



The Past and Present of Theatre Practice in Bihara Bikrampur

Dr. Mithilesh Chakraborty
Associate Professor
Maibang Degree College

Abstract:

Jatra, the vibrant traditional Bengali folk theatre, flourished in Bihara Bikrampur during the colonial period as a popular form of musical drama. Performed on open-air stages with elaborate costumes, songs, and dance, it drew stories from mythology, history, and social issues. In Bihara Bikrampur, rich zamindars and local merchants generously patronised Jatra troupes, funding performances during festivals and fairs. Despite strong patronage, its popularity remained relatively limited in the colonial era, overshadowed by urban theatre and emerging cinema. Many troupes struggled financially, performing mainly in rural areas with modest audiences. In recent decades, however, Jatra has seen a remarkable revival in Bihara-Bikrampur and across Bengal, boosted by cultural festivals, and renewed community interest. Today, both old and new generations flock to Jatra shows, ensuring this centuries-old theatrical tradition thrive once again.

Key Words- Jatra, Bihara Bikrampur, Colonial era, Rich Zamindars and Local Merchants

Bihara Bikrampur is an ancient town with a rich and diverse cultural history. Settlements in this region were primarily established around the arrival of the Dimasa kings. However, the area's demographic structure also points to other reasons for its development. Today, the population includes Dimasa, Assamese, Bishnupriya Manipuri, Nepali, Khasia, tea garden workers, and Bengalis. Among these groups, Bengali families—especially Hindu Bengalis—were initially very few in number.

Despite this remarkable diversity, it is striking that only the Hindu Bengali community demonstrated sustained enthusiasm and contribution toward cultural and theatrical practices in the region. The Assamese occasionally performed 'Angskia Bhaona,' but these performances remained confined within their own community. Similarly, there is no evidence that the Dimasa, Nepali, or tea garden workers participated in



any form of theatrical activity. The Vishnupriya Manipuri community staged “Rasleela” in their Srimandap, but these were entirely community-centered performances rather than public entertainment.

The Bengalis were the true pioneers of theatrical performance in Bihar Bikrampur. In the early days, “drama” referred almost exclusively to *Jatrapala*—a popular folk theatre form rooted in mythology. The first pioneer of this theatrical movement was Babu Ramkaman Sen, the former Moujadar of Bikrampur. A three-day *Jatrapala* performance was a central feature of his family’s Durga Puja celebrations. His son, Babu Yogesh Chandra Sen, became a famous actor whose reputation for outstanding performance still lives in local memory.

At that time, *Jatra Pala* performances were entirely mythological in theme, and women were not permitted to act. Male performers played female roles with such skill that audiences were often left astonished. One such performer was Zamindar Rajendra Deshmukhya, whose portrayal of female characters amazed people who otherwise knew him as a wealthy landowner. The *puja mandap* of Babu Ramkamal Sen came alive with performances by noted actors such as Nalinikanta Sharma Mahasaya of Ranighat and Manindra Chandra Chakraborty Mahasaya of Bihar Brahmangram. There was no social distinction among participants—people from all walks of life came together in devotion to the art of performance.

As time progressed, theatrical practice evolved. Dramas were no longer limited to the courtyards of landlords. Public performances began to take place on open stages, particularly during community events such as *Barwari Durga Puja*. A notable actor of this era was Narendra Lal Das, celebrated especially for his villainous roles. His portrayals of “Saktar” in *Chandragupta* and “Chakradhar Dutta Khal” in *Matir Ma* remain legendary. Another distinguished figure was Jatish Chandra Sen, son of Yogesh Chandra Sen, who was widely acclaimed for his regal performances in historical dramas—his acting talent matched his striking appearance.

Manorman Chakraborty, the eldest son of Manindra Chandra Chakraborty of Bihar Brahmangram, was another major contributor to theatre in the region. His professional life required him to move across various parts of the Barak Valley, yet he carried his passion for theatre wherever he went. He even established a traveling theatre troupe at his own expense, demonstrating an unwavering devotion to the art despite personal financial hardship. During the British period, *Jatra* theatre became a central cultural event in tea gardens, often organized by local patrons. Famous *Jatra* troupes performed at the Hatimara Garden of Bihar, inspiring later generations of local actors and actresses. Renowned groups such as *Jai Durga*,



Bholanath Opera, Ghatiya Dar, and Natta Company once graced the grounds of Bihar, leaving a lasting influence on the region's performing arts.

While the Partition of India in 1947 brought devastation to many lives, for Bihar it also brought an unexpected cultural renaissance. Displaced but educated and culturally rich families settled here, infusing new life into education, politics, and the arts. Prominent among them were Bharani Bhattacharya, Debprasad Bhattacharya, and Beni Madhav Chowdhury. Bharani Bhattacharya earned fame as a distinguished actor, while Debprasad Bhattacharya excelled both as an actor and director, mentoring a new generation of performers.

Among the later contributors, Rajit Deshmukh, son of Zamindar Rajchandra Deshmukh, deserves special mention. His performances displayed rare emotional depth and authenticity. Similarly, Mohant Babu, a Vishnupriya Manipuri gentleman who regularly played female roles, impressed audiences with his acting prowess and his remarkably fluent Bengali accent.

The year 1980 stands as a golden chapter in the history of Bihar Bikrampur's theatre. That year, two major plays—*Mahatirtha Kalighat* and *Nati Binodini*—were performed on consecutive days. In *Nati Binodini*, Shriyukt Mohit Ranjan Chakraborty delivered a powerful portrayal of *Girish Ghosh*, while Prasad Bhattacharya's performance as *Thakur Sri Ramakrishna* remains unforgettable. It is widely believed that such masterful performances have rarely been seen before or since on the soil of Bihar Bikrampur. Mohit Ranjan Chakraborty continued to captivate audiences in plays like *Ma Mati Manush* and *Kohinoor*, where his role as *Hossain* remains etched in the memories of local theatre enthusiasts. Another remarkable performer was Jayanti Devi, whose portrayal of *Binodini* in *Nati Binodini* stunned audiences. Coming from an Oriya plantation worker family, her flawless Bengali diction and emotional expressiveness were a revelation to all who witnessed her performance.

In those days, the Deshbandhu Club—then in its formative years—played a vital role in sustaining theatrical activity. Its members worked tirelessly to stage numerous plays, discovering and nurturing local talent. Among the many who contributed were Sajal Nikidar, Jahar Sikidar, Shekhar Sikidar, Tapan Saha, Kali Kumar Saha, Prabhanjan Dev, Nidil Deen, and Bitu Dev. As full-length plays gradually gave way to shorter, socially conscious dramas, the one-act play gained prominence. For many years, the annual one-act play competition organized by the Deshbandhu Club was a celebrated event in Bihar Bikrampur. Today, those vibrant nights of performance and applause live only in memory. Many of the once-passionate actors have



passed away; others, now elderly, lie in bed reciting the dialogues of their youth—lost in the nostalgia of theatre’s golden days.

In recent decades, both rural and urban theatre in Bihar Bikrampur has declined. The fast pace of modern life and the distractions of globalization have left little time for collective cultural engagement. Yet, a subtle revival seems to be underway. Audiences are beginning to rediscover their love for live performance. Theatre halls that once stood empty are slowly filling again, proving that drama still holds the power to bring people together. Perhaps one day, Bihar Bikrampur will once again reclaim the theatrical glory it once so proudly held.

Reference:

1. Personal Interview with Mohit Ranjan Chakraborty 23 rd March 2020
2. Personal Inter With Kripasindu Dey 20 April 2020