

THE FOLK DANCES OF BENGAL

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GURUSADAY DUTT

Indian Civil Service

(b. May 1882, d. June 1941)

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P R E F A C E

THE ARTIST SEEKS anonymity, so necessary for him to continue to create. The civil servant's life in India can be anything but anonymous if he seeks the limelight and is consumed by ambition. But a civil servant's life can also be anonymous, and, if he has talent, it can be fruitful and creative. The Late Gurusaday Dutt is one of a long line of scholars who chose anonymity in public life and produced work of permanent value.

But Gurusaday Dutt not only left behind him work of lasting value. He dropped a stone which started an everwidening circle of ripples. This soon became an attitude and a movement, which brought along much heartsearching and revaluation, much pride and much activity.

Born in the village of Birasri in Sylhet on the 10th of May in 1882, Gurusaday Dutt was the third and youngest son in a family of six children. The father, an ascetic who had almost renounced the world, was called Ramkrishna Dutt, the mother Anandamayi. The mother, an excellent housewife, had great talent and spread happiness all around her. The elder uncle, Radhakrishna, was head of the family.

There are many stories of Gurusaday's childhood, of his obstinacy, his proficiency in sports and athletics, his presence of mind, horsemanship, his keen memory. Birasri was a fine nurse and he never forgot his debt to her. The village stream, Kushiara, must have nourished his stream of life, too. The patter of young feet, fit for adoration, the tread of heavy earth feet, loam feet, nursing the soil, nourishing the corn, must have woven intricate tracteries of the village dance, which he sought to recapture in later years. The pattern of movement of breeze, water, bird and tree must have recurred again and again and enriched his memory and zest for folk art and the country dance. When in later years he turned to Birasri he recognised "the only begetter" of his inspiration, a village which blessed him and which he blessed in turn.

He offered his Entrance Examination in 1898 from Karimganj and took the second place at the University. Then came the First Arts Examination in 1901 in which he stood first. He set sail for England in 1903 and offered the Indian Civil Service Examination in 1904 in which he stood seventh on the list of successful candidates. He spent his year's probation in Emmanuel College at Cambridge. He took the first place in the final examination of the Indian Civil Service. He studied law and was called to the bar the same year, having stood first in Constitutional Law. He returned home in 1905. His official life is summarised as follows. The summary, contrary to popular opinion which cannot be blamed seeing how much it suffers from the law's delay and the insolence of office, shows how anonymous a public servant's life can be :

Dutt, Gurusaday. Indian C.S., Barr. (Secty. to Govt., local self-Govt. dept., Bengal) (b. 10th May, 1882).—Educ. at Govt. High Sch., Sylhet, and Calcutta Univ.; apptd. after exam. of 1904; arrived, 11th Dec., 1905; and served in Bengal as asst. mag. and collr.; jt. mag. and dep. collr., Oct. 1911; mag. and collr., Oct., 1917; sec. to Govt. of Bengal, agric. and industry depts., June, 1924; offg. commr., Aug., 1927; offg. dir. of industries, Bengal, June, 1933; secty. to Govt., Bengal, local self-Govt., dept., Feb., 1934; K-i-H. Medal, 1st class, Jan., 1938. Resigned Dec., 1940. d. 25th June, 1941.

In 1906 he married Sarojnalini, fourth daughter of Brajendra nath De, also of the Indian Civil Service. In 1909 was born their only child, Birendrasaday.

Their life together brought much charm and much happiness. Between 1911, when Bengal was separated from Bihar, and 1919, he served in Pabna, Bogra, Faridpur, Barisal, Khulna, Comilla, Jessore and Dacca. In 1919 he was District Magistrate at Birbhum. He took a couple of years' leave and took his wife and child to Japan. Here he spent a few months and learnt much about that great country.

Sarojnalini died on the 19th of January, 1928. In February of the same year was established the Sarojnalini Narimangal Samiti which soon had many branches and spread its activities in many directions.

It was during Gurusaday Dutt's fourth visit to England in January 1929 that he went to the All-England Folk Dance

Festival at the Royal Albert Hall in London. This at once inspired him and the Festival became the historian of his memories. The festivals of his village, the toys, the pictures, the objects of art, the dances, all flashed across his mind's eye and gave him the inward look. He thought of his village, its traditions, its heritage. He discovered himself and his country in far off England and left off copying what did not belong to his own.

Back in India he established at Mymensingh in November 1929 The Folk Dance and Song Society. This soon grew into a movement and having succeeded in taking the public imagination by storm and enlisting the support of the Director of Physical Education, the Society soon formed many branches in many districts.

The Society grew from strength to strength. In 1932 was organised the first Folk Dance Training Camp and the seeds of the 'Bratachari' movement were sown. Successive annual camps followed and in 1934 was founded the Bratachari Movement proper. Meanwhile in 1933 a Folk Dance Society had been formed in Delhi and in its wake The All-India Folk Dance Society. The All-India organisation soon got into its stride and established branches in many provinces. By 1934 the Bratachari Movement, still an infant, was strong and had spread tenacious roots. In his *The Bratachari Movement*, published in 1940, Ramananda Chatterji has outlined the genesis and career of this great movement which has come to stay as a most joyous, purposeful and vigorous institution throughout the Union.

Although the Bratachari Movement was the life-stuff of Gurusaday Dutt, he had as early as 1919 found other interests, and the consuming passion for the native dance led him to discover how alive and intertwined folk culture was, how earthy it was of the earth, how the dance was inseparable from the song, the picture, the decoration, the house, the toy, the way of life. Thus he arrived at the conclusion that style is not surface, but the whole way of life. His daemon drove him to find beauty in common life, in the collection of 'trifles' that

told of a whole world in a grain of sand, told him how ruthlessly the 'educated' mind was hastening the decay of an ancient culture, still rich and vibrant.

Henceforth his look became more inward and as he proceeded to make the greatest and richest single collection of folk art in Bengal, he began to interpret what the objects stood for. He had found the secret of all interpretative analysis : he was able to connect a particular object with the whole life of the place, a rare gift to which professional art critics are not born. He knew what sort of life and tradition, philosophy and economic activity each object represented and put his finger straight on the heart of the matter. Thus along with his Bratachari movement, along with his stupendous collection, he built up a mass of interpretative literature which for its insight, sympathy and comprehension still remains the most penetrating and brilliant account of Bengal folk art in all its aspects.

Gurusaday Dutt was in the direct line of a series of learned, humane, and distinguished scholars. But that is not saying enough. He was a rare scholar who stood out from the rest and made one of the first and most thorough-going investigations into the indigenous culture of our country by going all out among the commonest and humblest of men in an endeavour to discover the mainspring or source and unity of our culture. While many other scholars, masters in their own fields, have merely discovered and discussed the courtly aspect of Indian culture, its formal pattern, or whether India's culture can take its rightful place among the cultures of ancient times or the West, Gurusaday Dutt did more fundamental work. He went to the heart of all culture, the people themselves and their village, and tried to unravel the sources of their creative activity. There he met with the truth that man creates according to the laws of beauty.

Gurusaday Dutt died on the 25th of June in 1941. He did not live to finish his books on the folk dances and the folk art of Bengal. His draft of *The Folk Dances of Bengal* was nearly

complete in the rough when he died. The illustrations were all ready and numbered and woven into the text. It was a great privilege and honour, therefore, when the trustees of his estate asked me to edit the book and see it through the press. This I have tried to do in all humility, conscious of my lack of the interpretative faculty. The sole consideration that weighed with me when I undertook the task was to publish his books so that the world might read them. I have kept as much as possible to his own language, only bearing in mind that he did not have time to revise his script. In this task, apart from my acknowledgements to the trustees of his estate, I must gratefully acknowledge the help I have received from the author's son, Birendrasaday, and his daughter-in-law Srimati Aroti Dutt, from Dr. Amulya Chandra Ukil and Sri Sudhansukumar Roy. Sri Sailendranath Guha Ray of Sree Saraswaty Press Limited took upon himself most of the problems of layout, printing and publication and has earned my grateful thanks. My wife has checked the revised script with the original and illustrations. Srimati Maya Sarkar has been good enough to revise the text. The Census Office did the secretarial and proof-reading work.

Calcutta,
15 August 1954

ASOK MITRA

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CHAPTER I

HISTORICAL AND ANALYTICAL SURVEY

Cultural importance of Folk Dances

IT WAS Livingstone who recorded the interesting fact that whenever a man belonging to one branch of the great Bantu division of mankind met a member of another, one of the first questions they asked each other was, "What do you dance?"¹ This is a significant illustration of the truth that in the early history of man the dance covered the whole of life and religion, love and social life were all alike expressed in terms of the dance. Thus each race and each nation developed its own characteristic form of dance as an expression of its own race spirit. This is why we find that of all the arts practised by man, the dance is the one most characteristic of the spirit of each race and each religious or ethnic division; and being the least conscious and most spontaneous form of self-expression, the dance of each race affords a valuable indication of the innate traits of its character, besides furnishing a faithful record of its cultural link with its past and with the roots of its spiritual life. Being one of the basic arts, the dances of a people also furnish an indication of the extent and nature of its art-sense and its inherent capacity for artistic expression.

This, however, is true only for the indigenous dances that are tokens of the spontaneous growth of the social and religious life of the race and not for those dances which are the product of conscious or studied cultivation : that is to say, it is the spontaneously evolved folk dances, and not the sophisticated and laboured products of the stage or the court, which are of supreme importance to the ethnologist and anthropologist.

¹*The Dance of Life*, Havelock Ellis, ch. II, sec. ii.

Neglect of Indian Folk Dances by the educated classes

In India, the classic dance, the sophisticated product of the classic stage of India as expounded in the *Nāṭya Śāstra* of Bharata, with all its intricacies and subtleties of *mudrās* (or highly conventional gestures), has hitherto received considerable attention not only from Indian writers, both ancient and modern, but also from foreigners in recent times. The *nautch*, as Dr. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy has pointed out², represents a survival of the technique of the classical Indian stage dance. It has undoubtedly undergone considerable deterioration from the original classical tradition of the *Nāṭya Śāstra*. The art of the *Kathakali* dancers of Malabar is another cultivated form of dancing, which also abounds in *mudrās* and is a form of mimetic and representational art pursued as a profession. The *Kathakali* players dress themselves up in extremely elaborate and sophisticated costumes³ and give mimetic performances of plays from the *Rāmāyana*, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Purānas*. As in Java, these men are professional actor-dancers who have to undergo many years of training. They dance in silence, narrating stories in extremely intricate and conventional *mudrās* or gesture language, while a party of singers sing the accompanying *ślokas* and beat the rhythms and counter-rhythms on drums.

While these academic and elaborate creations have elicited a great deal of interest in modern art-circles, comparatively little attention so far has been paid to the simple and spontaneous folk dances, still widely practised by men and women in different parts of India, which constitute the basic forms of the nation's self-expression, evolved through the unfolding of the three great primeval impulses of ritual, war and play.

In the sphere of folk-dance, until only about ten years ago⁴, the educated classes of Bengal were under the belief that Bengal possessed no indigenous dances worth to be considered a contribution to Indian culture. As a result, attempts were made

² *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (14th Edition), VII, pp. 19-22.

³ See *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art*, Vol. III, No. 1, June 1935, Pl. xv, xvi, xvii, and xviii.

⁴ The draft was begun in 1939—A.M.

to introduce dances for both men and women from outside the province. Such a belief virtually amounted to assuming that the Bengalis as a race were deficient in art-sense and in the faculty of artistic expression. Nothing was, of course, further from the truth. Far from this being the case, the Bengali, is a sensitive and creative person with whom art has always constituted, and still constitutes in the rural areas, an essential and indispensable part of individual and social life.

The cultural and artistic value of the *Bāul* and the *Kirtan* dances, which are still widely practised in rural Bengal by men of all ages and of all classes during annual festivals and *pūjās*, has been lost sight of by the 'educated' classes; while the more ancient folk dances, surviving as living art-traditions among the illiterate, but none the less cultured poorer classes, are either not noticed at all, or if noticed, are regarded with unmitigated contempt and ridicule. The dance has been banished from the social life of the educated classes, except, latterly, for purposes occasional displays, staged by professionals. This is indicative of the extent to which the educated classes in the towns and cities of Bengal have become divorced from the life and thought of the rural population, not only among the lower classes but also, in certain areas, among the highest castes. Fortunately, the village has preserved intact to this day, as an inseparable part of its ritualistic, religious and recreational activities, folk dances of great nobility, dignity and rhythm combined with rare grace, harmony and spiritual value.

The position of Folk Dances in rural Bengal during the author's childhood

Fortunately for myself, my own interest in and knowledge of the folk dances of the Bengal people have been more than merely academic. They have been intimately woven with the experiences of my early childhood in my native village of Birasri in the District of Sylhet in a very remote corner of the old province of Bengal. Our village was still untouched by the new education and the economic forces of modern civilization. The old Indian traditions of social life still persisted there in

a large measure in the lives of the village people. Life was not pursued, as in the modern world, in separate compartments. Work, play, worship, art and religion were intimately integrated with one another, with a joyous community life and a profound urge of spiritual aspiration and spiritual fellowship.

Almost everybody, including my father and uncle who were premier village landlords in social rank, worked at the plough in the field with their own hands during the day, and in the evening men of all classes and creeds belonging to the Hindu society—Brahmins, Kāyasthas, Jugis (Naths), and Namashudras, rich and poor, landlord and tenant—joined in dancing traditional village dances to the accompaniment of simple *Kirtan* songs of adoration to the Infinite. My father not only joined in the dance along with his tenants of the humblest castes, but was held in high respect for the skill with which he played the complicated notes of the *mridanga*, which formed the accompaniment of the more complicated *Kirtan* tunes. As the *Kirtan* dancers moved round and round in a circle in our courtyard singing the *Kirtan* songs, my father would sometimes lie prostrate on the ground in the middle of the circle, and roll round and round from one end of the circle to the other in a fervent mood so as to cover himself with the dust of his tenants' feet. This was done as a completely rational act of self-immolation and not in a trance or delirium. As a little child I followed my father's example as well as that of others. Then there was the *Bāul* song and dance in which we joyously joined in common with the humblest villagers. Our Mohammedan neighbours also danced their traditional dances during the Muharram festival. Hindus often joined in these dances with their Moslem brethren, and I remember having done so myself on more than one occasion. During the *Durgā pūjā* festival our Mohammedan as well as Hindu tenants used to come round to our house in the evening and dance a mimic boat-dance, standing inside an imitation boat made of cloth and plying oars with their hands as if propelling a boat, to the accompaniment of the well-known tunes of the *Sāri* or boat-race songs.

My mother was not only an expert in all the arts of house-keeping but took pride in working, spade in hand, in the vegetable garden. She and my sisters also joined with all classes of Hindu women in ceremonial dances and songs on the occasion of seasonal *Bratas* as well as wedding festivities. These dances and songs were performed in the open in the courtyard of the house without troubling about privacy, and villagers who passed by paid no special attention to them, but merely regarded them as *stri-āchāra* (women's rites), that formed a part of the normal life of women. The village dances and songs practised by men and women were extremely simple, spontaneous, robust and spiritual in character, with not a trace of the sensual movements one associates with the so-called classical stage and court dances, and every village boy and girl, man and woman, regarded these dances as a part of his or her normal activities; and much of the moral and spiritual inspiration of my life I owe to my association with them in my childhood.

Such was the atmosphere in which I spent my childhood and early youth. When I came to the district town, and later on to Calcutta for education, I discovered that these village dances and songs were regarded by the newly educated classes with contempt as belonging to a barbarous and out-of-date civilization, so that whenever a person became 'educated' he ceased to have any connexion with these 'simple and unsophisticated' rural arts. Thus a generation of men and women grew up who either had no knowledge of the vigorous and beautiful art traditions of their own province, which were still very much alive among simple people in the rural areas, or failed to see any spiritual value and beauty in them. As the education of the city gradually spread to the remote village in the early part of the twentieth century, village men and women of the upper classes were in their turn infected with a sense of inferiority, and gradually gave up these valuable ancient traditions, until they lingered mainly among the poorer and comparatively backward classes.

Thus the education that I received in the city did not inspire

me with love or respect for the traditional dances and songs of rural Bengal, nor generated in me a spirit of inquiry into their significance and their history; but, on the other hand, it tended to infect my own subconscious mind with the same sense of inferiority which I have mentioned above; and by the time I joined the Indian Civil Service in 1905 my eyes had been effectively blinded to the value of the ancient culture of my country, including the rural songs and dances in which I had joyfully participated in my childhood with my father, and I ceased to take any special interest in them.

The origin of the Indian Folk Dance movement and the Bratachari movement

It was in the winter of 1928, during my fourth visit to England, that I had the good fortune of being associated with the English Folk Dance Society and to witness the All-England Folk Dance Festival held at Albert Hall in London. The important part which the revival of national folk dances was playing in the building up of modern England and the high value attached to them by enlightened men and women impressed me forcibly, and reminded me of our own folk dances in which I had participated in my childhood and early youth; and while I watched the dances in that hall, I resolved in my mind to start a folk dance movement in Bengal on my return home. When in the autumn of 1929 I came back and was posted as District Officer of Mymensingh, I discovered the beautiful *Jāri* dance extensively practised by Moslem villagers in that district. I at once set to work in starting a movement for the revival of the *Bāul* and *Jāri* dances, and for this purpose organized the Mymensingh Folk Dance and Folk Song Society. In the district of Birbhum where I was posted shortly afterwards as District Officer, I was fortunate to discover the living tradition of the *Rāibeñshe* war dance of ancient Bengal and of the *Kāthi* dance, and also valuable living traditions of folk art in the sphere of rural scroll paintings, wood sculpture, architecture, terracotta, etc. In January 1932 I organized the Rural Heritage Pre-

ervation Society of Bengal, the object of which was to make research into and take steps for the conservation and furtherance of the living traditions of not only folk dances and folk songs but also of the folk art of Bengal. In my capacity as Founder-President of the Society I engaged in discovering and making research into a number of important traditions of folk art and folk dances of Bengal.

It was as if my inner eye, which had been blinded by the superficial education of our cities, with their lack of real understanding of things Indian, had at last been opened; for as I saw each dance and heard each song, their real meaning and significance gradually revealed themselves to my mind and I realized that in the songs and dances, still living in the villages of Bengal, were to be found conserved down the centuries the subtle essence of the spirit, character and rhythm of the Bengali people. I perceived that these folk dances were 'not merely wholesome exercises or amusements, but moral, social and aesthetic forces, condensed expressions of ancestral and racial traits, story roots, ages old, that connect modern man with the times, facts and heroes that made his nation and shaped his character'⁵, and that they constituted 'residual, quintessential history told in an adumbrated form in action'.

Under the auspices of the Rural Heritage Preservation Society and in co-operation with the Education Department of the Government of Bengal, I held training camps every year from 1932 onwards for giving instruction to school teachers and others in the folk dances and sports of Bengal. In 1933, a Folk Dance Society was established at Delhi at my initiative and also an All-India Folk Dance Society with myself as President and leading members of the Indian Central Legislature as members. In the year 1934 the Rural Heritage Preservation Society was merged into the Bengal Bratachāri Society, and the Folk Dance movement developed into the Bratachāri movement, which became a movement of the New Life, of citizenship, social service, work and joy, national and international

⁵ Stanley Hall, *Educational Problems*.

fellowship, encompassing a great deal more than folk dance and folk song⁶.

In the Bratachāri Movement a number of folk dances of Bengal, such as the *Raibenshe*, the *Dhālī* and the *Kāthi*, have been incorporated without modification of their traditional form in respect of song or dance. In other folk dances, such as the *Jāri*, the *Bāul* and the *Kīrtan*, only the fundamental movements of the dance and its accompanying tune have been adopted so as to present it in a form acceptable to all communities in the country, without emphasizing any particular religious association, without hurting the religious susceptibilities of other groups in any way. Dances involving elements of magic or superstition or those pronouncedly religious in character, have, for the same reason, been excluded from incorporation into the Bratachāri movement.

Scope of the present work

In the present work I have tried to describe fully all the dances in their orthodox traditional forms as practised by those among whom they survive. The war dances, the *Rāibenshe* and the *Dhālī*, have no songs or recitation of verses, accompanying them or associated with them. Their names are suggestive of their origin and motive which are confirmed by literary references and traditions that have survived regarding them. The other dances are invariably accompanied by singing or associated with recital of verses or *mantras*; and it is these songs, verses and *mantras* that tell of their origin and motivation. I have, therefore, almost in every case, given a translation of typical songs or verses which accompany the dance as they hold together.

It will be observed that except in the case of the *Brata* and *Baran* dances of women and of the *Charak*, *Gambhirā*, *Dharma Pūjā* and *Manasā Bhāsān* procession dances, none of the folk

⁶ See *Modern Review*, October 1936, pp. 454-7, 'The Bratachāri Movement in India', and *Modern Review*, April 1939, pp. 427-32, 'Bratachāri Foundation day celebration and its significance'; see also *The Bratachāri Synthesis* by the present writer, a book published by the Bengal Bratachāri Society, Calcutta.

dances described in the present book are ritualistic in origin or character. There is also no element of imitative magic involved in any of the folk dances of the Bengali people, a feature which distinguishes them from the dances of primitive races inhabiting Bengal. Even the *Chain Jhumur* dance of the *Korās*¹, which is tribal in origin, is entirely social in character and has no element of imitative magic in it.

The *Charak*, *Gambhirā*, *Dharma Pūjā* and *Manasā Pūjā* procession dances stand in a class apart from all other folk dances of Bengal, being cult dances of a propitiatory character involving magic and superstition practised by certain classes. On the other hand, even the mask dances, although connected with the Chaitra Sankrānti festival, have no basis in magic or superstition, but are entirely interpretative and representational in character.

Classification of Bengali Folk Dances

The motive and content of the various folk dances of Bengal constitute an extremely interesting field for study and also furnish a basis for their classification. The following classification will help to distinguish the characteristics and the basic features of the various folk dances of Bengal. In each case an attempt has been made to distinguish the motive on the one hand and the content on the other. It must be explained here, however, that although some classification of this kind is obviously essential for clearly distinguishing the general features and character of the various dances as they are practised today, it is perhaps at the same time correct to say that all dances falling under groups III to XI in the following classification may be considered as directly related to spiritual aspirations. This also applies, although in a more restricted sense, to the *Dhāmāil* dance under group II.

(I) War Motive

In India, as in ancient Greece, dance of a virile character

¹*Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, H. H. Risley, Korā, pp. 506-11.

formed part of a soldier's physical as well as mental training; and the *Raibenshe* and *Dhālī* dances, both of which, from their names and nature as well as from references to them in Bengali literature, are ancient war dances, fall under that category of dances which have training for war for their motive. The content of these two dances includes acrobatics, besides mock fighting and evolutions in martial order.

(II) *Play Motive*

Under this head we may place the dances—*Kāthi*, *Lāthi*, *Jhumur*, *Dhāmāil* and the minor play-acting dances which form appendages to the *Brata* and the Wedding dances. While the motive of play is a common feature of all dances mentioned under this head, their respective contents may be distinguished. The various *Lāthi* dances have play as their basic motive. They obviously have for their content mock fighting and physical culture. The content of the *Kāthi* dance is group integration and social expression as revealed in accompanying songs as well as in the continuous physical touch maintained between dancers moving in a circle. The *Korā Jhumur* dance, like the *Kāthi* dance, has for its content group integration and self-expression, as indicated not only by the continuous chain formed by dancers but also by the sentiments embodied in the songs. The *Dhāmāil* dance of women, although having a play and joy motive, has a more profound content : the spiritual romance of the Krishna cult, as revealed in the songs accompanying the dances. Simple mimetic play-acting dances forming adjuncts of the *Brata* and Wedding dances, such as paddy sowing, paddy reaping, paddy husking and plum plucking dances obviously have joy and play as their motive, and various rural activities and humorous scenes as their content. Other minor dances such as *Kuchiā Morā*, the *Jor* dance, etc., are acrobatic in form and have a play and joy motive in common with the above mentioned dances.

(III) (a) *Ceremonial Greeting, Boon giving and Boon asking motive*

Under this head fall the *Baran* and *Ārati* dances. The content

of the *Baran* dance is offerings of flowers or other auspicious or ceremonial gifts. Besides the motive of adoration of a deity which it has in common with the *Baran* dances, the *Ārati* dance has an added motive of rhythmic identification.

(III) (b) *Ideal fulfilment and complete Self-Expression Motive*

Under this head fall the various *Brata* dances.

They are performed with a double motive : (a) aspiration after an ideal which is sought to be realised and (b) self-discipline with a view to achieving the ideal. The ideal or wish is always expressed through a co-ordinated discipline of body, mind and spirit and is prompted by a spirit of joyous oneness with the universe. The content of the *Brata* dances consists of ideals and wishes that are held in the mind and the fulfilment of which is sought with the help of discipline undergone through the fast, refraining from rest during the whole day and in singing, dancing, etc.; boons are asked for either from the Deity invoked or from the Spirits of Nature.

(IV) *Social ceremony and well wishing motive*

Under this head fall the wedding dances performed by women. The content of the dances varies according to the particular ceremony during a wedding which calls for their performance.

(V) *Joyous Self-Union Motive*

Under this head come the *Bāul* and *Murshīdī* dances, both of which have the motive of joyous self-union or a seeking after such union with the infinite within oneself. The content of these dances consists of allegorical representations of the various types of relationship conceived between the outer self and the inner self, or in other words between the Finite Self and the Infinite Self.

(VI) *Spiritual Supplication and Self-Purification Motive*

Under this head falls the *Kirtan* dance. The content varies

according to the nature of the allegory of life represented in the songs. In *Kīrtan* a synthesis is sought to be established between worldly life on the one hand and a broad spirit of non-attachment on the other, the aim being to attain *mukti* or inner liberation while yet living a householder's life and performing worldly duties.

(VII) *Didactic Motive*

Under this head fall the various ballad dances, namely *Rāmāyana*, *Satya Pīr*, *Satya Nārāyana*, *Padma Purān*, *Gāzīr Gān*, *Mānik Pīr*, *Shloka*, *Bolān* and *Bānshi* : the common object of which is the widest possible propagation of various aspects of religion represented in these ballads. The content of each dance is to be found in the ballad song sung by dancers.

(VIII) *Commemoration Motive*

Under this head fall the *Jāri* and *Dadhi* dances. In the *Jāri* dance the motive is obviously the commemoration of historical episodes connected with the story of the fight of Imam Hussain in the field of *Kerbālā* in Iraq. The content of the dance is mourning expressed in the songs sung and ballads recited on the occasion, as well as other poetic themes forming the subject-matter of songs composed by village poets for the nonce. The technique of the *Jāri* dance consists mainly of re-enacting on terra firma the movements of boatmen in boat races in East Bengal. In the *Dadhi*, or curd dance, danced on the occasion of the *Janmashtami* festival, the commemoration consists in the celebration of the birth of Krishna.

(IX) *Representational and Interpretative Motive*

Under this head fall the mask dances, the underlying motive of which is dramatic representation, in anthropomorphic form, of the profound conceptions of cosmic philosophy embodied in the *Shaiva* and *Shākta* cults, as well as of the joyous dance of the Infinite soul inhabiting every sentient creature.

(X) Fitness proving Motive .

The *Dharma Pujā* procession dance and the *Charak Gambhirā* dances fall under this head. The main object underlying these dances and the ceremonies connected with them is to make the worshippers, by undergoing physical austerities of various kinds, fearless and insensible to physical pain so that they may prove their worthiness as followers of the Deity worshipped in each case.

(XI) Propitiation Motive

The *Manasā Bhāsān* procession dance falls under this head. The object of the dance is to propitiate *Manasā*, the goddess who presides over snakes.

Bengal a congenial soil for the growth of Folk Dances

A common feature of the folk dances of Bengal is their vigour and sturdiness and the complete absence of any sensual suggestion either in idea or in movement. The court dances, the temple dances and the stage dances which were developed and practised in ancient India in court circles and in the more sophisticated levels of culture, do not appear to have found congenial soil in Bengal, at any rate after the Pāla and Sena periods. In the first place, after the downfall of the Pāla and Sena dynasties, there has been no Imperial Court laying down the fashion in dancing in Bengal, which was ruled between the eleventh and eighteenth centuries by small potentates who were themselves content with the rural culture of their own people and had no Imperial culture to impose on the rural population. Secondly, there were in Bengal no temples belonging to any established religious order during these centuries except the *ākhrās* or *maths* of the Vaishnava sect, and consequently the institution of *devadāsīs* or temple dancers was completely alien to Bengal. Even the *nautch* and the *Khemtā*⁸, which were imported

⁸ The *Khemtā* dance is merely a corrupt form of the *nautch*.

into Bengal in comparatively recent times from northern Indian cities, have never been acclimatized in Bengal, and have never become a form of popular diversion. Thirdly, the classical stage of ancient India does not appear to have found a sympathetic soil in Bengal, the art of which has been devoid of such features as conventional *mudrās* and sophisticated movements which formed the basis of the Indian dance of the ancient classical stage.

Thus Bengal, like certain other outlying parts of India, furnished a congenial soil for folk dances which, to use the words of Stanley Hall, 'grew up slowly through centuries and millennia until they came to fit and express the very soul of the people, embodying its memories, expressing its psychological traits, aspirations, and which constitute actual rituals which shape as well as utter the very psychic type of the people who developed and were developed by them'.

The question is sometimes asked as to whether these folk dances are not merely degraded forms of dances which were practised by the aristocracy. In regard to this matter it may be noted that while it is undoubtedly true that at every period of Indian history there has been a filtering of culture from above downwards as well as from below upwards, it is nevertheless proved by the internal evidence provided by the forms of Bengali folk dances and motives underlying them, that both in form and motive they are essentially creations of the common people are characteristic expressions of a popular, as distinguished from a sophisticated culture.

This view is supported by the opinions of such eminent authorities as Col. T. C. Hodson¹⁰ and Dr. A. K. Coomaraswamy¹¹ who hold that primitive culture is the matrix of the higher and that folk dances have not only an interest of their own but also provide the material from which dances of the aristocracy are derived.

⁹ Stanley Hall, *Educational Problems*.

¹⁰ T. C. Hodson, *Primitive Culture of India*.

¹¹ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 14th Edition, Vol. 7, pp. 19-22. Dance (Indian) by Dr. A. K. Coomaraswamy.

Nature and origin of the Bengali war dances

The war dances, namely the *Rāibenshe* and the *Dhāli*, have preserved something of the old martial spirit. They are remarkable for their expression of military energy and discipline and the atmosphere of martial excitement which they create. The vigorous and manly movements of the body together with the stirring notes of the drum generate courage and daring in the feeblest of hearts. They afford a significant and authentic reminder that Bengalis, now believed to be a non-martial race, were once renowned for their military prowess and were wedded to the profession of war. References in the works of Megasthenes¹², Ptolemy, Pliny and Quintus Curtius¹³ establish the existence, at the time of Alexander's invasion of India, of a powerful military race known as the Gangaridae in south-western and central Bengal stretching north and north-west from the estuary of the Ganges. The martial traditions of certain sections of the inhabitants of this ancient area,—the north-western portion corresponding to Burdwan, Birbhum and Bankura districts of today,—appear to have persisted in a vigorous form throughout succeeding ages till the end of the eighteenth century.¹⁴ The *Rāibenshe* dance and acrobatics would appear to be the last surviving vestiges of these warlike traditions. The spearmen or *Rāibenshe* soldiers in medieval Bengal were in all likelihood drawn from all classes of people, including such comparatively high castes as Sadgops who were a warlike and at one time a ruling caste in the Gopabhum area of Western Bengal¹⁵. Like *Dhāli* troops of lower Bengal, men of the higher castes who joined *Rāibenshe* troops appear to have discontinued their martial practices from the time they ceased to be recruited as soldiers. But the men of the poorer castes

¹² See McCrindle's *Megasthenes*, pp. 33-4.

¹³ See Appendix D; also *Bengal District Gazetteer*, Vol. XIII (Burdwan) pp. 18-9.

¹⁴ 'On its inhabitants devolved, during three thousand years, the duty of holding the passes between the highlands and the valley of the Ganges. To this day they are a manlier race than their kinsmen of the plains'—Sir William Hunter, *Annals of Rural Bengal*, p. 3.

¹⁵ See *Bengal District Gazetteer*, Vol. XIII (Burdwan), pp. 21-3.

who belonged to the *Rāibeñshe* army appear to have kept up the practice of their ancient martial dances and martial acrobatics as a means of livelihood by forming escort parties for wedding processions and by displays of dancing and acrobatics. The same phenomenon of the upper castes giving up the ancient traditions of their ancestors and the lower castes continuing to preserve them is observed in the *Brata* dances of the women of Bengal.

The military prowess of Bengalis at the time of the Pāla emperors and the early Sena emperors is well known to students of Indian history, while Bengali chieftains of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries always found it necessary to raise local levies and foot soldiers of various descriptions not only for their feuds among themselves but also for common defence against Mughal armies which were sent from time to time to subdue them. The armies of Nawab Siraj-ud-daula contained a large element of local soldiers, and must have included sprinklings of *Rāibeñshe* and *Dhāli* troops. *Rāibeñshe* dancers of Tantipara and Gohaliara in the District of Birbhum, who are also known as *ghātwāls* or 'defenders of gates or river crossings,' are undoubtedly descended from the soldiers of the Mohammedan Rajas of Rajnagar who carried on warfare against the East India Company long after the battle of Plassey.¹⁵ Their home is situated at one of the main gates of the far-flung boundary wall of the capital of the Rajas of Rajnagar. References in verses, accompanying *Brata* dances, praying for husbands', fathers' and brothers' safe return from mercantile voyages and to wives' prayers to be preserved from widowhood through battles, afford significant evidence of the mercantile and warlike activities of the people of ancient and medieval Bengal.

There is a very ancient tradition in India that the dance is the best training for a soldier—that it is the handmaid of valour. The tradition is at least as old as, if not older than, the period of the *Rig-veda*, in the verses of which Indra, the Warrior God *par excellence*, is represented in numerous places as the

¹⁵A. Broome, *History of the Bengal Army*, pp. 292-4.

Dancer (and also as the Singer), and so also are his chief lieutenants the Aswins¹⁷.

This tradition continued through later times, as is evidenced by the fact that Arjuna, the chief of warriors in the *Mahābhārata* legends, is represented as the most consummate dancer, who, when living in disguise, made his living as a dancing tutor.

General characteristics of Bengali Folk Dances

Bengali folk dances are robust in character and entirely wanting in the melting softness of movement and sensual music which one associates with the so-called 'oriental' dance on the one hand and the *nautch* on the other, or with ancient Indian stage or court dances. The instrument accompanying most of them, not excluding women's dances, is the robust drum, and in no case is it accompanied by soft stringed instruments like the *setār* and *esrāj*, which are associated with court and stage dances. Even the softest Bengali folk dance, the *Brata* dance of girls and married women, is accompanied by the virile *dhāk* (big drum), characterized by a great sturdiness and by the complete absence of any cloying sensual suggestion.

An interesting aspect of folk dances of Bengal is the peculiar physiological appropriateness of the dances for males and females respectively. For men, emphasis is laid more on the development of the upper part of the body and particularly of the chest and arms; whereas for women, the movements are calculated to develop the lower half of the body and particularly the abdominal, pelvic and gluteal regions which are helpful to women. The discontinuance by the educated classes of performing traditional rural dances as part of their social and religious life has cost the race dear. The health of the nation has declined; and particularly among females, maternal mortality has reached an alarming proportion, in sharp contrast to the state of things that existed before these traditional dances were discontinued.

¹⁷See Appendix E.

Place of the art of dancing in rural Indian life compared with that in ancient Greece

It has been said that dancing and music lay at the foundation of the whole political and military, as well as religious organization of the Dorian States.¹⁸ It may be said with equal truth that dancing and music lay at the foundation not only of the political, military and religious organization of the Bengali people but also of their social and educational organization. Unlike the upper classes in the Greek cities, the people of rural Bengal, even of the highest social castes, were cultivators and craftsmen, and it is in the Bengali folk dance and song that we find manifestations of an urge not only for spiritual self-expression and war but also for work and social fellowship.

The universal role of the dance and song in the life of rural Bengal can only be explained by the fact that rural Bengali culture embodies in itself the Indian philosophy of life according to which (in a more profound sense than even in ancient Greece) dancing and singing formed the basic arts of life and the foundation of a humane education. A well-known verse in Bhartrihari's *Nīti-shataka* voices the Indian attitude towards song and dance. In India, *sangīta* or music comprises three elements—singing, instrument-playing, and dancing,—unlike ancient Greece where music included singing and instrument-playing only and where dancing was classed under gymnastics. Says Bhartrihari :

Sangīta-Sāhitya-Kalā-Vihīnah
Sākshāt pashuh puchchha-vishana-hīnah

'One who is not versed in the art of music and the art of literature is a veritable brute *minus* only the tail and horns.' By 'literature' here is meant not necessarily reading and writing on which such importance is laid in this commercial age, but acquaintance with national traditions and a capacity to recite the national ballads and to understand and appreciate their significance. Thus we find that according to ancient Indian

¹⁸Havelock Ellis, *The Dance of Life*, ch. II, sec. v.

standards, the basic education of humanity, which differentiates man from beast, consists in training in singing, playing on instruments, and dancing, and the capacity for reciting and appreciating oral and written tradition. The whole system of popular education in India, both in ancient and medieval times, was based on the above principle. In the case of women, the Indian educational system went further and made not only singing, playing on simple instruments such as cymbals, and dancing, but also floor painting and simple clay-modelling an integral part of their education by embodying all these elements in the *Brata* ritual, which was practised by girls as well as women of all sections of the Hindu community.

In short, the orthodox Indian conceived the whole of life as art and the ideal was to train every boy and girl and every man and woman from childhood upwards as a complete artist, able to express himself or herself perfectly.

There was also a deeper principle involved, namely, the basic Indian theory of life according to which all life was derived from Joy, was supported by Joy and merged back into Joy. According to this theory, Joy is the only basic thing that has real existence and the Infinite Spirit is only another name for perfect harmony, perfect rhythm and perfect Joy. God, according to various Hindu cults, is a Power expressing itself through song and dance. This is the basic element in the conception of Shiva and Shakti as well as of Krishna. Dance and song with a high spiritual motive are thus at once an activity of the higher Self as well as a means of attaining union with the higher Self. This fundamental fact was realized in all primitive societies; and if we are to believe Havelock Ellis¹⁹, this realization lay at the foundation of all the great religious systems of the world. In rural Bengal the practical realization of this truth has been handed down to an advanced stage of civilization and spiritual expression, thus enabling an integrated attitude towards life to be maintained even to the present day.

A notable feature of Bengali folk dances is the almost

¹⁹ *The Dance of Life*, ch. II, sec. ii.

complete absence of special costumes for the dance. This is owing partly to the warm and moist climate which makes it unpleasant and unhygienic to wear elaborate costumes while dancing, but more to the spirit of simplicity and directness which gives to this people's art of Bengal an unadorned character.

Indeed, throughout the entire field of the art of rural Bengal, we find a maximum dependence on direct expression and a minimum dependence on paraphernalia or ornament. The spirit of Bengali dances thus represents the very opposite pole to that of such dances as the *Kathākali* of Malabar and the ancient Hindu court and stage dances, the main feature of which is the elaborate use of imposing costumes and ornaments. Even in the mask dances of rural Bengal, which comprise perhaps the only class of Bengali folk dances bearing some affinity to the philosophic dances of the classical Sanskrit stage, paraphernalia and costume are reduced to the barest minimum and the paraphernalia themselves, namely the masks and dresses, are of an extremely simple and humble character. This, together with the complete avoidance of the use of conventional and codified *mudrās* or gestures, serves to impart to the Bengali folk dance a spontaneous and elemental character and keeps it free from sophistry. The same applies to the *ākhallā* (cloak) of the *Bāuls*, which is generally of a plain ochre colour and is always of the cheapest and humblest material, entirely devoid of ornament.

Folk dances of Bengal are as a rule performed in the open air in the courtyard or on the village green. But apart from this, the leading householders of each village consider it a part of their social and religious duty to erect a dance hall or pavilion in their houses in front of the shrine of the household deity. In the case of the *Vaishnavas*, the dance pavilion is called the *nāt mandir* (dance temple). In the case of the *Shāktas*, it is called either the *nāt mandir* or the *Chandī mandap* (the 'pavilion of Chandī', the Goddess of Power). In the case of *Shaivas*, the dance hall is called *Gambhīrā* in north Bengal and is generally subscribed for and erected by the entire community.

Women's dances are always performed in the open courtyard, being essentially part of a ritual of integration with Nature.

Folk dances have a pronounced democratic base and are undoubtedly designed for solidarity, unity and fellowship in the village community among both men and women.

The *Dharma Pujā* and *Charak Gambhirā* cults, professed by the culturally backward sections of the Bengali people, rest on certain magical beliefs and practices in sharp contrast with the *Bhakti* cult represented by the *Bāul* and *Kīrtan* dances and the Nature cults represented by the *Brata* ceremonies and dances, which form the high levels of rural Bengali Hindu culture based on a spiritual conception of joyous trust in and dependence on a wholly benignant Infinite Spirit.

The economic self-sufficiency and general agricultural prosperity of villages undoubtedly provided a congenial atmosphere, while the break-up of the village economy, following the introduction of the competitive and exploitative spirit of modern commercial civilization, proved fatal to the continuance of this simple life of integrated work and joy. One may perhaps not inappropriately apply to this rural culture, still surviving in remote villages among unsophisticated classes, the same high praise which Havelock Ellis accorded to medieval Chinese culture : 'So exquisite, and refined in its civilization, so humane, so peaceful and joyous, so well ordered, so happily shared by the whole population, we realize that here had been reached the highest point of urban civilization to which man has ever attained.' Equally applicable would appear to be Bertrand Russell's eulogy of Chinese civilization : 'This simple, child-like yet profound attitude towards life results in a liberation of the impulses to play and enjoyment which makes life inevitably restful and delightful after the solemn cruelties of the West.'

In rural Bengal until very lately, the whole of life, including even its morality, was animated by art. This universal presence of art manifested itself in the smallest utensil and in the rhythms of movement, particularly of women.

As in China, this practical realization of the truth that all human life is art has enabled the Bengali people to preserve their civilization through a thousand cruel vicissitudes of history.

The undoubted affinity between Chinese and Indian civilizations is demonstrated by the similarity of the Chinese attitude towards Nature with the spirit underlying the *Brata* dance of the women of rural Bengal. The *Brata* attitude is based on kinship with Nature.

We find this outlook underlying the songs and writings of the Indian poet of modern times, Rabindranath Tagore, who, in his address at his Shāntiniketan *āshram* in August 1939, on the occasion of a tree-planting ceremony, made the following significant declaration :

“Not to the world of man alone, but to the world of Nature as well, we send our warmest greetings. On this auspicious occasion we extend our welcome to the trees and plants, invoking at the same time, the sun and wind and rain to shower benediction upon them.”

Laurence Binoy describes this as ‘the credulous, popular side of what in the minds of poets, artists and philosophers becomes a singular completeness of vision, a juster sense of man’s place in the universe and of the relations of human life to the lives outside it than has ever prevailed in the West.’

In the art of Europe before the nineteenth century it seems as if man, intent on himself, on his own doings and aspirations, had lost touch with this life outside him. Intellectual curiosity rather than natural sympathy has led him slowly and gradually to study this intermediate world (between man and the further, profounder, outlying mysteries of the universe).

This attitude towards life, which is common to India and China, has been contrasted with the European attitude towards life by Laurence Binoy in the following passage describing the civilization of China :

‘But the Chinese have never lost touch with that intermediate world of life; they have explored it more and more, not with the scientific curiosity of the Europeans, but as if in a desire

to be, so to speak, citizens of the Universe, so that not only the beasts of the chase, but the birds and the insects and then beyond these the things we call inanimate, come to be included in their consciousness of the universal life.'

In Indian culture the fundamental object of life was the attunement of body and mind to the Infinite which is conceived as Perfect Rhythm, Perfect Harmony and Perfect Joy. Krishna and Hari of the *Vaishnava*, the 'Man within my mind' of the *Bāul* or the "Beloved" of the *Murshidi* singer is nothing but merely another name for Infinite Rhythm, Infinite Harmony and Infinite Joy, which is the quest of Indian and Bengali culture. In this view the whole of life becomes an all-embracing art directed to the attainment of this eternal quest. This led to the permeation of the whole of life with the *Bhakti* cult. In the synthetic and syncretic mind of the Bengali, as also in the Tamil land in South India, even the Shiva and Shākti cults assumed the nature of a *Bhakti* cult; all these cults being often practised in the festivals or worship of the same family in the various seasons of the year. And the Infinite is only another name for the higher and finer Self of man himself. The Bengali Shiva idea is merely the apotheosis of harmony between the Yogi and the worldly man, between non-attachment and attachment. The Bengali Shākti is the apotheosis of the soul force and physical force of man. The Krishna motif is the apotheosis of the complete harmony of the ideals of rhythm, song, dance, pastoral life and physical and spiritual power. Thus work, play and worship were all based on a simple but profound philosophy of life, which to the Bengali Hindu, man and woman, was as natural and as simply comprehended as the very air he or she breathed.

I have confined the scope of this book to the folk dances of the people whose speech is Bengali and who are within the pale of Bengali civilization and Bengali culture.

The folk dances of the tribal races which inhabit parts of Bengal, such as the *Gāros* and *Hājongs* on the east and the *Sonthāls* on the west, have therefore been excluded. It is a remarkable fact, which may be of considerable significance to

ethnologists and anthropologists, that none of the Bengali dances except the *Chain Jhumur* dance of the *Korās*, who are akin to the *Kol*, *Munda* and *Orāon* tribes of Chhota Nagpur and who have recently adopted Bengali culture, have any resemblance to any of the dances practised by these tribes.

On the other hand such dances as the *Rāibenshe*, *Dhālī*, *Jarī*, *Kirtan* and *Brata*, display a complex structure resembling a complex musical composition, and consist of a succession of definite schemes of movement and tonal variations related to and originating from a common basic or key movement, a characteristic which is entirely lacking in tribal dances which consist of a repetition of monotonous movements without any complex organization.

The dances of the Mongolian races bordering on Bengal, such as the Manipuris who have adopted the *Vaishnava* culture and mental make-up, the Nepalese who have adopted the *Shākta* cult, or the Tibetans who have adopted the Buddhist religion from Bengal, have certain affinities with Bengali dances. A detailed examination of such affinities is, however, outside the scope of this book.

CHAPTER II

WAR. MOTIVE

The Raibenshe Dance

THE *Rāibenshe* dance came to my notice in the district of Birbhum in December 1930 when I was District Officer there. At that time it was extensively practised in the districts of Birbhum, Burdwan and Murshidabad, amongst the Bāgdi, Bāuri, Dom, Konai, Bhāllā and certain other castes of the Hindu community. When I first saw it nobody was able to explain the real meaning of the epithet “*Rāibise*” which was popularly applied to this dance and to the acrobatics which formed an inseparable part of it. From the very nature of the dance, I was convinced that it must have played an important role in ancient Bengali history and literature. With the help of the late Shiv Ratan Mitra of Suri, Birbhum, who was an erudite Bengali scholar, I was able, within a couple of weeks to trace very significant references to the valiant *Rāibenshe* soldiers of Bengal in several Bengali classics of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, to which a detailed allusion will be made presently¹.

From the striking similarity of the dress, equipment and physical evolutions performed by *Rāibenshe* dancers with those appertaining to the *Rāibenshe* soldiers as described in the above mentioned works, it was proved beyond doubt that the name *Rāibenshe* was a corruption of the word *Rāi-benshe* and that the *Rāibenshe* dancers were in their dance and acrobatics carrying on the martial traditions of the *Rāibenshe* soldiers of Bengal². The word *Rāi-benshe* is derived which literally means a ‘royal

¹ See a “*Note on the indigenous dances of Bengal*” by the present author in the *Census Report of India (Bengal and Sikkim)*, 1931, Vol. V, Part I, pp. 539-41; and Appendix B of this book.

² For further details relating to the discovery of the *Raibenshe* dance, see the author's articles on the subject in the *Banga-lakshmi*, of Phalgun 1337 B.S.; Baisakh, Jaishtha and Āsarh 1338 B.S.

bamboo'; [*rāi* or *rāy*; royal king, kingly; and *bānsh* (Bengali) = *bansha* (Sanskrit) = bamboo]. The Middle Bengali form is *rāy-bānsiyā*, from which is derived the Modern Bengali *rāy-ben'she* or *rāi-benshe*. In the middle ages the Bengali infantry soldiers used lances made of the solid species of bamboo (*i.e.*, those which are not hollow within) used as a shaft to which a pointed steel head was attached, so that the epithet *rāi-bānsh* came to signify a big bamboo (*vide* the Bengali dictionary "Chalantikā") and those who wielded the *rāi-bānsh* were called *Rāiben'shes*.

Equipment and dress :

From its very name as well as from historical evidence handed down in Bengali literature, it seems probable that this dance used to be performed lance in hand by the ancient spearmen of Bengal. At the time of my discovery, however, it was the invariable practice among all troupes of *Rāibenshe* dancers in the districts mentioned above to practise it empty handed. This was obviously due to their having been divorced for several centuries from the practice of their soldierly occupation. The dance is performed to the accompaniment of *dhol* (the ancient Bengali military drum) and the *kānshi* (a gong of bell metal making a sharp clanging noise). The drum is beaten on both its faces, a stick being held in the right hand. Percussion with the stick is ordinarily made on the right side of the drum, percussion on the left face is performed with the palm and fingers of the left hand. Sometimes the stick held in the right hand is used for striking the left side also. In olden days the performance of the dance was also accompanied by the sounding of the *ran-singā* (literally, 'war trumpet')³ which is an imposing-looking copper trumpet with a beautifully curved shape. In modern times the *ran-singā* is rarely used as an accompaniment to the dance. Every dancer wears a brass anklet or *nupur*, usually round the left ankle but sometimes on the right.

The dress is of the simplest character and consists merely

³ Sometimes also called *rām-singā*.

of the ordinary Bengali *dhoti* worn at the waist, the lower portion being kilted fairly high above the knees and worn in the tightened-up *māl-koncha* fashion. Often a long strip of red cloth is tied round the waist above the *dhoti* worn in the above fashion and taken between the legs and tucked up at the back. This lends an invigorating touch of colour and smartness to the simple dress of the dancers. Being a war dance, the *Rāibenshe* dance is not accompanied by any song.

Description of movements :

1. The assembling,
2. Getting into the attitude of preparedness,
3. Marching interspersed with manoeuvring and action movements,
4. Dancing in pairs—one man standing on the shoulders of the other,
5. Vigorous yells uttered in between the various sectional movements mentioned above.

The preliminary assembly consists in the dancers gathering in the place assigned at a run, performed with a series of leaps alternately on either leg with the two arms kept tightly stretched downwards along the sides. From the very beginning there is a vigorous beating of the drum on a definite scheme of rotation which varies according to the nature of the actions performed. After the dancers have gathered into a single circle, the leaping run changes into a simple run accompanied by vigorous clapping of the mouth with the right palm and production of an “*āwā, āwā, āwā*” sound with the mouth and palm of the hand.

The *Rāiben'she* yell has two parts. The first part consists of a production of the “*āwā, āwā*” sound with the mouth, to the accompaniment of vigorous clapping with the right hand. The second part consists of the sound “*yee-āh*” to the accompaniment of the upward raising of the right arm. The mouth-clapping yell appears to represent a traditional yell of victory dating from ancient times among all classes in rural Bengal including both Hindus and Muslims. This is borne

out by the fact that the same yell is given by the victorious parties, whether Hindus or Muslims, in the annual boat races in East Bengal. The mention of this yell as a custom prevailing among players, which is made in a passage of the Bengali work *Padakalpataru*⁴, also supports this view. The second part of the yell represents an ancient traditional form of greeting practised by the Kshatriyas (fighting castes of India) in the days of the *Māhābhārata*⁵. Immediately after the mouth-clapping and the “*āwā, āwā*” yell there is a sudden stoppage of the run, and each dancer, coming to a sudden halt, stretches both arms to their full length and utters the war cry ‘*yee-āh*’ (fig. 1). This is followed by immediately getting into a half sitting posture and by a leap and a high capriole movement in the air, returning after a complete somersault in the air to the original position facing the centre of the circle as the feet touch the ground. This is immediately followed by a simultaneous stretching of both arms in front to their full length with the palms extended vertically (fig. 2). The fists of both arms are then gradually clenched, and while the left arm remains stretched in front the right fist is gradually drawn back as if fully drawing a bow (fig. 3). I have purposely compared this with the drawing of a bow as I shall presently explain that originally this dance was in all likelihood performed by bowmen who formed the bulk of ancient Indian armies, as we find from the traditions recorded in such works as the *Rāmāyana* and *Māhābhārata*.

After the right fist has been fully drawn back in the attitude of discharging the arrow from a fully drawn bow, each dancer turns from facing the centre to a marching position facing the back of the man next to him on the right, and in this position a dance of soul-stirring vigour is begun to the rhythmic beats of the drum and of the gong. The knees of the dancers are slightly bent all the time, and as each leg is advanced the ground is lightly touched with the toes and the foot is slightly drawn

⁴ *Padakalpataru*, edited by Sree Satish Chandra Ray, M.A., Vol. II, 3rd *shākhā*, 21st *pallab*.

⁵ *Mahabharata, Shanti Parva*, Chap. 53, Verses 24, 25.

back before the weight is transferred on the advancing leg. The impression conveyed to the spectators is one of a line of bowmen advancing with drawn bows as if stalking an enemy with caution and firmness. This stalking march motion with arms in the attitude of drawing a bow or of holding a shield in the left arm and a spear in the attitude of hurling in the right, is the basic step of the *Räibenshe* dance (fig. 4).

Simultaneously with each step there is an upward jerk of the shoulders and a sharp lift of the entire chest corresponding to each beat of the drum. These shoulder and chest movements are continued through all the stages of the dance. The origin of this movement is obviously to be traced in the upward lift of the shoulders and the chest in the act of drawing a bow full length or of hurling a spear. All the movements of the *Räiben'she* dance are dominated by this lift inhalation. The repetition of this movement at every step and with every beat of the drum serves to impart an indescribable rhythmic dignity to the entire dance. Its effect on the development of the chest is remarkable.

After about twenty steps have been taken in this basic attitude, the notes of the drum change into a different system of beats and the first series of action movements is performed. This consists of two steps towards the centre with an alternate hop on each leg, the other leg being simultaneously held up and brought across the hopping leg, the fists of each hand being moved sideways parallel to and in the direction of the raised leg. This is followed by retreating movements backward with alternate hops on either leg (fig. 5), after which each dancer makes a gradual right-about turn with the arms held in the original position and the legs held apart (fig. 6), so that when the right turn is nearly effected, the two legs are twisted together at the knee. When the extreme twisted position is reached a high capriole is performed with both legs in the air, and as soon as the feet come down on the ground, three successive hops are performed on the right leg, the left leg being simultaneously thrown high up (fig. 7), and an action is performed with the arms as if hurling with the right hand

a spear on an enemy charging from a higher elevation such as an advancing force of cavalry. After this another capriole is performed in the air and then a simultaneous yell is uttered to the sound of 'yee-āh', the right arm with fist clenched being sharply thrown upward while uttering the yell. This scheme of action movement is then brought to a close and the basic step is resumed.

The next or second series of action-movements much resembles that of cavalymen riding horses at a trot, the knees of the bent legs being alternately brought inward and then thrown outward in a series of hops performed in that attitude with both legs towards the centre of the circle, the two arms swaying in the act of controlling the reins of the horse (fig. 8). A backward movement from the centre is then performed in a series of hops with both legs, and this is followed by a capriole in the air which ends with the usual yell bringing the series of movements to a close.

After twenty of the basic movement of the dance have been again gone through, the third series of action movements is enacted. In this series of movements the basic step is continued with the legs, but the body is bent towards the right with the left shoulder tilted high up, and both hands are moved in the attitude of hurling blows in an upward direction (fig. 9). This series of movement is again brought to a close with the yell "yee-āh" and the basic steps are gone through.

The fourth series of action movements consists of hops on the left leg, the right foot brought above the right knee. The right ankle is then held tightly attached to the left leg above the knee. The two upper arms are held in a perpendicular position and with the fists closed. This gives the appearance of an ecstatic victory dance which is brought to a close by another 'yee-āh' yell.

The fifth series of action movements consists of marching towards the centre of the circle with the left arm with its hand clenched and outstretched in front, and the right palm is rigidly held up and moved towards the raised outstretched left hand in a series of cutting strokes in the attitude of dealing out strokes

with a sword. After all the dancers have moved well into the centre, the drummer suddenly beats a change in the note of the drum and all simultaneously make a right-about turn and come back to the circumference of this circle repeating the action movements performed while proceeding inwards. While this series of movements is going on, some of the dancers suddenly separate themselves from the circle and proceed towards its centre; then they form into pairs, and one member of the pair jumps up on the shoulders of the other and standing erect in that position holds his arms in the basic attitude of the dance, while the man below holds the ankles of the dancer standing on his shoulders by way of support. The two men are thus fused as it were into a single human form; the man below dances round and round with his legs moving in the basic *Rāibenshe* step, while the man above performs the dance with his shoulders and arms, both keeping their knees slightly bent in the appropriate attitude (fig. 10). This brings the last series of action-movements to a close.

The centre dance is then repeated in a rapid tempo with the result that an extraordinary rousing atmosphere is generated. The drummer and the beater of the gong do not in the meantime remain still. The drummer also dances as he beats on the drum and goes through movements of an even more plastic and vigorous character than those of the dancers (fig. 11), jumping alternately on each leg with the other leg held up high across it and making powerful and evocative facial gestures and arm movements. Usually there are at least two drummers, if not more, performing in unison. The beater of the *kān'shi* (gong) also joins in the general excitement and vigorously beats the *kān'shi* in various poses. The *kān'shi* is beaten now above the head, now in front of the body, now at the back, now under one upraised leg and now under the other upraised leg. Not content with this, the gongman, while the dance is at its most exciting pitch, lies flat on his back as if wounded, and with his legs stretched up in the air, goes on beating the *kān'shi* rhythmically to the accompaniment of the dance, behind each leg in turn, and also behind his head, while moving

round and round on the ground with jerks of his back all the while, in sympathy with the circular progress of the general dance.

After the whole dance reaches a climax of quick staccato movements, it is suddenly brought to a close with the combined "āwā, āwā, āwā, yee-āh", yell uttered with mouth claps followed by a shout, repeated three times in quick succession, the last part of each yell being synchronised with a leap in the air.

Immediately after the dance is completed the dancers engage in a series of acrobatics which are also performed to the accompaniment of the rhythmic beats of the *dhol*, and consist of ground exercises and other forms of agility exercises of remarkable vigour and daring (figs. 12 and 13). Some of the exercises are also of the nature of *Yogic āsanās* involving deep breathing. Altogether there are about one hundred different varieties of martial acrobatics of a traditional character performed by the *Rāibenshe* dancers.

General observations on the Raiben'she Dance

The predominating characteristics of the *Rāibenshe* dance are its inherent heroic and epic qualities, its elemental verve, dash and virility, its sustained vigour, strength and dignity of gesture and movement, and particularly of the upward lift of the chest throughout the dance, its freedom from any trace of self-conscious posing, and above all, the manly grace of the plastic movement of the arms and the shoulders. The entire dance is permeated by a spirit of irresistible joy. By virtue of these manifold qualities, it occupies a place of unequalled eminence in the whole range of Indian folk dances, falling in the category of war dances. It is highly probable that it is from original war dances of this type that the more sophisticated *Tāṇḍava* dance of the Sanskrit stage was derived.

It may be observed here that the *Rāibenshe* dance has nothing in common with the war dances that are in vogue among the Sonthāls, Bhils and other aboriginal tribes, which are entirely

different in character from the *Rāibenshe* dance and are lacking in the particular features that distinguish the latter.

The fact that the *Rāibenshe* dance is extensively practised by men of the caste known as Bhallās in the district of Birbhum appears to be significant. 'Bhalla' is a Sanskrit name for an arrow with a crescent-shaped head, and this lends probability to the basic pose of the dance having originated from the war dance of ancient Indian bowmen referred to in the *Māhābhārata* legends.

The *Rāibenshes* were soldiers in ancient days and their dance was a war dance, but in recent years the only demand for these dances has been on the occasion of weddings in Hindu families. With the decline in public taste in this country, dancing as a martial and manly art and as a vehicle for the expression of pure joy fell into disfavour. The *Rāibenshe* dancers belong to what is called the lower and depressed classes of society, and being in a state of poverty and semi-starvation, were obliged to cater for a corrupted public taste. They started to grow long hair and adopted women's dress as their dancing ensemble. In consequence of this, their style of dancing underwent, in many instances, regrettable deterioration, inasmuch as it often became distinctly effeminate and suggestive of vulgar ideas, in puerile imitation of *nautch* girls. But fortunately this deterioration has not been universal and a few troupes of *Rāibenshe* dancers are still to be found who have preserved the old traditional dance in its purity of style and manliness of form. The degree of corruption and degeneration is to my mind directly proportional to the length of time that has intervened between their military ancestors and the present-day dancers. This view receives support from the fact that the *Rāibenshe* dancers of Rajnagar and the neighbouring villages in Birbhum, where a line of Muslim kings reigned till comparatively recent times, have been found to have remained most free from degrading influences⁶.

⁶The references to the *Rāibenshe* dance and to the circumstances of my discovery of this dance, given in the Bengali book *Vrihat Banga* by the late Dr. Dinesh Chandra Sen (published by Calcutta University) contain many inaccuracies as admitted by him in his preface to that work.

The Dhali Dance

The *Dhāli* (dhāl means shield) dance, as its name implies, is a war dance. It was the war dance of the *Dhāli* (shieldmen) troops in the armies of the ancient potentates of Bengal. That they were a body of intrepid soldiers who served under both Hindu and Moslem potentates in the Lower Bengal districts is borne out by numerous allusions to their valour in medieval Bengali literature. The *Dhāli* soldiers of Pratapaditya of Jessore, one of the renowned twelve Bhūyāns (twelve territorial potentates) who ruled over different parts of Lower Bengal in the 16th and 17th centuries, are particularly famed in Bengali history. The fact that the word *dhāl* is a Sanskrit word makes it probable that this dance is of ancient origin dating from the pre-Mohammedan period. During the Moslem period the *Dhāli* soldier was recruited from both Hindu and Moslem ranks. He formed the main body of the army of Pratapaditya of Jessore, who is said to have had 52,000 *Dhāli* soldiers. There is mention in Bhāratchandra's work *Annadā Mangal* of the prince who had '16 Halkas (Brigades) of elephant-mounted soldiers, 10 thousand cavalry soldiers and 52 thousand *Dhālis*', and also of 'numerous beautiful fighting boats and 52 thousand *Dhālis*' of the same potentate. A *Dhāli* soldier wielded a *dhāl* in the left hand and a spear in the right. The covers of the *Dhāls* were made of rattan basket-work and the hide of the rhinoceros, which abounded in the Sunderban forests south of the district of Jessore and Khulna where Pratapaditya ruled. *Dhāli* soldiers appear to have been recruited from all classes of society, including Brahmins⁷.

The descendants of *Dhāli* officers are still known by the appellation of "*Dhāli*" and there are still numerous families living in the districts of Jessore and Khulna at the present day. After the British occupation, *Dhālis* ceased to be recruited

⁷Madan Malla and his assistant Kalidas Roy were noted *Dhāli* leaders of Pratapaditya, and Madan Malla is mentioned as having fought against Man Singh (See Satish Chandra Mitra *Jasohar-Khulnar Itihas*, p. 224). In Ghanarām's *Dharma Mangal* there is a vivid description of the valour of Kalu *Dhāli*, the intrepid *Dhāli* leader under Lāu Sen.

as soldiers and lost their military profession. The fact that many of their descendants both among the Hindu and Moslem communities were still practising their ancient war dance and traditional martial acrobatics was unknown till I had the good fortune of discovering a Moslem party of *Dhāli* dancers and acrobats in the neighbourhood of the village of Rajghat in the district of Jessore on the occasion of my visit to that village in 1932.

Equipment of the dancers

Dhāli dancers no longer use actual military spears or shields covered by rhinoceros hide. Shields of this type are, however, still maintained as heirlooms in certain *Dhāli* families. Instead of real shields, cane or bamboo shields are used by dancers. The cane shields are, however, of very great strength and durability and they vary in diameter from 8 to 18 inches. A brass anklet with bells is worn on one leg. Besides those who dance themselves, there are one or more *dhol* players (drummers) who play on the war drum, and also a *kānshi* (gong) player. The dancers do not wear any special costume but have their *dhoti* kilted up high on their waist, the upper part of the body being bare. This practice is, however, not uniform. Sometimes a sleeveless *kurtā* is worn on the body and a green cloth is used as a waist-band. Uniformity of dress is not observed at the present day among *Dhāli* dancers owing to the fact that the demand of the dance as an athletic entertainment is now fast on the wane. The dance is nowadays usually performed on the occasion of the Muharram festival and other festive occasions such as weddings. Like *Rāibenshe* parties in West Bengal, parties of *Dhālis* are still sometimes engaged to escort the bridegroom's party on a wedding journey to the bride's house in central Bengal districts ostensibly to escort the groom against predatory attacks on the way. The classes who perform *Dhāli* dances are Moslems and Namasudras.

Preliminary ceremonials and yells

The leader of the party of dancers first takes his stand in the middle of the arena and, phumping on his right heel, performs

a sharp full turn so as to scoop with his heel a quantity of earth from the arena. He then promptly takes the earth in his left hand and utters a formula or incantation so as to invest the earth with magic properties for warding off evil from his party and ensuring its victory against rival parties or other enemies. He then waits for the other members of his party, who presently enter the arena one by one with shield and stick in hand. As each member passes the leader, the latter takes up with the thumb and forefinger of the right hand a pinch of the charmed earth held in the left hand and, muttering a short incantation, draws a mark on the forehead of the follower with an upward pressure of the right thumb. The same operation is performed upon each member of the party as he files past, the object being to guard him against the evil machinations of the enemy. The troupe then makes a complete round of the arena and as each member reaches a corner of the arena he makes a gesture of salutation to the corner, a circular movement of the right hand above the head. After the salutation of the four cardinal points of the compass is over, all the dancers rush forward with a 'he, he, he' yell, after which they stand in a circle and place the shields and sticks in front of them on the ground. Then they bend down on the ground on their right knees and right elbows, the left hand being placed on the back and the left leg stretched straight backward. In that position the leader utters a shrill 'he, he, he' yell, continuing as long as his breath lasts, vibrating his left hand with quick horizontal movements about an inch below the mouth so as to give a vibrant note to the yell (fig. 14). After the yell is over, all the dancers make a complete left-about turn while still remaining kneeling, but this time kneeling on the left knee and bending forward on the left elbow with the right leg stretched right back and the right hand on the back (fig. 15). In that position the head is lowered in the attitude of a salute and then they all spring back ready to start their rhythmic exercises.

The *Dhāli* dance consists of five distinct sections, all executed to the accompaniment of the *dhol* and the *kānshi* :

1. Preliminary ceremony and yell.

2. Freehand agility exercises.
3. A series of spectacular manoeuvres with the shields and sticks in hand by two opposite rows of dancers.
4. A vigorous rhythmic mock fight with shields and sticks between two rows of dancers.
5. The dance proper with vigorous *tāndava*⁸ movements.

The dancers stand in a circle with empty hands, their shields and sticks on the ground. Then they extend their arms full length sideways with the fingers stretched out, palms held down and legs apart. With the arms stiffly held in that position, they alternately raise and lower their heels to the rhythm of the drum. This forms the basic movement which intervenes between a variety of vigorous agility exercises of the arms, legs and abdomen, calling all the limbs into play. Prominent among these agility exercises are those of *bairhak*, or an alternation of quick kneeling and springing to attention, and some others with quick alternating inward and outward lunging and springing movements, all performed while the dancers keep on moving rhythmically in a circle, so that the movements constitute a combination of athletic exercise and dance (fig. 16). The agility exercises end with a spectacular rhythmic march with one leg alternately thrown forward in a bended position and the other stretched full right back, the back of one hand touching the forehead, the back of the other placed smartly on the back of the waist. This plastic stalk is known as the *bir-chalan* or the 'hero walk.' The agility exercises are interspersed with yells of various kinds.

The agility exercises over, the dancers pick up their shields and sticks and form into two straight rows of approximately equal numbers facing each other. Each dancer presses his left hand to his left flank or waist and the right hand to his right waist, with the end of the stick held up and forward. The rows approach each other to the beat of the drum in a series of simultaneous rhythmic hops of both legs, each foot being placed alternately backward and forward and the upper parts

⁸Vigorous, manly.

of the bodies inclined or bent forward (fig. 17). When the two rows meet, the men utter a yell (fig. 18), and then suddenly turn back and return to their original positions with similar steps (fig. 19). The two rows then again approach each other in the same way as before; but this time, without stopping when they meet, they march through the opposing row as if piercing the enemy's ranks. Having advanced a certain distance and after crossing each other's lines, they turn back again and perform a series of manoeuvres with the shields and sticks held above their heads, sometimes with the shield held in front of the chest and the stick held behind the right shoulder (fig. 20). They perform a series of advances and retreats through each other's ranks, sometimes in frontal marches, and sometimes in a series of sideways hops (fig. 21). All these manoeuvres are in the form of a deliberately planned tattoo and are essentially spectacular in character, their chief feature being a series of syncopated, ordered movements in serried formations.

The next stage is a vigorous rhythmic mock fight between men of the two opposing rows, the beat of the drum commencing in a slow rhythm and then gradually accelerating. The players in each pair strike each other's shield and stick alternately with violent strokes in attitudes of attack and defence in various positions, alternately advancing and retreating, crouching and leaping until the climax is reached (fig. 22).

The final stage or climax of the dance is a series of high *tāndava* movements with each leg alternately lifted up sideways after a smart jerk of the heel while the shield and stick are held high up in upraised arms. In this attitude the dancers run round and round in a circle until they leave the arena.

General observations

In the *Dhāli* dance, the movements are more deliberate, formal and spectacular than those in the *Rāibenshe* dance and are more in the nature of athletic exercises. It lacks the elemental directness, virility, rapidity and the plastic, sculptural

movements which characterize the *Rāibenshe*. Nevertheless, the *Dhāli* is a dance of high aesthetic value by virtue of its intricate manoeuvres and ordered formations, and experts have also testified to its great athletic value. Being a war dance, the *Dhālī* dance is not accompanied by any song.

CHAPTER III

PLAY MOTIVE

The Kathi Dance

THE *Kāthi* dance is practised as a traditional dance by the poorer classes and specially by men of the Bāgdi and Behārā castes in Birbhum District in Western Bengal, and I discovered it in 1931 in the village of Barsal (J.L. 72 P.S. Rampurhat) in that district. The dancers stand in a circle each carrying two short sticks, one in either hand. The dress consists merely of the *dhoti* worn in a *mālkoncha* fashion, the upper part of the body left bare. The accompaniment is the *mādal*, which is a kind of earthen drum with leather facings and leather strappings.

An even number of adults, usually 4, 6 or 8 stand in a circle with sticks about $1\frac{1}{2}$ cubits long in their hands. The man who plays on the *mādal* remains either outside the ring or at its centre. Save for short intervals at the beginning, the dancers move continuously in an anti-clockwise direction. To start with, each alternate dancer forms a pair with his right-hand neighbour and strikes with his left-hand stick the right-hand stick of his partner. Each man then strikes his own left-hand stick with the one in his right hand (fig. 23). Different pairs are then formed. Those who formed pairs with their right-hand neighbours now form pairs with their left-hand neighbours and strike the left-hand sticks of their partners with their own right-hand sticks. The process is repeated and all the while the dancers keep on moving along the ring in an anti-clockwise fashion. The steps are brisk and graceful and the body and arm movements are extremely plastic in perfect unison with the sound of the sticks and the beats of the *mādal*. The knees are kept bent all the while. Sometimes a dancer makes a complete right-about or left-about turn as the case may be before striking his neighbour's stick.

A different group of dancers sit on the ground and sing the accompanying song, as the dance is much too swift for the dancers to keep up singing along with the dance. The song is not begun until after the completion of the preliminary movements, and every now and then the song stops to allow the beats of the sticks to be heard.

There are about six variations in the movements of the dance. In one of the variations the dancers bend down and almost squat on their heels and, springing up on their toes from that position while still keeping their knees bent, they move round in a circle, striking each other's sticks in the manner described above. One of the dancers sometimes lies flat on his back with his head towards the centre of the circle, as though beaten to earth, and keeps moving along the circle by jerky movements of his back, defending and striking with his sticks as he does so (fig. 24). The speed of the music is greatly increased as the dance progresses, until it reaches an extremely exciting prestissimo. The movements of the sticks are made in the manner of striking and defending sharply and smartly as if in mock warfare.

The stick dance is fairly common in all parts of India and appears to be a very ancient form of dance. It appears to have practised in every province of India in ancient times by men and women separately as a social pastime. Numerous representations of stick dances by men as well women are found on the walls of ancient stone temples, particularly in Southern India¹, as also in ancient brass work. In the Indian Museum in Calcutta there are two stone pillars of the Pāla age, found in the district of Pabna, depicting stick dances by women of the higher classes. The representation illustrates that in ancient times the stick dance was practised by the higher classes of both sexes although at present it is confined only among males of certain poorer classes. In the form in which the dance has now survived among men of certain working classes in Western

¹St. Kramrisch, *Indian Sculpture*, fig. 114 (Vijayanagar, A.D. 1514), and 'SRISALLAM', *Indian State Railways Magazine*, October, 1931, p. 12 (c. A.D. '11).

Bengal it somewhat resembles a war dance by virtue of the vigour and speed with which it is performed.

The name *Kāthi* is obviously derived from the fact that the dance is performed with *kāthis* (sticks). The dance is not now associated with any particular ceremony but may originally have been performed as a *Rāsa Mandala* dance, which forms a part of the Krishna cult. The latter view is supported by representations of the *Kāthi* dance as a *Rāsa Mandala* dance in old brass-ware of South India and by its obvious affinity with the *Kolāttam* or *Rāsa* dance with sticks which still survives as a living folk dance in various parts of South India. There is obviously an underlying motive of continuing social unity or of rhythmic integration with the group while in movement, in imitation of the integrated rhythmic movement of planetary bodies.

The songs sung with this dance are simple ditties dealing with the simple joys and sorrows of peasant life, and often strike a pathetic note. The words of two typical songs are given below :

I planted paddy on yonder ridge
 But the wild duck ate all up.
 The scourge of flood came and covered up the
 fields with sand !

In the house of the Babus
 Live the predatory kite birds.
 They swooped down and took away all I had
 Leaving me only with my hopes !

The reference here is to the agents of oppressive landlords who often extracted illegal levies from the tenants.

The Lathi Dance

Lāthi dances are performed on the occasion of the *Janmāshtami* festival and *Muharrām* festival. Heroic traditions of rhythmic

lāthi play either solo or by two or more persons simultaneously and also of rhythmic mock fights with *lāthis* are popular features common to the *Muharram* as well as the *Janmāshtami* festival. In the *Janmāshtami* festival *Lāthi* dances and mock fights are mainly performed by Hindus although Muslims, until recent years at any rate, used to join freely in them in the same way as Hindus joined in the *Lāthi* dances and mock fights of Muslims on the occasion of the *Muharram* festival. *Lāthis* used for this purpose consist of bamboos about five feet six inches long. The *lāthi* is sometimes held in the right hand and sometimes in the left and sometimes one is held in each hand. The *lāthis* are revolved violently while the dancers perform vigorous movements of leaping, advancing, retreating and turning round and round as if dealing and parrying blows with their opponents. *Lāthi* dances and rhythmic mock fights are performed to the accompaniment of a *dhol* or *kārā*.

The Jhumur Dance

The expression *Jhumur* is a generic term applied to dances or songs which do not fall under any specific class but are of a miscellaneous character, particularly with erotic association.

Thus a *Jhumur* song may be defined as a miscellaneous song of an erotic character and a *Jhumur* dance as a miscellaneous dance. The name *Jhumur* may have originated from brass anklet bells making a 'jhum, jhum' sound on dancers' feet.

Jhumur dances may be solo dances, duet dances or group dances, and may be performed by men or women.

(a) Solo Jhumur

Solo *Jhumur* is danced by men as well as women belonging to such castes as Bagdi, Bauri and Dom. The accompaniment is always a drum which may be either a *dhol* or a *mādal*. The solo *Jhumur* is always of a *tāndava* character, involving free and wide movements of the arms and legs with wide swaying movements of the body.

The translation of a typical *Jhumur* song is given below :

O cuckoo, thou sittest on the top branch while thy nest
is on the middle branch.

Alas ! the branch breaks and there is no hope for thy
life !

In times of adversity I maintained and fed the bird with
powdered rice and *kura* :

In times of prosperity the bird flew away—piercing my
heart with a lance.

(b) *Duet Jhumur*

In duets, *Jhumur* is generally danced by two women to the accompaniment of the *dhol*. The dance involves co-ordinated movements of the body and all the limbs in various positions such as squatting, standing, bending, etc., as well as acrobatic exercises (figs. 25, 26, 27 and 28).

(c) *Group Jhumur*

The expression *Jhumur* is sometimes loosely applied to any group dance by women. In ordinary parlance among the gentry in India, the term is applied to group dances by women on the Indian stage. When applied to the group dance of the category of folk dances, the term *Jhumur* is applicable only to the *Korā Jhumur* dance, which is performed by women dancers of the *Korā* caste, forming into several single rows with the arms and hands of dancers in each row interlaced and clasped together to form a chain (fig. 29). The shoulders of the dancers touch each other so as to form a closely knit chain, symbolising a close tribal solidarity. There may be several separate chains of dancers with hands interlaced and clasped together. The *Chain Jhumur* dance generally consists of a simple scheme of seven steps which is repeated without any variety. The dancer on the right is the leader and leads the dance in circular movements in the arena, the seventh step, which is a long one, is utilized by the dancer to make turns on the left or right instead of moving forward. *

That the Chain *Jhumur* is tribal in origin is proved by the fact that it is practised in Bengal only among women of the Korā caste who have affinities with the Orāon and Mundā tribes of the Proto-australoid group among whom this type of *Jhumur* dance is very prevalent. There is, however, a significant difference. Whereas among Orāons, Mundās and Sonthals the Chain *Jhumur* is performed by men as well as women, the men forming a separate row facing the women's row and the two rows advancing and retreating as they dance; among Korās who have adopted Bengali speech and culture the men take no share in the dance, except that, as in the case of other Bengali women's dances a male drummer plays on the *madāl* as an accompaniment to the dance. The Chain *Jhumur* of Korā women is also different from the linear *Jhumur* of Sonthals in being much more vigorous. There is also an absence in it of those rocking movements of the middle of the body which are a prominent feature of Sonthal women's dances.

Korās are by profession diggers of earth and makers of roads, and the songs which accompany the Korā *Jhumur* dance relate to their simple life and work.

A translation of a typical song of Korā women's Chain *Jhumur* dance is given below :

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

The Chain *Jhumur* is also danced by women of the Mongoloid race group such as the hill people of the Darjeeling District, but in their case the body clasp is used instead of the hand clasp, each dancer, throwing her hands round the back of contiguous dancers and clasping them above the waist.

The Dhamail Dance

The name *Dhāmāil* may be a derivative of *dhāmal* (from Sanskrit *dhāman*, vigour) or of *dhāmāli* (from *dhayali*—Sanskrit *dhāban*, running or quick stepping). As the derivation of its name implies, it is a dance of vigorous movements as contrasted with the *Brata* or *Baran* dance. In the two latter dances the steps are a combination of gliding and shuffling movements of the feet without raising them from the ground, and gentleness is the predominating mood. In the *Dhāmāil* dance, on the other hand, the feet are sharply raised from the ground and with vigorous springs alternately moved inward and outward while the dancers proceed in a circle in an anti-clockwise direction. There are two principal schemes of movement in the *Dhāmāil* dance. In one, alternate inward and outward springs are made with the right foot, the left foot being used only for taking short steps along the circle in an anti-clockwise direction in the ring. In the other variety, which is of a more feminine character, a light backward step is alternately taken with each foot, and the ground is touched with a light tap on its toes while the heel is kept raised upwards. These movements involve a vigorous exercise of the pelvic, gluteal and abdominal muscles. The *Dhāmāil* dance is invariably performed to the accompaniment of hand claps or cymbals. The outstanding motive of the *Dhāmāil* dance is the spirit of joyous play, but the songs generally relate to the Krishna cult and are spiritual and allegorical. The *Dhāmāil* dance is performed on weddings and other festivals and often at the end of *Brata* rituals.

Here is a translation of a typical *Dhāmāil* song :

O my beloved, Thou art very cruel !
 I have come to know in my mind that Thou
 regardedst me not as Thine own.
 Alas ! how long can the *tamāl* tree live without
 its leaves ? the fish without water ?
 And Radha without Krishna ?
 Alas ! when the lotus is without honey, the bee
 loveth it not.

And so Thou mayest forsake me at Thy sweet will !
O my beloved, how long shall I endure the pang
of Thy love ?

The fire of Thy love has made me like a doe in a
forest on fire!

CHAPTER IV

- (a) CEREMONIAL GREETING, BOON-GIVING AND BOON-ASKING MOTIVE
- (b) IDEAL FULFILMENT AND COMPLETE SELF-EXPRESSION MOTIVE

The Significance of Brata and Baran

TO UNDERSTAND fully the nature and significance of *Brata* (Sanskrit *vrata*) and *Baran* (Sanskrit *varana*) dances, it is necessary to appreciate their psychological back-ground.

The word *Brata* is used in a variety of senses. It is commonly used to denote a duty and also a single-minded devotion to, and pursuit of duty. In its more specialized sense it signifies a simultaneous physical, mental and spiritual discipline with dance and song and other forms of self-expression for self-improvement, the attainment of an object or ideal or of attunement to an ideal. The *Brata* dances are expressions of this urge among the women of Bengal.

The *Brata* is intimately associated with the *Baran*, which signifies honouring, greeting, choosing, with a *Bar* (Sanskrit, *vara*) a choice, selection, gift, *i.e.*, a boon which is either given or asked for. *Brata*, *Baran* and *Bar* are thus intimately associated with one another. A *Brata* is always performed with a view to asking for *varas*, or boons in fulfilment of a desire.

Whenever someone deserving of affection or honour visits a Bengali house, the traditional custom is for the women of the house to receive him or her with a ceremonial reception and greeting. An integral part of this ceremonial greeting is the bestowal of a *Bar*, a choice blessing or boon. If the person greeted is young in age, the ladies performing the *Baran* or welcome ceremony bestow the *Bar* or gift by uttering blessings. If the person honoured is elderly or of a higher status, he or she utters words of blessing wishing fulfilment of the heart's desire of the person or persons performing the greeting.

The term *Baran* is used in two distinct senses closely allied to each other. In the first place, it signifies choosing something, particularly a boon. In its specialized sense in relation to certain women's rituals, it signifies ceremonial approval. Thus, before a bridegroom can be permitted to go through the priestly ceremony of wedding, he must be first "approved" (*Baran*) by the women by the performance of a formal *Baran* (approval) ceremony. Again, when the lady of the house desires to perform a *Brata* or other ritual which is the special prerogative of women (as distinguished from a priest's), but is incapacitated from doing so due to illness or other reasons, she may empower a priest to perform it as her representative, and for this purpose she performs the *Baran* ceremony, of approving and authorizing the latter to perform the ritual on her behalf.

The object of greeting or ceremonial honouring may be a Deity or a Spirit of Nature, *e.g.* the Spirit of the Sun, or of the stars or of the Earth. In such cases, after the formal greeting ceremony which naturally here partakes of the character of informal worship (not by priests, but by women themselves) the person or persons performing the greeting pray in simple unsophisticated language for the fulfilment of their cherished wishes. In the case of the *Bratas*, the prayer, for the fulfilment of which a *bar* is asked, is always recited in the form of simple verses, to the accompaniment of simple rhythmic movements or dances.

Although verses are recited expressing a prayer, there would appear to be no element of magic, imitative or otherwise, involved in the *Bratas*. The *Bratas* are an expression of the peculiarly synthetic ideology of rural women of Bengal. To them all Nature is alive. Everything in Nature—the sun, the moon, stars, the rivers, the trees—is endowed with a spirit and is a member of a common cosmic family, and as such an innate sense of joyous affinity and kinship runs through each. The practical expression to this feeling of affinity and kinship is given in simple song and dance, and floor-painting of simple symbolic images of these objects.

Bratas performed by women thus partake of the character of Nature dramas, performed in active sympathy with the elements of nature through the joyous employment of song, dance and floor-paintings, and the recitation of simple verses embodying a prayer, for the fulfilment of which a *bar* or boon is asked.

The *Baran* or ceremonial greeting often forms an integral part of a *Brata* and this is followed by a recital of prayer in verse (part of which is traditional and part improvised for the occasion) composed by women themselves.

A simple dance is an integral accompaniment of both *Baran* and *Bratas*.

In the case of the *Brata*, there is an additional preparatory discipline for self-purification, in the shape of a fast or a dip in the pond or both.

The subject of the *Brata*, often identical with the form of the *Brata* ritual, ends with the narration of appropriate stories with a deep moral and spiritual significance, or with the enactment of simple dramas of the marriage of the Sun with the young Moon; or of the Sun's son, Spring, with the Earth; or of other simple allegorical themes. These are followed by the recital of simple improvised verses asking for blessings from the Spirits thus honoured in the *Brata*. The whole thing constitutes a joyous musical play.

Brata dances and songs may thus be regarded as part of a joyous festival depicting the activities and moods of the seasons and of the spirit of the sun, moon and other forces of Nature. Man is here conceived as an active companion and fellow-actor of the heavenly bodies, the living rivers and trees which form his cosmic environment, exchanging thoughts with them, entering into their minds and their lives; conceiving their lives to be as human as the lives of men and women themselves, and in consequence imagining their taking an active interest in human life, and fulfilling human prayers by granting *Baras* or boons.

Dr. Abanindra Nath Tagore, in his work *Bānglār Brata*, observes : "We find here the expression of a profound rela-

tionship between man and the universe. The breath of man and of the forests beat in the same rhythm." While holding that the *Bratas* are pre-Aryan in origin, Dr. Tagore says : "In the popular *Bratas* we find the expression of the ideology, thoughts and strivings of a whole nation, just as in the verses of the Vedas, the ideals, aims and strivings of the entire Indo-Aryan people have expressed themselves. There is a close resemblance between these two in that through both of them the hopes and fears, ambitions and wishes of the race have found expression."

Dr. Tagore has also pointed out the close resemblance between the references in Vedic verses and in the popular *Bratas* to the mother of the Sun, the Spirits of Nature being conceived in both instances as benignant neighbours. The *Brata* verse regarding Surya's (the Sun's) mother runs as follows :

Far, far away can be hazily seen a series of large houses.
Yonder is visible the house of Surya's mother.
O Surya's mother ! what dost thou do sitting at the door ?
Your son (Surya) comes driving a pair of horses.

The Baran Dance

The *Baran* ceremony is performed to welcome a bridegroom or bride, to greet a deity (fig. 30) or visitor as a mark of honour or affection (fig. 31), or any person on the occasion of a ceremony as a mark of affection, such as the festival of *Bhāi Phonta* when sisters anoint the foreheads of brothers with sandal paste and give ceremonial blessings, while performing the *Baran* dance. Various objects are held in the hand while the dance is performed, such as the *kulā* (winnowing tray) or the *pradīpa*¹ (fig. 32) or fresh paddy and *durbā* grass. The contents of the ceremonial *Baran Kulā* include a lump of earth, various kinds of grain, a piece of stone, vermilion, turmeric, etc. In the *Baran* dance, the step is a continuous glide and shuffle movement of both feet with alternate raising and lowering of the

¹Lamp.

heels to the beat of the drum. The glide and shuffle movement may take place on the same spot on the ground exactly in front of the person or deity to be greeted, or there may be a smooth progression to the right or left; but the chief attention is placed on movements of the hands, which are of an extremely intricate and spectacular character. As a rule, the fingers and palms are held very rigid. Movements are mainly performed with wrists and elbow joints. The hands are sometimes held together either with the fingers touching one other or with the two wrists crossing each other. Sometimes the hands are moved independently. Arms and hands are sometimes held low and sometimes raised high or moved from side to side. When a human being is greeted, he is always seated; but the image of a deity greeted may be in a standing position. In either case the movements of hands of the woman performing the *Baran* are so described as to 'cover' or outline in the air each limb of the figure greeted. This corresponds with the fact that the word *baran* (Sanskrit, *varana*), besides meaning 'choosing,' is also used to mean 'covering.' The paddy and fresh *durbā* grass which are held between the fingers while greeting a human being are placed on his or her head after the ceremonial movements of the hands and fingers have been performed. The hands, wrists and shoulder joints as well as the entire body from the waist upwards are all brought into play in these movements, which constitute a healthy physical exercise of these limbs, while the movements of the feet involve a vigorous exercise of the pelvic and gluteal muscles.

The Arati Dance

The *Baran* dance practised by women has its counterpart in the *Ārati* (adoration) dance practised by Brahmin priests every evening before the household or temple deity. *Ārati* (from the Sanskrit *Aratrika*, night ritual) means the waving of lights in the evening or other hours before the image of a deity in token of worship. Here either a *pancha pradip* or a five-branched candelabra of brass is carried in the right hand or

two such lamps are carried one in either hand, and a simple dance of adoration or *Ārati* is performed with rhythmic steps of the feet and plastic and wavy movements of the hand or hands holding the lamp. The dance is performed either inside the temple or in the verandāh to the beats of the gong or bell swung by an attendant. Sometimes the dance is performed while holding a censer instead of the *pancha pradip*. The dance is symbolical of adoration and self-attunement.

•• Brata Dances

Brata dances performed by Bengali women and girls are divided into two main classes, Shāstric *Bratas* and Popular *Bratas*.

Shāstric *Bratas* are performed under the ministration of a Brahmin priest and lack the element of joy and spontaneity which form the basis of popular *Bratas*. Generally speaking, dancing or singing is not associated with Shāstric *Bratas*.

Traditional or popular *Bratas* are in the nature of cosmic plays or festivals created by the poetic instinct inherent in Bengali women. As has been already explained, to the mystic and synthetising mind of Bengali women the whole universe constitutes a cosmic drama in which humanity plays a joyous role. A close affinity is felt with Nature and the heavenly bodies, and this is expressed in the form of simple verses and dramas composed by women themselves.

The majority of the *Bratas* involve dancing and singing performed by young girls. Married women participate in such *Brata* dances as *Surya Brata* and *Kartick Brata*. The characteristic features of the *Brata* dance consist in —

- (1) the movements of the feet, and
- (2) the movement of the hands and wrists.

The dancing is performed by a group of girls or adult women, as the case may be, forming a ring, the dancers moving slowly in an anti-clockwise direction as the dance proceeds. There is a variety of movements from the waist upwards, particularly of the hands and arms, but in most of the dances the step is a

combination of slide and shuffle and the foot is not taken off the ground. The toes and heels are joined together alternately in the process of slide and shuffle. The movement is performed by a left and right sliding and shuffling of both feet without ever raising them from the ground, while moving on the same spot or in a circle or semicircle in a clockwise or anti-clockwise direction. These combined shuffling and gliding movements of the feet are an unvarying feature of women's *Brata* and *Baran* dances throughout Bengal, and involve vigorous exercise of the pelvic, gluteal and abdominal muscles. The slide and shuffle movement of the feet, although stereotyped, lends a characteristic feminine grace, dignity and solemnity to the dance. The hand movements assume a great variety of forms, according to the stage reached in the dance.

There is a subtle and significant difference between the glide and shuffle steps of the *Brata* dances performed by unmarried girls and those performed by married women. In the case of the latter, the movements consist of the two feet touching each other alternately with the big toes and the heels, while the general movement proceeds in a circle on the round heels of the feet. In the case of unmarried girls, the heels and toes do not touch each other; the two feet are kept apart and moved with simultaneous glide and shuffle movements on the round heels. The movement, in the case of married women, involves vigorous exercise of the pelvic and abdominal muscles. In the case of young girls, it is the gluteal muscles which are mainly exercised. The difference in the two systems of step is evidently based on a profound difference between the physiological needs of small girls and married women, and have been evolved, as a result of the experience of centuries, by women themselves, the object being to develop, in the case of young girls, only those parts of the female limbs the special development of which is necessary preparatory to motherhood. In the case of married women, emphasis is laid on the healthy activity of the pelvic bones and muscles and abdominal walls so as to keep the muscles supple and make parturition easy when confinement arrives.

(1) *The Surya Brata*

The *Surya Brata*, the *Brata* in honour of the Sun, is very common among adult and married women in the districts of Tippera, Mymensingh and Sylhet. Not many years ago it used to be performed by women of all castes including such high castes as Brahmins and Kayasthas, but in recent years with the spread into the rural areas of a spirit of sophistication and contempt for indigenous rural traditions, there has been a tendency among women of the upper classes to discontinue the *Bratas* and the dances connected therewith.

On Sundays in the month of *Magh* (January-February) the *Surya Brata* is performed for the welfare of the family of the *Bratinees* (performers of the *Bratas*). The women dig little square cavities in the earthen courtyard to represent little *Yajna-Pukurs* (ritual ponds) and plant a small plantain on its bank. The plant is then decked with flowers, and round the tank and the plantain plant floor designs are drawn with rice powders of various colours, and round these the women dance and sing in a circle playing on cymbals and *kānshi* (gong) as accompaniments. Those who perform the *Brata* take the vow not to sit during the whole day but to remain standing. The rigour of this discipline is lightened by the enlivening effect of the dances and songs. Only after sunset do they permit themselves to sit. The *Brata* is generally performed in the village, women gather together in the house selected each week for the purpose.

(2) *The Bhānjo Brata or Bhāduli Brata*

In *Bratas* performed during the month of *Bhādra*, the seasonal Spirit of Nature is delineated under the name of *Bhāduli* in East Bengal and *Bhānjo* in West Bengal. The spirit of the rushing streams of the rainy season as well as the fertility of Nature which marks the season are allegorically represented in verses and floor paintings as well as in prayers addressed to the Goddess on such subjects as the return journey of male

relatives who have gone abroad on commercial or military adventures. Like other *Bratas* these also used to be performed by all classes of women in Hindu society in olden times, but in recent times there has been a tendency to leave their performance to the poorer classes. The dance is performed by grown-up women as well as by little girls. The former, however, now-a-days perform the dance fairly late at night in seclusion and away from the gaze of men. No such restriction exists in the case of girls.

Early in the morning on the *Indra Dwādashi* day (12th day of the moon), on which Indra is worshipped, little girls of the village gather together for the purpose of collecting sand from a neighbouring spot. This is generally done from a little rivulet near the village. The usual practice in western Bengal is for the girls of two adjoining villages to indulge in a competition as to which party can first carry away the sand. In olden days young men of two adjoining villages also used to take part in the competition, which was in the nature of a physical contest. There is much mutual repartee and exchange of challenges between the two parties of girls. Then they engage in a physical contest until the members of one party push the others back and take as much sand as they can in their hands, the vanquished party collecting their sand after the victorious party has left the scene. Returning to the village the girls mix the sand with clay from the plinths of the huts and from the place of Indra-worship, and each girl places a quantity of earth thus prepared in an earthen plate or *sarā*. On each plate of earth the girls scatter seeds of five varieties of grain (*pancha shasya*), consisting of oats, pulses, etc., and then put a layer of sand over it. From this the *Brata* is sometimes called *Shaspātār Brata* (from *shasya pātār*, i.e., laying seeds of grain) or the *Brata* of growing grains. For the next seven days the girls take a dip early every morning in the village pond and from there bring water and sprinkle it over the seed-beds in the earthen *sarās*. The girls then dance and sing round and round the earthen *sarās* (fig. 33). During intervals of the dance there is an exchange of repartee and recitation of improvised

verses addressed to the spirit of *Bhānjo*. These generally relate to subjects of topical interest and are of a humorous nature. A few examples are given below :

How shall I describe the skill of Queen Bhānjo in cooking !
 In one cup of *dal* she puts $2\frac{1}{2}$ chataks of salt !
 She puts turmeric powder in rice, hot spices in milk
 pudding !

The deity is thus regarded as one of the family, who can be twitted with impunity. But there is also a more serious strain underlying the *Brata* which is represented in the blessings which are asked for, as the following verses which are recited during *Bhāduli Brata* will show :

All the various rivers come and flow in one junction.
 The *Bhāduli Thākurāni* will remove all our sufferings.
 She will give blessings and happiness for three generations
 of our people.

River, River, where dost Thou go ?
 Give us news of our fathers and brothers.

O Crow, O Crane, who gives you food ?
 My father and brother have gone to trade.
 Have you seen their boat ?

Sparrow, Sparrow, keep a look-out,
 When you see my father and brother
 Accost them with a smile.

Raft, Raft, remain in the sea,
 Keep my father and brother in mind•

Ocean, Ocean, I greet Thee, I make treaty with Thee.
 My father, brother and husband have gone to trade.
 May they come back today,
 May mother *Bhāduli* look after their welfare !

Married women recite such verses as the following

River, River, where dost 'Thou go ?
 Give me news of my husband and father-in-law.

Ocean, Ocean, I salute thee,
 I make treaty with thee :
 My brother has gone to trade, my father has gone to trade,
 My husband has gone to trade.
 They will come back today.
 May they come with their boats full of gold !
 May Mother *Bhāduli* preserve them against danger !

(3) *The Māgh Mandal Brata*

Bratas which are held in the month of *Māgh* (January-February) are called *Māgh Mandal Bratas* and are generally performed by unmarried girls. Here the Sun and Spring are the heroes of the poetic compositions and dramas.

Two typical songs and verses of the *Māgh Mandal Bratas* are given below :

I make obeisance to the moon with sandal paste, to the Sun with a salutation.

Let the world be washed away in a deluge—
 I perform the *Bratas* sitting on an immovable throne.

May my father be a king, with my brother as a subject !
 May I myself be versed in all the arts and my mother a queen

My plate be full of rice and my jar full of water !
 May I be like a queen unwidowed, in every life !

The principal folk drama enacted by girls on the occasion of the *Māgh Mandal Brata* is the traditional drama composed by women themselves on the subject of the love of the Sun for the young Moon. The following translation of the opening verse of this drama made by Dr. Aṅganindra Nath Tagore will convey the spirit of cosmic play-acting in the *Māgh Mandal Bratas* :

Young Moon, daughter of Spring has untied her tresses, and the Sun goes seeking her through many lands. Spring's daughter, the Young Moon, has unfolded her silver robe and the Sun peeps into many houses seeking her. The slender Moon, the Spring's lovely maiden, is wearing the silver anklet, seeing which the Sun seeks her union in marriage.

(4) *The Toshla Brata or Tunsh-Tushli Brata*

This *Brata*, performed in the month of Pous (December-January), symbolizes the enriching of the soil with manure. The spirit of Manure is represented by making little round balls of paddy husks mixed with cow-dung. A number of earthen *sarās* (saucers) are arranged in a row. A brinjal leaf is placed on each *sarā* and on the brinjal leaf is placed a number of manure balls described above.

Each girl performing the *Bratas* takes a *sarā* of manure balls in her hand. The girls then march in procession to the fields and there perform the *Brata* to the accompaniment of dancing and recitation of verses. A typical verse ends with the following wish :

May I build my house in a city !
 May I go abroad and die in the sea !
 May I be reborn in a good family !
 From thee I ask for this *bar*¹ !
 May I keep a happy home with husband and
 children !

¹ Boon.

(5) *The Ghat Olāno Brata Dance*

The *Ghat Olāno* (literally Pot-placing) dances performed by respectable women of Hindu families in the village of Rajghat in the district of Jessore, were discovered by me in the year 1932. The village Rajghat is situated on the banks of the river Bhairab. In a place called Buna not far from the village is an ancient temple to the Goddess Sitala (the Goddess who is believed to avert small-pox). Under a spreading banyan tree close to the temple is a place known as *Shitala-Talā*, or the place of *Shitala*. Hindu women of all ages and castes, high and low, from about 60 or 70 villages of the area go to offer *pujā* to the Goddess at this spot. The women make *mānat* or vows of offering *pujā* to the Goddess in return for prayers answered in respect of barrenness removed, small-pox averted or other desires achieved.

Three, five or seven days before the day fixed for the *pujā*, the lady who has taken the vow arranges to hold the *adhibās* ceremony in her house. She herself observes a fast on that day. All the adult women of the village are invited on that occasion. After the invited women have assembled, they march in procession to the *ghāt* of the river or the tank, as the case may be, to the accompaniment of the 'ulu' cry (traditional community cry practised by Hindu women of all classes in Bengal on all ceremonial occasions). The lady who has taken the vow places a brass pot over a *kulā* (a winnowing tray of bamboo) and takes a full dip in the water, head and all, holding the *kulā* with the pot on it on her head. She then carries the *kulā* and the pot on her head and marches home in procession with all the other women. On reaching home she places the consecrated pot on an appointed place in her house. The invited women keep vigil all night in that cottage. They while away the night by singing community songs without any instrumental accompaniment. The *Bandanā* or greeting song is first sung. This song begins as follows :

First I make obeisance to the feet of my holy *guru*,
 O my precious jewel, come thou to this gathering.
 Next I invoke the feet of Srihari (Krishna) etc.

Then follow other songs, two of which are recorded below :

A lotus seat (we offer), a lotus mat and a lotus throne,
 Satya Narāyana (the true God) takes his birth in a
 lotus leaf!

Why shakes the pot, O Goddess, why moves the seat ?
 Lo, here comes mother Sitalā unto this gathering.

Through rain, storm and darkness
 Goes Gopal (Krishna) to the house of Nanda.

Had she been thine own mother (O Krishna)
 Thy hunger she would allay with butter.

Come to my arms, O Krishna dear,
 Let me take thee unto my lap
 And cool my seared heart.

Had she been thine own mother
 She would dust thy dear body and take
 thee into her arms.

Come to my arms, O Krishna dear.
 Had she been thine own mother
 She would have placed the flute
 in thy hands.

For several days after this ceremony, the women and girls go in procession with the consecrated *kulā* from house to house, begging for gifts of rice or cash to collect funds for performing the contemplated *pūjā* in a befitting manner. As the procession enters each house in the village the lady of the house spreads out an *āsan* or ceremonial seat of cloth in her courtyard.

After the *kulā* with the sacred pot on it has been placed on this *āsan* (hence the name 'pot-placing' dance), the processionists perform dances around it to the accompaniment of the *dhāk* played by a man of the *Rishi* or traditional drummer caste. Thus the processionists dance in each house in turn in several

villages in the neighbourhood for three, five or seven days as the case may be, after which they march to the shrine of the goddess to offer the promised *pujā*.

Although performed in connection with a religious ceremony, the dances are not merely ritualistic in character. Many of the dances are undoubtedly of ritualistic origin. But to these have been added other dances which give simple and spontaneous expression to the joy of life. Some of them frankly profess to give mimetic representations of scenes and incidents of village life and are richly impregnated with humour.

The ritualistic portion of the *Ghat Olāno* dances falls into three main sections :

- 1 *Bandanā*.
- 2 *Arunā*.
- 3 *Bāyenā*.

1. The *Bandanā* or Adoration dance is performed in several sub-sections.

- (a) The body is bent forward from the waist and both hands are held in front with the fingers pointed downwards and the palms touching the ground. The hands are then gradually raised upwards and the fingers are tremulously shaken until the body is raised to a standing posture (fig. 34).
- (b) The body is bent forward and the tips of the thumb and the index finger are joined together, and with the other fingers spread out *durbā* grass or *bel* leaves are held between the thumb and the index finger. In this position the hands are turned round and round from the wrist while the dancers move in a circle in a clockwise fashion with gliding feet.
- (c) The body and the fingers are held in the same position as above. Both hands are shaken simultaneously once towards the right and once towards the left.
- (d) The body is bent forward and the feet are moved in gliding steps in an anti-clockwise direction. The right hand is raised gradually above the head in an

attitude of pouring something on the head. The same movements of the hands are then transposed while the feet glide in an anti-clockwise direction. This brings the *Bandanā* dance to a close and the basic movement is performed with gliding steps in an anti-clockwise fashion. The body is bent forward from the waist, both hands with palms upwards, fingers of the left hand being placed on those of the right hand and the two hands thus joined together are moved from the wrists (fig. 35). Before the basic movement comes to a close the palms are simultaneously turned downwards smartly, once to the right and once to the left.

2. The *Arunā* dance consists of three sub-sections : (a) *Archanā* (Invocation), (b) *Anjali* (Oblation) and (c) *Pranām* (Salutation).

- (a) The body is bent forward from the waist, the feet gliding from right to left, and the hands, held forward with palms turned downwards, make wavy motions.
- (b) The body remains the same as above. The feet move in gliding movements from left to right. The palms are first held downwards and then gradually raised with a turning movement of the wrist and both are moved forward several times in an attitude of offering oblations. The feet are moved in shuffling movements from left to right.
- (c) The body is held straight and the head is slightly bent forward. The left foot is advanced with the left heel striking the ground, and simultaneously the left hand is raised to the forehead. The same movement is repeated with the right foot and the right hand. At the same time the dancers make a right-about turn to the beat of the drum. After a full round has been made both hands are placed at the waist and another complete round is made with gliding steps, but this time a left-about turn is made with the body slightly bent forward.

3. In the *Bāyenā* dance, the thumb and index finger are joined together, the other fingers being spread out. First the left hand is extended forward and the right hand is held near the breast (fig. 36). Both hands are then moved in waves while a complete turn is made with sliding steps, the waist being moved from side to side. Similar movements are then performed with the hands transposed and with the head inclined towards the left. A variation of the dance is performed with the hands held upward above the head in a slanting position instead of in front of the body (fig. 37).

The above completes the ritualistic portion of the dance which is followed by other dances which are not ritualistic in character and are in the nature of play-acting representing various village activities such as plum plucking, plum eating, Khūdirām's headache, Bāirāgi calling, tobacco burning, paddy husking, etc. All these dances are in the nature of dumb shows with empty hands, the operations being indicated in the name of each dance while the body is kept lightly bent forward from the waist.

(a) *The Kuchiā Morā (Body-twisting) dance*

The clenched right hand is held touching the chin. The chin is slightly tilted upward while the left hand is held at the waist. In this position the whole body from the waist upward is gradually twisted, with jerks synchronizing with the notes of the drum, and gradually revolved from left to right. The feet keep time to the beat of the drum. The same movements are repeated several times with the hands transposed. The dance is at first performed with slow movements but gradually the pace is quickened. It is entirely in the nature of an acrobatic dance affording exercise to the abdomen.

(b) *The Pinpre-mārā (Ant-killing) dance*

The first movement is a rise from the kneeling position to a standing one. The dancers move their bodies in jerks at each

beat of the drum, both hands are held near the ground with the fists clenched. The wrists are shaken round and round as the body goes up until an erect position is reached and then both hands are suddenly thrown backwards with the palms extended (fig. 38). This movement is repeated, the hands being thrown alternately over either shoulder.

(c) *The Jor (pair) dance*

Dancers standing in pairs facing each other, hold hands, the fingers being interlaced (fig. 39). The outer arms are at first held upward and the inner arms downward. In this position the dancers move in a series of hops on both legs towards the centre. After moving as much towards the centre as possible they raise the inner arms upward and lower the outer arms downward and move away with hopping movements along the circumference of the circle. This is repeated several times.

(d) *The Paddy-husking dance*

The paddy-husking dance is danced by girls in pairs and consists of simulating the movements of working the *dhenki* (wooden husking pedal), one girl standing with her hands raised as if supporting herself from a string hanging from the thatched roof of a cottage and alternately stepping with her right leg on the free end of the husking pedal and then stepping back from it on the left while the other girl sits in front of her and acts the part of turning over and over the paddy in the pestle into which the hammer from the other end of the husking pedal falls, with a seesaw movement corresponding to the step of the first girl.

The song which the girls sing while performing this dance may be translated as follows :

Come, companions, let us stand in paddy husking :

The *dhenki* rises and says, 'I am the grandson of *Nārada*,

The householders husk paddy and kick me on my back.'

The Megharani (Rain-Calling) Dance

The *Meghārāni* dance is a pretty dance performed by women and girls in connexion with *Brata* in the months of *Baisākh* and *Jyaistha*, just before the rainy season, invoking the rain.

The end of the *sāri* is held with both hands above the head in a pretty manner (fig. 40) and the feet are moved along the ground as the dancers move in an anti-clockwise direction with the slide and shuffle steps of the *Brata* dance to the accompaniment of the following song :

O *Meghārāni* (Cloud Queen), wash your hands and feet and drop the water on the earth !
 In the *cheena* fields let there be shallow water;
 In the paddy fields let there be water up to the waist;
 But under the banana clumps let it be up to the neck.
 Come, come down, with a 'gagap' sound !

While singing the last line, the dancers suddenly drop into a half squat and make a right-about turn and spring up again erect as the turn is finished.

The Circular Jhumur

Dances with *Brata* step are performed by women as well as little girls of working classes not as ceremonial *Brata* dances but merely as social pastimes, and songs accompanying these dances are improvised by the dancers themselves on the spur of the moment from topical subjects. These dances may be described as Circular *Jhumur* dances (fig. 41). Here is an example of the songs improvised by the girls of the *Bāuri* caste to accompany the Circular *Jhumur* dance :

Oh what a misfortune to us these *bijli bātis* (Electric lights)
 Oh my *punkhā-pulling* ! my *punkhā-pulling* ! it is gone for ever !
 Oh what a terrible nuisance this *bijli bāti* is !

Another song runs as follows :

Oh this *kaler gāri* ! (railway train)
 Oh, what a nuisance it is ! Oh what a nuisance it is !
 Oh, the people of our country are going away in them to foreign lands !
 Oh this *kaler gāri*, what a nuisance it is !

These songs represent the pathetic resentment of the working classes who have lost their means of livelihood as a result of the introduction of mechanical contrivances such as electric fans and railway trains.

CHAPTER V

SOCIAL CEREMONY AND WELL-WISHING MOTIVE

• Wedding Dances

WEDDING CEREMONIES among Hindus in Bengal, while having a nucleus of priestly ceremonies, for example the *sampradānas* (giving away), consist mainly of a series of rituals known as *stri-Achāra* (women's rituals) performed by the women of the family and of the village independently of priests. These rituals last nearly a fortnight and are accompanied by songs and dances. The dances performed during a wedding ceremony are always accompanied by songs sung to the rhythm of the *dhol* played by a traditional male *dhol* player. According to traditional practice there is no reference in the songs to the name of a particular bridegroom or bride. The ceremonies are regarded as symbols of the marriage of Rāma and Sita or Shiva and Umā. The songs are all composed by women themselves and the tunes are also set by them.

The wedding dance steps are similar to those of the *Brata* dance and are performed with the glide and shuffle steps, but *Dhāmṭāil* dances are also performed during wedding ceremonies.

Wedding dances which are still in vogue in certain villages of Faridpur District will now be described :

(a) *Gangā Baran Dance*, (b) *Ashta Sakhi Dance* and (c) *Sājāno Dance*

The day before the wedding day, the women march in a procession to the tank and fill their pots with water, and a ritual is performed in honour of the Deity *Gangā* (the river goddess) : hence the ceremony is called *Gangā Baran*. After placing the *Baran* tray on the *sohāg hāri* or water-pot filled with holy water, the women dance on the bank of the tank in a circle round the water-pot with gliding and shuffling steps to the accompaniment of the notes of the *dhol* played by the village drummer. One hand is stretched to its full length while the other is brought in front of the body and put away

alternately. The dance is accompanied by appropriate songs. After the *Gangā Baran* ceremony the women return home, and before the bridegroom is given the send-off from his house on his journey to the bride's, the women perform the *Ashta Sakhi* dance (the dance of the eight companions) and the *Sājāno* (dressing) dance to the accompaniment of a song which begins as follows :

Come, O sisters, let us go to Ajodhya and bedeck Rāma.
 We shall bedeck him with turmeric,
 We shall bedeck him with silk cloth,
 We shall bedeck him with sandal paste,
 We shall bedeck him with garlands,
 We shall bedeck him with golden *nupurs*¹,
 We shall bedeck him with a crown and
 We shall bedeck him with a flute.

The *Sājāno* dance consists of various appropriate movements suggestive of the themes sung e.g., placing a crown on the head and playing on a flute (fig. 42).

(d) *The Dhol Baran or Mādal Pujā Dance*

In the bride's house one of the ceremonies performed before the wedding day is the *mādal pujā* or *dhol baran* or the worship of the *dhol* or *mādal*. The *dhol*, though played by men of the traditional drummer caste of the poorer classes, is held in high spiritual esteem as typifying the spirit of divine rhythm. The *dhol baran* or *mādal pujā* festival takes place even among Brahmin families in the form of ceremonial dances called the *Mādal Pujā* dance or *Dhol Baran* (drum-worship) dance (fig. 42). The drummer holds the drum in front of him in a vertical position, and the lady of the house holding the consecrated *kulā* (winnowing tray) full of paddy dances and makes offerings of the paddy on the drum by slightly tilting the winnowing tray and dropping the paddy on the drum as she dances in front of it. The drummer pours the paddy back on the tray, and the lady with the tray, while still dancing, pours the paddy back on the drum. In this way the paddy is poured and re-

1. Bells.

poured several times, after which the tray is placed on the ground. The lady who performs the dance then sits on the tray and the other women dance round her with sliding movements of their feet while making with their hands movements simulating the picking up of grains of paddy dropped on the floor and placing them back on the tray (fig. 44).

(e) *Dhupi Dance*

- During the wedding ceremony the women perform a dance called the *Dhupi* while the bride makes the traditional seven turns round the bridegroom. The dance is accompanied by the following song :

In the *nikunja*² forest, the holy couple are meeting in union,
Surrounded by all the *sakhis*³

Radha and Krishna sit on the same seat.

They unite together as the lightning unites with the
dark cloud.

On the day after the wedding, the women dance, singing the following song :

O Rāma's mother, what dost thou do sitting down ?

Thy Rāma bathes sitting with his face to the East :

Bring the carpenter's stool and place it at the door

So that your Rāma may sit on it facing the East

Bring turmeric in the pot and mix it with musk and rub
it on your Rāma's body;

Bring the water of the Jamunā in a jar and pour it over
your Rāma.

While the dance is performed the feet move in gliding steps, and the two hands alternately touch the waist and the forehead.

Sometimes the song is also sung on the day before the wedding at the ceremony of bathing the bridegroom.

(f) *Phul Shajyā Dance*

On the second day after the wedding, the *Phul Shajyā* (flower-bed) dance takes place. In this dance the end of the *sāri* is

²Leafy.

³Female attendants.

held with both hands above the head and the feet are moved with gliding steps (fig. 45).

(g) *Pranām Dance*

On the day following the wedding, when the bride leaves her father's house for that of the bridegroom, the women perform the *Pranām* (salutation) dance before the couple. Here each foot is alternately raised from the ground and each hand is raised alternately to the forehead with the back of the palm touching the forehead.

(h) *Dwirāgaman Dances*

Several dances are performed on the occasion of the *Dwirāgaman*, when the child bride becomes a woman and comes from her father's house to live with her husband.

Dances performed on this occasion are in the nature of play-acting, representing common village activities such as paddy sowing, paddy reaping, paddy weeding, paddy threshing, cattle selling, or fortune telling, and contain a predominating note of humour in place of the earnestness which characterized the dances before and during the wedding. In all these dances, the movements are exactly similar to those in the *Brata* dances, the feet being moved with the glide and shuffle step, the knees kept slightly bent, and the body bent forward while the hands indicate mimetically the theme of each particular dance. Some of the dances, e.g. those of cattle selling, and fortune telling, are not mimetic but are accompanied by appropriate dialogue.

In olden times dancing was considered an essential accomplishment of the bride, and after the bride had come to the bridegroom's house she had to give an exhibition of her dancing abilities before the assembled women. For this purpose, it was customary for the bride to wear *ghungurparā mal*, or anklets with tinkling bells. No excuse was considered adequate for a bride who could not dance well, whence the well known Bengali proverb : 'When she does not know to dance, she says the courtyard is undressed.'

CHAPTER VI

JOYOUS SELF-UNION MOTIVE

The Baul Dance

THE BAUL SONG and dance may be found in all parts of Bengal. The singing and dancing are performed either solo (fig. 46) or in groups (figs. 47, 48, 50) to the *anandalahari* (popularly known as the *gābgubāgub*) and *ektārā* and in some cases, the *karatāli* (cymbals) and the *dubki* (small hand-drum) as well.

The dress of the *Bāul* is generally a plain long sewn cloak called *ālkhallā* reaching below the knees, but in some cases no special dress is worn.

Sometimes ordinary villagers dress up as *Bāul* on festive occasions and perform the dance in groups with appropriate instruments (fig. 49). In such group *Bāul* dances there is one leader who leads the song and the rest of the group sing the burden in chorus.

Bāul dancing and singing are not associated with any particular occasion or festivity, and are performed as an act of joyous spiritual self-expression on the part of the *Bāul*, and also as an act of spiritual education of the community.

The word '*Bāul*' means 'mad'¹, i.e. mad with love for the Infinite Self. The songs invariably preach the unreality of mundane existence and their message is that of religious tolerance and universal brotherhood. *Bāul* songs are often sung with the singer seated, without any dance accompaniment.

Bāuls are a sect of people with a distinctive mystic ideology of their own. They spurn the things of the world and live on the barest necessities of life. They observe no caste system. They do not worship any image, and never enter any temple. Each *Bāul* considers his own body to be the one sacred and

1. See Rabindra Nath Tagore's *Religion of Man*, Appendix I.

real temple : he knows that therein dwells his beloved one, the Supreme Spirit of the universe which is the same as his own higher self. The consciousness of this simultaneous dwelling of his own self and the Divine Self within his own body fills the *Bāul* with a never-ending quest after his beloved. The quest can never end because the Beloved, although felt to be dwelling in the same body as the seeker's, ever eludes complete union, and the intoxication of this perpetual search and pursuit of the Beloved, who is always felt to be very very near but just outside reach, fills the *Bāul* with a never-ending madness. The subject of the songs composed and sung by *Bāuls*, whether with or without the dance, is called *deha-tattwa* (the philosophy of the body).

Extracts from a typical *Bāul* song are given below :

The man within my mind keeps a-craving and I see him
not, I see him not!

And for lack of union with the man within my mind
Tears flow from my eyes day and night.

O could I but find the man within my mind

I would enshrine him in my heart and wash his feet with
the water of my eyes,

And with all the nectarous honey of my love I would
feed him.

It is for finding the man within his mind that Shiva has
forsaken all worldly things and roams about in burning-
grounds!

The only form of worship which the *Bāul* recognizes is the simple, spontaneous and apparently unsophisticated song and dance which he believes can alone help to effect the union between the Self and the Non-Self.

The most striking feature of the *Bāul* dance and of the tune of the *Bāul* song is a spirit of joyous self-forgetfulness and fluidity of rhythmic movement which is in complete accord with the sentiments of the songs. The *Bāul* tune with its ripples of rise and fall resembles the surface of a large tank or lake wrinkled by the spring breeze.

The basic movement in the *Bāul* dance consists in standing with the whole weight of the body alternately on each leg. The other foot is then brought up to the one on which the weight is resting, but without its being placed flat on the ground. Both knees are slightly bent and the foot which was drawn up is moved slightly sideways after which the weight is transferred on it. The movement is then repeated with the other leg. Sometimes a hop is made with the left leg while the right leg is thrown forward with a kick. The hands are engaged in playing on a musical instrument, often only one hand but sometimes both. Usually one hand is held near the waist, while the other is held fairly high up above the head.

The *Bāul* dance may be regarded as the Dance of Spiritual Love and Spiritual Union.

The Murshidi Song and Dance

Closely related to *Bāul* song and dance are the *Murshidi* songs composed by Muslim *fakirs* and recluses, and the simple dance movements with which they are sometimes sung by rural Muslim singers while they play on a simple *sārendā* or *ektārā*. The word '*Murshid*' means a spiritual *guru* or preceptor; the Infinite spirit within man being also often referred to as such in the *Murshidi* song. In sentiment *Murshidi* songs are indistinguishable from *Bāul* songs, for the *Sufi* doctrine which they embody is almost identical with the *Bāul* doctrine and the *Murshidi* songs are often composed as much on the Radha-Krishna theme as on the Islamic *Sufi* philosophy, the broad human and national outlook of Muslim composers of the *Murshidi* songs placing them above petty squabbles over the vehicle of expression as distinguished from the spirit of the song itself. Thus the *Murshidi* song is also set to *Bāul* tunes.

The dance step accompanying the *Murshidi* song is the simple *Bāul* step and is often nothing more than a slow rhythmic walk with slight bending of the knees at each beat of time. The dance is not a necessary accompaniment of *Murshidi* songs, which are as often, or rather quite frequently, sung while seated.

Translations of two typical *Murshidī* songs are given below :

Without sight of my beloved my life is in vain !
 With the four elements of water, fire, earth and air
 my beloved charmer has built the house
 Wherein he resides.
 Residing though we both do in the same house,
 I search for him, but find him not.
 And the yearning for sight of him has turned me mad.

Thou art I and I am thou : this I have come to know
 in my mind;
 Or else why does the tree, which grows out of the seed,
 become transformed into the seed again ?
 The One divides itself into two for the sake of love,
 And from that time onward the lover's heart pines
 eternally for the beloved.

CHAPTER VII

SPIRITUAL SUPPLICATION AND THE SELF-PURIFICATION MOTIVE

The Kirtan Dance

THE KIRTAN DANCE (fig. 51) is the most widely practised of all folk dances in Bengal and is in vogue among Hindus in the country districts. It is of great antiquity, being associated with the worship of Vishnu; but it was the great religious leader Chaitanya who gave it its present national character. The word '*Kirtan*' signifies 'utterance' or 'acclamation', the idea being that the singers acclaim the greatness of God while sending forth to Him the supplications of their souls. Perhaps the most striking feature about the *Kirtan* is its democratic character. People of a whole village, young and old, rich and poor, zamindar and tenant, freely join in it, without any distinction of caste or rank. The dance is performed to the accompaniment of the *khol* and *mridanga* (the Vaishnava drums) while the dancers move in a circle. Sometimes the *Kirtan* dance and song are performed in a procession through the village. This is called *Nagar-Kirtan*.

Kirtan is *par excellence* the national dance of the Hindus of rural Bengal, as the normal expression of their spiritual life and its distinguishing characteristics are its completely natural, spontaneous and unsophisticated character. The playing on the *mridanga* is often of a vigorous type. The *mridanga* players who keep to the middle of the ring not only play on their instruments but at the same time perform dances with vigorous leaps. The tunes range from very simple ones to extremely complicated melodies. At intervals the dance stops and the leader moves up and down and explains in recitative speech the deeper implications of the songs to the accompaniment of the simple dance movements performed to the beat of the *mridanga*.

The motive of the *Kīrtan* dance is a combination of two elements of aspiration the transformation of life and self-purification. With these two objects the movements are made in an attitude of supplication to the Infinite Spirit, who is addressed as *Hari*. The root meaning of *Hari* is one who dispels the difficulties in the way of the Spiritual Life. The dominant feature of the dance is the inherently unsophisticated nature of the movements. The leading motif is expressed by a movement of the hands and arms, which are thrown upwards in a simple plastic movement in an attitude of aspiration or supplication. There is a complete absence of any studied movement, and the basic movements of the feet are purely in the nature of ordinary steps in a walk. From this basic movement, the chief variation consists in taking two, three or four steps towards the centre almost in a left-about turn and then the same number of steps away from the centre in an almost right-about turn. All these minor movements are made while keeping up the major movement in a circle in an anti-clockwise direction.

The very simplicity and sincerity of the dance movements and the tunes, impart to the *Kīrtan* dances and songs a profoundly spiritual character which is unequalled or unsurpassed by any other more complicated or sophisticated.

The words of the songs as well as their tunes are in complete harmony with the movements. The most important element is the structure of the rhythmic notes played on the *mridanga*, which supplies the inspiration to the whole dance as well as the background of the various structural variations of the dance and song which arise from the basic movements.

The ensemble of the song and dance and the rhythmic notes of the *mridanga* constitute a unified stream, the movements of which resemble the majestic flow of a Bengal river. The energetic circular and leaping movements of the players on the *mridanga* constitute, as it were the eddies in the centre of the stream. The ordinary movement of the *Kīrtan* tune is like the slow, deep and restful movement of the current of a Bengal river in autumn; but when the song

reaches its climax the movements are correspondingly quickened.

The villagers are almost invariably all practical field workers and artisans who work hard in the field, or at the forge or loom during the day. At the end of the day's hard work an integration is established with the Life Divine and with co-villagers through pure song, and the dances represent the yearning for the higher life of the Spirit and for the reconciliation of a life of non-attachment with the performance of worldly duties. They give an opportunity to everyone to acquire a basic training in art and self-discipline and in developing a capacity for self-expression, and also help in creating an atmosphere of equality, unity and brotherhood. They also form a natural medium for physical culture for every one.

The *Kirtan* dance is inherently democratic in more senses than one. First, by virtue of the simplicity of its structure and the spirit of the dance and songs which enable every villager, however illiterate, to participate in them; secondly by the direct appeal of the songs to the Infinite Spirit without intervention of any priesthood or any ceremonial or ritual; thirdly by the fact that all classes in the village from the high castes, landlords and Brahmins, down to such castes at the bottom of the Hindu hierarchy as the Namasudras and Chandālas, join in the dance on an absolutely equal footing; and fourthly, by the fact that as the dance proceeds towards the climax, members participating in the dance, whether belonging to the upper or lower classes, one by one leave the circle and prostrate themselves (with bare bodies and wearing only the *dhoti* round the waist and hips) in the middle of the dance circle and deliberately roll on the ground from one side of the circle to the other so as to cover themselves with the dust of the feet of the combined group of dancers, to touch their feet, and at the same time to integrate themselves with Mother Earth. This is not done in a trance or delirium but as an entirely rational process and as a deliberate act of self-purification and self-enlargement. After rolling up and down several times each dancer rejoins the circle and proceeds with the dance.

All the above elements combine to make the *Kirtan* song and dance a simple and sincere ritual of the integration of the Individual with the Infinite as well as members of the Hindu village community.

In the *Kirtan* song human life is usually conceived as a journey across a river or ocean, which has to be crossed to reach the other side in the journey of Life. The human soul is conceived as attempting to cross this river either by swimming or by a boat. The passions and difficulties, trials and tribulations of life are conceived as the storms and stresses of the weather, and the dangers of the waters. These prevent a successful crossing by corrupting and drowning the soul, and so preventing its realization of Infinite Beauty and Infinite Harmony and Perfection, which is Hari or Krishna. The ideal of Infinite Perfection and Infinite Harmony (or Hari) is held up to save the traveller (the swimmer or boatman) on the river or ocean from drowning, and to assist in reaching the other bank (or Infinite Perfection and Infinite Harmony) successfully without mishap.

Translations of two typical *Kirtan* song are given below :

O merciful Hari,
 I am drowning, I who have taken refuge at Thine auspicious feet.
 Do Thou make Thine appearance before me !
 Dangerous is the crossing of the river of life,
 Frail is my bark and violent blows the storm :
 Do thou become its helmsman, O Hari !
 For Thou bearest the name of the Saviour of the fallen;
 Fulfil Thy appellation of the Saviour of the fallen.
 The passions of desire, anger, greed, ignorance, pride
 and envy—
 These six bind me in a heavy snare
 And prevent my mind and soul from pursuing the path
 of truth and sincerity;
 By virtue of the companionship of the forces of evil,
 My mind has become like a black serpent :

So do Thou make Thine appearance before me,
O my Deliverer, O my Saviour !

The Infinite Soul, or Krishna, is also conceived as the inner consciousness of self as in this song :

O my mind, thou hast not understood the power of the nectar of Krishna's name.

Seek the company, O my mind, of the *guru* in the form of consciousness.

Through the influence of companionship, even copper changes its colour and becomes transformed into gold. So seek thou wisdom from the inner consciousness and sit at the sacred feet of the *guru*.

Thy wife, sons and friends will not accompany thee.

Make the name of Hari thine only pursuit in the universe and stray not into evil paths, O my mind !

I have described the *Kirtan* as it is practised in its simplest and most unsophisticated forms by the ordinary Hindu villagers. Many sophisticated forms of *Kirtan* tunes have been evolved out of this simple base. They are generally either sung while seated, or in a play-acting manner, but not to the simple and spontaneous accompaniment of dance as described here.

CHAPTER VIII

THE DIDACTIC MOTIVE

Ballad Dances

BALLAD DANCES are a special feature of rural Bengal. They are performed to the singing of ballads relating to such subjects as stories from the *Rāmāyana* or *Māhābhārata*, or *Padmaṣurān*, Radha-Krishna stories, as well as *Satya Pīr* and *Manik Pīr* ballads. A group of villagers dressed in *dhoti* perform the dancing and singing. There is a leader who leads the song, which is generally known as *pātā gān*, i.e. a story sung in *pātās* or instalments, while the group of dancers sing the chorus and move in the middle of the arena in a circle. The audience may consist of the entire population of the village assembled to witness the performance and hear the ballads. The movements are very simple. It is only the leader of the dance who gesticulates with his hands while reciting or singing the main theme of the story. The ordinary dancers forming the group merely move round and round in simple steps without any gesticulations of the hands. The leader of the song always has in his hand a *chāmara* (fly-whisk) which he brandishes as he dances and sings. The instrument accompanying the song and dance is always a *khol* or *mridanga* as in the *Kīrtan* dance. The four principal forms of ballad dances practised in Bengal are the *Satya Pīr* dance (fig. 54), the *Satya Nārāyana* dance, the *Padmāsurān* dance (fig. 53) and the *Rāmāyānā* dance (fig. 52).

(1) *Satya Pīr*, *Satya Nārāyana*

The *Satya Pīr* cult represents an attempt on the part of the Muslims of rural Bengal to make a synthesis of the Hindu and Muslim religions, while the *Satya Nārāyana* cult represents an attempt on the part of the Hindus of rural Bengal to make a similar synthesis. The special distinguishing feature of *Satya*

Pir and *Satya Nārāyana* dances is that the dancers in any one group belong to both the Hindu and Muslim communities. The leader of the dance in the *Satya Pir* dances is a Muslim and in the other a Hindu. In the *Satya Nārāyana* dance the ballads are taken from the epic Rāmāyānā. In the *Satya Pir* dances the ballads relate to the doings of Muslim *Pirs* recorded in the popular Bengal ballads composed by rural Muslim poets. The *Satya Pir* ballads seek to glorify the Muslim *Pirs* (saints) but emphasize a broad spirit of tolerance for the Hindu cult, while in the *Satya Nārāyana* ballads the subjects relate mainly to the Hindu religion but are leavened by a broad spirit of tolerance for Muslim culture. *Satya Pir* and *Satya Nārāyana* are often identified in the ballads as one and the same deity.

(2) *Padmaṣurān Dance*

The *Padmaṣurān* ballads relate to the story of Chānd Sadāgar and the punishment meted out to him for not performing the worship of the Snake-Goddess, *Manasa*.

(3) *The Rāmāyana Dance*

In the *Rāmāyana* dance (fig. 52) the principal dancer often makes vigorous, expressive, dramatic and rhythmic movements corresponding to the events described in the ballad while his companions sit and sing the refrain at intervals.

(4) *The Shloka Dance*

The *Shloka* dance is a form of ballad dance which is in vogue in eastern Bengal, particularly in the District of Faridpur. The leader sings the main verse of the ballad and the other dancers sing the chorus while dancing to the accompaniment of a *dhāk* (ritual drum) and a *kānshi* (fig. 55). This dance is open to all and is joined by people of all classes of Hindus. The steps are merely simple walking movements backward and forward and round and round with the knee slightly bent, while the drums are held up in a simple gesticulating attitude.

The subjects of the *Shlokas* (verses) have a wide range covering the entire religious literature of popular Hinduism and relate

particularly to *Pauranic* Hindu themes such as the *Krishna Līla*, and *Rām Līla*, and the *Siva Durgā Līla*.

(5) *Bolān Dance*

The *Bolān* dance is practised in the Birbhum District in the Labhpur area.

The word '*Bolān*' means 'recitation', and the dance derives its name from the fact that one of the dancers chants or recites the story or ballad from a writing which he holds in his hand. The dancers stand in two lines, joined at right angles forming an L (fig. 56). The instrument which accompanies the dance and song is the *mridanga*, and there are generally two players. One of them stands at the junction of the two arms of the L, while the other stands at the extremity of one of the arms. This formation appears to have derived from two groups of dancers joining together for the purpose of song and dance, each arm of the L constituting one group of dancers with its player. The dancers of one group have cymbals in their hands while those of the other group have their hands empty. The players in one group simultaneously make a sudden jump forward with extended arms before they take up the singing, after which they move forward slowly. As soon as they have finished singing, the men of the other party make a similar jump and repeat the song. In this way the dance wheels round and round. The two branches of the L^o move like the radii of a circle, the *mridanga* player at the junction of the two arms remaining in the centre. The distinguishing feature of the dance is that every dancer wears a flower wreath round his head and a flower wreath hanging from his neck. The songs relate to *Krishna Līla*, *Rāmāyana* and *Māhābhārata* stories. The compositions are often crude being the work of rustic dancers themselves, who generally belong to the poorest working classes. They always dress up in their best clothes on the occasion of the dances.

(6) *The Bānshi (Flute) Dance* .

The *Bānshi* (flute) dance is a form of ballad dance (fig. 57) which is prevalent among the working classes in western Bengal

particularly in the district of Birbhum. The dance is generally performed by two or three men who play on flute of a special T-shape. The flute is made in three pieces. Two pieces of bamboo, each about a foot in length and $1\frac{1}{4}$ inches in diameter and plated with round bands of brass, form the main horizontal shaped flute. To the middle of this is attached a mouth piece a little less than one inch in diameter and about a foot in length. The flute has a powerful wind. The dancers alternately sing verses from popular ballads, mostly from the *Rādhā-Krishna* legend, and repeat on the flute the tune which they have been singing. Two players on the *mādal* accompany the singing and dancing by the flute players, themselves dancing at the same time.

CHAPTER IX

THE COMMEMORATION MOTIVE

Jari Dance

THE NAME OF this dance is derived from the Persian word 'zār' which means 'lament' or 'groan', and 'zāri' 'weeping' or lamentation. Certain sections of Muslims in Bengal perform the Muharram festival in memory of the historic tragic battle which took place in the plains of Karbālā in Arabia. Besides the mourning itself, the celebrations during Muharram include singing, dancing, *lāthi* play and mock fights.

The dances are vigorous and songs as well as dances on the occasion of the Muharram are known as *Jāri* songs and dances. They are community songs and community dances dear to ordinary Muslim cultivators throughout Bengal and particularly in the eastern Bengal districts, and are entirely traditional in character, being handed down from generation to generation. Generally speaking, only adult males take part in traditional *Jāri* songs and dances. The forms of the song and dance differ considerably in different districts of Bengal; but perhaps the most interesting and artistic forms are found in the district of Mymensingh.

The dancers are usually dressed in *dhotis* or *loonghis* with a *kurtā* (short close-fitting shirt) worn on the upper part of the body. They wear either bells or brass bell anklets on the right legs, and a handkerchief, usually red in colour, is held in the right hand.

The songs and dances are led by a leader known by the name of *Boyāti*. The *Boyāti* does not wear bells or anklets. The dancers enter the arena in single file holding their handkerchiefs with both hands above their heads. They advance into the ring with a series of hops of the left leg and simultaneous short forward kicks of the right leg to the accompaniment of the jingle of the anklets worn on the right leg. This forms

the musical accompaniment of the dance through all its stages. As they advance in this manner, the leading dancer sings '*Bhālo, bhālo, bhālo re bhāi*' ('It is well, it is well, it is well, O brethren'). The other dancers sing in answer in chorus '*Ahā besh bhāi*' (Oh yes, brother, it is well indeed!) The leader then sings : 'We take the name of *Allāh*, Brethren.' The chorus sing in answer : 'We come dancing into the *sabhā* (gathering).' After forming a ring in the middle of the arena, the dancers move in the circle anti-clockwise performing the hop-and-kick movements described above (fig. 58). Presently, they wave their handkerchiefs round and round over their head to the accompaniment of the exchange of verses between the leading dancer and the other dancers.

A translation of a sample is given below :

Leading dancer

From sesame is produced oil and from milk *dahi* (curd).

Group singers

From paddy is produced *muri*, *chirā* and *khoi*.

Leading dancer

Grass and leaves are green in colour and the *shimul* flower is red.

Group singers

The ripe plantain is yellow and the hair of the head is black.

Before starting chanting the ballads the *Boyāti* sings a *bandanā* song, a song of greeting to the audience, which generally is sung by both Hindus and Muslims. A typical *bandanā* song is here translated :

Hindu and Moslem brethren are sitting in this gathering,
After making our *bandanā* (greeting) we shall sing the *Jāri*
dance song.

To the Musalmān brethren we make our *salām*
And to the Hindu brethren we send *pranāms*.
Build your house in the name of *Allāh*
And thatch it in the name of the Prophet.
In this house, brother, sleep at ease.

Moslems call him *Khodā*, and Hindus call him *Hari*;
 But when you come to ponder over it, brothers, you will find
 You can attain salvation through either name.

The *bandanā* over, the *Boyāti* who remains outside the ring, slightly bends forward and claps his hands, chants ballads describing the exploits of Muslim heroes, usually taken from traditional Muslim Bengali literature including the deeds of Imām Hussain in the field of Karḅālā. While the *Boyāti* chants the ballads, the dancers standing in a circle mark time with hops of their right feet to the sound of the anklets and wave the handkerchief in their right hand backward and forward in unison with the movements of the right leg. As soon as the *Boyāti*, who is dancing all the time outside the ring to the chant of the ballad, has come to a convenient stage of the story, he gives the signal for the chorus which is taken up by all the dancers (fig. 59). Singing the chorus, they dance in vigorous movements anti-clockwise round and round the circle (fig. 60). In this way the dance proceeds for hours together with alternate chanting of ballads by the *Boyāti* and singing in chorus by the dancers. While the dancers dance to the accompaniment of the chorus, the *Boyāti* merely walks up and down instead of dancing himself. When the *Boyāti* chants his ballads, the dancers do not stand idle but keep on marking time rhythmically with their right feet.

The scheme of the dance lends itself to an infinite variety of very simple movements in which the dancers, as they stand in the ring face inwards, make light hops with their left feet along with simultaneous kicks of the right. They repeat these movements as they proceed anti-clockwise round and round in the ring waving the red handkerchief in their right hands with sharp downward jerks. This is the basic step of the *Jarī* dance and forms, so to speak, the key step out of which at regular intervals rise other structural schemes, which again revert to the basic step before a fresh structural scheme is introduced. The most notable variation, which is introduced as soon as vigour is imparted to the dance, is the alternate turning in and turning out movement which each dancer makes while

keeping his place in the moving circle. This consists in taking a wide inward left turn with the right foot, while standing on the left foot as a pivot, followed by a short step with the left foot along the circle in an anti-clockwise direction, and then taking a wide right turn with the right foot away from the centre with the left foot as the pivot, after which another sharp step is taken with the left foot along the circle. In this fashion each dancer takes an inward lunge into the centre of the ring and then steps again sharply on the left leg and lunges back away from the centre; the right hand carrying the handkerchief follows the movement of the right leg. These movements are performed while the dancers progress anti-clockwise round and round the ring. Throughout the dance the dancers hold the ends of their *dhotis* in the left hand. At times the dancers while keeping up the ring formation pair themselves into several separate pairs of dancers. They sometimes stand *face to face* and step simultaneously forward and backward and then form fresh pairs with their neighbours advancing in the ring from the opposite direction (fig. 61). Sometimes they join hands in pairs formed alternately (fig. 62).

There are other complicated schemes of the dance arising at intervals out of the basic movement, all remarkable for the perfect symmetry and rhythmic vigour of the body and arm movements. Sometimes the dance is performed while the dancers remain in a half sitting position (fig. 63).

The *Jāri* dances are not confined to songs of mourning over the tragic historical events in the desert of Karbālā or the doings of Muslim heroes. The *Boyāti* often composes songs breathing ideals of religious harmony between Hindus and Muslims and these are sung in chorus by the entire party while dancing. Generally, the songs are in the *bhātīālī* tune, a melody affected by boatmen as they ply their oars on the broad rivers of east Bengal. Translations of two typical *Jāri* songs are given below :

*Come, O Hanif, come, bringing water from Medina,
Out of grief for my brother's death
I feel like committing suicide with a knife across my neck;*

*O come, brethren from Medina,
Let us join each other in embrace.*

*The branches of the tree droop with the weight of the flowers,
In the middle of the night the flower-bud blossoms in answer to
the touch of the dew,*

The bee buzzes lovingly in search of the honey.

The origin of the Jāri dance

The movements of the *Jāri* dance closely resemble those performed by leading oarsmen who stand in the prows of the racing boats in the annual boat races which take place at various religious festivals in eastern Bengal. The advance to the arena with handkerchiefs held above the heads to the accompaniment of hopping movements resembles the action of the leading boatmen in a boat race who hold their oars above their heads and perform hopping movements on the prow of the boat. The movement of the right hand at the time of the dance corresponds almost exactly to the movement performed with the oar by the right hand during the race. The *Jāri* dance is therefore functional in origin but is actually widely performed by men who are not boatmen.

The *Jāri* dance has a striking resemblance to the morris dance of European countries, which is also performed with sounding bells on the legs and with handkerchiefs in one or both hands. Some of the movements in the dances exhibit similarity but at the same time it is obvious that the origin of the *Jāri* and morris dances are entirely different. Although the leading motive in *Jāri* songs is one of mourning, they also express a poetic sentiment which is composed by the *Boyāti* and sung by the dancers. Though there is a general atmosphere of mourning, a feeling of social sympathy between all classes of the villagers is created with the result that Hindu villagers often eagerly join their Muslim brethren in the *Jāri* dance in the villages of western Bengal.

Dadhi Dance

Closely connected with the Radha-Krishna cult there are various forms of dances which are performed on the occasion

of the Janmāshtamī, the festival in celebration of the birth of Krishna. The dances performed during the Janmāshtamī festival are the *Dadhi* and the *Lāthi* dances

The *Dadhi* dance is mainly performed by the *Goālās*, members of the milkman caste to which Krishna's adoptive father Nanda Ghosh belonged. *Dahi* or curd is carried in pots hanging in rope slings suspended from a bamboo balance across one shoulder. This is the traditional form in which curd and milk are carried by village *Goālās*. A group of milkmen carrying curd in this fashion, and holding with their hands the middle of the rope slings from which the pots hang, perform vigorous dances to the accompaniment of the *mridanga*, as a festivity of rejoicing over the birth of Krishna.

CHAPTER X
**THE REPRESENTATIONAL AND
INTERPRETATIVE MOTIVE**

Mukha (Mask) Dances

MASK DANCES of considerable interest are practised on the occasion of religious festivals of the Chaitra Sankrānti by large sections of the rural population in several districts of Bengal, particularly in Mymensingh and in Vikrampur in the District of Dacca. The masks in the Mymensingh dances are made of wood and those in the Vikrampur dances are made of sola pith. The dances themselves exhibit certain local variations of considerable merit. In certain districts the masks are made of the dried rind of the gourd.

The mask dances of the Tangail Subdivision of Mymensingh District are the most representative in character and a description of some of the principal varieties will be given.

The art of these Bengali mask dances is purely rural in character. The wooden masks (figs. 64, 65 and 66), are made by rural carpenters and painted by local potters with pictorial designs, remarkable for their forceful simplicity and expressiveness.

The costumes are of the simplest possible character, made locally by village artists. The dances represent an ancient folk art of great value and significance. These folk artists of Bengal appear to have preserved in its original simplicity the art of representing the play of cosmic forces. Mask dances undoubtedly constitute a survival of one of the original prototypes, out of which were elaborated the various dances of the classic Indian stage in ancient times, recorded in ancient Indian treatises.

These mask dances are essentially popular in character and form an integral part of the religious and social life of the rural Hindu population of Bengal, irrespective of caste or rank.

They are not practised as a thing apart from life, as a decorative and formal performance of art on a theatrical stage, but are performed entirely in the open air on the occasion of the annual religious festival of Chaitra Sankrānti. The artists are drawn from the ranks of all classes of Hindu society, participating in the dances in a spirit of devotion, as an act of personal *sādhana*. The masks are the property of the village community. The leader of the party and drum instructor is ordinarily known as the *bāyen* (drummer). At the time of performance, he is given the special appellation of *sādhuli*, which has the profound meaning of 'attuner' or 'inspirer' of the rhythmic *sādhana* or spiritual exercise; and in that capacity he is accorded special veneration and respect by all castes.

It is difficult to say which is the most important element in this composite art of the mask dances of Mymensingh: whether it is the carving excellence of the wooden masks made by the village carpenter or the remarkable expressiveness of the paintings made on them by the village potters, or the plastic vigour of movement of the human limbs which support the masks, or the stirring notes of the rhythmic beats of the drum. All these various elements are fused into one integral whole and cast an irresistible spell over the rural audience.

(a) *Mahādeva Dance*

The *sādhuli* and his assistant first take their stand in the open ground. They do not resort to any make-up at all in the way of dress, but stand as ordinary villagers in their ordinary daily garb and proceed to give a series of vigorous beats on their *dhaks*, invoking the spirit of dance. There is no attempt whatever at producing any illusion of stage effect. No disguise is made of the fact that they are ordinary villagers well-known to the audience, who have dressed themselves in a special garb for the purpose of participating in the *sādhana* of the dance. The artist who personates Mahādeva wears a simple red loin-cloth; the front of the body, waist upwards, as well as the legs and arms, is left completely bare except for a smearing of white ash and chalk. A double string of *rudrāksha* seeds hangs round

his neck and a simple red cloak, reaching slightly below the knees, hangs on the back. On his head he wears a wig of black hair with two long matted locks reaching down to the knees dangling in front on either side of his neck. With both hands he holds reverentially the mask of Mahādeva which he is about to wear. In this posture he advances from a corner from amongst the audience; and holding up the mask with his hands, he bends down and touches the ground with his head as an act of devotional preparation for wearing the mask of the Divine Spirit. As soon as he puts the mask on his face, two attendants tie it behind his head with strings. They then place an iron *trishul* (trident) in his right hand, which he holds upraised high in the air, and a small *shankha* (conch shell) on his extended left hand. Round both the ankles are tied strings of brass ankle bells. This completes the ensemble.

The dignity of the mask of Mahādeva is greatly heightened by the crown of snakes with which it is surmounted, the snakes forming the crown being either three (fig. 65) or five in number (fig. 66).

The mask, including the crown of snakes surmounting it, is hollowed and carved out of a single piece of mango or *kend* wood. To give the necessary fleshy tone and sheen to the surface of the wooden mask, it is plastered and covered over with a cloth smeared with clay, which, when dried, is painted over with a thick application of paints. The colours employed in the Shiva mask are simple white and black. A red cloth is bandaged tightly round the head, ears and front of the neck, so that the mask may fit tightly round it. A third eye, representing divine intelligence, is painted on the forehead of the mask in accordance with tradition.

Perhaps the fundamental element in the whole art is the conception of the mask and the painted design on it as it supplies the particular mood and feeling of the cosmic spirit which is sought to be delineated through the music of the drum and the dance movements of the human figure wearing the mask. The most prominent mood portrayed in the Mahādeva mask, sculp-

turally as well as pictorially, is the supreme spirit of lofty detachment, the spirit of unconquerable freedom and naturalness permeated by an effortless power which tames and holds in easy and effortless check the most turbulent and unruly elements in the universe, depicted by the hooded snakes surmounting the mask.

The notable feature of the Mahādeva motif in this dance is that it represents the Bengali conception of Shiva. It is not a remote philosophical and supernatural abstraction of the revolving and whirling universe which forms the Shiva motif of South Indian art. It is a combination on the hand of the completely detached and unworldly *Yogi* with the *trishul*, and on the other, of the married man who has a wife at home and who acknowledges a husband's duty towards her to supply the conch shell out of which are made the bangles which she loves to wear¹. In this conception the hooded snakes on the head represent the tamed passions of humanity. This personal and human conception of Mahādeva is a distinctive feature of rural Bengal, being part of the deep-seated ideology of the rural Hindu population of the province, and is really symbolical of the drama of human life and of the spirit of Man trying to reconcile the inner call of renunciation with the responsibilities of worldly life. This Shiva motif is delineated throughout rural Bengal, not only in songs and dances but also in the ballads and paintings of *patuās* and in the earthen doll representations of this deity. It illustrates the fact that rural deities of Bengal are really symbolical representations of the apotheosis of Man, based on the Bengali *sahajiyā* ideology, namely that Man at his best is the highest embodiment of all Being.

This corresponds to the *Sufi* doctrine embodied in the Persian couplet :

Az Khodā Khudī talab
Az Khudī Khodā talab.

¹For Shiva's preoccupation in procuring conch shell bangles for his spouse Pārvati, see *Patuā Sangeet* by the author (Calcutta University), pp. 69-88.

(*In Self seek self and in self seek Self*).

The basic features of the dance of Mahādeva (fig. 67) are its balance and restraint and the rhythmic progress from slow measured steps to the gradually developed finale. The body from the waist upwards and the arms are held in a rigid attitude. The movements are of the legs only, except that the upper part of the body is swayed with a restrained movement from side to side according to the degree of vigour reached by the dance. The movements of the legs are characterized by an effortless yet restrained *tāndava* abandon, there being none of the spectacular movements that are generally associated with the more sophisticated forms of the dance of Shiva. There is a total absence of any attempt at stage effect or of any *mudrās* or other conventional poses or iconographic attitudes. All movements proceed out of the free and natural inner urge for self-expression of the artiste. In fact, the actual movements vary considerably from artiste to artiste impersonating the same character within the same party. The leading motive of this Mahādeva dance, as already explained, is the portrayal of a spirit of lofty detachment, combined with the calm harmony of inward joy that marks the spirit of the high-souled recluse. In popular Bengali art and philosophy, wildness of movement and activity are set apart entirely for Shakti to whom Shiva imparts energy while confining himself to the lofty sphere of calm energy expressed by measured and highly restrained rhythmic movements. The dance of Mahādeva is designed to produce in the audience a spirit of synthesis and harmony between a lofty and placid non-attachment on the one hand and the duties of domestic life on the other, between the mundane life and the life of the inner spirit, between worldly life, which, although dutifully performed, is of insignificant value, and the higher spiritual life.

(b) *Dance of Kāli*

Kāli is the personification of the supreme cosmic energy, and a profound philosophical significance attaches to the Kāli dance (figs. 68, 69 and 70). The artiste dresses up as a female

wearing a simple sleeveless blouse with a red diamond-shaped embroidery in the middle of the bosom. Below this is worn a skirt made with two bands of red cloth separated by an intervening band of blue cloth. Bells are worn on both legs, and ordinary bangles both at the wrists and at the elbows. A garland hangs from the neck and a rough wig of matted hair reaches below the waist. The mask is worn in the same fashion as in the case of Mahādeva. The Kāli mask (fig. 64) is also made from a single hollowed-out piece of wood, except that a detached piece of wood is used for the protruding red tongue and there is a simple design of painted pasteboard surmounting the wooden structure of the mask and forming the crown. Excepting the whites of the eyes and the black of the eye-balls, the rest of the face is painted blue, with red lines representing the two blood streams trickling from the two ends of the mouth. Red lines also mark the eye-brows and ornaments.

The protruding red tongue is symbolical of Kāla (*i.e.* Time—whence the feminine form Kāli).

After the mask has been donned by the artiste, the attendant places a *khāndā* (a sacrificial sword) in her upraised right hand and a round earthen lampholder with a burning wick in it in the rigidly extended left hand². Sometimes the sword is held in the left hand and the lamp in the right.

The active sword arm symbolizes the spirit of active struggle for existence and of aggressive battle with the enemies of life and the spirit of evil. The lamp, which is held rigidly without any movement whatever, is by some of the folk artistes interpreted as representing the steadily burning flame of life. Others interpret it as the power of destroying earthly bonds and attachments and generating supreme enlightenment.³

²The conception of a lamp or fire in one hand of the two-armed Kāli appears to be an original creation of the mask dancers of rural Bengal. In the classic conception of Kāli, the deity is represented as having either two, four, eight (as Mahakāli) or eighteen (as Bhadrakāli) arms. Only in the Bhadrakāli conception is she represented as holding fire in one of her eighteen hands. (Gopinatha Rao, *Elements of Hindu Iconography*, Vol. II, p. 357).

³This latter interpretation accords with the significance of the fire motif in the hand of Shiva (*ibid.*, Vol. I, pp. 293-294.)

Thus accoutred, the cosmic Shakti, or personification of the cosmic energy, begins her dance of joy to the rhythm of the drum. It is the rhythmic joy of the dance that alone can sustain the spirit of life in its struggle for existence and self-realization and in its grim battle against the enemies of progress.

Before the dance of Kāli takes place, Mahādeva appears again dressed exactly in the garb described previously and lies prostrate on his back in the middle of the arena in a perfectly motionless state. Shakti, on her part, thereupon quickly runs around the prostrate figure of her divine consort and when, after a complete round, she reaches his feet, she approaches him with deliberate motion between his extended legs and lifting her right leg places her right foot on his chest (fig. 68) and in that position performs a few simple and quick dance movements to the accompaniment of the drum, after which she withdraws her foot from the body of Mahādeva and proceeds to perform her joy dance of the preservation of life and destruction of life's enemies. Meanwhile the artiste who represents Mahādeva gets up from his prostrate position and leaves the arena, having performed his part in setting Shakti on her course. This momentary act of Shakti placing herself above the prostrate figure of her spouse, which is a familiar subject of the representations of Kāli and Shiva, is variously interpreted. According to one school of thought, including the popular artistes themselves of the Tangail Subdivision of Mymensingh District, Shakti is about to begin her dance of destruction of the entire world, when Mahādeva, in order to save the righteous elements of the world against her destructive activity, prostrates himself in her path so as to check her indiscriminate and unrestrained progress. Kāli, without noticing her husband lying in her path, unwittingly treads on him, but detecting her mistake, immediately checks her unrestrained career and as a result of her intense surprise and bewilderment, she involuntarily protrudes and bites her tongue with her teeth. This sudden interlude serves to discipline her activity so as to keep it from destroying the entire creation. The influence of Shiva

thereafter dissuades her from destroying the righteous aspects of the world and she confines her work of destruction to the unrighteous in the shape of the Asuras, with whom she has a long and relentless fight until they are finally exterminated. It is the joy of this fight against the evil forces of the world that is delineated in the dance of Kāli. According to the *Tāntric* school of thought, while the main purpose of the dance is the destruction of evil, the momentary physical contact with the prostrate body of Mahādeva is interpreted as a *Tāntric* act of Shiva-Shakti union whereby she is charged by her male consort with the righteous energy with which she is enabled to proceed with her joyous task of the destruction of evil.

As the dance proceeds, the rhythms, which are slow to begin with, are accelerated, and the movements of the legs become more and more of a *tāndava* (wild) character. Shakti now crouches low and now leaps in the air, while her gaze all the time remains fixed right ahead, and the arm wielding the sword of destruction is brandished and whirled furiously (figs. 69, 70). Under the spell of the drum and the dance, the person performing the dance appears transformed into an expression of divine energy overcoming all the forces of evil in a protracted but victorious combat. With all the wildness of the movements there is a strong abiding sense of an underlying spiritual and beneficent purpose; so that the dance actually operates not to terrify the audience but to generate in them an exalted spirit of righteous energy and undaunted courage. The genius of folk artistes succeeds in divesting the Kāli dance of the character of academic delineation and imparts to it an intensely personal and human interest.

There is no element of idol or image worship whatsoever in the spirit of these dances or in the feeling produced among the audience. As the dance proceeds, the audience only see before them the symbol of the flame of life fighting joyously its eternal battle of struggle for existence and for self-realization through the destruction of the enemies that block its progress. The dancer does not lose himself in an unrestrained ecstatic fit. On the other hand, the entire performance is a deliberate

and rational symbolic representation of the spirit of joyous battle against the forces of evil and the obstructing hindrances of life. As such the Kāli dance may be described as the joy dance of the human soul in its grim battle of life. It is pre-eminently the dance of power and vitality. It tends to generate in the audience a spirit of active courage and vigour of thought and activity. The complete absence of any conventional *mudrās* or iconographic poses, and the sincerity, freedom, directness and spontaneous character of the movements make the broad underlying meaning of this dance easily intelligible to one and all, even to little children. The artistes have among their repertoire other interesting dances such as the *Rādhā-Krishna* dance, the *Hara-Pārvati* dance, the *Gangā* dance and the like.

(c) *Tiger Dance, Crocodile Dance and the Monkey Dance*

The inner life-urge and the genius for plastic expression of these artistes are not confined to *Puranic* themes only. They are capable of appreciating and delineating the joy of life, animating every section of the creation and every plane of existence. This is competently illustrated by the skill, effectiveness and appropriateness with which they enter into the joy-urge of such animals as the tiger (fig. 72), crocodile and the monkey in dances with appropriate masks representing these animals, accompanied by movements distinctive of each of these animals. These dances are performed to the accompaniment of the drum.

(d) *Burā-Buri Dance*

The same skill is illustrated in the exquisite artistry of the *Burā-Buri* (literally : old man and old woman, *i.e.* old married couple) dance (fig. 71) representing a duet wherein two artistes wearing masks of a middle-aged woman and an old man move in rhythmic unison to the notes of the drum representing the joyous harmony of conjugal existence and the spirit of work and joy even among the aged male and the aged female. There is a masterly blending of humour and profundity in these dances which place them on the level of true art, beyond mere casual amusement.

CHAPTER XI

THE FITNESS-PROVING MOTIVE

Dharma Puja Procession Dance

DHARMA PUJA is practised by men of extremely backward classes in the western Bengal Districts and particularly in Birbhum. Dharma pūjā is believed to be a relic of Buddhism with an admixture of *Tāntric* Hinduism. In the Birbhum District the pūjā is performed by the working classes of the Bāuri, Bāgdi, Hāri and allied castes, and it takes place at the end of the month of Baisakh, the first month of the Bengali year. The deity *Dharma Rāj* is worshipped in the form of a long log of wood (fig. 74) which is called *Bāneswar* (the Lord of Arrows) and decorated with red vermilion. *Bāneswar* corresponds to the *Pat Thakur* of the *Charak Gambhirā* Dance, and is generally identified with the deity Shiva. The worshippers, or the *Bhaktas* as they are called, observe a fast during the pūjā. On the thirteenth day of the moon *Bāneswar* is taken in procession from house to house and finally to the *Ghat*, the bank of a tank, to the accompaniment of singing and dancing. Each *Bhakta* generally holds in his right hand a long cane with a round loop at the end. One of the *Bhaktas* burns incense in an earthen vessel while another rides a hobby-horse and participates in the dance (fig. 73). The drummers play on the *dhāk* (big drum). The drummers face the dancers and go on dancing backwards as they beat the drums. At the tank *Bāneswar* is bathed in water and worshipped and then brought back again in procession to the *Dharma Rāj talā*, the place under a tree which forms the holy seat of *Dharma Rāj*, of which *Bāneswar* is the emblem. On the 14th day of the moon the ceremony is repeated with a slightly different ritual, and during the night following that day, the *Bhaktas* burn some logs of wood and, after having scattered them on the floor of *Dharma Rāj talā*, they dance wildly on the burning logs. This is called

phul-khelā or 'flower play' and corresponds to the *phul sannyās* dance of the *Charak Gambhirā* festival. Next morning they march to the tank with empty pots on their heads and fill them to about three-fourths of their capacity with water. They then proceed to the local country-wine shop and fill the rest of the pot with country-wine. Then they march in procession with the filled pots on their heads and dance to the accompaniment of the notes on the *dhāk*. While they dance, the men carrying incense-burners hold the burners close to their faces so that after inhaling the smoke they pass into a state of ecstasy or trance and go on dancing in this state with the liquid from the pots spilling on their faces (fig. 75). This condition is believed to be produced by the descent of *bhar* (literally 'possession') i.e. by their being 'possessed' by the spirit of *Dharma Rāj*. In the evening a fire is burnt in front of *Bāneswar*. The *Bhaktas* hang with their heads downwards and with their feet tied to a horizontal wooden pole about 6 to 7 feet long. In this position they swing towards *Bāneswar* across the burning fire and make offerings of flowers to him. This ceremony is called *dolan pūjā*, the 'swinging worship', and this feat of endurance and courage as well as other austerities performed during the ceremonies are undergone with the purpose of acquiring courage and toughness and becoming like the deity himself, indifferent to pain and hardship, and thus proving the worshippers' fitness to be worthy of the deity and of receiving his favours.

Charak Gambhira Dance

The festival of *Charak Gambhirā* takes place towards the latter part of Chaitra, the last month in the Bengali calendar, culminating in the Chaitra Sānkranti day or the last day of the Bengali year. The month Chaitra is devoted to the worship of Shiva, and the *Charak Gambhirā* relates to the cult of Shiva. The Bengali conception of Shiva identifies him with non-attachment, valour, and insensitiveness to pain. His worshippers, who are called *Bhaktas*, aim at shedding fear and completely growing insensitive to physical pain of all descriptions like Shiva, and with this object in view they submit themselves to austerities of various

kinds involving painful processes of piercing the body with pointed rods, etc. The term 'Charak' is derived from a root *cad* (to rise) and ultimately from *scar* (to move) while the word 'Gambhirā' means 'the house in which the worship of Shiva takes place'. The castes which generally take part in the *Charak Gambhirā* festivals in eastern Bengal are Kāyasthas, Namasudras, Mājhis (boatmen) and Pāls (potters). *Charak Gambhirā* rituals generally begin before the last five or six days of the month of Chaitra. The worshippers or *Bhaktas* generally fast for five or six days before the last day of Chaitra. The deity is worshipped in the form of a log of wood called the *Pāt Thākur* and resembles *Bāneswar* worshipped in the *Dharma pūjā* festival of western Bengal. Every evening during the time of the fast the worshippers perform the *Ahātara* dance, the Incense dance and the *phul-sannyas* dance. On the *Pāt Thākur* a small iron trident symbolical of Shiva is planted erect. The *Bālā*, or leader, utters appropriate *mantras* which are traditional Bengali verses relating to the cult of Shiva.

At the commencement there is an invocation dance to the beats of the drum (fig. 76). The dance is accompanied by the following song :

O Lord, in Thy yoga sleep :

*Show Thy wonderful activities to Thy worshippers who sit at
• Thy feet.*

*Thou sleepest at ease with Kartik and Ganesh in Thine arms,
How can Thy worshippers perform their obeisance ?*

*On Thy left is Sati, the Primeval Shakti (power) who
is Bhagabati :*

On Thy two sides stand Nandi and Bhringi.

*I utter Thy name and stand in front of Thee in the hope of getting
the dust of Thy feet.*

*Wonderful is Thy capacity, Thou art the source of all and sundry,
I know not how to worship Thee !*

*Thou art Shiva the victor of Death, the holder of the Ganges on
the head.*

Thou art the essence of the Universe,

Thou art Hari :

*Thou enclosest the Universe, Thou savest the living and helpst
the living in crossing the sea of life.*

*O Thou five-headed one, white of body which is smeared with
ashes from the funeral pyres !*

*Thou with the matted hair and riding on the bull, give Thy bless-
ings to Thy worshippers !*

(a) *Avatār Dance*

In the *Avatār* dance the *Bāī* 'describes in turn the doings' of each of the ten *Avatārs* of Viṣṇu, namely the Fish incarnation (fig. 77), the Tortoise incarnation, the Hog incarnation, the Man-Lion incarnation, the Dwarf incarnation and the Balarāma (fig. 78), Parasurāma, Rāma (fig. 79), Buddha and Kālī incarnations. After he has recited the verses relating to each incarnation, he indicates by appropriate *mudrās* the different types of activities of the particular *avatār*, as for example, the swimming of a fish to indicate the Fish incarnation, the driving of the plough to indicate the Balarāma *avatār* and drawing of the bow to indicate the Rāma *avatār*. The group of worshippers standing in a row then repeat the verses and make the same gestures with their hands while dancing. The dance is performed to the accompaniment of the *dhāk* (ritual drum) and the *kānshi* (gong). Earthen incense-burners with incense burning in them are placed in front of the dancers.

(b) *Dhup (Incense) Dance*

The Incense dance is also performed to the accompaniment of the *dhāk* and *kānshi*. Each of the dancers takes a *dhunachi* or earthen incense-burner in his hand with charcoal burning in it, and as the dance proceeds in a ring in an anti-clockwise direction each dancer takes a handful of *dhunā* (incense) from a pot held by a man standing outside the ring and vigorously throws it into the burning charcoal of the *dhunachi* held in the left hand. This action causes the fire in the incense-burner to flare up, and as the dance is performed during dark nights, it lends a picturesque appearance to the dance (fig. 80). There is no song accompanying this dance. At the end of the incense

dance the dancers place the incense-burners on the ground and dance the *Sātgayen* (literally 'seven villages') dance, sometimes joining their hands together and sometimes alternately lifting each arm high in the air and lifting and crossing their legs (figs. 81 and 82).

(c) *Phul Sannyās Dance*

The *Phul Sannyās* (literally flower-renunciation) dance is of a wilder character. Each of the worshippers holds in his hand a long cane with a round loop at the upper end. A number of burning wooden logs is placed at the centre of the arena. The *Bālā* or the leader places some *bael* leaves on the burning logs indicative of the worship of the spirit of fire and as a magic act to control the burning power of fire. The burning logs are then scattered in the arena and the worshippers perform a series of wild dances on the burning logs without any appreciable damage to their feet. Like the Incense dance this dance is also performed at night. Sometimes the dances take place on the bare blades of *khāndā*, the Bengali sacrificial machete. The object is, as in the case of the Dharma *Pūjā* and Chaṛak Gambhirā austerities, to chasten the body as well as the spirit against all privations and hardships of life so as to become Shiva-like and to acquire fitness as worthy worshippers or *Bhaktas* of Shiva. These dances are performed by the more virile sections of the poorer classes among the Hindu population.

(d) *Chālān Dance*

On the last day of the month of *Chaitra* the final dance of the series of the Chaṛak Gambhirā dances takes place. It is called the *Chālān* dance (literally Invocation dance). A number of *Bhaktas* carry the *Pāt Thākurs* or holy wooden logs on their heads while the others hold in their right hands canes with a round loop at the upper end. The *Bhaktas* then dance to the rhythm of the *dhāk* while the *Bālā* himself dances with an incense-burner in his hand and holds it to the face of each dancer so that he may inhale the smoke therefrom. After a time the dancers get into a state of semi-trance and imagine

themselves to be possessed by the spirit of the Deity Shiva. The *Pāt Thākurs* are then taken down from the head but they go on dancing and disappear in the distance. After a time they come back, one by one, and fall down at the feet of the *Bālā* who recites *mantras* appealing to the Deity to leave the *Bhaktas* and thus free them from possession by the spirit of the Deity.

CHAPTER XII

THE PROPITIATION MOTIVE

Manasa Bhasan Procession Dance

THIS DANCE is performed on the occasion of the procession of installation and immersion of Goddess Manasā who presides over snakes. The goddess is worshipped in the form of *ghats*, vessels of earthenware or brass. The *pūjā* lasts several days. On the first day the empty *ghats* are taken in procession to the tank and filled there with water. At the mouth of each *ghat* is placed a bamboo twig, and over that a lotus flower. Half the *ghat* is covered longitudinally with a red cloth veil, and a garland of pith is hung from its neck. Some of the *Bhaktas* play on cymbals and others play on a *bisham dhāk*. The *Bhaktas* then carry the *ghats* under a moving canopy in procession and return to the place of worship, singing and dancing as the procession proceeds (fig. 83). The leader of the procession holds a *chāmar* (fly whisk) in his hand and leads the song and dance, which are accompanied by playing on the *mridanga* or *dhāk*. A similar procession is held on the day of the immersion ceremony.

A typical Manasā Bhāsān song is as follows :

Come, let us go to the bank of the ocean of milk

To bring the mother.

We shall bedeck her with a Chānd-Mālā (moon garland made of pith),

And offer flowers at her feet.

The object of this festival is to propitiate Manasā or the Snake Goddess. Songs relating to the *Padmapurān* story of how Manasā punished the merchant prince Chānd Sadāgar and his son Lakhindar and daughter-in-law Behulā for not worshipping her are sung during the dance.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

IN THE CASE of dances which are accompanied by a drum (*dhol*, *dhāk* or *mādal*) the inspiration of the dance as well as the pattern of every portion of it is derived from the notes of the drum. The more complicated a dance, the more complicated is the scheme of notes played on the *dhol* or *dhāk* as the case may be. For the purpose of instruction and description, the notes are expressed through a score. For instance the basic score in the case of the *Kāthi* dance is 'dhātin-tā, dhātin-tā'. The *Rāibenshe* dance has the most complicated scheme of patterns, all the patterns arising at intervals out of the basic step to which they are related. Consequently the note on the *dhol* accompanying the *Rāibenshe* dance is of a very complicated character. The score of the notes of the *dhol* accompanying the *Rāibenshe* dance is transcribed below :

The assembling :

GHI-UR GIJJA (repeated many times).

Mouth clapping yell and capriole :

U-R-R ghinitā ghinitā ghur tā-tā-tā.

Getting into attitude of preparedness :

U-R-R jāghin jāghin jhā tā tā tātāk tā.

Basic step :

U-R-R jhāur gijjār gijā ghinitā tilitā tilitā tā tā (repeated many times).

First scheme of action movement :

U-R-R ghināk tākur kurtā jurā kurāk tākur kurtā.

U-R-R ghināk tākur kurtā kurā kurāk tākur tākukur tākukur

Kurākur tā kurākur tā kurākur kurā.

Gijāghin gijāghin gijāghin tā.

Jāghin jhā jhā jhā jhā

Jāghin tā tā tā tā

Jāghin jhā, Jāghin tā.

U-R-R jāghin jāghin jāghin jhā tā tā tā tātāk tā.

Second scheme of action movements :

U-R-R tātāk tātāk tā

Tāktā khitā khitā

Jhā jāghin ghinā tā

Tātāk tātāk tātāk tā

Tāktā khitā khitā jhā

Jāghin ghinā

Ghinā ghinā ghin jhā jhā

Ghinā ghinā ghin tā tā

Jāghin jhā jāghin tā

Jāghin jāghin jāghin jhā tā tā tā tātāk tā

Third scheme of action movement :

U-R-R ghinā tātāk tāktā

Tāktā khitā tāktā

} (twice repeated).

Jāghin jhā jāghin tā

Jāghin jāghin jāghin jhā

tā tā tā tātāk tā

Fourth scheme of action movements :

U-R-R jhāur ghināk tā tā tā (twice repeated).

Jāghin jhā jāghin tā

Jāghin jāghin jāghin jhā

tā tā tā tātāk tā.

Fifth scheme of action movement :

U-R-R (ghi ṭhak ṭhak ṭhak ṭhak gijjār jhā) twice repeated.

Ṭhaṭak ṭhaṭak ṭhaṭak ṭhak

Ṭhak ṭhakaṭak ṭhaṭak

(Ṭhak ṭhaṭhak ṭhak ṭhak) twice repeated.

(U-R-R Ghināk ghināk) twice repeated.

U-R-R Jāghin jāghin jāghin jhā

tā tā tā tātāk tā.

APPENDIX B

Literary references to the Raibenshe soldiers

In *Kabikankan Chandī*, an epic poem of Mukundaram Chakrabarti who lived from A.D. 1544 to 1608, the following passages occur :

(1) Footmen with bells round their waists and sounding anklets round their ankles press on—the *Rāi-benshes* also rush forward. (This passage occurs in the description of King Sālibāhan's march).

(2) "Footmen with sounding anklets march on with closed fists, the *Rai-benshes* carry their *rāibānsh* (lances) in their hands."

(3) "The *Rāi-benshes* wearing golden anklets march with great speed in rings and circular formation, and carry their *rāibānsh* (lances) in their hands." (These two passages occur in the description of the march of King of Kalinga which then lay immediately south of Raṛh country—West Bengal).

(4) "Thousands of battle drums are beating, millions of footmen rush forward; in the turmoil of battle nobody pays any heed to others; the *Rāi-benshes* musketeers and archers participate in the struggle, the golden standard bearers go ahead."

(5) "The *Rāi-benshes* form themselves into rings and press forward; some brandish their javelins as they advance." (These two passages occur in the description of the conquest of Guzrāt by the King of Kalinga).

The following passage is found in *Annadā Mangal*, a poetical work of Bhārat Chandra Rāy Gunākar, a famous Bengali poet who lived from A.D. 1712 to 1760. In describing Raja Man Singh's expedition in the 16th century against Pratapaditya of Jessore, the poet writes :

(6) "Soldiers in red uniforms and the personal guards (of the Raja) march ahead in columns. Musketeers, archers,

shieldmen, *Rāi-benshes*, Kals (probably soldiers recruited from Mallabhumi in Bankura) and cavalrymen follow.”

The passage quoted below is from Ram Prasad Sen Kabiranjana, who lived from 1718 to 1775 :

(7) “There are millions of expert archers who never miss their mark and there are the *Rāi-benshes* who are not behind-hand in the use of their *rāibānsh* (spears)”.

The following passage is from *Dharma Mangal*, a famous Bengali book by Manik Ganguli who lived from 1694 to 1748. The passage occurs in the description of the Court of a Raja in the 11th century.

(8) ‘*Rāi-benshes* and cavalry soldiers are assembled in martial uniforms.’

The following passage is from *Dharma Mangal* of Ghanaram Chakrabarti, who lived in the latter part of the 17th century. The passage occurs in the description of the scene of attack of Maynagarh by Mahamado Patra in the 11th century :

(9) “The Ranabhuyān and Malla-bhuyān soldiers (probably recruits from Ranabhumi and Mallabhumi), soldiers from Magadha (modern Behar), archers, musketeers, *Rai-benshes*, soldiers on chargers and elephants, altogether a hundred thousand strong march forward.”

APPENDIX C

Thus knowing his strength fully well, Sitaram aspired to make himself prominent. The ambition to possess suzerain authority in the country stirred him up. We find at this time the following generals working under him to elevate him to eminence :

1. Rupram Gnosh *alias* Menāti, Commander-in-chief.
2. Madan Mohan *Basu*, Commander of 22,000 *Beldar* soldiers.
3. Rupchand Dhali, Commander of *Dhali* soldiers.
4. and 5. Kalumal and Fakir Machkata, Commanders of *Rāibenshe* soldiers.
6. and 7. Bakhtar Khan and Amin Beg, Commanders of Mahomedan soldiers'

(L. P. Dutt, *Ruins of Muhammadpur*, pp. 26-7).

APPENDIX D

I. *The Gangaridae*

(a) He (Alexander)...learned the following particulars : Beyond the river lay extensive deserts which it would take eleven days to traverse. Next came the Ganges, the largest river in all India, the farther bank of which was inhabited by two nations, the Gangaridae and the Prasii whose king Agrammes kept in the field for guarding the approaches to his country 20,000 cavalry and 200,000 infantry, besides 2,000 four-horsed chariots and what was the most formidable force of all, a troop of elephants which he said ran up to the number of 3,000. 'The Invasion of India by Alexander the Great,' by Quintus Curtius Rufus (Vide McCrindle's, *Ancient India*, pp. 221-2).

(b) He (Alexander) gathered them (his soldiers) all together and in a well-weighed speech addressed the assembly on the subject of the expedition against the Gangaridae; but when the Macedonians would by no means assent to his proposal, renounced his contemplated enterprise. 'Invasion of India by Alexander the Great,' by Diodoros Siculus (Vide McCrindle's, *Ancient India*, pp. 283).

II. *Gangaridae*

'This great people occupied all the country about the mouths of the Ganges. Their capital was Gange, described in the Periplus as an important seat of commerce on the Ganges. They are mentioned by Virgil (Geogr. III, 1.27), by Valerius Flaccus (Argon. lib. VI, 1.66), and by Curtius (lib. IX cii) who places them along with the Pharrasii (Prasii) on the eastern bank of the Ganges. They are called by Pliny (lib. VI, c. Lxv) the Gangaridae Calingae, and placed by him at the furthest extremity of the Ganges region, as is indicated by the expression *gens novissima*, which he applies to them. They must have been a powerful people, to judge from the military force

which Pliny reports them to have maintained, and their territory could scarcely have been restricted to the marshy jungles at the mouth of the river now known as the Sundarbans, but must have comprised a considerable portion of the province of Bengal. This is the view taken by Saint-Martin. Bengal, he says, represents, at least in a general way, the country of the Gangaridae, and the city which Pliny speaks of as their capital. Parthalis can only be Vardhana, a place which flourished in ancient times, and is now known as Bardhaman.

McCrindle's *Ancient India*, as described by Ptolemy, pp. 173-4 (Reprint, Calcutta 1927).

III. 'Among the southern countries, the first under Kaukasos is India, a kingdom remarkable for its vast extent and the largeness of its population, for it is inhabited by very many nations, among which the greatest of all is that of the Gangaridae, against whom Alexander did not undertake an expedition, being deterred by the multitude of their elephants. This region is separated from farther India by the greatest river in those parts (for it has a breadth of thirty stadia).'

"From the extracts of Diodorus, Quintus Curtius, and Plutarch, given at the beginning of this chapter, it will appear that, at the time of Alexander's invasion, the most important power in Northern India was that of the two nations, Prasii and Gangarides, who inhabited the country along the lower Ganges, now comprised in the provinces of Bihar and Bengal."

(F. J. Monahan, *The Early History of Bengal*, pp. 2 and 15.)

APPENDIX E

Extracts from Hymns of the Rigveda

Translated by

Ralph T. H. Griffith, M.A., C.I.E.

Third Edition—IV. I. 130

Indra

6. Eager for riches, men have formed for thee this song,
like as a skilful craftsman fashioneth a car, so have
they wrought thee to their bliss;
Adorning thee, O Singer, like a generous steed for deeds
of might,
Yea, like a steed to show his strength and win the prize,
that he may bear each prize away.
7. For Puru thou has shattered, Indra! ninety forts,
for Divodasa, thy boon servant with thy bolt,
O Dancer, for thy worshipper.

IV. II. 23

Indra

4. This, Indra, was thy hero deed, Dancer, thy first
and ancient work, worthy to be told forth in heaven,
What time thou sentest down life with a God's own
power, freeing the floods.
All that is godless may he conquer with his might, and,
Lord of Hundred Powers, find for us strength and food.

IV. V. 33

Indra

6. Strength much to be desired is in thee, Indra :
the Immortal dances forth his hero exploits.
Such, Lord of Treasure, give us splendid riches,
I praise the Friend's gift, his whose wealth is mighty.

IV. VI. 30

Indra.

3. Thy devotees embrace thy feet for glory. Bold,
thunder-armed, rich, through thy strength, in guerdon,

Robed in a garment fair as heaven to look on, thou hast
displayed thee like an active dancer.

IV. VI. 63*Asvins*

5. Lords of great wealth! for glory Surya's
Daughter mounted your car that brings a hundred
succours.

Famed for your magic arts were ye, magicians!
amid the race of Gods, yet dancing Heroes!

V. VIII. 24*Indra.*

9. O Indra, Dancer, ~~thou~~ invoked! as thy great power
is unsurpassed,
So be thy bounty to the worshipper unchecked.
12. For, Dancer, verily I find none else for bounty,
saving thee,
For splendid wealth and power, thou Lover of the song.

V. VIII. 58*Indra*

6. Indra, the strong, the measureless, worthy of praise,
Most bountiful,
Sole Ruler even over wealth.
7. Him, for his ample bounty, him, this Indra do I urge
to drink,
Who, as his praise was sung of old, the Dancer is the
Lord of men.

V. VIII. 81*Indra*

2. Lauded by many, much-invoked, leader of song,
renowned of old :
His name is Indra, tell it forth.
3. Indra the Dancer be to us the giver of abundant strength :
May he, the mighty, bring it near.

V. X. 18

3. Divided from the dead are these, the living; now
be our calling on the Gods successful.
We have gone forth for dancing and for laughter,
to further times prolonging our existence.

V. VIII. 20

Maruts

20. Who, like a celebrated boxer overcome the
 challengers in every fight :
 They who, like shining bulls, are most illustrious
 honour those Maruts with thy song.
21. Allied by common ancestry, ye Maruts, even the Cows,
 alike in energy,
 Lock, all by turns, each other's head.
22. Even mortal men, ye Dancers breast—adorned with gold,
 attains to brotherhood with you,
 Mark ye and notice us, O Maruts; evermore your
 friendship is secured to us.

APPENDIX F

List and Description of Musical Instruments used by Folk Dancers of Bengal :

Name	Fig. No.	Used by
(1) <i>Ananda lahari</i> (or <i>Gab-gubā-gub</i>)	47, 48, 49, 50.	Bāul.
(2) <i>Bānshi</i>	57.	Bānshi dancers.
(3) <i>Bāyān</i>	46, 48, 49, 50.	Bāul.
(4) <i>Behālā</i> (violin)	50.	Bāul.
(5) <i>Dhāk</i>	38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 55, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82.	Ghat Olāno Brata, Shloka, M u k h ā (Mask) Dharma Pūjā and Charak Gambhirā dancers.
(6) <i>Dhol</i>	4, 5, 7-18, 21, 22, 31, 36, 37.	Rāibenshe, D h ā l i, Wedding, Baran and Bhānjo dancers.
(7) <i>Ektārā</i>	46-48.	Bāul.
(8) <i>Kānsi</i>	4, 5, 7, 12-18, 55, 73, 74, 83, 75-82.	Rāibenshe, D h ā l i, Shloka, Dharma Pūjā and Charak Gambhirā dancers.
(9) <i>Khanjani</i> (<i>dubki</i>)	47, 48, 50.	Bāul.
(10) <i>Mādal</i>	23, 29, 57.	Kāthi and Jhumur (Kora) dancers.
(11) <i>Mandirā</i>	48-50, 54, 56, 84.	Bāul, Satya Pīr, Bolān and Manasā Bhāsān dancers.
(12) <i>Mrindanga</i> (<i>khole</i>)	51, 53, 54, 56, 84.	Kīrtan, Padma Purān, Satya Pīr, Bolān Manasā B h ā s ā n dancers.



Fig. 1







Fig 6



Fig



Fig. 9







Fig. 13

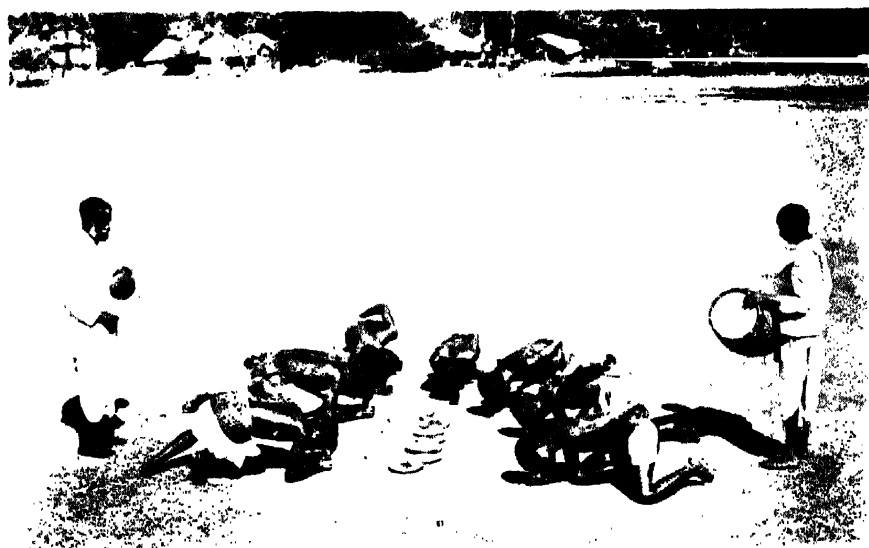


Fig. 14



Fig. 10

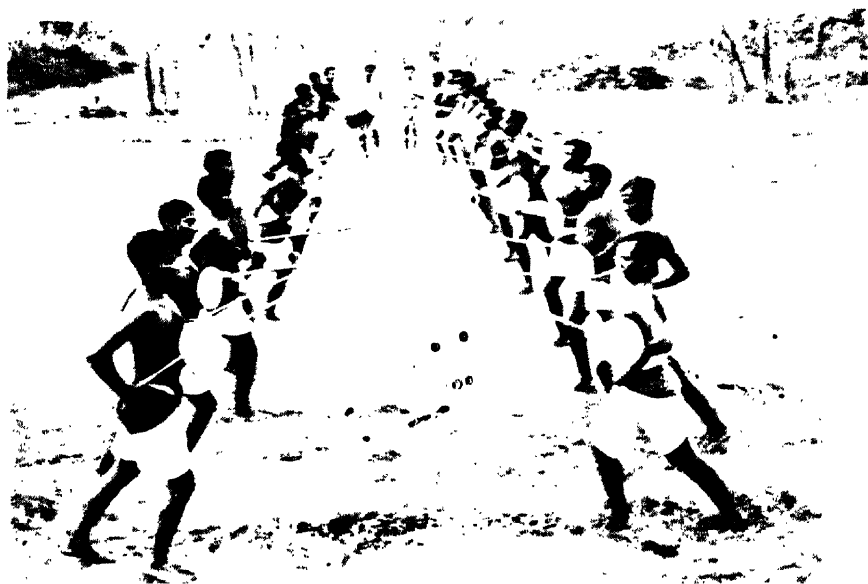


Fig. 17



Fig. 18



Fig. 19



Fig. 20



Fig. 21

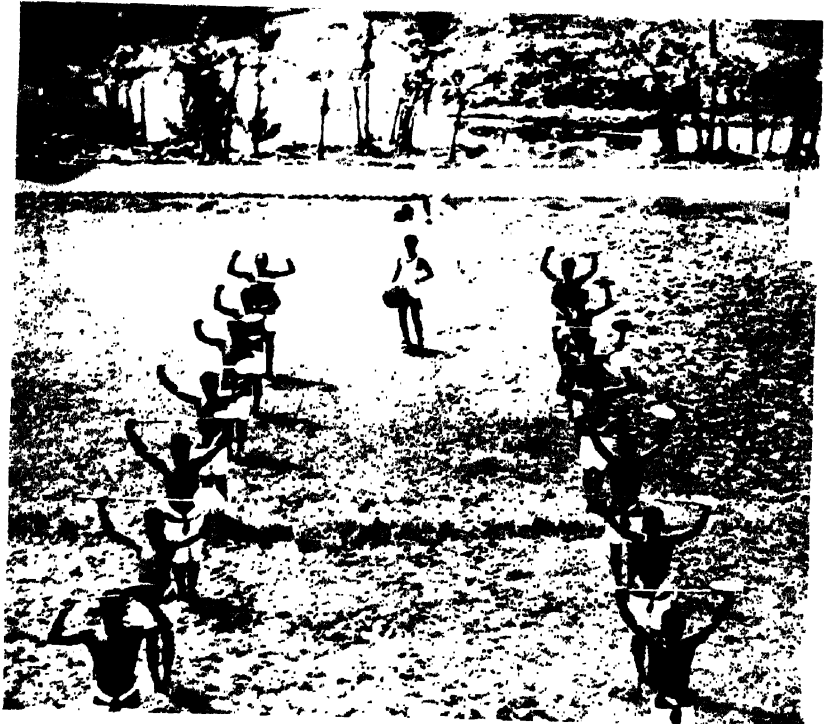




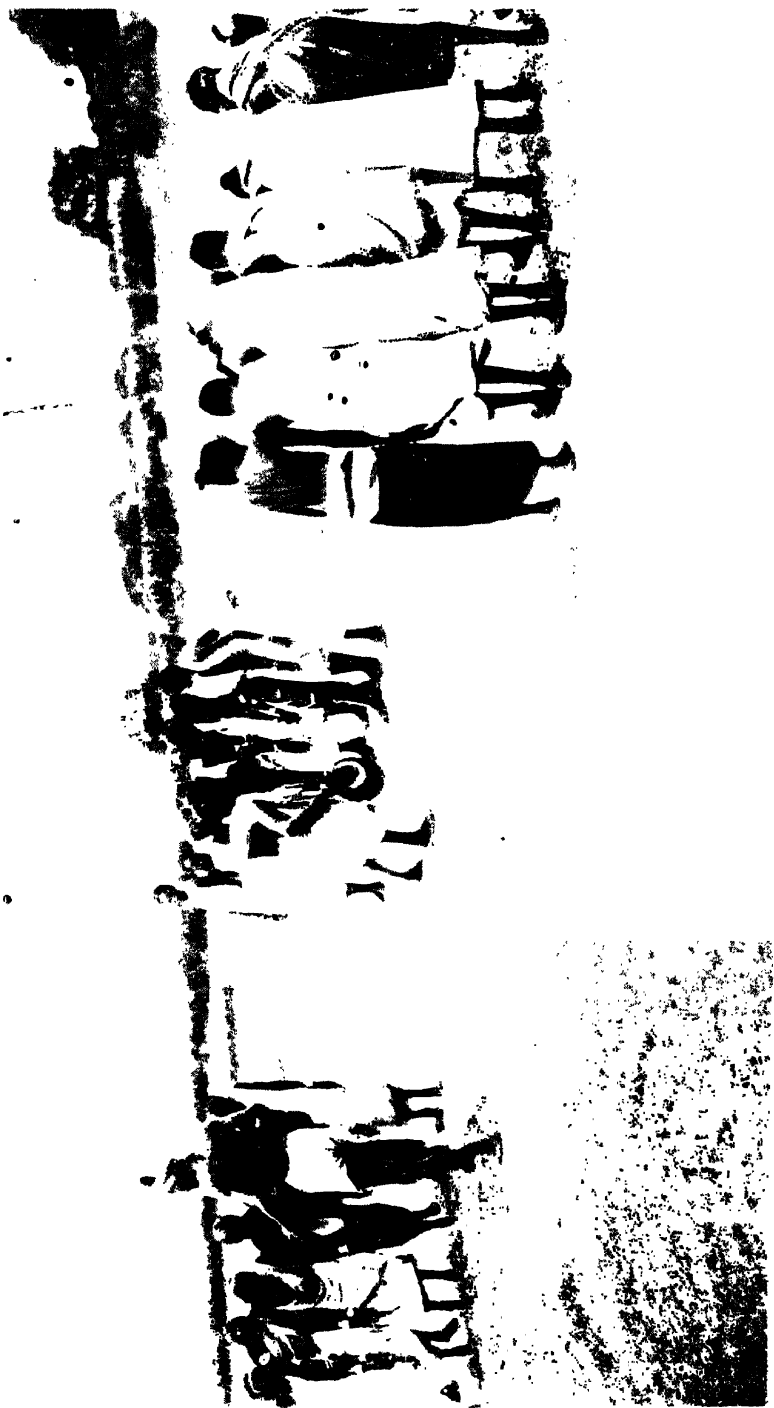
Fig. 23



Fig. 24



Fig. 28



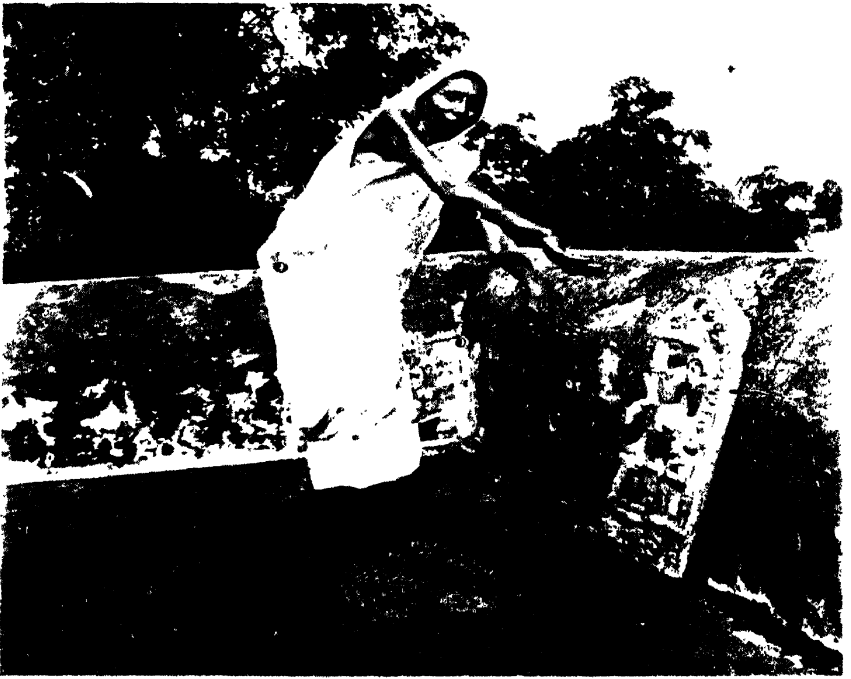




Fig. 32





Fig. 34



Fig. 35



Fig. 36



Fig. 37



Fig. 38





Fig. 40



Fig. 41



Fig. 42



Fig. 43



Fig. 44



Fig. 45



Fig. 46



Fig. 47



Fig. 48



Fig. 49



Fig. 50



Fig. 51



Fig. 52



Fig. 53



Fig 54



Fig. 55



Fig. 56





Fig. 58



Fig. 59



Fig. 60



Fig. 61



Fig. 62



Fig. 63

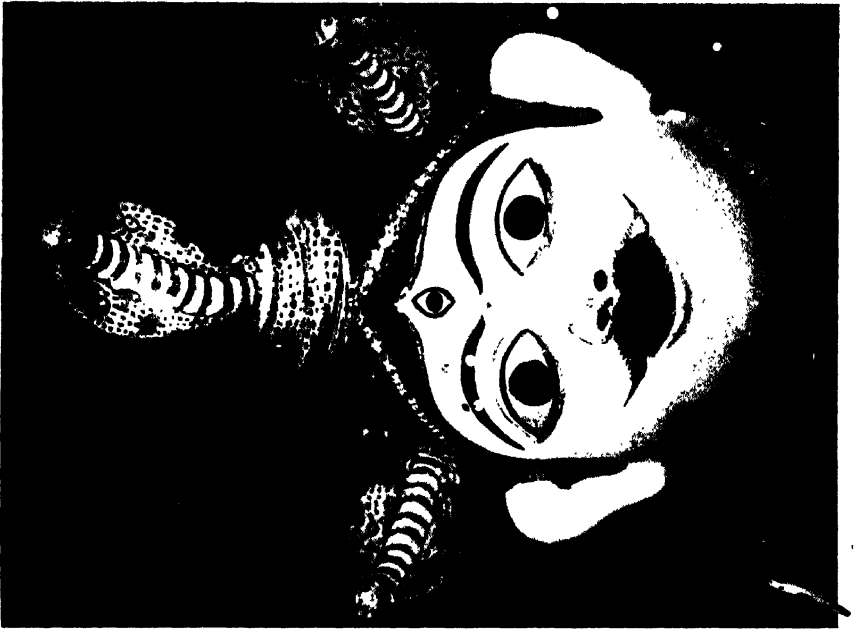




Fig. 66



Fig. 67



Fig. 68



Fig. 69



Fig. 70





Fig.



Fig.



Fig. 74



Fig. 75



Fig. 76



Fig. 77



Fig. 78



Fig. 79



Fig. 80



Fig. 81



Fig. 82



Fig. 83

LIST OF PLATES

- Fig. 1. *Rāibenshe Dance* : The dancers, coming to a sudden halt, stretch both arms to their full length and utter the war cry 'Yee-āh.
- Fig. 2. *Rāibenshe Dance* : The dancer stretches both arms in front to their full length with the palms extended vertically.
- Fig. 3. *Rāibenshe Dance* : The fists of both arms are gradually clenched, and while the left arm remains stretched in front, the right fist is gradually drawn back as if fully drawing a bow.
- Fig. 4. *Rāibenshe Dance* : This stalking march motion, with the left arm in the attitude of drawing a bow or of holding a shield and the right arm in the attitude of hurling a spear, is the basic step of the *Rāi-Benshe* dance.
- Fig. 5. *Rāibenshe Dance* : This is a retiring movement backward with alternate hops on the legs.
- Fig. 6. *Rāibenshe Dance* : The dancers make a gradual right-about turn with the arms held in the original position and the legs held apart, so that when the turn is nearly complete the two legs are twisted together at the knee.
- Fig. 7. *Rāibenshe Dance* : Simultaneously with a spring from the ground, with both feet the left leg is thrown high up and an action is performed with the arms as if hurling a spear with the right hand on an enemy charging from a higher elevation, such as an advancing force of cavalry.
- Fig. 8. *Rāibenshe Dance* : Simultaneously with springing movements from the ground, the knees of the bent legs are alternately brought inward and thrown outward, as if riding a horse at a trot, the two arms swaying as if controlling the reins.

- Fig. 9. *Rāibenshe Dance* : Both hands are moved as though dealing blows upward.
- Fig. 10. *Rāibenshe Dance* : During the dance some of the dancers suddenly separate from the circle. They form into pairs and one member of each jumps upon the shoulders of the other. The two men are thus fused into a single dancer.
- Fig. 11. *Rāibenshe Dance* : The drummer also dances as he beats the drum.
- Fig. 12. *Rāibenshe Dance* : As soon as the dance is commenced the dancers engage in a series of acrobatics.
- Fig. 13. *Rāibenshe Dance* : Another view of the acrobatics.
- Fig. 14. *Rāibenshe Dance* : The dancers bend down on the ground on the right knees and right elbows, the left hand being placed on the back and the left leg stretched straight backward.
- Fig. 15. *Dhāli Dance* : All the dancers make a complete left-about turn while remaining in the kneeling position, but this time kneeling on the left knee and bending forward on the left elbow with the right leg stretched straight backward and the right hand on the back.
- Fig. 16. *Dhāli Dance* : Quick kneeling and standing movements and some other with quick alternating inward and outward lunging and springing movements, all performed while the dancers keep on moving rhythmically in a circle, so that the movements constitute a combination of athletic exercise and dance.
- Fig. 17. *Dhāli Dance* : The rows of dancers approach each other in a series of simultaneous rhythmic hops of both legs, each foot being placed alternately backward, and forward, the upper part of the body is inclined forward.
- Fig. 18. *Dhāli Dance* : When the two rows of dancers meet, the men utter a yell.
- Fig. 19. *Dhāli Dance* : After the position of Fig. 18, the dancers suddenly turn back and return to their original positions with similar steps.

- Fig. 20. **Dhāli Dance* : The dancers perform a series of movements with their shields and sticks held above the head, and sometimes with the shield held in front of the chest and the stick held behind.
- Fig. 21, 22. *Dhāli Dance* : The dancers penetrate through each other's ranks sometimes in frontal marches and sometimes in a series of sideways hops.
- Fig. 23. *Kāthi Dance* : Each man strikes his own left hand with the stick in his right hand.
- Fig. 24. *Kāthi Dance* : One of the dancers sometimes lies upon the ground on his back with his head towards the centre of the circle and moves along by jerky movements of his back, defending and striking with his sticks as he does so.
- Fig. 25, 26, 27, 28. *Duet : Jhumur* : Duet Jhumur is generally danced by two women to the accompaniment of the *dhol*. The dance involves co-ordinated movements of the whole body and all the limbs in various positions.
- Fig. 29. *Korā Jhumur* : This dance is performed by women dancers of the Kora caste forming into several single rows with the contiguous dancers in each row clasping hands so as to form a chain.
- Fig. 30. *Baran Dance* : A woman dancer greeting a deity.
- Fig. 31. *Baran Dance* : Women dancers welcoming a bridegroom and a bride.
- Fig. 32. *Baran Dance* : Various objects are held while the dance is performed, such as a *pradīpa* (lamp).
- Fig. 33. *Bhanjo-Brata Dance* : The girls dance and sing round and round the earthen *saras*.
- Fig. 34. *Ghat Olāno Dance* : Girls performing the first part of the *Bandanā*, or Adoration dance, in which their hands are gradually raised and the fingers are tremulously shaken until the body is raised to a standing posture.
- Fig. 35. *Ghat Olāno Dance* : Girls performing the fourth part of the 'Bandanā' dance.

- Fig. 36. *Ghat Olāno Dance* : Girls performing Bāyenā dance.
- Fig. 37. *Ghat Olāno Dance* : Girls performing the last part of the Bāyenā dance.
- Fig. 38. *Ghat Olāno Dance* : Girls performing Pinpre-Mārā dance.
- Fig. 39. *Ghat Qlāno Dance* : Girls performing Jor (pair) dance. Dancers standing in pairs, facing each others, hold hands, the fingers being interlaced.
- Fig. 40. *Meghārāni Dance* : Meghārāni dance is performed by women and girls before the rainy season for calling the rain.
- Fig. 41. *Circular Jhumur Dance* : Performed by girls of the working classes not as a ceremonial Brata dance but merely as a social pastime.
- Fig. 42. *Wedding Dance* : The *sājāno* dance (part of the wedding dance) is performed by women. The movement suggests the theme sung by them viz. playing on a flute.
- Fig. 43. *Wedding Dance* : In the bride's house one of the ceremonies performed before the wedding day is the Madal puja or Dhol Baran or the worship of the Dhol or Madal.
- Fig. 44. *Wedding Dance* : Last part of the Dhol Baran dance. The lady who performs the dance then sits on the tray and the other women dance round her.
- Fig. 45. *Wedding Dance* : On the second day after the wedding the Phool Shajyā (the flower bed) dance takes place. In this dance the end of the sari is held with both hands above the head and the feet are moved with glide and shuffle steps.
- Fig. 46. *Bāul Dance* : A Bāul dancing and singing in solo with an Anandalaharī and Bāyan.
- Fig. 47, 48, 49 and 50. *Bāul Dance* : Bāul dancing and singing in groups with appropriate instruments.
- Fig. 51. *Kīrtan Dance* : It is of great antiquity, being associated with the worship of Vishnu; but it was the great religious leader Chaitanya who gave it its present

form. The instruments played on are the *Mridanga* or earthen drum and cymbals.

- Fig. 52. *Ballad Dance* : An Eastern Bengali dancer performing Rāmāyana dance. In his left hand he is holding a Chowry (*Chāmara*).
- Fig. 53. *Ballad Dance* : Dancers performing the Padma Purān dance. The Padma Purān ballads relate to the story of Chānd Sadāgar and the punishment meted out to him for not performing worship of the snake goddess Manasā.
- Fig. 54. *Ballad Dance* : Mahomedan dancers performing Satyapīr dance. The leader of the dance performs gesticulations with his hands while reciting or singing the main theme of the story. The ordinary dancers forming the group move round and round in simple steps without any gesticulations with their hands.
- Fig. 55. *Ballad Dance* : A band of Eastern Bengal dancer performing Sholoka dance.
- Fig. 56. *Ballad Dance* : Western Bengal dancers performing Bolān dance. The word Bolān means "recitation" and the dance derives its name from the fact that one of the dancers chants or recites the story or ballad from a writing which he holds in his hand.
- Fig. 57. *Ballad Dance* : The Bānshi (flute) dance is a form of Ballad dance which is prevalent among the working classes in Western Bengal. The dance is generally performed by two or three men who play on the flutes of a special T-shaped form.
- Fig. 58. *Jāri Dance* : Forming a ring in the middle of the arena the dancers move in the circle in anti-clockwise direction performing the hops and kick movements.
- Fig. 59. *Jāri Dance* : The Boyāti (leader) gives the signal for the chorus which is taken up by all the dancers.
- Fig. 60. *Jāri Dance* : The dancers move in an anti-clockwise direction as they dance, the *Boyāti* remaining outside.
- Fig. 61. *Jāri Dance* : While the dancers keep up the ring formation, alternate dancers face each other, thus

forming two groups of dancers, one moving in a clockwise and the other in an anti-clockwise direction, each dancer moving forward rhythmically to form successively a fresh pair with the next dancer advancing from his opposite direction.

Fig. 62. *Jāri 'Dance* : Sometimes the dancers join hands in pairs formed alternately as they move in the circle.

Fig. 63. *Jāri Dance* : Sometimes the dance is performed in a self setting position, the *Boyāti* moving energetically outside the ring and reciting the ballad.

Fig. 64. *Painted Wooden Mask for the Kāli Dance* : The crown is made of painted paste board.

Fig. 65. *Painted Wooden Mask for the Mahādeva Dance* : With a crown of three hooded snakes.

Fig. 66. *Another Painted Wooden Mask for the Mahādeva Dance* : With a crown of five hooded snakes.

Fig. 67. *Mahādeva Dance* : Mahādeva has a Trishul (trident) in the right hand and a Shanakha (conch shell) in the left, the *Sādhuli* (drummer) plays on the *Dhāk*.

Fig. 68. *Kāli Dance* : The preliminary step in which Kāli carries a *khāndā* (sword) in the right hand and a burning *pradīp* (lamp) in the left.

Fig. 69. *Kāli Dance* : Kāli makes horizontal cutting movements with the sword as she dances.

Fig. 70. *Kāli Dance* : Here Kāli holds the sword in the left hand and the *pradīp* (lamp) in the right.

Fig. 71. *Burā-Buri* (old man and old woman) *Dance* : The painted wooden masks of the old man and old woman have a characteristic expression.

Fig. 72. *Tiger Dance* : A mask dance with the painted wooden mask representing a tiger's head.

This dance is also performed to the rhythm of the drum played by the *Sādhuli* (drummer).

Fig. 73. *Dharma Pūjā Dance* : The dancers carry looped canes. One of the dancers carries an incense-burner with burning incense in it, while another dancer rides a hobby horse.

- Fig. 74. *Dharma Pūjā Dance* : One dancer carries the holy *Pāt Thākur* (the wooden deity) decorated with a garland. The Bhaktas (worshippers) carry pieces of cane while others play on the feathered Dhāks (drums) and Kānshis (gongs).[•]
- Fig. 75. *Dharma Pūjā Procession Dance* : The dancers carry on their heads earthen pots filled with water and country wine while dancing. Some of them go into a state of ecstasy while dancing and the liquid in the pot spilling on their faces.
- Fig. 76. *Charak Gambhirā Dance* : The Invocation with three incense-burners on the foreground.
- Fig. 77. *Charak Gambhirā Dance* : Representation of the Fish Avatāra (Incarnation) with the movements of the right palm and fingers.
- Fig. 78. *Charak Gambhirā Dance* : Representation of the Balārāma Avatāra (Incarnation) with the arms in the attitude of driving a plough.
- Fig. 79. *Charak Gambhirā Dance* : Representation of the Rāma Avatāra (Incarnation) with the arms in the attitude of drawing a bow.
- Fig. 80. *Charak Gambhirā Dance* : Each dancer carries a *Dhunachi* (incense-burner) with burning charcoal in it and as the dance proceeds in a ring he takes a handful of incense from a pot held by a man standing outside the ring and vigorously throws it into the burning charcoal, thus causing the fire to flare up with extreme picturesque effect in the dark night.
- Fig. 81. *Charak Gambhirā Dance* : One of the Charak Gambhirā dances performed in a ring with alternate uplift of the arms.
- Fig. 82. *Charak Gambhirā Dance* : Performed with the dancers joining hands while moving round in a ring with each leg alternately raised high above the ground.
- Fig. 83. *Manasā Bhāsān Procession Dance* : The *ghats* or sacred pots representing the goddess Manasā are carried by two of the worshippers under a moving cloth canopy.

Two women carry baskets filled with flowers. The leading member carries a *chowry* as he sings and dances with the other members of the party some of whom play on Mridangas (earthen drums) and cymbals.

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