



Kushan Gan as a Study of Mnemonics, Tradition and Performance: A Reportage

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Abstract

Human history can be mapped based on the dominant modes of communication via cultural form. These cultural forms are essentially mnemonic in nature. The articulation of generally imparted memories happens through foregrounding the body. Various types of performances are an articulation of memories of generations as they disseminate through the media of speech, gestural, and performative or oral compositions. North Bengal (the north-western part of Bangladesh and the northern part of West Bengal) is a storehouse of rich cultures and folk performative traditions. This place is dominated by the *Rajbanshi* community and the diversity of their folk songs, folk dances, and folk theatres. Among these, one of the oldest enriched folk theatre forms is *Kushan Gan*. This form of theatre is a means to portray stories to the audience in the *Jatra* or drama format. The thematic stories largely revolve around the great epic of Indian Mythology – *Ramayana*. This performative tradition of North Bengal belongs to the fundamental religious belief system of the *Rajbanshi* community and how they eulogize the stories of *Ramayana* through gestures, speech, and performances. Although this art form is now on the verge of extinction, in the era of digital media, this folk theatre strives to evolve continuously with the artists' constant struggles and hardships to keep this art form alive. This paper attempts to highlight the narrativity and musicality in the performative traditions of *Kushan Gan*. It will also delve into the plight of the *Kushan* artists in preserving *Kushan Gan* i.e archiving memory. This paper also aims to study the origin and mode of *Kushan Gan* and the continuity and changes in the presentation style of *Kushan Gan*. This article will examine the taboos related to the female participation in this theatre form and how fluid *Rajbanshis* are becoming gradually based on the socio-cultural scenario.

Keywords: Performing Traditions, Folk Theatre, Mnemonics, Ramayana, Struggling Artist

Introduction

“*Gan er aarek nam holo gyaan (Another name of music is knowledge)*”

- Bashinath Dakua, Kushan Artist¹

A traditional conceptualization of music and songs, is that they originate in the mind of the composer and as such both music and singing is believed to be an art that one learns and cognizes purely “in the mind”². Bashinath Dakua a Kushan artist, acknowledges the impact of composing music calling it his “*moner khorak*” (a joy to the mind of the composer). However, not only do Kushan songs bringing joy to the composer, they also seek to impart knowledge and attune the morals and norms of the auditor.

Folk theatre in India is a unique blend of various artistic forms which draw upon a wide variety of elements, including but not limited to, dancing, pantomime, versification, drama, stylized speech, and spectacle. Moreover, each form of folk theatre has its deep root in local identity, dialect, and way of life. Folk theatre's existence depends on its tendency of becoming a method of expression of everyday joy and sorrow. The northern region of West Bengal is the hub of various tribal populations and the storehouse of their respective folk culture. One of the dominant groups of tribal people in northern West Bengal is the community of the Rajbanshis. In the 15th Century, after a day's toil, the tribal people used to gather around the village centre and engage themselves in singing and dancing to relieve themselves of the boredom of everyday life and also to connect with one another. The Kushan Gan, which closely conforms to the tenets of dramatic performance, replete with singing, dancing, and music is, however, still called “Gaan” or songs, and not merely drama. In this regard, one may draw parallels between Kushan Gan and *Jatra*³. Another important reason, why Kushan Gan is thought of more as a song rather than play-acting is because it mostly derives its plot from *Krittibasi Ramayana*, or the Bengali transcreation of the Valmiki epic⁴. This article aims to analyse the various tenets of this lyrical folk drama Kushan Gaan, as it is an intrinsic and intangible part of North Bengal's heritage. This article seeks to uncover how this relatively unpopular folk art is a writing back to the canonical epic tradition of the Sanskrit *Ramayana* by Valmiki.

The Origins of Kushan Gan and its Literary Aspects:

Researchers and scholars of folk-art forms are of the belief that the origin of Kushan Gan was the erstwhile Koch kingdom — an area that pans over the Northern region of West Bengal, Lower Assam, and Northern Bangladesh⁵. Although the Koch people were believed to subscribe to such religious



faith which was largely animistic in nature, they eventually drew upon such religious rituals which was a mix of the two strands of Hindu religious belief, namely Vaishnavism and Shaivism⁶.

There are a few distinctions in the etymology of the term *Kushan*. —Bashinath Dakua says that Kushan Gan is a musical saga created by the two sons of Lord Rama, namely Lab and Kush, as described in *The Ramayana*⁷.

It is interesting to note that the songs or music used in this theatrical form — which forms an integral part of this theatrical form — is not limited by strict codes of a music sheet or a written manuscript. Rather, they are free-flowing and suited to the sections of the *Ramayana* which is being narrated during a specific performance. However, the absence of a written manuscript has come to have important bearings on this form of folk art, as it faces extinction in our contemporary times. Since the tradition of the Kushan Gan is handed over from one generation of performers to the next through oral renditions and mnemonics, it lacks any surrogate archive which may enable it to be accessed through ex-situ conservation techniques. Thus, disseminated through speech and gesture as a mnemo-cultural medium, this theatre form of North Bengal is also a kind of medium through which a particular culture articulates its distinctiveness and qualitative cultural singularity.

As stated earlier, that subject matter of Kushan Gan is broadly religious in nature, as it is largely based on eulogizing Laba and Kush. A recurrent subject of Kushan Gan is the creation of Kush. Although distinctions maybe observed between one rendition of a Kushan Gan from another, though they maybe based on the same story, one fact remains common among all of them –t Kushan Gans are usually narrated from the point of view of Laba and Kush and rarely from the perspective of other important characters of the *Ramayana* such as Rama or Laxmana. In this regard, Kushan Gan endeavours to give voice to who have been overshadowed or neglected in the Sanskrit epic. Thus, in Bashinath Dakua geedal's version, in *Uttar Kanda* of *Ramayana*, Sita, after her exile from Ayodhya, is found to have taken shelter in the ashram of Sage Valmiki⁸. One day she leaves to fetch water, leaving her young son Laba in the care of the Sage. The Sage was however engrossed in meditation and he did not realize that Laba had left the ashram and followed his mother to the river. After his meditation, he realizes that Laba is missing. He is mortified about giving Sita this news. So, he takes some *kashiya/kush* or haystacks and creates a statue in Laba's resemblance. Then he infuses it with by using his magical powers. After some time, Valmiki sees Laba returning with Sita so he attempts to kill the boy he had given life to. Sita stops Valmiki from killing the boy and names him Kush. From that day onwards, Sita raised both boys as her own. Laba and Kush are therefore the rightful progenitors of this *Ramayana*

Gan, and it is believed that by listening to Sage Valmiki, and humming after him, that they learned these songs.

লবের হাতে ছিল তালযন্ত্র

কুশে নিল বীণা

দুই ভাই চলিয়া গেল অযোধ্যা বলিয়া

There was tabla in Laba's hand,

Kush took bena,

And two brothers went on humming

Some others believe that “Kushan” means “to wipe away evil” (“*Ku*” – evil and “*shan*” – to clean by wiping). This is consistent with the ulterior aim of Kushan songs, which is the eradication of injustice or evil and celebrating the triumph of righteousness over dishonour.

Area of Research and Methodology:

In preparing this research paper I have taken the help of a few research papers, books, and articles related to Kushan Gan and the Rajbanshi culture. To get authentic information about the art form Kushan Gan, I contacted Bashinath Dakua (65 years) [picture on the right]. Bashinath Dakua is one of the prominent Kushan artists of our time. I went to his home which is located in Salbari, Nagurhat in Tufanganj of Coochbehar district. There I met him and I collected the data with the help of a questionnaire to understand his point of view. Then I interviewed audiences and tried to analyse the dichotomous point of view of the performer and the audience. The aforementioned interaction is of paramount significance to the present paper, and it is out of this interaction, that the following perspectives were gained.



Artist Bashinath Dakua as Laba, holding a bena in his hand. (Photo by Mousumi Sen)

The Kushan Gan artist, Bashinath Dakua, resides in Tufanganj in Coochbehar district. He is of the firm belief, as mentioned above, that the act of composing music provides great joy and impetus to the mind of the composer, and thereby he calls his art a “*moner khorak*” (a joy to the mind of the

composer). Kushan artists from North Bengal are deprived both socially and culturally. Though they gain respect as artists they have to face grave economic hardships in sustaining their mind and bodies. Bashinath Dakua talks about his journey of becoming a Kushan artist which started at the age of eight when he left school. He had to provide for his family, so he could not even complete his elementary education. As it is the case with many folk artists- lack of opportunity or financial constraints in the family forces them to drop out of the school and earn for the family. Thus, the least literate section of the population takes up this practice of performing these folk-art forms. As they are unaware of a lot of changes in audio-visual formats and entertainment means, for this a lot of opportunities are curtailed. However, it is the need of the hour that if these folk artists, there is an urgent need to adapt themselves, as well as their artform to contemporaneous needs, such as they must learn new advertisement techniques such as using social media and YouTube and to adopt modern innovative skills and take recourse to electronic media. Bashinath Geedal at present has two groups- one for the business with 24 members and another for government sponsored programmes with 15 artists. Bashinath says that artists earn Rs 500-700 per show. This is their only profession and therefore, their only source of income. In 2017, a new flagship project namely 'Lokprasar Prakalpo' was introduced by the Department of Information and Cultural Affairs with the inspiration of the State Government. The objectives of this project is to bestow dignity to the folk artists, to revive nearly- extinct folk-forms of art and to uplift socio economic conditions of the artists associated with the folk culture. Hence, in 2019 Bashinath Geedal has begun to receive a meagre sum of Rs. 1000 per month as a government allowance solely for his art.

Kushan Gan Performers: Roles of Characters, Musical Equipment, Use of Makeup and Staging:

There is a distinguished hierarchy in Kushan Gan. The troupes of folk artists who are integral to a performance usually consist of around twenty people. The main performer, narrator, or leader of a particular group is known as "*Geedal*" or "*Mool*". He enacts the role of Laba or Rama's elder son. The second important performer in terms of ranking is the *Doari*. He assumes the role of Kush or Rama's younger son. While the *Geedal* narrates and sings in Bangla, the *Doari* translates it into the local Rajbanshi dialect. This duo directs the audience through the performance, providing context and explanations as necessary. The *Geedal*'s followers or supporting singers-cum-actors are known as *Diana Pail*. Some of the most important musical instruments which were used included the harmonium, clapping cymbals, and a flute. Musicians who played these instruments, were given specialized names, such as the harmonium master plays the harmonium, the "bain" would play the clapping cymbals, while the flute player would simply be known as "aar banshi". All three of these musicians would sit at the centre. *Chukris* would be found dancing, centring around them. Earlier, Up

until the 20th century, boys used to cross-dress as girls and they were called *chukras*. But nowadays, there is a lack of interest among the boys in joining these groups. So, girls themselves play this role now, and they are known as “*chukris*”. There is minimal use of props, makeup, and special costumes in this art form. Dressing remains limited to Bengali-style clothing: *dhoti*, *kurta*, *chador*, *saree*, and simple ornaments.

Instrumental music is one of the many attractions of Kushan Gan. Music supports and gives accompaniment to the *Geedal* during narration and to the *Chukris* while they dance. The major instrument is one steel-stringed *Bena* along with a bow-shaped *Chhar* which is threaded with horsetail hair. Due to the extensive use of musical instruments in this kind of folk narration, it is also commonly referred to as *Bena Kushan*, which suggests that Laba and Kush will be singing and playing the *bena*. It is commonly believed that the wood and bamboo used to make *Bena* is from



BENA (Photo by Mousumi Sen)

the tomb Rajbanshi people make after burying a corpse. Apart from the *bena*, another instrument used extensively is a bowed instrument – *Sharinda* (*sharinga*). Over the years we can observe the inclusion of Western instruments like the Harmonium and Violin which provide background music during emotional sequences. During the course of my interviewing the Kushan Gan artists, it was revealed to me that the inclusion of certain Western instruments had become necessary over the passage of years, as it helped attract the attention of the audience, since these instruments sounded catchy to their ears. Thus, from the 2000s, it could be observed that various western instruments being played besides the regular instruments used during the performance, such as the *Aarbanshi* (bamboo flute), *Khol* (double-head drum), *kartal* (clapping cymbals), *dotara* (a two-string instrument). However, I would take this opportunity to point out, that the Kushan Gan artists do not put much thought into their performances, which could enable them to compete, toe-to-toe with other popular audio-visual forms. are also there. The stage of Kushan or Ramayana Gan is usually located within the common space in a village or the spacious courtyard of a private residence. Although a particular group of artists performing a Kushan Gan can be hired by clubs or individuals as well, yet they are mostly seen to perform for a large gathering. Kushan Gan is performed throughout the year. But the shows increase in Autumn and Spring. People arrange these programs in their houses on the occasion of a wedding ceremony. It is



also performed at public fairs and religious festivals. When it is performed in a village, people flock to enjoy these performances as most of the folk performances are free. The sole hope of employment in the off-season remains for the artists is government-sponsored programmes, which, however, are also very few in number.

Structure of the Performance: Thirteen Episodes

Every performance of Kushan Gan commences with an invocation to Ram Chandra and this part of the performance is called *Aasor Vandana* which is a formal prayer to Lord Rama, seeking his blessings, so that the present performance may be completed without any untoward incident. This is followed by a brief episode from the *Ramayana*.

As an exemplification of “Asor Bandana”, I cite here from Bashinath Geedal’s *Aasor Vandana*⁹:

The “Asor Bandana” begins when Bashinath Geedal stands up with the bena in his hand, and begins to sing and walk around the stage, so as to capture the attention of the audience:

ও এসো রাম, ওহো রাম, বন্দন
তোমারে, একবার এসো রাম
আমার আসরে।

ও এসো রাম, ওহো রাম, বন্দন
তোমারে ,একবার এসো রাম
আমার আসরে।।

ওগো রাম, ওগো রামচন্দ্র
আচ্ছা বলি বেশ, ও মোরি রাম
ভায়ারে

এই যে রাম , ভজ রাম, চিন্তাই
রাম, রাম রাম করো সার
আরে আয় আয়, আরে যে
নামে তলিয়া যাবে এ ভবসাগর।

এসো রাম, ও রাম বন্দনোং
তোমারে

একবার এসো ও রাম, আমার
আসরে।

O Lord Rama, O Rama, invoking you to come to my
gathering once.

O Lord, O Rama worshipping you to join in my
gathering.

O Rama, O Ramachandra

Oh let me sing, o my brother Rama

Here we are hymning your name, thinking about you,
and we are muttering Rama’s name

Please descend and join, this whole world will sink in
your name.

O Rama! I Call on you, O Rama worshipping you to
come once in my gathering.

The Geedal now invokes Rama to descend on earth and join everyone in his gathering. The rhyme scheme of the song is “*dotala*” – a staccato and fast-moving rhyme scheme typical to Kushan Gans.



Soon, Bashinath is joined by the *Doari*, and the two of them move around the stage while singing together. They are eventually joined by other musicians who sit in a circle in the centre of the stage while the *chukris* wait in a line to join them:

ও এসো রাম, ওহো রাম, বন্দন তোমারে, একবার এসো রাম আমার
আসরে।

ও এসো রাম, ওহো রাম, বন্দন তোমারে, একবার এসো রাম আমার
আসরে।।

ওগো রাম, ওগো রামচন্দ্র

আচ্ছা বলি বেশ, ও মোরি রাম ভায়ারে

এই যে রাম, ভজ রাম, চিন্তাই রাম, রাম রাম করো সার

আরে আয় আয়, আরে যে নামে তলিয়া যাবে এ ভবসাগর।

এসো রাম, ও রাম বন্দনোং তোমারে

একবার এসো ও রাম, আমার আসরে।

O Lord Rama, O Rama, invoking you to come to
my gathering once.

O Lord, O Rama worshipping you to join in my
gathering.

O Rama, O Ramachandra

Oh let me sing, o my brother Rama

Here we are hymning your name, thinking about
you, and we are muttering Rama's name
Please descend and join, this whole world will sink
in your name.

O Rama! I Call on you, O Rama worshipping you
to come once in my gathering.

Then the *Geedal* narrates the main theme of “*Saptakhanda Ramayana*” and starts singing while the *chukris* accompany him in dance¹⁰.

আরে আদিকাণ্ডে রামের জন্ম বিবাহ সীতার
আরে আদিকাণ্ডে রামের জন্ম বিবাহ সীতার,
অযোধ্যাকাণ্ডেতে রাম ত্যাজি রাজ্যভার আরি আয় হায়
অযোধ্যাকাণ্ডেতে রাম ত্যাজি রাজ্যভার আরি আয় হায়;
আরে অরণ্যাকাণ্ডেতে সীতারে হরিল রাবণ
আরে অরণ্যাকাণ্ডেতে সীতারে হরিল রাবণ
আরে কিঙ্কিয়াকাণ্ডেতে বালিবধ সুগীবের মিলন
আরে কিঙ্কিয়াকাণ্ডেতে বালিবধ সুগীবের মিলন
আরে সুন্দরকাণ্ডেতে হইলো সাগর বাঁধন
আরে সুন্দরকাণ্ডেতে হইলো সাগর বাঁধন আরি হায় হায় হায়।
লঙ্কাকাণ্ডেতে উভয়পক্ষে রণ
লঙ্কাকাণ্ডেতে উভয়পক্ষে রণ আরি হায় হায়।
আরে উত্তরকাণ্ডেতে অবশেষে মরি হায়রে হায়
আরে পাতালের মা সীতা পাতালে করে প্রবেশ, মরি হায় হায়
হায়রে বিধিরে ও বিধি হায় হায়
ওই আমি বৃন্দাবনে যাবোগো কবে নিতাইয়ের দয়া হবেগো
আমি বৃন্দাবনে যাবোগো কবে নিতাইয়ের দয়া হবেগো।।

In Adi Kanda, we encounter Rama's
birth and his marriage to Sita,
In Ayodhya Kanda, Rama gave up the
burden of a kingdom
In Aranya Kanda Sita was abducted by
Ravana,
In Kishkindhya Kanda we encountered
the slaughter of Bali and Sugreeb got
his kingdom back.
In Lanka Kanda both the alliance
fought,
Finally in Uttara Kanda, the daughter
of the earth submerges inside the
earth.
O Fate!
I will end up in Vrindhaban when
Nitai would want me to,
I will go to Vrindhaban when Nitai
shows his kindness.



Hereafter, the *Geedal*, the *Doari*, the *Diana Pail*, and the *Chukris* all stand in front of the audience, while the *Geedal* announces the episode of that day. The *Geedal* offers a brief overview of the epic *Ramayana* in Bengali:

Look, everyone! The story of *Ramayana* consists of seven cantos—*Adi*, *Ayodhya*, *Aranya*, *Kishkindhya*, *Lanka*, *Sundara*, and *Uttara*. Here is an example from *Aranya Kando* which describes the abduction of *Sita* (*Sita Horon*). Recently *Rama* with his wife *Sita* and brother *Laxman* came to *Panchaboti* forest. They built a hut and started living. One day *Sita* saw a magical deer...

সবাই শুনোগো, আমাদের রামায়ণে সাতটি খন্ড, আদি, অযোধ্যা, অরণ্য, কিষ্কিন্ধ্যা, লঙ্কা, সুন্দর ও উত্তরা। অরণ্যকাণ্ডে সীতা মায়ের হরণের গল্প বর্ণিত, সদ্য রাম পঞ্চবটি জঙ্গলে স্ত্রী সীতা ও ভাই লক্ষ্মণের সাথে এসেছেন। এক কুটিলে তারা থাকা শুরু করেছেন। একদিন সীতা মায়ার হরিণ দেখতে পেলো...

It would not be completely out of context to mention herein, that *Bashinath Dakua* narrated this story when I interviewed him. He gave a demo of his performances. This interview happened on 18th July 2021 around 12pm.

The narration is then suddenly interrupted by a dialogue between *Sita*, *Rama*, and *Laxmana*:

সীতা – “দেওর লক্ষ্মণ, প্রভু, এই যে একটা স্বর্ণহরিণ, দেখছো? হরিণটাকে আমাকে ধরে এনে দাওনা, এই

হরিণটাই হবে আমার খেলার সাথী।”

Brother *Laxmana*, Lord, and see there's a golden deer, please catch it for me, this deer will be my playmate

লক্ষ্মণ- “না! দাদা না, এ হচ্ছে মায়ার হরিণ, কোনোদিন স্বর্ণহরিণ হতে পারেনা, এ কোনো না কোনো মায়ার ছলনা করতে এসেছে, এই মায়ার পেছনে যাওয়া যাবেনা।”

“No brother, it's a magical deer, there is no such thing as a golden deer. Certainly, something came in this form to deceive us. We should not go after it.”

However, because of *Sita's* stubbornness, *Rama* was forced to go into the forest, to catch the golden deer, posting *Laxmana* to care for *Lady Sita*. Suddenly *Sita* and *Laxmana* heard *Rama's* loud cry for help. *Laxmana* knew someone was surely falsifying *Rama's* voice but *Sita* did not realize this, and started panicking. As *Laxmana* showed his disinterest to leave to save *Rama*, *Lady Sita* rebuked *Laxmana* as:



সীতা - লক্ষ্মণ তুই যাবিনে? তোর দাদা তুই রক্ষা করতে যাবিনে? বুঝেছি বুঝেছি তোর দাদার অবর্তমানে তুই আমাকে ভোগ করবি, তুই যাবিনে তাই না?

“Will you not go, Laxman? Oh! I understand, in your brother's absence you will exploit me, you won't go right?”

Laxmana is veritably annoyed and flabbergasted at such a rebuke, but since he respected Sita as his mother; he agrees to leave Sita, to go and aid Rama, but not before he draws a line (*Laxmana Rekha*) and requested Sita not to cross it. After his departure, Lanka's lord, Ravana came in disguise as a sage, and uttered the following lines:

রাবণ - কে আছে মা কুটির? আমি অভুক্ত সন্ন্যাসী, আমাকে এক মুষ্টি খেতে দাও, আম সাতদিন যাবৎ অন্ন খেতে পারিনি, আমি উপোষী, একটু না খেলে আমি যে মারা যাবো!

Who's inside this hut, Mother? I am a hungry sage, give me a morsel of food, I did not eat anything for seven days. If I don't get any food, I will die.

As a result, Sita invites the disguised Ravana inside the hut, but the evil Ravana politely refuses, stating that he could not enter the hut of a householder, nor partake of the food, as he fasts until he has completed his worship of his God.

সীতা - তাহলে আমার ভিক্ষা ও দেওয়া হবেনা।

Then I cannot give you any alms, for I am not permitted to leave the house.

Hearing this, Ravan was furiously outraged, and proceeded onto curse Sita, when the timely utterance of Sita, as quoted below, save the situation:

Sage please don't go, I am crossing this line to give you alms

হে প্রভূ! আপনি যাবেন না, এই আমি লক্ষ্মণরেখা পার করে ভিক্ষা দিচ্ছি...

However, as soon as Sita came out of her household, crossing the *Laxman Rekha*, Ravan grabbed Sita's hand and started laughing. He abducted Ma Sita to Lanka and there was no stopping to his laughter. Then Ram Chandra and Laxman came back and found no one in the hut. This is the summation of Sita's abduction episode in Bashinath Geedal's tone.



Socio-economic Condition of Kushan Artists

Kushan artists from North Bengal are deprived both socially and economically. Though they gain respect as artists, they have to face grave economic hardships in sustaining their mind and bodies. Bashinath Geedal at present has two groups – one for business with 24 members and another e for government-sponsored programmes with 15 artists. Bashinath says that artists earn Rs 500–700 per show. This is their only profession and therefore, their only source of income. The West Bengal State Government has started paying attention to preserving this cultural heritage. These benefits which accrue to them are owing to the new flagship project namely ‘Lokprasar Prakolpo’ has been introduced by the Department of Information and Cultural Affairs with the inspiration of Honourable chief Minister Mamata Banerjee. In the year 2017. Hence, Bashinath Geedal has begun to receive a meagre sum of Rs.1000 per month as a government allowance solely for his art, since 2019.

Inclusion of Women: We live in a patriarchal society. In the 19th and early 20th century, people used to consider these ‘gan’ or drama businesses to be derogatory, so girls belonging to good families were not supposed to join these groups or even enjoy these performances. It was argued that if women become a part of these groups they would be considered ‘fallen’ in the eyes of society and these women would lose their honour and their family’s name would be tarnished as well. To understand how women used to think about this, I talked to Shanti Roy, a woman in her 70s and a resident of Dudumari Village in Coochbehar district who eagerly enjoys these performances nowadays. She got married at an early age and it was near impossible for her to watch any of these theatrical shows in her 20s. Due to societal norms and stigmas attached to theatre viewing to female audiences and performers, her father-in-law never allowed her to even watch these shows. This is how patriarchy uses morality as a tool to restrict the mobility of women and their agency. Nevertheless, nowadays women are becoming *Kushanee* (Kushan performers) too and gaining popularity.

The near abolition of “Chokras”(Boys who used to cross-dress) . Women were not allowed to participate in the performances in the 19th and early 20th century, so boys used to take up this job. Heteronormative society would look at it as a taboo or stigmatise for a boy to cross dress and these boys would become a laughstock. So, they are losing their interest gradually and this opens up scopes for women to join and perform.

The female kushanees are also provided with Government sponsored shows as male kushanees to come forward and show equal participation in art forms like men.



Men demand to add women performers. It has a negative connotation as well. They believe if women perform then it would attract more viewers and the show would turn out to be more appealing. Although women could earn money and provide for their families and become self-reliant, this thought of patriarchal society would reduce her to nothing but a spectacle.

Conclusion:

In the wake of civilization, development, and urbanization, folk theatre is standing at a point of extinction. Although there is no end to government aids and efforts to conserve these ingenious forms of folk art, but the Geedal is of the view that it is not sufficient. Geedal points out that although he is lucky to have his contribution recognised by the government, numerous other Kushan Gan artists remain unnoticed. Furthermore, comparing Kushan Gan to another folk culture of Rajbanshi origin – Bhawaiyan – he further points out that, ““Kushan Gan is ignored by the government.”¹¹”

While there is a proper arrangement of competition of Bhawaiyan at the block, district, and state levels, Kushan Gan never gets an opportunity to compete regularly like this.

The *Geedal* is also not in favour of the modern paraphernalia of colourful costumes, musical instruments, and tools. “The old songs have heart,” he says.

The new generation seems to be disenchanted with the form, displaying no great interest in joining the tradition. When asked if his children are practicing the art form, the *Geedal* replied, “My son thinks that since his father’s life is not improving, he will also have to spend a life of poverty if he joins the troupe.”

Ramayana Gan or Kushan Gan and related art forms in the Bengali-speaking locales are esteemed styles of folk art. They attract audiences because artists meticulously understand and directly communicate with their audiences. Folk theatre portrays the people in their natural dwelling with all their dichotomy and multifarious activities. It reflects their style of speech, dance, music, behaviour, dress, humour, proverb, wit, and wisdom. It holds a rich store of mythological heroes, chivalric tales, medieval romances, social customs, beliefs, and legends.

Today Kushan Gan continues to fascinate audiences. However, it is increasingly facing stiff competition from popular media and it has become what UNESCO calls “imperilled cultural heritage”. The relationship between performers, patrons, and audiences is also changing. The cost of hiring a troupe for the patron is high whereas the salary for the performers is less and precarious. Expanding literacy seems to have diminished in traditional art and performing art. Although Bashinath Dakua is



still teaching over 100 students from neighbouring villages, the struggle to sustain forms such as Kushan Gan is becoming more acute day by day.

The government needs to play a more proactive role in preserving such endangered forms of cultural heritage. But whatever obstacles they face, Kushan performers are passionate about Kushan Gan. To them, this dramatic form plays is the nectar of life.

Acknowledgment

I express my humble and whole-hearted gratitude to Bashinath Dakua for giving his time and sharing his knowledge, information, and experience about Kushan Gan. I also express my thanks to Shanti Devi for all her valuable input.

Notes

¹ Bashinath Dakua (Kushan Artist) in discussion with the author, July 2021.

² Pereira, Andre Novais. "Music as Constructor of Identity: A Study of Koch- Rajbanshi's Kushan Gan." Centre of Koch Rajbanshi Studies and Development (December 2017): 1–11.

³ Jatra is a popular folk-theatre form of Odia, Bengali theatre, spread throughout most of Odia, Bengali speaking areas of the Indian Subcontinent, including Bangladesh and Indian states of Odisha, West Bengal, Assam and Tripura. The word Jatra means journey or going. The origin of *jatra* intrinsically a musical theatre form, is traditionally credited to the rise of Sri Chaitanya's Bhakti movement, wherein Chaitanya himself played the role Rukmini in the performance of *Rukmini Haran* (the abduction of the Charming Rukmini) from Krishna's life story, a first definite presentation of theatrical performance. Jatra plays are usually performed on stages that are open on all sides in open-air arenas. The dramatic performance itself is liberally interspersed dramatic monologues, songs and duet dance routines on folk tunes, which often serve as scene transitions and sometimes mark the end of the act.

For further reference, cross-refer: Pabitra Sarkar, "Jatra: The Popular Traditional Theatre of Bengal," *Journal of South Asian Literature* 10, no.2/4 (1975): 87-107.

⁴ The *Krittibasi Ramayan* appears to be a translation into Bengali from one or another recension of the Sanskrit text known as *Valmiki's Ramayana*. It is composed by the fifteenth-century Bengali poet Krittibas Ojha, from whom it takes its name. Written in the traditional Ramayana Pacali form of Middle Bengali literature, the *Krittibasi Ramayana* is not just a reworking of the original Indian epic, but also a vivid reflection of the society and culture of Bengal across the period of its circulation, from the Middle Ages into the Modern period. Like its model, Valmiki's *Ramayana*, the work is divided into seven books, in the case *Adikando*, *Ajodhyakando*, *Aranya Kando*, *Kishkindh Kando*, *Sundor Kando*, *Lankhakando*, and *Uttorkando*. It does not greatly alter the structure or overall plot of its source, though it does make localised alterations. For further reference, see: The Indian Quest Digital, "*The Ramayana of Bengal—Krittibasi Ramayan*", Last Modified December 26, 2017, <http://www.theindianquest.com/blog-details/TIQD-20---The-Ramayana-of-Bengal---Krittibasi-Ramayan>.

⁵ Information regarding this aspect can be found on the official website of the Daricha foundation. Please see: https://www.daricha.org//sub_genre.aspx?ID=131&Name=Kushan

⁶ Vaishnavism and Shaivism are considered to be the two strands of the Hindu religious faith, as it broadly refers to the differing beliefs in the origin of the world and the cosmos. The followers of Vaishnavism, or commonly



called Vaishnavas, belief that the Hindu God, Vishnu is the creator, and the whole cosmos is born from the lotus blooming out of the navel of Lord Vishnu. On the other hand, the believers of Shaivism believe that Lord Shiva had existed even before the cosmos was created, and therefore he is the one who had led to the creation of the world.

⁷ Bashinath Dakua (Kushan Artist) in discussion with the author, July 2021.

⁸ *Uttarkanda* is the last Book of the great epic Ramayana and it deals with the return of Rama to Ayodhya and his coronation to the throne and it also describes Sita's ordeal and the birth of Laba and Kush in Valmiki's hermitage and ends with the descriptions of the last days of Rama in the world. This is drawn from a blog by B.M. Rakesh. See:

B.M.Rakesh, "My Kannada translation of Vyasa Mahabharata", Accessed on April 12,2023.
<https://www.vyasaonline.com/about/>

⁹ A typical Kushan performance begins with a Bandana or Ashor Bandona. This is usually an invocation to Lord Rama or sometimes, the goddess Saraswati and is considered to give the space and performance an auspicious start. Everyone participates and this is traditionally performed with the players and musicians seated.

For more information on this, see:

Daricha: Window to India's Indigenous Heritage, "Kushan", Accessed April 10, 2023.
https://www.daricha.org//sub_genre.aspx?ID=131&Name=Kushan

¹⁰ *Saptakanda Ramayana* is the 14th-15th century Assamese version of the Ramayana attributed to the famous Assamese poet Madhava Kandali. It is considered to be the second translation from Sanskrit into modern regional language, preceded only by Kambar's translation into Dravidian language, Tamil and the first translation to an Indo-Aryan language. The work is also considered one of the earliest written examples of Assamese. A particular feature of this work is the non-heroic portrayal of Rama, Sita and other characters as explicitly stated by Madhav Kandali himself, which rendered the work unsuitable for religious purposes. This feature disturbed a later poet, Ananta Kandali, who was moved enough to comment on it. The first and last (Uttarkanda) cantos of Madhava Kandali's work were lost, and were later inserted by Madhavdeva and Sankardeva respectively in the 16th century. The poem has been translated into English. See:

DBpedia, "Saptakanda Ramayana", Accessed April 5, 2023.
https://dbpedia.org/page/Saptakanda_Ramayana

¹¹ Bhawaiyan, a genre of North Bengal folk song, believed to have originated in Rangpur and Coochbehar, India. The name of the folk song, generally about love between man and woman, derives from bhava (emotion). Bhawaiyan songs, however, may also be spiritual in theme as in 'fande poriya baga kande re' (The heron cries entrapped in a net), 'chhar re man bhaver khela' (O my mind, leave earthly games), etc. See:

Banglapedia, "Performing Arts: Bhawaiya", Accessed April 6, 2023.
<https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Bhawaiya>

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