

Rhymes and Riddles in the Texts and Contexts of Folk-Games in West Bengal: An Ethnographic Study

Dr. ¹Abhijit Das

Abstract: Folk-games are one of the important indigenous elements of expressive folk-culture of West Bengal till the advancement of culture under globalization. These games, being orally transmitted tradition, are part and parcel of the pastime recreation of the rural children. The variegated patterns of folk-games can be broadly categorized as chasing, rhyming, chance, jumping, counting and so on. Some game texts, consisting of rhymes, riddle, couplets, etc often express certain cognitive as well as historical aspects of age old Bengali culture of West Bengal. These may also be considered as the vital elements of folk-literature, too.

Now-a-days due to the impact of urbanization, industrialization mass media influence as well as modernization, the folk as well as indigenous elements in the game texts are changing rapidly. A very time has come to let them survive and revive from their probable extinction in near future from the wider gamut of folk culture of the Bengali core. Folklorists, anthropologists and historians should have the responsibility to study those vital elements of folk culture of West Bengal in the era of globalization.

Introduction

Game is a universal form of recreation. It is one of the arts of pleasure. It is a culture trait (like ritual, dance, art form etc.), as if possesses a theme, structure, function which are conceptual and symbolic. Its primary purpose is to bring about interaction between persons or groups involved (Chapple and Coon, 1942; Avedon and Sutton-Smith, 1971).

The interrelationship and interaction centering around game is basically social in nature. Games provide regular opportunities for interaction within habitual techniques using well known symbols, ordinarily learned in childhood, and thus provide a constant framework in a society, where change in interaction afforded by different types of its and characteristic

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology; West Bengal State University, Barasat; West Bengal.

patterns of interactions are developed for each people and thus games are related to social system. The various relations and interactions are guided by the specific kind of values in a given culture and the existing relationships and values change and get modified according to the different processes of cultural change and games as way of recreation are played through culturally sanctioned norms and values of a given society. This part of games thus represents its cultural uniqueness. The interrelations as found around games and values behind these in the socio-cultural system reveal that games can be a microcosm of a given society, as it mirrors the values, structure, and dynamics of the society (Cozens and Stumpf, 1953; Culin, 1958 and Caillois, 1961; Lipsyte, 1975).

Therefore, games are aspect of culture and this is the first and foremost reason of viewing it in social cultural anthropology. Folk-games are forms of folklore orally transmitted within a society as well as culture from one generation to the other. The study of folk-games as one of the elements of folklore in a given culture is an area in which linguistic scholars, ethno-historians, sociologists and folklorists have for long interacted with the social-cultural anthropologists.

Aims and Objectives of the Present Study

Games have imbibed a particular tradition in the history of West Bengal from the times immemorial. Game patterns are an integral part of the culture of West Bengal. Different patterns have different kinds of interaction between individuals and groups involved. Culture of West Bengal represents two basic kinds of traditions. One is the rural or folk and the other is of western urbanization. Games of West Bengal show these contextual consequences, too. Moreover, there is always an intricate relation between these two. Unlike urban games, the folk-games as patronized by the rural context of West Bengal consist of flexible texts and frequently vary in time and contexts in terms of their names, rules or techniques of play, number of participants, and so on.

Therefore, while observing games for the present study, the villages of West Bengal which are still the abodes of traditional and age old folk-games have been selected. The aims and objectives of the present study are-

- (i) To study broadly the folk games as one of the important elements as well as parameters of studying folklore in West Bengal.
- (i) To study primly the structural-functional aspects as found in the texts of folk-games consist of rhymes riddles, etc.
- (ii) To observe and interpret the traditional norms and values of the Bengali people as depicted from the texts and contexts of those games.

- (iii) To make an ethnographic record of folk games of West Bengal as they are getting lost day by day under modernization.
- (iv) To observe the changing status of those folk as well as rural games due to the impact of developed system of communication, urbanization and industrialization.

Venues of Observation

In order to collect data for the present study, the interior villages in the districts of North 24 Parganas, South 24 Parganas, Burdwan, Medinipur, Bankura, Birbhum, Purulia have been selected as the rural contexts of West Bengal are the abodes of folk-cultural traits.

Methodology of the Present Study

For the present study a longer duration of field work was necessary to reach in proposed aims and objectives. As the study was basically an ethnographic as well as qualitative one, the basic techniques in social-cultural anthropology, like Participant Observations, Structured and Intensive Interviews were applied along with Case Studies.

Furthermore, some textual or secondary data from books, journals, magazines, newspapers, etc. were also utilized (Ref. cited).

II

The World of Folk Games: An Overview

While doing tiresome and tedious work in their day to day life, the Bengali Hindu people of the rural areas practice their own folk-games. These games are part and parcel of their life. These games keep them fresh and give them joy because most of them are recreational in nature. Patterns involved in such games differ in terms of laws and rules as well as in the degree of involvement of participants. Some varieties are individualistic in nature, while some others are collective or team games. Not all are found to be played with the equal firmness of rules in every corners of the villages. In some places the rules and regulations or laws are flexible, in contrast to the rigid adherence to the rules in other places. The local characteristics of the folk games are noteworthy since the same game can be played with different names and tests in different places.

With reference to the context the classification of patterns for the present purpose can be done in a different way. The folk games of West Bengal may be viewed or classified as indoor and outdoor games or else for the present study. It has also been classified according to the seasons of Bengal, places of performance, number of players, equipment,

nature and procedure of games and so on by some researchers. It can also be commonly classified according to the sex and age groups of the participants.

In some patterns, physical skill and dexterity gets prime importance, while some are strategic and some others maybe dependent on the chance factor between the participants. Some games consists of rhymes, riddles, couplets etc. in their play texts and in some patterns sticks, mud, stone balls, tiles, leaves etc. are needed to play which are readily available in local surroundings. It is also worth mentioning that the age groups of the players in participations the vital thing.

The variegated patterns of folk games, as collected by the present me searcher from the rural areas of West Bengal are given in the Table below.

Patterns of Games in the Villages of West Bengal

Category	Indoor	Outdoor
Indigenous Folk Games (Traditional)	<i>Tash</i> (Cards) <i>Daba</i> (Chess), <i>Chor-Dakat</i> (Thief and Decoit) <i>Rosh Kosh</i> (Juice and Extract), <i>Guti</i> (Small Stone Pieces), <i>Shologuti</i> or <i>Bagi-Bandhi</i> (Sixteen Stone pieces or Tiger in trap), <i>Milano Khela</i> (Matching game), <i>Ikir Mikir</i> (Finguring game with rhyme)	<i>Guli</i> (Marble), <i>Gadhi</i> (Court game), <i>Fultola</i> or <i>Buribasanti</i> (Flower collection or Old woman in sitting), <i>Hadodo</i> or <i>Kabaddi</i> (Court game), <i>Danguli</i> (Game with tree branch), <i>Lal-it</i> (Red brick), <i>Luko churi</i> (Stealing meat), <i>Kana Machi</i> (Blind man's buff), <i>Kumir kumir</i> or <i>kumir danga</i> (Crocodile game), <i>Kit kit</i> (Court game with flat pieces of tiles), <i>Golla pak</i> (Circular running), <i>Upantibasko</i> (Open tea box), <i>Iching Biching</i> (Jumping game with couplets), <i>Lengri</i> (One legged hopping), <i>Talachabi</i> (Lock and key), <i>Tash and ticket</i> (Game with cigarette packets and Bus tickets), <i>Elating Belating</i> (Riddle game), <i>Bequick</i> (Rhyming with question-answer), <i>Joga-re-joga</i> (Game with tree climbing), <i>Pittu-pittu</i> (Game with rubber ball and pieces of tiles), <i>Rumal churi</i> (Stealing the handkerchief)

Therefore, the problem of classifying games basic to further research has not been completely solved. Besides the broad categories as mentioned above there are different scholars (Chakraborty, 2001; Chowdhury 1990; Das, 1991; Dasgupta, 1993; Khanra, 1990;

Mukhopadhyay 2001, Sengupta 1976.) who have classified these games differently. Here, in brief is an attempt where the folk-games of West Bengal can be classified further as follows:

1. Mixed folk-games of boys and girls.
2. Folk-games of boys only.
3. Folk-games of girls only.
4. Folk games of youth as well as adults only.
5. Folk-games in water.
6. Folk-games in open field.
7. Folk-games under roof, court yard etc.
8. Folk-games both as indoor and outdoor.
9. Seasonal folk-games.
10. Folk-games as played year round.
11. Folk-games of day time.
12. Folk-games of moony night.
13. Folk-games in ritualistic or ceremonial occasions.
14. Group/Team folk games.
15. Individual folk-games.
16. Folk-games consist of rhymes, riddles, couplets etc.

To bring out the nature of the games under the last category with rhymes, riddles, couplets etc. , the techniques of few patterns of respective categories are stated below briefly.

Ikir – Mikir (Fingering game with rhyme): It is almost an indoor game and found to be played during rainy season and winter. The boys and girls of age groups (6-10) and (11-15) years prefer it: It is generally a game of counting of fingers of players with a long rhyme. First of all four to five players sit in a circular fashion, and their hands lying on with face on the ground. One leader among them counts the fingers with a rhyme. He/She touches the fingers one by one and counts each word of the following rhyme. By the time, the last word touches on which ever finger the finger has to be folded or concealed under palm. In this way the game continues until the all fingers of all the players gets folded players. The rhyme is given below.

Ikir Mikir Cham Chikir

Chamer Kata Majumdar

Dheye elo Damodar

Damodare Hanri Kunri

Duare boshe chal kuri

Chal kurate holo bela

Bhat khabina Dupur bela

Bhate parlo machi

Kodal die chanchi

Kodal holo bhota

Khenk sialer matha.

[Free translation: *Damodar* (a man) came running. There were pots and pans of *Damodar*. Sieved rice sitting on the doorstep. Sieving of grains took time. Will you have rice in the afternoon? Housefly fell on the rice, had to dig it out by a spade, in the process the spade became blunt like the mouth of country fox.]

Kana Machi (Blind man's buff): It is more popular among the junior girls in the villages. At first the *kanamachi* (blind man) is selected and he/she will be the *chor* (thief) in the game. Then he/she is to close his/her eyes with a cloth. He/she always tries to touch (*mor or choa*) the other players as a blind. He/she has to identify correctly the player who has been touched. If it is correct, then the touched player will be *kanamachi* for the next chance (*dan*) and continues. Some times the *kanamachi* is whirled round and round by other players to bewilder him/her. It is important to mention that during the game, the players continuously tell '*Kanamachi Vo Vo, Jake pabi take cho*' (The blind man whom you will get closer, touch him/her).

Kumir Kumir (Crocodile game): It is played mainly in the morning and afternoon at school building, courtyard or temple stairs etc. in this game one is selected as *Kumir* (Crocodile). The *Kumir* sits within a circle drawn on the ground which is an imaginary water area (*jal*). Other players place their hands on the head of the *Kumir* and move around him/her clockwise telling a rhyme like "*Ekta bajlo, akhono kumir elona*" (It is one'o clock, yet the Crocodile did not arrive) etc. After rhyming upto ten'o clock or twelve o'clock, the players quickly move away higher areas (like high verandah, stairs, tree branches, sand, heap of bricks etc.) thinking that they have gone upland or *danga*. The

kumir moves within his/her zone of water and always tries to touch or *mor* (knocked out) the others. In some villages, the game is known as *Kumir-Danga* (Crocodile and upland).

Upanti Bioscope (Rhyming game): The junior girls usually are found to be played in the villages. Before forming two teams they select two representatives of two teams as *mul* (chief representative). Those representatives remain the as *fal* and *ful* are kept secret. Then they stand facing each other and hold their hands above their heads. Other members pass one by one below the raised hands first from left and then from right direction. While passing, the representatives utter a long rhyme like below.

*“Upanti bioscope,
Nine-ten tasko,
Chultana bibiana,
Sahib babur baithak khana,
Sahib boleche jete
Pan-supari khete
Paner upor morich bata
Iskabaner Chabi anta,
Choto choto Dadu moni,
Jete habe anek khani
Bel fuler mathay chapa.”*

[Free translation: Upanti bioscope, nine-ten task, braided woman, drawing room of a gentleman. The master has asked to come to have betel nut with betel leaf. But there was cinnamon paste on the betel leaf with a spade drawn on it. Little children, we have to go a long way with flowers in our hair.]

At the very moment of uttering the last line (*“Bel fuler mathay chapa”*) the representatives suddenly drop their hands and catch on of the passing players. In this way two teams are formed: Both the teams sit face to face keeping a distance of about 20 ft. The representative shields the eyes of one player of his/her team with palm. One player from the opposing team would mildly knock on the forehead of the player whose eyes are kept concealed. Another rhyme is chanted, wanting to know who has knocked on the forehead. If the blind folded player can guess the name correctly, then game is over. The rhyme as chanted is given below.

“Ka, kha, ga, gha, umo,

Ke mereche balo na?

Rajar dike cheyo na

Matha hent koro na

Bole dile khelbo na”

or “Je bolbe khelte nebo na”

[Free translation : Ka, kha, Ga, gha, umo (the Bengali first five consonants) please tell who has knocked on the fore head? If the player can tell, I shall not play. Don't bend head. One who will tell I will not take him to play].

Iching Biching (Jumping game): it is also a group game and mainly liked by small girls. Two teams are formed and the team mates select which team will take the first chance of the game. The two players of the losing team sit on the ground face to face, stretching their legs apart. Then the players are to jump over the legs of the seated players. In the course of jumping by the players, the sitting players keep both their hands on their feet in order to raise the height of the obstacle. The players again jump over the sitting players in the similar way. The sitting players always try to touch the frock or pant of the jumpers. In case, the jumping team fails to cross the height of the sitting players, they are disqualified. In case of successful completion of jump, next stage of the game is followed. When, the sitting players again keep their legs apart in a manner to spread the area of crossing. The jumping players jump twice on the leg forward and backward. It is repeated six times. In the process they tell a short couplet like “**Iching Biching Chiching cha**” – “**Prajapati ure ja**” (the butterfly is requested to fly away).

Elating-Belating (Rhyming game with question- answer):It is a team game.First of all two representatives or mul is selected mutually among themselves.Each mul or leader takes the position with other players.Each team players can move within a particular area, then the players holding hands of each other make a chain a in this way two teams (suppose A and B)stand face to face.The question –answer pattern as uttered during the game is given below.

A Team: ‘Elating-Belating sai lo’

B Team: ‘Kiser khobor ailo ?’

A Team: ‘Raja ekta balika chailo’

B Team: ‘Kon balika chailo ?’

A Team: ‘..... balika chailo’.

[Free translation : “ oh dear friend ,what news you have brought?” “The king has asked for a girl” “Which girl has he asked for?” “The specified girl will then be asked for”.]

From the foregoing description of indigenous folk games consist of rhymes , riddles etc. in the rural areas of West Bengal, it has also been observed that there are particular toss-winning processes. These processes are generally followed for the formation of *dal* (teams) or the selection of *chor* (thief) in different games. The following processes or techniques have been identified during investigations.

1. The *Coin* process (the toss with coin).
2. The *Chara* process (the toss with potsherd).
3. The *Pata kata* process (the cutting leaves process).
4. The *Nam patapati* process the naming process)
5. The *Ache ki Nei* process (the ‘have’ or ‘have not’ process).
6. The *Angul Motkaho* process (the bending of finger process).
7. The *Gona* process (counting of players with rhymes to select a ‘*chor*’)

The Nam patapati (process the naming process): To form team this process is often followed by the rural players.

For teams, two captains are, first, fixed. They request players to go or name themselves, meaning *nam patapati*. Two players go aside to name themselves. When they come back to the captains, they recite to ask. “*Dak dak dak iske*”?

The captains will question them: *Hum ko mari tumke? or Iske?*

Players: “*Ke nebe Golapful*”?

“*Ke nebe Padmaful*”?

It means that we have come after naming ourselves. The captains would ask: ‘Oh, what are your names?’ The players would reply: ‘Who wants a Rose and who wants a Lotus?’ the reply of a captain would be : I want Lotus’. The Lotus-named player would join that captain. And thus a team is formed for the game. Having formed the team, they toss. And toss-winning team gets first chance to start.

It is worth-mentioning here that, in some cases of naming the names are taken after modern Hindi and Bengali film-stars. This is mainly due to the impact of cine culture in the villages.

The Gona Processes: These are the processes of counting of players in order to select a *Chor* (thief) for the game. Different processes or types of counting are prevalent in the villages. These are of following types.

“*Apan, Bapan, Chouki, Chapan*”

Ol Dhol mamar Khol

Oi Cheleti Khatia chor”.

[Free translation: A jingle of rhyming words like *Apan, Bapan, ol* (arum) *dhol* (drum) of maternal uncle are recited and then when the rhyme ends, one boy is pointed as the true den for physical labour.]

“*Kochi Kochi Payara Pata*

O, Thakurji ! jachcho kotha?

Ami jachchi kolkata.

Amar janye anbe ki?

Ami anbo Dhakai sari

Ta ki ami parte pari?’

[Free translation: There are green guava leaves. Oh sister-in-law (husband’s sister) where is going.? She replied that she is going to Calcutta. Further she is asked what material would she bring for the interrogator and then she replied again that she will bring a *Dhakai sari* but the interrogator replied that she cannot put on this sari.]

This process is quite similar to that of the previous process i.e. the last word of the rhyme counts or indicates the **chor**.

III

It has already been commented upon that the games are accompanied with couplets, rhymes or riddles with some phrases etc. some patterns include silent uttering. However games with gibberish rhymes or riddles (Swartzman, 1978) are commonly preferred by the children groups. Where only phonological rules are observed and existed only to maintain metrical rhythm when recited (for example ‘*Iching-Biching*’). But the jabberwocky, rhymes on the contrary are mainly preferred by the adults and are found to be practiced by the junior girls and boys during playing. Both these follow phonological and syntactic rules with definite connotations (for example *Upanti Biascope*). Sometimes in course of analyzing the riddles in some of the game texts, it would be possible to consider the riddles as parodies of all question answer message transactions. There are many other examples of

players interest in games, with rhymes or verses of phonological structure. Senior boys and girls as well as adults are seldom amused by these creations, but children and girls group mostly repeat the apparently unmeaningful rhymes with great pleasure, gusto and vigour (for example *Elating-Belating*).

Discussion

Therefore, the rhymes, riddles or couplets etc. consist of meaningless as well as meaningful words as used in various games. These are passed down verbally from player to player of subsequent age groups, from place to place. These rhymes etc. once might have been introduced by the adults in the society. It is important to mention here in this context, that the metric rhythms, music, tunes etc. have some significant relations with participants in relation to steps, breaths, tune and strain.

From the data it has been observed that the rural children or junior boys of age group (6-10) years, junior boys and girls of age group (11-15) years and also a few of senior boys of age group (16-20) usually practice their traditional folk games, These games are fully recreational in nature because of their availability of play time, context of occurrence and flexibility of rules. There are various categories of games prevalent in the villages. Some consists of physical activities and skills, strategy of chance factors (Roberts & Bush, 1995). Some consist rhymes, riddles etc. within their play texts.

IV

Conclusion

The Games like *Rash kosh, Guli, Shologuti or Baghabandi, Guti, Gadhi, Boubasanit, Kabaddi, Gollapak, Danguli, Kit-Kit, Chor-chor, Rumal-churi, Ikir Mikir*, etc. are very commonly found to be played everywhere in the villages. These folk games are less formal than modern urban games. The rules are relatively simple, unwritten, legitimated by custom and sometimes revised to fit the circumstances of the moment. The names and rules prevalent in one locality or village often differed sharply from those with another and the significance to the game usually extended only to the immediate region. Those patterns are passed from player to player in almost pure oral tradition with no reference whatever to print and probably with negligible guidance from trainers, parents, recreation leaders. No bureaucracies or referees supervision is required. The rules are of course flexible and

subject to amendment at the will of the players. It is also worth mentioning that in those games, the material used is generally very simple and local, or as available in the huts or from the local surroundings. Those folk games also have technical terminologies. Those terms become meaningful to them while playing. It has been already mentioned that some games are accompanied with rhymes, couplets, riddles or folk-cries with some words or phrases. These express many cognitive, ethno historical, socio-psychological, as well as socio philosophical aspects of the folk elements of traditional Bengali culture, which are changing due to rapid urbanization and developed system of communication. The borrowed modern games (like football, cricket, volleyball etc.) are less played in the rural areas though such games getting popularity day by day mainly among the school going boys and the youths. This is due to the influence of western education and electronic media. In rural areas yet such games are played with local modifications in terms of their rules, dress, equipment and also management and institutionalization, as well. This is due to their economic inability and also certain environmental factors. Some of the borrowed urban patterns (football, cricket, volleyball, badminton) have parochialized and some others (*kabaddi*, *kho-kho*) have become universalized in recent times (Marriot, 1955). It is also an observed fact that the urban based modern games are making their irresistible impact felt on the rural societies of West Bengal.

Thus urbanization, industrialization, mass media influence have proved paramount importance in changing the nature, extent and forms of folk games in West Bengal. Urbanization and developed system of communication brought new structural changes and innovations in the spheres of traditional folk games.

Basing on this situation proper incentives may be given according to the present resource of the folk games and its sustainability revealed and the level of aptitude. The ethnographic texts of the games has collected in the wider contexts of socio-cultural milieu of West Bengal may be utilized in the sense of their survival an revival for applied aspect of rejuvenation of the rural socio- cultural system of West Bengal which is obviously plea for rural development, as well.

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