

Folk Songs and Dances of Kushmandi and Surrounding Areas in Dakshin Dinajpur District, West Bengal

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Human mind, born with some inherent capabilities of expressing itself through rhythms and sounds, is the main source of dance and music. Man is a gregarious creature and he has been enjoying his collective life since the dawn of his evolution. He always wants to share his joys and sorrows with other members of his community. This communicative nature of man along with his exhibitionistic character often comes out spontaneously in the form of dance and music. These dance and music once created by him, act as the containers for holding his myths, religious beliefs and history, and with the passage of time these are evolved as the main constituents of a folk culture.

Generally there is a common melodious tune among all the mankind. But practically dances and songs of a particular group of people are deeply influenced by their different anthropogenic factors as well as their local environment. Thus we can find a wide variation in such art forms all over the world. In fact, the characteristics of a folk song or a dance always remain unique for a specific group of people, though few aspects are found common in a wider section of population irrespective of their natural and political barriers. In such cases their past totem and other religious rituals play significant roles.

The undivided Bengal had been famous for various types of folk songs and dances since time immemorial. Dakshin Dinajpur district lying at the middle of West Bengal (a part of the former province presently situated in India) is a place possessing some unique folk characteristics which may be pride for the whole nation. In the present paper attempt has been taken to explore such cultural treasures of this district mainly emphasizing on Kushmandi block and surrounding areas.

Location of Study Area:

The study area of the present paper, Kushmandi, is the northern most block of Dakshin dinajpur district. It is bounded by Uttar Dinajpur district in the north-west and west, Bangladesh in the north-east, Gangarampur block of Dakshin Dinajpur district in the east, Harirampur and Bangshihari blocks of the same district in the south. Mahishbathan village of Kushmandi block is the cultural hearth having a variety of folk songs and dances. The village is located at the close proximity to the state highway 10A which connects Kushmandi with Raiganj (about 40 kms), the Headquarters of Uttar Dinajpur district. It is also connected to Balurghat (about 80 kms), the Headquarters of Dakshin Dinajpur district by the state highways 10A and 10 via Buniadpur.

Historical Background:

Kushmandi and surrounding places are historically enriched. It has got a long history of human habitation since the time of Mahabharata. Bairhatta village, located 18 kms southward from Kushmandi is the place where ruins of the Palace of king Virat can be seen still now. According to myth, the Pandavas, in incognito, took shelter in this palace during their 'Agnatabas-parva'. A road named as Ushaharan Road is passing westward through Mahishbathan which has been named after the incidence of the abduction of Usha (the daughter of king Ban) by Aniruddha, the grandson of Lord Krishna. Kushmandi and surrounding places also played important role during the reign of Pal and Sen Dynasties (during seventh to twelfth century). The place Mahipal is just 15 kms east of Kushmandi where the king Mahipal-I of Pal dynasty dug a large lake which is known as Mahipal Dighi (area 24.86 ha).

Population characteristics:

Dakshin Dinajpur district is inhabited by 1,676,276 persons with a considerable percentage of Rajbangshi population settling in different parts of the district (as per 2011 census). In Kushmandi block, total population is 198,752. Mahishbathan mouza is 5 kms away from Kushmandi and it is populated by 1,446 persons of which 98.2% is SC population. About 41% of the total population is engaged in economically gainful activities of which a major portion is related to agriculture. Thus the folk dances and songs reflect their simple agrarian based lifestyle.

Folk dance without song:

Mokha Dance: Mokha dance, much familiar as Gomira, is a unique dance form of Dakshin Dinajpur district. The origin of this dance is obscure, but is probably being practiced for more than thousand years. In this type of dance the artists wear wooden masks, i.e. the 'mokha' to represent his specific role. The term Mokha is used in local dialect and has surely been derived from the word 'Mukhosh', meaning the same. The characters represented in this type of dance are generally based on God and Goddesses of Purana like Shiva, Parvati and Kali. Other characters are based on mythological stories like Narashingha (Half man and half lion), Dakini (a female form of spirits), Bishala (a symbol of primitive men), Hanuman (monkey), Bagh (tiger), Nararakshasha (a primitive man with blood-thirst), etc. The play may continue for five to six hours based on number of characters represented at a time. The total number of artists taking part in a play may vary from 13 to 15. Female artists cannot take part in this dance because of the unbearable weight of masks worn at the time of dance. Hence the female characters are presented here by male artists.

The Mokha dance is not assisted with songs or any other type of dialogues. The entire performance is alike a mime. Some indigenous instruments such as dhank and kanshi are used to keep 'taal' (rhythmic pace) with the dance. Sanai is used at the beginning of the play as well as other dramatic moments. The participants come one by one wearing wooden mask (mokha) and proper dress, and dance with the music. The performing dancers express their role by conventional body movements with traditional rhythm. A sequence of roles is, however, maintained throughout the performance. At first, Bura and Buri (Shiva and Parvati) come on the stage. Their tale simply based on love may be accepted as the prologue of the whole drama. Then come Hanuman and Bagh. Their roles are just for amusement among the audience. Dakini and Bishala appear thereafter to induce the exciting events of the play. Kali comes on the stage at a chaotic and horrific situation created by her predecessors and tries to calm down the environment by killing an asura (rival of the God) symbolically. Narsingha comes later and kills another one. At last Nararakshasha comes on the stage. He plays a vital role showing powerful but fearsome icon. At the climax of his performance he becomes hysteric and sucks blood of a pigeon to satisfy the soul of the character. This character cannot be played by all rather than a few who are honoured very much among the people.

Most of the artists of mokha dance live at Mahishbathan village and surrounding areas. These artists make groups and perform dances at various parts of the district as well as outside the region. The Mokha dance is performed at the time of Chadak puja, Gombhira puja, Aamatkali puja, Kali puja and Durga puja.

Folk songs without dance:

Khan Gaan: Khan Gaan is a typical form of folk songs sung by the Rajbangshi people of this region. In a Khan Gaan, there are two arbitrary characters interacting with each other through dramatic songs. Each 'pala' (song) contains several stanzas without any repetition. The characters of such song may either be human beings or other inanimate objects like some parts of a machine, a cycle, a pump set and so on. In all cases the characters are divided into two opposite sexes: the first one is the female 'sori' putting a question on an observed problem to her male partner 'boudia' who, in his next role, is obliged to satisfy her by explaining the matter. All dialogues are presented through songs with unique tune. The interaction continues in a series of such questions and answers and sometimes goes on the whole night. The language used in the songs is local, i.e. Rajbangshi dialect and the construction of sentences are straight and simple. The lyrics are, however, much significant and are written on the basis of any kind of change taking place in

the society. No distinguishing features exist between the animate and inanimate characters. Few lines of such a 'Pala' are presented below:

Pala: Pumping sori (the pumping part of a deep tube well)
Pumping sori: Deeptubewellti jamon dada jal chechoner meching hay!
Amon ekti meching dada pade achhe
Diver (driver) bine maching dada kano na chale?
Engine Boudia: Kon machingtir diver pumping nahi ray!
Diver sabete dekha jay.
Kon machingtii diver bine pade achhe
Seta kiba naam tar, Ki kaje lage
Diver sabete dakha jay.

The dialogues are very similar to ones used in the lips of the famous fairy avian couple 'Bangoma-Bangomi' who were well known to all over the Bengal. The Palas are based on some significant attributes prevailing at a particular period in the society. The term Khan has most probably been derived from the conventional word 'kshan', meaning the moment which is very much appropriate for this reason. Brahmmsori, Dakaisori, Nayansori, Bostam Boudia, Dakosori are some of the famous Palas of Khan. The songs are simply accompanied by khol and kartal. Khan is very popular in the districts of Uttar and Dakshin Dinajpur, Maldah and adjacent parts of Bangladesh. Like other folk songs Khan Gaan is believed to be very old practice of this region dating back to some hundreds of years. Khan performers are mostly concentrated at Mahishbathan and surrounding areas of Kushmandi block. Here are the names of a few Khan artists: Ramani Sarkar, Japen Gosai, Behalu Sarkar, Nayanu Sarkar, Akulbala Sarkar, Gita Sarkar, Shashen Sarkar and Baidya Mahanta- all belonging to Rajbangshi community. Generally one pair of male and female artists takes part in the Khan Gaan.

Satyapeerer gaan: Satya peer is an icon derived from mixed culture of the Hindu and Islamic religions. The palas are created for describing the supernatural powers of a peer, i.e. the saint, which once had been used to recover some painful or dangerous situations experiencing by the villagers. The songs are sung normally in a soft voice accompanied with some simple indigenous instruments and may be performed throughout the year whenever it is arranged by the villagers. The origin of the song is comparatively recent and is being sung for about 400 years.

Folk song with dance:

Manasha mangal gaan: Manasha mangal gaan, often called 'Bishaharir gaan' is performed at the time of Manasha Puja held in early or middle part of the monsoon. The deity of Manasha (goddess) is worshipped as a precaution of snake-biting. So the lyrics or tales are sung in a Manasha mangal for the blessing of the said goddess. There is a wide variation in the tales as well as in their singing styles of Manasha mangal.

In Kushmandi area the mangal-song represents a special type of lyric basically collated from some parts of the mythical story 'Chand Sadagar': the most famous character fighting with Manasha devi until his old age. Normally seven to eleven persons participate in this type of Pala-gaan. In the smallest group there are one gayen (the main singer), two bayens (playing khole) with an extra (playing kartal), two chhokras (dancing with the song) and a last person playing just for fun. It is performed part by part during a period of three to four nights or wholly in a single night.

Folk Opera:

Halua and Haluani is the most famous folk opera of the Rajbangshi people. In Rajbangshi dialect 'Halua' is a person who tills the land and 'Haluani' is his life-partner. The opera is obviously based on the daily life of a farmer. This play represents the normal situations of a farmer's life, his sorrows, happiness and thinking about the other members of his family. The drama starts with halua going for tilling in early morning with the plough over his shoulder. Haluani carries panta bhat (rice kept in water, prepared in

previous day) for him to the field at noon. Halua shows his anger first for her delay and other problems regarding their family arise then one after another. Other members including Halua's brother come on the stage according to the structure of the tale. More or less five to six persons are required to perform the different characters of a play. Local dialect is used as a medium of communication and songs and dances are essential parts of this play.

Instruments used in folk songs and dances:

In most of the cases khole, kartal, sanai, flute, Dhank, kanshi are used as instruments. In Gomira dance dhank, kanshi and sanai are used. In khan and Manasha mangal palas khol, kartal and flute are used. All instruments are indigenous and no alien types are found to be used in these folk music.

Present problems:

Most of the folk artists are poor and consequently they cannot afford transport and accommodation costs which they have to bear for performing their palas outside the district. That is why the folk songs and dances discussed here are not being spread all over the country.

Future prospects:

In future, the Mahishbathan area can be transformed into a centre of cultural tourism. Various folk songs and dances might attract the tourists not only from within the country but also from abroad. Proper planning and development of infrastructure is required in this regard. The communication systems are to be developed. A large lodge is under construction at the Mahishbathan Gramin Hastasilpa Samabay samiti with the Governmental aids. If some other lodges on Ppp Model also appear, the villagers of whole area will be benefited. Income of the artists will increase which will have a positive impact on their lives as well as on their creations. New generations will also be interested to carry on the tradition of their folk forms.

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