

Aspects of the Cultural Heritage of the Rajbongshi Community in West Bengal: Kushan, Shaitol Bishohori & Shonarai



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Introduction to Rajbongshi culture

The Rajbongshis - a little history

The Rajbongshis, who belong to the Koch Rajbongshi umbrella, are an ethnic community spread across North Bengal, most of Assam, adjoining parts of Bihar, Meghalaya, Tripura, and parts of Bangladesh and Nepal. Controversies regarding their racial origin abound and whether the Rajbongshis are of Kshatriya descent (associated with the Raja) or the Koch tribe of Mongoloid origin is a moot point. However, it may be safely said that as a result of the influx of various races into the region over the course of time, and inter marriages between tribes, they are of mixed Tibeto Burman, Dravidian and Aryan ancestry.

The history of the Rajbongshi community starts from the medieval ages. In the 13th century, the western edge of the ancient Kamrup kingdom, gave way to the Kamatapur kingdom, which is now the plains of North Bengal and Western Assam. In the early 16th century, this region became the domain of the Koch dynasty. By the end of the century, with the death of the powerful king Naranarayan, the kingdom had broken up. The western portion, Koch Behar, became a vassal state under the Mughal Empire while the eastern portion, Koch Hajo was absorbed by the Ahom tribe and subsequently became the latter day Assam. The vastly diminished remnants of the Koch kingdom survived in the princely state of Cooch Bihar under British rule (which included parts of present day Bangladesh) and later in 1949, became a district of the same name in North Bengal.

Though originally animist, the Koches, during their rule, embraced Hinduism, with a liberal mix of Vaishnavism and Shaivism and scholars believe that they adopted the Hindu Kshatriya title of Rajbongshi ("of royal lineage") to signify their royal status. Both tribal and Brahmanic cultures began to co-exist and eventually synthesized.

Rajbongshi Culture and Language - a short overview

The hallmark of the Koch rule was the cultural development of the North east over which they held sway. The Koch kings were great patrons of education and literature, music and dance, art and architecture. Resulting from the wave of sanskritization that was initiated by the royals, a process of de-tribalization started. The Koch language gradually gave way to Bengali and Kamrupi and sanskritized culture was popularized among the masses

comprising newly Hinduized people and tribals through state sponsored translations into the new vernacular.

As a result, the spoken language of the Rajbongshis, ever since they became Hinduized, is a local dialect of Bengali which varies from region to region. Thus, for example, the Rajbongshi dialect in Cooch Behar varies from that of Jalpaiguri.

It is this rich heritage and culture, quite distinct from that of their Bengali and Assamese neighbours, that the Rajbongshis (who are mainly cultivators) and indeed all the traditional inhabitants of the region, have inherited.

Though the Rajbongshis today are predominantly Hindus, their ancient animist beliefs are reflected in their way of living, their cultural integrity and harmony with nature. It is reflected too in the expression of their folk arts - which depict a curious synthesis of animist, Shaivite, Vaishnav, Shakta, Buddhist and Tantrik beliefs.

Music, dance and drama are a very important part of Rajbongshi folk life, all of which can be traced back to their medieval origins. As with most folk communities, many of the songs and dances have their roots in traditional rituals. Other songs echo the Rajbongshi's oneness with nature, the trials and tribulations of their daily lives or the pangs of separation suffered by the lovesick individual. Ritual worship too was expressed with music, as in the songs worshipping Shaitol, Shonarai and so on. Many of the songs also lent themselves to folk drama. These dramas were mainly based on orally transmitted popular religious texts of the time like the Padma Purana or stories from the Ramayan and Mahabharat. Stories were related in the interactive "*pala-gaan*" style, through song and dialogue, accompanied by music and dance. Musical instruments, typical of the region, like the Dotara, the Sarinda, Mokha Banshi and Bena along with the percussion instruments like Dhol, Khol and Dhak played a vital role in all these performing art forms. The Kushan-gaan (Kushan pala) was a particular popular form of folk drama, prevalent within undivided Bengal, in the districts of Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri.

Rajbongshi Kshatriyas are not the only people who have been immersed in the local culture. Rural folks, be they non-Rajbongshi or Muslim even, who have lived in this land for generations together, have adopted the language and culture as well. For example, Naib Ali Tepu and Abbasuddin of Cooch Behar, renowned Bhawaiya singers of yesteryear were both Muslims. Participants in Kushan performances too have often been non-Rajbongshi.

Kushan pala

Overview

The Kushan folk theatre is a Ramayan-based folk drama which probably originated in the erstwhile Koch kingdom, an area that presently spans the northern parts of West Bengal, Assam and northern Bangladesh (former Greater Rangpur district). Though originally animist, the Koches, during their rule, embraced Hinduism, with a liberal mix of Vaishnavism and Shaivism and scholars believe that they adopted the Hindu Kshatriya title of Rajbongshi ("of royal lineage") to signify their royal status.

The Kushan tradition which existed over a large area, was adopted by many ethnic groups such as the Rajbongshi, Hajong, and the Koch. However, it is particularly associated with the Rajbongshi people, an ethnic community of mixed Dravidian, Aryan and Tibeto-Burman ancestry. Today the Kushan tradition, though diminished in the main, can still be seen in Cooch Behar in North Bengal, parts of Assam and Bangladesh. In Cooch Behar, in particular, the tradition was once so strong, that it permeated down to even other communities who have lived in the region for numerous generations. The absence of primary literary sources prevents us from determining the exact time of origin of this folk form, but according to oral sources and collective memory, Kushan has been an unbroken tradition since at least, the last five hundred years.

Kushan folk theatre, also known as Bena-Kushan, or more simply, Kushan pala or Kushan gaan, was based on a local form of the Ramayana, the Shapta Kando Ramayan (though Mahabharat based narrations were also introduced later). Shapta Kando Ramayana is the 14th century Assamese version of the Ramayana attributed to the poet Madhava Kandali. It is considered to be the first translation from the Sanskrit to a modern regional Indo-Aryan language. A particular feature of this work is the non-heroic portrayal of Rama, Sita, and other characters, which rendered the work unsuitable for religious purposes. Thus, there are no religious associations with Kushan and its performance is purely a form of entertainment. Kushan is traditionally performed seasonally, between September-October (Durga Puja) and March-April (Choitra Parab).

There are several schools of thought with regard to the etymology of the term Kushan. According to most popular version, one day, Sita, in the ashram of hermit Valmiki, had gone for a bath, leaving her young son, Lav, in the hermit's care. After a while, Valmiki noticed with consternation that the child was missing. Mortified at his own carelessness, he quickly

created a boy in Lav's image out of straw or "Kush" (Bengali) and infused life into it. Meanwhile, Sita returned from her bath, with Lav in tow and quickly assessing the situation, decided to keep both the boys. From then on, Sita had two sons - Lav and Kush.

Legend has it that Kush wandered around singing stories from the Ramayan and playing his veena, accompanied by Kush who provided rhythmic support. The Kushan folk tradition too comprises the narration of the Ramayan. It is for this reason that the chief singer and narrator in a Kushan performance always holds the primitive Bena (root: Beena/veena), made of bamboo. It has a social significance and determines the geedal's position in the hierarchy of the performers in Kushan theatre.



Baanshinath Dakua , a practising geedal, with his Bena

The Bena, an ancient fiddle like, single stringed, bowed instrument, is intrinsically associated with Kushan. Kushan and Bena are in fact, firmly intertwined. One cannot take place without the other. The tune and the rhythm of the Kushan songs are such that it is only the Bena which is a suitable accompaniment. The Bena is a chordophonic instrument which is roughly about 18" to 20" long, comprising a sound box, bamboo neck and wooden head. The sound box which used to be made with a hollow coconut shell has been substituted with the more readily available bamboo in most cases.

Tradition

Traditionally, Kushan Pala is an open-air folk drama where song, dance, narrative and dialogue come together. Kushan pala owes its origins to the narration of the Ramayan which became common among the rural folk of Bengal about 500 years ago. The family elders would sit around in the evenings either outside their homes or within and relate stories from the Ramayan - especially Sita's abduction. Gradually, these took on the form of folk dramas, with family members playing various mythical characters. At first these performances were simply "home productions" for the viewing pleasure of the family perhaps.

Later, it emerged as an open-air folk theatre, and soon became a popular form of entertainment for the village folk. It would be presented at the village centre by a local group, sponsored usually by the local landowner and would span several consecutive evenings. Stories were related in the interactive "pala-gaan" style, through song and dialogue in the local dialect, accompanied by music and dance. This was the standard entertainment in these villages in pre independence India and the form as a folk pala gaan thus became popular.

The performance would go on all night for seven nights at a stretch, from sundown to daybreak, until the entire narration of the ballads from the seven books of the Ramayan was completed. In the days of yore, the entire village would sit through these performances, as yet unhindered by modern entertainment or a more hectic pace of life. Later, as rural society began to change, the Shapto Kando Ramayan was divided into episodes and each night's performance, reduced to several hours, comprised the enactment of a single episode - for example, Rabon Badh, Sita Haran, etc.

In the past, Kushan folk dramas would take place in an open space under a canopy of leaves, framed by bamboo and held aloft by 4 posts. The space would be illuminated by flaming torches, and subsequently, by hurricane lanterns followed by petromax. The musicians sat in the middle, encircled by the performers, around whom the audience sat. The geedal, doari and chhokras would move around within this inner circle. With time, the performance space gradually started moving to the stage and by the nineties, the shift was permanent.

The players



Mahindra Barman , a popular geedal, with his Doari and Chhukris

The central player in a Kushan pala is the Geedal or Mool or Kushani. The geedal has to be well versed in the Ramayan and trained from an early age. He is the principal performer/narrator and leads the performance, weaving the main story together by narrating and singing the ballads, as well as interpreting and acting out the roles with help from the Doari, accompanying dancers, supporting singers and musicians. The geedal plays all the roles in a story, while the doari, who is the jester-cum-commentator, acts as a bridge between the audience and the geedal. It is presumed that the geedal represents Kush and the doari, Lav. The doari's role is to provide interesting interjections, often humorous, with song or dialogue and generally keep the audience involved. While the narration of the main story by the geedal is in standard Bengali, the doari, uses the local dialect, Rajbongshi or Rangpuri to interact with the audience or to elucidate further on their behalf. To ensure that the main narrative is understood by the audience, the geedal further uses simple dialogue with the doari, for the benefit of the audience. Whenever required, he also acts out the role of a character in the episode, in addition to the songs and dialogue. Thus, using a combination of song, dialogue, acting and dance, the story unravels - a fascinating package comprising humour, sorrow and entertainment to a rapt audience.

The dancers, at least four of them, were originally male dancers dressed as women - the Chhokra or Sokra, who have now been replaced by women or Chhukri/Sukri. While the geedal always plays the Bena folk instrument to accompany himself, the background music is provided by the musicians in the troupe, the Baiin. The backing vocalists are the Paail or chorus. In all, there are about 12-13 members in a Kushan troupe.

Earlier, the geedal would always be simply clothed in a short dhoti upto his knees and a "panjabi" (kurta), while the doari would wear a vest or "photua" and a knee length dhoti with a gamchha (towel) thrown over his shoulder. The chhokras/chhukris would be dressed colourfully in the traditional rajbongshi costume - patani with chandrarhar necklaces and other items of jewellery. But costumes are less traditional now. The dancers mostly wear saris today.

The structure

As with all pala gaan performances, the entire Kushan pala comprises primarily musical verse, interspersed with acting and dance. There are two distinctive parts: the invocation and the main body of the performance. The main performance adheres to the format typical of all rural folk theatre - songs in the Lachari, Poyar, Dhua and Khosha mode interpolated with dialogue and dance.

The Lachari/Nachari is a folk rhythmic structure suitable for dancing (root word lach or nach, meaning dance; literally, songs accompanied by dance). It is the tune sung in the Lachari mode that typifies Kushan. The main narrative, the story of the Ramayan, is to be sung in this tune and style.

All through the performance, there are musical interventions called Dhua songs, which may not have any relation at all to the main theme, but in which the main Kushan tune is held. Dhua songs are refrains or choral songs. This is usually a single line, a couplet, or a few lines. Dhua is an abbreviation of the word Dhruvapada - which means refrain or chorus. Thus the lyrics of the Dhua songs could vary from performance to performance, but the tune remains the same. The Lachari lyrics on the other hand, do not change, since they hold the main theme or narrative.

Interpolated with the narrative and chosen so that they fit into the theme of the preceding dialogue are the songs called Poyar. Poyar is a medieval 14 syllable prosodic metre which

developed in the 13th century and was popularized in the Mangal Kavyas. However, among the rural Kushan artists, the term refers to functionality rather than metre. The poyar songs sung here belong to the folk genres of the region and are usually bhawaiya tunes but may be kirtan based too.

A third kind of intervention involves singing popular folk songs or enacting short comic breaks, musical or otherwise, initiated by the doari. These songs are Khosha. The purpose of a Khosha was originally to provide some light hearted relief, when the interest of the audience is seen to be flagging. A Khosha could be a popular song or about a recent local event. The pace of the Khosha songs is usually quick and the mood, playful and humorous. Such songs are usually from the Chotka or Chalan genre of songs. The Khosha, though automatically incorporated into the performance these days, invariably lifts the mood of the audience and the main narrative then continues.

Traditionally, the Kushan pala performance began with the entrance of the musicians who seated themselves in the middle of the performance circle. They would start the performance with an overture. The chhokras or chhukris then entered dancing to the music. They would sing a Saraswati Bandona and then sit down. The Geedal would enter next and walk around the four posts holding the canopy, offering his prayers. The Doari would enter last and follow the Geedal's actions. They would then join the seated group in the centre. The Geedal would then pick up his bena, play some opening chords and the whole group would sing an invocation or Bandona.



This is known as the Ashor Bandona. It is usually an invocation to Lord Ram or sometimes, the goddess Saraswati and is considered to give the space and performance an auspicious start. Everyone in the group participates and this is traditionally performed with the players and musicians seated. Some performers, in recent times, and breaking away from tradition, stretch this segment further by singing several more Ashor Bandona songs by way of seeking divine blessings, introducing themselves and welcoming the audience. If there are performances over several consecutive days, then these songs are also varied.

The bandona is followed by the main introductory narrative in the Lachari mode. This is an introduction to the Shaptokando Ramayan through song and dialogue by the geedal and doari. Each book (kando) is described in some detail with the doari interjecting for the sake of the audience. As a result, this segment would take the greater part of an hour in earlier days. In the old days, the audience would understand the Ramayan through this process. These days however, it is only an abbreviated musical narration of the Shaptokando Ramayan that is presented.

Once the overview of the Ramayan has been shared with the audience, it is time for a specific episode to be enacted - the pala of the day. Sometimes, the Shaptokando narration is followed with a poyar after which the geedal and doari decide before the audience the episode they will perform. This narrative too is related through the singing of the specific ballad, interspersed with dialogue and acting by the geedal and doari and accompanied by dancing. On occasion, if the story requires it, and a third character is required, then a member from the paail fills in. All through, the doari offers cues to the geedal, or questions him, or emphasizes a word or phrase he has sung, all of which helps the audience understand better.

Woven in and out of the main narrative are the Dhua, Poyar and Khosha songs, to keep the pace going and whose functions have been explained above. Accompanying the songs, the chhokras or chhukris dance in rhythmic patterns. The dances are graceful and require the dancers to perform difficult steps with dexterity. One such step is the Adhai Pyaanch which is two rotations clock and anti clock wise and one half rotation clockwise after which the dancer sinks to the floor. Popular episodes include Sitaharan, Lakhon er Shoktishel, Ashwomedh Jogyo, Harishchandrer Daan and Ratnakar Doshyu.

Being fairly free formatted, it is upto the geedal to decide the duration, number of songs and the kind of songs (accent on humour or devotion), the extent of dialogue and action, depending on his analysis of audience taste and mood. Since organizers would hire Kushan

groups to perform for several nights at a stretch, it was up to the Geedal to make an accurate assessment of the nature of the audience on the first day. Thus, the duration could vary from three to four hours to an all night performance. The Geedal would ensure that there was enough variety to hold the interest of the audience. Even the bandonas would be varied for each performance.

It is to be noted that there seem to be some differences between information gathered in the field from performers from what has been described in earlier texts/research with regard to the format of these songs. Some performers met in Cooch Behar opined that songs related to the main narrative of Kushan are either Dhua or Poyaar; others maintained that Khosha and Poyaar are synonymous. This confusion may have something to do with the fact that the form being nearly extinct, these rural artists of Cooch Behar may have forgotten/or are unaware of these metrical concepts. However, irrespective of the terminology used, the main Kushan song is supposed to be sung in a particular style.



Musicians and the Doari . Khol, harmonium or flute and mondira are the minimum requirements

There are a number of instruments which may be used in a Kushan pala. In the olden days, it is said that there was just the khol and the bena. With time, numerous other instruments were added : aar banshi (bamboo flute) and a number of percussion instruments, principally

the akhrai (e.g., dholak) and mondira. The sarinja which was also used, was later replaced with the violin or the harmonium. Today, the synthesizer seems to have replaced the harmonium.

A particularly interesting feature of the Kushan pala is the Narok gaan. Narok is a competition between 2 rival groups of Kushan players who are performing a short distance away from each other, on perhaps a large field. Since the greater the size of the audience meant the greater victory, "spies" from each group would be assigned the charge of weaning away audiences. They did this by surreptitiously throwing a "magic" powder in the air and muttering a "goon mantró", near the rival's audience, which would immediately have the desired effect, it is said.

Performances

Because the Kushan pala had no associations with any religious rituals, it could be performed throughout the year for the entertainment of the masses. Stakeholders of the form in the past, performed out of a love for the form and those who could afford to, displayed a preference to focus on their art, even though they (or their families) may have owned some land. With music in their blood and a natural mode of expression in their agrarian lives, most Rajbongshi folk performing arts are not a hereditary occupation. It is not necessarily handed down from father to son. A Kushan performer's father need not have been associated with Kushan himself, but he or someone in his family would have been a musician.

Commerce did not enter the picture and the performer did not expect to earn from Kushan. They were happy enough to be fed and some cash to cover basic costs. Performances would last for only a couple of days each time, during rural fairs and there would be, for most performers, no more than 25-30 days of performance the entire year.

In the past, there was also a definite social hierarchy among the members, with the geedal being at the top, while the dancers were often looked down upon by society - to the extent that it would be difficult for them to find suitable brides. Gradually, after independence, social acceptability of most folk performers began to increase.

Social change

Further changes took place from the 1970s when the Left Front government came into power in West Bengal. Folk performing arts began to be officially encouraged. Whereas

previously they would be invited to perform only in their own villages, gradually Kushan performers began to be invited across the district for a fee. The geedals turned professional.

Today, the duration of a Kushan performance, which could go on for days, depends on the agreement between organizer and performer. A two day booking would mean performing two different episodes and the geedal ensures that there is no repetition from the previous day. The few Kushan troupes that exist are usually booked for over a straight month during the festive season, spanning multiple organizers. However, what is performed is a very diluted Kushan.

As with all other rural folk forms, the main threat to Kushan has been socio-economic change. According to oral sources, the rate of Kushan performances declined after the Independence. This was a result of the shifting modes of entertainment, rapid structural changes in rural society and the changing patterns of public interaction. The change has deepened in the last few decades, especially from the seventies. Attitudes and lifestyles have changed, borders between urban and rural have blurred and in the face of urbanization and globalisation, interest in traditional knowledge systems sparse.

Thus, when Jatra troupes came visiting from Kolkata with their loud, colourful, dazzling shows, the simple, rural Kushan format proved no match for such an adversary.

Kushan Jatra

Fighting to survive, some troupes began to introduce jatra elements while others simply withdrew from the art. There was a gradual demand for more varied entertainment and so the number of players in a Kushan pala started increasing. More actors were brought in to play the various roles; sometime the chhokras would also double as actors; there would be more dancing and more songs. But even in emulating the jatra, they could not hope to compare, because of the paucity of funds. Where there was residual interest, passion even, among the few remaining masters, there was no encouragement offered by the only available sponsor - the government. Added to their woes was of course ready-made entertainment from television. The final blow was the younger generation's lack of awareness and an absence of ownership or pride in their cultural heritage.



Scene from a Kushan jatra

Thus, traditional Kushan, caving in to modernization, changing tastes and popular demand, metamorphosed to Kushan Jatra. This period also marked a shift of the performance space from the ground to the stage. By the early 90s, the decline was complete.

The Kushan jatra fuses the Kushan and Jatra folk drama formats - usually an introductory piece in the simple Kushan format gives over to the dazzle, flamboyance and melodrama of a jatra performance on perhaps the same theme or maybe even something completely different. The Kushan pala gaan presentation has become practically extinct in West Bengal. As a result, most of the traditional songs and styles have been forgotten. What is practised today, if at all, is a highly abbreviated Kushan performance from the Shapto Kando Ramayan, extending from thirty minutes to an hour, followed by jatra, perhaps on the same Ramayan theme or any other unrelated historical or social theme. But in the main, there is no reference to the Ramayan even - just the invocation and a token nod to the Bena (which has been reduced to a prop) and the jatra begins. The organizers and the audience call the shots.



Kushan Jatra usually begins with the traditional "Ashor Bandona"

Conclusion

But even with Kushan Jatra, with practically no sustainable income from the form for its practitioners, who necessarily have to depend upon alternative employment, it certainly does not attract students from the younger generation. Besides, a Kushan group, inclusive of the jatra players, usually comprises 15 or 20 people. The entertainment they provide thus does not come cheap. This too impacts the demand and thus many groups have been forced to disband.

Further, governmental measures to "support" folk arts has unfortunately given rise to a class of "artists" who have jumped on to the bandwagon, without the relevant background/knowledge. This lends an additional threat to the propagation of the authentic form.

Renowned geedals of the past include Jhampura Geedal and Lalit Kushani. Today, there are just a handful of geedals in Cooch Behar and for the last decade or so, a few women geedalis have also started performing Kushan jatra. The male geedals interviewed said this placed them at a definite disadvantage, as far as modern audience tastes are concerned,

notwithstanding the fact that these ladies do not know how to play the Bena! These modern day Geedalis in Cooch Behar were not part of this documentation, since they have not received traditional training and therefore do not know the original Kushan songs.

While the form has undergone varying degrees of decline in Cooch Behar in North Bengal, at least one folklorist feels, that there is less evidence of decline in Lower Assam (undivided Goalpara) and parts of Bangladesh (erstwhile greater Rangpur). It was suggested that the remnants of the form in Assam, indicate that the Rajbongshi language used is more pristine, the dances more vigorous and varied. The Cooch Behar variant or what is left of it was probably influenced by the sanskritization that took place in the district in the early part of the 20th century and therefore shifted away from its original roots.

Observations from field survey

In Cooch Behar, among the artists met, even those who professed to adhere to the traditional "adi" form, it was observed that the singing style has changed drastically. Highly melodramatic dialogue delivery (in jatra style) overpowered the actual singing of the main story in some cases. The traditional Kushan tune was often replaced by other folk tunes, even for the main story. There are 3 main tunes that have prevailed in Cooch Behar - the Kushan pala tune, the Dotorā pala tune and the Bishohori pala tune. Naren Kushani opined that in many places during some of the Kushan performances documented, dotara pala tunes have been used.

Traditional Kushan Performers (Geedal)

Past Masters:

Late Basanta Gidal, Cooch Behar (died in 2002 or 2004)

Anecdote: Before partition, during the riots, Basanta Gidal's sang a song referring to Hindus and Muslims in Pabna (present day Bangladesh). He was arrested. But to prove his innocence, he insisted on singing his song in front of the Officer -in-Charge at the police station, who was persuaded that the song was indeed about unity. Thus Basanta was invited to perform at the jail grounds that very evening. The year was 1947.

Late Dugdhan Kushani, Cooch Behar

Anecdote: Dugdhan Kushani was one of the pioneers of Kushan - one of the few educated Kushanis - a matriculate. Dugdhan was famous for his portrayals of Ram or Ravan - when he spoke their parts, it would seem to the audience that he was the character himself.

Dugdhan would perform in the tea garden areas of Dhubri and Goalpara in addition to Cooch Behar. He had two doaris - Harikanto and Nariya. The latter was a muslim whose unfortunate thieving habits often found him behind bars. (He also happened to be Narendranath Roy's guru's guru.) Everytime Dugdhan had a show, he would "borrow" Nariya from jail, with permission from the Daroga of the jail. Nariya was also a tantric, who apparently could disappear at will and was often found missing from his cell!

Late Dharani Kushani, Cooch Behar

Late Meghlal Kushani, Cooch Behar

Late Jhampura Kushani, Cooch Behar, guru of Lalit Kushani, Dwijen Barman, Mahim Geedal, Baanshi Kushani, late Kartik Kushani & others

Late Lalit Kushani, Cooch Behar, guru of late Bhubaneswar Kushani, late Purna Kushani, Dhaneshwar Barman & others (based on a conversation with his widow, Chandrabati in November 2014)



Lalit Mohan Barman aka Lalit Kushani died in 2002 at the age of 72. Chandrabati who is now 60 was his second wife, whom he married when he was 20. At the time, Lalit was already a performer and a student of Jhampura Kushani, who lived in Rangapani (north of Gosanimari).

Though he had a little land, Lalit would perform all year and be at home only in the off season in during the monsoons. Rehearsals would take place in the Bengali month of Bhadro (August-September) and

performances would start by Ashwin (September-October) and continue right up to the beginning of Baishakh (April-May).

Lalit made his own Bena and also wrote several books. His Bena is made of coconut shell and has a steel string, while the bow has horsehair strings. This is now in the possession of his son, Benoy, who also performs with a Kushan group; but his books have been destroyed by insects. Several of Lalit's students had also made a name for themselves - but they have either died or have given up performing. Lalit was the recipient of numerous awards including the state's Lalon Purashkar in 2001, which he received shortly before his death.

Retired Kushanis:

Most of the senior surviving Kushanis, all of whom received authentic training, have either stopped performing altogether or have switched to other forms. A couple of these artists were approached.

***Naren Roy, Cooch Behar** (based on a conversation with Ramani Barma, since Naren Geedal refused to meet this interviewer)*

Naren Geedal, 81, used to be a master Kushani. Even now, this powerful performer can sing all night - though he only sings Bishohori songs these days. To him, the days of the Kushan pala are over. In his heydays as a Kushani, since well before Partition, he roamed the villages of (undivided) Cooch Behar performing all year long. There is probably no village in what was the princely state of Cooch Behar that he has not entertained as chhokra, doari or mool. Educated till Class III only, Naren now sings commercially.

Narendranath Roy

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Sixty year old Naren Kushani, son of Sukchand Roy was born in Gopalpur village. Unable to attend school beyond class VI, he joined a Kushan group started by his uncle, with the

blessings of his musician father, when he was fourteen years old. After a very short training



and committing to memory the drama Harishchandra from the Ramayan, Naren was made the mool of his group. He gave his first performance at the age of fifteen, but did not even know how to play the Bena at the time - he merely held it. Later he learnt to play the Bena and became famous as *Chyangra* (teenager) Geedal. The Doari who accompanied him was also in his teens. Naren's Bena was made by his guru.

Naren recalls that forty-five to fifty years ago, Kushan groups would be invited to perform at *Nabanna* celebrations or even at death anniversaries. They would not be paid anything but were happy to be just fed. As part of the village, they would have been invited anyway, but the performers took pleasure out of being able to entertain the village as well. The fact is that artists at that time performed out of a passion for the art, not the money.

Within his twelve years as Geedal of his group, Naren built himself an excellent reputation. But after he got married and moved to a nearby village, managing the group became difficult. As a result of professional jealousies and rivalries, a disheartened Naren gave up being a Kushani and disbanded his group. That was thirty-four years ago. He continued to participate sporadically in Kushan palas, though with a borrowed group. But, to his disappointment he found that that the Kushan tunes were not sung properly, indicating lack of training and knowledge.

Naren feels that barring a few tunes that are commonly sung, the major body of tunes that comprise a Kushan repertoire have been forgotten. According to him, present day Kushanis know no more than two to four songs and need a book to refer to and a mike as well! The old timers needed no such assistance and knew all their songs by heart.

Naren, who has three daughters and a son, works at a furniture shop as a wood carver. He continues to sing other folk songs like Bhawaiya, but at heart, he continues to be a Kushani.

Dwijendranath Barman

Village : Kesharibari, P.O: Dhumerkhata, P.S: Sitai, Cooch Behar 736167, W. Bengal

Phone : 9474518565



Seventy-three year old Dwijen Barman became a Kushani when he was twenty-eight and spent twenty-five years with his art. But twenty years ago, due to family problems and with the loss of his parents, he was forced to abandon his beloved Kushan. In order to support his family and provide for his children's education, he turned to cultivation.

His father, Phaguney Barman and his grandfather were folk singers of *Nimai Sanyas Pala Gaan* and *Bishohora* genres respectively. Dwijen used to sing *Dotra gaan* at first but later switched to Kushan. Dwijen trained under Jhampura Geedal for a couple of years and then formed his own group. He has had no students.

The group did not perform for monetary benefit nor did they treat their art as a profession. The entire group would be paid about Rs 1000-1500 per night, inclusive of costs and a small remuneration. They would be invited to perform for about 25 to 30 days in the entire year, which obviously could not sustain them and their families. Dwijen would depend on his father for financial support.

Dwijen does not know how to make a Bena; his own was made by his father, an instrument maker. Kushan is practically extinct, Dwijen feels - the Ramayana is not sung anymore and the Bena is held just for show and maybe, just a few notes played. Songs and tunes have changed. In his days, Kushan was still a pala gaan - not the jatra form it gradually became later. Though he witnessed a gradual move from the ground to the stage from about 1992 onwards, the change had already begun elsewhere from the seventies.

Some present day Artists:

Baanshinath Dakua (Baanshi Kushani)

Village : Chhoto Shalbari, P.O: Nagurhat, P.S : Boxirhat, Cooch Behar 736159, W.

Bengal

Phone : 9002505679



Born in 1955, Baanshi first heard Kushan and other folk songs from his father, Jogeshwar Kushani.

When he was in class III, he wished to give up his studies for music. He was eight years old then, and with his father's permission, he started learning from Dhano Kushani in the neighbouring village of Ullarkhawa. He also later trained under the master Kushani, Jhampura. He started as a chokra and was known as *Baanshi Chyangra*. He trained for

eight years and then started learning the Bena. Meanwhile, he also started performing in Dotra palas, but after a few years, decided to focus on Kushan. He was about 18 years old when he became renowned as Bachha Kushani.

Performances would go on for more than 40 hours - for which they would be fed (as much as they wanted), given gua-paan (shupari/ areca nut and betel leaf) and be paid a meagre Rs 5. Money was not the objective of the performers of those days - their art was their life.

Baanshi's children have refused to learn the art. They question the value of this art which has done nothing to improve the quality of their lives. But Baanshi pays no heed to his children - he will continue performing till he dies. He opines that though the teenagers want only the latest popular entertainment and film music, the older people in the village still want to hear the old Kushan songs.

In 1996, he participated in a district competition which also featured Lalit Kushani and stood first both in the Kushan and Dotra pala categories. Baanshi gets about 140-160 programs (nights) per year. Of the 28 people in his group, only 13 are involved in the Kushan - the rest

perform the jatra that is appended to each Kushan performance. The group earns between Rs 12000 to Rs 14000 each night.

Baanshi has performed around Cooch Behar, Assam, Jalpaiguri, Siliguri and Bihar. His Bena, which he had made himself, is about 40 years old. However Baanshi now calls on his neighbour, Santosh Dakua for any assistance his Bena may need. Baanshi just about makes do with his earnings from Kushan, sometimes supplementing it with farming work in the monsoons.

In Baanshi's opinion, there are only a handful of trained Kushanis currently practising across Cooch Behar. These include himself, Mahim and Dhaneshwar. Amongst the other Kushanis, there is no authentic training. The songs being sung are incorrect and according to him, the new women Kushanis get by only because they are better looking and sing reasonably well. The decline started from about the 1990s. Baanshi says that among the trained Kushanis, the songs have remained the same, but the presentation has changed.

Mahindra Barman

Village: Rangamati, P.O: Shibpur, P.S: Sitalkuchi, Cooch Behar 736172, W. Bengal

Phone : 7602369709



Encouraged by his father, Kalia Barman, a musician and harmonium player in a jatra group, a young Mahindra Barman began to train in Kushan songs, believing, as his father did, that it would bring him fame one day. His guru was the famous Jhampura Kushani of Gosanimari. Mahindra, better known as Mahim Geedal, is 61 years old and has been performing for almost 40 years with his group of 25-26 people.

According to him, the downslide of Kushan pala started when jatra groups from Kolkata began visiting North Bengal. When local audiences began to get a taste of this, they began

to clamour for more. The local folk dramas, could not possibly hope to compete against the costumes, lighting and glamour of the Kolkata jatra. In an attempt to cope, the length of the traditional performance was shortened to include a jatra add-on, to attract audiences.

However, he feels that even though it was shortened, attempts were made to retain its traditional character. But the main difference was that while in the old days, the Kushani and Doari between themselves carried the show, in its Kushan jatra form, actors in costume were introduced to play the parts of various characters. Generators were introduced for lighting and the action moved to the stage.

Yet, the Kushan jatra element, in Mahim's opinion, still does not draw enough crowds as it is a poor cousin to the glamour, spectacle and budgets of the Kolkata jatra. Therefore in his experience, people stay to watch the Kushan pala portion of one or one and a half hour duration, but often disperse after the jatra begins, which carries on through the night.

Mahim has taught several students, including Dhaneshwar Barman. He also performs other forms of folk music like Kobir Lorai, since the demand for Kushan has dwindled.

Shaitol Bishohori

Background: Manosha myth and worship

All folk ballads have their roots in primitive rituals and a discussion on the ritual songs of the female folk deity, Shaitol Bishohori necessitates a discussion on Manosha and the relation between the two.

The source area of the myth of Manosha, the serpent deity is in the jungles of north east of India, in what was once ancient Pragjyotish/Kamrup. These were matrilinear societies and the numerous folk deities that developed were mainly female. In the north east of India and North Bengal, the folk deity Bishohori is but another name for the serpent goddess Manosha who has reigned supreme for centuries. She is also known as Padmaboti, Marai, Chang Muri and Kani. Myths and rituals, two central components of religious practice, have flourished around her in these regions, the "ancestral homes" of these myths, so to speak. All the myths speak of Manosha's wrath, violence and wantonness in her desire to be worshipped by mankind and at the same time, her compassion and her regenerative powers.

The serpent-cult existed long before it became enmeshed with Shaivism and the Hindu pantheon. Worshipped in pre-Aryan times by tribes of the region, not only as a saviour from snake bites, but also as a symbol of fertility, the remnants of this culture and form of worship lingered on amidst the lowest castes of the Hindu hierarchy who mingled easily with the tribes even after the advent of Brahminisation. Primitive serpent goddess (though now in the form of Manosha) ritualism continues to this day among tribes like the Koch, Rabha, Garo, Bodo as well as the Rajbongshis.

Over time, Manosha became the subject of folk tales and folk ballads. By the 13th century or so, the popularity of the cult of the folk deity Manosha began to be perceived as a very real threat to Shaivism. The matter was resolved by assigning her a position in the Hindu pantheon as Shiva's daughter. Myths glorifying her followed and between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries, such oral practices led to the creation of the literary genre of the Mangal Kavyas (Mongol Kabbo), eulogizing folk deities like Chandi, Manosha or Dharma Thakur. The Mangal Kavya texts of Bengal are long narrative verses and researchers

believe that there are at least 58 versions of the Manosha Mangal that have been written by various poets. Though differing not only in style and language, in detail and technique, but also in the form of the myth they record, the basic story frame remained constant (Dimock). These latter day Manosha Mangal texts, synthesizing folk culture with Vedic culture, gave the Manosha story of the Puranas a Shaivite accent by creating a parallel lore with Manosha as a daughter of Shiva, born of his seed.

Chanting of the Manosha Mangal texts in tandem with non-Vedic ritualism became a plea for divine intervention by the common people for their well being and betterment as well as a charm against the ravage of snakes. These Manosha texts also became the basis of popular folk operas and dramas in the region and were known variously as Manosha Bhashan or Bishohora Gaan. Both as a ritual and as a performance practice, the trend continues in rural areas. The Manosha Mangal version primarily followed in Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri areas of North Bengal is that of the 18th century poet, Jagajjibon Ghoshal.



Shrine of goddess Bishohori in a Cooch Behar home

According to regional experts, three classifications of ritual chanting evolved on the basis of myths: The first was directly based on the text - the Manosha Bhashaan, the next was Shaitol Bishohori and the third, Cholonti Bishohori. Shaitol and Chalonti were the outcome of local myths - which held that Manosha, Shaitol and Cholonti were three sisters. Some myths further depicted Shaitol and Cholonti as being two forms of Neta, who was, variously, a close companion of Manosha/washerwoman of the gods/ Manosha's elder sister (Narayan Dev version 17th c) in the different versions of the Manosha fable. While Manosha Mangal songs have been traditionally sung only by men (as Bhashan gaan), and Cholonti songs as duets by men and women, it is strictly women who conduct the Shaitol Bishohori ritual and sing the songs through the night.

These myths finds acceptance in Jagajjiban Ghoshal's version as well: As Behula floated away with her dead husband, Lokhhindar, intent on reaching out to the gods to bring him back to life, she surreptitiously hangs an image of Manosha in the form of Shaitol in her home, so that her father-in-law, Chand Sadagar, a staunch Shaivite who strongly objected to Manosha worship, would not catch on. The songs of separation that Behula sang in adoration of Manosha as she sorrowfully floated down the Ganga are known as Cholonti songs, according to these myths.

Indeed Manosha was not only the preserver of mankind from the venom of snakes (Bishahara - destroyer of poison), but also a goddess of human fertility and prosperity during the 9th and 10th centuries, by virtue of being goddess of snakes. Recent researchers place Manosha more as a symbol of fertility rather than snakes.

Shaitol and her ritual

While the Manosha myth developed from the jungle areas of the north east of India, the myth of Shaitol, also related with fertility, evolved much later in an agrarian background in the region bordering ancient Pragjyotish and Gaur. These areas constituted Rangpur, Dinhata in the southern part of Cooch Behar and lower Assam. There was little or no evidence of Shaitol further north of these regions, where Manosha reigned supreme. Over the centuries,

there was a gradual merging of these two fertility related deities among the people who worshipped Shaitol.

Being a fertility rite among many Rajbongshis in Cooch Behar, the Shaitol Bishohori ritual is conducted either after a child's birth or at a rice eating ceremony of a child or on the eve of weddings, for the welfare of the baby or the bride and wellbeing of her future children.

The bearers and practitioners of the Shaitol/Shaitor Bishohori tradition are Rajbongshi women, especially the older women. The chief performer or the Geedali performs the ritual at the home of the family which has requested her services. Accompanying her are a chorus of women who sing and dance with her, and a few musicians, of whom, the Dhak player (male drummer) is most essential. It is usually from the Geedali that the others in the group have learnt the songs. There is no need for a priest to officiate. There is no fixed date for this ritual and it always takes place late in the evening, always ending at dawn.



Icon of Shaitol

The objects of the worship are not clay images, but abstract representations of Manosha (Bishohori) and Shaitol/r fashioned out of shola pith (sponge wood) made by local Shola pith artisans or Malakars. This representation of Bishohori is peculiar to this ritual alone.

Elsewhere, she either assumes an anthropomorphous form or is symbolized by a pot (Manoshar ghot).

Shaitol is worshipped in the form of a cage-like structure. It comprises an outer frame of concentric rings of shola pith, fitted within which are an inner frame of smaller shola rings, held together by a series of arches. Fitted into the space between the inner and outer ring at the base are five or more rings containing cylindrical forms painted with the supposed likeness of Shaitol. Suspended from the base are flowers made of shola pith. The whole structure is tied to the end of a bamboo pole and planted in the ground near the shrine.



Icon of Manosha in the foreground with characters from the Manasha Mangal story on 4 corners : Goda, Godani, Dhopa, Dhopani. Triangular object on the right also represents Manosha/Bishohori

A shola pith installation representing Bishohori is also placed at the same shrine (thaan). It is Bishohori who is propitiated first. The items needed for the ritual are chiefly incense, vermilion, banana, betel leaf (paan) and nut (supuri), egg, flattened rice (chirey) or popped

rice (khai), curd, flowers and Bel, Tulshi and Mango leaves. Essential too is the Dhak which accompanies the songs and dances, though other instruments may also be used in accompaniment.

It is believed that those who attend the ritual may seek a boon of fertility from the deity and should they receive her blessings, they in turn would be expected to hold a worship in Shaitol's honour. At the end of the ritual, the image of Bishohori is immersed, but Shaitol's image is kept back in the north facing "Baastu Ghar", which serves as the household shrine and storage room.



Preparing for the puja

There are divergent beliefs regarding Shaitol's origin and the various myths that have evolved are reflected in the songs that are sung in different regions of North Bengal and Cooch Behar in particular. Thus Shaitol or Shaitor or Shaiton or Shaitori Mao as she is variously called, means different things to different people, but the common denominator is that she stands for fertility.

Moreover, not all Rajbongshis practice Shaitol rituals since in the opinion of researchers, belief was limited primarily to erstwhile Rangpur district (in Bangladesh today) of undivided Bengal and neighbouring regions, including parts of Cooch Behar and Assam as already

mentioned. Thus the effect of Shaitol was limited only to the people who lived in that area. The ritual spread to other parts of North Bengal only as a result of migration.

There are many who identify Shaitol/r/n with Shoshti, the folk goddess of fertility and protector of children of pre Aryan origin, widely worshipped in South and East Bengal, and who was equated with Durga in the later Puranas. Shoshti has been traditionally worshipped on the 6th day after the birth of a child among the rural people. The lyrics in the version of the song sung by these people mention Shoshti, but strangely enough, not Shaitol. But while there is a similarity between Shaitol and Shoshti, with both being worshipped for the wellbeing of children, Shoshti has never been an object of Rajbongshi worship. Thus it can be argued that the assimilation of Shoshti into Shaitol belief must have been an outcome of migration. One of the singers interviewed mentioned that she clearly remembers that the shift from Shaitol to Shoshti in the lyrics happened around the time of Partition in 1947.

Those who call her Shaitor believe she is the elder sister of Manosha, otherwise known as Neta/Neto. Still others call her Shaiton and Shaitori Mao. Some believe that the root of the word Shaitol or Shaitor could be Shait, meaning 60 and Tor, which means a tower or turret,



relating to the tubular shapes within the Shaitol structure. This would mean that traditionally, the Shaitor/l form would have encased within it, 60 tubular structures. This would have made the structure huge and does not seem probable.

The link to Bishohori as in Shaitol-Bishohori is probably a result of assimilation. Some of the performers say that the Bishohori tag is given because the worship of Shaitol cannot take place unless Bishohori, the greater deity is also worshipped. Therefore both the name of the puja and song is a hyphenated term linking these two folk deities related with fertility. Moreover, among those who believe Shaitor to be Neta, there is

Shaitol returned to the Baastu Ghar after the puja

no question of not worshipping one without the other. One way or the other, both the deities are linked.

The songs



The renowned Phulti Geedali (seated) and her group perform

As is usual with folk performances, the Shaitol Bishohori ritual singing begins with an Ashor Bandona, invoking the blessings of deities for the performance to follow. Then follows a lyrical description of the creation or "Shijjan" of the objects required for ritual like vermilion, incense, flowers and so on and finally the story - which is usually that of a barren woman eventually blessed by Shaitol. The theme centres around the glory of Shaitol and the tunes are simple and usually tetratonic.

The stories in the songs differ widely, probably having developed from folk tales current in a particular region. 105 year old Phulti Geedali of Dinhata sings of the story of Lilaboti (Nilaboti), the youngest of 7 wives, who is the subject of rebuke and ridicule by her in mother-in-law on account of her barrenness. She is banned from entering the cowshed, the prayer room, the kitchen etc, for fear of contaminating these spaces. In despair, she takes permission to return to her parents. En route, she tries to end her life, but even wild animals will not touch her for fear of becoming tainted by her touch. She then tries to drown herself in

a lake but notices that the gods and goddesses have descended to the very same lake, for a pleasure trip. She enlists their help and it is finally Shaitol, referred to as Shoshti in the song, who grants her a boon. Shaitol returns home and eventually gives birth to twin boys, Dhanai and Manai and then arranges a puja for Shaitol Devi. The ballad ends with the birth of the twins.



Kanduri Barman (extreme right) and her group from Mathabhanga

While this is the gist of the story, the song fuses a variety of tales around her and also includes a description of the ritual, the objects required for it, the heavenly guests in attendance, Lilaboti's life, the way she does her hair, her pregnancy and so on. The song through its detailed narrative, reflects aspects of Rajbongshi life.

Phulti also spoke of Shaitol songs about a maiden called Kamala, which was what she learnt she first started singing these songs as a young girl.

In another version, the heroine is Sharonja, whose marriage is arranged by Shaitor, sister of Manosha to Srimanta Sadagar. There seems to be some confusion here as Srimanta Sadagar was a character in the Chandi Mangal and in no way related to the Manosha Mangal. It is to be noted that when the Kshatriyization of the Rajbongshis started in the

1920s, spearheaded by Panchanan Barman, many Rajbongshis started worshipping Chandi and Chandi related myths were gradually integrated into their culture

However, the rest of the story is reminiscent of the previous Lilaboti myth. But Sharonja forgets to worship Shaitor as agreed upon and is thus cursed with barrenness; she is, as in the previous Lilaboti story, then subjected to abuse and ridicule by her in laws. The folk tale veers off in a different direction, but peace and happiness prevail when Shaitol is worshipped.



After the worship, Shaitor is taken to the household shrine : Madhuri Barman of Borodanga and her team

In a third myth, Shaiton is an ordinary woman who conceived when she was blessed by Bishohori. Shaiton promised Bishohori that she would worship her when her twin sons got married. But she did not keep her promise, and her sons Lob and Kush died during the wedding festivities. They were later brought back to life by Bishohori and this is why Bishohori is worshipped during many Rajbongshi weddings.

Conclusion

The worship of the fertility deity Shaitol arose out of folk beliefs and myths that prevailed primarily among Rajbongshi cultivators in and around erstwhile Rangpur district. On the

other hand, the worship of Manosha or Bishohori as a fertility cult already had a strong presence among Rajbongshis across the jungles north of this region, covering much of what is North Bengal and Assam today. There were many legends that referred to Manosha's ability to grant children to childless women and over time, the myths around the lesser Shaitol merged with those of the reigning Manosha, with both sharing the same characteristics as giver of life and sustenance and the protector of children. This is probably the reason why, in addition to giving credence to the name of the ritual/song, Bishohori worship necessarily precedes that of Shaitol during a Shaitol Bishohori ritual.

In the Manosha myth, the goddess wished to be worshipped on earth and would wreak vengeance on anyone who refused to do so. In the same way, Shaitol, in the folk tales of Lilaboti or Shoronja, harboured similar hopes and administered curses on those who failed to do so.

Additionally, the fertility aspect in both Shaitol and Shoshti, a newer entrant as a result of migration, may have led to a fusion of the one with the other, depending upon the prevailing belief in the region.

The ritual Shaitol/r Bishohori does not have much currency today and is considered to be on its way out. Moreover, surviving practitioners of the ritual are not "performers" in the true sense of the word - they do it out of devotion, rather than the little money or goods they may receive for their services. With many of these practitioners being mainly ageing artistes, and with the decreasing interest in traditional knowledge systems of the young women of the villages, there has been no visible transference of the tradition. There is no "hook" for the younger lot. Thus its longevity is sorely threatened.

A few Shaitol Bishohori performers in Cooch Behar



Phulti Barman

Village & P.O: Putimari, Ps : Dinhata, Cooch Behar
736135

Contact : 9832062807 (Amulya Debnath)

The feisty Phulti Barman, who is about 105 years old, started performing as a folk singer in her early teens after her husband died. Accompanying her guru, Ichhey Barman who also lived in the same village, and already a young mother by then, she would travel around with the group. She sang many varieties of folk songs including Bishohori, Kati Puja and Shaitol Bishohori and would travel around with her group singing these songs all year.

She insists that nobody is interested in learning these songs anymore and is most dismissive of the abilities of her chorus these days. Other than her daughter, she has not taught anyone, because most girls were not interested in learning properly. Old and infirm, Phulti has lost none of her magnificent spirit and can give younger singers a run for their money.



Kanduri Barman

Village: Rangamati, P.O: Shibpur, P.S: Sitalkuchi, Cooch
Behar 736172, W. Bengal

Contact : 7602369709 (Mahim Geedal)

70 year Kanduri Barman, is a late bloomer. She used to help with the arrangements when other Shaitol puja geedalis used to visit her village and gradually developed an interest after listening to them. She began singing only about 8 years ago, having learnt from her guru, Rajbala Barman. Kanduri leads a group of ladies, Sarabala, Pushubala, Phulphuli, all of whom learnt from her. All of them find this a

good way to spend their time and are invited to perform at weddings and Annaprasans all year long.



Sarodini Barman

Village : Paschim Dewanhat, Moamari, P.O : Dewanhat

P.S : Kotwali, Cooch Behar 736134

Contact : 9832062807 (Amulya Debnath)

80 year old Sarodini Barman has been singing and dancing since she was 6 years, first as a dancer at Padmapuran performances and then as a singer, having trained under her paternal aunt. She went on to form her own group of seven musicians, including the dhak player who would usually be a renowned "dhakua" of the region.



Madhuri Barman

Village : Borodanga, P.O : Petla, P.S : Dinhata, Cooch Behar 736134

Phone : 8972857229

55 year old Madhuri is usually invited to sing Shaitol songs at annaprasans (rice eating ceremony) for the Shaitol puja. She is possibly the only singer in her locality who performs these songs. She does not have a group as such, but collects friends and neighbours to accompany her when there is a ritual to be performed. She has been singing for about 25 years.

Shonarai

Overview

Shonarai (or Sonaraya) is a male-centric folk ritual, now extinct, that used to be practised by cowherds and other young men of predominantly, the Rajbongshi community in Cooch Behar and adjoining areas in North Bengal and parts of Assam and present day Bangladesh.

Shonarai was believed to be a tiger deity with supernatural powers and the myths of Shonarai and his brother, Ruparai dominated vast areas of North Bengal, parts of Assam like Dhubri and Goalpara and parts of Bangladesh like Rangpur, Pabna and Rajshahi. The cult gradually developed into rituals accompanied by folk ballads called Shonarai-er gaan (songs on Shonarai). The rituals were performed to seek his protection for men and cattle from tigers, and to also obtain other boons and Shonarai as both protector of the fields and giver of prosperity was eulogized in ballads and worshipped by both Hindus and Muslims of the region. The name Shonarai was probably given because of the golden colour of the tiger. The independent worship of Ruparai is not known.

Until about twenty years ago or so, upto the penultimate day of the Bengali month of Poush (December-January), peasant-boys aged between 15 - 20 years, would go from house to house, singing the Shonarai folk-ballad and begging for money or grain with which to prepare a feast and bear the expenses of worshipping the deity Shonarai. The feast would take place on the following day, commonly known as Poush Sankranti and the "bhog" would be offered to Shonarai. In an earlier time, this would assuredly offer safety of their cattle.

Shonarai Thakur, as the deity was referred to, did not evoke any feelings of dread or reverence - instead it was likened to an occasion for merriment.

Origins

In India, the worship of tigers has prevailed since ancient times and the tiger especially has played an important part in rituals and folklore. In Bengal too, the tiger cult has prevailed, especially in tiger ravaged regions such as the Sunderbans in the Ganga delta and in the Terai region of North Bengal. Both these areas were thickly forested and therefore tigers

were a real threat. The tiger cult manifested itself as Dakshin Rai and later Bare Khan Gazi (who was worshipped by both Hindus and Muslims) in the Sunderbans (where the threat continues), as Baghai in erstwhile East Bengal and in North Bengal, as the tiger lord Shonarai. Ordinary people believed that tiger attacks could be warded off by propitiating the presiding deity of tigers, with offering of eatables etc.

In the forested areas of North Bengal and its neighboring regions, tiger lore, stemming from a fear of tigers, prevailed in abundance among the Indo Mongoloid tribes like the Bodos, Rabhas, Koch and Kochas. Such was the fear that among the Rajbongshis for instance, the very word tiger was taboo - it was instead referred to as "Buraar Beta" (the old man's son). As a result of such folklore and folk beliefs, tiger based rituals developed. In fact, many of the mounts (vahan) of folk gods of the region were tigers.

The practice of begging for alms with which to procure the offerings to be presented to certain deities was a form of the worship of the lesser gods and goddesses, most of whom are non-Aryan deities. Some researchers feel that the Shonarai cult may have evolved out of the Bodo practices of worshipping animal-deities and the custom of collecting alms by cowherd boys for the protection and well-being of the cattle.

The Ritual

The Shonarai ritual has been traditionally celebrated in the month of Poush (December-January), coinciding with the end of the winter harvest. Farmers and young cowherds are the main devotees, who would worship Shonarai in order to seek immunity from tiger attacks. However, over the centuries, as socio-economic changes developed and the tiger population reduced, they sought boons for prosperity instead.

In order to raise the funds required for the worship on the last day of Poush, a band of 10 to 15 young men would go from door to door singing songs in praise of Shonarai and begging for rice, pulses or money for the worship of the deity. This practice is called "magon". The group would sing and dance with the music, much to the enjoyment of the inmates of the houses they visited. Most of the songs were popular rhymes traditionally recited in the course of the alms-collecting rounds. There were songs blessing those who donated

willingly, with prosperity and there were also songs about the harming powers of Shonarai if defied and neglected.



A householder donating rice to the Shonarai singers



As a token of thanks, the group would present some flowers to the householder on the winnowing fan (*kulo*) from which the grain was given and return a few grains of rice as a symbolic act (image on left).

The timing, at the end of harvest, suggested that the young men could be sure of receiving a donation from each village home. Some of the dancers

would be men dressed as women (chhokras). The use of accompanying instruments varied

from village to village, but drums (khol) and cymbals would always be used. However, in the old days, in areas like Pabna (Bangladesh), musical instruments were not be used. A feast was arranged on the last day of Poush from the money and food collected and the "puja" would take place. The puja would be conducted after sundown, by any member of the group with chira, curd, milk and bananas. The assigned pujari would fast that day. The food cooked "bhog" was first offered to the deity for the safety of the cattle under the charge of the cowherds and then a small feast would be held. There was no fixed shrine dedicated to Shonarai.



Getting ready for the puja on the final day - Poush Sankranti

Icon of Shonarai

Shonarai is an anthropomorphic deity, as is evident from the ballads, but the visual representation of Shonarai has been varied. According to some, a few representations show a male form made of sholapith riding an animal that could be a tiger while some others

mention a gold painted male idol made of clay sitting astride two tigers - but these have probably been literal interpretations from the lyrics of the Shonarai ballads.



The traditional object of worship would be small flowers in seven colours made from jute fibre, along with a garland of marigolds attached to the top of a reed from a madhua or kash plant. Or these objects would be suspended from a split bamboo frame, mounted on a vertical bamboo rod which was carried around during the "magon" (alms-seeking trips). This would be planted in the ground during the puja.

The ballads

The songs have been passed down the generations orally. According to folklorist Sarat Chandra Mitra (1863-1938), who published several papers on Shonarai (Sonaraya) more than a century ago, there were several versions of the Shonarai ballad. One version of the folk-ballad of Shonarai of North Bengal embodies an account of the miraculous birth of the tiger-deity Shonarai and his brother Rugarai. Nanda, the cowherd of Gokula, and his wife Nandarani had no child of their own and that, therefore the latter worshipped the deity Dharma Thakur (whose worship was a fertility ritual) and prayed for a son. This deity granted her the boon. As the result of this, the deity Krishna, assuming the form of a white fly, entered her womb. After completing her period of pregnancy extending over ten months and ten days, she gave birth to the deity Shonarai and his brother Rugarai.

The ballad also records how Shonarai assumed the garb of a sannyasi and, having failed to satisfy some Mughal soldiers whom he met on the way that he was a holy man, was arrested by them and bound and thrown into prison. But at midnight, under his orders, his army of thirty crore (300 million) tigers appeared and they proceeded to slaughter the whole

Mughal army. At dawn, breaking his fetters, Shonarai escaped from the Mughal prison and crossing the river Yamuna, began to be worshipped by the people of this world.



Chhokras: male dancers dressed as women

According to Mitra, a second version of this folk ballad in this region, did not give any account of the birth of the tiger-deity Shonarai. It simply mentions that, while, on one occasion, this deity was walking about in the street, uttering the name of Hari, he was confronted by a band of Mughal soldiers who enquired of him as to who he was. But when Shonarai refused to respond to their queries, the Mughals arrested him and placing on his chest a massive stone weighing 22 maunds (1 maund= 38kgs), kept him confined in their prison-house. But, casting off the heavy stone by a miracle, he escaped from the Mughal prison-house. Discovering this, the Mughals hid themselves in seven houses. But, with a roar, Shonarai summoned his army of 2000 tigers to slaughter the whole Mughal army. Their wives and daughters too lost their lives in the ensuing panic. The Mughals surrendered

to the might of Shonarai and from that day onwards, people began to worship the tiger deity, Shonarai.

The songs of Shonarai that are still in public memory today in Cooch Behar, bears similarity with both these version.

Mitra also opined that where the ritual was performed by Muslims (in Pabna and Rajshahi districts of erstwhile East Bengal), Shonarai became Shonapir or Shonagazi and the songs would glorify a Muslim pir or saint. However Mitra concluded that the Muslim peasants who sang these songs to Shonapir may well have been recent Hindu converts who used to worship Shonarai earlier. Or perhaps, Muslims may have borrowed from their Hindu neighbours, indicative of a harmonious relationship and religious tolerance which among the local people. Thus Shonarai became Shonapir and it was probably expedient to transform him into a brother of another pir, Manik. The various versions of the ballads sung eulogised Shonarai as a pir and dealt with his greatness, his parentage and birth, his wedding, riddles asked of him in his wedding chamber and so on.

Gurusaday Datta too speaks of the tiger deity Shonarai worshipped by Hindus and Muslims alike in North Bengal. Many believe that these tiger lords were probably names of brave chieftains or feudal lords who were adored by their subjects in their lifetime. But even after their deaths, the adoration continued, now transformed as a ritual. Or they could have been virtuous mortals deified after death.

It is apparent that the Shonarai cult followed the manner of the various folk myths of medieval Bengal, like those of Manasa and Chandi, where the usual way adopted by the deities for manifesting their supremacy and propagating their own worship, was to subject particular people to terrible calamities, and then to restore happiness and prosperity on the distinct understanding that they should be worshipped. The deity Shonarai manifested his omnipotence to the people of Northern Bengal by ridding them, by means of a miracle, of the oppression by the Mughal soldiers on the peasantry of the countryside, at the time of the Mughal conquest of North Bengal in the 16th century.

The ballads of yore also give us an idea of the various superstitions and customs which were prevalent in medieval North Bengal. Being barren was considered to be so inauspicious that

the childless woman would be considered a pariah in every possible way. For instance, she and her husband would not be able to buy or sell in the market, nobody would drink the water of the river where she had bathed and even the birds would refuse to build their nests in the tree under which the childless Nanda had sat.

It would appear from the ballads that Shonarai's role was not for protection from tigers. Instead, he used the tigers to spread terror among those who defied him.

The full story of the ballad is as follows : In a cowshed, live a milkman and his wife, Nanda and Nandarani. Because Nandarani is barren, nobody in the village is willing to buy milk from her. Cattle won't drink water from the river where she bathes and birds wont nest on a tree, under which Nanda stands. Consumed with grief and frustration, Nanda decides to pray to Dharma Thakur. She begs Dharma for a son and threatens to take her life if he did not comply. Thus approached, Dharma agrees to grant her a boon. He gives her very specific directions. She was to bathe in the river at dawn, entering the water using the bad ghat (ku-ghat) and come out of the water using the clean or holy ghat (shu-ghat). A ghat refers to a series of steps leading down to a body of water. She was to then change into dry clothes. After meticulously following instructions, Nandarani was given a pair of fruits by Dharma, after consuming which, she became pregnant. In another version, Krishna enters her womb as a white fly. After ten months and ten days elapse, Shonari and Rugarai are born (there is no mention of the other brothers).

The villagers offer worship in honour of Shonarai and Rugarai and Shonarai is regarded as Krishna born to the house of Nanda. Meanwhile, tigers have been marauding the village and a group of villagers decide to start begging for alms for the worship of Shonarai. Thereupon, Shonarai, assuming the form of a Sanyasi, goes from house to house and runs into the invincible Moghuls, who mistaking him for a thief, rough him up and drag him to their den. It is nightfall by now, and Shonarai, bound and fettered, roars for his army of tigers and commands them to destroy the Moghul army. A new day dawns and Shonarai breaks free, crosses the Yamuna river and counts his tigers. All but the tiger Bedaripa are present. In this way, Shonarai reveals his true form to the world. All the boys sing his glory to householders, telling them the boons he would grant them so that their wealth increased, their family multiplied and there was no dearth in their granaries or their cattle pens.

Punctuating the ballads glorifying Shonarai, the men also sing what is known as Dhua gaan, songs on a separate subject entirely, to break the monotony. These songs were mostly popular rhymes or isolated couplets. The purpose of the most relevant rhymes was to urge people to donate generously for Shonarai in return for which the god would bless the donors with offspring, cattle, wealth and general prosperity, and also to remind them that refusal to give anything would bring upon them dire calamities apart from the misfortune of their cattle being devoured by tigers. At the end of the singing (magon) in each home, the householder (if willing) comes forth to donate money or foodgrains, which is placed in a sack that is always carried by a member of the group. The group now leaves for the next home.

Socio-cultural timeline

From the songs that were documented a hundred years ago and from the snippets that have survived in Cooch Behar, it is evident that there are parallel references to several cults : Dharma Thakur worship, Vaishnavism and Shonarai. Some people have also related the deity with Shiva, while still others say Shonarai is the admixture of both Shiva and Krishna.

It thus becomes necessary to map these ballads against the socio-cultural and religious changes that took place in the region. With the spread of Hinduization to Bengal from around the 6th or 7th century, many of the tribal inhabitants of North Bengal who were originally animist came under the influence of Shaivism. Thus by the time that Maharaja Bishwa Singha established the Koch dynasty in 16th century, Shaivism was already well entrenched among Rajbongshi, Koch, Bodo and Rabha societies of the time. (The terms *Rajbongshi* and *Kshatriya* came to be applied to the Koch people from the *sixteenth century onwards*). Bishwa Singha was known as the first Hindu Koch. Added to this was the syncretism that had developed between Shaivism and Buddhism in earlier centuries, resulting in Dharma Thakur worship, which must have spread upto North Bengal and its neighbouring regions. *Not unnaturally then*, Shonarai the folk god, which had initially developed from tiger lore, began to incorporate Shiva and Dharma Thakur lore.

Then came Krishna lore. According to some researchers, the attribution to Krishna came with the advent of Gaudiya Vaishnavism in North Bengal through Nityananda's disciples who

helped establish the faith in the region only about 200 years ago. Influenced by the upsurge of Vaishnavism, Shonarai now gradually became equated with the legend of Krishna in a society that had become increasingly agrarian, with a tiger as his mount.

Though the ritual is in the main extinct, at least one old timer spoke of it still being conducted on occasion, though most of the songs have been forgotten. Most others had not performed it for several decades. However, in the recent past, there have been some attempts to revive the songs through performances in country fairs etc. On such occasions, a young lad dressed as Krishna is made to stand near a clay model of a tiger.

Conclusion

Although it is impossible to ascertain the exact time when these folk-ballads were composed, it is possible that they were originally composed when Dharma-Thakur worship was prevalent in full vigour in Northern Bengal. (The Dharma Thakur cult, either a form of decayed Buddhism or some form of non Aryan worship has been traced back to the 9th or 10th centuries by some scholars). To substantiate this line of thought, is the fact that there is a 10th century rock cut statue of Shonarai in the ancient ruins of Gaur, bearing some similarity to Shiva. However, the reference to the Mughals in some of the ballads tells us that they could not have been composed before the 16th century. Moreover, Neo Vaishnavism in North Bengal too did not start before the end of the 16th century (Sankardev) and Gaudiya Vaishnavism, even later.

Since the ritual has been long abandoned - since the 1980s or so, what remains of these songs has depended completely on the memory of the villagers. Because local myths about saints and folk deities are pretty similar, some myths have fused with others over time. (In one village visited, the story of Shonarai's mother had elements of the story of Manik Pir's mother). There continues to be differing opinions of who Shonarai was and the many ballads and doggerels that remain in their memory reflect this. In some cases, he is no longer identified as a tiger god, but as a giver of prosperity and fertility, who rides a tiger as his mount (vahan). According to one old timer interviewed, Shonarai was a folk god of Cooch Behar, one of seven brothers, Rugarai, Manikrai, Tamak, Kansha, Heera and Mukta. He was

born on earth and men worshipped him to receive his blessings, for their welfare and happiness.

Where he is thought to be Krishna incarnate, the singers even perform the Shonarai ballads in Kirtan style. This may have to do with the fact that jungles were cleared long ago and there are no more tigers in the region.

Today, the Shonarai ritual is a practice of the past, but among the people who remember performing the ritual in their youth in Cooch Behar, the connect with Krishna is the strongest and the original relation with tiger lore is completely forgotten. Thus though the ritual is a relic from a previous animist time, the songs remembered today appear to reflect a more recent vintage.

A few Shonarai performers in Cooch Behar

While it is possible that several old timers around Cooch Behar remember snatches of the songs, I found two people who have been trying to keep this tradition alive by performing this ballad at local fairs, with a local group.



One is **Amulya Debnath**, who though not a performer himself, has striven to preserve the heritage of his district in many ways. Delving deep into the memories of his youth, and with the help of others who remembered the songs, Amulya has pieced together the lyrics of the ballad and arranges for Shonarai to be performed by his group, "Kaniyal Lokosanskriti Charcha O Gabeshona",
Village : Bhetaguri, P.O: Dinahata, Cooch Behar ,
Phone : 9832062807



Manmohan Barman used to sing the Magni songs of Shonarai in his youth. He now performs these songs at local fairs or programmes.

Village Bhareya, P.O : Baro Kodali, P.S : Boxirhat, Tufanganj,
Cooch Behar
Phone : 8972009673



Ramesh Chandra Barman and his group Nabin Sampradaya, last performed Shonarai about 15 years ago and do not perform these anymore. The songs they performed for us however did not bear similarity to the Shonarai tunes and were more in kirtan and other folk styles.

Village : Boro Sholmari, Dhaamer Haat, Dinahata, Cooch Behar
Contact : 9635302369 (Tapan Kumar Roy)

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