

Revisiting the Artisans of the Dashavatara Cards of Bishnupur, Bankura, West Bengal



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Abstract

Games are a good source of recreation and a common pass time cutting across the people and country. Playing or watching games constitute an important feature of our culture, both because of their significance in the lives of the people and their capability to bring families and communities together, and because of the degree of creativity and skill that work into devising them. No indoor games can match the passion with which the cards are played in India. Playing cards is often considered a pass time, a pleasure to neutralize the burdens of life which people face generally in their personal or professional lives. In Medieval period, the Mughal emperors introduced the Ganjifa playing cards in India. Bishnupur, in the Bankura district of West Bengal was the only place in Bengal, where the Hinduized Ganjifa popularly known as the Dashavatara cards were crafted by the artisans. Though, in course of time, the game was changed here both in its content and rules. The artisans from the Faujdar family of Bishnupur specialize in crafting these cards. Though the craft once enjoyed a glorious time, now it has become an instance of the numerous art forms of India that are gradually becoming extinct, as they are not commercially feasible in their own land of origin.

Keywords: Artisan, Ganjifa, Dashavatar, Cards, Craft, Game.

Introduction

Playing cards is often regarded as a means of pleasure and enjoyment to be relieved from burdens of life which we generally confront in our personal or professional lives. It might be supposed to be a game like other indoor games. But there is always a socio-cultural aspect in playing any game. However, game of cards holds a significant value in maintaining a social brotherhood. In an era of compartmentalized family system, where we vie to fit ourselves in pigeon like flat culture, this type of game can bring us out amid some people and teach us some important social values. Like past times, players can enjoy social gathering where not only the participants but the viewers are equally welcome to participate. Anthropologists tracing and documenting the cultural history of the temple town of Bishnupur in West Bengal's Bankura district have found a new dimension to its cultural heritage presenting a unique fusion of the Kalinga School and the prevalent Bengal architecture. This unique cultural expression is evident not only in the famous temples of Bishnupur but also in the other material and cultural aspects of the town such as its terracotta art, a distinct musical gharana, articles of conch shells and most importantly, a distinctive art of making playing cards particularly known as the Dashavatar cards, which is a set of playing cards depicting the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu. Under the royal patronage of the Malla dynasty of Bishnupur, the game had flourished and become famous. The artisans from the Faujdar family of Bishnupur specialize in making these cards.

Objective of the Study

The main objective of the paper is to ascertain the reasons behind the entry of a mythological concept like Dash Avatar (ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu) into the socio-cultural process. Secondly, how and in what ways, the process creates job opportunities among a section. Thirdly, to trace the changes in the concept and in the utilization of resource products as well. Fourthly, to find out the reasons behind its gradual decay and decline.

Review of Literature

There is plenty of scholarly revelations on the history of artisans of the Dashavatar cards of Bishnupur. Nevertheless, the historical works, which have undergone investigations so far on the history of these artisans deserve special attention.

L.S.S.O'Malley's 'Bengal District Gazetteers: Bankura' (1908) depicts the history, geography, culture, antiquities and socio-economic condition of the people of Bankura district. It also contains the history of the rise and fall of the Bishnupur Raj, under whom the artisans of the Dashavatar cards received a place in the society.

Rudolph von Leyden's 'Ganjifa, the Playing Cards of India' (1982) describes that the Dashavatara cards of Bishnupur was none other form than the Dashavatara Ganjifa which used to be played during the medieval period in various parts of India like Rajasthan, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra etc.

David Parlett's 'A History of Card Games' (1991) contains significant information on card games including Hare and Tortoise, which has been published in ten languages.

M.P.Ranjan and Aditi Ranjan's 'Handmade in India' (2007) states that the Indian way of life is replete with products made with the help of simple, indigenous tools by crafts people who belong within a strong fabric of tradition, aesthetic and artistry. The range of Indian handicrafts is as diverse as the country's cultural diversity. A source book of handicrafts, the book is a unique compendium of Indian crafts. It is a resource of the craft repertoire that reflects the diversity of the country, its cultural milieu and the relationships that nurture creativity and ingenuity.

Samira Dasgupta, Rabiranjana Biswas and Gautam Kumar Malik's 'Heritage Tourism: An Anthropological Journey to Bishnupur' (2009) appreciates the cultural items of Bishnupur through its temple architecture, terracotta engraving on the walls of the temples etc. that clearly reflect the tangible links between past and present and also future. The artisans' products of Bishnupur are an additional attraction for a tourist and often myths and legends etc. are depicted and disseminated through those artisans' products which also carry extra weight to show our diversified rich Indian culture with simple tone of solidarity.

Tarapada Santra's 'Folk Arts of West Bengal and the Artist Community' (2011) mentions the history of the origin of the Ganjifa cards along with the Bishnupur cards. The shape, size and method of its production as well as the rules of the game have also found place in this seminal work. Despite the presence of so many scholarly revelations, some integrated and comprehensive writings are the demand of the day.

Hypothesis

1. To bring into the notice of the people of Indian society a distinct position, once, enjoyed by the artisans of the Dashavatara play cards mainly in the pre-colonial period.

2. To draw the attention of buyers towards the handicraft products.
3. To attract the attention of the government to adopt welfare projects for the socio-economic empowerment of the artisans.
4. To inspire the new generation towards their own profession.

Methodology

1. The primary sources consisting of archival materials such as official records, government publications, minutes, reports, photographs, paintings, artefacts such as objects, tools etc. preserved at West Bengal State Archives, Calcutta, National Library, Calcutta, Asiatic Society, Calcutta, Anthropological Survey of India, Calcutta, and secondary sources that is books and journals written in English and vernacular language have been consulted for this work.
2. The Census reports remain the most important source of our information on the artisan castes of Bishnupur and their profession.
3. Oral information obtained by interviewing the artisans is very handy for this work.

Discussion

The scholars are not unanimous regarding the origin of playing cards. It is believed to have started in China after the invention of paper here during the Western Han dynasty. The playing cards were found in China as early as the ninth century during the Tang dynasty (618 A.D.-907A.D). They were certainly known in Europe by thirteenth century and used in several countries. One of the earliest cards made in Europe was the Tarot Cards which embodied an obscure system of occult philosophy and were used in fortune forecasting and magic, cartomancy and inscription.¹ Ganjifa, Ganjapa or Ganjapha is a card game or type of playing cards that are most associated with Persia and India. The Ganjifa cards are believed to have originated in Persia and became popular in India under the Mughal emperors in the sixteenth century. Rudolf von Heyden states, "Ganjifa is supposed to have travelled from Persia to India with the Persian etymology 'ganj' that denotes treasure, treasury or minted money".² The autobiography of Babar, 'Tuzuk-i-Babari' mentions the game. Babar, the founder of the Mughal dynasty, who ruled from 1526 to 1530, writes: 'This evening...Mir Ali Korchi was dispatched to Tatta (in Sindh) to Shah Hussain. He is fond of the game with cards and had requested some which I have duly sent him.' Ain-i-Akbari of Abul Fazl gives a detailed account of an eight suited pack of Mughal Ganjifa with 96 cards and also an ancient pack of twelve suits.³ In course of time, the Ganjifa cards became popular in different parts of India by various other names such as the Mughal Ganjifa, Dashavatar Ganjifa, Ramayan Ganjifa, Rashi Ganjifa, Ashta Malla Ganjifa, Naqsh Ganjifa, Mysore Chad Ganjifa, etc.

In West Bengal, the sole torch-bearers of the Ganjifa Dashavatar art are the Faujdar family of Bishnupur. Bishnupur is a subdivision of the Bankura district of West Bengal. It is situated in the eastern part of the district. It lies between 22° 54' and 23° 25'

N. and between 87° 15' and 87° 46' E., and extends over 700 square miles. It is bounded on the north by the river Damodar, on the south by the districts of Hooghly and Midnapur, on the east by Burdwan, and on the west by the Bankura subdivision. The subdivision is for the most part a flat alluvial plain presenting the appearance of the ordinary paddy fields in Bengal, but in the western portion, and in the tract bordering on the Midnapore district, the land is undulating, the soil is laterite, and the surface is covered with low scrub jungle. The principal rivers are the Dhalkisor, Birai and Sali.⁴

The Dashavatar card game was introduced in Bengal at some stage in the sovereignty of Malla King, Bir Hambir, who ruled Bishnupur from 1591 to 1616.⁵ His strong and stable rule, came to be regarded as the golden era of art and culture-classical in taste and nature of the Bishnupur kingdom. Bir Hambir was as pious as he was powerful, and was converted to Vaishnavism by Srinivas.⁶ The teachings of Srinivas inspired him to create a distinct style of art and to nurture a different type of cultural atmosphere in Bishnupur.⁷ The popularity of Vaishnavism might have played an important role with enjoying pass time in a different and non-violent manner and this might have resulted in the birth of the Dashavatar card game. The successors of Bir Hambir, Raghunath Singh and Bir Singh carried the tradition to its new heights in the coming days. In a series of articles written in the late 19th and the early 20th century, Haraprasad Shastri advanced the view that the Dashavatara cards had originated in the Malla kingdom of Bishnupur, possibly in the 8th century.⁸ However, almost all other scholars who have explored the history and development of playing cards in early modern India are inclined to discount this explanation.⁹

The artisans from the Faujdar family of Bishnupur specialize in making the Dashavatar play cards. The Faujdar family belongs to carpenter (Sutradhar) community by profession. According to nature of work, there are four types of Sutradhar in West Bengal. They are carpenters of wood, stone, earth and drawing. Sutradhars of Bishnupur are famous for drawing. The Malla rulers conferred upon them the title of Faujdar. The noted artisans from the family are Gadadhar Faujdar, Satish Faujdar, Kedar Faujdar, Jatin Faujdar, Sudhir Faujdar, Patal Faujdar and others.¹⁰

It is quite difficult to speculate on what kinds of artistic styles were in use in Dasavatara Ganjifa, which were made in Bishnupur for its kings during the 17th and 18th centuries. The few Bishnupuri Dashavatara Cards now in evidence in various museum collections bear the imprint of a vigorous, bold style reminiscent of local folk art and also of the style of patachitras of nearby Orissa. The Malla kingdom of Bishnupur has an older history of assimilating cultural influences from Orissa. A period of time in the late 15th and early 16th century, when Bishnupur and various other parts of South Western Bengal were under the political control of the Gajapati kings of Orissa, had created conditions for the local chieftains of Mallabhum and elsewhere to appropriate

and emulate aspects of political and administrative culture from the then far more politically and culturally dominant Gajapati kingdom of Orissa. Subsequently, following its integration as a vassal kingdom into the Mughal Empire in the late 16th century, the Malla rajahs of Bishnupur deliberately adopted and modified many elements of Mughal –Rajput aristocratic culture in an effort to integrate themselves into the courtly or aristocratic society of northern India of the 17th and 18th centuries.¹¹

The Bishnupur Dasahavatar cards are 120 in numbers instead of 96 of the Mughal set. The cards have, painted on them, images and symbols representing the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu, the Dashavatar. These suits can be identified by their symbols. The Matsya is symbolized by a fish, Kurma by a turtle, Baraha by a conch-shell, Nrsingha by a chakra or disc, Baman by a water pot, Parsuram by an axe, Sri Ram with an arrow or a bow, Balaram with a plough or club or cow, Lord Buddha with a lotus and Kalki with a sword or horse.

The making process of the craft requires hard labour and participation of almost all the members of the family. The making of the cards need an old piece of cloth which is folded several times and the folds are then joined together with a paste of tamarind seeds to make the cloth thick. Once the cloth becomes dry, a paste of chalk is applied on both faces to prepare a base. Thereafter, a smooth piece of stone is used to level both surfaces of the cloth. When the base is ready, circular pieces of pre-fixed sizes are cut out from the cloth and the pictures of the avatars and their symbols are neatly painted on one side by using light brushes. Once the painting is completed, a paste of shellac and vermilion powder is applied on the reverse side of the card.¹² However, during the royal era, when the game used to be played by kings; the cards were made on ivory or even tortoise shell. It was after it gained a following amongst the commoners, the cards began to be made on inexpensive and easily sourced materials such as wood, cloth and paper. Nevertheless, through the combined effect of colour and artistic drawings, these traditional cards represent a unique example of the folk art of Bengal.

The rules of the playing the Dashavatara cards are basically the same as the Mughal Ganjifa except that the Bishnupur cards have eight suits while the Mughal cards have ten suits. The Dashavatar cards are played by three persons with 120 cards. There are 10 suits of 12 cards each- the suits correspond to the ten incarnations (avatars) of lord Vishnu. On the contrary, the Mughal Ganjifa is played in some parts of Orissa with 96 cards in 8 suits of 12 cards each. The suits of Bishnupur have been extended to make it more complex and interesting. The Mughal Ganjifa gets started by the holder of the Raja (king) card of 'Surkha' (dark in colour) suit in daytime. In night, the game is started with the Raja (king) of the 'Safed' (white) suit. In the system of the Dashavatar cards of Bishnupur, the game starts with the king, 'Ram' during the day, Nrsingha at twilight, Kurma during a rainy day and Matsya during a rainy night. The Dashavatar playing cards which once

enjoyed a prime time are on the brink of decline due to some extent by the introduction of European printed cards. The players were also attracted to the stylized figures of the French King, Queen and Jack. The Dashavatar set thus got gradually replaced by the attractive European cards and it became reduced to one or two families creating the cards not for players but for tourists and art lovers.¹³ Unless some urgent and extreme steps are adopted by the government, the art will become extinct and its pieces will find their places in the drawing rooms of the riches as the wall hangings.¹⁴

Findings/Result

1. The concept of Dashavatar is associated with mythology which was experimented on playing cards. It transforms a cultural concept into a resource base.
2. It is a caste and group specific occupation.
3. Absence of the royal patronage has led the art to its extinction.
4. The cards are widely used in pandal decoration.
5. Due to rejuvenation of ethnic values and concept, urban elites are using these cards in their interior decoration.

Conclusion

In present scenario, the digitally addicted generation is not interested in such traditional games nor is it interested in the pure art form. Moved by the current of globalization, people, these days, frequently inquire the need to conserve the fading skills, disagreeing that as cultures flourish, long established practices gets relentlessly substituted by newer ones. The Dashavatara card is simply an instance of the numerous art forms of India that are gradually going on the verge of decline, as they are not commercially feasible in their own land of origin. Survival is not an easy task, but there should be determination and a solemn promise. To be precise, it is our valour that keeps us afloat. The first and foremost step is awareness and the second is the generation of demand. Art and craft forms must be placed by some adoration; or else it won't be long before our generation overlooks not only them, but perhaps even the Indian mythology, a grand motivation why the Dashavatar card was formed in this place.

Suggestion

Some suggestions are welcome worth for the revival of this art and craft. The Central and State governments should regularly organize exhibitions and workshops for a comprehensive development of these artisans and their craft with a holistic approach. Certain schemes and projects such as the marketing support and service scheme, design and technology up gradation scheme, export promotion scheme, insurance scheme etc. could prove a panacea for these artisans. And most importantly, the awareness

regarding our own heritage, art and craft is the demand of the day to save this age old practice.

Endnotes

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