Performative Genres as Boundary Markers

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In Bakhtin’s (1986) famous essay he broadens the concept of genre to include everyday forms of utterance, saying that the specific contexts in which language is used develop stable genres of speech. The focus on genre foregrounds the sensitivity of language to context as well as to the intentions of the user, in that speakers actively choose the genres in which they wish to couch their utterances.

My interest in genre is of a somewhat different order. Performative genres are not merely sensitive to context, they also serve as boundary markers separating different spheres of communication and social life, configuring the discourses that emerge around them. In this essay I will examine two performative genres from Purulia, West Bengal – viz. the chho dance and the jhumur song – to describe some of the different ways in which the people of Purulia, the communities that perform these genres, come to be described in the scholarly discourse of folklore. There has been a sustained interest in the folklore of Purulia from the early 80s. Descriptions of the various communities that inhabit this region, their dialects and customs, appear in Bangla folklore journals like Lokoshruti and Chhatrak and in texts by scholars associated with the Folk and Tribal Cultural Centre, a government sponsored research organization in Calcutta. Essays on these two performative genres occur with great frequency in these publications, as if they have some iconic significance for the region and its people. Before I elaborate on this point let me first give a brief account of Purulia and its relationship to the culture of West Bengal.

Purulia was a part of the Jungle Mahals – the hill areas that ranged from Birbhum, now in West Bengal, to Ranchi, in Jharkhand – until this district was dissolved in 1833. It then became part of the district of Manbhum in Bihar. Manbhum, in turn, was dissolved in 1956 and Purulia became a separate district in the state of West Bengal. However, Purulia still has strong cultural links with the state of Jharkhand that was carved out of Bihar a few years ago. This region is of great significance for folklore scholarship. It is home to diverse tribal groups some of whom have a long history of interaction with medieval state formations in Central India. This has led to the development of an aristocratic stratum within some of the tribes of this region. Surajit Sinha, one of the first scholars to study this process, called it the ‘Rajputisation’ of the tribes (Sinha n.d.). This process of Rajputisation went hand-in-hand with the emergence of a courtly culture that was strongly rooted in the local folk traditions. The courts of the tribal chiefs were important centers of patronage where performers and poets congregated. It is important to remember, however, that the forms that became the object of royal patronage were originally folk forms. Thus, now when the tribal chiefs have disappeared the musical traditions that they nurtured have become once again, the heritage of the folk. The folk traditions of tribal Central India have a distinctive identity of their own even though this region does not form a unified political entity. (This region is divided between the states of West Bengal, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand.) Thus, as I have already mentioned, Purulia as a border region has greater cultural affinity with the neighbouring state of Jharkhand than with many of the
other districts of West Bengal. This poses an interesting challenge for Bengali folkloristics that has a deep-rooted interest in cultural nationalism and has always maintained that it is her folk culture that gives Bengal her distinctive identity (cf. Sen 1985, Dutt 1954). Purulia is sometimes incorporated within the sphere of folk culture and at other times as part of a distinctive tribal ethos. The shifts in location are determined by the vantage point from which the particular scholar addresses his/her object. Purulia as an object of folkloric discourse is most often represented by her performative genres and each genre offers a particular perspective from which she may be viewed. This has consequences for the study of culture itself. Culture becomes a site for border crossings and is defined not so much as a collective property of a group but by the discourses that purport to speak for and about it. In this essay I will show how the culture of Purulia is constituted by the overlapping boundaries between different discourses and genres. The thematic foregrounded in the discussion of these genres can be conceptualized in terms of two sets of oppositions viz. culture vs. civilization and folk culture vs. popular culture. I submit that it is through the juxtaposition of these two sets of oppositions that Purulia is mapped in the discourse of folklore.

In my discussion of the two performative genres I focus on the writings of Ashutosh Bhattacharya, the doyen of Bangla folkloristics and one of the first folklorists to write about Purulia. Other scholars on Purulia usually take Bhattacharya as a reference point in their own writings, whether as support for their own assertions or to engage in polemics. Thus their discourse take on a dialogic style configuring both Purulia as a social imaginary as well as the public within which the discourse circulates. (Genres are framed by the style in which they are embodied which also determines the public that it addresses.)

Chho dance, primitive culture and authentic tradition

Ashutosh Bhattacharya’s writings on Purulia chho are framed by a special context. They serve to introduce the dance form to a global audience that has no familiarity with this genre. (I may mention here that Bhattacharya is also known for his role as an impresario for the dance, taking it first to Delhi and then to Europe and North America.) The framing of the chho as a tribal war dance, the focus on the masks that the dancers wear and the music of the drums in his description can be explained in terms of the context in which he wrote. Thus the masks and the drum music become dense symbols carrying the qualities associated with tribalness, that is, the assumption of magical persona represented through the mask, coupled with the ‘primitive’ savagery of the music. In the process other aspects such as the singing of a jhumur song at the start of a performance in a style that cannot be characterized as warlike or the use of wind instruments as musical accompaniments are left out of the description. The ‘primitive’ is a complex term for Bhattacharya. He sometimes uses it as synonymous with ‘tribal’, at other times it is used to characterize a type of society that is self-contained, isolated and threatened by novelty or change. The shifts in meanings are perhaps inevitable given the fact that he wrote for so many different audiences. However the representation of the chho acquires a remarkable fixity even as it circulates among different publics. So much so that even scholars who take a very different stance to tribal societies still tend to represent the dance in the same way. Thus the association between magic and the primitive is valorized by Bankim Mahato (1978). He cites James Frazer’s magnum opus, The Golden Bough, to claim superiority of the primitive tribal over the believer in false religions. I quote:

Magic assumes that in nature one event follows another necessarily and invariably without the intervention of any spirit or personal agency. Thus its fundamental conception is identical with that of modern science, underlying the whole system is a faith, implicit but real and firm, in the order and uniformity of nature.

(in Mahato 1978: 25)

Both authors assume certain core features of the dance behind the obfuscating layers imposed first by Hindu civilization and then by modern technology and mass culture. Purulia chho as a living tradition has been influenced by history. The dance themes are taken from epic texts like the Mahabharata and the Puranas which bears testimony to the long process of interaction between the tribal cultures of Purulia and Bengali Hinduism. Both Bhattacharya and Mahato think that they can strip off accretions imposed by history and modernity to present the authentic, timeless form of the dance.

The theme of authenticity has been taken up by a group of younger scholars. They do not associate it with the notion of tribal culture but rather use the theme to represent Purulia chho as a site for a dialogue between folk culture and pan-Indian civilization. Thus Mahua Mukherjee (1996) and Malati Agniswaran (nd.) both read the chho against the Natyashastra in an effort to re-create a lost classical dance tradition for Bengal. The cultural activist Pashupati Mahato (2000) criticizes this perspective as a form of internal colonization by the dominant Bengali culture. He says that if there are traces of continuity between Bengali culture and the tribal culture of Purulia it is because tribal culture is primordial. However, Mahato’s argument is not strictly based on the study of the Chho dance. He speaks of dance and music in general and more specifically about the musical genre known as jhumur. It is to this that I now turn.
The jhumur and the interface between tribe and Hindu civilization

In the previous section I have shown how the chho becomes a symbol of tribal culture by excluding certain features that do not fit the image of the tribal war dance. One of these is the jhumur that is sung at the opening of the dance. Representations of the jhumur are complex and fragmentary scattered over different discursive sites. References to jhumur songs are found in texts about the popular culture of 19th century Calcutta for instance. What link do they have with the jhumur songs sung in Purulia? On the face of it, authors that mention these songs in the context of popular urban culture do not directly refer to the folk culture in which these popular forms were once rooted (Banerjee 1989).

Ashutosh Bhattacharya frames his discussion of the jhumur genre around the theme of the subaltern. His focus, however, is not so much on the opposition between elite and popular culture. Instead, he uses the jhumur form to elaborate on the relationship between tribal and Bengali/sanskritic cultural forms in a way that draws upon the specific features of this border region. Thus Bhattacharya (1965) says that the jhumur developed within a historical context that fostered Bengali-tribal syncreticism. The tribal groups that inhabit Chhota Nagpur voluntarily adopted cultural elements from Bengal and created a vibrant, multi-lingual culture. The jhumur is a product of this cultural hybridity, sung in all the different languages spoken in this region. Bhattacharya is especially interested in the Bangla jhumur as a trace of pre-historic cultural contact. He explores one particular theme prevalent in the jhumur, the Radha-Krishna story. This story, he says was known in this region before the rise of Bengal vaishnavism, through song forms that readily adapted themselves to the popular musical traditions of Bengal like the kirtana. Bhattacharya uses this as evidence for the hypothesis that the Bengali Hindu influence on this region did not manifest itself as a form of colonization. Rather, it took the form of a voluntary and selective adaptation of themes that were already familiar to the inhabitants of this region. He characterizes this as a form of ‘bilingualism’ and traces an evolutionary course from the tribal jhumur in Santhali to the Bangla jhumur via the Radha-Krishna theme.

As I have already said, Bhattacharya does not mention the Bangla jhumurs that are sung during the performance of the chho dance. It is as if the representation of tribal culture when viewed from the vantage point of the dance must necessarily be monolingual, excluding non-tribal elements from its essential form. However, in describing the jhumur as a bilingual form there are some factual anomalies. If Santhali songs are the first and most unique feature of jhumur forms this is not borne out by empirical evidence. The examples of Santhali jhumurs reproduced in Bhattacharya’s account are actually daadshalya jhumurs most commonly sung by Kurmi-Mahatos and Bhumij (Sinha 1997). In fact the Santhals do not think of the jhumur genre as one of their own musical forms. The Santhals function as a symbol in Bhattacharya’s text. They have come to represent the archetypal tribal group in Bangla literary discourse. In contrast groups who do sing jhumurs like the Bhumij and Kurmi-Mahatos claim a mixed status as both kshatriyas as well as tribals and no longer have mastery over a tribal language. Instead both groups speak Bangla. Clearly Santhals were more suitable for Bhattacharya’s model of bilingualism as they speak both Santhali and Bangla and have sustained their distinctive identity while still being able to interact with other groups.

Is tribal culture coterminous with folk culture? Bhattacharya makes a distinction between folk and primitive societies on the basis of their relationship to the ‘other’. Primitive societies are exclusionary and fragile, threatened by forces of modernity. Folk societies are contemporary and welcome novelty (Bhattacharya 1962). Are the people of this border region part of folk or primitive society? It is not always clear in Bhattacharya’s writings. His accounts of tribal society are filtered through the cultural forms that he describes. When he writes about the chho dance it is in the context of an ideal primitive society. But this is not the case with the jhumur It seems to represent the dynamic face of folk society without being part of mainstream Bengali culture.

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