

FOLK THEATRES, ORAL POETRY AND CULTURAL ARTIFACTS ALONG THE BORDER REGIONS OF NORTH BENGAL

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Abstract

Contested border regions often become “memory landscapes” with monuments, historical sites, and cultural artefacts; they become sacred spaces for national or ethnic memory. In some cases, border regions can take on a dramatic theatrical character in which specific national interpretations of past conflict and the culpability of the other side are carefully staged. This is particularly the case of Cooch Behar district. Martyrs from past conflicts are “reanimated”, at appropriate times for the strategy of social mobilization. Such changing cultural expressions can be traced to the growth and evolution of the indigenous art forms of Cooch Behar. The successive waves of migration and a shift in the demographic in the later decades of the last century have resulted in the emergence of a very syncretic cultural scene, one that is informed by both migrant narratives, while paying due diligence to the indigenous roots of the art forms. This chapter aims to evaluate orality not as a static medium but as one that is subject to constant change resulting in cultural transition. This paper highlights the history of border planning and population division in the region of North Bengal is fraught with religious tension, transition from a principality to a constituting state in the case of Cooch Behar and an overarching sense of loss that is prevalent across the whole region of North Bengal. Midnight’s borders that were arbitrarily drawn in Undivided Punjab and Bengal in 1947 had wreaked havoc in the lives of people occupying the border adjacent districts, an impact that can still be felt in the mnemocultural productions of these districts.

Keywords: Memory, Border, Relocation, Theatre, Performance.

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Introduction:

Cultures and indigenous cultures and mnemocultures to be precise are never devoid of the material underpinnings of the society that they manifest themselves in. In the decades following the independence, the shifting parameters of the literary representation of trauma and post-memory have become more and more prominent, reasons of which are varied and disparate. The socialist ethos of the Postcolonial Indian Republic have proved to be inadequate for bringing out the people of the border regions of North Bengal out of the grips of poverty and misery. This should not be seen as the failure of socialist theory but as a disappointing result of inefficient praxis.

Socio-political Milieu of the Border Regions of North Bengal:

However sad the socio-economic condition of the border regions of North Bengal, might be, indigenous cultures have held their sway over the collective psyche of the people of North Bengal. The lives of people inhabiting the border regions of North Bengal were beset by multiple problems, such as: Enclave Problem, Adverse Possession Problem and No Man's Land Problem, which took quite a few decades to solve and till that happened, these people have suffered and paid a heavy socio-economic price. Such moods of despondency and economic marginalization have impacted the nature and the process behind the creation and oral narratives, narratives that are mostly comprised of oral poetry and folk theatres, which as discussed in the previous section, remain mostly unscripted and rely on the mnemonic registers of the performers and participants.

Relevance of the Folk Theatres:

In the realm of folk-theaters in North Bengal Bishohari Puja occupies the prime focus of popular rendition. The ballads and devotional songs sung in these rituals are the sources from which the folk-theatres emanate from. They make it possible for the audiences to situate these folk theatres within the indigenous belief systems which are markedly different from the scriptural faith. The reasons behind observing the Bishohari Puja are as follows:

- The songs are composed and sung mainly because it is believed that they push

the householder towards prosperity and material gains.

- Some people observe the Bishohari Puja, because they want to be blessed with healthy babies, some people pray for decent jobs.
- In some parts of North Bengal, Bishohari Puja is observed on the occasion of Seasonal Harvest of Crops, which is celebrated as Nabanno in the Bengali calendar. It is a big event in the rural agriculture based societies and lifestyles of North Bengal and many householders pray to Manasa on this occasion with much aplomb and gusto. The householders organizing this puja have to abstain from consuming any sort of non-vegetarian food as long as the puja is going on their house. This is done to ensure class similarities and pious devotion as the singers and the performers of the folk-theatres encompassing Bishohari Puja also eat vegetarian foods on those days. On the last day of the Puja, the owner of the house fasts along with the Gayens (minstrels and singers specializing in folk-ballads) to ensure that the Puja is done with utmost devotion and sincerity. This is one of the main purposes.

The puja is divided into two main parts, namely the devotional songs and the performance of plays, which are essentially part of the folk-theatres. The songs are of older origin and compared to them, the folk-theatres are relatively recent creations. The singers are called Geedals in the districts of Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri, while in Maldah and the Dinajpurs, they are called Gayens. Such heterogeneous nomenclature of performers, in different districts, who are essentially practicing the same craft points to the fluid nature of the Bishohari Puja, which are not bound in rigid conventionality and are open to subjective interpretations and regional variations.

These folk theatres have spawned a whole host of oral poetry and they are equally rich in spiritual quality and piety. For the convenience of discussion, we are going to look at the oral poetry that has directly originated from Bishohari Puja. Fuleshwari Sapuriya Murder is a popular pala (particular scene in any theatrical production) in North Bengal. It has the following lines:

Shono Mago Bishohari Mago Manasa (Listen to our prayers, Goddess Manasa)

Duhate minit kori dhori tomar paa (We prostrate before you)

Ekhani pukurer charkhani ghaat (Our pond has four barges)

Tate janmilo padmar paat (Lotuses bloomed in that pond)

Padmat jonme Padmakumari (On those Lotuses were born, Padmakumari)

Baap-maaye naam rakhe Joi Bishohari (Her parents named her Bishohari) These verses show that the poems and renditions are all deeply entrenched in agricultural sensibilities and they show the pious and devotional relationship that the villagers share with their indigenous, animistic deities. These poems are examples of the perennial popularity and continued relevance of oral narratives, most of which have been passed down from one generation to the next in an organic nature.

The main composers of the folk-theatres in North Bengal are Tandrabibhuti, Jagatjibon Ghoshal & Jibonkrishno Moitra. The first two of these three, were born in the rural plains of North Bengal in the seventeenth century. They composed their poetic versions of Manasamangal, a perennial classic of Bengali literature, composed in the middle centuries of the last millennium. The themes of their poetic creations were deeply spiritual and pandered to the sensibilities of the indigenous population here at North Bengal. It is from these tomes that the stories of modern day Bishohari Puja have been collected and finessed to perfection. It is a bit surprising that people are still referring to this works as spiritual touchstones, even after all this time. It is a testament to the poetic grandeur of these works and the sustainable nature of the oral narratives. The folk theatres make gracious and plentiful usage of these poetic works and slightly tweak the plot in favour of regional variations and contextual sensitivity. These folk-theatres also see the participation of local Muslims, another feature that brings out the culturally syncretic nature of North Bengal and its pluralistic ethos, that have survived the Partition of the Indian sub-continent.

The Radcliffe Line: Inception of Border Crisis in North Bengal:

Cyril Radcliffe was the chief architect and the brains behind the geographical bi-furcation of Undivided India. Here was a man tasked with the transference of heterogeneous population in India, a country that had more or less assimilated its various ethnic and religious groups into a unified whole, or so it seemed until the 1940s, when communal frenzy and hateful sectarian violence brought out centuries-old political and religious insecurities

and paved the way for the division of this country, a thought so alien in the collective psyche of the Indian population that most people were not even willing to take it seriously. Radcliffe was never meant to be an administrator; he was not even a cartographer. Yet, the British Raj appointed him with carving up this nation and the results were diabolical and catastrophic. Armed only with tentative revenue maps that showed nothing more than the limits of taxable districts and taluks, Radcliffe set about

this mammoth task with indifference and haste. He only had thirty six days to accomplish his mission of dividing up the nation, which meant that he never had enough time to visit the rural stretches of the undivided Punjab and Bengal. He operated from the seat of the British Raj in Delhi, never even bothered to come to Kolkata, so it would be somewhat fallacious and naïve to expect him to visit North Bengal and take stalk of the situation. The ramifications of such con-job proved to be too bloody and gory for the rural people of these two provinces, especially Hindus and Muslims who found themselves on the wrong sides of the Radcliffe line and overnight lost most of their economic resources and landholdings. This precipitated a decades' long migrant crisis, especially in the Bengal section of the Radcliffe Line, as the borders here are porous and the transference of population was never absolute unlike in the undivided Punjab province. North Bengal bears the burden of such migrant crisis to this day and the colonial apathy of the administrators and their Indian collaborators are on of the chief reasons to blame for this.

Further evidences of lackluster policy-making and its shoddy implementation were on display when, the Radcliffe Commission pretty much conceded that the border that they were coming up with should at best be treated as 'tentative' and the prevailing wisdom was that the two new countries would later on a later date 'agree to a mutual frontier based on people's wishes'.

After Partition, the Radcliffe Line had left a murky distinction between the newly created independent India and what was then called East Pakistan. Later, the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation war ended with East Pakistan breaking away from Pakistan and becoming an independent nation. In the aftermath of the war it was estimated that over three million people died in Bangladesh, and nearly ten million Bengali refugees crossed the border into Indian Territory. (Source: *Midnight's Borders: A People's History of Modern India*, 2021 by Suchitra Vijayan)

The Mutability of Crises:

It would now be useful to list out the various ways in the border crisis has unfolded in the rural plains of North Bengal, which are as follows:

- Due to the negligent border planning and shoddy execution, places like Boda, Paatgram, Tetuliya, Bhurungamari, Jaldhaka and Domar were never really included in the Indian Territory. All these places were Rajbanshi dominated and they held the political sway over there and yet, these places were given to the newly formed state of Pakistan.

- The exclusion of the Tetuliya block meant that the districts like Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri got cut off from Southern Bengal; one has to traverse through Kishanganj of Bihar to actually get to Kolkata from the distant parts of North Bengal, which is a logistical nightmare.
- The Indian state would have never had to deal with the enclave crisis and territorial disputes, if places like Dimla, Hatibandha, Gaibandha and Vurumari were included in 1947 in India. This would have saved the residents of Indian Enclaves an enormous amount of grief and would have accorded them all the constitutional rights right from 1947.
- The brutal oppression and state apathy that the people of North Bengal felt since 1947 have fostered a sense of marginalization and disenchantment. This has created the problem of insurgency in North-Eastern India and the Indian state have found it very hard to contain these separatist and often violent movements in those provinces.
- The Radcliffe Line had far-reaching consequences and ramifications. It soon manifested itself into various problems like the Adverse Possession Problem, The Indo-Bangladesh Water disputes and the Teesta Water-Division Discord. It took the Indian State a significant amount of time in the late 1980s and 90s to solve these obstacles, which did not really help the economic cause of the people of North Bengal. It certainly made matters worse for the East Bengali migrants who found it incredibly hard to get an economic head start amid all these geo-political anomalies and their socio-economic fall-outs.
- In a desperate bid to keep the vast territorial area of North Bengal into India, many political leaders in the 1940s took it upon themselves to make the various tribes living here, Hindus. Before such attempts were carried out, tribes such as the Santhals, Oraons, Mundas identified as animists. In the 1941 census, all these tribes identified themselves as Hindus. Such proselytization was taken out on community level, which meant that scriptural Hinduism replaced animism and pantheism among the tribal population. This pushed the tribal people away from their indigenous culture, something that was already in dire straits.

Conclusion:

All these are the ugly manifestations of a border crisis that could have easily been avoided in 1947. The Radcliffe Line is nothing more than a Cartographic

Catastrophe. Too many people in North Bengal have suffered because of the indiscretion of an incompetent Englishman and the Indian Republic have hardly risen to the occasion and provided any meaningful and long-lasting solutions to ease the afflictions of the survivors of Partition. It remains a blot on the socialist democratic ethos of India and the region of North Bengal has paid dearly because of it.

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