



Manifestation of Dharma through Lokanatya: An Analytical Study of Kushan and Gambhira Traditions of North Bengal

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Abstract- Folk theatre is an inseparable component of folk culture, reflects the collective identity, religious beliefs, ethical values, and social experiences of a community. In North Bengal, Lokanatya or folk theatre not only exists as a powerful medium of entertainment, but also a significant cultural tool for transmitting religious ideas, moral principles, and social responsibilities to the masses. The concept of Dharma in the Indian cultural context reaches far beyond the boundaries of institutional religion and incorporates ethical behaviour, social harmony, moral responsibility, familial responsibilities and the preservation of collective values. This paper focuses on the reflection of Dharma through selected folk theatre traditions of North Bengal, namely, Kushan Pala of Cooch Behar and Gambhira of Malda districts of West Bengal. Kushan Pala represents Rama, Sita, Lav, Kush and others and through these narratives the performers embody the idea of Dharma, on the other hand Gambhira presents Lord Shiva and Dharma Thakur and incorporates them in social context. The study also mentions some other performances to get a glimpse of the broader religious dimensions of folk performative traditions of the region. It adopts a qualitative and analytical methodology. Theoretical lenses of Richard Schechner's Performance Theory and Victor Turner's concept of Communitas have been used to analyse performances.

Keywords- Lokanatya, Dharma, Kushan Pala, Gambhira, North Bengal, Performance Studies, Religious Consciousness, Folk Tradition

I. Introduction

The origin and development of folk theatre are integral part of cultural evolution of human civilization. From the ancient times, human beings desired to articulate their experiences, emotions, beliefs, and collective understanding of life through various forms of artistic creativity. Music, dance, storytelling, and dramatic performances emerged as important cultural practices through which communities preserved their memories, values, and worldview. Lokanatya or folk culture is one of such performative traditions that originates through lived experiences of generations. The term Loknatya can be divided into two sections Lok and Natya. Lok means ordinary



people, Natya refers to theatre. So, Lokanatya refers to the theatrical performances which survived for hundreds of years among the masses. Unlike written theatrical traditions, folk theatre does not have any written script. It is primarily oral in nature and transmits through participation and continuous interaction among performers and spectators. It reflects the social realities, religious beliefs, moral values, and cultural imagination of rural communities.

North Bengal occupies a significant position in the cultural landscape of Bengal due to its rich and diverse natural, cultural and political landscape as well as multifaceted folk traditions. The region has preserved various forms of folk theatre, including Kushan Pala, Dotara Pala, Gambhira, Alkap, Dhamgan, Khan Gan, and Natua Pala. These traditions are not merely artistic performances, these function as living cultural institutions through which communities communicate knowledge, preserve collective memory, and negotiate their social and religious identities.

Religion occupies an important position within these folk performances. However, religious expression in folk theatre cannot be understood merely as the propagation of rituals or theological ideas. Rather, folk theatre transforms religious narratives into meaningful social experiences. Through songs, dialogues, dramatic enactments, and audience participation, concepts such as morality, duty, devotion, justice, and social responsibility become accessible to ordinary people.

In the Indian cultural context, the concept of Dharma possesses a wider significance. It does not refer only to religious faith but also indicates the principles that sustain individual morality, social order, and collective harmony. Folk theatre becomes an important medium through which this broader understanding of Dharma is communicated and preserved.

Among the various folk theatre traditions of North Bengal, Kushan Pala and Gambhira represent two distinctive yet interconnected manifestations of Dharma. Kushan Pala, rooted in the narratives of the Ramayana, presents Dharma through ideals of righteousness, devotion, sacrifice, and moral duty. Gambhira, influenced by Shaivite traditions and the worship of Dharma Thakur, extends the meaning of Dharma into the sphere of social awareness, ethical reflection, and collective responsibility. Therefore, this paper attempts to analyse how Dharma is manifested through these two significant folk theatre traditions and how they contribute to the formation of religious and cultural consciousness among the people of North Bengal.

II. Review of Literature

The study of folk culture and folk theatre in Bengal has a long academic tradition. Scholars have explored folk performances from historical, sociological, anthropological, and literary perspectives. Dr. Ashutosh Bhattacharya Banglar Lok Sahitya and others remain important for understanding the structure, evolution, and



social significance of Bengali folk traditions. His studies on Bengali folk literature and folk performance highlight the relationship between rural communities, oral traditions, and cultural expressions. Apart from these Charu Chandra Sanyal's *The Rajbanshis of North Bengal* is another important work. These Scholars of Bengali folk culture have generally emphasised that folk theatre is not merely a form of entertainment but a repository of collective memory and social experience. These studies reveal how folk performances preserve religious beliefs, local histories, social values, and community identities through oral transmission. However, most of the earlier studies have primarily focused on the descriptive documentation, classification, and regional characteristics of folk theatre traditions. Although the religious elements of these performances have been discussed, the concept of Dharma as a dynamic performative phenomenon requires further exploration. The present study attempts to move beyond a descriptive approach and examines how religious consciousness is created, transmitted, and transformed through performance. By applying the theoretical insights of Performance Studies, particularly Richard Schechner's concept of performance (Schechner,32) and Victor Turner's idea of *Communitas*, (Turner,126-27) this research analyses folk theatre as a living cultural process where religious narratives interact with social realities.

III. Conceptualising Dharma in Folk Performance

The concept of Dharma occupies a central position in Indian philosophical and cultural traditions. However, Dharma cannot be understood merely as a synonym for religion or ritual practice. It represents a wider ethical and social principle that includes duty, righteousness, moral responsibility, justice, and harmony.

Within folk culture, Dharma often emerges through stories, songs, rituals, and performances. Unlike philosophical texts that discuss Dharma in an abstract manner, folk theatre presents it through human experiences and relatable narratives. The struggles of characters, their moral choices, devotion, sacrifice, and responsibilities towards society become mediums through which communities understand the meaning of Dharma.

In North Bengal's folk theatre traditions, Dharma operates as a cultural value system. Through performances, communities not only remember religious narratives but also interpret their relevance in contemporary social life. Therefore, Dharma in Lokanatya can be understood as a performed cultural consciousness rather than merely a religious doctrine.

IV. Research Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative, analytical, and interpretative research methodology to examine the manifestation of Dharma through North Bengal's folk



theatre traditions. Since folk theatre is primarily an oral and performative tradition, the research depends on both primary and secondary sources.

V. Theoretical Framework

The present study is primarily guided by Richard Schechner's theoretical approach to performance. Schechner argues that performance extends beyond the boundaries of conventional theatre and includes rituals, cultural practices, and everyday social actions. His concept of "restored behaviour" explains how cultural actions are repeatedly performed, preserved, modified, and transmitted across generations (Schechner, 34). From this perspective, North Bengal's folk theatre traditions can be understood as dynamic cultural performances where religious narratives are continuously recreated. Although forms such as Kushan Pala and Gambhira are rooted in traditional religious frameworks, performers often modify dialogues, expressions, and themes according to contemporary social contexts. Thus, folk theatre does not simply preserve the past; it actively reconstructs cultural meanings in the present.

Victor Turner's concept of *Communitas* provides another significant framework for analysing folk theatre. According to Turner, ritual and collective performances create moments of social unity where ordinary social differences are temporarily reduced.

The asar or performance space of North Bengal's folk theatre creates such a collective environment. During performances, performers and audiences participate together in a shared emotional and cultural experience. The boundaries between performer and spectator become flexible through direct interaction, humour, songs, and spontaneous responses (Turner, 126-127). This communal participation plays an important role in creating religious consciousness. The audience does not remain a passive receiver; rather, it becomes an active participant in the cultural process through which Dharma is experienced and transmitted.

VI. Kushan Pala: Manifestation of Dharma through Ramayana and Moral Ideals

Kushan Pala, primarily associated with the Cooch Behar region, represents one of the most significant religious folk theatre traditions of North Bengal. The narrative foundation of Kushan Pala is deeply connected with the Ramayana. Stories such as Lav-Kush, Ramer Banabas, and Lakshmaner Shaktishel form the central themes of this performance tradition. However, Kushan Pala is not merely a dramatic reproduction of epic narratives. It transforms the moral universe of the Ramayana into a cultural experience accessible to rural communities. The characters of Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana represent ideals of truth, duty, sacrifice, devotion, and righteousness. The performance structure strengthens this transmission of Dharma. The Geedal or lead singer narrates the story through songs, while other performers contribute through



acting, dialogue, and humour. The presence of the Doyari creates interaction with the audience and connects the sacred narrative with everyday human emotions. Through this process, the abstract ideals of Dharma become concrete and meaningful. The audience does not merely listen to a religious story; it experiences moral values through performance. Therefore, Kushan Pala represents Dharma primarily through mythological narratives, ethical ideals, and devotional consciousness.

Gambhira: Manifestation of Dharma through Social Consciousness and Human Values
Gambhira, one of the most significant folk theatre traditions of Malda district of North Bengal, represents a different dimension of Dharma. Unlike Kushan Pala, which primarily communicates religious ideals through epic narratives, Gambhira transforms religious consciousness into a medium of social reflection and ethical awareness. The origin of Gambhira is associated with Shaivite traditions and the worship of Shiva and Dharma Thakur. The religious foundation of this performance creates a sacred atmosphere; however, its thematic concerns extend far beyond ritualistic devotion. Through songs, dialogues, satire, and dramatic representation, Gambhira addresses various social issues and human concerns.

A distinctive feature of Gambhira is the conversational structure between characters, particularly the interaction between the grandfather or Nana and grandson Nati figures in many performances. Through this humorous yet critical dialogue, performers discuss contemporary social problems, moral decline, injustice, corruption, and community issues. The divine presence of Shiva functions as a symbolic framework through which human actions and social conditions are evaluated. In this context, Dharma in Gambhira does not remain confined to religious observance. It becomes associated with social responsibility, justice, compassion, and collective welfare. The performers use religious symbolism to encourage people to reflect upon their duties towards society.

Therefore, Gambhira represents Dharma as a living social ethic, where spirituality and social consciousness become interconnected. It demonstrates that religious awareness in folk culture is not separated from everyday human experience but deeply connected with the challenges and realities of community life.

Other Religious Manifestations in North Bengal Lokanatya

Although Kushan Pala and Gambhira are the primary focus of this study, several other folk theatre traditions of North Bengal also contribute to the formation of religious consciousness.

Dhamgan, also known as Pachali, Palatia, or Mukha Khel, contains strong religious and mythological elements. Traditionally associated with religious gatherings, these performances gradually expanded beyond ritual contexts and incorporated folk narratives. Man Pachali, based on mythological and devotional themes, reflects values of devotion, faith, and moral responsibility. The folk theatre traditions of North and South Dinajpur include performances based on Goddess worship. These forms express



the power of divine forces, the victory of righteousness over evil, and the protective role of the deity within collective belief systems. Natua Pala, based on Radha-Krishna narratives, represents the Vaishnav devotional tradition. Through the portrayal of divine love and devotion, it creates a spiritual experience connecting human emotions with religious faith. These traditions demonstrate the diversity of religious expression within North Bengal's folk theatre culture.

VII. Comparative Analysis

A minute analysis demonstrates that Dharma in North Bengal's folk theatre operates through multiple dimensions. In Kushan Pala, Dharma appears as an ethical and spiritual ideal derived from sacred narratives. In Gambhira, it emerges as a principle of social responsibility and moral reflection. Both traditions, however, share a common function: they preserve and transmit cultural values through collective performance.

VIII. Conclusion

The study of North Bengal's folk theatre traditions reveals that Lokanatya functions as a significant cultural medium through which Dharma is continuously created, performed, and transmitted. Rather than being limited to religious rituals or theological ideas, Dharma in folk theatre becomes a lived experience connected with morality, social responsibility, and collective identity. Kushan Pala and Gambhira represent two important dimensions of this process. Kushan Pala manifests Dharma through the mythological and ethical universe of the Ramayana, presenting ideals of duty, sacrifice, devotion, and righteousness. Gambhira, rooted in Shaivite traditions, expands the meaning of Dharma by transforming religious consciousness into social criticism, ethical reflection, and collective responsibility. Through the theoretical perspectives of Richard Schechner and Victor Turner, it becomes evident that folk theatre is not a static cultural object but a dynamic performance practice. It continuously reconstructs religious and social meanings through interaction between performers, audiences, and communities. Thus, North Bengal's Lokanatya demonstrates that Dharma survives not only through scriptures and religious institutions but also through the collective performances of ordinary people. These folk traditions serve as living cultural spaces where religious beliefs, moral values, and social consciousness converge.

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