

From Jatra to Proscenium: Epical Narrative Architectures and the Evolution of the Folk Chorus in Modern Bengali Drama

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Abstract

This paper investigates the formal and structural cross-pollination between indigenous performance modes and Westernized theatrical architectures in Bengal, focusing on the transition from the open-air Jatra tradition to the urban proscenium stage. Historically characterized by its immersive, four-sided performance platform (asar) and dynamic community engagement, Jatra relied on an epical narrative architecture that challenged Eurocentric conventions of linear plotting and realistic dramaturgy. A central element of this indigenous system was the folk chorus, which underwent a profound structural transformation as it adapted to modern theatrical formats. This study traces the evolutionary trajectory of this choral device, mapping its journey from the collective, group-singing Juri, which provided lyrical commentary and structural breathing room for actors, into the singular, highly mobile character of the Bibek (Conscience). Operating with complete temporal and spatial freedom, the Bibek emerged as an active narrative agent capable of stepping across the imaginary fourth wall to offer subaltern critiques, effectively anticipating European avant-garde alienation techniques by several decades. Through a qualitative, historico-dramaturgical analysis of primary texts by seminal twentieth-century playwrights like Utpal Dutt and Badal Sircar, this paper explores how post-colonial theater practitioners systematically weaponized these hybrid performance models. By grafting episodic folk architectures onto the rigid, directional framework of the enclosed proscenium, these dramaturgs sought to decolonize the modern Indian stage. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates that the strategic reclamation of the folk chorus serves as a potent tool of resistance, subverting colonial scopic regimes and transforming traditional moral voices into radical vehicles for contemporary socio-political critique.

Keywords

Bengali drama, jatra folk tradition, folk chorus (Bibek), proscenium stage staging, post-colonial dramaturgy, decolonizing Indian theater.