

Blueprint for
Documenting aspects of the Cultural Heritage of the Rajbongshi community in Cooch Behar
District, West Bengal (Their folk musical instrument - Bena or Byana)
under the Scheme Safeguarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage and Diverse Cultural Traditions
of India, sanctioned under Sanction Letter No: 28-6/ICH-Scheme/70/2013-14/13654,
Dated: 31st March, 2014.

BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Documenting aspects of the Cultural Heritage of the Rajbongshi community in Cooch Behar :

The folk musical instrument, Bena or Byana

The Rajbongshis, an ethnic community of Koch origin, have for centuries occupied the erstwhile Kamrup region which is now North Bengal and Western Assam. The Koches are non Aryan and Mongoloid in ethnicity. In the 16th century, some of them adopted Hinduism and became Rajbongshis (associated with the Raja). Later, led by a Kshatriyazation movement organized by Thakur Panchanan Barma in the early 20th century, in order to be accepted by upper class Bengalis, a Kshatriya link was claimed and Rajbongshis began to identify themselves as Kshatriya Rajbongshis.

Whether the Rajbongshis are of Kshatriya descent or the Koch tribe of Bodo origin is a moot point, but the Rajbongshi community has a rich heritage and culture inherited from the ancient Kamrup/Kamtapur civilizations. Their culture and language, is distinct from that of their Bengali and Assamese neighbours. The community has its own dialects and way of living and their cultural integrity and communal harmony is reflected in their unity and harmony with nature. The Rajbongshi community mainly spread across the districts of Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri and North and South Dinajpur in North Bengal is recognised as a scheduled caste.

The Rajbongshis are passionately fond of song and dance, sometimes singing and dancing to instrumental music all night long. Musical instruments are an intrinsic part of their rituals, social events like marriages and of course their performing arts.

For the purpose of this project, I have chosen to focus on, as part of the Cultural Heritage of the Rajbongshis in Cooch Behar, the folk instrument, Bena (Byana).

The Bena, a fiddle like, single stringed, ancient folk instrument is native to the culture of the Rajbongshis. Other than Cooch Behar, it is also used in Jalpaiguri and North and South Dinajpur, as well as in Assam and Manipur (where it is known as the Pena). But it is little known to the outside world.

The Bena has been traditionally used as an accompaniment for the Kushan folk drama but is today also used with several Rajbongshi performing arts like Bhawaiya, Monoshiksha, Madan Kaam and Bishohora as well as for folk drama like Dotra pala and Chor Churni. Yet, the practice of this simple instrument is said to be declining.

In Cooch Behar, some skilled Bena makers are to be found in the areas of Dinhata and Tufanganj. But their numbers are not many. There are also a few artisans in Maynaguri, Jalpaiguri.

About 18" long, the Bena is made of bamboo, a medium that is culturally very important in this region. The bamboo neck is fitted through a coconut shell or a wooden cup. The wider end of the cup is covered with animal skin, while the bottom end is hollow. A string is stretched from the tuning peg at the neck to the cup, passing over a bridge placed at the resonator. The instrument is played with a bow made of bamboo and usually, horse hair.

Documentation on this particular instrument has been minimal. Therefore a study needs to be done addressing the origin of this instrument, its evolution and where it stands today. There is also a need to examine the ethnic character of the Bena in relation to the ethnicity of the communities associated with its use.

OBJECTIVE

- Archive and Document this declining form on multimedia for *posterity* - both the craft and the performance
- Fulfill the purpose for which this project was undertaken, *by creating immediate awareness* about the Bena through the Daricha Foundation knowledge portal - www.daricha.org and thus encourage a revival of interest in the form and its practice.

IMPLEMENTATION

The project aims to :

- Study the background and origins of the Bena through interviews with artists and experts across several key villages in Cooch Behar. Both instrument makers and performers will be interviewed.
- Video/Audio/Still image documentation of performances and the various stages of crafting the instrument
- Create a database of the artists, both makers and performers, within the field area - containing contact details, short bio data, photos and awards won, if any.
- Identify masters of this art
- Initial investigation on at least one rare performing art form, associated with the Bena, for future reference.

TIMEFRAME:

The estimated time frame is September 2014 to December 2014

GEOGRAPHICAL AREA TO BE COVERED

Dinhata and Tufanganj regions in Cooch Behar district

PHOTOS

The Bena accompanying a Kushan performance

CONCLUSION

The folk arts of North Bengal, have so far, to some extent, managed to stay out of the clutches of urbanization, possibly because of its distance from West Bengal's capital. But this is the 21st century and globalization is THE mantra. Bena artisans and performing artists are declining. Therefore it is imperative that these arts be documented in their traditional forms before the winds of change blow harder.



Scheme for “Safeguarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage and Diverse Cultural Traditions of India”

Form for National Inventory Register of Intangible Cultural Heritage of India

A. Name of the State **WEST BENGAL**

B. Name of the Element/Cultural Tradition (in English) **BENA**

B.1. Name of the element in the language and script of the community
Concerned, if applicable **ব্যানা** (Bengali)

C. Name of the communities, groups or, if applicable, individuals concerned
(Identify clearly either of these concerned with the practice of the said
element/cultural tradition)

The Bena is traditionally used by two communities - the Rajbongshis and the Meities of Manipur. The Rajbongshis are spread across North Bengal, western Assam, Meghalaya and eastern parts of Bihar and the neighbouring countries of Bangladesh and Nepal. The Meiteis of Manipur have a similar instrument which they call the Pena and it plays a very important role in their culture - accompanying many of their rituals and their folk music. It continues to play a much larger role in their lives than the Bena does among the Rajbongshis.

D. Geographical location and range of the element/cultural tradition (Please write about the other states in which the said element/tradition is present)

The Bena is to be found in the northern districts of Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri (which has recently been bifurcated into Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar districts) in West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Bihar and also neighbouring countries like Bangladesh and Nepal. The Bena is traditionally an integral part of a Rajbongshi folk theatre called Kushan. However the Kushan tradition prevails only in North Bengal, Bangladesh and Assam. In the other Rajbongshi-centric regions, the Bena is used as an accompaniment to local folk songs or dances. The scope of this project is only the Bena used by the Rajbongshis of North Bengal and of Cooch Behar district in particular.

E. Identification and definition of the element/cultural tradition of the India

(Write “Yes” in one or more boxes to identify the domain(s) of intangible cultural heritage manifested by the element. If you tick ‘others’, specify the domain(s) in brackets.)

- i. (**YES**) oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage
- ii. (**YES**) performing arts
- iii. (**YES**) social practices, rituals and festive events
- iv. (**NO**) knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe
- v. (**YES**) traditional craftsmanship
- vi. other(s) ()

F. Provide a brief summary description of the element that can introduce it to readers who have never seen or experienced it:

The Bena, a fiddle-like, single stringed, primitive bowed folk instrument, is native to the culture of the Rajbongshis of North Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Bihar and also neighbouring countries like Bangladesh and Nepal. It is also an intrinsic part of the culture of the Meitei community of Manipur, who call it the Pena. But it is little known outside these regions .

Among the Rajbongshis, the Bena has been traditionally used as an accompaniment for the Kushan folk drama which is performed in North Bengal (Cooch Behar mainly and to some extent in Jalpaiguri), Assam and Bangladesh. The Kushan folk theatre, also known as the Bena-Kushan has been in evidence since the middle ages and is based on a 14th century adaptation of the Ramayana - the Saptakanda Ramayan- and is presented from the point of view of Lav and Kush, the children of Ram. It is narrated and sung in the local dialect purely as form of recreation for the public.

In other Rajbongshi centric regions, the Bena is used to accompany local folk songs. However, in more recent times in North Bengal, it is also being used as an accompaniment with several other Rajbongshi folk song forms like Bhawaiya, Monoshikkha, Madan Kaam and Bishohara as well as for folk drama like Dotra pala and Chor Churni.

About 18" long, the Bena is made of bamboo, a medium that is culturally very important in this region. The neck (*Daari*) made from bamboo is fitted to a squat tapering bamboo piece cut from the thick base of a bamboo. There is a lot of effort that goes into the cutting and carving of the bamboo cup, which is about 6 inches in diameter at the wider end. Sometimes, a coconut shell replaces the bamboo cup, because it is easier to make. This sound box is called the *Khol*. The wider end of the cup is covered with goat skin, while the bottom end is hollow. The skin is held in place with the help of strings (originally jute, now sometimes nylon) tightly criss-crossed between the two ends of the sound box.

The instrument is played with a bow (*Chhor*) made of bamboo and traditionally, horsehair (from the tail of a horse). However, due to the unavailability of horsehair, the stem of the single stemmed "*Bora Chakkar*" plant is being used for the last few decades. The stem is cut and then soaked in water for 10-12 days. When the stem ferments and softens, it disintegrates into long hair like fibres which are extracted. Several strands of

these fibres are then used to form the string of the bow. The string is stretched from the tuning peg (*Kaan*) at the neck to the cup, passing over a bridge (*Ghora*) placed at the resonator.

Both the Bena and Kushan folk theatre are quickly becoming practically extinct in West Bengal.

- G. Who are the bearers and practitioners of the element/Cultural Traditions? Are there any specific roles or categories of persons with special responsibilities for the practice and transmission of it? If yes, who are they and what are their responsibilities?

In the Kushan folk theatre, it is the chief actor and performer, the Kushani or the Geedal who is the practitioner and sometimes also the composer. He plays the Bena and is the narrator and chief vocalist as well.

However the Kushani is the owner of his own Bena. He does not need a new Bena unless he needs to replace it or change the skin and he sometimes fashions his own instrument.

With interest in both Kushan and the Bena having waned in West Bengal, Bena makers (of North Bengal) are now very few in number. In Cooch Behar, some skilled Bena makers are to be found mainly in the areas of Dinhata and Tufanganj. There are also a few artisans in Maynaguri, Jalpaiguri. Since this is hardly a profitable occupation, most of the artisans are usually poor farmers, who are also part time wood carvers. They make their Benas more out of a love for the instrument and a desperate need to uphold this tradition and with it, their sense of identity.

The fact that in recent times, the Bena is also being used to accompany other varieties of Rajbongshi folk songs probably offers some respite to Bena makers and newer opportunities to performers.

- H. How are the knowledge and skills related to the element transmitted today?

Bena practitioners of North Bengal usually belonged to a hereditary line of Kushanis while the Bena artisans have been usually woodwork artists, some of whom also carve masks which are used in Kushan theatre. While wood carving may sometimes be a hereditary occupation, they do not necessarily follow a family legacy in Bena making. Besides, Bena making was never their sole occupation - it had to be invariably supplemented by farming.

Today the scene has changed drastically in North Bengal. There are only a few Kushan groups left. Most of the old master Kushanis are dead and the few masters remaining have mostly given up their tradition because it is no longer popular and thus there is no demand. There is neither interest nor enthusiasm among the younger generation to learn the skills. Moreover, a few masters opine that among the few groups still practising, the

traditional tunes (Sur), beats (Taal) and even themes are sometimes dispensed with - sacrificed at the altar of modernization. They further claim that some Kushanis do not even possess proper training in the original tradition and often put together a show from the little they have observed in the name of upholding tradition and for the sake of some remuneration.

This dilution of the traditional form is possibly best exemplified by a new phenomenon that is being witnessed: A few people from non Rajbongshi communities are making the Bena commercially for the use of newly created Kushan groups, who again are not members of the Rajbongshi community. It is not known whether such initiatives have arisen out of a genuine love of the form by people outside the community or as an opportunity to take advantage of the remuneration that the government offers to folk artists.

Transmission of skills therefore has to be the responsibility of society at large and the government if the ancient Bena and its performance is to be saved in North Bengal. Some attempt towards this has been made by local universities like the North Bengal University, where both master makers and performers are invited to demonstrate or workshop. Such seminars are often their only ray of hope. But dissemination in academia is not enough. The need of the hour is to revitalize the form through proper training and greater opportunities to perform.

- I. What social functions and cultural meanings do the element/cultural tradition have today for its community?

The Kushan folk theatre, also known as the Bena-Kushan is the local form of the Ramayana and sung in the local dialect. Purely a form of entertainment, it is traditionally performed between September-October (Durga Puja) and March-April (Choitra Parab) - which is high season for all forms of folk performances. There are no religious associations with Kushan and with it, the Bena (unlike in Manipur) and this in a way has impacted its demand.

- J. Is there any part of the element that is not compatible with existing international human rights instruments or with the requirement of mutual respect among communities, groups and individuals, or with sustainable development? I.e. describe any aspect of the element/cultural tradition that may be unacceptable to Law of the country or may be in opposition to practicing community's harmony with others. **N/A**

- K. Your Project's contribution to ensuring visibility, awareness and encouraging dialogue related to the element/cultural tradition

Documentation on this particular instrument has been minimal, with respect to West Bengal. Therefore this project will address the origin of this instrument, its evolution and where it stands today. It will also examine the ethnic character of the Bena in relation to the ethnicity of the communities associated with its use. The documentation will include both Bena makers and performers. This will then be put up on the knowledge portal www.daricha.org, whose objective is to create visibility and awareness of folk and tribal

arts online. This will include Video/Audio/Still image documentation of performances and the various stages of crafting the instrument along with a database of the artists, both makers and performers, the few that remain, within the field area - containing contact details, short bio data, photos and awards won, if any.

L. Information about the safeguarding measures that may protect or promote the element/cultural tradition

a. (Write "Yes" in one or more boxes to identify the safeguarding measures that have been and are currently being taken by the communities, groups or individuals concerned)

- i. () transmission, particularly through formal and non-formal education
- ii. () identification, documentation, research
- iii. () preservation, protection
- iv. () promotion, enhancement
- v. () revitalization

b. Write about the measures taken at local, state and national level by the Authorities to safeguard the element/cultural tradition?

National Museum for Performing Arts had organized a Bena workshop at their North East Centre in Guwahati as part of a training program for rare musical instruments under Guru Shishya Parampara in 2011-12. But what is required is continued activity in North Bengal. Local colleges, universities and organizations attempt to keep the flag flying by organising seminars and conferences in North Bengal from time to time - where Bena makers and performers are invited. Such academic activities offer some succour to the practitioners, but this not enough to revitalize.

On the other hand, the Pena of Manipur and the Kushan of Assam have received government attention in the form of training programmes, festivals and seminars.

M. Write about the threats, if any, to the element/cultural tradition related to its practice, visibility and future longevity. Give facts and relevant reasons based on the current scenario.

In the past, the Kushan being strictly a form of local entertainment, would be presented at the village centre by a local group, sponsored usually by the local landowner during the festive season. As with all other rural folk forms, the main threat to the Bena and the Kushan has been socio-economic change. 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. And there is of course ready-made entertainment from television.

Added to this is the younger generation's lack of awareness about and therefore an absence of ownership or pride in their cultural heritage. Where there is residual interest, passion even, among the few remaining masters, there is barely any encouragement offered by the only available sponsor today - the government. 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 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. The importance of the Bena has thus reduced even further.

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 authenticity of the form.

Safeguarding measures proposed

(This section should identify and describe safeguarding measures to protect and promote the element/cultural tradition. Such measures should be concrete and can be implemented to formulate future cultural policy for safeguarding and promoting the element/cultural tradition in the state)

TRAINING: To ensure speedy transmission of learning, urgently set in place a structured, long term training program by creating an infrastructure in the region, a sort of a Gurukul, where experts from within the community will train students, both in the making and performance of the Bena. The experts should be masters of the art, who have been recognised by the community as such and are held in high esteem. This is a dying breed where the Bena is concerned and therefore urgent documentation and conservation is the need of the hour. Students from within the community will have to be screened and also encouraged through stipends. Such a system already exists - but the Bena of North Bengal does not fall within its scope as yet. Moreover, the current system supports a Guru and his students for only a year. This is self defeating for the art itself. The process must be on going, even if the Guru/students change.

AWARENESS CREATION: Stimulate the form through interaction between the scholar-researcher-performer-maker-NGO through on-site symposiums/seminars (at local schools/colleges) - so that researchers, scholars etc would be able to update themselves on developments or problems faced by the practitioners which would have to be highlighted/resolved. A day should be set aside for demonstrations and performances - a kind of Bena Kushan Awareness Fair, where the public would be invited. Benas could be made available for sale, possibly along with other folk instruments of North Bengal (just the way musical instruments of the Bauls - Ektara, Khamak etc have been popularised). The conditions laid down by the organisers should be strict - only performances that are authentic and follow the traditional norms of Kushan would be encouraged. Opportunities

for performances should be rotated among all practitioners within a year. The event should take place twice a year - the idea being to give a thrust to visibility and condition the local public and the Rajbongshi community in particular, to associate Bena-Kushan revival with a specific time of the year. In response to the raised levels of activity, a sense of expectation, of being "wanted" would restore the practitioners' sense of identity. It would also simultaneously engender a sense of continuity among the younger Rajbongshis and revive interest and pride in their cultural heritage. Such programmes should receive govt funding and also be monitored by a panel of experts from the community.

Simultaneously, organise academic seminars/workshops in urban spaces for even wider dissemination.

SUSTENANCE : Provide financial assistance to impoverished senior artists (above 50); provide some measure of financial security and regular opportunities to trained artists so that they are encouraged to take up the art seriously.

DOCUMENT: Since these are oral traditions, and there are only a finite number of traditional themes, document each performance both on video and print, along with song lyrics and notations.

N. Community Participation

(Write about the participation of communities, groups and individuals related to the element/cultural tradition in formulation of your project)

The first fact that has emerged from the project, is that there are very few Bena makers and performers left in North Bengal. The Rajbongshis I spoke to - academics, experts, practitioners - all agreed on this. What also emerged was that the senior practitioners continue to stay with their art - not as a "peshha" (occupation) but as a "nesha" (addiction). It is this passion that motivates them to not give up - even though this alone cannot sustain them. Some of these people do not even have Artist ID cards given by the government. Yet they are constantly on the lookout to teach interested students or perform. I came across a young Bena maker who learnt the art from his father. Too poor to afford a mobile phone even, (he is a daily wage earner) he continues to make Benas in the hope of recognition and sustenance from his art.

Well aware of their plight, academics and folklorists from the community organise seminars where their participation is sought - in the hope of bringing to light the crisis that stares the Bena in the face.

It is both the despair and hope of the Bena makers and performers that is the driving force behind this project.

- O. Concerned community organization(s) or representative(s)
(Provide detailed contact information for each community organization or representative or other non-governmental organization that is concerned with the element such as associations, organizations, clubs, guilds, steering committees, etc.)
- i. Name of the entity: **Dr Dipak Kr Roy**
 - ii. Name and title of the contact person: **Asst Professor, University of North Bengal**
 - iii. Address: **Department of Bengali, University of North Bengal, Siliguri, Darjeeling district, West Bengal**
 - iv. Telephone number: **+91 9474903746**
 - v. E-mail: **dkroynbu@gmail.com**
 - vi. Other relevant information : **Dr Dipak Roy is a renowned folklorist and linguist specialising in North Bengal and North East India.**
- P. Give information of any Inventory, database or data creation centre (local/state/national) that you may be aware of or of any office, agency, organisation or body involved in the maintenance of the said inventory etc.
none known
- Q. Principal published references or documentation available on the element/cultural tradition
(Books, articles, audio-visual materials, names and addresses of reference libraries, museums, private endeavours of artistes/individuals for preservation of the said element, publications or websites)

- **There are no specific books or articles dedicated to the subject in either English or Bengali. A short note on Bena is to be found in The Rajbansis of North Bengal by Charu Chandra Sanyal , (pub . Asiatic Society, 1965) .**
- **The Akshaya Kumar Maitreya Heritage Museum, University of North Bengal, Siliguri, Darjeeling district, West Bengal has a small collection of Benas.**
- **There is a project currently in progress to research and document the Bena of North Bengal for the web portal www.daricha.org**

Signature: 

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Aspects of the Cultural Heritage of the Rajbongshis in Cooch Behar, West Bengal : The Bena folk instrument



A Project under the "Scheme for Safeguarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage and Diverse Cultural Traditions of India" / 2013-14 / Ministry of Culture / Government of India

Grantee & Project Investigator : Ratnaboli Bose

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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. Religious worship too was expressed with music. 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.

The Bena and Kushan in Rajbongshi culture



The Bena, a primitive single string folk instrument of the Rajbongshis of North Bengal and its surrounds

The Kushan Pala is an open-air folk drama where song, dance, narrative and dialogue come together. Kushan 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 characters. At first these performances were simply "home productions" for the viewing pleasure of the family perhaps. Later, these began to be performed outside the home; even later costumes were added and eventually began to be performed at the village center, perhaps in front of the local temple. The form as a folk pala gaan thus became popular.

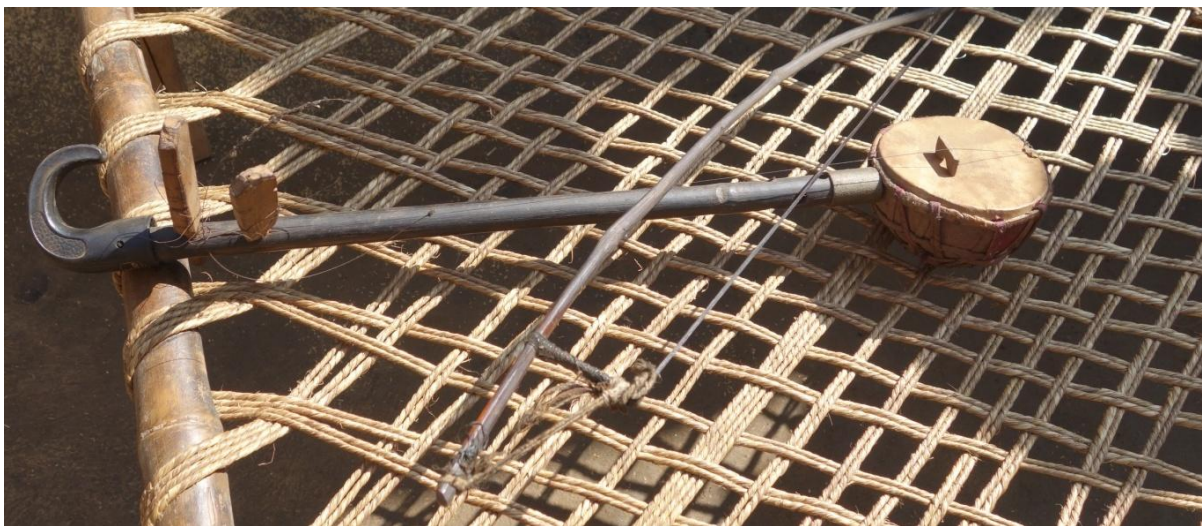
Intrinsically associated with Kushan performances is an ancient fiddle like, single stringed, bowed instrument, the **Bena**. Kushan and Bena are in fact, firmly intertwined. One cannot take place without the other. The tune and the rhythm of the Kushan songs are such that it is only the Bena which is a suitable accompaniment.

The Rajbongshis believe that the origin of the word Kushan is from *Kush*, or straw, that was brought to life by sage Valmiki, in the form of the second son of Ram. It is believed that Lav and Kush, the sons of Ram, would wander around singing the ballads from the Ramayan as taught by their guru, the sage Valmiki, with Kush playing the Bena and Lav accompanying him on a drum. This they believe is the reason why the Bena has been traditionally used as an accompaniment for Kushan Pala. The instrument is constantly held by the principal

storyteller, known as *Geedal* or *Mool* or *Kushani*, who accompanies himself on the instrument as he sings.

The name Bena is possibly a corruption of the word Veena (Beena) in North Bengal - which is mentioned in the Ramayan and other ancient texts. Though the Veena is a plucked instrument, the word was probably a local generic for any stringed instrument, whether bowed or plucked.

The Bena is little known to the outside world, though a variant is to be found in Manipur, where it is known as the Pena. There also seems to be a similarity with the Huka Banam of the Santals.



Huka Banam of the Santals is a two stringed instrument, with a coconut shell resonator

The central character in a Kushan pala is the Geedal or narrator. He leads the performance, weaving the plots and sub plots together by narrating, interpreting, singing, acting with help from the Doari (who mostly provides comic relief), accompanying dancers (male *chhokras* later replaced by female *chhukris*) and musicians. As in all folk performances, Kushan pala is characterised by choric elucidation of the narration and interactions with the audience. The Doari's role would be to provide interesting interjections, often humorous, with song or dialogue and generally keep the audience involved. Thus the whole act would proceed - a fascinating package comprising humour, sorrow and entertainment to a rapt audience. If the audience did not understand the Geedal, (perhaps because of the difficult language), the acting would further elucidate his meaning.

Performances would go on all night, with just the Kushani playing all the roles. But gradually, the audience started demanding more entertainment and so the number of players started increasing. So more actors were brought in to play the various roles; sometime the chhokras

would also double as actors. Unfortunately, the form has undergone varying degrees of decline in the area of its birth



Kushan Jatra being enacted on a Kolkata stage: Benoy Barman, the Kushani accompanied by Chhukris (female dancers)

in the last few decades - Cooch Behar in North Bengal, West Assam (undivided Goalpara) and parts of Bangladesh (erstwhile greater Rangpur). In recent times - no more than 10 years ago - a trend of women Kushanis has also begun.

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. Similarly, Bena makers have espoused their art, either out of an established proficiency in carving wood or bamboo or a love for music or both. Thus many instrument makers are often referred to as carpenters (*mistris*). But, the curious thing about the Bena is that, in spite of commercialization and unlike other folk instruments, it is rarely sold. It is usually made at the request of someone who requires a Bena. Thus there are no artisans who specialize in Bena making alone. In addition, Bena making is not confined to artisans alone. There are many Kushanis who have made their own Benas.

Because the Kushan pala had no associations with any seasonal religious rituals, it could be performed throughout the year for the entertainment of the masses. Stakeholders of the form fifty years ago or more, performed out of a passion for the arts and those who could afford to, displayed a preference to depend on their art, even though they (or their families) may have owned some land. Commerce did not enter the picture and they did not expect to earn from their art. They were happy enough to be fed and some cash to cover basic costs. This of course did not extend to Bena makers, who being mostly cultivators, could not depend upon their art alone.

Things began to change 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. But, with commercialization, the form too gradually debased into what is now known as Kushan Jatra. Also, Bhawaiya was popularized and commercialized at the cost of Kushan, Shonarai and other folk forms.

As a token nod to past tradition, most Kushan performances today start with the *Ashor Bandona* (ritualistic inauguration of the performance space) and a short performance before giving over to the Jatra. Though the Bena continues to be held by the Mool for the duration of the traditional component of the performance, it has become at best, an essential prop. The other musical instruments also have also expanded in variety.

With the gradual disintegration of the form, traditional knowledge is disappearing. This applies not only to the Kushan songs, but also to the Bena. Not every Geedal is able to or sees the need to pick out a proper tune. Some use it as a kind of rhythmic accompaniment, not necessarily in sync with the song being sung, while recent Geedals, like the handful of female geedals today, do not even know how to play the Bena.

Making of the Bena

Owing to the abundance of many varieties of bamboo in the richly bio-diverse region of North Bengal, this "poor man's timber" is an intrinsic part of rural Rajbongshi lives. The native of this region is a born artist in bamboo and wickerwork. Almost every article of daily use is manufactured from bamboo, which largely replaces wood. The simple Bena has traditionally been fashioned almost entirely out of this readily available material. However,

the key word being availability, it has been observed during the course of this small survey, that whatever material available was used, as long as it served the purpose.

The Bena is a chordophonic instrument which is roughly about 18" to 20" long, has three main sections: the sound box or resonator (*khol or mala*), neck (*daari*) and head (*muroli*), the last generally being carved from wood.

The Resonator



The stump of the Baro Bnaash bamboo is used for the sound box

Traditionally, the sound box is made from the stump of a larger, tougher variety of bamboo known locally as *Baro Bnaash* (bnaash being the Bengali term for bamboo). After the bamboo is felled, it has to be allowed to dry out under the sun for at least 20 days before work can begin. Once the bamboo is ready for use, the process of crafting the Bena takes less than a week.

A prescribed length, normally the horizontal span of the player's fist, has to be sawed off from the stump. The outer skin of the bamboo piece is then carefully shaved with a sharp knife (*dao*) to reveal the woody interior. The slightly tapered segment is then hollowed out from the wider end (*mukh*) with a chisel, leaving a narrow rim. This end is about 3" in diameter and the bottom about 1.5". It is later sandpapered so that it resembles wood. Sometimes it may also be painted for a better finish. The process takes several days as the bamboo needs to dry and harden at each step.



The Baro Bnaash bamboo is allowed to dry for 15-20 days before work can begin



Carving the sound box



Hollowing out the sound box

The crafting of the bamboo sound box is arduous, given the hardness of the Baro Bnaash root, and thus coconut shell became an acceptable substitute. In recent times, wood from

Neem and *Gamar* (*Gmelina Arborea*) trees have been easier, less cumbersome substitutes. At least one case of a metal sound box too has been observed.



Fitting the membrane

The membrane (*chhauni*) used for the resonator is monitor lizard (*gui shaap*) skin, though this has gradually given way to skin of a female goat, ever since the Indian monitor lizard was declared an endangered species in 1972. Monitor lizard skin lasts much longer and its vibration is very different, being finer than goatskin.

The moistened membrane is stretched taut across and its edges firmly tucked into a narrow bamboo or jute circlet (*kundi or peshta*) that exactly fits the top rim of the frame. This framed membrane is then pushed firmly down over the top rim of the sound box. The bottom end remains hollow, but is also fitted tightly with a bamboo circlet.

At first a length of twine is tied around the sound box and the two frames to hold them in position. Seven or nine miniscule holes are then made on the skin along the inside edge of the top frame. Through these holes, the two frames are laced together with a *doaal* which is traditionally a length of thin leather or jute strapping. Nylon cord or thick twine is also used these days. The tighter the lacing, the more the membrane stretches and the drier it gets, the tauter it becomes.



Bamboo resonator covered with goatskin and cotton twine lacing



Coconut resonator with leather lacing

The Neck

The flute like hollow neck (*daari*) is crafted from the *Makla Bnaash*, a slimmer, softer variety of bamboo than Baro Bnaash. This segment which is roughly about 13 to 14 " long, has to be cut from a length of dried bamboo, and must contain two nodes (bamboo joints) within it. One node will be required for the tuning peg and the other, to facilitate connecting the neck to the sound box. The distance from any *one* end of the neck to the farthest node must equal the distance between the performer's elbow and the lower end of his fist - that is approximately the distance between the sound box and the tuning peg. This is the upper

node, through which the tuning peg will be inserted, marking the top of the neck. At the bottom end of the bamboo, a notch is cut into the neck.



The upper node of the Bena's neck through which the hole for the tuning peg is made

Attaching the neck to the sound box

First a hole has to be bored or burnt (if the medium is bamboo) into the sound box, a little below its top rim. Sometime two holes, one on either side, are made. A slender split of



One end of the connector goes through this wooden sound box, which has two holes pierced through it.

bamboo (*kheel*) is then fashioned to connect the sound box to the neck. The length of this split is usually about 10". One section of this split is trimmed so that it can be pushed

through the hole and wedged tight within the sound box, or pushed out through it, if there are two holes.



The other end of the connector goes through the lower end of the bamboo neck and is secured with a splint or by the lower node on the bamboo

The width of the remaining section of the split must exactly fit the hollow of the neck. In the absence of a second node in the lower end, some artisans push a small bamboo splint laterally through the neck, so that the connector inside is kept firmly lodged.



Example of connector trimmed to exactly fit the hole in the sound box



The other end of this connector exactly fit the hollow of the neck



The notch of the neck is pushed firmly over the top rim of the resonator. (In the demo, paper was used to simulate the membrane)

The Makla bamboo neck is carefully pushed over this end of the connector and pressed tightly against it, with the bamboo node acting as a natural wedge. Finally, the notch of the neck is pushed firmly over the rim of the sound box, so that the mounting is secure. The notch grips the mouth of the sound box.

The Tuning Peg

Being a single stringed instrument, there is just the one tuning peg. A hole is burnt through the neck at the upper node and a large tuning peg (*kaan or phuti*) made usually of bamboo is jammed in.



The tuning peg, carved out of bamboo or wood, should fit the hole in the upper bamboo node tightly

The Bena string

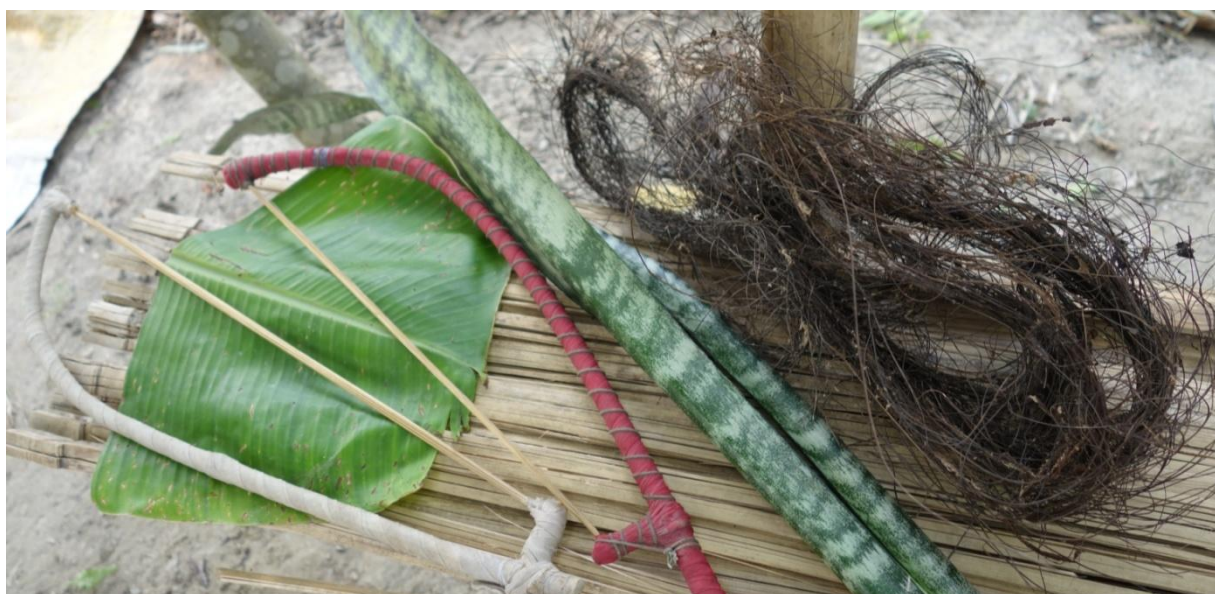
The single string (*taar*) of the Bena is traditionally made out of a bunch of hair from a mare's tail. But since the last four decades or so, with horses not found as easily in the region as before, substitutes have ranged from fibres from plants, steel wire and even nylon string.



Fibres obtained by retting the Sansevieria plant

Fibres from the Sansevieria (*Chakro Bara*), a decorative plant, are obtained by either a water retting process or by carefully pounding the leaf and stripping off the pulp. The whitish fibres

revealed are then cleaned in water, removing the last of the green pulp. The fibres are dried in the sun for a few hours and a few strands are all that are required for the Bena. This has been a traditional substitute for Sarinda strings as well. It is known locally as Chakro Bara because the mottled designs on the leaf are similar to the marks on the local Chakro Bara snake. Perhaps this is also why common names for the plant include Snake Plant and Snake Tongue.



From left: Bowstrings from Areca palm fibre and horse tail hair, Sansevieria plant and fishtail palm fibres

Sometimes, the black, strong, wiry fibres embedded in the hard stem of the Chawa (Fishtail palm - *Caryota urens*) tree, which used to grow wild in the region, are used. (These trees were not considered to be particularly useful locally and no longer grow as abundantly. However with a decline in supply of wood, their trunks are now being used for making doors etc in recent times. The strings from the Chakro Bara are much softer than those from the Chawa. Fibres from the bark of the Areca Palm (Shupari) have also been used.

The fibres from one Chakro Bara leaf are enough to provide the strings for both the strings on the bow and the Bena, while about 15-20 strands from the fishtail palm fibres would be required. However, unlike horse tail hair, plant fibre on both Bena and bowstring do not produce a particularly musical tone. Therefore, the material for the string and the bowstring has to be properly selected.

One end of the string is tied around the tuning peg and sometimes, passed around a tiny bamboo (or a nail even) tack or two embedded into the neck to centre the path of the string.

It is then stretched down the length of the Bena, across the sound box, and over a bridge (*ghora*) placed at the centre of the sound box. (*Incidentally, the name for this bridge on the resonator in most Eurasian languages means horse.*) The bridge which sometimes has a groove cut on it is made from *chhatim* (Indian Devil tree) or *gamar* wood and is about 1.5" wide and half inch high. The end of the string is tied down behind the sound box, either to the end of the bamboo split connecting the sound box to neck or to a small tack inserted near the rim.



One end of the Bena string is tied around the tuning peg. Areca palm fibre used here



The other end of the string is stretched over the bridge on the sound box and fixed to the protruding connector. Steel wire has been used for this Bena

The Bena Head



Baanshi Geedal's Bena

The head of the Bena (*murol*) is always a wooden carving of an elephant's head with a raised trunk. There are no fixed measurements for the head and it could be small and simple or long and ornate, depending on the creativity of the artisan and especially if it is used for performance. It is mounted inside the hollow at the top end of the neck, up to the node. The head is usually painted in bright colours and the space between the neck and the tuning peg tied up with decorative bits of cloth, ribbons, tinsel, beads, leather laces, etc.

The history behind this tradition is not known but some Bena makers opine that the tradition is related to the elephant being a symbol of royalty : princes and maharajas used elephants as ceremonial carriages in ancient and medieval India. They believe that since, according to mythology, Kush, the son of King Ram, was the original player of the Bena, the wooden elephant head, always in front of him, may have been seen as a fitting symbol of his status.



Suresh Roy's Bena

The Bow and Bowstring



Bowstring made of horse tail hair

The bow (*chhōr*) is made from a curved strip of bamboo and the string traditionally from horse (not mare) tail hair. There is no uniformity in the curve of the bows: the curve varies as does the way the strings are tied. Sometimes the bow tapers at one end, at other times it is of uniform width. Most bows, especially those used for performance, are wound around tightly with colourful strips of cloth and tinsel.

Since horse tail hair is not always available, plant fibre and even cotton string are used as substitutes. The order of preference would be horse tail hair, followed by Sansevieria, followed by the harder palm fibres. Obviously the melodiousness suffers; therefore the choice of strings for Bena and bowstring has to be well considered.



Bowstring made with fishtail palm (Chawa). The Bena string used here is steel.

Some Benas observed had a steel string and plant fibre bowstrings, another had a fish tail palm fibre string and a horsehair bowstring; yet another had a steel string with a cotton bowstring. However, because individual playing skills vary, the melody produced was widely divergent.



Cotton twine bowstring

Whatever be the fibres used, it is essential to rub rosin (*razon*) on the bowstring before a performance. This stickiness in the rosin helps the strings adhere together; it hardens the strings thus providing greater friction and vibration on the Bena string. The craftsmen usually have access to only the cheaper raw rosin rather than more expensive processed block. The former is less sticky and is not as effective.



Bowstrings being stroked with a block of rosin

This process, along with proper tuning of the Bena string (and of course, the necessary skills) is essential for a melodious Bena performance.

Though a simple enough instrument, Bena making requires specific skills and it takes an accomplished instrument maker to make a good instrument. Any error in measurement will affect the sound.

Playing technique

Tuning:

The scale of the single stringed Bena is set by tuning it with a flute or harmonium. In addition to the tuning peg which alters the tension of the string, a tuning noose (*shuto*), is sometimes used to fine-tune the instrument. This is a fibre which is passed around the string at a certain position on the neck, dividing the string into two sections. Fine-tuning is effected by moving



Tuning noose

the noose up and down the bamboo neck, thus altering the active vibrating length of the string and therefore the pitch.

Body Posture:

Though it may be played in a sitting position, the Bena is always played standing during a stage performance. With the left arm bent at the elbow, and the resonator against the chest, the neck is held between the thumb and four fingers the left hand, just beneath the tuning peg. The left hand is used for fingering, altering the pitch of the strings by pressing on the string at desired points. The bow is held in the right hand and played near the lower end of the neck, near the resonator, with short quick strokes or longer glides

Since the Bena accompanies the Geedal as he sings and sways about, the stance is very relaxed. Of course the quality of the performance depends on the training or lack of it of the Geedal. Some claim that the Bena cannot be used for any other form and is only used as a rhythmic accompaniment, while others skillfully pick out a tune. The sole association with Kushan is probably only just traditional, in conjunction with the fact that the plaintive bowed notes of the Bena match the style of the Kushan songs.



Mahim Geedal demonstrates

Initiation and Apprenticeship

Music has always been a way of life with the Rajbongshis and they are exposed to the community's wide variety of folk performing arts from a young age. With the traditional Kushan pala being extremely popular once, many a young boy was drawn to it. The affinity usually developed because someone in his family was a musician. But to become a full-blooded Kushani, he would need to master the Bena as well. These were times when the pursuit of folk arts was a passion (*nesha*) and not a profession (*peshha*) and young boys or men would throw themselves full tilt into the arts, often with the support of the family. With food and lodging and basic costs provided by the host (usually the *jotedar*, the rich peasant), they would spend their youth roaming from village to village along with a Kushan group,

usually as Chhokras (male dancers). If they showed promise, they would later intern under the Geedal, receiving impeccable training in the songs and the playing of the Bena. Simultaneously, those with a skill or interest in instrument making picked up the craft as well, possibly under the guidance of a musician in the group. Thus several of the older Kushanis today (including those who have stopped performing) know how to make the Bena. Meanwhile, other young enthusiasts espoused the craft, out of an established proficiency for instrument making and a love for music. Such was the scenario about four decades ago.

Though Bena making is usually a Rajbongshi activity, it was not unusual to find or hear of non-Rajbongshis, who lived in the region and were part of the culture, being associated with the Bena or Kushan pala. Denatullah Mian, for instance, was a well known instrument maker who also made Benas. Keramat Mian was a well known Doari in his prime.

But the scenario has changed today. With the declining popularity of the Kushan and with it, of the Bena, the average age of the surviving Bena craftsman is fifty plus. There are no longer any young enthusiasts.

The Crisis faced by the Bena

The Kushan performance is not seasonal and thus, Kushanis would like to depend on their art even though they may have some land. However, the demand for Kushan is such that only very few can manage this. But Bena makers being mostly cultivators cannot depend upon their art alone today.

Demand for the Bena has always been minimal. For one, Bena making has always been a need based activity and was and is often made by the Kushani (Geedal) himself - unlike the construction of a Dotara (dotra) or Sarinda (sarinja). The materials used are inexpensive and easily procured. However not all Kushanis know how to make a Bena and it is usually the artisan or instrument maker who is assigned the task. Secondly, the Bena is a very sturdy instrument and rarely needs to be replaced, excepting perhaps for a change in the skin. This reduces the demand even further. As a result, the Bena has never been made commercially and there have never been any established master craftsmen of the Bena. The decline of the popularity of the Kushan pala has rung the death knell for this ancient instrument. There are Kushanis spread across Cooch Behar who no longer sing but there are just a handful of Bena makers across all of North Bengal.

Against this dismal background, there are very few Bena makers left in Cooch Behar and only one in Jalpaiguri. These surviving Bena makers say that they have not had to make more than four to seven Benas in their entire working lives. To make matters worse, the Bena has become more of a prop in the new avatar of the Kushan pala - the Kushan jatra.

Typically, most artists of traditional theatre are from marginalised classes - in the case of Rajbongshis, mostly cultivators. Traditional folk drama pays very little and folk artists are forced to take on other professions for sheer survival. Apart from the financial hardships that do not allow performers to devote themselves exclusively to the art, they have been forced to submit to demands from an audience increasingly influenced by satellite television, cinema and other forms of modern entertainment. To attract these viewers, many traditional artistes try to cater to the demand for such cheap entertainment, at the cost of preserving the traditional form. On the other hand, there are the loyal few, who rather than degrade the form, have either stopped performing altogether, or switched to alternate professions.

A Kushan jatra now begins with (mostly) a short Bandona (invocation) reminiscent of the earlier pala form, but soon gives over to the main jatra on usually a totally different theme. The simplicity of a story well told by just the simply clothed Geedal and his onstage partner, the Doari, who provides the comic relief, with the assistance of dancers and musicians, has been replaced by a costumed, jazzed up, crowd pleasing, entertainment piece, replete with songs from Hindi or Bengali movies - much like the jatra form of theatre. Modern Kushanis may or may not know how to play the Bena or even sing all the traditional Kushan songs for that matter - but it is no longer important. There are now women Kushanis on the scene as well, most of whom do not know how to play the Bena. Holding the Bena and perhaps strumming it for a bit is quite literally a token gesture. Yet, the Kushan jatra, it appears, is quite popular.

For the Bena to survive or escape its death throes, Kushan pala needs to be resuscitated first, in all its former glory. Without Kushan, the Bena cannot survive.

Meanwhile, efforts ought to be made to organise Bena workshops, led by existing makers recognized for their prowess, before it is too late. Finally, just as practically every mela (fair) held in West Bengal displays Baul instruments for sale, it is about time that similar initiatives were taken for the dying instruments of North Bengal.

Artists, Past & Present

Bena Makers

Past masters:

Late Denatulla Mistri , instrument maker, Cooch Behar

Late Gumachan Dakua (Santosh Dakua's father), instrument maker, Cooch Behar

Artisans today:

Ramesh Chandra Barman, Wood carver & Instrument maker

Village : Dakshin Bharali, P.O : Sitaihat, P.S : Sitai, Cooch Behar 736167, W. Bengal

Phone : 9547098067



Eighty year old Ramesh Chandra Barman, son of Basanta Kumar Barman is a brilliant craftsman who hails from a family of farmers. Born in 1935 in Mahishkhacha village (now in Rangpur, Bangladesh), he never went to school, though he can read and write. Having lost both his parents as a child, he was determined to stand on his own feet as soon as he could. When he was a little older, he decided to start learning woodcraft. He was only eleven when he began his three year training in Dhaka, under a master craftsman,

Harimohan Chakraborty.

Ramesh makes the Sarinda, Dotara, Esraj, violin, harmonium and the Bena, but usually on request. He has made about five to seven Benas in his entire life. He uses horsetail hair for the strings, procuring it from horse owners – with some difficulty. He thoroughly disapproves of plant fibre especially that from the fish tail palm. For the resonator, he uses Gamar wood. Since there is hardly any demand for it, he had no Benas with him at the time of the

interview. He also makes statues from wood from locally bought wood. The wood he uses is Gamar, jackfruit, teak, Shishu (shisham, Indian Rosewood) bought locally.

Though he receives a pension from the government and has participated in government sponsored fairs within and outside of Cooch Behar district (Siliguri and Assam), he has received no other recognition from the government. However, his mastery in wood carving is well known locally among the common people of the district.

Satyendranath Roy, Instrument maker & bamboo artist

Address : Hazrapara, P.O: Cooch Behar, P.S : Kotwali, Cooch Behar 736101

Phone : 9832588318



Nearly 60 years old, Satyen Roy took early retirement from a government job to devote himself to his passion - his music and his craft. His family originally held the title Roy Pakhadhora (fan bearers) - his forbears were landowners - while his father, Bimal Chandra Roy was well known in the field of folk songs and folk theatre.

As a child, growing up in the village of Chilkirhat, he learnt to play the dotara for more than five years from Ajimuddin

Mian, a staff artiste of Siliguri radio station and also learnt bamboo craft during the long rainy months when there was no school. Unwilling to sit for his school examinations, he ran away from home and began working in the fields instead. He also later started learning music from Triphullo Kumar Roy.

Though as a young man, he opted to take up a job in Cooch Behar, he continued his musical training. Subhas Das's music school was a hub for all the major folk artists of the region - like Gangadhar Das and Suren Bosuniya (Bhawaiya) and Satyen found himself right in the middle of a vibrant musical environment and was able to interact with the musical greats of the time. Sadly, he says, those times are gone - and there has been nobody to replace these great artistes. In 1980 he was recognised as a Dotara artiste by All India Radio.

After a regular day at work, it was Satyen's practice to devote himself first to his music and then to start fashioning instruments from wood or bamboo as a hobby. He is the proud owner of several old instruments. Satyen is also a guru for the Sarinda and teaches students at workshops organised by the government.

Satyen's connection with the Bena began when he was about fifteen years old. A Kushani who used to work in his childhood home would make his own Benas and Satyen learnt the craft from him. But since there was no demand for the Bena, he concentrated on Dotara and Sarinda making instead. He has experimented with Benas using wood for the sound box, and plant fibre for the strings.

Santosh Dakua, Instrument maker & musician

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

Phone : 8348171474



50 year old Santosh Dakua is an extraordinary instrument maker and player. His initiation into music started under his father who was a singer and musician, playing various instruments. After he lost his parents at the age of 14, Santosh went to live with his uncle and tried his hand at making instruments, encouraged by his grandfather, the late Jameswar Dhani of Dhalpal, who was the owner of a Kushan pala group. Moving around with the group, the Geedal of which was Suresh Kushani,

Santosh gradually improved his skills at both making and playing various instruments. For about three years, he also received training on instrument playing from his guru, Phul Kumar Barman, a harmonium player who was part of the group. But Santosh is an entirely self taught instrument maker.

It has been eight or nine years since he has returned to his village and acquired a piece of land on which he has built his home, but Santosh continues to roam around with performing

groups. He has two sons and a daughter - but feels that they lack the requisite musical skills or passion - they do not possess his strong connect with music.

Santosh has made numerous instruments like the Bena, Mokha Baanshi, Aar Baanshi, Dotara, Sarinda, violin, Khamok and Ektara. He does not make them commercially and so, makes these instruments when he is in the mood for it or when he requires it to accompany a particular genre of song. As for the Benas, he makes these only when requested to, since there is no market for it. He has made Benas for the various Kushan groups he has moved around with since his teens - about seven in all. However, his current focus is on flutes, since that is what he plays the most these days.

He will not compromise on his stringed instruments and uses only horse hair and will go to great lengths to procure them, if needed. Santosh has also got some training in classical music - having learnt it out of books with the help of a few masters. His meagre education up to Class II did not stand in the way of his learning. Santosh accompanies folk performances as a music hand, playing on tabla, harmonium, or flute (Aar Bnaashi) as required and occasionally sings.

Other than West Bengal, Santosh has performed in many places, including Tripura, Assam and the Suraj Kund Mela in Haryana - accompanying performers of Bhawaiya, Padmapuran gaan (Bishohora), Naam Kirtan, Padabali Kirtan, Jatra and Kushan Jatra, and a large variety of Rajbongshi folk plays on the flute, violin etc. He performs less for Kushan jatra however, because these are usually daily shows extending over numerous villages for 20 to 30 days at a time. One performance often leads to an invitation for the next. With the kind of income he makes, Santosh cannot afford to be away from his family for such a long stretch. He finds it more convenient to work in short bursts.

The extremely talented Santosh earns only Rs 300 or Rs 400 from each performance, and is away no more than 45 days each year, including travel time. During the off season, which is from the summer till the end of the monsoons (Baishakh to Kartik), he does small jobs, including working on people`s fields and also tutoring a few students in far off villages on the flute and the violin for small wages.

Santosh has recently suffered a stroke, (Feb 2014) but he bravely soldiers on. It is his music that keeps him going.

Suresh Chandra Roy (nickname Makra), Instrument, mask and doll maker

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Phone : 9800910923



Suresh is a sixty year old farmer and possibly the sole Bena maker from Jalpaiguri. His grandfather, Moinath Roy was a Kushani whom Suresh watched as a child of six or seven. He grew interested in the Bena because it was rarely performed - Sarinda and Dotara being the more common; and when he was older, he too joined the Kushan group. His guru from whom he learnt Kushan songs and Bena making was Naresh Roy of Cooch Behar, a renowned Kushani who had come to work in

Jalpaiguri.

Suresh, who was 18 years old at the time, trained for about five years and then started his own group. He would also sing Bhawaiya songs. But with the fading demand for Kushan pala, he was unable to keep his group together.

Today Suresh is known for his carpentry skills - making instruments, masks and dolls and is registered as a handicraft artisan. But he continues to play the Bena for his own pleasure and sometimes makes the instrument when requested to by a Geedal. He has managed to sell a few for Rs 1200-1300 apiece. Suresh uses bamboo for the sound box but does not prepare the goatskin membrane for the resonator himself. He opines that goatskin is superior to monitor lizard skin! He uses Chakro Bara (Sansevieria) fibres for the bowstring by retting a leaf in water for about 10-12 days and steel for the Bena string, since people don't allow the tails of the horses to be cut off anymore. Thirty years ago, they would always manage to cut off a bunch of hair surreptitiously. In his youth, Suresh claims, bowstrings would invariably be made from horse hair, while the Bena string would always be made from steel.

His income is dependent on his farming - he works on the field during the day and plays the Bena in the evenings. When there is less work, or when the harvest is over, or when the

paddy is transplanting is done, he finds the time to make his Benas. He has donated some old Benas to the museum of University of North Bengal in Siliguri.

Suresh lives with his wife, daughter, son and his family. His son is a cultivator and a daily labourer who has no interest in learning his father's art. Suresh feels that if the heritage of Bena is to be preserved, the young generation needs to be taught to play this instrument. Awareness programmes need to be organized and educated people ought to speak out; in short, everybody needs to work together to revive interest in the cultural heritage of the Rajbongshis.

Bena Performers (Kushanis)

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

Village & P.O : Chakchaka, P.S : Kotwali, Cooch Behar 736156, W. Bengal

Phone : 9563771527



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.

Artists today:

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 chhokra 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.

Dhaneshwar Barman

Village : Dawabari, P.O : Shilduar, P.S : Sitai, Cooch Behar 736167, W. Bengal

Phone : 9933170444

Born in 1972, Dhaneshwar is a farmer and part of a Kushan group and has been performing for thirty-five years. His father, Jatin Chandra Barman was a Geedal and Dhaneshwar joined his group as a child. He never went to school and was about twelve years old when his father's group disbanded. He then joined Lalit Kushan's group as a chhokra - dancing and acting as required. He also picked up the Bena and started learning to perform the instrument.

After spending about ten years with Lalit Kushan, he left to start his own group. He performed with his group for about fifteen more years before the group broke up, as a result



of declining demand and diminishing respect for the form among the people. The popular demand was for jatra, on social or historical themes and the Ramayan based Kushan was simply not exciting enough for an audience that would get increasingly restive and raucous.

However, from 2014, Dhaneshwar has rejoined a Kushan group under Mahim Geedal and is performing again - though the form is now a mix of pala gaan and

jatra. He travels around North Bengal giving performances. The form, in its new avatar, though offering more income for people like him, is still not enough for a livelihood. They are a group of 26 (including a Casio master these days) each of whom receives about Rs 350 per night.

He is a self taught Bena maker as well and has made only 4 Benas in his entire life. Two for his present guru, one for a friend and one for himself. The Bena is a sturdy instrument and lasts a long time, excepting perhaps for the bowstrings, hide and the Bena strings. He uses steel strings for the Bena, and the fibres from the Fishtail palm for the bowstring. For the sound box, he uses coconut shell. He feels this produces a better sound. He usually gets the goat skin membrane made for him by the Muchi (leather workers) community since he does not work with animal hide. He then assembles coconut shell, the bamboo neck, the elephant shaped head, the pegs, strings etc together and then decorates the instrument. Since Benas are never sold and are used by only Geedals, he has no idea what price it would fetch in the market.

Dhaneshwar says the old Ramayan based Kushan tunes of old still exist - but the change is in the duration and the format. After the traditional *Ashor Bandona*, the inaugural act, the performance continues in the jatra form, with actors playing out possibly a Ramayan theme, or a social or historical theme, according to audience demand. But the slow unfolding of a tale in the traditional question-answer format by the Geedal-Doari pair circling around the space, interpreting and elaborating the theme, punctuated by the *khosha* songs and dances by the chhokras/chokris (dancers) has become extinct.

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 downside 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.

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- Dhaneshwar Barman, Cooch Behar district
- Dwijendranath Barman, Cooch Behar district
- Mahim Geedal, Cooch Behar district
- Naren Kushani, Cooch Behar district
- Santosh Dakua, Cooch Behar district
- Satyendranath Roy, Cooch Behar
- Suresh Roy, Jalpaiguri district

Field Trip Snapshots



Bamboo bridge across the River Singimari - the only way to get to Sitai!



Experts, artists and locals: seated from left: Ramesh Barman, Dhaneshwar Barman, Ramani Barma, Tushar Roy, Prafullya Das, Dwijendranath Barman & unknown local at Ramesh Barman's home in Bharali, Sitai.



The 80 year old master carver Ramesh Barman, his wife Golap and his magnificent walking stick, which he carved himself



Rural scene - Cooch Behar



Courtyard of a Rajbongshi home



Fishtail palm tree - the Chawa gaach, the black fibres of which are used for Bena strings



Instrument maker, Satyen Roy in his workshop



Makla Bnaash grove



A room in Santosh Dakua's home, Tufanganj. Most rural homes are made of bamboo.



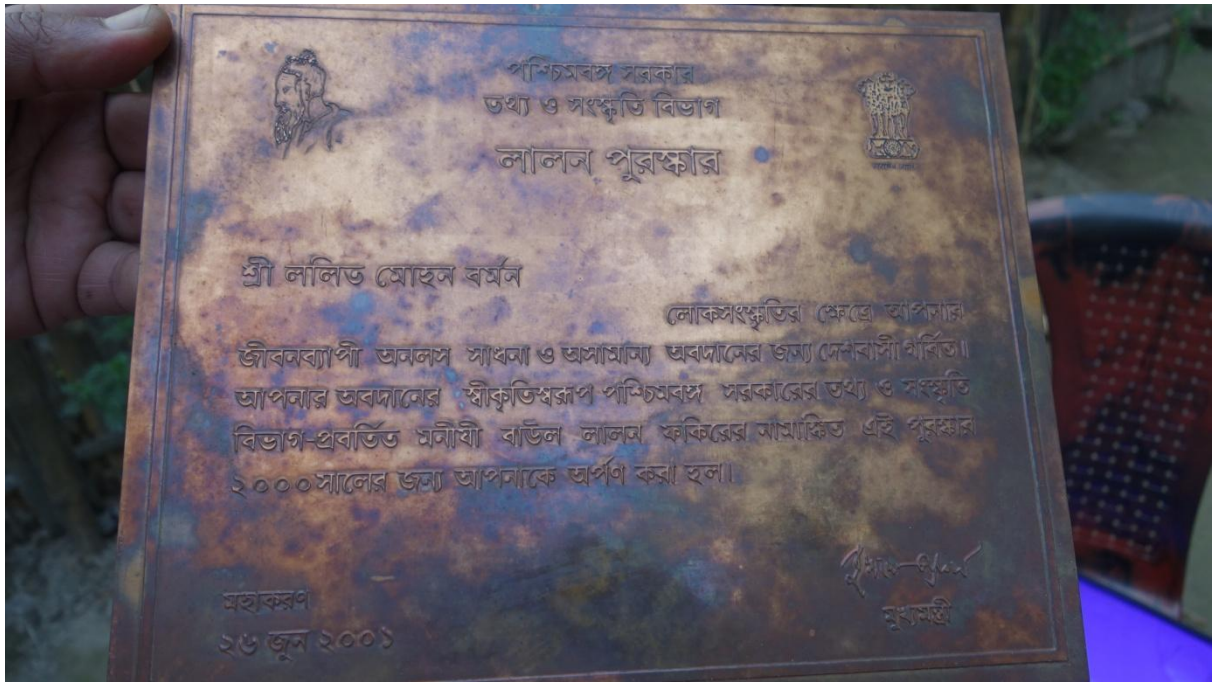
After the Bena making demo, flanked by Santosh Dakua (l) and Baanshi Geedal (r)



A few horses are still seen around the countryside



Path to Lalit Kushani's home



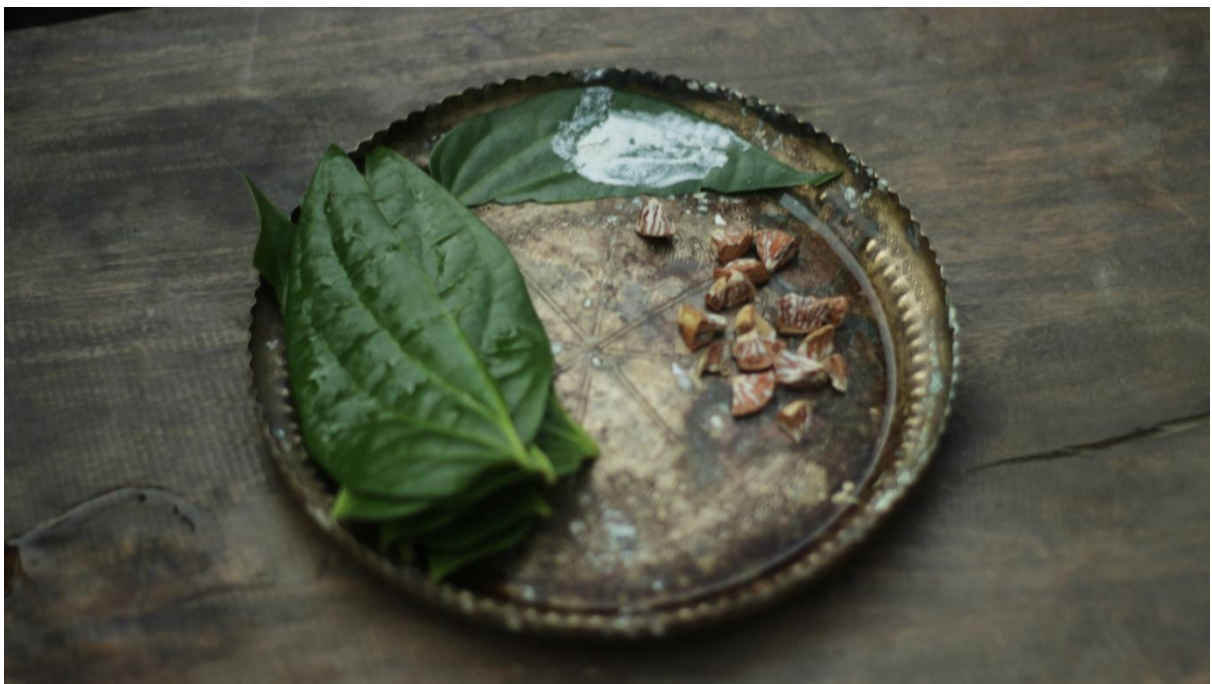
Lalit Kushani's Lalon Puraskar award. There is also an auditorium named after him in Dinhatata.



Lalit Kushani's son, Benoy Barman, holds his father's Bena. Benoy is a Kushan jatra performer.



Explaining the project to Baanshi Geedal (not in picture) and the late Parbananda Das (in brown jacket) in his home at Natabari



Traditional Rajbongshi welcome : Gua-Paan on a bell metal plate

Notes

IPA characters have been used in some words : Chakro Bāra (Chawkra Bawra - a type of plant), Bāro Bnaash (a variety of bamboo), Bāndona (Bawndona - invocation/vandana) and Rāzon (Rawzon - rosin).