

## **Camouflaging the Carnavalesque: An Enquiry into the Culturally Syncretistic Performative Tradition of the Bahurupis of West Bengal**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The term 'bahurupi' refers to the wandering folk performers- who delineate diverse characters, mostly mythological in nature, such as Lord Shiva, Lord Krishna, Goddess Kali, and Hanuman. Bahurupi is a dying folk art form that was once the predominant agrarian entertainment even a few decades ago. The bahurupis belong to the 'Bedia' (byadh) community (a Scheduled Tribe (ST) community) who were mainly hunters and used to catch birds and sell them in the market. In course of time, these nomads have turned themselves into bahurupi performers who tend to amuse people by camouflaging themselves into different characters. Their art form is also called 'chameleon art' because of their ability to reverse the social hierarchy by camouflaging their real identities. Mask, costume and Make-Up enable them to camouflage their real identity and appear mostly as the characters of Ramayana, Mahabharata, and other epics. They are treated as untouchables, but during their performances, they metamorphose themselves into gods and goddesses and at that moment, the audience starts interacting with them. So, the disguise helps to reduce caste and class discrimination and overturn the social hierarchy. This carnival period is their second life where they can fully express themselves and forget their real identities. So, this paper will elucidate the bahurupi culture, their origin and transformation and how the camouflage enables these wandering performers to earn their livelihood. It will also explore the importance of Carnavalesque in the lives of the lower-class Bahurupis as they enjoy a certain amount of acceptability during their performances.

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## Introduction

### Defining Cultural Syncretism

In the modern understanding of the word, syncretism simply means the lack or absence of violence and conflict, an atmosphere that is conducive for the growth and rehabilitation of peace, comfort and mutual amity. In the lexical sense, the word blandly comes across as one of the many platitudes that signify an array of things, while embracing nothing and staying unencumbered in the white-hot mess of political correctness that seems to camouflage most of the cultural debate in today's world, forever eluding the grasp of the reader and containing within itself the a host of implications. As a socio-cultural development, Syncretism is dependent on a few factors, which are listed as below:

1. An overall air of economic prosperity, which facilitates the growth of mutual respect and trust among historically opposite and the culturally divergent communities.
2. The presence of common strands of culture, language and religious affiliation. Bonds that seem to be the harbinger of the message of unity and mutual co-operation.
3. An intellectual pursuit consciously taken out by the members of the civil society that fosters the attempt to understand the intrinsic of communal amity, the intrinsic value of diversification and representation. This can manifest itself in the forms of Op-Eds in leading newspapers, an increasingly tolerant and diverse popular media landscape, and an effective measure taken out by the state to promote interfaith and inter-ethnic dialogue. All these can prove to forces for good, at once symbolizing the promise of cosmopolitan living and global thinking,
4. It has been proved that communal harmony and the absence of interreligious strife can promote mercantile enterprises and economic investments. Again this prods to the old Marxian idea of base and super-structure that says; economy is the base of all socio-cultural; development in any given society. So it is wise to assume that the economic wellbeing, an altogether prosperous atmosphere and a society that is on the ascent not just in terms of human resource but also on the indexes of social development, seem to encourage the prevalence of syncretism.

All these factors and socio-economic indicators are suggestive of the pre-conditions that are necessary for people in any given society to be respectful and welcoming of social change and “outsiders”. A brief sociological overview of the border regions of Cooch Behar would suggest the presence of all these aforementioned factors that are required for the eventual growth of syncretism.

### **The Many Contours of Cultural Syncretism**

At the heart of the matter of cultural syncretism lies the issue of co-habitation and co-existence; traits that do not necessarily manifest themselves in a volatile setting, but requires a decent amount of respect to exist between the communities that appear to be opposed to each other; at least on paper. Such a binaristic mode of thinking often fails to do justice to the complexities that are inherent in the term Cultural syncretism; as it sees it merely as a result of favorable pre-conditions and suitable factors that bolster the growth and chances of the prevalence of Syncretism. These factors have just been discussed in the section above; which suggest that Syncretism does not just happen, rather it is the consecrated result of crafty social engineering, a ploy that has to carefully imbibed, otherwise it may end up alienating a large chunk of the disgruntled masses. It is important to realize that Syncretism is not a static state of social inertia, rather a dynamic, concerted effort towards ensuring lasting peace and harmony between the masses. This benign influence is something that ethnographers have long identified, and have tried to come up with copious theories about such a unique development. But, to the dismay of everyone concerned, the reigning atmosphere of Syncretism, especially in the border regions of anywhere in the world, does not lend itself to easy generalization. This poses a unique challenge to the scholars interested in studying the implications of Syncretism, that is, the question: What are the limits of syncretism and just how far can it work as a civilizing force in an increasingly majoritarian world, an unfortunate and unwanted growth that, sadly, the South Asian states are not immune from. This question aims at the foundational aspect of the idea of Syncretism, some of whose defining features are as follow:

1. In pre-literate societies, Syncretism seems to facilitate the growth and existence of mnemocultures,, which seem like a very unusual development given the fact that mnemocultures depend upon the lack of transcription, technology, documentation, archiving and lithography, basically everything that spells modernity; whereas the sole reason why syncretism might manifest itself in any society is probably because of the socio-economic development and an overall prosperous environment that can only happen under the

technocratic influences of modernity. However these apparent self-revelatory factors are grossly inadequate to explain the very unique way Syncretism exerts a positive influence on mnemocultures, that is the civilizing mission of Syncretism which often inspires communities and populations to look back at their collective unconscious and old achievements and harkens back to an idyllic past that was free from the oppressive homogenizing forces of technocratic advancement, conditions and preferences that are suitable for the growth of mnemocultures and liminal growth. At the same time, Syncretism also fosters the unique micro-narrative of the cyclical nature of history, something that mnemocultures seem to revel in as their amorphous nature makes it possible for them to bend and defy the rules of spatial and temporal belonging.

2. In the highly colloquial and anthologized parlance of the border regions of Cooch Behar, the linguistic authority, at least when it comes to the local dialects, belongs mostly to the local indigenous community, i.e., the Rajbanshis. This satiates their aggrieved pride that might have taken a hit following the rehabilitation of the East Bengali migrants, who, many Rajbanshis believe were accorded unfair government benefits and land grants, often at the expense of the local Rajbanshi population. This wounded pride gets an ameliorating balm when it is held in general consensus that the linguistic authority of the local dialect lies with the Rajbanshis, which helps avoid ethnic strife and promote harmony and syncretism. So here is an example of language and its practical usability affecting positive change in the realm of social relations, something that is uniquely South Asian. This is one of the many ways in which Syncretism operates in the border regions of Cooch Behar, a place where ethnic relations could have gone horribly wrong, but were saved from such a calamity by the wholehearted attempt taken out by the Rajbanshi community to soothe the ethnic relations and minimize conflict despite feeling at times, deprived and taken for granted by the Indian state.

3. Syncretism seems to have fostered the spirit and ethos of democratic citizenship and reduced the overwhelming pressure on citizens to prove the ingenuity of their citizenship. On paper, this might seem a bit ludicrous; since how can a socio-cultural development such as Syncretism reduce the burden on the citizens. But what one must realize is that, Syncretism reduces ethnic strife which results in a much more peaceful environment for ethnic relations, which in turn lessens government scrutiny on the vile details of citizenry and bio-metric details, which proves really helpful in a country like India where literacy levels and access to documentation are low and often the brunt of this borne by the lowest of the income groups. These impediments can

temporarily take a backseat in the long run of things as the syncretic environment in any social setting can be a boon for evading the exploitative clutches of the state machinery. This makes it very rewarding for communities and populations to live amicably with each other and forge deeper, meaningful ties that help in the long run to negate the threat of disenfranchisement and possible deportation.

As is already clear, the pre-conditions involved in the rightful emergence of Syncretism are hard to fulfill and require a lot of conscious social-engineering on the parts of the different communities that dot the vast expanses of India. Generations of men have lived by this syncretistic ethos in the regions of Bengal at large, a trend and tendency that shows no sign of ebbing, which should secure the safe transition of these border-dwelling communities from occupying the periphery to establishing themselves in the centre.

Bengal's folklore is affluent with various traditions, customs and cultural heritage that fascinate people through various art forms. One such art form is polymorphism- represented by bahurupis- the wandering folk performers- who limn diverse characters, mostly mythological in nature. Bahurupi is a dying folk art form that was once the predominant agrarian entertainment even a few decades ago. Today, a bahurupi is dark-skinned Kali, tomorrow he is blue-faced Shiva, or he may appear as Ardhanarishvara. This is the life of a bahurupi; he lives in many faces, in many shades and colours. They are the birds of passage who delineate various characters which are mostly mythological in nature like Kali, Tara, Shiva, and Krishna. They are the street performers who embrace disguises to amuse the agrarian folks. They dress themselves in conspicuous costumes of mainly the Hindu gods and goddesses and embellish their faces with dazzling and spectacular Make-Up and thereby, they metamorphose themselves into different characters from Hindu epics. They put on their costumes and do their makeover which are changed every day according to the characters they will enact and roam around the villages performing and recreating the stories from the epics. They also employ props, masks and other accessories to heighten their performances. As they are considered as the lower-class section of society, this art of disguise becomes convenient for reducing caste and class discrimination in ad interim. So, the very idea of camouflaging oneself into a God from a human being renders to theme of carnivalesque and their 'carnival life' provides them the opportunity to escape the morbid reality. They saunter from village to village to perform and accept food, money, clothes etc. from the audience. In past, the bahurupis were a familiar sight on the street, but now this form of entertainment is gradually diminishing because of the

easy availability of newer forms of entertainment like television, cinema, internet. Now, they perform during a few festivals like Charak, Holi, Ram Navami, Bengali New Year. So, one day he is disguised as a mythological god or goddess, but he may also take the disguise of a police officer, a housewife, a saint or a tiger or a lion. This is called a bahurupi- the mimic man of many faces. This is the lives of these wandering folk performers. In return for his performance, he receives contributions from the spectators but it is not considered as begging. This is the way of living by masquerading as a necessity. This is also the modus operandi of preserving this gradually diminishing art form of bahurupi. Camouflage performance of Bengal has encouraged syncretism.



Figure 1. A bahurupi camouflaged as Goddess Kali is travelling by train.



Figure 2. A child artist in the guise of Lord Shiva.

## The Bedias

The bahurupis belong to the 'Bedia' (byadh) community whose primary profession was hunting. The Bedias are a Scheduled Tribe (ST) community who are mainly found in Eastern India. They were mainly hunters and used to catch birds and sell them in the market. They are considered low in the social hierarchy and they were restricted from other occupations like farming, and weaving. After the enactment of forest law, they are forced to renounce their hunting profession and they switched to other professions like snake charmers, monkey charmers, and herbal medicine sellers. It is rumoured that a Bedia guard was employed at a zamindar's house and he watched a stage performance of a 'noti' (a trained actor). After watching this performance, the guard was so overwhelmed that he taught this to the people of his community and bahurupi tradition came into existence from this. They were nomadic people but in course of time, a lot of changes have occurred in their lifestyle. They started to amuse people by transfiguring themselves into different characters by taking recourse to camouflage. The bahurupi art is also called 'chameleon art' because of their ability to reverse the social hierarchy by camouflaging their real identities.

### **Myth Related to Their Origin**

The term 'Bahurupi' is originated from the Sanskrit word 'Bahu' (many) and 'Rupa' (form), meaning one who changes his form. It is one of the earliest forms of recreation in ancient India and the meaning of the term dates back to the ancient period when bahurupis used to work for the kings as spies to gather information from the enemies. The references to bahurupis can also be found in Jataka tales (circa 4th century BCE).

We can encounter various stories related to their origin. Sometimes, it is called that King Jarasandha of Magadh was their forefather. In another version, it is told that they are the descendants of monkey king Bali who was killed by Lord Rama to make Sugriva as the king of the monkeys but Rama also promised him that he would kill Rama in his next life. It is believed that Bali was reborn as a byadh and kills Krishna. Another story tells that Kalketu, the byadh of Chandimangal is their ancestor. There are multiple versions of the stories of their origin but every version denotes their 'otherness' and lower social strata.

In Ain-I-Akbari, we find references to the bahurupis who used to entertain people by taking different disguises. But they are not probably the ancestors of bahurupis of Bengal. The bahurupi performers are the lower caste Hindus who can still be found in many villages. But in course of time, because of the hardship of the profession, many bahurupis have switched to different professions and some of them have turned themselves into farmers. In West Bengal,



they initially identify themselves with the Kurmis but later they pleaded for their inclusion into the Scheduled Tribe category. So, the narrative of their origin is not a singular one and they have transformed themselves from purely nomads to semi-nomadic folk performers.

### **Mask and Make-Up: Means of Camouflage**

Mask and Make-Up act as means of camouflage in bahurupi art form. Camouflage is a tactic that is used to mask one's identity, location and movement. Bahurupis take recourse to masks and makeovers for their performances. A mask is used to metamorphose into another self by concealing the real one and Make-Up is used to highlight and enhance their performances. We encounter the bahurupis transforming themselves into mainly the Hindu Gods and Goddesses by dint of shimmering, eye-catching costumes and Make-Up. For Make-Up, they mainly use zinc oxide, alaktaka liquid, vermilion powder, coconut oil, vaseline etc. Their Make-Up boxes contain so many things like- daggers, guns, knives, false arms and heads, rubber snakes, dolls, flutes, drums, and masks of various animals. So, these cosmetics and masks help them to mask up their real identity and give them the opportunity to portray their second self before the world.



Figure 3. A bahurupi man with his make-up kits.





Figure 4. A child bahurupi artist is being painted.

### **Tales Told by the Bahurupis**

Their art form owns a cultural distinctiveness, it is not merely a means of sustenance. They entertain people by frightening them, playing jokes, making mock fights etc. For most performances, there is a story and a bahurupi does his costume and makeover accordingly. He has to learn jumping, dancing, acrobatics and also the art of polyglottery for his performances. He receives training from his guru for this art. They mostly enact the tales from Ramayana, Mahabharata and other epics. They do not follow any written script instead they depend on their oral narratives. Religion is closely associated with their performances as dressing up as Hindu Gods and Goddesses becomes helpful for earning money. If a bahurupi performs dressed up as Shiva or Kali, he will be easily able to attract the audience and the audience will provide him with some money and seek blessing from him. Mostly performed epic characters are Lord Rama, Ravana, Lord Krishna, Lord Shiva, Goddess Kali, Tara Maa, Lord Hanuman, and Ardhanarishvara. Dressing up as animals like tiger, langur, lion, bear is also common. They mainly perform during festivals like Durga Puja, Kali Puja, Charak. Now, they also use film songs and jokes in their performances to attract the audience. Nowadays, they also perform at weddings and birthday parties to amuse the guests and they dress up as Charlie Chaplin, birds, animals and some other cartoon characters. Through their performances, they also provide progressive messages like the abolition of child marriage, pandemic, global warming etc.



Figure 5. Two baurupis in the disguise of Rama and Lakshman narrating stories from the Ramayana.



Figure 6. A baurupi dressed up as Shiva in a mela.



Figure 7. A man dressed up as the Hindu God Hanuman is performing in a village.

## **The Effectiveness of Camouflage**

Many of the bahurupis have changed their profession because of the meagre income and hardship. But, some of them are still continuing with this profession. It's crucial enough to discuss the necessity and effectiveness of camouflage of the bahurupis.

- Initially they were the hunters, their work was to trap birds and sell them in the market. Therefore, they did not have the skill of agricultural work or other skills. So, after the enforcement of forest law, they switched to the performative art of bahurupi culture. It was easier for them to learn the art of bahurupi. Previously, they were nomads, so they continued their habit of wandering from village to village and earning their living.
- They mostly take the disguises of the Hindu Gods and Goddesses as religiosity becomes helpful for them to earn their livelihood. They are the lower-class people but when they camouflage their identity with the help of masks and Make-Up, spectators forget the caste demarcation and segregation temporarily and mingle themselves with the bahurupis. So, the camouflage of Gods and Goddesses offers the bahurupis a social acceptance for the time being.
- They are treated as untouchables; they are not allowed inside the houses of upper-class people. So, they feel uncomfortable in the company of the upper-class sections of society. But during their performances, they metamorphose themselves into gods and goddesses and at that moment, the audience starts interacting with them. So, the disguise helps to reduce the discrimination of caste and class. This disguise offers them a second life where they can escape the harsh reality and emancipate themselves from the shackles of caste barriers.

## **Camouflaging the Carnavalesque**

Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World* (trans. 1984), propounds the idea of 'carnavalesque'. "This literary mode parallels the flouting of authority and temporary inversion of social hierarchies that, in many cultures, are permitted during a season of carnival. The literary work does so by introducing a mingling of voices from diverse social levels that are free to mock and subvert authority, to flout social norms by ribaldry, and to exhibit various ways of profaning what is ordinarily regarded as sacrosanct" (Abrams and Harpham 86). Carnival is the laughter, the bodily, the parody, the ugly and the so-called 'low'. Laughter, clowning and bodily functions are part of carnival as official culture does not sanction them. So, the carnival is the eventual other, it escapes control and classification. Bakhtin speaks for the need for subversion of the established order. Bakhtin defines carnival as-

“... it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal” (Bakhtin 10).

Carnival overturns the established social order temporarily and it allows people of all classes to interact freely. The behaviour which is not accepted in normal life is legitimized during carnival. It also removes the discrimination between high and low. Bakhtin states that carnival offers people a second life which is full of laughter, banter and amusement and in the second life, a person can express him/her fully-

“...all were considered equal during carnival. Here... a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age” (Bakhtin 10).

Bahurupi culture can also be analyzed in the light of ‘carnavalesque’. Their main purpose is to entertain and amuse the audience and for that purpose, they camouflage their real identities with the help of masks and make-up. During their performances, they decorate themselves with the costumes of Gods and Goddesses. In their real life, they are the lower-class people of the society and they are not allowed to mingle with the upper-class people. But, during their performances, they are allowed to interact with the upper-class sections and the spectators also seek blessing from them considering them as the incarnation of gods. So, their transformation into Gods and Goddesses with the help of costumes and makeover helps them to overturn the social hierarchy and emancipate themselves from the shackles of casteism. This carnival period is their second life where they can fully express themselves and forget their real identities.

Mask plays an important role in overturning the social hierarchy and camouflaging the real identity of a bahurupi. The costumes, Make-Up, and masks act as means to conceal their real selves and enjoy the second life.

“...it (the mask) rejects conformity to oneself. The mask is related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries, to mockery and familiar nicknames. It contains the playful element of life; it is based on a peculiar interrelation of reality and image, characteristic of the most ancient rituals and spectacles” (Bakhtin 40).

In normal life, a bahurupi is regarded as untouchable and he experiences segregation and discrimination. But during the carnival, the difference between a bahurupi and the audience is annihilated. He can freely interact with the audience. He gets the freedom to enjoy his carnival life and escape the harsh reality.

## Conclusion

This once popular rural art form is now disappearing in the age of extreme globalization. In course of time, newer forms of entertainment like television, internet, radio have captured the field of older art forms. The changing taste of the audience has pushed the baturupis to move on to other fields. The once-popular folk-art form is now the dying art form. The popularity of the mass media, modernization and lack of patronage have tolled its death knell. Many of the baturupis have switched to different professions and migrated to urban areas and the baturupi families are not at all eager to allow their children to continue with this profession because of the hardship of this profession. In an interview with VillageSquare.in, Chabi Chowdury, a 45-year-old woman artist tells-

“There were days when people touched our feet and took blessings though they knew we were just dressed as gods and goddesses. But things have changed now and it’s painful that some have even begun to look down upon as beggars.”

They also blame the state govt. for their precarious situation. The state govt. has introduced Lokprasar Prkalpo Scheme and assured to grant one thousand rupees per month but most of the performers do not have the retainer card and so, they do not even get the minimum amount of grant. They were also promised to give at least two shows per month but all are just promises; nothing has been changed. Still, there are some performers who are trying their best to preserve the age-old art form. They have also collaborated with theatre artists, musicians, and puppeteers to make their performances more innovative for present-day spectators. But, if the younger generations do not take the initiative for perpetuating the dying art form, this unique and fascinating art form will dissipate into oblivion.

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