

Life of a Jatra Artist - Post Advancement of Mass Media

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Abstract

Jatra was the artform, that originated in Bengal in the 15th century as part of the Bhakti movement. The devotees made mass gatherings and processions dressed as Krishna and promoting the culture, in recent times post the 19th century they became the tool promote and spread social and cultural messages. This paper investigates the life of the artists who have been performing for years as part of the art form and now that media has been seeing its highest boom, these artists do not really get a call and that has changed their livelihoods. We will see how their lives have changed as an effect of advancement of mass media and how that has left them devoid from practicing the said art form. With the urge to earn daily livelihoods they have moved away from the art and thus that has been killing the art form in West Bengal. The paper asks the question,

1. if an art form is eventually killed due to the advancement of media, is the advancement of media a good or bad thing.
2. If media has been advancing, should it kill another medium if expression or should it become a mode of flourishing the art and make it reach to a larger audience?

The paper has taken interview of Jatra artist and has analysed how the lives have changed when media started booming and the mass media started popularising through TV and through phones in recent times and if it has affected the flow of performances and the flow of people who used to come to watch these kinds of performances earlier.

Keywords: - Jatra, Pala Gaan, Performance, New Media, Youtube, marginalised communities

Introduction

To understand how media has been affecting the marginalised communities, we need to understand what the marginalised communities are, to describe, they are the ones who are curbed to the lowest strata of society. In this chapter, we will look into an art form that has become part of the marginalised communities over time as it does not get ample stage to showcase the form as compared to the other art forms that are flourishing in the age of digital media. The art form has been present since the British era and has channelised itself into different smaller sects, yes we are talking about the Jatra, and in this chapter we will look into the Pala gaan.

Any artform that we talk about is always practiced only by a small population and is taken forward by a community of artist. This small group of people who practise the form of the art can be considered as marginalised community lending to the fact that they are a small part of society if we have to see it that way. In other words, the art form is practiced by a smaller section of people and the sword is always on their shoulders to take the art from ahead and keep it alive so that the present can make way for a better history of the future.

“In Bengal, Jatra as a distinct dramatic presentation had begun to take its shape with the worship of Shakti cult in Chandi Jatra. It dealt with the Great War between the demons and the Goddess Chandi.

Later in the 16th century, when entire eastern India was swiped by the wave of Vaishnavism, a new kind of folk performance called Krishna Jatra became predominant in the popular imagination. It is said that Chaitanya Dev after returning from Gaya in 1506 played the role of Rukmini in Rukmini Haran (The Abduction of Rukmini) at the house of Chandra Sekhar. Krishna Jatra deals with the Lila (life and action) of Lord Krishna characterized by heroism, devotion, melodious songs and demonstration accompanied by folk music.” (Ghatak, 2020)

The art form that is practiced by a very small section of people in the state of West Bengal, has been present in the country before independence, we will also and will look into the lives of the artists post the advancement of the media which has brought content to the hands of the viewers in forms of OTT and YouTube, and see how that might have affected the same people who are practicing the art form. ‘The Jatra was originally associated with the religious rituals, although certain forms of debates or speculations exist about the meaning of the root word ‘Jatra’. Having ritualistic connotation, ‘Jatra,’ was believed to be a musical procession where the deity was carried from one place to another; hence it is connected with the word journey or the state of a journey in Bengali.’ (Maitra, 2019)

An art, no matter the form thrives to live through its practitioners and its viewers, the artform that lives a glorified life has its gratification to be paid to the people who have been practicing it and to the viewers who have been prolifically enjoying it.

Is it Important?

In today’s world when the world is moving at a speed that was unimaginable in the last decade, people do not have to now go to a place for entertainment, the content of entertainment comes to their doors. The indigenous art forms need the eyes of the audience, and it would suffer if the people are hooked into their mobile devices or hooked into the content that the new media has brought into their homes and to be more specific on their palm tops. The advancement of the new media has made it easy for people to get entertainment or education easily which has in turn harmed art forms that need a live audience to be present at the time of performance that is organised at a smaller level. Thus, this study is important to assess the nature of harm if at all caused to Jatra Pala due to the advancement of mass media and if the artists are surviving the catastrophic boom of the OTT.

Statement of Problem

As we know that new media has seen a boom that was not speculated, and the pandemic was the catalyst to its everlasting growth. As the world was hit with a catastrophic lockdown, every being was looking for a means to pass their time as the world had gone to a complete halt, the audience themselves became content creators and thus gave a boost to the online media, where the consumers could upload their own works of art, for the world to consume. While people were not being able to leave their own doorsteps, films and other forms of entertainment came knocking in the form of OTT and it soon hit its peak. People lost the habit of watching live shows. They also became creators instead of just being the consumer of creative content that was earlier presented to them. This led to less of shows of Jatra Pala and people stopped visiting these live shows, and their main entertainment and news sources were thus confined to the mobile phones that allowed them to watch an array of content that was previously unavailable with a click.

This brings us to the problem that the Jatra Pala might have been harmed and thus a loss of shows might result in the artists shifting their profession ultimately leading to the silent death of a loud art form, Jatra Pala.

This study is thus an important one that will measure the importance of restoration needed to save Jatra Pala as an art form and will help future studies

Literature review

‘The original pala was based on a mythological theme that narrated a battle between the Gods and the demons. But the technique of performance, inherent in a Jatra performance, invoked a feeling of excitement among the audiences. Most of the Jatra performances of the age excited such adrenalin rush in the audiences, making them shout, or express themselves in some other audible or visible manner.’ (Pandit, 2013) The article gives a vast description of why the history of the Jatra and how and why it was performed, It also gives insights about the important name who started the Jatra movement and made it a pioneering movement that has made the art form famous.

Although folk dramas have their distinct individual regional flavour, yet the authentic source of these stories are taken from Ramayana, Mahabharata, Puranas, legends, folktales etc. It might also include certain forms of foreign romances which can delight the mindsets of the viewers. (Maitra, 2019)

The author in the above paper explains the development and the origin of the Jatra Pala in Bengal. The origin dates back to the British period and that is important in today’s context as the art form has been there for a long time and it is slowly getting obsolete and is somehow slow in the fast-paced world that we are living in due to the advancement of media, that has brought entertainment to homes.

The "old" Jatra represents palas which dealt in religious themes and were instructive and moralistic in tone, i.e., the Bengali versions of "miracle" and "morality" plays. 7 The "old" Jatra was also marked by performances of professional troupes, which were in most cases owned and managed by the chief singer or actor of the troupe. (Sarkar,1975)

As we have already mentioned, the professional Jatra troupes are privately owned business undertakings and as such the actors and other participants are paid employees of the company. Until recently the owner could hire and sack them at will. But recently there has been some concerted effort to safeguard the rights of Jatra actors. Now contracts between the owner and the actor are made on a seasonal basis. When the season is over, the troupe virtually ceases to exist and the actor is free to renew his contract or to sign a contract with another company. (Sarkar, 1975)

The article shows us the differences between the artforms and also shows how Jatra pala was commercialised in the area and how the artform has flourished. The art form that has a history and has been in practice from an era that has been ruled by the British is now practiced by a very small number of artists and is slowly going obsolete that has made it important that we bring the concern in to being and that take forward a study that will try to assess how the artists are facing the wave of advancement from mass media and if at all the art form is surviving or dying a slow death.

‘Digital Technologies have also altered the nature, scope and functions of folk media in Indian society, thereby challenging its privileged role as one of the most effective means of communication for the folks’. (Chakraborty, 2022) In their paper, the authors have looked into the Bhaona – the ritualistic theatrical performances of Assam and how it has been affected due to the advancement of digital media. They also look into how the audience has become a part of the art form by contributing their efforts in documenting and digitally archiving the art form on various social media, and other digital platforms.

Research Questions:

This research paper seeks to find answers to these specific questions –

1. Whether an art form has to eventually perish due to the advancement of media?
2. Are the recent advancements in media a positive or negative aspect in promoting or killing an art form?

This paper will look into how the media has been a force in affecting the art form in a positive or a negative form, and if the art form is in danger in the age of new media where people do not have to go out for entertainment, the entertainment or a social learning content has come to their palm tops and a simple click can get the audience a large number of content that were unavailable before when these Artforms were the only mode of information and entertainment for the audience.

Theoretical Framework:

The Uses and gratification theory very clearly state that the media has no role to play in the lives of the viewers and they are highly active in choosing the media that they deem necessary according to their taste and needs for consumption. The theory is attributed to researchers Jay G. Blumler and Elihu Katz. In 1974, they published 'The uses of mass communication: Current perspectives on gratifications research', which painted a complete picture of the Uses and Gratifications Theory. The theory originated, however, with the research of Harold Laswell. (Gordon, 2022)

The theory as stated by Bloomer and Katz, states that the audience uses the media for mainly four of these main purposes,

1. Diversion or Entertainment
2. Personal Relationship
3. Personal identity
4. Surveillance

In this paper, we will see how the audience reacts to the different kinds of new media and if that affects the other art forms on a larger scale. The researcher have chosen to work around the theory as this theory defines how people consume and use the Mass media as per their needs and requirements.

'Uses and gratification theory focuses on the free will of the audience and is deterministic as media can be used in different ways and for different purposes.' (Bajracharya, 2018).

Thus, this theory is important for the study as it's because of the free will of the audience that the audience chooses a different form of media that are easily available to them, by sitting in their homes, rather than stepping out to the locality to watch a Jatra Pala gaan that has been organised by the local cultural committee on the occasion of a Manasa or Shani puja.

Research Methodology:

To find out the effects of the media, the researcher have conducted a mixed method of data collection, we have done a brief survey to understand the audience behaviour towards the Jatra Pala as an art form and also interviewed a Jatra Pala group, to understand their side of the story on how the advancement of media has affected the way they used to and now practice the artform.

We have surveyed a small number of 50 people through online mode, google docs and asked them a set of questions to understand if their viewing behaviour and approach towards the Jatra Pala has changed over the years and if they are still interested to view a Jatra Pala or if they will ignore it and stick to the mode of entertainment that they regularly use, that is the consumption of the new media channels.

We have also interviewed the proprietor of Bhai Bhai Jatra and the interview helped us understand how the media has affected the practice and if the art form needs a special restoration or protection so that it doesn't get lost in the fast-paced advancement of the mass media.

Thus, the research methodology is a mixed method that is a mixture of quantitative and qualitative means of data collections that has helped us come to our solution.

Qualitative data is used by researchers to describe and elucidate their subjects and make use of that information in the creation of theories and models

Data Interpretation and analysis:

As part of the Primary data, we had interviewed around 51 people from and around the city and wanted to understand how much the new media has influenced them and if they will still be interested in a visiting a Jatra Pala even when they have all the content needed right in their hands.

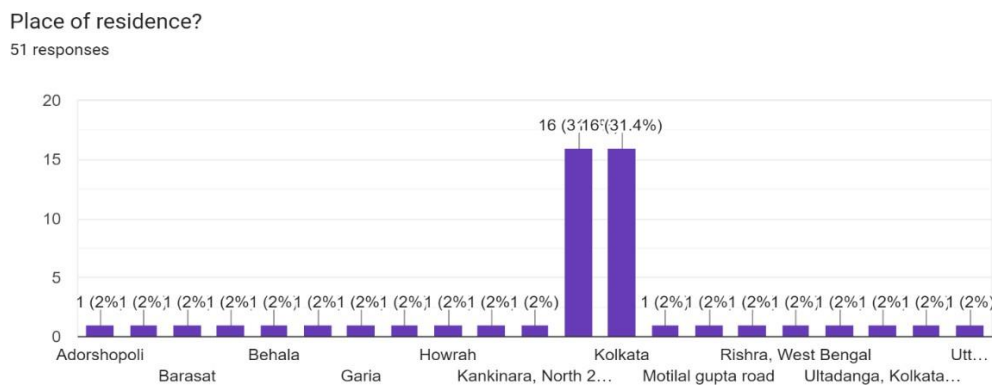


Chart 1: Shows the composition of the people and their place of residence who were questioned during the study.

The above chart shows that most of the people belong to Kolkata and are permanent residents of the city. They were also asked about their age and the data consist of people of both sexes and the age comprises from 19 to 50 years.

The people were asked if they had heard about the Jatra Pala and the response was:

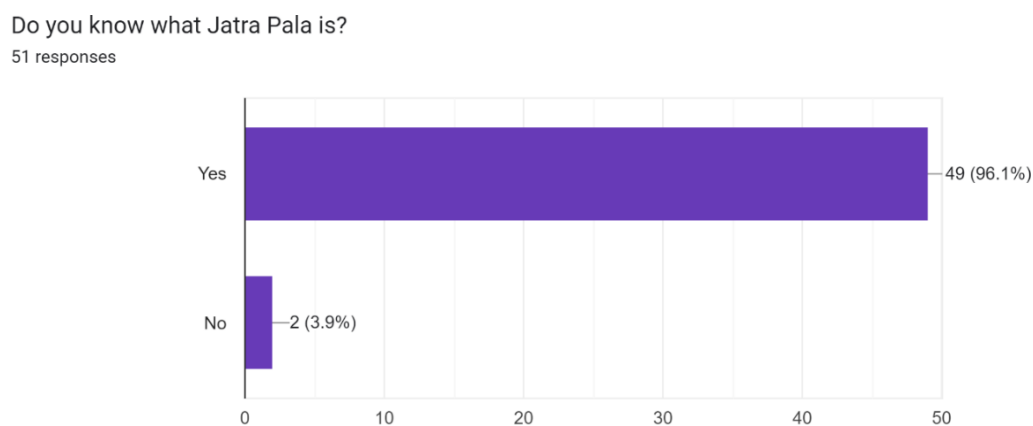


Chart 2: Shows the percentage of the people who have heard of Jatra Pala

The main revelation came when we asked them if they have ever seen one, the below chart shows the percentage of the people who have seen a Jatra Pala and one who have not seen one.

If Yes, have you ever seen one?

51 responses

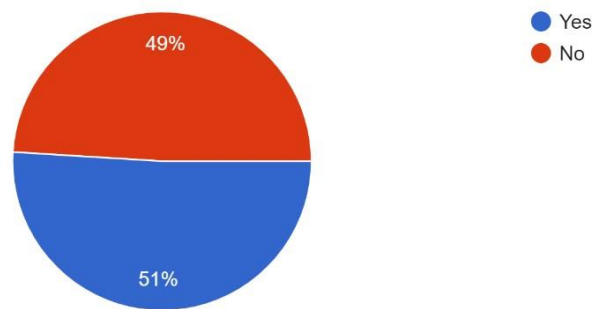


Chart 3: Shows the percentage of the people who have seen a Jatra Pala and ones who have not seen one.

In the above two diagrams, we get to see that although around 96% percent of the people who had answered the survey had heard about Jatra Pala, however, 50% of the people who answered the google form did not see one. This show that although they know about the art form, they have not seen one, and the less amount of people who see Jatra Pala will make it easier for the art form to vanish in the near future.

This has brought us to the problem if the art form is not well promoted, or if the shows have decreased in times which has led to the thing, that people have not yet seen a Pala yet.

We asked the audience if they own a smartphone and here is what they answered:

Do you own a smart phone?

51 responses

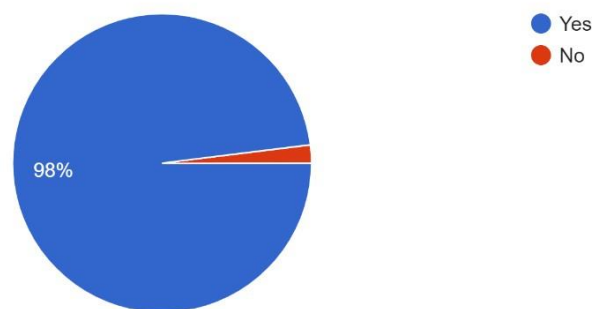


Chart 4: Shows the percentage of people who owns smartphones.

In the above chart, we see around 98% of the people own a smartphone and that shows us that they are more prone to using new media applications such as OTT platforms and other applications that make them more inclined to stick to their phones for long hours. Once a person has gets the needs of his entertainment fulfilled in the comfort of his home, it is unlikely they will go out to seek it, thus these Jatra Palas have become less in number in recent times and the art form might slowly become obsolete in the near future.

Our respondents were asked what kind of content they consume on their mobile phones, and the answers were varied, the content ranged from comedy to drama, music to thrillers, documentary to news, reality shows to web series, and also they mentioned they work educational videos that relate to work. Thus, the people have fully been inclined and are using their phones to immerse themselves in all kinds of content that are found in the web and that new media has brought to their doorsteps.

We also asked our respondents if the advancement of media and availability of content on the palm top has harmed art forms like Jatra Pala.

The answers were varied, where some think that it has been harmed due to the advancement of the new media, and some think that the new media has no effects on the art forms like Jatra pala. However, the important thing that came to light was the respondents also “Yes. But we can use this advancement of media and availability of content on the palm top wisely to understand and promote our culture easily without causing any harm to the art forms.”

They also think, ‘Not exactly.. There is quite old form of Yatra Pala is performed across the world on stage such as Oprah... So with the advancement of playmaker and mates and correct incorporation of technology and social platform will only enhance the scope of modern art and play.’

It is an important finding in this study that the respondents think that the digitisation of the artform and bringing the content to the palm top will not harm the art in the long run, so as art enthusiasts, we have to keep in mind to make the content viewer friendly and serve them on a plate they are likely to consume faster and better.

We then asked our respondents if they will attend a Jatra Pala if organised in their close vicinity, there were mixed answers as it the no’s were more than equal to the yes we had got, to quote the respondents, we got answers like, ‘I would watch something else on OTT platform.’ One of the respondents also said that, ‘Yes, watch it may be, depends on the content.’ This clearly shows although they have heard about the Jaatra Pala, most of them have never watched it and they have no idea of what originally the Jatra Pala is, as they have no idea of what the content is on a Pala. ‘

We also asked the respondents, to state the reason why they would like to go watch the Jatra pala and if no, then why would they not like to go for one. The answers that came in have given us an insight that ‘Would love to see an art form which we hardly see these days. Moreover, some experiences like plays and jatras don’t have the same feel on OTT.’

One of the respondents also mentioned, ‘The experience of Jatra pala in a physical set up is much better and you can be true to the art.’ Another respondent also said that, ‘First of all I feel there is better content available on internet. Secondly, in a country like India, where most of the parts have a hot and humid type of climate, it is very difficult to sit outside without fan or AC for 2-3 hours. So winter might be a better time for organizing Jatras.’ The answers ranged to mostly yes as most of the respondents have never experienced a Pala and they would like to go visit if organised, however, most of the respondents who are from an urbane area, nearly have no idea on what a proper Jatra Pala is and although some of them would like to go visit it, many of them are not interested and would prefer to watch OTT. This is a harmful revelation because with the decrease in the number of audiences the puja committees might stop organising the Pala in near future, with less amount of work, the artists will be forced to take up work to earn money and thus the artform will slowly vanish in oblivion with its presence only in the pages of a history book.

We finally asked our respondents on how can the new media be used so that the art form can be promoted used it not be a reason for the death of the artform, the suggestions from the first-hand users have given us a good insight and some of the suggestions can actually be considered so that an art form be it Jatra Pala or any other small indigenous artform that now falls under the marginalised section can be revived and saved from vanishing into the oblivion.

The respondents mostly said that the OTT platforms can be used to promote and perform the Jatra Palas so that the digitisation of the artform will help it stay afloat on the mainstream and will not harm it in fading out of existence, however some of the answers from our respondents range from:

- ‘In this new age, advertising gets huge opportunity and it will reach every nooks and corner around the world in no time.’
- ‘Promoting the shows using social media and not releasing the shows online so that people have the urge to watch them live and experience the jatra pala.’
- ‘Use of Jatra Pala in mainstream movies, both Tollywood and Bollywood’
- ‘Jatra Pala can be now saved by Live streaming or if we can show it on social media platforms like youtube, Facebook etc and OTT will also be a good platform for saving this art form.’
- ‘It can be seen from a perspective of community skill building. So, it can be revisited to use it as a tool of gathering mass and create awareness’
- ‘Ott yes, it can be saved. But it needs good marketing.’
- ‘The revival of traditional art form like Jatra Pala has been a topic of great interest for many, and there are multiple efforts in that direction. But there is no denying that it needs a more concerted push, given that practising arts handed down over generations is often not an economically viable option for artists.’
- ‘It is a very difficult thing....as OTT and new media is a very powerful device which has intruded people's lives in a big way.’

The answers show that most of the respondents want the Jatra Pala to be brought to the OTT and platforms like YouTube which makes it easier for them to access. As per our secondary data, we have considered interviewing one of the Jatra Pala groups, and that has made our study clearer, we spoke to Mrityunjay Majhi, who is the proprietor of Bhai Bhai Monosha Jatra Sangsthya and is aged 43 years old. We asked him a set of questions and his revelation gave a new turn to the study, as per him he is in the trade and practicing the art form for the last 15 years and he is the first in his family to have become a regular Jatra Pala artist who brings in and does show that range from Monosha Puja, Shani Puja and so on.

This shows that the Jatra Pala groups have started expanding their horizons and are not sticking to a single genre, the Jatra Pala groups in today's time perform all the kinds which range from Monosha Puja to Shani Puja, previously they used to stick to a single genre, but now as the competition was steeping up, they have indulged in to multiple Palas so tha the business keeps running and they can be attached to the artform and do not have to find other work.

We also asked him if the Jatra Pala was affected in the last 10 years due to the advancement of the New media, he confirmed that it was, however for the better. We got to know from him that the advancement have helped them reach to a larger audience as they have uploaded their Jatra Pala on youtube and that is helping them reach a larger audience than before. The more the reach, the better number of shows that are coming. He also revealed, although none of the media have come forward to promote the art form or the group, they have used the negative advancement towards their achievement of reaching more people and getting more shows, this has helped him not to choose another part-time work and he and his group are still practicing the art form as a full-time job. This helps the people attached to it get continuous work and also helps the Jatra Pala to be alive and living. This will guarantee that the art form does not die in the wave of the advancement of the new media.

He has also revealed that YouTube has helped them attract more customers in recent times than in the past. So we can see that if the Jatra Pala groups can use social media and other streaming platforms to their own benefit, the boom of the new media can actually support to the artform and help it survive and even contribute to its growth.

Conclusion

After talking to the people and to the Jatra Pala group, we have concluded that the research questions that were asked in the beginning of the chapter, we have summed up that the Jatra Pala is not yet in the stage where it needs a separate revival, the art form is still alive.

We have also concluded that the content has to be packed as per the liking of the audience and they will surely consume it and so is the same for Jatra Pala. Most of the viewers wanted the Jatra Pala to be brought into the online platform, which is the same that the new age Jatra Pala groups are doing and that has helped them bring in more audience and thus more shows that help them continue practicing the art form.

We have also seen that the Jatra Pala artists are still full-time practitioners of the art form, although some have farming as their secondary source of income, they still keep Jatra as their primary source of bread and butter. This shows that the art form is still present and can be made better if the new media tools can be used and implemented properly in the Urban areas so that it gets better reception and the artists can have a better number of shows that will help them encourage the next generation to take it up and practice the art form so that it can keep living through.

We can thus make a statement that the new media is not directly harming the Jatra Pala, however, if the new media can be used properly the art forms like Jatra Pala can flourish and also cross borders due to the gamut reach of the internet. This will not only help the art form stay alive, but it will also help in spreading the culture overseas.

Limitations of the Research

The limitations of this research were that, we had interviewed people who are from the Urban and a bigger number of samples could have been taken. The Jatra Pala groups who stay in remote places of the State are sometimes very shy to appear for interviews, thus only one group could be interviewed. Future researchers can reach a large number of groups if possible and that might give a number of new results.

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