

Odia Opera Tradition and the Undying glory and Contribution of Jatra Samrat Shyama Sundar Mohapatra

Bishnu Charan Dash

*Prof. of the Department of English
Assam University, Silchor, Diphu Centre*

Together with Leela, Suanga, Daskathia and Geetinatya, Jatra constitutes one of the most powerful folk-cultural institutions that served as a powerful source of entertainment to the rural people of Odisha. In this connection, Kapila Vatsyayan in her discussion on various forms of Indian folk plays maintains that “Yatra forms are an important branch of the parent forms of Indian literatures, languages and theatres forms” (146). Interestingly, Jatra as a popular form of traditional dramatic representation developed in Assam, Odisha and Bengal with a good deal of commonalities precisely because of their linguistic and cultural proximity. For instance, Jatra in Assam was popularized by Abhinayacharya Brajanath Sarmah under the prevailing influence of “West Bengal Dramatic Club” (Das 2019:25). The sophisticated Bengali employees working in Assam under British administration and the impact of Krishna Leela centering round the separation and union of Radha and Krishna since the day of Sri Chaitnya, the champion of Neo-Vaishnavism in Bengal. Mr. Sarmah joined the Dramatic Club as an actor and was meticulously trained by the veteran actor cum director Hrisikesh Mukherjee. Sarmah’s role as Sankar Rao in the play “Baji Rao” and as Antigonus in the play “Chandragupta” not only startled his mentor, Mr. Mukherjee, but also inspired Mr. Sarmah to establish Jatra in Assam

with a solid shape. This shows that the connection between Assam and Bengali Jatra is incontrovertible. On his arrival in Assam, Brajanath Sarmah started a Jatra party under the title “Shila Kalika Opera” and went to the extent of translating the Bengali Jatra Plays such as “Bajirao” and “Rana Paratap Singh” into Assamese. Sarmah’s contribution as a harbinger of renaissance in Jatra tradition of Assam will be ever remembered (Das 25). In much the same way, as a popular folk representation on the stage in Odisha, Jatra emerged out of Leela/Rasleela centering round Radha-Krishna discourse as described in the *Bhagavata Purana* and Jayadeva’s *Geeta Govinda* which was staged regularly within the precincts of the temple of Jagannath at Puri. Sankardev’s Bhaona in Medieval Assam, Chaitanya’s emotional Bhakti Movement and his performance in the female role of Krishna’s wife Rukmini in the play *Rukmini Haran* and the dramatic performance of *Geeta Govinda* in Odisha bear brilliant testimony to the inception of Jatra tradition in Assam, Bengal and Odisha from the traditional representation of Krishna Leela with the help of music (flute), dance and songs. In the later medieval period, we also notice the emergence of Rama Leela in North India combining religious music and dialogic performance in the open field which was started by the devotee-poet Tulsidas during the Mughul period in Kashi (Banaras). Suanga as a traditional folk performance in Odisha embodying delicate emotion, dialogue and specific costumes are commonly found in Punjab, Haryana and Odisha (Panda 3). The etymological meaning of Rasa Leela points to the manifestation of ‘rasa’ such as love (sringara), laughter (hashya), sorrowful emotion (karuna), heroism (veera), fear (bhayanaka) and terror (rudra) as adumbrated in Bharata’s *Natya Shastra*. On the other hand, the word ‘leela’ signifies the performing part of Rasa Leela in terms of song, dance and dramatic performance on the stage which is done on various festivals, social and religious occasions. Therefore, the dynamics of Jatra entails a ‘progression’ or ‘journey’ through various form of representation like Rasjatra, Chandanjatra, Rathajatra, Krishnajatra and Devjatra as mentioned in *Vishnu Dharmottar Purana*.

Dynamics of Jatra in Odisha experiences a trajectory from Suanga and Ras Leela to ‘Geeti Natya’, ‘Opera’ and ‘Gananatya’ (Panigrahi 809-810). Whereas there were several Leela Parties between 1900 and 1945 till the end of the second world wars, the tradition of ‘Geeti Natya’ was developed in Odisha by Jagannath Pani and Vaishnava Pani who introduced song as a prominent feature of Jatra. Subsequently, dramatists like Krishna Prasad Vasu, Rama Chandra Swain, Dayanidhi Swain, Pallikavi Krishna Prashad Behera, Balakrishna Mahanty, Natyacharya Raghunath Panda and Jatra Samrat Shyamsundar Mahapatra and Natyasri Artabandhu RautRoy show the transformation of Geetinatya into Opera. Basu’s ‘Viraja Opera’, Ramchandra Swain’s ‘Jaya Narayani Opera’, Pallikavi Krishna Prasad Behera’s ‘Jaychandi Opera’, ‘Natyacharya Raghunath Panda’s ‘Neelachakra’s Opera’, and Shyamsundar Mahapatra’s ‘Odisha Opera’ vindicate this point. In the second half of the 20th century, opera tradition is expanded into Gananatya signifying the fact that Jatra is no more confined to the folk tradition or to the exclusive satisfaction of the rural people. Given the postcolonial condition after India’s independence, Jatra is expanded from the rural ethos to the urban space and under the western influence it has become a hybridized mode of cultural entertainment with innovative stage technique, sound system and light arrangement thereby negotiating folk culture with mass culture. In the backdrop of the above discussion on dynamics of Jatra, an attempt has been made in the following pages to assess the contribution of Jatra Samrat Lt. Shyamasundar Mahapatra to the gamut of Odia Jatra. With his original ancestral place at Dhamnagar in the district of Bhadrak, Jatra Samrat was born to Dayanidhi Mahapatra and Sundari Devi at Telenga Bazar, Cuttuck in 1927. He lost his father while reading in class eight and had to forge under a series of trying circumstances. a tryst with Destiny and was adopted by his maternal uncle Gangadhara Mahapatra of Saro Village in Bhandaripokhari Police Station of Bhadrak district. As an ardent patron of Jatra culture, Gangadhar owned “Saro Leela Jatra Party” since 1916. and it was one of the ten best Jatra parties of Odisha often engaged

MOSAIC, VOLUME : I, 2025

in close contest on the stage with other Jatra parties like “Naveena Natya Mandali” (Balasore) “Veeraja Opera” (Jajpur) and “Turata Party” of Arjun Chanda (Bhandaripokhari). After having passed his intermediate in Arts (I.A), Mahapatra started as an Arts Teacher at Giridhari Panda High School at Manjuri Road, but young Shyamsundar was more interested in dramatic performance and he requested the director of Saro Leela Party, Ghanashyam Bharati to give him a chance to act. Like the veteran Assamese actor Brajanath Sarmah of Barpeta who surprised his Guru Hrisikesh Mukherjee by his mesmerizing role of Sankar Rao in the play “Bajirao,” Shyamsundar surprised his director Ghanashyam Bharati by appearing in the major role of Meghanad in the play “Meghnada”. Subsequently. it so happened that the rural public wanted Shyamsundar to join the Jatra Party and Mahapatra had to give up his job as a teacher. In course of time, educated Shyamsundar with his profound knowledge in Sanskrit, Bengali and Hindi, tended to apply his knowledge in ‘Natya Shastra’, ‘Anhinaya Darpana’, and ‘Dasa Rupaka’ to give ‘Saro Leela Party’ a new life, breath and soul. The Leela Party was christened as “Kalinga Natya Parishad” and under the fostering care of his two maternal Uncles Gangadhar Mahapatra and Dukhishyam Mahapatra, Shuamsundar reorganized the party, invited veteran actors, singers and music directors like Lt. Gajendra Tripathy. As a result, “Kalinga Natya Parishada” continued to be a fountain source of aesthetic delight, moral and spiritual enrichment of the audience for nearly three decades (1945- 1976) by extensively travelling from Odisha to Bengal and Bihar. By virtue of his extraordinary action on the stage, young Shyamsundar earned wide acclaim from the cultured audience of Calcutta (now Kolkata) including the veteran Bengali actors like Shanti Gopal and Rakhai Singh. Mahapatra was at once a dramatist, lyricist, musician, director, a kind human being bereft of pride and arrogance and till today the best veteran Jatra actor in Odisha. He adorned Lt. Krishna Prasad Behera as his Guru in “Kalinga Natya Parishad” his unconditional love and respect for his mentor is unparalleled indeed! Under the direction of his Guru he surprised

both rural and elite audiences of Odisha by virtue of his strong and animated action. In Behera's plays like 'Raktapuja', 'Chandra Hashya', 'Asavarna', 'Kusha Barjana'. 'Jana Shakti', 'Balya Vidhaba', and 'Agni Mantra'. He ignited the moral and spiritual strength of the audience by fighting out casteism and class distinction in Odishan society and his role as 'Basanta' falling in love with a washer- woman's daughter Kanchan bears true testimony to this fact. His roles as King Hamsadhvaja in 'Santi Pratistha', Nawab Mirkasim in 'Chandrasekhar', Siddhinath Sarmah in 'Vasudhara', Lava in 'Kusha Barjana', Daud Khan in 'Jatiya Pataka', Mahmud of Ghajini in 'Sultan Mahmud', Aurengzeb in 'Veer Chatrasal', King Ugrasena in 'Mahanubhava Kangsa', and Shakuni in 'Utkataka Kie' bear true testimony to his unparalleled performance on the Jatra stage. As an actor, he was invincible and snatched away shields and cups many a time by defeating such powerful Jatra parties as Nilachakra Opera (Natyacharya Raghunath Panda), Sarada Kala Kunja (Nagespur), Veenapani Kala Kunja (Tarapur) and Benirampur Party as well. Later on, he was invited to Benirampur Party as an actor and director. At the same time, he established 'Odisha Opera' in solid footing as one of the ten best Jatra parties of Odisha. During his five years long stay as director in this party; he has produced many veteran actors among whom the names of Deenabandhu Matia, Gayadhar Mallick, Jadunath Panda, Khagendra Barik stand prominent. Among his prominent actors in Kalinga Natya Parishada the names of Mahendra Raot, Ganesh Parasad Dash, Bharat Chandra Dhal, Nidhi Majhi, Amulyadhan Mishra, Jadunath Khilar, Sanatan Samal, Dibakar Peda, Ananta Jena, Sundar Majhi deserve mention. Towards the last part of his life, he also established 'Janani Gananatya' (Taladanda), 'Natyarupa' (Dhamnagar), 'Manchapushpa' and 'Utkalika' at Saro. As a veteran actor, Shyamsunadar was a past-master in all the four types of actions on the stage (Angika, Vachika, Sattvika, and Aharya) as expounded in Bharata's *Natyashastra*. Veteran actor and dramatist Lt. Umakanta Behera maintains that Shyamababu was a 'sanglapa premi angik abhineta'. Since the father of this writer Lt. Ganesh Prashad Dash was

MOSAIC, VOLUME : I, 2025

associated with him as a co-actor in royal roles for more than a decade in 'Kalinga Natya Parishada' and 'Natyarupa', in my humble opinion Jatra Samrat was well versed in all forms of actions inculcating various rasas in the audience. However, he is second to none in his display of pure emotion in terms of actions (sattvik abhinaya). His royal roles like Sultan Mahmud, Mughal Samrat Aurengzeb and villain Shakuni and of couse Nawab Mirkashim made the audience of Odisha, Bihar and Bengal spell bound. I still remember his action in 'Balya Vidhaba' (Child Widow) in which he appeared in the role of Simanta Brahman. In a state of rage and fury, Mahapatra aroused both 'rudra' and 'bhayanak rasa' and tore away his sacred thread thereby inviting unconditional applause from the audience for several minutes. Another brilliant action of Shyamsundar is his adroit art of moving the dice- sticks with dancing eyes in the role of Uncle Sakuni in the play 'Sampurna Mahabharata'. His frequent dialogue modulation and repetition of one dialogue in three different ways with high pitch and low scale in the play 'Shanti Pratistha' can never be erased from my memory. Thus speaks king Hanshadhvaja to Dimbaka in a characteristic style of dialogue delivery in which Shyamasundar is second to none: "Tell me Dimbaka, tell me Dimbaka, where is Keshavati? Tell...tell...tell." His royal gait, meticulous stepping, well articulated dialogue, use of gestures and postures and the marvelous art of crying in one eye and laughing on the other have not only silenced his veteran rival actors like Natyashree Artabandhu Raotray but also humbled his three veteran mentors Pallikavi Krishna Prasad Behera, Natyacharya Raghunath Panda and Janakavi Jadumoni Kanungo. Keeping his astounding artistic/poetic talent and dramatic genius in view, Odisha Sangeet Natak Academy conferred on him 'The Natya Samrat Award' in 1980 at Bhubaneswar (Mishra: 137). But he is more popularly known as the 'Crownless Jatra Samrat' (Emperor of Odia Jatra) in every nook and corner of Odisha. But Alas! Jatra Samrat did not live long to take pride in his immortal glory and dramatically breathed his last in cardiac arrest on 5th of August, 1981at Sriram Chandra Bhanja Medical College Hospital thereby leaving a vacuum

MOSAIC, VOLUME : I, 2025

in Odia Jatra which can never be replenished.

Works Cited:

1. Vatsyayana, Kapila. *Traditional Indian Theatre*. National Book Trust. New Delhi. 1980.
2. Das, Ranjit. *Glimpses of Dramatic Discourse in Baranagar* (Barnagarar Natya Charchar Abhas). Spandon Prakash. Sarbhog. 2019.
3. Mishra, Ajay Kumar. *The Rise and Growth of Odia Yatra* (Odia Jatra: Ummesh O Uttarana). Akshara Publishers. 4th ed. 2013.
4. Mahapatra, Santosh (ed.). *In Memory of Jatra Samrat Shyamasundar* (Jatra Samrat Shyamasundar Mahapatra). Janapriya Press. Chandikhol. 2006.
5. Panda, Dr. Ajoy Kumar. "Folk Drama of Odisha versus Other Indian Folk Drama". *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*. Vol. 26, Issue I, series III, January 2021.
6. Panigrahi, Dr. Debahuti. "The Mass-Cultural Hybridized Jatra Industry : A Comparative Study of Traditional and Modern Form of Theatre in Odisha". *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research (JETIR)*, November, 2018. Vol.- V, Issue 11.

– X – X –