous work on swadeshi movement in Bengal, has followed the standard path of aesthetic definition. It has been variously described as a 'technique of mass contact' and as the harbinger of national feeling, using the standard trope of 'awakening the people to a nation'. But swadeshi jatra performances, as recorded in governmental records and collective memory, appear as a space of entertainment, a space of interaction between performers and audience, and most importantly as a space for interaction between ideas of the intellectuals, performative presentation of the idea, and its reception by the audience. The performance and reception in the space excited the audience into a frenzy of reaction,*

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1   *Jatra* is a form of folk theatre popular in rural parts of Bengal. Its performance gained popularity during the medieval times when it became an indispensable medium disseminating Bhakti ideals, dealing particularly with stories relating to Krsnas infancy, youth and the dalliances of Radha and Krsna. For a discussion on this, see the Introduction to Nishikanto Chattopadhyay's, *The Yatras: Or the Popular Dramas of Bengal*. London, 1882. Apart from the Radha-Krsna amours, stories from the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and the *Puranas* also formed the staple of *jatra* performances. A delightful discussion of this point can be found in Majumdar, R. C. *History of Modern Bengal.* Calcutta: G. Bharadwaj & Co., 1978, p. 562−563.

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expression, hence audibility. As the folk space of performance made the hitherto unheard voices audible, a pattern of bonding based on felt sensation began to emerge in the space. The community of sensation that emerged, bonded as a nation, however, modulated the notion of nationhood in the moment of reception, adding new contours to it. This led to the development of various shades in the notion of nationhood. In this article, through an analysis of the performance of swadeshi jatra and its reception, I have tried to discover the vision of nation engendered by performances like jatra, and how precedence was set by it for the development of a nuanced national identity in the spaces of performance of South Asia.

Introduction

During the anti-partition agitation[2], and the subsequent swadeshi and boycott agitation, public sphere became the arena of conducting politics. When political action of the intellectuals and the educated people of the upper scions of the society against the Raj began to make their presence felt in the premises of Bengali public life, it needed to legitimize their ideas of nationhood[3] as the social, moral, and cultural authority of the people (the non-intellectuals of Gramscian analysis). As the intellectuals in their bid to gain leadership deployed new and traditional media, jatra emerged as an important media of the public sphere. Being a popular form of entertainment *jatra* and *prachar* [dissemination] became coterminous. *Mukti Kon Pathe*, a proscribed literature of the swadeshi era, and the District Magistrate of Bakarganj, rightly noted that *jatra* was a form of communication that could act as a substitute of swadeshi meetings. Popularity of the media ran high among the people and no doubt held more charm for them than hours of platform speaking. In perspective of the communicative capacity of the media and particularly the popularity it enjoyed, what really concerned the nationalist leaders, and the colonial government, was the effect it had the power to influence on public mind.

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2   On 19th July 1905, the Government of India announced the scheme to organize a new province called Eastern Bengal and Assam conglomerating Chittagong, Dacca and Rajshahi divisions, Hill Tippera, Madras and Assam. The official proclamation came on 1st September and Bengal partition came about on 16th October 1905. The partition was followed by an attempt on part of the leaders, represented by cosmopolitan, Hind, educated male middle-class intelligentsia, to annul the plan of partition by developing a national identity imbued with a sense of economic and political self-sufficiency. Resolution of the Government of India in the Home Department, No. 2491 of 19th July 1905, Parliamentary Papers (House of Commons), 1905, Volume 58, Cd 2658, n.2. Sarkar, S. *Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908*. New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1973, p. 11−12.

3   Benedict Anderson defined nation and nationalism as an abstract entity born from a certain communitarian feeling of fellowship attained through an invisible link established amongst people. Feeling of common emotions invoked by media like newspapers, or a song, or even a drama could bind people together in a community, translating itself into a nation. Anderson, B. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and the Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1983.

The intellectuals pinpointed the effect as the growth of *swadhinatar bhab* and *swadeshi*. The idea of *swadesh* originated from the Bengali notion of *sva* and *desh*. The word *sva* stood for one's own[4]. The connotative grid of the term *desh* was quite open-ended as it meant locality, province, state and even country. In terms of territorial boundary, negotiated through the concept of cultural and emotional oneness, *desh* meant both a region as well as a country[5]. Hence, put together the word *swadesh* or *svadesh* meant one's own region or land or loosely one's country. If, on one hand, the *prachar* or communication invoked the idea of *swadesh*, on the other hand, it disseminated the idea of *swadhinata*. In the Bengali lexicon, the word *swadhinata* is defined as independence i.e. freeing oneself from external domination. So, alongside an idea of indigeneity, the communication was also intent upon invoking a notion of oneness, an oneness supported by separation or breaking free from an external or foreign force antithetic to this oneness. The gamut of ideas, brought together by the communicative mechanism of *jatra*, tried to arouse a sense of indigeneity amongst the public. But the sense of 'self' was a communicated idea disseminated by jatra performances among the people. Idea remained at a superficial stratum of mind where it could produce knowledge; but the intellectuals, as pointed by the anonymous author of the article published in *Mukti Kon Pathe*, wanted involuntary and passionate action through acknowledgement/consent to legitimize their leadership. Consent of the people had to be invoked by striking a root in their emotionalism. So, the performance of *jatra* performances arranged a rendezvous between the ideas of the intellectuals and popular emotion. Popular emotion held the complex set of root metaphors and practices that defined popular existence. These emotions defined and directed the social actions of the people. The intellectuals needed to influence and at times mould these defining metaphors and practices to gain hegemony. Jatra communication, therefore, served as public space where performance was used to make the Bengalis who came to witness the performance understand the ideas, discover a concord between it and their world believes, internalize the product that emerged from this concord and transform it into a part of their mentality.

The *jatra* parties of the Bengal countryside were an unusual media for ingraining political ideas in public mentality. Engaged in performances, dealing with various Hindu mythological themes, the *jatras* seemed to be quite unlikely form of art, capable of delivering ideas of political import to the public. Nevertheless, jatra performances emerged as one of the most effective means of disseminating and legitimating political ideas. As Aswini Kumar Dutta noted later that if the political ideas of the intellectuals were presented before the people through jatra than speeches then its dissemination would be more effective. A consensus regarding the communicative effectiveness of the media emerged among the Bengali intellectuals during the early twentieth century owing to the changes introduced in its framework in the previous century. Since the nineteenth century, an intermixture was at work in the jatra texts and performance, which attempted to bring together the highbrow Sankritistic moral order and popular culture

4   Inden, R. B.; Nicholas, R. W. *Kinship in Bengali Culture*. New Delhi: Chronicle Books, 2005, chapter 1.
5   For an in-depth discussion see Gupta, S. *Notions of Nationhood in Bengal: Perspectives on Samaj, c. 1867-1905*. Leiden: Brill, p. 130, 277, 348−350.

with the middle class theatre going and *jatra* listening audience acting as a catalyst between the two[6]. Sudipto Chatterjee is of the opinion that this accommodation resulted in the growth of a hybridity in the theatrical culture[7]. Jatra texts, in its manuscript and *battala* (chapbook) format, began to find a place in the theatrical repertoire. The culture of hybridity carried itself well into the twentieth century, and became one of the most important factors of swadeshi theatrical performance. Now, the same middle class audience, who visited theatrical performances, also frequented jatra performances. Hence, just as they transpired some techniques of jatra to theatre, in reverse, they also infused some characteristics of theatre into jatra performances[8]. The influence of theatre was greatly felt in matters of performance. Owing to the import of this hybridity in jatra, the texts or narratives performed by them began to adapt to a historical genre of narrative. Though the erstwhile mythological theme did not die out, new historical themes joined the plethora of jatra narratives. Performance also adapted itself with contemporary performative techniques and audience demands owing to this development. The hybridity did not merely make jatra performances introduce new themes; it also made it present a new vision of the cultural order in the colonial paradigm. Popular visions changed. But they were not stark in its moral division; rather a nuanced vision emerged. In this essay, I shall try to trace the development of a vision generated by jatra performances, and the various shades that appeared in it.

1. Contextualizing the Text: Middle Space and Meaning Making in Jatra Palas

The text of *jatra* became a major concern of the colonial Raj in the early twentieth century. With the inauguration of the swadeshi and the boycott agitation, the popularity of swadeshi *jatra* made the government extremely uneasy. This new genre of *jatra*, as the official reports indicated, became one of the most "effective means of spreading seditious feelings"[9]. Since its inception, *jatra* operated more like an extempore of music and words[10]. The impromptu performance helped it to suit any and every situation in which the *jatra* was performed. Thus, inherent within the very constitution of *jatra* was the ability to develop, to add, precisely, to extemporise. The *jatra palas* or the text of *jatra*, therefore, had to be of such nature that it could accommodate modifications. Likewise, the pala *Matripuja* was modified into various forms during the swadeshi era[11]. Under different swadeshi jatra party, it acquired a new mould making it one of the most feared categories of jatra pala by the Raj. objections were raised against *jatra*

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6   Chatterjee, S. *The Colonial Staged: Theatre in Colonial Calcutta*. Kolkata: Seagull Books, 2007, p. 144−49.

7   *Ibid*., p. 147−148.

8   *Ibid*., p. 122−24.

9   WBSA-HPB (Confidential), F.N. 410 of 1909. It can also be found in the book of home political records compiled by Basudeb Chattopadhyay, Folk *Theatre and the Raj: Selections from Confidential Records*. Kolkata: West Bengal State Archives, 2008, p. 16.

10   Guha-Thakurta, P. The *Bengali Drama: Its origin and Development*. New York: Routledge, 2000, p. 8.

11   Chattopadhyay, B., *supra* note 9, p. 16.

palas Mayabati and *Brita Sanhar* (probably *Brita Ankar*). The copies of books of either *palas* were, however, not in record. We do not have any conclusive report as to whether the *palas* were ever printed in a book form or not. In either case, the policing authorities remained suspicious of its production. In fact, they were careful enough to take an undertaking of abstinence from further performance from the manager of the *jatra* party that was detected performing the pala *Brita Sanhar* or *Brita Ankar*. As for the *pala Mayabati,* the policing authorities found out that the *pala* was not printed and published in a book form. The *jatra party* from whose possession it was interdicted was performing it from the manuscript. Absence of a proper printed format made the jatra palas open to changes. Keeping the mythological subject of war between Gods and demons intact, the performance had many opportunities to introduce innovations. The manuscripts of mythological palas was, therefore, feared by the government because of the opportunity it provided for extemporising the words and introducing references of differences within the performance. However, the interdiction order was not restricted to manuscript palas alone; it included to printed pala books too. Even in printed books like *Matripuja* numerous open-ended passages appeared defined by the Government Translator as "an invective harangue"[12] having the potential to make the readers to infer a new meaning from what was written. Such inferences could also be extemporised by the performer while performing the jatra pala.

Palas of historical theme also fell under the British radar of suspicion. Jatra palas that were strictly mythological in character began to demonstrate efficiency in historical themes too in the early twentieth century. In fact, palas with historical theme became very popular during the swadeshi age. Under the influence of *kal* (age/time) and *ruchi* (opinion/taste) jatras began to introduce historical themes and characters in the constitution of the palas. One such pala was Haradhan Roy's pala *Padmini* narrating the historical tale of the fall of Chittor under the advances of Allaudin Khalji due to his desire to capture Padmini, wife of the Rana of Chittor's uncle. In this extraordinary treatment of history, Haripada Chatterji transformed the battle of Chittor into an ethical battle fought at the behest of Padmini who was at once portrayed as a historical character and at the other time as a mythical figure or as a counterpart of the Primordial force. History in this treatment attained mythical proportion. The intermixture of history and myth probably rendered the narrative open to varied interpretations. The government reports noted apathy of Muslim population to the particular jatra pala and dubbed seditious for spreading class hatred. The pala in its attempt at mixing myth with history used the character of Alaudin Khalji in a very open-ended manner. But such usage only opened it to varied interpretation, one of them being reading of vilification of a Muslim character by the Muslim population of Bengal.

The legal opinion proffered by the Legal Remembrancer to the Government of Bengal on the play *Mira Uddhar*[13] noted the play in itself could not be brought under the radar of the Press Act of 1910 but there were few passages, which appeared to be open to objection. In fact, he further noted, "They are in their phraseology somewhat

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12   Chattopadhyay, B., *supra* note 9, p. 17.

13   Roy, H. *Mira Uddhar*. Kolkata: Pasupati Press, 1315 B.S. (1908).

indefinite as regards the period to which they relate."[14] The Raj was concerned with the 'phraseology' because that enabled the intention and interpretation nexus of jatra pala to travel between two time frames-that of the play and that of the reader/public/audience. The Government ordered the Government Translator to ransack every available jatra pala, both manuscript and printed, for such phrases and passages. The play *Ranajiter Jiban Jajna* was also found rift with "incidents and characters" that were clearly drawn from the "political situation of India of to-day" and had "no reference to Bharatpur as it was then."[15] However, the prohibitive measures of the Government fell hard on the play *Matripuja*, by Kunja Behari Gangopadhyay. This particular play put the colonial government in dilemma for its terminology that surreptitiously quartered two meanings. The use of names like Surendra, Aswini, Crurjan was believed to be have been used deliberately to make a connection between myth and reality, and narrative-time and present time. These connections not just introduced an image of division in the mental world of the audience but also posed them against each other. The portrayed distinctions, therefore, were made more than evident. The texts of jatra introduced a distinction in the mental world of the people, which the in-text allusion to contemporary rendered comprehensible. A middle space emerged due to the enmeshing of text time and (alluded to) contemporary time enabling the performer to make allusions and the audience to read between the lines. Such possibility of beyond-the-text expression in the middle space of jatra palas enabled the performance of jatra pala to generate new meanings, hence a new vision.

2. Un-Natural Spectacle: Building a Community of Sensation

Amrita Bazaar Patrika, a popular vernacular daily, reported a jatra performance held in the private premises of Raja Bahadur's Haveli in the year 1907. They considered the performance given by the swadeshi jatra party of Mukunda Das "simple" yet "calculated to impress the swadeshi cult"[16]. They further noted the "profound impression" the performance made on the audience. The news piece also reported that the audience was "literally spell-bound" and disregarded the summer heat to watch the performance for full five hour. Effect of the performance was so prominent that it attracted the attention of the British officials too. They noticed that the performance created such a feeling of excitement amongst the audience that they filled the place with shouts of *Bande Mataram*[17]. The accounts of the vernacular newspapers and the British ICS officials, who witnessed jatra performances, unanimously noted and agreed that these were exciting in nature. Mukunda Das gained popularity and notoriety among the public, and the

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14   WBSA-HPB (Confidential), F.N. 206 (5-9)/1911, letter from G.H.B. Kenrick, Advocate General of Bengal, dated Calcutta, 22nd June 1911, to the Government of Bengal.

15   NAI-HPB, Political A, July 1909, Progs. No. 19-23.

16   *Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, 18th April, 1907.

17   NAI-HPB, Progs. no. 112, Political A, March 1909, letter no. 4337-S.B., dated Camp, the 29th November 1908 from H. LeMesurier, The Chief Secretary to the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam, to the Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department.

colonial official circle, respectively, due to such exciting performances. Mukunda Das adapted the pala *Matripuja* by Kunja Behari Gangopadhyay in his famous pala having the same name. The original pala was based on a mythological theme that narrated a battle between the Gods and the demons. But the technique of performance, inherent in a jatra performance, invoked a feeling of excitement among the audiences. Most of the jatra performances of the age excited such adrenalin rush in the audiences, making them shout, or express themselves in some other audible or visible manner. During a performance of Mukunda Das, held in Jessore, women audiences were reported to have broken their English made glass bangles, in a fit of excitement[18]. The audience/listener of the swadeshi jatra performances were enchanted by the representations onstage. Something in the way it was delineated before them made the audience feel an excitement. However, jatra performances, unlike theatrical performances, lacked spectacularity. It was, on the contrary, rather *unspectacular* due to the un-naturalistic representations that the jatra performances displayed before the audience. The performance lacked the sophistication that the staged performances of theatre could afford. Jatra performances held in open spaces, devoid of the assistance of footlights, proper exits and entrance could hardly match the spectacular show that the theatre houses of the age could put up. Nevertheless, in matters of exciting the audience jatra performances exhibited no less adroitness than the theatrical performances. Despite the lack of stagecraft and properties that the theatres had what made the jatra performances so exciting? The question though perplexing holds the key to the answer. The jatra performances held the audiences "spell bound" because of its very un-spectacularity or un-naturalness. The simplicity of the act, and its un-naturalness, created a unique space that connected the audience to the performance, time and space, and the performer, instilling in them a feeling of 'being-there', which became the prime source of excitement.

The un-naturalistic nature of the act merged the two spaces and times. The merging put the space of representation in a flux. The represented images and ideas could now move beyond their proclaimed exteriority. Thus, the treatment of a mythological theme in the play *Matripuja*, and other plays of similar genre, like *Mohisashur Badh*, *Brita Ankar, Prithurajar Satasvamedh Jajna,* and *Britasur Badh*, when performed in such un-naturalistic manner added new elements to the image portrayed and perceived. Addition became possible due to the un-natural way and space of performance that brought the performer and the audience together, in a fluxed space and time. Thus, the audience too became a part of the act. The performer's treatment of the audience as a part of the act involved the audience in the crises and resolutions enacted in the space. Such involvement was desired so that the audiences could feel an emotion of 'being-there', bodily/physically. The physical sense of 'present-in-it', or of 'being-a-part-of-it', flooded the audience when they could actually see and feel the representatives/*svarups* in the space and moment of action. The scene involving flogging of a boy of *Svarga*, beaten up by the *asuras* for singing praise of the Motherland/*Svarga*, in the play *Matripuja*

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18   NAI-HPB, Progs. No. 109, Political B, February 1908, Weekly report of the Director of criminal Intelligence, dated the 15th February 1908.

gained potency due to the 'present-in-it' sense afforded by the jatra performances[19]. The audiences witnessed the particular scene as a part of it and interpreted it in a moment of flux where both the times, time of the narrative and the time of the audience, collapsed into a whole. The scene represented for them not merely the beating up of the *devbalaks* but also of Sushil who was ordered by the British court to be flogged publicly for uttering Bande Mataram[20]. Intermingling of two times not merely helped coalesce the two incidents, where one suggestively indicated the other, but also tried to inspire an emotion of dislike for the judicial system of the Raj that practiced such inhuman and medieval means of punishment on a child, and for reasons that was registered in their perception as not a severe crime. Thus, the involvement induced through un-naturalisation of the act proved helpful in evoking emotions that granted potency to the meaning-making process.

Sartorial arrangement forms an integral part of the process of dissemination of any performance. It serves as the main determinant of the spectacularity of the performance that naturalises the un-natural. The 'you-are-there' feeling promoted and inspired by any performances depends largely on the clothing or the costumes that transforms the not-real factor of performance into not not-real. The political ideas of the swadeshi age gained leverage in the jatra performances through sartorial factors of performance too. It was most poignant in the jatra performances of Mukunda Das. In 1908, the British ICS officials noted that the women who came to view Mukunda Das's performance held in Jessore broke their English made glass bangles during the performance[21]. The performance was immediately interdicted under section 144, Criminal Procedure Code. But what is most striking is the reaction of the people, in this case, the women, who witnessed the performance. They were excited enough to act in the most conspicuous manner like breaking their glass bangles in public place. But more striking than the breaking of the glasses was the source of production of the bangles; all these bangles were English made. Mukunda Das's performance definitely signified such signs that excited the women into such open refusal to use foreign made goods. This idea of boycott of foreign goods in favour of swadeshi found a clearer voice in the costumes worn by Mukunda Das himself and in the attire of his twenty other performers. The costumes used in the performance, enacted by Mukunda Das's swadeshi jatra party, were made from swadeshi fabric. During the swadeshi period, a variant of swadeshi fabric was available in the market that were dyed purple with indigo. Such fabrics were popularly known as swadeshi *chhit kapad* [spotted fabric]. The swadeshi clothes worn by Mukunda Das's party members, as a signifier, attained new possibilities and meanings in the

19   Gangopadhyay, K. B. *Matripuja ba Svargoddhar* [Worship of the Mother or Deliverance of Heaven]. Kolkata: Indian Patriot Press, 1908, p. 94.

20   Sushil Sen, a Bengali youth of the swadeshi, age was tried before the court by Magistrate Kingsford for beating up an English police who lathi charged on a peaceful group of protestors. Kingsford ordered Sushil to be lashed publicly for his impunity. The incident of public flogging of Sushil created quite a stir in the Bengali society already agog with discontent owing to the partition of Bengal.

21   NAI-HPB, Progs. No. 109, Political B, February 1908, Weekly report of the Director of criminal Intelligence, dated the 15th February 1908.

performance/signification, appearing as a new sign altogether before the audience. The sign signified in the performance was a mixture of the signifier/swadeshi clothes and the signification/addition of fiery ideas of economic *swadeshism*. Serving as a symbol the attire had the potential of directing the interpretive-will of the audience/public in favour ideas of economic swadeshi. It tried to influence the audience to quit the usage of foreign goods. The influence worked by means of sensations that the performance could arouse in the minds of the audience. The clothes used during the performance, particularly the swadeshi variant of clothes used by Mukunda Das's swadeshi jatra party, also enabled the performance to bring the performer and audience, hence the performance (i.e. the make believe space and time) and the reality (i.e. the contemporary space and time) in one place, together, making the audience feel more involved in the performance, hence, more excited.

The unnatural form of performance and the clothes worn during it created a space where the audience and the performer could come together. In the space, the audience was afforded a chance by the performance to be a part of the represented events and feel the tensions associated with it. The opportunity to become a part of the dramatic progression and feel it often made the audience react in ways that was directly influenced by the theatrical time, space, and incident. The excitement made the audience to express oneself vocally. They exhibited the emotion felt in the theatrical time in the contemporary time. The emotions, thus, enabled the audience to express their views, opinions, and perceptions. A change thus swept over the countryside of Bengal and Eastern Bengal and Assam. The performance and the space of performance inspired an emotion of excitement in the audiences. The excitement, often, if not always, induced them to respond vocally in the space of performance. The vocal response was a result of the excitement and wonders that the audience experienced due to the 'you-are-there' illusion created by the performance. The excitement felt by the audience in unison was felt and realised by the fellow viewers at the moment of expressing the excitement. The expression created awareness among the audience that the scenes and dresses that thrilled them also excited his fellow viewers. The awareness drew the viewers together in a camaraderie, which generated a bond among the viewers. This brought them together in a community of sensations, just as spectacular scenes did in theatrical performances. But the community engendered by the jatra performances went far and wider. People of the lower sections, women, and people dwelling in the villages, excited by the jatra performances, and having a space in the jatra performance to express themselves, began to realise that their fellow people (ones who came to witness the performance, and those witnessed it earlier) and they shared one thing in common – the thrill created by the performance, and the subsequent vocal response that it elicited. The knowledge drew the people together in the community of sensation already at work in the theatrical performances. The jatra performances, in ways, popularised the community. Thus, a tidal change was overboard that in one stroke brought the hitherto unheard sections of the society together inspiring a felt bond among them.

3. Surprising them Into Frenzy: Archaeology of Hidden Voices

The partition of Bengal and the tidal changes that it brought in its wake became an integral part of Bengali memory. Reminiscing about that age Tarashankar Bandopadhyay said, "*Elo amar kaler notun kal. 1905 shaler tirishe asvin*"[22] [Then came the new age of my age. 30th asvin of 1905]. The partition of Bengal unleashed a wave of newness over Bengal. The contours of the new age and the new taste was set by the voice that the people suddenly realised they had. The jatra viewing population bonded together in a community through a realisation that their fellow viewers felt the same, as did they, was made aware of it by the expression of excitement by all present at the same time. So, the expression of excitement, or its vocal representation, and the time of the expression (i.e. together) was essential to the community formed. The community of sensation depended on the voice of the people. The jatra performance, thus, brought the audience together in a space where they had a potent voice. The excitement that the performance generated made the audience express themselves vocally and together. The space empowered the lower class and countryside audience, often derisively referred to as jatrar darshak, to formulate an opinion and above all enabling them to make their opinion audible. People whose voices were hitherto unheard of suddenly became prominent. Ideas travelled to them, no doubt, by means of newspapers and books, and other forms of media. But the space of jatra performance did not merely impart knowledge, or idea, to them. It allowed them to learn and critic the ideas, and pass necessary judgement on it. Thus, the power that the performance in its enactment and spatiality gave the audience turned them from *jatrar darshak* (audience of *jatra*) to a public.

The social category labelled as *jatrar darshak* developed a taste for palas that opened a space for critique and inspection of colonialism/the 'other' and the Indian public life offered by 'them'. Mukunda Das, one of the most notorious *jatrawallahs* of the swadeshi age, when interrogated by the District Magistrate of Barisal, Mr. Hughes Buller, conceded that unless he introduced swadeshi subjects in his palas it failed to draw ticket-paying audiences to his entertainment[23]. Such a confession was in no way an exaggeration because later still the colonial secret police reported to the Director of Criminal Intelligence that the performance of such palas reflected the public mood of the district[24]. We can imagine that the audiences or *jatrar darshak* were not a few idle individuals visiting a private entertainment. Neither the space of jatra performance can be ruled out as a space of private and religious performance. The *notun kal* with the

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22   Bandopadhyay, T. *Amar Kaler Katha* [The Story of My Age]. Kolkata: Bengal Publishers, 1358 B.S. (1951), p. 143.

23   *The Bengalee*, 17th July 1907.

24   NAI-HPB, Progs. No. 110, Political A, July 1908, Fortnightly report for the first half of June 1908. In the letter no. 1749-S.B., dated Shillong, the 29th June 1908, written by Mr. P.C. Lyons, Chief Secretary to the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam to the Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department, he clearly stated, "It may be taken, perhaps, that these parties indicate to some extent the trend of public opinion in the mufassil generally."

innumerable changes it brought transformed the space of jatra performance, too. The space developed as a space for critical engagement between ideas and the people.

The key engagement between idea and people became more potent with the element of surprise inherent, particularly, in the swadeshi jatra performances. Most of the reports on the jatra performances of the age noted that it often introduced gags, which were always seditious in nature. In theatrical terminology gag is defined more as a piece of charlatanerie. Any improvisation in the dialogues or words interpolated by the actor in the text of the play is referred to as a gag. Swadeshi jatra performances excited many expectations in the audience/public through the introduction of gags. Sudden interpolations in the body text served to catch the audience unprepared and made them experience an adrenalin rush. The gags of Mukunda Das whereby he included new dialogues in the text of the pala *Matripuja* made the play more exciting. The reports on the performances enacted by the swadeshi jatra parties in various parts of Bengal and Eastern Bengal and Assam, and particularly the performances by Mukunda Das's party, noted and repeatedly reported an excitement and frenzy gripping strongly the minds and attitude of the audience who came to view the performance. Not merely the performance of Mukunda Das various other performances, particularly the ones on mythological themes, seemed susceptible to the interpolation of such offensive passages or gags. These additions came to fore during the performance and usually held little or no connection to the performance. Interpolations of such nature rendered the performance un-natural. Despite the un-naturalisation, the gags surprised the audience. Involved as they felt in the course of the performance, sudden appearance of the gags in the space of the performance, surprised them into a frenzy or excitement. The excitement often made them express themselves audibly. The audible expression often made the audience aware of the excitement felt by their fellow viewers at the inclusion. It made them realise that the excitement they felt was generated by the surprising element introduced by the gags. Hence, the feeling, expression and the realisation of the feeling felt commonly by the audience bonded them together in community of feeling.

The un-natural spatial rendition of jatra performances worked in its favour, creating an easy communion between the performers and the audience. The audience in the un-natural setting of the performance was afforded an opportunity to become a part of the movements and actions of the performance. Such involvement registered a keen sensation in their body. The sensation felt by the audience became sharper due to the inclusion of songs and music in the performance. Songs being rhythmic dialogues held great sway over the mind of the audience and could effectively communicate with the people through its crescendos and diminuendos. The songs excited the gathered audience to such extent that the women present in the audience broke the English made glass bangles they were wearing. Though the report does not state the song that created such repercussion among the audience the later reports of the colonial officials on the songs sung by the jatra parties, and particularly by the party of Mukunda Das, it can be assumed that probably the famous *white ghost* song was sung during the performance in Jessore. The song attracted the attention of the British officials as an inflammatory song. The song brought the following message before the people:

"Babu, oh that you would understand after death that white ghosts have climbed on your shoulders and that you are done for. You used to take your rice in gold dishes, and now you are satisfied in steel ones. You like (prefer) pomades to country manufactured atar.

You had golas full of paddy, now do take of your spectacles, babu, and see that they are being spoilt by white rats. Your chastity, honour and wealth have been taken away by deceit and do you know, Deputy Babu, that your head is now under the boots of the feringees?"[25]

According to the legal Remembrancer of the Raj, the song was an objectionable song as it compared the English to white rats, and "says that the feringhees have taken away chastity, honour, and wealth of the country."[26] The lyrics in this case became complementary to dialogues. In the play *Matripuja*, this song followed dialogue between the characters of the Deputy Magistrate's wife and Santan. In the dialogue, the misery of an honest and dutiful wife was shown who was forced to leave her house by her husband, the Deputy Magistrate, for being sympathetic to the plight of the nation and critical of the actions of the Feringhees. The song as a corollary to the dialogue tried to unveil the misfortune of those loyal to the Feringhee who were no less than *white rats*. The song was a direct appeal to the section of "*babu*" [the natives who served under the British] to put aside their spectacle and look at the condition of the country. It said that *svet eedure* [white rats] were "taking away the chastity, honour, and wealth of the country."[27] The song sometimes replaced the word "white rat" with "white ghost"[28]. Nevertheless, the intent of the song remained the same. The song communicated to the audience a notorious image of the British where they were compared with a devil and a rodent. The comparisons could evoke in the minds of the audience a comical image. The image of the British officials as a ghost or even as a small rat was ludicrous. The song further claimed that the natives have given up their own commodities for foreign made things like *pomatum* [pomade] which has lead such epithets as "brutes", "nonsense" and "foolish" to be heaped upon them[29]. It further claims, "Do you know Deputy Babu, now your head is under the boots of the feringees and that they have ruined your caste and honour and carried away your riches cleverly."[30] The image of a Feringhee holding the head of a native down under his foot and robbing him of his caste was contemptuously created making it humorous yet making the person, against whom the ridicule was targeted, detestable. Therefore, the lyrics played a significant role in

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25   NAI-HPB, Progs. No. 112-131, Political A, March 1909, Prosecution Of Certain Persons In Eastern Bengal And Assam Under Section 124 A, Indian Penal Code, In Respect Of Certain Seditious Performances And The Printing And Publishing Of Two Seditious Books Called Mukunda's Matripuja Gan And Desar Gan.

26   NAI-HPB, Progs. No. 112-131, Political A, March 1909.

27   NAI-HPD, Political A, March 1909, Progs. No. 112-131, Prosecution of certain persons in eastern Bengal and Assam under section 124 a, Indian penal code, in respect of certain seditious performances and the printing and publishing of two seditious books called Mukunda's Matripuja gan and Desar gan.

28   NAI-HPD, Political A, March 1909, Progs. No. 112-131.

29   *Ibid*.

30   *Ibid*.

disseminating swadeshi/nationalist ideas among the masses, but more important was the role it played in infusing a being-there feeling among the audience. The presence of the audience in the space of the performance felt the lyrics of the songs, being rhythmic dialogues, meant for them. The felt sentiments aroused a plethora of sentiments in the audience who responded openly in the space of performance resulting in coming out of hidden spaces and becoming visible, and audible.

Conclusion

The performance enacted by the swadeshi jatra parties generated an illusion in public mind. The fantastic world of heaven, bravado, *janani-santan* relationship, and sacrifice presented in an immensely un-natural form of performance affected the audience-public sensationally. The illusion that it created lay in the un-natural temporality of the performances. Jatra performances stood in-between two times. Mukunda Das's performance, and for that matter the performance of other swadeshi jatra parties, recurred this phenomenon, repeatedly, in their performance. Every performance gave the viewer/listener public a chance to stand in a space that lay in-between two temporal planes. The two times coming together in this middle space not just made ideas comprehensible, it opened up a space where the new ideas could enact a transition. It lay betwixt, and between, a stage of ordinary and profane life. Jatra performances in its act of un-naturalising the actions opened up a potential space where the time and spatial plane of both the performance and the viewers/listeners was dissolved. Instead, a more powerful plane was brought into existence, one that was free of the prying surveillance of the Raj and the ever-assertive hold of the ideas of the nationalist leaders. In this stage, the ideas represented by the jatra performances, could retain its original form, or could be dissolved into something new. Describing the intricate characteristics of a liminal stage Victor Turner asserted, "But the besetting quality of human society, seem processually, is the capacity of individual to stand at times aside from the models, patters and paradigms for behavior and thinking, which as children they are conditioned into accepting, and, in rare cases, to innovate new patterns themselves or to assent to innovation."[31] Hence, the proceedings of a liminal stage or a liminoid are optional[32]. Under such circumstances, the liminal stage, or the middle space, created by the swadeshi jatra performances, not just stood aside from the *Ruling Order* but also had the potential to re-interpret it. Thus, the rendition of a mythological warfare between the Gods and the demons, in the play *Matripuja*, by Bhushan Chandra Das, stood every chance of being re-interpreted in an open-ended manner. In the betwixt middle space audience/listener public could be described the warfare as a transition from the colonial paradigm, better described by the jatra performances as *paradhinata*, to a new, desired stage of freedom, glorified as *swadhinata*. A transition was no doubt imagined, but the course of it could be defined

31   NAI-HPD, Political A, March 1909, Progs. No. 112-131, p. 14−15.

32   *Ibid*., p. 16−17.

in many ways. What would be the direction of the change? Though deploying directive peformative techniques jatra performances could not decide the direction. In that middle space ideas could be, and assume various shape and form.

The middle space and time, provided by the jatra performances, therefore, by this definition, represented a *liminal*[33] stage. Susan Broadhurst describes the situation as one lying just at the edge of what was possible[34]. In such space, meanings lay betwixt i.e. nuanced. In the moment of interaction between the performer, idea and the audience, the represented notions could be re-interpreted and modulated. Therefore, the audiences watching the performance of *Sujajna* in the betwixt space attained a new plane of consciousness where they interpreted and co-related the time of the performance with their time. Coalescence of time-frames enmeshed the performative meaning with contemporary meaning. Reading into the symbolic value of the performance, they singled out the British merchant Kuhak (portrayed as the negative force, or the 'other' of the narrative) as the source of their present plight. This incensed them enough to hatch a plan to beat up the actor playing the character. A consciousness was engendered among the audience-public that granted them knowledge of a new stage, a stage of freedom where they could reformulate the meanings/ideas presented before them, express their opinion, and internalize it. Jatra performances, thus, forged a nuanced national consciousness.

Modern south Asian today is faced with the development of socially dissenting forces claiming for themselves a different version of nationalism. This is not a new phenomenon and can be traced back to the deployment of liminal performative spaces during the formative years of Indian nationalism. Performance arena as a space of many possibilities and entailing innovation of new meanings has added layers of interpretation over the notion of national identity. Who are the south Asians in today's world? Though a simple question, it can generate multiple answers. To such simple questions, the forces of Hindu fundamentalism would answer in a religious rhetoric. The Ramlila Committee of Allahabad answered the imminent question in 2008 in the peformative space of Dussera. In the performance, the traditional effigy of Ravan, burnt to celebrate the victory of Rama over Ravana, was replaced by that of M. Karunanidhi, the then chief minister of Tamil Nadu, for questioning the presence of the natural route way to Lanka to alleviate the debate over the Sivasamudram project[35]. The statement of Karunanidhi was equated with blasphemy as it denied the existence of the causeway supposedly made on the eve of the battle between Rama and Ravana, hence denying the existence

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33   Victor Turner described liminal, or liminality, as an interim stage that had the potential to disintegrate the root metaphor into something new, creating a new metaphor or root paradigm, altogether. See, Turner, V. *Dramas, Field, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974, p. 13−17.

34   Broadhurst, S. *Liminal Acts: A Critical Overview of Contemporary Performance and Theory.* London: Cassell, 1999, p. 12.

35   *Indian Express*, 18th October 2007, *Karunanidhi is Ravana in Allahabad Dussehra* [interactive]. [accessed on 17-08-2012]. <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/karunanidhi-is-ravana-in-allahabad-dussehra/229386/>.

of Rama himself, considered to be an essential part of Indian identity by the Hindutva forces.

Such performances over the years in various performative spaces have not been very rare. The space of performance has recurrently been used to disseminate ideas of nationalism, and add new meanings and definitions to it through subsequent moments of reaction and expression. Recently in Bangalore during the celebration of the 66th Independence Day programme the school students organized a cultural performance, a mosaic of Indian freedom fighters, folklore, and people[36]. The fight of Abbakka Devi, queen of Ullal (located in the coastal Karnataka) against the Portuguese was staged by the students during the performance recalling, and in the process modulating, the contours of Indian history and identity. Presentations of such nature can be, and often is, read between the lines adding a new meaning to the original idea presented in the space. Requalification of nationalism have repeatedly been staged in such spaces of performances, ranging from traditional performances like *jatra*, *nautanki*, and *bhawai*, to more carnivalesque performances like *ramlila*, *dussera*, or even independence day programme. Such modulations have added onto nationalism building up a layered notion of identity. Within the framework of that identity a south Asian living in the politico-geographical boundary of the sub-continent is an Indian; an Indian who is a creation of the intermixture of his own regional, ethnic, linguistic, or even religious logic and that of the intellectuals. Thus, in retrospect, jatra performances of the formative years of Indian nationalism re-organized the liminality of the performative space, which in later years has become the central ground for incessantly generating new layers of national identity and nationalism in the south Asia.

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36   Deccan Herald, 19th August 2012, B'lore students tell Rani Abbakka tale [interactive]. [accessed on 19-08-2012]. <http://www.deccanherald.com/content/271940/blore-students-tell-rani-abbakka.html>.

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SVADEŠI JATROS VAIDINIMAI BENGALIJOJE (1905-1911): PIETŲ AZIJOS TAUTINĖS TAPATYBĖS NIUANSŲ KILMĖS ATSKAITOS POZICIJOS PAIEŠKOS

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Santrauka. *Po Sumito Sarkaro išsamaus veikalo apie svadeši judėjimą Bengalijoje pasirodymo svadeši vaidinimų istoriografija Bengalijoje klostėsi tradicine estetikos apibrėžimą atitinkančia linkme. Juos apibūdindavo ir kaip „masinio kontakto techniką", ir kaip tautos jausmų raišką, remiantis tradiciniu įvaizdžiu, – „žmonių pabudimą tautai". Tačiau svadeši jatra vaidinimai, kokie jie išliko apibrėžti valstybiniuose dokumentuose ir kolektyvinėje atmintyje, yra ir pramogų erdvė, erdvė, kur sąveikauja atlikėjai ir auditorija, o svarbiausia yra sąveika tarp intelektualų idėjų, idėjų perteikimo vaidinimu ir žiūrovų šių idėjų recepcijos. Atlikimo ir suvokimo erdvėje žiūrovai įsiaudrindavo, jų reakcija būdavo siautulinga. Kadangi liaudies vaidinimų erdvė suteikė iki tol negirdėtiems balsams girdimumą, šioje erdvėje ėmė formuotis vienijimosi modelis, kylantis iš bendrų jutiminių išgyvenimų. Atsiradusi pojūčių bendruomenė vienijosi kaip tauta, moduliavo tautos sąvoką ir suteikė jai naujas prasmes. Taip atsirado įvairūs tautos suvokimo atspalviai. Šiame straipsnyje tirdamas svadeši jatra atlikimą ir jo suvokimą aš mėginau įžvelgti šio reiškinio suponuotą tautos viziją ir suvokti, kaip jis suformavo precedentą tautos tapatumo niuansavimui vaidinimų erdvėse Pietų Azijoje.*

Reikšminiai žodžiai: *svadeši jatra, tautinė tapatybė, Pietų Azija, atlikimas, sklaida, suvokimas.*

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