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## **A New Glance in Folk Performances: Diversities in the Folk Drama *Khon Palagan* of Dinajpur District**

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### **Abstract**

Culture constitutes the identity of people across the world. It reflects the lived experiences of folk communities; their activities, rituals, beliefs, language, and literary expressions. Folk drama is one of the most significant genres of folk culture, representing the dramatic performances of indigenous communities living in specific regions of a nation. J. A. Cuddon, in *The Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, observes that "...folk drama is a common and living phenomenon in many parts of the world....". Generally, folk drama embodies local history, social suffering, individual and collective struggles, economic and political conditions, and religious beliefs. *Khon Palagan* is a popular folk drama tradition of the Dinajpur region. It is also a major cultural heritage of the Rajbanshi community, narrating a cultural history of nearly five hundred years. This performance tradition is rich in emotion, love, faith, and belief, and it vividly portrays the social structure and cultural heritage of the Rajbanshi people. However, in contemporary times, significant diversity can be observed in its performance practices, which has resulted in the emergence of a new canon shaped by modern sensibilities. Today's performances appear more professional than passionate, as artists increasingly modify traditional methods under the influence of digital technologies. Therefore, this paper seeks to explore the traditional patterns of *Khon Palagan*; its performance style, subject matter, language, and musical instruments and to examine the extent to which these patterns have been affected by modern canons. The paper also investigates the interaction between folk culture and popular culture.

**Keywords:** Rajbanshi, Folk Drama, *Khon Palagan*, Modernity, Popular Culture

Culture reflects the reality of society and shapes the ways in which people are bound to live. Without culture, human life becomes meaningless. Culture encompasses folk life, including rituals, beliefs, language, and literature. Every community possesses its own distinct culture, rituals, and customs; therefore, folk culture varies from one society to another. This variation leads to diverse themes found in folk drama, folk songs, and folk verses.

*Khon Palagan* is a popular folk dramatic genre of the Dakshin Dinajpur district and has been performed continuously over generations. Various types of *Palagans*, such as *Satty*

*Peer, Antu Shori, Dhako Shori, Kani-Bisahari, Maiya Bandhaki, Budho Shori, Chakai Shori, Bormo Shori, and Lovisadhu* are identified as “*Khon*” and are regularly performed throughout the district. Each *pala* differs in theme, myth, folklore, and narrative structure; however, a common feature across all performances is the representation of the social background and economic conditions of ordinary people.

A significant transformation can be observed in contemporary performances of these *Palagans*. Today’s performances are highly professionalized, characterized by artificial decoration, DJ sound systems, dance sequences, excessive spectacle (*hangama*), and the extensive use of technological elements. These features have established a new cultural canon within society. This paper, therefore, aims to examine the nature of these changes and assess the extent to which modernity has influenced and reshaped traditional performance practices.

Dakshin Dinajpur is a district in the state of West Bengal, India. About thirty years ago, it was part of the West Dinajpur district under the Jalpaiguri Division. Earlier, it belonged to the undivided Dinajpur district, which is now located in present-day Bangladesh. Being the southern part of the Dinajpur region, it came to be known as Dakshin Dinajpur. The district is culturally rich and inhabited by diverse communities with distinct cultural practices. Folk dramas, folk songs, *Khon Palagan*, *Baul* songs, and *Sadhuamat* are widely performed here. These traditions once flourished alongside *Khajagar*, *Hari-Kirtan*, *Chok-Chandi*, and *Padabali-Kirtan*. Approximately two decades ago, these forms were widely practiced, but today many of them are gradually losing their presence due to rapid social change. While traditions have not disappeared entirely, they have undergone substantial transformation, with time acting as a dominant force that has made society more mechanical and globalized.

There was a time when people derived entertainment from *Khon Palagan*, folk songs, *Baul* performances, *Hari-Kirtan*, *Khajagari Gan*, and *Jalmanga Gan*. Cultural gatherings usually took place in the evenings. The day was divided into two phases: from morning to afternoon, people engaged in livelihood activities; in the evening, they gathered at common spaces to practice cultural traditions and relieve the monotony of daily life. In contrast, contemporary society has moved away from such collective practices. People are now more inclined towards technology, mobile phones, and social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and television. Consequently, traditional cultural engagement has diminished, as people aspire toward globalization and modern lifestyles.

An examination of *Khon Palagan* performances across the district reveals how time has shaped these genres across generations. It enables an understanding of how modernity and its new canon have transformed their form, style, and performance patterns. Time thus plays a crucial role in bringing about social and cultural transformation.

### ***Khon Palagan:***

*Khon Palagan* is one of the principal indigenous folk cultural practices of the district. It is performed by members of the Rajbanshi community in the Rajbanshi language. These performances depict the daily struggles of common people, including issues of social domination, deprivation, political and economic exploitation, and illicit relationships. For this reason, *Khon Palagan* is often regarded as a mirror of Rajbanshi society. To illustrate its thematic significance, this paper highlights two *Khon Palagans*.

**Antu Shori:**

The narrative of *Antu Shori* is based on a real-life incident. Antu Shori is portrayed as an uneducated yet intelligent village woman, while her husband is depicted as innocent and naïve. Antu Shori manages the household and bears the primary responsibility for sustaining the family. Another important character, Baudiya, is the husband of Sukoshori and the maternal uncle of Antu Shori. Despite this familial relationship, Baudiya attempts to seduce Antu Shori and seeks to establish an illicit relationship with her. He vows to *Masan Kali* that he will offer double goats if he succeeds in fulfilling his desire.

দোহায় লাগে মাসান কালী  
অন্তসরি মিলি গেলে দিম পাঁঠাবলি ।  
তোর পূজা করিতে মা মোর  
যদি যায় মা ঘরবাড়ি  
অন্তসরি পাইলে মাগে দিম কালো ধলা পাঁঠাবলি ।

**My Translation-**

Please listen Mashan Kali  
Getting Antushori, will full my vow.  
Maa, going to worship you,  
If I will have to sacrifice all,  
Getting Antushori, will immotale goat in double.

This promise enables us to understand the ritualistic practices of the society of that time and the prevailing social mindset. Although certain aspects of these beliefs continue to exist in contemporary society, most people today tend to question them due to the development of logical and scientific reasoning. The advancement of science has brought about significant changes in such ritualistic belief systems.

The narrative begins with a conversation between Antu Shori and Sukoshori, in which they discuss going to the market to sell sackcloth made from jute that they have woven themselves.

ধকরের বস্তা পিঠিৎ কইছু  
পতিরাজের হাঁটতে যাছু ।  
দুই জনা না যাম বাঙ্গরে  
যাম হামরা সারাই বারাই  
মালাম কিছু পামনাই ।  
ধকরের বস্তা পিঠিৎ কইছু  
পতিরাজের হাঁটতে যাছু ।।

**My Translation-**

Tacking the sackcloath in my back  
Going to the Patiraj market.  
We are two, lets go  
Making a conversation,  
Don't feel any hesitation.  
Tacking the sackcloath in my back  
Going to the Patiraj market.

The above expression provides insight into the socio-economic reality of rural society about thirty years ago. During that period, women were accustomed to making jute sackcloth both for household use and for sale. Jute sackcloth served as one of the primary sources of income for women, who engaged in this activity after completing their domestic responsibilities. In contrast, contemporary society has shifted towards the use of plastic sackcloth instead of jute. Women of the present generation are largely unfamiliar with the process of making jute sackcloth, as people have become increasingly detached from traditional rural crafts and now prefer modern technology and industrial products.

***Chakai Shori:***

*Chakai Shori* is a satirical and ridicule-based narrative rooted in a real incident that occurred in a village of Kushmandi. The title refers to the female protagonist of the story. Chakai is a village girl who falls in love with Palash, a young man from her own village. As time progresses, their emotional bond deepens, and they become inseparable. However, Chakai's father arranges her marriage with a man named Dhurut Baudiya from another village, disregarding her emotional attachment.

After learning about the proposed marriage from her mother, Chakai becomes anxious and distressed, unable to comprehend how to respond to the situation. She informs her lover Palash and urges him to find a solution. Palash, though slightly educated, remains unemployed and powerless, and he fails to resolve the crisis. When Chakai's father fixes the date of marriage, the couple finds no alternative but to flee from the village. They eventually marry in the name of the goddess at a Kali temple. The news spreads rapidly throughout the village, and the couple is condemned by the villagers for violating social norms.

The narrative reflects a flashback of a society where individuals, especially women were caricatured, ridiculed, and socially punished for actions considered immoral or deviant. Chakai becomes *Chakaishori*, where the term "*Shori*" signifies a woman accused of maintaining an illicit relationship outside marriage. Such relationships were considered signs of moral degradation and social injustice. This caricature reveals a time when individuals were compelled to strictly obey societal norms and conventions. In contrast, contemporary society projects a seemingly utopian image where individuals enjoy greater personal freedom, and such acts are no longer subjected to the same degree of public ridicule. With the passage of time, social attitudes towards such events have gradually changed.

At the same time, the story exposes the deeply patriarchal structure of society. Women had little freedom to express or fulfill their desires and were constantly controlled by male authority. Any deviation from prescribed social norms resulted in condemnation and ridicule. The narrative thus documents the socio-cultural condition of the late twentieth century, when society functioned under rigid moral codes enforced by collective authority.

In the twenty-first century, however, societal structures have undergone substantial transformation. Education has played a crucial role in reshaping social perceptions, altering traditional forms of mockery, and redefining moral judgment. Incidents once considered taboo are now increasingly normalized. Women today are more empowered, capable of challenging oppressive structures, and asserting their rights through education

and awareness. This transformation illustrates how time continuously reshapes social values and cultural practices, guiding society toward progressive development.

Traditionally, performing *Khon Palagan* was a form of recreation and cultural engagement among indigenous communities. Through this practice, performers relieved monotony while earning a modest income. In contemporary times, however, professionalization has created a crisis of creativity. Performance has become a profession rather than a passion, and folk drama is often treated as a fashion rather than a cultural responsibility. As a result, *Khon Palagan* is increasingly perceived as outdated.

Modern audiences show greater interest in *Hangama*, a contemporary form of *Yatra* characterized by lavish stage decoration, multicolored lighting, remix dance performances, DJ sound systems, and sensational visual effects. Traditional narrative elements are replaced with modern devices, such as mobile phones instead of messengers, social media platforms instead of handwritten letters, and technological effects to depict murder or flight scenes through lighting techniques. Thus, modernity introduces technological sophistication at the cost of tradition, resulting in the emergence of a new canon within folk drama.

Several key components of *Khon Palagan* have undergone transformation due to technological advancement. These include subject matter, *Asar* (folk stage), performance techniques, duration of performance, and musical instruments.

**(a) Subject Matter:**

Traditionally, *Khon Palagan* addressed contemporary social issues and classical narratives. It existed in two primary forms: *Khisha Khon*, which dealt with everyday social realities such as poverty, social hierarchy, political and economic exploitation, and illicit relationships; and *Shastori Khon*, which drew upon classical texts such as the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Vedas*, and *Puranas*.

In recent times, the subject matter has shifted significantly. Present-day performances often revolve around government-sponsored welfare schemes such as *Kanyashree*, *Rupashree*, *Yubashree*, and *Swasthasathi*. Folk artists receive financial support through schemes like *Lokprasar Prokolpo*, which compels them to align their narratives with governmental agendas rather than traditional themes. Consequently, original folk narratives are gradually being replaced by promotional content.

**(b) Stage Decoration (*Asar*):**

Folk performances traditionally take place in open spaces accessible to all members of the community, without physical barriers or social hierarchies. *Khon Palagan* is distinguished by its performance space known as *Asar*, where audiences sit on all four sides of the performers, often on the ground, without segregation or class distinction. This open and inclusive arrangement contrasts sharply with urban theatre, which is confined within enclosed spaces.

However, performances conducted under government projects no longer follow the traditional *Asar* format. Performers stand in a linear arrangement and rely heavily on microphones. The circular, immersive performance space is largely abandoned due to time constraints and logistical limitations, which undermines the expressive freedom and moral confidence of folk performers. As a result, the traditional performance structure is steadily eroding.

**(c) Performance Style:**

Folk performance is inherently natural, spontaneous, and minimally artificial. In regions of Bangladesh, traditional *Khon Palagan* still retains the authenticity of *Asar* and relies on simple sound systems. In contrast, performers in Dakshin and Uttar Dinajpur increasingly prefer artificial techniques, modern stages, and high-powered sound systems. This shift has significantly diminished the traditional aesthetic value of folk performance.

**(d) Time Duration of Performance:**

The duration of performance is a defining feature of *Khon Palagan*. Traditionally, performances lasted throughout the night from 8 p.m. to 6 a.m. and audiences were accustomed to this extended engagement. However, performances conducted for government projects are limited to 15–20 minutes, focusing on brief narratives designed to convey specific messages related to welfare schemes.

This shortened format presents several challenges. First, it disrupts audience engagement, as viewers are accustomed to longer performances. Second, it dilutes the cultural essence of *Khon Palagan* by shifting focus away from traditional themes. Third, it undermines the genre's ability to reflect the social, cultural, and ritual life of indigenous communities.

**(e) Musical Instruments:**

Musical instruments are integral to *Khon Palagan*, which combines lyrical narration with dramatic dialogue. Traditionally, instruments such as the harmonium, *Kortal*, and three-set *Naal* were used throughout performances. However, contemporary audiences favor modern sounds, leading performers to replace traditional instruments with electronic keyboards (*Casio*), *Khol*, *Jhumka*, and flutes. This shift has contributed significantly to the erosion of indigenous musical traditions.

**Conclusion:**

In conclusion, modern technology offers both advantages and disadvantages. While it enhances accessibility and visibility, it also poses a threat to traditional cultural forms if used indiscriminately. Society will inevitably evolve with time; however, folk culture remains an integral part of collective identity. Therefore, it is essential to preserve and nurture traditional cultural practices alongside modernization, ensuring that transformation does not lead to cultural erasure.

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