

## An Interview with Ranjan Bose

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(An interview with actor, Ranjan Bose on the concept of *Purus Rani* of Bengal's stage. The evolution of androgyny as a practice in Indian diaspora and social tribulations connected to it.)

*“I believe an artiste is just like a white paper...beyond any gender, religion, race, caste or creed....”*



**Play : MayaMridanga**

*Pic: Ranjan Bose in the play, Maya Mridanga*

*“The theatre is certainly a place for learning about the brevity of human glory...”*

**– Iris Murdoch**

### TRACE OF HISTORY

Indian theatre during bygone era lacked the presence of female artistes on the stage. To fill that space the male counterparts used to impersonate them on the public platforms. This was indeed a practice in several other cultures across the globe. Still, in some cultures beyond India, women had a strong existence, but were swapped by men in due passage of time. Like

in Japan, Kabuki, founded by a woman, is a classical Japanese dance-drama, but from which women were gradually disregarded. Another major form of Japanese classical musical drama of 14<sup>th</sup> century is Noh or Nogaku, was performed by women till the 1600s.

The Indian format we had hardly any female actors. Men used to act as fillers in both the gender roles. To name such famous men in theatres, we had Bal Gandharva of Maharashtra, Jayashankar Sundari of Gujarat and Fida Hussain of Parsi theatre. Bengal is proud to have the two of the last living impersonators of India — Chapal Rani and Janardan Rani.

‘*Purush Rani*’ – the title was entitled for male theatre artistes who portray female roles on stage. The tradition dates back to the initial days of the *jatra* (the folk theatre of Bengal), when women were less seen on stage and men played the female characters. *Purush ranis* (or *ardhanarishwaras*) relished a celebrated reign at one time. Prof Ananda Lal, theatre historian, says the suffix ‘Rani’ in the name of actors who portrayed female roles became a signifier of his identity. Most of the actors came from a downtrodden society amidst extreme poverty, especially during the famine in the 1950s. In next two decades, this trend steadily was phased out when women entered the public domain as artistes and men had to step back in the 1970s. It is widely believed that the era of the great *purush ranis* – the last of whom include Chapal Bhaduri and Janardan Rani – is facing its looming end.

Kathryn Hansen, theatre researcher, in her paper in the Economic and Political Weekly (Vol. 33, No. 35, (Aug. 29 - Sep. 4, 1998), writes: “The latter half of the 19th century and the early 20th century was a period of transition when the public image of Indian womanhood was being crafted not only through literature and social experiments but also through the commercial media of the Parsi theatre and silent cinema.” Hansen further states that Jayashankar Prasad and Fida Husain from Parsi theatre represent the pillars of our theatre history. The evolving entertainment economy and new-fangled methods of publicity altered the relations between audience and actors, when the theatre companies presented women on stage through female impersonators.

Among traditional theatre forms that employ/employed impersonations are Ramlila, Krishnattam, Raslila, Therukuttu, Bhavai and Jatra. Among which ‘Jatra’, a popular folk theatre form of Bengal, dates back to 400 years. Female impersonators are said to have found a footing in Bengal during the time of Sri Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, propagator of the

Vaishnava sect in Hinduism, who portrayed the character of Rukmini in a play staged at Chandrashekar Bhavan in 1506. He was only twenty years old at the time.

## PLIGHT OF PURUSH RANIS

When women folk initiated to step into the stage arena with the escalation of nationalism in the country. The female impersonators were exposed to uncertainty, they were condensed to poverty and had to toil as domestic helps and even as sex workers to lead their livelihood. As they have intrinsically imbibed feminine conformism, attitude, body language, make-up and garb habits for decades, they found it really hard to slip into male characters. Some even turned to solo performances of goddesses in temple grounds. Among them is Chapal Rani/Chapal Bhaduri who now act as Goddess Sheetal in a Bengal temple.

## A FEW DOCUMENTATION

As the 'Purush Rani' began fading, artistic works around female impersonators commenced to spring up. As Naveen Kishore made a documentary on Chapal Rani in the mid-1990s. In 1999, Madhusree Dutta's documentary on Jayshankar Sundari, **Sundari -An Actor Prepares**, articulates his journey and explores concepts of femininity in the context of modern gender treatises and politics of acting. Nitin Chandrakant Desai made a fictional biography on Bal Gandharva in 2011. Another documentary, **Known Strangers (Chena Kintu Ojana)** in 2014 by Debojit Majumdar and Dipankar Dutta. This film explores the artistic iconography of 15 female jatra impersonators. These include Nitai Rani, Upen Rani, Kanai Rani, Rakhal Rani, Harigopal Rani, Haripada Rani, Bonophool Rani, Khsitish Rani, Phoni Rani, Chhobi Rani, Babli Rani, Satadal Rani, Chapal Rani, Jatin Rani and also the contemporary Bobby. Debojit Majumdar said, he was inspired to make this film after he watched documentaries on two famous female impersonators of the past century. One of these was Sundari – An Actor Prepares by Madhusree Dutta.

## FEMALE IMPERSONATORS – SOME OUTSTANDING PERFORMERS



*Pic: Ranjan Bose with the legendary Purus Rani, Chapal Bhaduri*

In this age of gender fluidity, we can look back in pride to that bygone era when Bengal swanked of numerous popular artists who depicted the opposite gender in Jatras. Two such living legends are Janardan Nandi and Chapal Bhaduri, more popularly known as Janardan Rani and Chapal Rani. Chapal Bhaduri commenced his acting career at the age of seven and his performance in Raja Debidas, Chand Bibi, Sultana Razia and Mahiyashi Kaikeyi were immensely cherished and he became the prime donna of Bengali jatra. Later, he starred in a Kaushik Ganguly directed film “Arekti Premer Golpo” along with actor-director, Rituparno Ghosh. Another legendary actor, Janardan Nandi started his acting career at five. He too performed in several key roles and his performance as “Uttara” received huge admiration.



*Pic: Ranjan in the play Rwituparno Ghosh*

This author took interview of Ranjan Bose who is considered as one of the flag-bearers from the contemporary generation for the Purush Rani community in Indian theatre.

1. Share the concept of ‘Purush Rani’ in Bengal theatre and folk-art form.

Ranjan: Since 1872, Bengal’s public theatre, has been a man’s world. Wherever performing arts lost their sacramental appeal and became “entertainment” and where society riven into public and private spheres, theatre was considered to be a public domain. Primarily, women were not permissible to perform on stage so men impersonated as women. For centuries, men in drag have been a key part of Bengali theatre. In India, among traditional theatre forms that hired female impersonators, were in North India, Ramleela (performed during Dussehra), in Kerala, Krishnattam (enacted in temples) and Raas Leela. Other forms like Therukuttu of Tamil Nadu, Bhavai of Rajasthan and Jatra in Bengal. The history of Jatra, dates back to nearly 400 years for decades traversing rural and urban Bengal. So, female impersonators held the prime stage as women were socially not allowed to perform on stage. Though in rural Bengal, jatra is still a popular medium, but

nowadays, female actors enact their roles. Experts say that the absence of female impersonators in Jatra is indeed a loss for contemporary Indian theatre because they are just inimitable. These actors went out of their way and even against their biological self to integrate with the feminine characters they depicted on stage. The fact that this tradition is on the verge of fading out, is truly painful.

2. Can you trace some significant names who spearheaded the concept of gender fluidity in bygone era?

Ranjan: I can name a few prominent names who is considered to accept this concept of gender fluidity on stage in bygone era. Like, the theatre thespian, Shishir Kumar Bhaduri who played 'Nandini' the lead protagonist based on Rabindranth Tagore's drama 'Raktakarabi'. In one of his interviews, Bhaduri shared that Tagore was keen to play 'Nandini' himself and was strongly in favour of the protagonist to be played by a man in artistic viewpoint. Noti Binodini, another theatre personality of yesteryears played the character of 'Shri Chaitanya' on stage under the tutelage of Bhaduri and broke the glass ceiling in the male bastion was also significant.

3. Who inspired you to tread this path?

Ranjan: I never planned it wilfully, it just happened to me by chance. In 2015, I played 'Draupadi' in a play named 'Apratim' based on androgyny concept. In the same year, I played 'Shikhandi', a Mahabharata's character in the play 'Amber'. Then Raja Sen's film 'Maya Mridanga' happened to me based on Syed Mustafa Siraj's novel on Alkap team. These characters spearheaded my choice of playing androgyny characters on stage. But besides this, one significant factor, which I can't deny is of audience acceptance, *na hole ami partam na...* (or else I would not have made it...). If you ask me who inspired me as a person? Director, Rituparno Ghosh. He made me from no one to someone. When Sangeeta Datta offered me to play Rituparno Ghosh in her documentary-feature 'Bird of Dusk'. I was overwhelmed with joy, I thought at least I could touch his soul through this feature.

4. Can you trace a few folk-art forms in eastern India that signify female impersonation?

Ranjan: Likewise, in Alkap art form is an amalgamation of music, dance and theatrical presentation. It is a reflection of rural society that emphasis on the

predominant socio-economic state of the rural population. An alkap group of ten to twelve performers is led by a sarkar (master) or guru (leader) and includes two or three young men called chhokras, one or two gayens or singers, dohar, choristers, and musicians. Alkap is presented in five parts: Asar Vandana, Chhora, Kaap, Baithaki Gaan and Khemta Pala. popular in the districts of Murshidabad, Malda and Birbhum in West Bengal and Chapai Nawabganj, Randajshahi in Bangladesh. It has also spread to the adjoining areas of Jharkhand and Bihar such as Dumka and Purnia.

Ghetuputra: History says some 150 years ago in colonial Bengal, a musical group was created called Ghetugaan, where young boys danced in female clothing; those dancers were called "Ghetu". Soon they became famous among people but the landlords wanted them for sexual desires and gradually elite pederasty became recognized in the contemporary local society. A film Ghetuputra Komola ( Pleasure Boy Komola) was released on 2012, a Bangladeshi musical film written and directed by Humayun Ahmed.

Sattriya or Sattriya Nritya, is a major Indian classical dance of Assam. It is a dance-drama performance art with origins in the Krishna-centered Vaishnavism monasteries of Assam, and attributed to the 15th century Bhakti movement scholar and saint Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardev. In the satras (Vaishnavite ashram) of Majuli, the river island in the Brahmaputra, young boys still impersonate women characters. A Sattriya performance comes in many styles such as the Sutradhara (or Sutra-bhangi), character specific Bhangi, Prabesh, Nritya and Jhumura. The Sutradhara is a style that tells a story and presents the spiritual values of Vaisnavism in a complete classical format: nritta, nritya and natya. I played a role of a narrator in a Kalpana Baruah's collaborative production '**A journey with Surpanakha**'.

5. What are the challenges you face while impersonating characters on stage?

Ranjan: There are both positive and negative sentiments attached to it. When theatre personality like Samir Bandopadhyay appreciates my performance, I detest to think any pessimism in my life. The family acceptance did not happen in a single day, it was a steady makeover. I won over my parents' confidence as I never wanted to declare a jihad at home. There had been instances where my female colleagues toopassed snide remarks. I am a gay that's my orientation, I don't have inhibitions to

say that... but society has an issue in my choice of profession. I think mindset needs to be evolved, by mere decriminalising Sec 377 will not do. Society needs to accept us and give us that space and respect that we deserve. I believe an artiste is just like a white paper...beyond any gender, religion, race, caste or creed. They forget that IT'S MY LIFE....

6. What are the methods of acting that you adapt to prepare yourself?

Ranjan: I was a graphic designer with a company before I joined the stage. But I soon realised that to play an effeminate character, I have to surrender myself completely to the act. So, I cleaned my chest, plucked my eyebrows, required to grow my nails, wear accessories needed for each character. As I love my characters and live in and out each of them it was a part of my evolution *Amar Japoneer moddhe ei onushilon*. I have to adapt to the body movements of a woman to add a dose of 'lasya' and practice the core elements of 'Navarasa'.

7. This dying art form of 'Purush Rani' while borne out of a sexist practice, did a lot in terms of changing social perceptions of gender roles – What is your take on it?

Ranjan: I share a special bond with Chapal Da (Chapal Bhaduri, the few last beacons of Purush Ranis of Bengal) He has been a guide to me throughout and we shared stage too on regular intervals (*Upal Bhaduri*). So, to answer your question, can gender be the only identity of a person? I believe it to be the only biological, nothing beyond it, so why so hullabaloo? Society has not changed a bit since Chapal da was at the helm of his affairs. The key thing is the dual life they had to lead to suppress their true identities. Earlier stage was considered not respectable enough so mostly they belonged to the downtrodden class. Like that of Chapal Da, whose mother Prabha Devi was from Kolkata's red-light zone. I have grudge against my community so I don't believe in pride walks. If I have to send any message to my audience, I will send through my stage shows.

8. What are your future plans?

Our theatre group **Dum Dum Shabdomugdho (DDS)** takes care of Chapal Da and we soon plan to launch a documentary on his *jatralife*. People should know him. His



many tribulations in life also moulded me to who I am. This documentary will focus on his plight to become a *Purush Rani*, his passion for his art, his vision for life. We have collected photographs, videos of his performances, even made him enacted a few of his famed characters on stage. Since 2013, DDS is working on androgyny concepts, plays like: Maya Mridanga, Upal Bhaduri, City of Joy, Rituparno Ghosh, Rajkulagatha, Raat Bhor Brishti, Raho Raho Sathe, Manush, Nibedito Pran (Sister Nibedita), Devdaasi (a historical play). My director and partner Rakesh Ghosh would like to work a script on late Ms Shefali of Bengali tinseltown.

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