



Time, Tradition, and Transformation: Reconstructing *Khon Palagan* in the Cultural Landscape of Dakshin Dinajpur District

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Abstract

*Time is not merely a passive dimension in which human history unfolds, but an active cultural and social construct that shapes and reshapes human experiences. Sophist philosophers argue that, "Time is not a reality but a concept or a measure. Time is not natural, it is just socially constructed". In this view, time is not an objective force but a cultural product, shaped through customs, rituals, diets, and social routines. It structures human lives in profound ways. Everything in the world may pause, but time persists. The whole universe is bound to time. And every moment that we possess is the ultimatum of time. None can keep the time fixed. It is dynamic and runs continuously. Heraclitus said, "The world is a process of ceaseless change or flux, and here reality is dynamic and ephemeral". He also said the world is so fleeting that it is impossible to step twice into the same river. Thus, everything in this world is dynamic over time. In this paper, I have tried to explore how the dynamic nature of time transforms itself at every step of our generation. This perspective becomes critical in understanding how temporal dynamics reshape cultural practices, especially in the realm of folk performance traditions such as *Khon Palagan* in the Dakshin Dinajpur district of West Bengal. This paper also argues that the changes in the performance and reception of *Khon Palagan* are inextricably linked to broader processes of social transformation driven by the passage of time.*

INTRODUCTION

Dakshin Dinajpur is a district of West Bengal in India. Twenty years ago, it was established as an individual district under the Jalpaiguri Division. Before that, it was inclusion in the Dinajpur district, which is now in Bangladesh. It is the southern part of Dinajpur District, so it is named Dakshin Dinajpur

District. The whole district is culturally rich. Its socio-cultural fabric has been shaped by centuries of historical shifts, political realignments, and communal interactions. Different kinds of communities belong here. Their culture is distinct in nature and characteristics. Here, folk drama, folk songs, *khon*, *baul*, *Sadhuamat*, etc., are performed

popularly. These genres succeed in *Khojagar*, *Hari-Kirtan*, *Chok-chandi*, etc. These performances were not merely entertainment, but they were also communal acts of storytelling, ritual observance, and moral instruction. However, in recent decades, the practice and popularity of these forms have dwindled. Factors such as rapid urbanization, increasing reliance on digital entertainment, the breakdown of joint family systems, and the rise of neoliberal economic models have contributed to their decline. Although it is evident that tradition has never been completely changed, but it has been quite transformed. And for this transformation, time can be considered an absolute dominator that makes people mechanical and global. If we go back to the early history of this district, then we must get some extraordinary pictures that are being lost day by day.

There was a time when people took entertainment from practicing folk dramas, folk songs, *Baul*, *Hari-Kirtan*, *Khajagar gan*, *Jalmangar Gan*, etc. The specific time of the gathering was every evening. The whole day they divided into two parts. From morning to afternoon, they would engage in their various activities by which they would earn their livelihood. In the evening, they gathered at a specific place to practice their culture and change their monotonous mind. But now, this tradition is diverted through the dynamic nature of time. People have left their hobbies to play or perform; instead, they are very interested in using mobile phones, Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, TV, etc. And people are now becoming mechanical in mentality. They do not hold up their tradition. They want to be globalised. Time makes them global and changes their mind to do more. If we journey through some *Khon Palagans* performed across the whole district, we may understand how time leads these genres from generation to generation, how much these genres are affected by time and its transformation, and how much they change in their form, style, and pattern. We may also understand how time plays a significant role in transforming socio-cultural practices.

Folk Drama:

Folk drama is one of the elements or genres of folk culture that an ethnic or folk group performs. It has developed traditional rules for time, place and manner of performance. It is a compiling art form of traditional stories and cultural heritage. It covers the areas of family story, the ordinary lifestyle of common people, puja festivals, ritual, custom, etc. The historical background of Folk drama or theatre shows the transformation of drama with the dynamic nature of time. Here, we will find how time brings changes in dramatic performances in Indian theatre. Originating from Greek or Roman theatre, the folk drama of India shows various forms. After the Islamic Conquest in India during the 10th and 11th centuries, an attempt arose to value the indigenous culture, and village theatre was encouraged across the sub-continent. Now, how and why have India's dramatic forms or theatrical forms changed and developed due to the duration of time? How much area of the Indian Theatre is covered in society at present?

It is already acclaimed that Dakshin Dinajpur is a culturally rich district. In this district, different types of folk performance forms such as *Khon Palagan*, *Chokh-Chundi*, *Khojagar*, *Bisahara*, *Bandhu Panchali*, *Natua*, etc., are significantly performed. Although these performances are considered as the cultural heritage of this district, *Khon Palagan* is an exceptional folk performance form, reflecting the socio-cultural narratives of the indigenous Rajbanshi people and making a great identity of this district.

Khon Palagan:

Khon Palagan is a folk drama performed by the Rajbanshi community of the Dinajpur district of undivided Bengal since ages. It is an oral tradition that has survived the test of time and sustained itself from generation to generation. Here 'Khon' means 'moment' or 'duration' that describes the contemporary issues of society. It describes the dramatic activities of indigenous Rajbanshi people living in particular regions of Dinajpur district. And this particular art form deals with the daily life style of common people, their day to day struggle, suffering, *puja*, festival, ritual, custom,

etc. It is a form of performance that represents the socio-cultural and economic ethos of a certain period in time. '*Khon Palagan*' is mainly two types formal and informal. The formal *pala* is called *Shastori Khon*, which is performed during a ritualistic occasion and the informal *pala* is called *Khisa Khon*, which is performed in anytime. While *Khisa Khon* is performed by focusing on events that happen in the social context of contemporary rural life, the pain and suffering of ordinary people, political exploitation, disgrace, economical crisis, love and affection etc., *Shastori Khon* represents different subjects by harboring various classical ideas or narratives such as '*Charyapada*', '*Ramayana*', '*Mahabharata*', '*Bhagvata Gita*', '*Puran*' etc. Most popular *Khisa Khon palas* are *Mayabandhaki*, *Haluya Haluyani*, *Shisho Shori Ulanga Baudiya*, *Haji Keno Paji Sadhu Keno Soytan*, *Kamala Shori Jiban Dakat*, *Dhako Shori*, *Budho Shori*, *Antu Shori*, etc. On the other hand, the significant *Shastori Khon palas* are '*Kani Biso-hari gan*' based on '*Manashamangal Kavya*', '*Ram Banabas*' based on '*Ramayana*', '*Satyapeer*' based on '*Quran-Hadith*', '*Brahmashori*' based on '*Vaishnava Scriptures*'.

Now, I have theoretically analyzed some popular *Khon palas* to explore the time, society, and transformation of *Khon* performances by the passage of time.

Satyapeer Pala:

This *pala* is a *Shastori Khon*, representing a mythical story based on the birth of Peer Sahib on earth. It narrates the story of a Hindu king, Mutlub Raja, who was a kind-hearted king for only Hindu people, discriminating violently against Muslims. The following Bengali lines depict the king's religious autocracy:

মালঞ্চর মুতলুব রাজা বড়ই কাফরান
সেই বেটার মুখে নাহি আল্লা নবির নাম।
হিন্দু রাজা, হিন্দু প্রজা, হিন্দু খাজনা সারে
কাল যৌবনে মুসলমান নাহিরে নজরে,
মুসলমানের কাল্লা কাটে অগ্রচণ্ডীর দ্বারে।
ওনা সেই বেটা বড়ই কাফর
একশ ষাটটি চণ্ডী পুজে দরজারও উপর।
বৈরাগী বৈষ্ণব গেলে অতি সেবা করে

কাল যৌবনে মুসলমান গেলে বলিদান করে চণ্ডীরও
মণ্ডপে।

My Translation-

The king Mutlab of Malancha was an autocrat
Never pronounced the name of Allah or Nabi.
Hindu king, hindu tenants, took hindu tax
No sign of Muslims during his period.
Cut their throat at the door of Agrachandi,
Individually, he was a dictator
Worshipped one sixty Chandi maa on his door.
Giving care if the Anchorite and Vaishnava
came,
But sacrificed Muslims at the shrine of Chandi
if they were found.

The above lines clarify the king's autocratic nature, which is really inhuman behaviour for those who belong to the Muslim community. The Bengali quoted lines portrays the Satya Yuga's influence on religion. It shows the social condition with a religious background.

But in heaven, the Muslim Lord, '*Khoda*' or '*Allah*' became angry by the inhuman behavior of Mutlub Raja, and he decided to bring a solution to this conflict. He sends one of his favorite prophets, '*Jibrail*', to the kingdom of Mutlub raja to lead the king on the right track. But as the king did not care, the lord destroyed the dynasty by causing a devastating Earthquake. By the earthquake the whole kingdom was destroyed and entered into the underground. Then the people of both the Hindu and the Muslim communities started to worship the Peer Sahib.

The mythical narrative, set in the Satya Yuga, portrays time not as a neutral backdrop but as a divine force regulating cosmic justice. The representation of the Satya Yuga, a golden age of truth and piety, invokes a temporal ideal that contrasts sharply with the perceived moral degeneration of contemporary times. The story reflects a period when religious identity was not only a personal belief system but also a determinant of power, justice, and social belonging. The eventual divine punishment meted out by Allah via the angel Jibrail signifies a moral reckoning embedded in the cosmological order. In modern times, however,

this tale is read less as historical fact and more as myth. This shift illustrates the movement from mythic time, when gods and humans interacted directly to secular, historical time where rationality prevails. Thus, the evolution of the story's reception over time signals the diminishing role of divine authority in shaping contemporary moral codes.

However, people of the Kushmandi block of Dakshin Dinajpur district, claim that the story is based on a real incident which was happened in Satya Yug. According to the villagers, once upon a time, there was a kingdom in Krishnapur village under Kushmandi block. And the name of the kingdom was *Malancha Sahar* which is now lost and underground by the pride of time. The relics of this kingdom clearly express its existence. I hope we all know that according to Hindu mythology, there are four kinds of yuga or era, namely, *Satya*, *Treta*, *Dapar*, and *Kali*, in our Indian society. Among these four yugas, Satya yuga is the first one. And it is well said that the universe was born in the Satya yug. The dynasty underground, which was built by the crucial hand of time, was located at Krishnapur village under the Kushmandi Block of Dakshin Dinajpur District.

Antu Shori:

This is a *Khisa Khon* revolves around the story of a real incident. In this *pala*, Antushori is a village woman, uneducated, but clever enough. Her husband is innocent. She maintains the whole family. Baudiya is another character who is Sukoshori's husband. Antushori is a nephew of them. Though Baudiya is Antushori's uncle, he tempts her to form an illegal relationship with him. And he keeps a vow to *Masan Kali* for making a relationship. As a vow, he will provide a double goat to the mother *Kali* if he succeeds.

দোহায় লাগে মাসান কালী

অন্তুসরি মিলি গেলে দিম পাঁঠাবলি।

তোর পূজা করিতে মা মোর

যদি যায় মা ঘরবাড়ি

অন্তুসরি পাইলে মাগে দিম কালো ধলা পাঁঠাবলি।

My Translation-

Please listen Mashan Kali

Int. J. Lang. Lit. Cult.

<https://aipublications.com/ijllc/>

Getting Antusari, will full my vow.

Maa, going to worship you,

If I will have to sacrifice all,

Getting Antusari, will immotale goat in double.

This promise helps us understand the rituals of the time. Though society's present status remains the same, most people do not try to believe it due to their logical and scientific minds. The innovation of science truly brings huge changes to this kind of rituals.

The story begins with the conversation between Antushori and Sukoshori. They discuss to go to market for selling sackcloth of jute made by them.

ধকরের বস্তা পিঠিৎ কইছু

পতিরাজের হাঁটতে যাছু।

দুই জনা না যাম বাঙ্গরে

যাম হামরা সারাই বারাই

মালাম কিছু পামনাই।

ধকরের বস্তা পিঠিৎ কইছু

পতিরাজের হাঁটতে যাছু।।

My Translation-

Tacking the sackcloath in my back

Going to the Patiraj market.

We are two, let's go

Making a conversation,

Don't feel any hesitation.

Tacking the sackcloth on my back

Going to the Patiraj market.

The above expression makes a rural sense regarding the society of thirty years ago. Women were habituated to making sackcloth of jute for their use and sale. Sackcloth of jute was the only source of income for the women. They did this after completing their housework. But we are now modern and using a sackcloth of plastic, not jute. Women of the present generation do not know how sackcloth can be made. People are now separated from this rural craft and mostly prefer modern technology.

Antu Shori presents the lived experience of a rural woman navigating a deeply patriarchal society. The protagonist, though uneducated, is resourceful and resilient. The

narrative reveals a world where women's labor such as weaving sackcloth from jute was both a domestic responsibility and a source of economic contribution. This gendered economy has now largely disappeared, replaced by industrial and synthetic alternatives. Ritual plays a significant role in the narrative. The antagonist vows to offer a goat sacrifice to Masan Kali in exchange for his immoral desires being fulfilled. This act of making a religious vow for personal gain reflects a worldview rooted in ritual causality. From a modern perspective informed by science and rationality, such practices are often dismissed as superstitions. The story thus illustrates a transition from a theocentric worldview to a more secular, empirical understanding of the world a hallmark of temporal transformation.

Chakai Shori:

This is also a Khisa Khon represents a ridiculous narrative. It is based on a real event at a native village of Kushmandi. The title represents the heroine of the story. Chakai is a village girl who falls in love with Palash from her village. The time closes upon the two souls, and they become one. On the other hand, the father of Chakai brings Dhurut Baudiya from another village, who wishes to marry his daughter. After hearing this news from her mother, Chakai became tense and depressed. What should she do? She does not understand. She then informs her lover, Palash, and requests that he do something. But Palash was a little educated, and he is unemployed. He could not find any way to manage the situation. Chakai's father fixed the date of marriage. Finding no way, Chakai and Palash decide to flee from their village. And they do that. They marry by the name of the goddess in a Kali Temple. The news instantly spread over the village. The villagers condemn them for their antisocial activity.

Chakai Shori explores themes of forbidden love, honor, and community sanction. Chakai, a village girl, defies her father's arranged marriage by eloping with her lover. This act of resistance transforms her identity in the eyes of the community; she becomes a "shori," a term loaded with moral judgment. The community's condemnation reflects the rigid gender norms and social codes that governed

personal behavior in earlier periods. From a structuralist standpoint, Chakai's defiance disrupts the binary opposition of virtue/shame that underpins traditional social order. Today, such actions are increasingly seen through the lens of individual agency and rights. Feminist theory, particularly Judith Butler's concept of performativity, helps us understand how Chakai's actions challenge normative gender roles. The shift in audience reception from condemnation to empathy signals a broader transformation in social values over time. It also reflects the influence of education, legal reforms, and media representation in reshaping notions of morality and honor.

The time shows the social condition of the late 20th century when society was ruled by its own constitution. But now the society is totally changed. The twenty-first century diverts the ways of mockery. Time changes the present condition through education. It transforms the tradition into a new genre where this kind of incident always happens, but is considered normal. Now the women are empowered. There is no way to suppress them. They succeed in the dark side of society through their education. How events change daily, and time takes people into a well-developed place.

Khon Palagan is a folk performance form performed by the Rajbanshi people. It serves multiple functions such as entertainment, moral education, historical narration, and social critique. Performances are held in open-air community spaces, fostering a sense of collective participation. In the contemporary context, however, *Khon Palagan* faces a crisis of relevance. The emergence of commercialized folk performances like *Hangama* replete with DJ music, colorful lighting, and professionalized actors, has led to a significant transformation. These new forms prioritize spectacle over substance and commodify traditional aesthetics for mass consumption. This phenomenon aligns with Fredric Jameson's critique of postmodern culture as one that replaces depth with surface, authenticity with simulation.

Moreover, the integration of modern elements such as mobile phones and social media platforms into traditional narratives reflects a hybridization of form. While this

adaptation keeps the genre alive, it also dilutes its original cultural significance. The shift from participatory to passive consumption further distances audiences from the ritualistic and communal essence of folk theatre.

CONCLUSION

Understanding its transformation through time offers critical insights into the broader dynamics of cultural change, identity formation, and historical memory. The analysis reveals that tradition is not a static inheritance but a living process, continuously negotiated and redefined through the lens of time. The evolving patterns of *Khon Palagan* thus serve as a microcosm of larger societal transformations, reminding us that what we perform today may become myth tomorrow, and what we once considered sacred may eventually be archived as folklore.

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