



INDIGENOUS SPORTS AND PHYSICAL CULTURE IN THE FOLK DANCES OF COLONIAL BENGAL

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Abstract:

Exploring the various forms of human sport and physical exercise has become a concern among historians of new social history. Sports, a crucial component of popular culture, represent historical traditions, national glory, and physical prowess. In Bengal, towards the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, a variety of indigenous as well as traditional sports and physical activities were observed in numerous social rituals, religious ceremonies, and folk dances like Rāibenshe, Dhali Nach, Kathi Nach, Lathi Nach, Jhumur Nach, Dhamail, etc. With the help of these athletic pursuits, Bengal's age-old martial tradition also became apparent, refuting colonial stereotypes of Bengalis as effeminate and promoting social dynamism and other recreational values. In this context, the present study attempts to explore the cultural implications of indigenous physical exercises and recreational activities that are embedded into Bengali traditional folk dances, taking into account the social structures and colonial milieu within which such activities persisted.

Key Words: Folk Dance, Indigenous Sports, Martial Tradition, Rāibenshe, Kathi, Dhamail, Dhali, Jhumur, Lathi.

Sports is an integral part of human society as well as cultural life. Sports history is important to have a deeper knowledge of how a people's sporting culture developed. It is also essential for understanding the political processes strongly influenced by nationalism in the colonial setting. When culture is viewed as a common set of conventions by which humans orient themselves in the world and give meaning to their communitarian existence through an engagement with a wide range of symbolic interactions, the importance of studying how games and sports have

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changed historical contexts becomes evident. In recent times, an emphasis has been placed on understanding the social structures and processes of change that affected a wider range of common people at a given time, shifting away from traditional histories that tried to investigate the actions of elite persons ¹. The symbolic significance that sport has in people's lives and their collective emotional engagement in what happens in the sporting arena is the fundamental areas of sports history. The study of game rituals and rules combined with fan conduct and spectator behavior, together with inquiries into cultural patronage and its influence on political attitudes, all contribute to the configuration of sports history as a component of "total history" ². During the colonial period, Bengal had a legacy of a large number of indigenous sports including *Danguli*, *Kanamachi*, *Kit-kit*, *Gollachut*, *Lonta-lonta*, *Lathi Khela*, *Nouka Baich*, *Ekka-dokkae*, *Gaigodani*, etc ³. Some of the traditional Bengali games are thousands of years old and make references to traditional ways of life. For example, it is argued that some of the rhymes of *Gollachut*, were associated with the slave escape attempts during the Indus Valley Civilization or later ⁴. The predominant nature of the residents of Bengal is reflected in the color and tone of its games and amusements.

On the other hand, dance is a vigorous, non-competitive type of exercise with potential benefits for both physical and mental health ⁵. It can be a strategy to get people interested in physical activity and has the power to inspire and motivate them. According to scientific studies, practicing dance and engaging in physical exercise can improve physical fitness in both sexes and also improve lung function, lung capacity, flexibility, and aerobic capacity ⁶. Dance is considered to be a creative art form and a physical activity that can significantly advance the healthy-living agenda. In India, there exists a large number of traditional folk dances. The variety of Indian folk dances reflects the diversity of culture and tradition. Folk dances essentially have a much stronger connection to Indian history ⁷. They are preferred by regular people in every festive mood and they create a full forum for all participants. Since many of these dances are typically performed in groups, this promotes a sense of community among the dancers and over time reflects the harmony among India's different ethnic groups. Due to India's extensive cultural diversity, Indian folk dance is diversified. It comes in a variety of styles, such as *bhangra*, *lavani*, *dandiya*, etc. These dancing styles have rural roots. They are therefore replete with the authentic aroma of Indian soil. *Bhangra* (Punjab), *Karagam* (Tamilnadu), *Chou*, *Rayabese*, and *Dhali* (Bengal) are powerful dance styles that when practiced, promote good physical health, strength, power, and mental support. The primary relevance for all forms of folk dances is the potential for excellent health and general physical well-being

The wonderful combination of sports and dance that Bengalis have managed to achieve is not seen in any other country or nation in the world. Sports and performing arts (especially dance) can be included in the same category as both express the identity of the nature of the nation very simply and clearly. Infact, performing arts can be considered as a rhythmic sport of human nature ⁸. There were several folk dances in Bengal such as *Kathi*, *Lathi*, *Rāibenshe*, *Jhumur*, *Dhali*, and *Dhamail*, etc. which have different features in terms of content and elements but the main motivation of the dances was the joy of playing. Indeed, there is a long-standing belief in India that dancing is the best kind of military preparation and the symbol of bravery. The tradition was at least

as old as, if not earlier than, the time of the Rig-veda, in which Indra, the supreme Warrior God, was frequently depicted as the Dancer (as well as the Singer), and his chief lieutenants the Aswins were as well⁹. This tradition persisted into later eras, as shown by the fact that Arjuna, the legendary chief of warriors from the Mahabharata, made his living as a brilliant dancer and educator when he was in disguise. Similar to this, Bengal's traditional folk dances like *Kathi*, *Lathi*, *Rāibenshe*, *Jhumur*, *Dhali*, and *Dhamail* have a long history of warfare. In this context, the present study has tried to understand the cultural implications of indigenous physical exercises and recreational activities that are embedded in the traditional folk dances of Bengal, taking into account the social structures and colonial milieu within which such activities persisted.

Rāibenshe:

An example of the wonderful combination of sports and dance is the *Rāibenshe* dance exercise. It belongs to the category of war dances and holds a position of unmatched eminence in the entire range of Indian folk dances because of its many different attributes. The word *Rāibenshe* means 'royal bamboo'. From the early and late medieval period, the Bengali infantry soldiers used lances made of solid species of bamboo as a shaft to which a pointed steel head was attached, so that the epithet *Rāibenshe* came to signify a big bamboo¹⁰. The dance is performed to the accomplishment of *dhol* and *kanshi* and in some places with *Ran-Singha* or war trumpet. Inherent heroic and epic qualities, elemental verve, dash, and virility, sustained vigor, strength, and dignity of gesture and movement, and particularly of the upward lift of the chest throughout the dance, freedom from any trace of self-conscious posing, and above all, the manly grace of the plastic movement of the arms and shoulders, are the dominant characteristics of the *Raibenshe* dance. During the dance, there are occasional shouts of victory. This dance is filled with the atmosphere of war excitement and intoxication. An unstoppable energy of delight permeates the entire dance. Rabindranath was also impressed by the masculinity of this dance and wrote – "Such a manly dance is rare. This dance can remove the weakness of our country".

This is the best surviving symbol of India's primitive warfare. It was largely practiced in the districts of Birbhum, Murshidabad, and Burdwan, amongst the Bagdi, Bauri, Dom, Konai, Bhalla, and certain other so-called lower castes of Hindu religion. Many *Rāibenshe* soldiers served in the army of the illustrious ancient Hindu kingdoms of Rajanagar in Birbhum and later Muslim kings; these fighters' descendants were eventually known as the 'gang of *Rāibenshe*'. According to Ghanram's *Dharmamangal*, Mahapatra attacked 'Mayanagar' in the 11th century with the aid of *Rāibenshe*'s troops. Indeed, there was also mention of the *Rāibenshe* warriors in the literary sources of Bharatchandra's '*Annadamangal*' and Kobikankan Chandi's '*Chandimangal*'. Moreover, a striking similarity found between the Ajanta cave depictions and the dressing pattern of the modern *Rāibenshe* warriors pushed back its antiquity to the 6th century AD.

However, from the beginning of the twentieth century, the heroic dance had suffered greatly due to the expansion of western culture and the perverted inclinations of modern Bengalis. The only occasions on which these dances were performed were weddings in Hindu families. Nevertheless, the *Raibenshe* dancers were forced to cater to a distorted public taste since they belonged to the so-

called lower and downtrodden levels of society and were living in poverty and semi-starvation. They began sporting long hair and began dressing like women when they danced. Thus, *Rāibenshes'* dance style deteriorated and became distinctly effeminate and suggestive of vulgar ideas, in imitation of nautch girls ¹¹.

Kathi Dance:

Another beautiful example of the perfect combination of sports and dance in West Bengal is the masculine Kathi dance. Since the dance is done with *kāthis* (sticks), it is evident where the word *Kāthi* comes from. This dance has its roots in war dances. Wands represent swords. The way the sticks are twisted mimics how a sword would hit and counterattack. Although it is not currently connected to a specific ceremony, the dance may have first been done as a Rasa Mandala dance, which is a component of the Krishna cult. The latter hypothesis is backed by the Kathi dance's depictions as Rasa Mandala dances on antique brassware from South India as well as by the dance's clear similarities to the *Kolāttam* or *Rāsa* dance with sticks, which is currently practiced as a living folk dance in several South Indian regions. The stick dance is quite widespread throughout India and seems to be a very old style of dancing. Men and women separately appear to have engaged in it as a social pastime in each area of ancient India. Two Pala-era stone pillars from the Pabna region are housed in the Indian Museum in Calcutta and show stick dances performed by upper-class women. The core intention of this dance is to maintain social cohesion or rhythmic integration with the group while moving, mimicking the coordinated rhythmic movement of planetary entities ¹². Simple ditties that frequently have a pitiful tone are sung along with this dance and deal with the simple joys and tragedies of rural life. Below are the lyrics to two popular songs:

"I planted paddy on yonder ridge

But the wild duck ate all up.

The scourge of flood came and covered up the fields with sand!

In the house of the Babus

Live the predatory kite birds.

They swooped down and took away all I had

Leaving me only with my hopes!"

(Gurusaday Dutta, *Banglar Lokoshilpa O Lokonritya*)

The agents of repressive landlords are the ones being discussed here, who frequently forced tenants to pay unlawful charges.

Jhumur Dance:

Like the Kathi dance, the *Jhumur* dance had also the same motivation of playing. The word *Jhumur* was derived from brass anklet belts making a '*jhum, jhum*' sound on dancers' feet. *Jhumur* dances may be solo dances, duet dances, or group dances, and may be performed by men or women. Solo *Jhumur* contains a *tandava* character and involves movements of the arms and legs with wide swaying movements of the body. Duet *Jhumur* is typically danced by two women to the *dhol's* accompaniment. The dance consists of coordinated motions of the body and all of the limbs in a

variety of situations, including squatting, standing, bending, and other acrobatic exercises. Indeed, there existed a distinct category of *Jhumur* called *Kora Jhumur* which embodies individual expression and group cohesion. Not only through dance but also through *Jhumur* songs, the way of life of the people of that time can be identified¹³. A translation of a typical song of the Kora women's chain *Jhumur* dance is given below:

“We are people of the Korã race;
Early in the morning we dig the earth and throw it on a high mound;
With infinite patience, we labor with our precious bodies
And mingle them with the soil”.

(Gurusaday Dutta, *The Folk Dances of Bengal*)

Dhamail Dance:

Another prevalent dance style with outstanding play motive was the *Dhamail* dance. The name *Dhamail* may be a variant of *dhamali* (from *dhayali* - Sanskrit *dhaban* - rushing or fast stepping) or *dhamal* (from Sanskrit *dhaman* - vigour). It is a dance with energetic movements, as implied by its name, as opposed to the *Brata* or *Baran* dance. The two latter dances feature softness as the dominant mood, and the steps are a combination of gliding and shuffling movements of the feet without lifting them off the ground. On the other side, in the *Dhmail* dance, dancers move in an anti-clockwise circle as their feet are sharply raised off the ground and vigorously springing alternately inward and outward. The *Dhmail* dance has two main movement patterns. The left foot is solely utilized for taking brief strides along the circle in an anti-clockwise orientation in the ring as the right foot performs alternate inward and outward springs. In the other version, which is more feminine in nature, each foot alternately takes a light step backward and lightly taps the ground with its toes while maintaining a lifted heel. These motions need the strenuous exercise of the abdominal, gluteal, and pelvic muscles. The attitude of joyful play is the primary motivation for the *Dhmail* dance, but its songs generally relate to the Krishna cult and are spiritual and allegorical. The *Dhamail* dance was performed at weddings and often at the end of *Brata* rituals. It was a dance of vigorous movement as contrasted with the *Brata* dance. However, the *Brata* and *Vivah* (wedding) dance also features a variety of rural activities, jokes, physical activity, and enthusiasm¹⁴.

Dhali Dance:

Dhali dance (*dhal* means shield) was a war dance of *Dhali* (shieldmen) troops in the armies of medieval Hindu and Muslim potentates of Bengal. *Dhali* dance featured rigorous physical exertion like rigorous *tandava* dance, bare-handed exercise, mock battle drills with shields and sticks between two rows of soldiers, etc. *Dhali* is a dance of high aesthetic value by its intricate maneuvers and ordered formations. The name “*dhal*” is a Sanskrit word, suggesting that this dance has a long history that dates back to before the time of Mohammed. The *Dhali* soldier was enlisted from both Hindu and Muslim ranks during the Muslim era. There is also mention of *Dhali* in Bharatchandra's work *Annadamangal*. The *Dhali* warriors of Pratapaditya of Jessore, one of the fabled twelve *Bhuiyans* (twelve territorial potentates) who ruled over various parts of Lower Bengal in the 16th and 17th centuries, are particularly well-known in the history of Bengal¹⁵. However, after

the British occupation, *Dhalis* ceased to be recruited as soldiers and lost their military profession. Since the late nineteenth century, the popularity of *Dhali* dance as a form of sporting entertainment had been rapidly declining. The dance was typically performed during the Muharram holiday and other joyful events like weddings. Similar to *Rāibenshe* parties in West Bengal, parties of *Dhalis* were occasionally hired to accompany the wedding party to the bride's home in central Bengal districts, ostensibly to protect the groom from predatory attacks along the route.

Lathi Dance:

Another example of the wonderful combination and connection of dance and sports that Bengal has given us is the *Lathikhela* (stick game) dance of Bengal. Many people may be surprised to include stick games as a dance, but in the incomparable method of stick games that still exists in rural Bengal, there is a strange harmony of masculine play with dance¹⁶. And I believe that in no other province of India or any other country in the world is there such a beautiful system of dance and play so perfectly coordinated. It was among the most significant ways of engaging in physical culture in Bengal. People have been practicing stick games since the earliest stages of human civilization. People have been using tree branches, canes, or sticks for self-defense and to strike at enemies because sticks were readily available and no metal weapons had yet been invented¹⁷. Over time there have been many changes and evolutions in the methods and practices of stick games. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Lathi dances were organized in various religious festivals such as Muharram and Janmashtami in Bengal. Both the Janmashtami celebration and the Muharram festival are known for their rhythmic mock fights with lathis, which can be played solo or by two or more people at once. Bamboo that is around 5 feet 6 inches long is used to make lathis. The lathi is occasionally handled in the right hand, occasionally in the left, and occasionally in each hand and is violently rotated while the dancers exhibit powerful movements such as leaping, moving forward, moving backward, and rotating repeatedly as if dealing and parrying blows with their opponents. A *dhol* or *kara* is used as the background music for lathi dances and rhythmic mock combat. Gaining patience, self-control, and fearlessness through *Lathi-Khela* helps people to develop strength of body, mind, and character. During the Swadeshi era, lathi's acceptance as a sport and a representation of Indian strength grew gradually¹⁸. Local organizations popularized Lathi-playing competitions at the local level.

Any warrior nation's sporting culture is modeled after its military culture, and Bengal's indistinguishable identity as a once-proud warrior race can be discovered in their vanished sport from ancient Bengal. When Bengal's souls and spirits were free in the past, they elevated Bengal to a very high position of glory by using power and courage. The war sports, namely the *Rāibenshe*, *Dhali* Dance, *Lathikhela*, *Bach Khela*, *Narikel Karakari Khela*, etc., have preserved something of the old martial spirit. They are remarkable for their expression of military energy and discipline and the atmosphere of martial excitement which they create. However, during the colonial period, British officials regarded the Bengalis as cold-hearted dull, frigid people with feeble bodies, lax nerves, and timid souls¹⁹. As the Bengalis lived in a tropical climate, the colonial authority did not expect them to be proficient in the field of sports and war. According to them, because of the sedentary character of games and sports, the Bengalis did not provide the British army with a single

sepoy. They believed the Bengalis as an effeminate and non – martial race. Therefore, it would be absurd to expect them to flourish in any activities demanding male action given their dictum that “walking is better than running, standing is better than walking, sitting is better than standing, and lying down is best of all.” All of their amusements and pastimes must be, for the most part, sedentary due to his gentle manners, indolent habits, timid disposition, unenterprising thinking, and lethargy. However, such a British perception of the character of the Bengali nation is completely shattered when we delve into the history of Bengali military sports. The physical and sporting culture of Bengal affords a significant and authentic reminder that the Bengalis were once renowned for their military prowess and were wedded to the profession of war. According to references in the writings of Megasthenes, Ptolemy, Pliny, and Quintus Curtius, a formidable military race known as the Gangaridae existed in southwestern and central Bengal spanning north and north-west from the mouth of the Ganges during the time of Alexander’s invasion of India ²⁰. The martial traditions of certain sections of the inhabitants of this ancient area, the northwestern portion corresponding to the Burdwan, Birbhum, and Bankura districts of today, appear to have persisted in a vigorous form throughout succeeding ages till the end of the eighteenth century. The armies of Nawab Siraj-Ud-Daula consisted of a large number of local soldiers and must have included sprinklings of *Rāibenshe* and *Dhali* troops. The *Raibenshe* and *Dhali* troops ceased their military practices when they were discontinued to be recruited as soldiers. But some of the poorer sections continued the *Rāibenshe* dance and acrobatics which would appear to be the last remaining remnants of these warlike traditions.

Thus, from the above discussion, it is evident that the traditional folk dances which were an integral part of the socio-religious and cultural life of colonial Bengal were rich in various forms of physical exercises and recreational values. The foundation of the Bengali community is made up of these traditional sports and games, which are a component of the intangible legacy and representation of the cultural diversity of our communities. While the traditional war dances of the colonial period carried the Bengali legacy of bravery, hard work, and competence, they also disproved the British stereotype about the Bengalis as timid and effeminate. They also effectively communicate the social values of inclusivity, diversity, and solidarity that are fundamental to a healthy society. However, most traditional folk dances and sports, which were manifestations of indigenous cultures and ways of life and contributed to our shared identity, have already vanished or are in danger of going extinct due to the effects of globalization and the harmonization of the rich diversity of world sport.

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