



## **Bahurupi is a marginalized living tradition of West Bengal: a critical analysis from a theoretical perspective**

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### **Abstract**

*Bahurupi is a folk-art form of Bengal. It has counteracted the ravages of time and has retained its entity. In Bengal, it has been a popular art form, a mode of entertain for the rural audience primarily in Murshidabad and Birbhum districts. Saratchandra Chattopadhyay (1876-1938) depicts the character of 'Sreenath Bahurupi' in his novel Srikanta (1917-1933). In the Puranic as well as Medieval period, these performers entertained the people belonging to the upper class like the King and Badshahs. Later on, this mode of entertainment became a mode of sustenance, to be more specific, a viable profession for a particular group of people. The form itself enabled these performers to engage with and subsequently transform into different characters (like 'Rama', 'Ravana', 'Putna Rakshasi', 'shiva', 'Durga', 'Krishna', 'Kali', 'Krishna-Kali', 'Hara-Parvati' etc. of Purana) easily.*

*They go door to door in the villages for showing their performance, asking for alms or object in lieu of their performances. They use various kinds of costumes and make up to portray a particular character which has a legacy in the particular system. They communicate through the mode of spoken words (like 'Chara', 'Panchali', 'Kabita', 'Probad' and songs). Through their artistic skills they win the heart of the audience instantly. Thus, they are able to establish the connection between the audiences instantly. In spite of their traditional skills the creative artist earns meagre amount. More or less, they belong to the lower-class communities (Bajikar. Das Bairagya, Mahanta etc). One needs to look at this caste identity and the 'performing body' critically from our position. These marginalized artists are keenly trying to save this kind of living tradition of Bengal. In spite of their skills, they are in a deplorable condition. These 'text'/Events are continuously engaging in the process of history making Thus we can study another dimension or alternative historiography which challenges /questions the notion of so called 'centre'. I would like to present the performance as a 'text' which would contest our general understanding of the centre, margin/ periphery.*

**Key words:** Text, Marginalization, Performing Body, Cultural production, Centre-periphery, Reception.

### **The meaning and history of Bahurupi performance tradition in India:**

The word 'Baharupi' is constituted of two parts: 'bahu' and 'rupi.' The word 'bahu' in Bengali means 'various' or 'myriad,' and 'rupi' means form or appearance. So, the Bahurupi is applied to those who take on various appearances and engage in an attempt to entertain people. This form of 'folk art' is in vogue not only in West Bengal but also in various parts of India. We should keep in mind that this form of 'folk art' was one means of livelihood for

many people. At present, the number of these people is on the wane, but it is not non-existent.

Bahurupi is an ancient art form and performance tradition of India. It has a long history and a significant impact on Indian performance traditions as well as the cultural life of people in our country. In this paper, my attempt is to show the history, lifestyle, livelihood, and the everyday life of Bahurupi artists in west Bengal, especially in the district of Birbhum. This approach begins with Puranic and mythological stories. In the Puranic Age, we can easily find several references regarding the tradition of Bahurupi. At that time, the mythological gods, goddess, and sometimes demons also took different forms and shapes to fulfil their desires. There are a few instances where goddess took on shapes to save their lives and protect their self-esteem or self-respect. There are many references available in the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Haribansha Purana, the story of Baidhya Jataka, Acharangarasutra, Tripitaka, etc. In Shiva Purana, we find that Mahadev came in disguise for several times to fulfil his purpose or self-desire.

There is another interesting story regarding the disguise of Uma or Devi Durga. The narrative centred on Devi Durga, on the battlefield, she has taken different forms to defeat the demons. This story predominates will of Ashur communities, and they vow to take revenge after being defeated by Shiva in battle. The story deals with the more interesting narrative of Andhakasur and his brother Sundakasur. This story delineates that Andhakasur transformed into the shape of Shiva, while Sundakasur took the form of Nandi. Andhakasur wanted to fulfil his sexual desire by targeting Parvati. There is another incident found in the Shiva Purana where the Apsaras of Paradise planned to test Shiva's intellect. Therefore, they took on disguise of different types of characters, namely Chitralkha disguised as Parvati, Urvashi as Nandi, Ghatchi as Kali, Bishachi as Chandika, Pralichi as Sabitri, Menoka as Gayatri, Sayajanna as Jaya, Punjakthali as Bijaya, and Trastitili as Binayak.

Now we are going to discuss the historical aspect of bahurupi performance tradition. During the period of the Maurya kingdom, Emperor Ashoka himself engaged a few spies to take care of his kingdom. These people enacted various roles and successfully collected secret information, which was meaningfully supplied to the emperor. Thus, their actions and roles, in the context of a critical assessment of ruling the kingdom, were of considerable significance. We know that during the age of the Gupta Empire, Vikramaditya (a historical king from around the first century BCE) engaged Bahurupis in his kingdom. Kautilya (375 BCE-283 BCE), in his writing 'Arthashastra,' discussed that in ancient India, spies were engaged for some valid reasons. For this purpose, the most intelligent, skilled, clever men were essential. Sometimes they took the form of madman, traders, or salesman. They could also be comfortable in disguise, even in the form of women, hermits, prostitutes, and astrologers. The 'Buddha Jataka' tells the story of Jogi Sanyasi, Brahmin, Vikhu, Tantra Sadhak, and Kapalika, etc. In the period of the Mughal Empire, Abu'l Fazl (1551-1602) introduced characters like 'Bhand' or 'Bhanda' in his 'Ain-I Akbari' (16<sup>th</sup> century, 1590), which was written in persi. He did not describe them in detail but it was prominently indicated that this community entertained people by using different kinds of "gestures" and 'bodily' movements. Here, the reader can think critically.

**Bahurupi form and its reception in Literature: a brief overview:**

The dancing figure of the Orissa temple in the seventeenth century has significant cultural value and opens up the possibilities of multiple meanings and interpretations. We can find the character of Bahurupi in Charja Pada from the tenth century. In the fourteenth century, it depicts the character of Bahurupi in Annadamangal Kavya (1752-1753) by Bharat Chandra (1712-1760). Apart from these, the Mangal Kavya contains many references regarding Bahurupi. Vrindavana Dasa Thakura (1507-1589 CE) referred to the notion of Bahurupi in his 'Chaitanya Bhagavata' in the sixteenth century. The poor beggar Shiva and Nata Murti of 'Sibayan' were written by Ramkrishna Kabichandra in the sixteenth century. All these literary references are significant in the context of reading and analyzing Bahurupi art and performance. The caste, class, and gender politics are deeply embedded in these texts. Within the premise of the performance text, in the context of cultural production and the performance of the Bahurupi artists are meaningful to the contribution of literary history.

It is most important to discuss the 'marginalized' art forms that existed or are alive in so-called 'lower' class communities. The reference to Nata Naragrati of Kochin Para is found in 'Shibayan Kavya' written by Rameswer in the eighteenth century. In the writings of Michael Madhusudan Dutta (1824-1873), the character Padmabati disguises herself in the drama 'Padmavati' (1859). In the drama 'Krishana Kumari,' a character named Madhanica transforms into a male character and takes the name Madan Tagore. This character, named Gadhadhar, disguises himself as a Bahurupi, who contests with the falsified nature of Alik Babu. After the drama Alik Babu, Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951) wrote a valuable book named 'Banglar Brata' (1350 Bangabdo). However, he limited the character within the confined space and boundaries of the world of Rakhal Balak and Kulai Thakur. The expansion of the art and performance tradition did not reach a level of "high" status. It is the work that significantly plays a role in recognizing Bahurupi as a dramatic art form. The discussion of caste orientation and the lifestyle and status of these artists were not addressed in detail. Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838-1894), in his novel Kapalkundala (1866), introduces a character named Mati Bibi, who is disguised as a Brahmin. It is interesting to note that Debendra takes the form of a Baishnavi in the novel Brishabriksha (1873) to see the Kunda. However, the famous character in the world of Bahurupi (in literature) did not emerge until the hands of Saratchandra Chattopadhyay (1876-1938) in his novel Srikanta (1917). Srinath Bahurupi became very famous in the minds of readers. The novelist depicted the character successfully, but to a certain extent, he was unable to explore the real life and world of the Bahurupi artist. It is true that the writer was well aware of the lifestyle of the performer and also wanted to recognize the real facts of society.

Tarashankara Bandhyopadhyay (1898-1971), in his story 'Matilal,' features the character Jataburi, who plays an important role. Bibhutibhusan Bandhyopadhyay's (1894-1950) style of depiction is somewhat different from that of Tarashankar Bandhyopadhyay. We come across the story and the life of the 'group' or people who are recognized as the 'wondering travelers community' in the novel 'Aranyak' (1976). At one level, Nanichornatya is a real portrait of Bahurupi. Samaresh Basu's (1924-1988) novel 'Suchander Swadwesh Jatra' (1969) was the first unique representation of the life of the Bahurupi community. 'Titas Ekti Nadir Naam' (1960s), a drama by Utpal Dutta (1929-1993), illustrates the picture and life of Bahurupi in a different way. The most important thing is that the dramatist presents the Bahurupi to entertain the people. He didn't properly recognize their contribution as

artists in our society. The dramatist Tulsi Lahiri (1897-1959), in his drama 'Chenra Taar,' successfully introduces the character of Bahurupi. The characters Hunuman and Jumbuban satirize social inequalities and the caste system. Generally, we can think that the representation of this Bahurupi performance tradition is confined within literary works and world mythology. However, its presentation is also available in the world of cinema. Renowned filmmaker Ritwick Ghatak (1925-1976) highlighted the art of Bahurupi in the film 'Subarnarekha' (1965). It was not the last work regarding Bahurupis' lives and their creations. Nabendu Ghosh (1917-2007) produced a Hindi film titled 'Sarishrip.' Apart from Bengali films, there are two notable Hindi film productions. One is Bhuddhadeb Basu's 'Bahadur,' and the other is 'Dor,' both remarkable in the history of Bahurupi art. Literary sources depict not only the mentality of community with in a particular phase but also rightly portray the experience though classes and castes or social group. It helps to understand dimension of problems, change in performance tradition and their identity.

### **Bahurupi performance tradition and reaction of British Government:**

In 1891 H. H. Risley (1851-1911) indicated the life of the Bahurupi in his book *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal* (1891). In this book consists of a description of the manner, role, and existence of Bahurupi artists. A superficial picture of their way of life has been presented. He has dealt with references to their physical performances but did not explain the details of their lifestyle, sufferings, art, livelihood, and struggles. He concentrated more on their physical acting. Performance of these artist was not regarded as art from the point of British Government. This argument is discussed by Mala Maitra in her book called *Bahurupi: Subal Dasbairagya*. As I cited here: "Another popular role is that of Shiva-Gouri, in which the Bharupia gets up one side of his person as Shiv and the other as Gouri and conducts humorous dialogues between the two" (p. 21). In this process of unfolding the harsh reality, the main obstacle was the British Raj and colonial rules, the mono-centric or dominating nature of power, and the aura of the British Government. Therefore, the caste, class, and community conflicts are intertwined in the story or the "life" of the famous Bahurupi artist. The novel 'Pather Dabi' (1926) features a famous character named Girish Mahapatra, who was in disguise to successfully deceive the British police. In 1878 R. D. Hime published a list describing the 'marginalized community' or 'antaja serini' under the Labour police station in Birbhum District. There were three thousand six hundred families livilng there. Among them, only three families were listed in the category of the "byadh" community. This byadh family not only existed under the Labour police station but also lived in Debipur village, under Illambazar police station, and in Kujitipara village under Nanoor police station. (maitra)

Relevance of subal Dasbairagya's performance in the process of making literary history Kanailal Chakraborty was a disciple of Sripat Adhikai, and Subal Dasbairagya was a disciple of Kanailal Chakraborty. Kanailal Chakraborty gained fame for his Bahurupi art and performances during his lifetime. He was a permanent resident of Charkalgram village, under Nanoor police station in Birbhum District. Before I analyse Bahurupi art, we should focus on the enactment or performance that made him famous: the 'ardhanariswar' (half man and half woman) in the Bahurupi art form. In this art form the artist plays an important role, and he adopts a unique style. Most of the time he dresses up as 'Krishna-Kali' or 'Hara-Gouri' and narrates the contexts of the Puranic story. His performance is very significant here because his class and caste relations, as well as the concept of gender binary, are being

challenged. His performative body questions the so-called notion of gender stereotypes in society. At the same time, his performances open up space and strengthen the scope of analysis, as the notion of gender is not 'fixed' but rather very 'fluid'. In other words, his innovative performance style expresses a multidimensional perspective regarding gender. The storyline, techniques, and mannerisms of Subal Dasbairagya are somewhat different from the Bahurupi traditions or artistic mannerisms of Bishaypur, under the Labour police station. He has spent a lot of time achieving this kind of technique regarding Bahurupi performance. He has spent a lot of time achieving this kind of technique regarding Bahurupi performance. The practice of "Abhinaya" for him is a bond with the divine. Spiritual thinking is closely associated with his performance practice. More interestingly, he takes themes and storylines from Hindu mythology. Sometimes he uses themes from Muslim religious storylines and significantly enacts the role of 'Fakir Baba'.

On the other hand, he subsequently chooses the themes of 'Radha' or 'Radha-Krishna', which shape the very consciousness of the artist's understanding of art and artistic creation. Thus, religious subject matter is not an obstacle for him. During the performance, the artist places his body in the process of artistic creation, and subsequently, with the help of his body and body movements, broadens the space of his inner self, which is saturated in 'rasa' or 'bhava' within the performance tradition. So, the body movement and act of performance can connect the 'outer' and 'inner' self in the time of performance. We can find the process (both) and transformation of self in the traditional forms of 'classical' Indian dance. Body movement plays a significant role. The same thing can be observed in the performance of Subal Dasbairagya. His 'Krishna-Kali' shape introduces the two branches of knowledge and understanding in the bhakti tradition in India. The Shakta (related to Shakti worship) and the Vaishnava are merged to a point of ultimate feeling of spirituality. Thus, his 'Abhinaya' or 'performance' brings to light the importance of Bahurupi artists and this art form in our society, both in religious and social contexts. Therefore, they cannot be defined as artists of a 'lower' class, distinct group, or community. We cannot claim that this art form is centred on 'marginalized' people. All the thematic components and elements of Abhinaya and performance are inclusively present within this art form, which facilitates our understanding of 'art' and the real life of the artists.

### **Bahurupi performance tradition and history of Bishaypur village:**

Ram Choudhury Byadh is a Bahurupi artist from Bishaypur village under Labpur Police Station, Birbhum District. He has been continuing this profession for three generations. He has taken up this art to earn a livelihood. To preserve this art form, they are trying hard. Mainly, they belong to the Byadh community and have a long history. Their primary source of income is hunting animals and birds in the forest. Collecting and gathering are basic needs for their livelihood. According to the newspaper New Time First Page,

"The Bahurupis belong to the Bedia community, a Scheduled Tribe that comprises around 1.25% of the Scheduled Tribe population in Birbhum district, according to the 2011 census." They have preserved this Bahurupi art in society. Their economic condition is not sufficient for living well, but they are still engaging themselves in this art form, which is very important in the context of cultural perspectives."

Ram Choudhury Byadh confesses that they learned the art from a guru named Ghanashyam Byadh. He shared their history, which he had heard from his ancestors. They

were experts in Gujarat; the rulers of Bengal recruited them into their armies for their expertise with bows and arrows. Sitaram Badh Chowdhury is also a performer. He takes on the roles of Shiva, Lord Ganesh, and Ravana. The story and struggles of their grandfather and father have inspired them a lot to learn this art. He also expresses the anxieties that nowadays the younger generation is not willing to take this art form as a profession. Sanatan Byadh Choudhury is also a renowned Bahurupi artist. He runs a small shop in the village to support his family. They enjoy this performing art, but in reality, these artists are not getting more than two programs a month.

### **Conclusion:**

There was a time, all the performances of Bahurupi were based on particular stories. They toiled hard to collect the props and costumes in accordance with the story. They used a lot of their materials, ranging from colours like zinc oxide to different types of masks, clothes, shirts, and so on. Not only were they skilled in dressing and appearance, but they also had amazing physical fitness. They could apply and adjust their acting skills according to immediate needs. They acquired the skill of throwing their voice. There are artists who can effortlessly change their voice from male to female. Their ability to be an artist, poet, actor, and musician all at the same time deserves accolades. One way in which audiences reach the point where they see the performers' bodily representation in the same time and space is significant. This space for the performer is very important for worship and training. The basic elements of religion and the beliefs of the community are practiced by the actors. Here, the performer Subal Dasbairagya and his performance 'Ardhanariswar' are considerably relevant. On one level, the activity and performance are theatrical; on another level, they are also religious in nature. At the same time, the distinction between theatre practice and religious practice is pointless. Thus, theatre is religious, and vice versa, performative. Here, the temple activities are not directly related to these performances, but the faith and customs are closely attached to them. On the other hand, the artists of Bishaypur and Sitalgram are trying to preserve this art form. They have taken up this art to earn their livelihood and support their family members.

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