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**THE ROLE OF RAṄGAMAÑCA OF BENGAL IN GAUḌĪYA MUSIC**

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**Abstract**

Among the rich musical traditions of Gauḍa-deśa or Ancient Bengal, the genre popularly known as Gauḍīya music, has been prevalent since ancient times; in fact, it can be traced to the period of the Nāṭya Śāstra itself. The music and dance were performed on the stage in the Thākurdālān, Raṅgamañca, or Nāṭyamaṅḍapa (performance spaces). The theatres were built following the scriptures, based on scientific thought. Mañca experts of the time determined everything—from choosing the land to the lighting on the stage. This article tries to delineate some of the theatres or Raṅgamañca of ancient Bengal, which played a very important role in Gauḍīya music.

**Keywords:** Gauḍa, Bengal, Gauḍīya music and dance, Raṅgamañca, Sculpture.

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### The Role of Raṅgamañca of Bengal in Gauḍīya Music

*Gauḍīya* dance and music is an extraordinary form of art from ancient Bengal; from before the *Nāṭyaśāstra* period (i.e. before 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE). This classical dance style is a testimony to the unique creativity of Bengali *Gaūr Vanga*. The history of Bengal is ancient, and its trade and commerce, education, consciousness, art style, and architectural sculptures were considered highly advanced. Greeks, Shakas or Sha-kā, Hunas or Hūṇā, Mughals or Moghul, Turkish, Chinese, Japanese, and many other civilisations came here at different times for trade, education, or for setting up industries. The *Mahābhārata*, *Rāmāyana*, various *Purāṇa*-s, *Mahākāvya*, *Maṅgal-Kāvya*, *Sāhitya*, ancient manuscripts, and historical texts mentioned the location of ancient Gauḍa. *Nāṭyaśāstra* also mentioned the region of Bengal and its several divisions like Puṅḍravardhana, Utkal, Vanga, Gauḍa, Tamralipta or Tāmraliptaka, Gangaridai, Barindri or Varendra. This ancient area of Gauḍa also saw many changes over time (Roy, 2014, Murshid, 2005). The classical forms of regional dance and music, which were a part of leisure and entertainment, were prevalent among the people. Therefore, I will discuss the ways Gauḍīya dance and music were performed in theatres or *Raṅgamañca* or *Nātmandira* or *Nāṭya-maṅḍapa*. I have also focused on how they have built the structures of these theatres. In addition to this, I have discussed how they have followed the *śāstrya* or Classical tradition to build theatres. I have outlined some of the evidences found in different kinds of literature and many old temples. Furthermore, I have discussed the rationale behind the building of structures and their appreciation.

### Research Methodology

For this work, I have conducted research in temples, among several districts of West Bengal and other Indian states and from Bangladesh, especially those that have sculptures of dancers and singers. Among them, I have also visited various terracotta temples built by the Malla kings of Bishnupur in the Bankura district of West Bengal. I have interviewed several priests, many of whom were hereditary. I have also conducted field surveys in various temples built by the Van Raja, Chandra dynasty kings of West Medinipur, West Bengal. The present Bangladesh, which was a part of undivided Bengal, previously ruled by the Gauḍa king

Shashanka, the Pala dynasty, the Sena dynasty, and the *Bāro-Bhuiyān-s*<sup>1</sup> had many well established temples and raṅgamañca-s. Many of the ancient sculptures are currently preserved in the National Museum of Bangladesh in Dhaka, where I visited to make observations. By studying these sculptures and artefacts, I have attempted to showcase how dance and music were performed in front of the deities on the *nātmaṇḍapa* or raṅgamañca-s of Bengal. Besides, I have visited the *Manasāmaṅgal* temple of Kabi Bijoy Gupta in Barishal, Bangladesh. I have visited the Indian Museum in Kolkata several times. In my writings, I have presented pictures of various ancient Bengali deities and dancers of Gauḍa. Besides, I have taken the help of various books from Kolkata National Library and the Central Library of Rabindra Bharati University and have availed the help of the e-Library of India viz., the National Digital Library. Lastly, I have compiled and presented my observations from my visits to the different temples of West Bengal and Bangladesh.

### **Purpose of the Research**

The purpose of this research work is to present the rich, ancient but extant traditions of Bengal to our contemporary society and thus demonstrate the vivacity of her history and culture. The dancers, singers, and devadasis who lived in the various temples of ancient Bengal used to worship, and performed on the *nātmaṇḍapa* or raṅgamañca in front of the deity. I have investigated in detail the questions regarding orientation, direction, types of theatres, the seating arrangement of kings, tenants and members of the households, the singers, musicians and dancers during the performances. Furthermore, I investigated the resting rooms of the artist; investigated different types of temple structure; discovered the building materials used to build a raṅgamañca. I wish to demonstrate through my writings that the temples of Bengal were not merely a place of worship, rather they were a great place for the flourishing of both culture and cultural education.

### **Musical History of Gauḍa**

Gauḍīya dance and music were performed even earlier than the Nāṭya Śāstra period. We know this because the Gauḍīya dance and musical form is mentioned in Bharata's Nāṭya Śāstra (2<sup>nd</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Baro Bhūihuiyān are individual 12 landlords of Bhāti region in medieval Bengal. They all were individual Zamindars.

century BCE), considered the oldest treatise on music. (Banerjee, 1956). The powerful Gangāridai civilization in Bengal around 327 BC was famous for its naval power. Then came the Nanda Dynasty, the Maurya Dynasty, the Shunga or Śuṅga Dynasty, and the Kāmba or Kāṅva Dynasty who ruled different parts of Bengal at various times, such as Suhma or Summa, Rarh or Rāḍha, Puṇḍra, Hrikela, Samatata, etc. Then came the Gupta dynasty. Around the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE, a Bengali king named Shashanka or Śaśāṃka became the emperor of Bengal. Then, for a while the Pala and Sena dynasties ruled, and some feudal kings had also formed smaller kingdoms. The ruins of Karnasuvarna, the capital of the Bengali king Shashanka, were found in the *Raṅgamati* region of the Murshidabad district. After Shashanka's death, Bhaskara Varman, the king of Kamarupa, occupied Rarh, Puṇḍra, and Gauḍa. Later, Jayapir, the king of Kashmira, was dominant in Rarh, also known as *Rāḍha*. The kings of the Khadga dynasty ruled in the *Samatata* region in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century CE (Chanda, 1975). Finally, Gopala formed a kingdom after several minor kings. The period of composing *Caryāpada* in the Buddhist era began. The lyrics for the songs of this dance music had been composed by various Bengali *Caryā Padakartā*-s in the *Caryāpada* texts, and by the *Vaiṣṇava Padakartā*-s, as available in the *Vaiṣṇava Padāvalī* Literature. In *Caryāpada* I find the tribal people of Bengal performing their dances with the *Caryā padakartā*. In the *Caryāpada*-s I find a Bouddha *Padakartā* Vusukupāda, who adopted Bengali cultural and religious ways by marrying a *Chandali* girl. From ancient times *Caṇḍālā*-s, *Śabara*-s, *Svarṇakāra*-s, and other classes of people lived in Bengal (Das, 1997). The said *Caryāpada* verse is as follows (Shastri, 1917):

Āji Bhūsuku Vangali bhaili

*Nia gharinī caṇḍālī lelī* ||

If we carefully observe ancient Bengali texts, we find that *Gauḍa Rīti*, *Gauḍa Geetī*, *Gauḍīya Rāga and Rāgini*, *Gauḍīya Language* etc., formed the traditional culture in Bengal (Banerjee, 1956). *Nāṭyaśāstra*, *Saṅgīta Ratṇākara* and *Saṅgīta Dāmodara* described all of them as being followed by the *Gauḍīya* people.

*Caryāpada* also described Bengali dance, drama, music and instruments. Atīś Dipankar, Śīlabhadra, Chandragomin were some of the famous Bengali *siddhācārya*-s who wrote

caryāpada music. Caryāpada mentions that the Padakartā performed the Buddha *nāṭaka* or drama with the Ḍom or Caṇḍāla women. The Siddhācaryā sang and played musical instruments, and the Ḍom women Gānti Devī danced to the accompaniment of songs and instruments. Musical dance-dramas were very popular in Bengal, as can be seen from the following Caryāpada verse (Das, 1969):

Nācaṅṭi bājila gānti devī

Buddha nāṭaka bisamā hoi ||

The above verse describes that Gānti Devī was a Ḍom girl. She had been performing Buddha *nāṭaka* or Buddha drama, dance, music and instruments with the *siddhācārya*-s.

Baru Chandidas's *Śrīkṛṣṇa Kīrtana* was a dramatical *kāvya*. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu performed dance drama with songs from *Śrīkṛṣṇa Kīrtana*, *Gīta-Govinda*. He was a true dancer or *naṭa* (Sen, 1970). In the twelfth century, Jayadeva wrote the dance drama *kāvya Gīta-Govinda*. Dancer Padmavati was danced to *Gīta-Govinda* in front of the Gauḍa king's *Sabhā*. Jaydeva had his own troupe for dance drama or *Nṛtya Nāṭya*, much like the modern-day ensembles (Sen, 1970).

In mediaeval Bengal Kaṁsabadh, Chaitanyamangal, Sasthimangal, Manasamangal, Krishnalila, Jatra and Pālāgān (these songs are sung in the form of stories) were performed on stage, in open village fields or maṇḍapa-s. Manasāmaṅgal, Dharmamaṅgal, Caṇḍīmaṅgal, and Pāñcalī songs were performed in *nāṭya maṇḍapa*<sup>2</sup>. Dohār or side singer, Pāli Gāyen or main singer (the one who sings Pālāgān), Vāyeṇa or the instrumentalist, perform this Pāñcalī song or Pālāgāna music with Cāmara and the instruments of *Mandirā* and *Mṛdaṅga*. People enjoyed Yogīpala and Vogīpala Gīta, Gopichāñd's songs, Maynāmati's songs, Chandrāvati's 'Rāmāyana' Gīta, Manasā Vāsān Pālā and Bisahari Gān. They were traditionally performed over a full night. This type of *Jāgaran Gīti* was performed in different parts of Bengal (Haldar, 1986). Villagers used to enjoy *Jāgaran Gīti*, Maṅgal caṇḍīr gīt, Yogīpala and Vogīpala Gīta and jagorani songs awaking whole night, which was mentioned in the flowing verse.

<sup>2</sup> natya manadaypa is a kind of stage where mainly dramas are performed.

*Dharma karma loka sobhe ei mātra jāne |*

*Maṅgal caṅḍīr gīt kare jāgarane ||*

*Yogīpāla bhogīpāla mahīpāler gīt |*

*Ihāi śunīte sarva lok ānondita || (Chattopadhyay,1369)*

### **Raṅgamañca**

In the temples, since childhood devadasi-s learnt Gauḍīya music, dance, and instruments from their Gurus, naṭa, or *rasika*. These dance songs were performed on a specific stage or in an open stage or kholā mañca or grāmīn mañca (village courtyard). In ancient Bengal, there used to be a stage in every temple and palace. Most of the ceremonies were performed in front of the deity. The *devadasi*-s of different classes used to dance and sing on these stages for the deities. In many temples, there were thousands of devadasi-s (Banerjee, 1956).

### **Figure 1**

*Rasa Mañca and Terracotta of dancing girl-playing mridanga curved in this Rasa Mañca, Bishnupur, Bankura.*



*Note.* (Koley, 2021)

The stage or mañca, as shown in Fig. 1, is called Rasa Mañca. It is still in good condition in Bishnupur, Bankura, West Bengal. *Dol* festival was one of the various festivals of the Malla kings. At different times of the year the devadasi-s danced and sang in front of the deities. The ancient terracotta sculptures on the temple walls no longer exist. However, one or two

sculptures have somehow survived the ravages of the past. In them we can see images of different dancers dancing and playing musical instruments. The flower-vine leaf terracotta are also visible. The terracotta work on the stage, especially on the stone altar, was remarkable.

In time, the name of Bengal came to be identified with the region of Gauḍa. Of the four genres or style or *Pravṛtti-s*<sup>3</sup> *Āvantī*, *Oḍramāgadhī*, *Pāñcālī*, and *Dākṣiṇātyā* were the four types of *Pravṛtti* used in drama. *Nāṭyaśāstra*, mention *Oḍramāgadhī* is the main *Pravṛtti* or style one, which was prevalent in Gauḍa or Bengal. *Oḍramāgadhī* *pravṛtti* followed in different areas of Gauda (*Aṅga*, *Kaliṅga*, *Vaṅga*, *Tamralipta*, *Videha*, *Bhārgava*, *Nepāl*, and *Mallavartaka*).

*Aṅgā Vaṅgā (ut) Kalingā Vatsāsacaivaūdrāmāgadhāḥ |*

*Paūndra Nepālakāścaiva Antaragirivahirgīrāḥ ||*

...

*Prāṅgaprabhritayatscaiva yuñyjanṭi caūdrāmāgadhīm ||* (Banerjee, 1956)

Another verse from the *Nāṭyaśāstra* mentions that *Bhāratī* and *Kaishikī Vṛtti* were the styles followed *Oḍramāgadhī* *pravṛtti*. *Nāṭya*, *Nṛtya* and *Geet* have been performed on the stage following the *Bhāratī* and *Kaishikī vṛtti* or styles. The dance styles of Bengal have followed the scriptures of Bharata (sage) since ancient times. The artists of Bengal followed the *Tāṇḍava* and *Lāsya* dances belonging to the *Oḍramāgadhī* *pravṛtti* or styles. *Tāṇḍava* and *Lāsya* were two main art forms of *Nāṭya Geet*. That art trend follows *Śiva and Pārvatī*. The following verse is one written by Bharata (Banerjee, 1956):

*Annyehapi dveśah pracaya ye purane saṃprakirtitaḥ |*

*Tesu prayujyate tveṣā, pravṛttiścaūdrāmāgadhī |*

*Bhāratīm kaiśikīm caiva vṛttimeṣā samīśrita ||*

Bharata's *Nāṭya Śāstra* is the first scriptural book in India, which is rich in rules of dance, songs, and instruments. In the case of dance, Bharata categorised *Tāṇḍava* as the dance form for men and *Lāsya* as the dance form for women and nature. Depending on the area of Bengal, river, Rarh region, hill, valley, sea area, forest etc., the main features of *Tāṇḍava* and *Lāsya* can

<sup>3</sup> Four different styles used for performing drama in the ancient times together called *Pravṛtties*.

be noticed in the dance songs of Bengal. That is why Bharata has referred to Bengali songs as Gauḍī songs. For Bharata the language as well as the customs of Bengal were called Gauḍī (Mukherjee, 2019).

Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* describes Jayapir and dancer *Kamala Sundarī*. When Jayapir was supposed to have come to Paundravardhana Nagar in Gauḍa Bengal in disguise, he saw a classical dancer named Kamala, who had been performing the oḍramāgadhī *pravṛtti* dance style in a temple of *Kārtikeya* in Bengal. Seeing this, King Jayapir of Kashmir was very impressed, married her, and took her to his kingdom. The following is a verse written by Kalhana (Stein, 2017):

*Maṅdalesu narendrānām payodanamiva Ārryamā |*

*Gauḍarājāsroyaṃ guptaṃ jayantākshyena bhūbhūjā ||*

...

*Lāsyamsa drastam viśat kārttikeya nīketanam ||*

*Bharatānugamālakshyanṛtyagītādiśāstryavit |*

...

*Nartyakī kamalā nāma kāntimantaṃ dadarśatam ||*

We know two very popular songs about Kamala. One is, “Vālo kaira bājāore dhākuya sundari kamalā nāche,” and the other one is, “Tomrā dekhago āsiya, kamalāy nritya kare thamakiyā thamakiyā.”

The below mentioned three figures (Fig. 2, Fig. 3 and Fig. 4) prove that the dance and musical culture of Bengal depends on the deity and is said to be initiated by the deity; Shiva is a very ancient deity in Bengal. Many Śiva temples had thousands of Devadāsi or *Sevadāsi* or *Nartakī*. In the rural area, many dance and music festivals have been performed on raṅgamañca-s in front of Śiva temples. *Gamvirā nāch*, *Śaiva nṛtya*, *Kālī nāch*, *Chau nṛtya* etc. were also performed very often on the *Nāṭyamañca* in front of temples. The ancient scriptures also prove that *the Guru-Śiśya tradition was very popular in Bengal* (Mazumder, 1946).

## Figure 2

*Nataraja or Narteshwara śiva murti of 10<sup>th</sup> Century found in Palagiri, Cummula Bangladesh.*



*Note. (Koley, 2021) dancing Shiva on cow (Nandi), this is a statue from the Pala era. This mūrti is preserved in the National Museum of Bangladesh at Dhaka.*

**Figure 3**

*Śiva-Pārvatī, from the 12<sup>th</sup> century, found in Munshiganj, Bangladesh.*



*Note. (Koley, 2021), is preserved in the National Museum of Bangladesh at Dhaka.*

**Figure 4**

*Śiva-Pārvatī, from the 11<sup>th</sup> century made of basalt rock, found in Bihar, India.*



*Note.* (Koley, 2021)

There were different types of temples in Bengal. Every temple had a stage or mañca for performing dance songs. They were called Nāṭmandira, Nāṭyamañca, Raṅgamañca, *Devasabhā*, *Nācmahal*, *Nāṭyagrha*, or Nāṭyamaṅḍpa etc. Various kinds of mañca or stage structures are found in Gauḍa or Bengal, as shown in Fig. 5. The word mañca comes from *māchā* or higher place, called rostrum or stage in English. And the meaning of the word Raṅgamañca is the stage on which various colours, postures, jokes, dance, music, festivals and lectures are presented. The stages differ in structure and shape. *Dol* Mañca or *Rāsmāñca*, *Tulasī* Mañca, *Rathamañca*, *Deul* or *Deula* or *Deoul* mañca, *Chārchālā*, *Ātchāla*, *Do-chālā*, Nāṭmandira, *Jaḡamohana*, *Nahabatkhānā*, etc. are the different types. Again, they can be classified into different categories.



- Ātchala Śiva Temple: Hoomgarh, West Medinipur, West Bengal.
- Ekaratna Temple: Nandalāl Temple in Bankura, West Bengal.
- Pañcharatna: Śyam Rāi Temple, 1643 CE. Raghunath Singh built this, located in Bishnupur, Bankura, West Bengal.

The *Saptaratna* temple, *Navaratna* temple, and *Ekādash Ratna* temple structures were found in Bengal. There were few *Math* or *Upāsanāsthāl* and Deoul Mañca temple structures in Bengal. Two types of Deoul or Deula were found in Gour, like Rekhā Deoul and Pedhā Deoul. To welcome the king and the devotees in front of the entrance gate of the main temple, Nahabatkhānā-s were built. Nahabatkhānā found in front of the Madanmohan temple at Bishnupur was built in 1694 by the King of Malla, Durjan Singha. This temple can be classified as an Ekaratṇa temple or one *Śikhara* temple. The design of the terracotta found in this temple, Nahabatkhānā (where musician perform musical event is *situated in front of the entrance to the main temple*), as shown in Fig. 6, and Nāṭmañca (where *artists perform musical events*) are very beautiful. The ancient stories of Rāmāyana, Mahābhārata, Kṛishṇa Līlā, devadāsi dances, and instrument forms, are painted on the walls of these temples using terracotta.

### Figure 6

*Terracotta found from Madanmohan Temple, Bishnupur, Bankura, West Bengal.*



Note. (Koley, 2020). These photos were taken from Madanmohan Temple of Bishnupur, Bankura, West Bengal. These terracotta are made of brick. Devadasi or *Nartaki*, and *Nartak* or *Rasik* are dancing and playing different types of musical instruments. The

platforms are made of stones, brick, clay, wood, bamboo, and banana trees of five to six cubits high.

The mañca-s in rural areas are made of bamboo with a wooden deck on top of it. In this high seat, artists performed dances and songs, accompanied with musical instruments.

Ghanaram's *Dharmamangala* mentioned that there were different types of Raṅgamañca, Nātmandira, Rasamancha, etc. in Bengal:

*Sājāye kadalī – manche, kātāri pātiye sanche, vār diyā ela dharma bāte* | (Palit, 1914).

In the book *Nāṭya Śāstra* we found the name of the mañca, which we call a gallery or prekṣāgrha. Thousands of people can sit on the stage and enjoy. Some of the ancient galleries have been destroyed all over the world. It is known from 'History of Bikrampur' text, written by Shri Yogendranath Gupta (1910), that sixteen youths climbed together onto Śiva's *Charaka* or *Gamvīrā tree* during the *Charaka* festival. I witnessed this festival in Medinipur district, West Bengal. People used to make noise with the help of drums. I discovered that the Navaraṭna palace, of a woman from Bikrampur, was single storied. In the middle, there was a *Dhikala* house or a two-floor brick house. There were pictures of various herbaceous flowers on the wall of this tiny house. The sweet melody of the morning and the melody of the *Sanaiya* or *Shehnāi* instrument used to flow from this house. In addition, there were a few other *Jhikati* houses, where musicians used to sit and play during the festival. There was also a *Rang Mahal* or *Raṅga Mahala*, the beauty of which was dazzling. There was a temple in front of the *Rang Mahal* where the idol of Vasudeva was kept on a swing stage. In spring, on the day of *Dol Purnima*, there were melodious music festivities accompanied by the *mṛdaṅga*. With the help of musical instruments, the musicians would divide into two groups and compete in songs, which seemed to be the battle of poets. From 'History of Bikrampur' text, I discovered the songs of the *Bhāt* community, who lived as royal poets. I also got to know the song composition of a woman named Gangamani Devi (Gupta, 1910).

The *Manasāmaṅgal Kāvya* by Ketakadas Kshemananda, written in the seventeenth century, described the dance style of *Behula*-s, dance songs, rhythmic musical instruments and wearing designer costumes. By careful reading of *Manasāmaṅgal Kāvya*, I can find that *Behula* danced

in ‘Sūrpūri’ or ‘Swargā’ or ‘Indra Savā’ in front of all deities to impress the *Mahādeva* or *Ādī Deva* or Shiva. The verse is mentioned below (Khemananda, 2011):

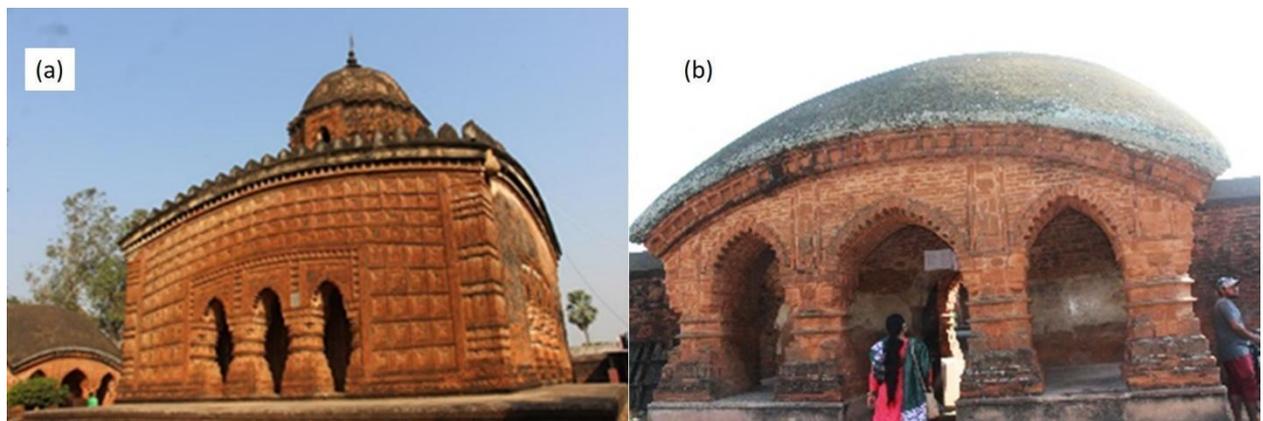
*Debatā sabhāy giyā mṛidaṅga maṇḍirā laiṅyā*

*Nṛtya kare behulā nacanī |*

Various methods were observed for the construction of mañca-s, using stones or bricks. On the high stone altar, stones were arranged in layers, and the design was cut and coated with wet lime. In some place, the high altar of the burnt bricks had various designs, decorations, flowers, leaves, and idols of gods and goddesses. Beautiful terracotta with block-shaped, round or *mandala*-shaped images were created on the walls of these stages. Some of them have been lost over time; a few remain in different parts of Bengal. The following pictures (Fig. 7), taken very recently from several parts of Bengal, clearly show Nātmaṇḍira, Rāsamañca, Nahabatkhānā in front of some temples.

### Figure 7

*Nahabatkhānā (b) in front of the entrance of the Madanmohana Temple (a), Bishnupur, Bankura, West Bengal, India.*



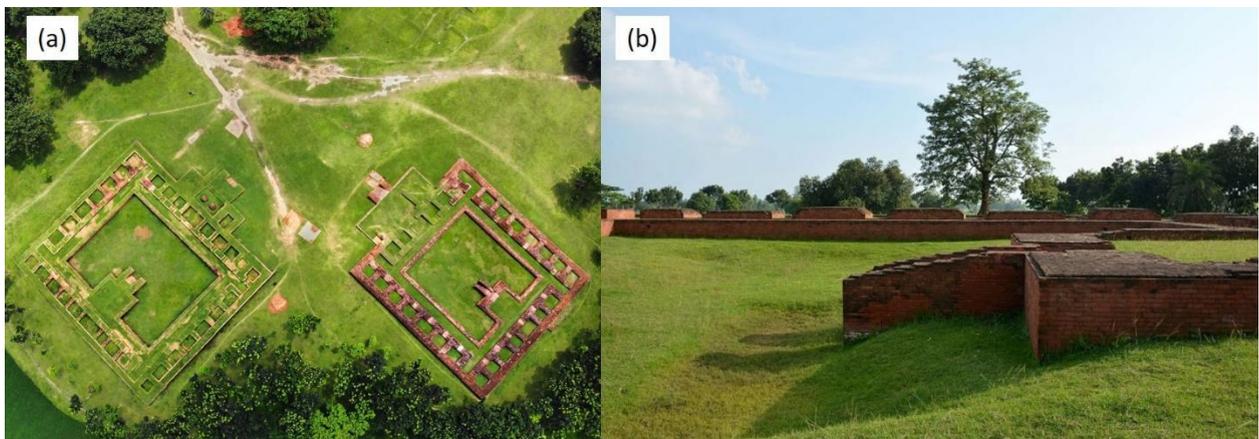
Note. (Koley, 2021). Fig. 7 shows the Nahabatkhānā (b) at the entrance of the Madanmohana temple (a) where musicians played while the singers sang.

Singers on both sides had to enter the temple through the seating area. During a festival or the visit of a kings to the temples, dance music was arranged in such Nahabatkhānā-s.

Since ancient times, different types of Mañca-s of Bengal were built following scientific and scriptural rules. Every artist had to abide by the dictates of the scriptures. Several rules are followed in general. First, it is necessary to determine the land where the stage will be created. If the perfect place is not selected, the mañca can be damaged. It cannot be on soft, hilly or sloped land. Therefore, they would check the soil properly. During the construction of a separate Nāṭyamaṇḍapa, the soil needs to be first examined. They even thought about the ecological balance; land quality was checked by ploughing the soil. *Bhūmipūjana* helped lay the foundation of the house. Ācārya-s perform this Bhūmipūjana ceremony. After the Bhūmipūjana the pillars would be constructed. Even after the construction of the stage, ācārya-s would begin a special ceremony to invoke the Gods and Goddesses. Even today, all these ceremonies and rules are followed before entering the house or a newly constructed space for the first time.

### Figure 8

*Vasu Bihara, Bogura, Bangladesh.*



Note. Vasu Bihār (a) Aerial View – (Momin, 2018) and (b) Steps of Vasu Bihar or Narpati – (Sayem, 2021).

Figure 8 represents the 8<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> Century structure of *Vasu Bihāra*, Bogura, Bangladesh. Even after the 12<sup>th</sup> century, construction materials were seen in this Bihāra. Palas built Bihāra, where thousands of students studied all types of books and followed the Buddhist culture. All these Bihāra-s have a Mañca or Raṅgamañca, where different types of Drama, Dance, and Music

were performed. The main temple is situated in the middle of three Bihāra-s. Different types of statues of Gods and Goddesses, dancers, and stones were found in this Bihāra.

The Nātmaṇḍira or Raṅgmañca is generally built in front of the temple deity, so that the performance can be seen from the sanctum of the deity. Therefore, the mañca and the sanctum have to be in a straight line.

**Figure 9**

*Gokulchand Temple and Natmandapa in Bishnupur, Bankura.*



*Note.* Gokulchand Temple and natmandir, Gokulnagar (Datta, 2012).

The Gokulchand temple (Fig. 9) was built in the 17th century CE. The Nātmaṇḍira is in front of the temple. The Nāṭamaṇḍapa was built with laterite stones, showcasing beautiful designs. This Nāṭamaṇḍapa is a two-floor structure. The base of the Maṇḍapa was also built with laterite stones. Many festivals and cultural programmes continue to be organised in this Nātmaṇḍapa even today.

After that, the selection of materials to build the stage. The brick walls of the Mandapa were plastered with limestone. The terracotta of various temples can still be observed in Bengal. On the smooth wall, different types of flowers and plants were painted. Earlier, the stage was

formed by arranging bricks on willow or stone with pillars on different sides of the stage. In rural areas, the open stages were made of bamboo, *kadali* or *banana tree*, or wood. In some rural areas, temples were made entirely of bamboo and clay. In front of the temple or maṇḍapa, on the high earthen *dāwā* or altar village procession, *kīrtan* pālā, Rāmāyana pālā and drama were performed. In the case of the stage, the main altar was surrounded by a *vārāṇḍāh*-like *Mattavāranī* which was formed on four pillars where musicians sat and played instruments. In this way, rural area of village's Chaṇḍī- maṇḍapa, *Durgā-maṇḍapa*, *Śivālaya* maṇḍapa premises in the middle ages were built in Gauda. Dance Drama, Yātrā or *Jātrā* were performed in this maṇḍapa-s or mañca-s. These type of theaters or mañcas were also called 'Samāj Maṇḍala'.

### Figure 10

*Ādina mosque, also known as Āddyānātha temple built in the 8th century from Malda, West Bengal, India.*



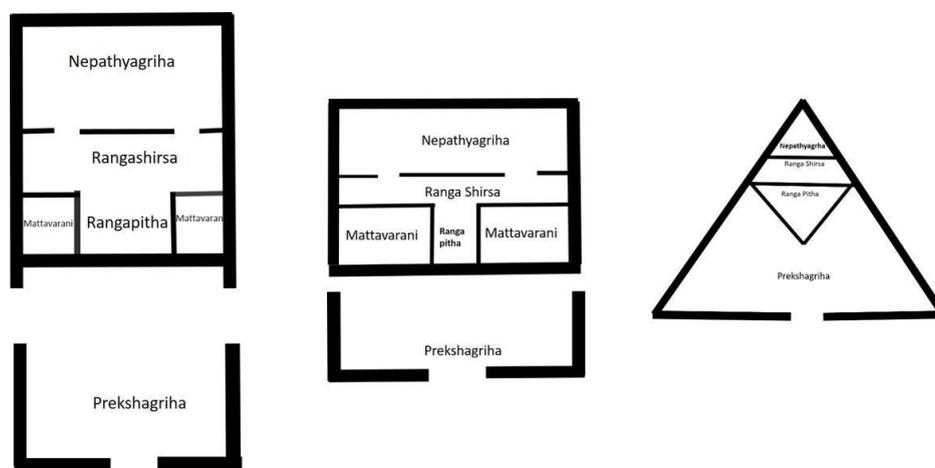
*Note. (Koley, 2021).*

It is uncertain when, but the Āddyānātha temple shown in Fig. 10 was certainly destroyed and converted into a mosque. If we observe, the lower part of the mosque, one could observe that it was built with basalt stone, and the sculptures representing a dancing doll and a dancing Ganeśa can be found; they are surely not found in any mosque. The structure proves that it was a Hindu temple. There are also many other Hindu symbols on these stone pillars. The top photo represents a big hall where many cultural programs were performed. Today this temple is under the control of the Archaeological Survey of India.

There were mainly three types of maṇḍapa-s mentioned in Nāṭya Śāstra. *Trasya*, *Caturasya*, and *Vikṛsta* (like triangles, quadrilaterals, rectangular). Oḍramāgadhī areas follow these three rules. Here, mañca-s have five parts or *Pītha* like *Raṅgapītha*, *Raṅgaśīrṣa*, *Nepathyagrha*, *Mattavarani* and *Prekṣāgrha*. Mañca-s are of three types. The pictures of the three categories of Raṅgamañca are shown in Fig. 11.

**Figure 11**

*Vikrista Mandapa, Caturasra Mandapa and Trasya Mandapa*

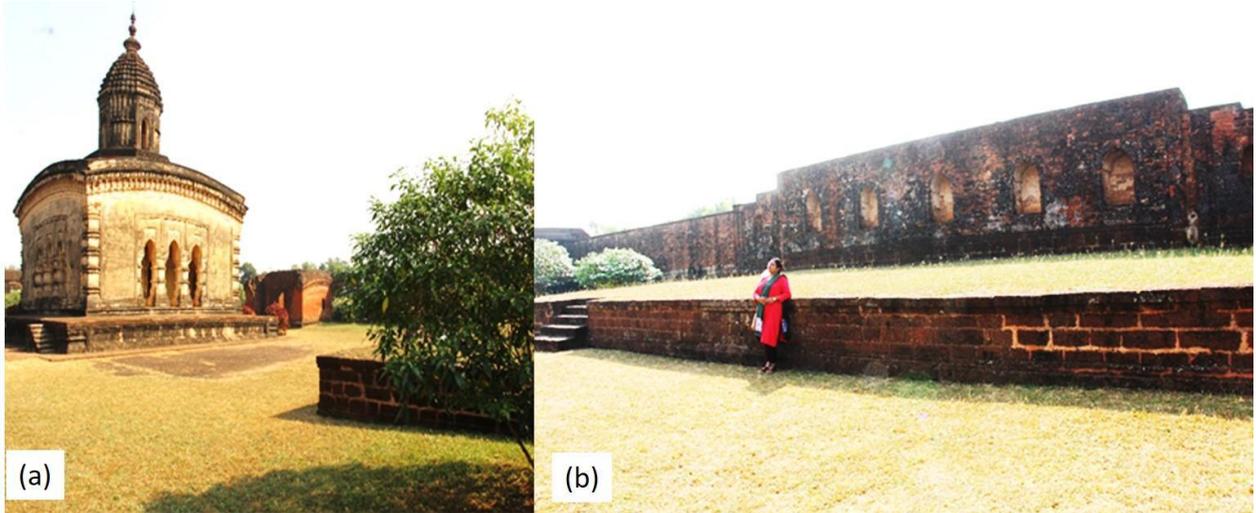


*Note.* Vikrista Mandapa, Caturasra Mandapa and Trasya Mandapa mentioned in Nāṭya Śāstra (Banerjee, 1956).

The sizes of the stages were also small, medium and large. The triangle or small stage was 32 cubits, 108 cubits long for the large quadrangular and around 74 cubits long for the medium quadrangle. The medium stage was typically 64 cubits long and 32 cubits wide and was suitable for the audience to see and hear. If it is bigger than this, the gestures of the artist would not be visible and hearing of the artist's voice will be distorted. Therefore, a medium auditorium is suitable for that. According to Nāṭya Śāstra, the dimensions of the raṅgamañca should be 32 cubits wide and 64 cubits long.

**Figure 12**

*Radhalal Jiu Temple (a) and Natmandir (b), Bankura, Bidhnupur, West Bengal, India.*



*Note.* (Koley, 2021).

King Bir Hambir of the Malla Dynasty built the Radhalal Jiu Temple (see Fig. 12) in 1658 CE. This temple is a kind of Ekaratna temple or one Śikhara temple made of laterite stones. The Nātmaṇḍapa or Natmandir is also made of laterite stones and is situated in front of the temple. Radha and Krishna are the main deities of this temple.

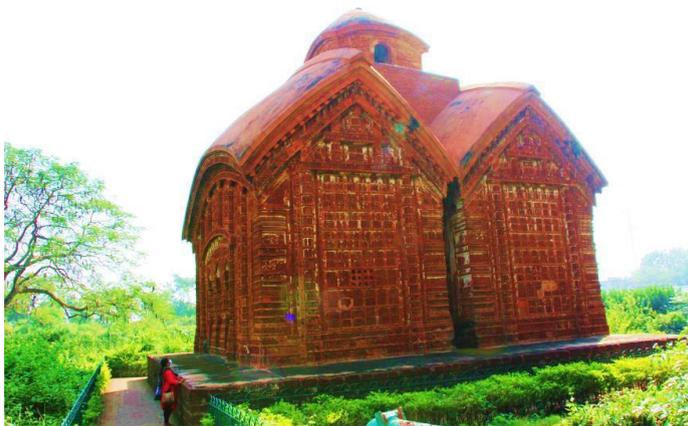
The shapes of the Maṇḍapa-s show that they were double-storied like mountain caves. Even today, the same method is seen in Gauḍīya dance stages, various theatres and rural processions in Bengal. This elevation is used to denote space, heaven, or the upper floors. The shape of the outside of the stage can sometimes be seen in the form of a plain style, the shape of a shed, the shape of a duel, the shape of a flat Āthchala or eight roofs, the shape of a Chārchālā or four roofs, Do-chālā or two roofs sometimes in the form of a chariot.

Jor Bang temple, shown in Fig. 13 and built in 1655 CE, is also known as the Kesta Rai temple. The Malla king Raghunath Singha built it. The shape on the top of the temple is like a pair of huts. It also has a Chārchālā Śikhara or Ekaratna on the top of the roof. It was constructed in a square area. Terracotta work covers this temple. Different types of ancient epic scenes like

Krishnalīla, Rāmāyana, hunting scenes, dancing styles, various categories of instruments etc., can be seen on the walls of this temple.

**Figure 13**

Jor Bangla, Do-Chala Ratna Mandir, Bishnupur, Bankura, West Bengal, India.



Note. (Koley, 2021).

**Figure 14**

Mañca (a) and RathaMañca (b), Bishnupur, Bakura, West Bengal, India.



Note. (Koley, 2021).

Discussing the seating of the audience; where to place the seating and how far away from the stage. If the audience sit far away, they will not be able to see, hear or perceive the scene. The seating of the king, councillors, royal scholars, and priests were decided separately according

to the rules. Otherwise, the audience sitting in different seats will not be able to appreciate the performances on the stage. Several types of pillars marked the seating area of the visitors. The white pillars represents the seating place for the *Brāhmins*, red represents *Kshatryas*, yellow pillars on the northwest side represent the seating place for *Vaisyas*, and blue pillars in the northeast for the *Śūdras*.

The kind of screen or curtain or *pardā* that would be used on the stage was deliberated upon. Would it be raised up or down? Even the colours had to be arranged beautifully. Nowadays, the front of the stage is covered with a curtain before the beginning of each performance. It is controlled by the use of a crane. In the past, the curtains were rolled by two beautiful women as it was divided into two parts.

The artists did their make-up behind the scenes in the *sājagr̥ha* or *nepathyagr̥ha* (the makeup room). There were two doors between the *sājagr̥ha* and the *mañca* and it was located below the *raṅgaśiṛṣa* or the main stage. At the back of the stage, there was a veil or coloured curtain or ribbon or *patī*. Different curtains or *pardā* or *yavanīkā* were used, according to types of scenes or various *rasa* acts such as *Vīra*, *Vīvatsya*, *Vayānaka*, *Hāsya*, *Śṛṅgāra*, *Śānta* etc. (Mukherjee, 2005). *Yavanīkā* or curtain was used on stage in the twelfth century, and artists performed dances full of *rasa* to delight the audience.

*Brida prasāra prathamam tadanu ca rasabhāva – pusta cesteyam*

*yavanī vinirgamanādanu nativa dayita mano harati* | (Chakrabarti, 1378)

The direction of the entrance and exit were maintained accordingly. The entry to the stage was from the south in the case of Oḍramāgadhī. Moreover, the stage was circled from north to south.

*Āvantī Dākshinātyā ca pradakshinaparikrame*

*apasavya praveshā tu Pañchalī Caūdramāgadhīm* | (Banerjee, 1956)

*Āvantyaṃ dākshinātyāṃ yoyyaṃ dwarmathottaram* |

*Pāñchalyāmaūdramāgadhyaṃ yoyyaṃ dwaranu dakshinam* || (Banerjee, 1956)

What did a stage look like? What kind of colour, artwork, and design would be used on the wall of the stage? The top of the stage should not be *Matsya* or fish shape or *Kūrma* or tortoise shape, which goes to say that the stage cannot be uneven. Earlier, various precious stones, pearls, corals, and diamonds were embedded at the top of the stage, i.e. at the top of the ring. There were various wood carvings, dolls, designs of tigers and lions.

**Figure 15**

*Dancing girl and playing instruments found in the Madanmohana Natmandira, Bishnupur, Bakura, West Bengal, India.*



*Note.* (Koley, 2021).

This design of *ratha* and dancing girl playing instrument was found in the terracotta wall of Madhanmohana Nātmaṇḍira in Bishnupur, Bankura, as shown in the Fig. 15. In this terracotta, we can see flower work, tree work etc. Terracotta representing different flower works are also found in the Shyam Rai Temple of Bishnupur, Bankura, West Bengal which is shown in Fig. 16.

**Figure 16**

*Shyam Rai Temple terracotta flower work, Bishnupur, Bankura, West Bengal, India.*



*Note.* (Koley, 2021).

The lighting of the stage was done by a variety of tinted glass and stones on the walls of the stage, reflecting different types of light according to different *rasa*-s. Without proper knowledge of that usage, it was not possible to manage the stage, lighting or the stage in any way. Plays were performed in the form of mountain caves. From the Raigarh cave inscription, the pattern of this mountain cave hall is matched, which dates back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE. These houses were called *Pekh* in Pali literature. Existence of Yogimara, Sitavenga's cave, proves that there were ancient stage systems. Many such caves have been discovered in India where dance and music started from the worship of Gods. Nasik, Aurangabad and Junagarh cave paintings depict the image of musicians. Paharpur, Sompur, Vasu Bihāra discovered in Bangladesh further confirm the same. In this destroyed vihāra the mañca and the terracotta signs are proof that Gaudīya musical culture was very popular in Bengal.

**Figure 17**

Paharpur Bihara (top), instrumentalist playing drum (bottom), and male dancer found in Paharpur, Naogaon, Bangladesh.



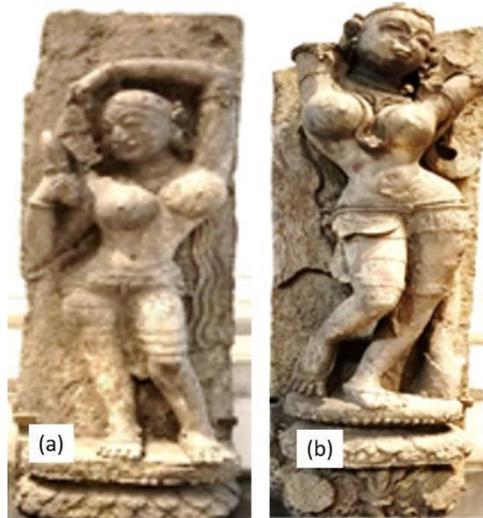
Note. (Koley, 2021).

Figure 17(a) represents Pāhārpur Bihāra, also, an instrumentalist playing the drum can be seen in Fig. 17(b), and a male dancer as seen in Fig. 17(c). They are found in Paharpur, Naogaon, Bangladesh. Pāhārpur Bouddha Bihāra was built by king Dharmapala around the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE. This Bihāra also has an Nātmandira and the main temple. A terracotta showing a Nartak or dancing man was collected from Naogaon, Bangladesh. Another statue showing playing instruments from the 10<sup>th</sup> century CE was found in Bogura district of Bangladesh.

A Devadasi named Sutanuka was identified in the inscription of Yogimara, a testimony to the fact that there was a theatre for dancing and singing. Pandit Haraprasad Shastri, who translated this inscription said that “the heart of a lady living at a distance (from her lover) is set to flames by the following three – Sadam, Bagara, and the poet. The cave is excavated for her and let the God of love look to it.” (Banerjee, 1956).

**Figure 18**

*Dancing girl found from Orissa, India named Darpanika and Shalvanjika.*



Note. (Koley, 2021). *Darpanika Lady statue of 14<sup>th</sup> century from Orissa, India 18(a) and Shalvanjika of 13<sup>th</sup> century, obtained from Orissa, India 18(b) made of Khondolite.*

The figure shown above represents two dancing girls obtained from Orissa, India, named Darpanika and Shalvanjika. This *murti* was built from Khandolite stone around the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. The picture proves that the dancing and singing culture was very popular with all of Bengal and Orissa. The picture was collected from Kolkata National Museum.

According to Nāṭya Śāstra, before the start of the dance or before the application of the Nāṭya, there is a process of saluting the God with *Puspāñjalī*, which is called *Pūrva Ranga*. With the expectation of receiving the blessings of the Gods, to please the Gods, to destroy evil, for the protection of the animal race, for the benefit of the spectators, and for perfecting the Guru's teachings, *Pūrva Ranga* or *Puspāñjalī* are offered to the Gods, before starting any performance. The main reason for this process is to ensure that there is no obstruction in the drama, and that peace prevails.

From 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> century CE in Bishnupur, many Vishnu temples were built by Malla Kings. The Malla King Bir Hambir constructed a lot of Vishnu temples by following Vaisnava guru Srinivasa. During his reign he built a lot of RasaMañca or RaṅgaMañca where thousands of

devadāsi-s performed Gauḍīya dance and music. In Bishnupur, there was a Natī Pārā where all the Nati or dance artists lived with their Nāgar, Nat or Rasik. They also learned music and dance there. All the performances in the stages are also a form of enjoyment and refreshment of the mind so the ruling King and his army, zamindāra, pārisad, sāmanta prajā came there to fulfil their musical mind. Many Rāsmañca-s were built in Bishnupur at that time where *Rāsa Utsav*, *Krishna Janmāshamī*, *Durgā Pujā* were held and devadāsi-s used to dance and sing. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century CE, King Raghunath Singh built temples named *Shyam Rai temple*, as shown in Fig. 19, and *Kalachand temple* in Bishnupur. Anyone will be amazed to see the burnt earthen terracotta sculptures of these temples and mañca; such beautiful fine carvings, the design of the vine leaves, the idols of devadasis, musical evidence of Gauḍa, the story of Rāmāyana, Mahābhārata.

**Figure 19**

*Shyam Rai Temple, Bishnupur, Bankura, West Bengal, India.*



Note. (Koley, 2021).

**Figure 20**

*Nahabatkhana and Raṅgamañca in front of Radhamadhava Temple, Bishnupur Bankura.*



Note. (Koley, 2021). This *Nahabatkhānā* shown in Fig. 20(a) is *Do-Chālā* or two-roof style hut of Bengal. In the medieval period, devotees entered the *Nahabatkhana*, and the artist performed dance music and instruments to welcome the king. Fig 20 (b & c) show the *Nahabatkhānā* and *Raṅgamancha* in front of *Radhamadhava temple*, which has been destroyed.

From 16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century CE in Bengal, many kings and rural Zamindār-s (Samanta king) built many Rādhā Kṛṣṇa temples, Śiva temples, Durgā maṇḍapa-s, Caṇḍī maṇḍpas, rāsamañca-s, nahavatkhānā-s and nātmaṇḍira-s. The *Nahabatkhānā* at the entrance of the temple is also full of remarkable sculptures. The musicians used to play music while sitting in the *Nahabatkhānā*. Though the tradition of dance songs of Devadasis is now extinct, the present-day dance and music artists come to the temple on *Rāsa Purnimā*, *Durgā Pujā*, *Jhulan festival*, *Caitra Purnimā*, *Holī*, and *Māghī Purnimā*. Dance songs were used for *Pālāgāna* or *Pālā-nṛtya* during each festival. At present, under the patronage of the government, festivals and dances are organized in all these ancient temples. On festivals, most of them are currently receiving patronage from the government. From ancient times in Bengal, various musical *Pālā*-songs (*yātrāpālā* song, *līlākīrtana*, *pālā kīrtana*, *gamvīrā* song, *chāū*), *baul*, *śākta* music

(*Rāmprasādī* song, *Kamalākānta padāvali*), drama, *nācñī* dances used to be organised and various instruments like flute, khol, mridang, karatal, mandira, harmonium etc. were used.

### Figure 21

*Char Chala Natmandir curved with terracotta work in front of Madanmohan Temple, Bishnupur, Bankura, West Bengal, India.*



*Note.* (Koley, 2021).

The above Fig. 21 shows the Cār-cālā Nātamandira, where the curved terracotta work shows a *devadasi* playing mridanga and also dancing.

When British rule came into India, they also enjoy the festivals of Bengal. Krishnacandra Ray; the king of Nadiā, every year organised a big festival of Durgā puḷā. Different type of song like *kavigana*, *jātrāgāna*, *kheūr gāna*, *tarjā*, Baul, *Vātiyalī*, *jhumur-gana*, *tappā*, *pācalī*, *vaī nāca*, and classical dance would be performed on *Durgādalan* or Rangamañca. *Kaviyāl* Anthony Firingee, Bholā Moira was a very popular singer in Bengal. Herasim Lebedev, a Russian, built the first theatre in Bengal in 1895 on the 25<sup>th</sup> Domtala Lane or Ezra Street, Kolkata (Mukherjee, 1905). After that, the theatre established by Bengalis in Bengal was the Hindu theatre established by Prasannakumar Tagore in 1831 CE. Then in 1835, the theatre was established at Shyambazar with the help of Navin Chandra Bose. Kaliprasanna Singh established in 1857 a theatre named

'Vidyotsahini'. Later, a theatre called '*National Theatre*' was established at the home of the renowned Sanyal Mahasaya in the Jorasanko area of Kolkata. From this theatre, tickets started to sell for the first time in Kolkata. '*Nīla-darpana*' drama was performed on December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1982, from this theatre for the first time. The theatre was later demolished, and a new '*Great National Theatre*' was built on Beadon Street. Girish Chandra Ghosh used to act in this theatre. He was the manager of this theatre at that time with a salary of one hundred rupees. 'The Star Theatre' located on Beadon Street, was established in Kolkata around 1883. For acting in this theatre, he wrote several plays such as *Nimāi Sannyāsa*, *Buddhadeva Carita*, *Caitanyalīla*, *Hīrār Phul*, *Bilvamaṅgal Thākur*, *Prahlād Charitra* etc. (Mukherjee, 1905).

Apart from this, various theatres like *Jorasanko Theatre* established by Parimohan Basu, '*Banga Natyalaya*' at Pathuriaghata, '*Amateur Theatre*' at Bagbazar, '*Thakur Bari Raṅgmancha*' at Jorasanko, '*Bengal Theatre*', '*Oriental Theatre*' etc. were most popular in Bengal. Shobhabazar Rajbari *Thakurdalan* was very popular for Durga Puja. It is *Khilān* style *Thākurdālān*. There was also a *Nātmaṅḍapa* where dance, drama, songs, music and other acts were performed. The 18<sup>th</sup> century Kavigan, Tarja, Baul, Nacni Nach, Jhumur Nacher pala, are also performed on stage in village festivals like *Charak*, *Gājan*, *Gamvira*, Dol festival, *Rasa Purnimā*, *Durgā Pujā*, *Kālī pujā* etc. Thus, dance, drama and music are deeply ingrained in the life of Bengalis.

So, the construction of the theatre continued over the ages. Therefore, the contribution of Bengalis in preserving the culture is no less; in fact, this culture is being preserved meticulously by following the scriptures on performance and art. Gauḍīya dance, music, instruments, and *Nātyaśālā* or *Natyashala* of Bengal have proved time and time again that they have a scriptural and scientific basis (Gangopadhyay, 1914; Bhattyacharjya, 1955). So, we should study the ancient scriptures of Bengal in-depth and create new ones with the essence of the scriptures. More elaborate research is needed on this subject. It is hoped that this paper will encourage the coming generations to learn more about Gauḍīya music and dance, thus proliferating our knowledge and research on this subject.

## Conclusion

The antiquity of the history of Bengali dance and music is proved by these ancient sculptures and ancient literature. Hundreds of *Nātya Maṅḍīr*, *Deula mañca*, *Nahvatkhānā*, *Raṅgmañca*,

Dolmañca, and Thākurdālān were built, as evidenced by the ruins of various palaces and in ancient cities of Bengal. The success and proliferation of the *Bishnupur gharānā* of music, which was once famous for its classical music, can be understood by looking at all the ancient temples of Bishnupur and its Nātmaṇḍira Natī, devdāsi, and dancers. That can be seen in Bankura and Purulia, West Medinipur and other districts. Bengal was filled with the melody and the beauty of the dancers. Even nowadays, in different rural areas of Bengal, Nātmaṇḍira are built in front of the temples where various dances and songs are performed for the deities. In conclusion, I have tried to highlight the history of all these ancient Mañca-s, Raṅgamañca-s or stages, which bear testimony of the rich culture of Bengal. I hope future generations will keep the ancient Gauḍa culture alive.

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**Glossary**

Nahavatkhānā: A permanent stage or mañca in front of a main temple for performing musical events. It is used for welcome people to the festival.

Nāṭmañca: A stage where artist perform dramatic or musical event.

Mandapa: In Indian architecture, especially Hindu temple architecture, is a pillared hall or pavilion for public rituals.

Do-chālā: A kind of house having two roofs, in an inverted “V” shape.

pardā or yavanīkā : Curtain.

Matsya: Fish, one of the 10 avatars (incarnations) of the Hindu god Vishnu

Kūrma: Tortoise, one of the 10 avatars (incarnations) of the Hindu god Vishnu

Pūrva Ranga or Puspāñjalī: Kind of prayers or saluting to god expecting the receiving of the blessings of the Gods, to make please the Gods, to destroy evil, for the protection of the animal race, for the benefit of the spectators, and for perfecting the Guru's teachings  
*Pūrva Ranga* or *Puspāñjalī* are offered to the God before starting any performance.