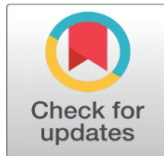


THE FOLK CARNIVALESQUE: RESISTANCE AND SUBVERSIVE WIT IN BENGAL'S ALKAP TRADITION

Mir Masudul Hoque¹, Md Sujauddin Shaikh²

¹ PhD Scholar, Dept. of English, Aligarh Muslim University

² PhD Scholar, Dept. of English, SHMSS, The Neotia University



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ABSTRACT

Alkap, a distinctive form of folk theatre encompassing a vibrant amalgamation of dance, drama, and music, shares its roots with the Jatra tradition. As an indigenous performing art, it once enjoyed widespread popularity in specific districts of West Bengal and Bangladesh, as well as regions spanning Jharkhand and Bihar. Historically, Alkap has served as a source of entertainment for rural communities, captivating audiences with its portrayals of mythological narratives, social injustices, and a myriad of intriguing everyman subjects. However, Alkap's original charm lay in its capacity for subversion and resistance, as it artfully mimicked the kings and landlords, challenged gender norms through cross-dressing, and infused performances with elements of sexual innuendo, profligate colloquialism, etc. Although the Alkap tradition has largely faded into obscurity, its significance as a platform for social commentary remains paramount within the socio-political matrix of rural Bengal. Through a comprehensive exploration of historical and contemporary Alkap theatre and by analysing the carnivalesque characteristics such as wit, humour, satire, and parody within Alkap performances, this paper explores how Alkap theatre serves as an artistic medium for the expression of social critique and cultural resilience against dominant ideologies and power structures. Furthermore, this research delves into the ways in which Alkap theatre adapts to contemporary socio-economic and political contexts, continuing to be a dynamic force of folk carnivalesque. In conclusion, the study underscores the imperatives for the preservation and revitalisation of this tradition, recognising its potential not only as a source of entertainment but also as a means to foster critical dialogue and societal transformation within rural communities.

Keywords: Alkap, Folk-Theatre, Carnivalesque, Subversion, Resistance, Preservation



1. INTRODUCTION

Folk theatre has long served as a vital conduit for cultural transmission, embodying the social, political, and moral ethos of the communities that sustain it. Across South Asia, folk performance traditions have evolved in response to historical shifts, adapting their narratives, aesthetics, and modes of presentation while retaining their fundamental role as vehicles of communal expression. Among the diverse vernacular theatrical forms in this region, *Alkap* stands out as a distinctive and dynamic art form that intricately weaves together oral storytelling, music, bodily performance, and extemporaneous humor. An *Alkap* group, led by a sarkar or guru, consists of ten to twelve artistes, including two or three young boys called *chhokras*, one or two *gayens* (singers), and the remaining members comprising *dohar*, choristers, and musicians, with performances held at night on an open stage illuminated by lanterns (Ahmed, n.d.). The audience stand or sit around the stage, leaving a narrow passage for the performers. Its vibrant performative structure, deeply embedded in the rural landscapes of West Bengal, Jharkhand, Bihar, and Bangladesh, has made it a central element of village festivities and social gatherings. Prominent folklorist Ashutosh Bhattacharya denotes that *Alkap* is a Form of folk theatre which is mostly prominent in Murshidabad and Malda, it's not a formal theatre rather a portrayal of village life (Islam, 2001, p. 2)

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Despite its superficial resemblance to other indigenous theatrical traditions such as *Jatra*, *Alkap* has developed into an autonomous and complex cultural phenomenon, marked by its unique dramaturgical conventions and interactive audience engagement. Unlike the more structured and scripted forms of theatre, *Alkap* thrives on improvisation, audience participation, and the subversive power of satire. Performers, often in cross-dressed roles, employ humor, allegory, and parody to critique socio-political hierarchies, challenge dominant narratives, and articulate alternative worldviews. The performative grammar of *Alkap*, therefore, extends beyond entertainment; it functions as a dialogic arena where power structures are questioned, social norms are destabilized, and marginalized perspectives find resonance. This study undertakes a critical examination of *Alkap*'s structural components, historical evolution, and its enduring relevance within contemporary folk performance traditions. By engaging with theoretical discourses on folk resistance, performance studies, and Bakhtinian carnivalesque, this paper seeks to foreground *Alkap* as a vital locus of subaltern expression and cultural negotiation.

Historical Context and Evolution

Alkap's emergence is intimately tied to the socio-economic and agrarian history of Bengal. Rooted in the folk traditions of agrarian communities, *Alkap* developed as a performative response to both seasonal festivities and broader sociopolitical shifts. Traditionally performed post-harvest during winter months (Bhattacharya, 2015). *Alkap* troupes comprised itinerant performers led by a master storyteller, or 'sutradhar.' These performers traversed village circuits, enacting skits that synthesized mythological allegories with contemporary socio-political commentary. The art form gained brief prominence when the renowned novelist Syed Mustafa Siraj, who was himself an *Alkap* artist from the Murshidabad district of West Bengal, incorporated its narratives into his literary works (Kaahon, 2017).

The performance structure of *Alkap* was inherently fluid, allowing for audience participation, real-time adaptation, and an organic interplay between humor and critique. Regarding the origin of *Alkap*, another opinion found among *Alkap* artists is that *Alkap* originated as a medium of the anti-British movement (Islam, 2001). Central to its form was its reliance on bawdy jest, biting satire, and transgressive humor, which often targeted local authority figures, including feudal landlords (zamindars), corrupt officials, and religious elites. The integration of grotesque realism and exaggerated gestuality in *Alkap* resonated with Bakhtin's conceptualization of the carnivalesque, wherein laughter serves as a disruptive force against established power.

Bakhtinian Carnavalesque and Alkap

Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque provides a crucial theoretical lens for understanding the subversive potential of folk performance traditions such as *Alkap*. In *Rabelais and His World* (1984), Bakhtin explores the carnival as a space of temporary suspension of hierarchical norms, where laughter, satire, and grotesque realism serve as mechanisms for disrupting the established social order. According to Bakhtin (1984), the carnivalistic spirit enables the inversion of power structures, allowing the oppressed to momentarily reclaim agency through collective festivity and humor. Scholars such as Stallybrass and White further elaborate on how the carnivalesque operates within folk traditions to critique authority and reinforce alternative, counter-hegemonic worldviews (Humphrey, 2000). In this context, the performance of *Alkap* embodies the Bakhtinian notion of carnival, creating a performative space where rigid social hierarchies are destabilized, and marginalized voices find expression.

Existing literature on the carnivalesque in South Asian folk traditions has highlighted its role in resisting and renegotiating power structures. Chakrabarty (2000) emphasizes how vernacular performance forms, including Bengali folk theatre, employ satire to challenge dominant socio-political discourses. Similarly, Lutgendorf (1991) in his study of Indian oral traditions demonstrates how humor, parody, and grotesque exaggeration allow performers to critique societal contradictions without directly confronting oppressive forces. *Alkap* aligns with this tradition by using mimicry and ridicule to expose the hypocrisy of landlords, bureaucrats, and religious leaders. Through the grotesque embodiment of authority figures, performers diminish their symbolic power, making them subjects of communal laughter and derision. This mode of critique is consistent with what Bakhtin terms the degradation and renewal of official culture—a process where dominant ideologies are not only challenged but momentarily overturned through comic inversion.

Furthermore, *Alkap*'s reliance on audience participation resonates with Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque as an interactive experience. The participatory nature of *Alkap* disrupts passive spectatorship, encouraging communal

engagement and reinforcing the performative dissolution of social distinctions. This aspect of *Alkap* aligns with the Bakhtinian carnival, where the boundaries between performer and audience collapse, creating a shared subversive experience. The laughter generated in these performances does not merely entertain but serves as a collective act of resistance, a temporary yet powerful reclaiming of agency by rural communities.

While *Alkap*'s performative elements and subversive qualities appear to align closely with Bakhtinian notions of the carnivalesque, this connection has not been thoroughly examined in scholarly discussions. Existing studies on South Asian folk theatre have touched on themes of resistance and critique, yet *Alkap*'s unique relationship to carnival aesthetics remains largely unexplored. Further inquiry into its historical trajectory, performative practices, and socio-cultural significance could provide a richer understanding of its role within the carnivalesque tradition. Such an approach might reveal how *Alkap*, through its use of humor and satire, serves as a subtle yet powerful medium for negotiating the complexities of power and marginalization in rural Bengal.

Carnavalesque Elements in Alkap

Bakhtin identifies humor, parody, and inversion as defining traits of the carnivalesque. *Alkap*, with its satirical narratives and performative transgressions, embodies these elements in ways that challenge dominant discourses while providing entertainment to rural audiences.

1. Humor and Satire as Subversive Tools

Alkap thrives on humor and satire, which function as powerful instruments of resistance. Performers lampoon local zamindars (landlords), corrupt officials, and societal elites, exposing their hypocrisy and injustice. These critiques are embedded in witty dialogues and bawdy humor, ensuring accessibility to rural audiences while mitigating the risk of direct confrontation with the powerful.

A key component of this satire is the *khemta* segment, a comedic interlude characterized by exaggerated gestures, ribald jokes, and sharp repartee; This segment provides a space for questioning authority and voicing social grievances, all within an entertaining guise. Through humor, *Alkap* performances address sensitive issues such as land exploitation, caste discrimination, and gender inequality, allowing for social critique without provoking overt censorship.

2. Parody and Mimicry as Instruments of Demystification

Parody is central to *Alkap* performances, as it allows artists to mimic the speech patterns and mannerisms of authority figures, thereby turning social hierarchies on their heads. Figures of power—including kings, landlords, priests, and even colonial officials during the British Raj—are frequent targets of such mimicry.

One of the most distinctive parodic forms in *Alkap* is the *Kap*, a satirical dialogue that exposes the pretensions of local elites. These figures are often portrayed as bumbling and ineffectual, their flaws exaggerated to the point of absurdity. By reducing authority to farcical caricature, *Alkap* performances empower marginalized audiences to recognize and challenge oppressive power structures, transforming passive spectators into critical thinkers. (Islam, 2001)

3. Gender Subversion through Cross-Dressing

Cross-dressing is a hallmark of *Alkap*'s carnivalesque spirit, aligning with Bakhtin's notion of the 'grotesque body,' where societal norms of gender and propriety are temporarily dismantled. Male performers, known as *chhokras*, take on female roles with exaggerated femininity, engaging in playful subversion of gender norms. (Kaahon, 2017)

While cross-dressing serves as a source of humour, it also acts as a critical lens on societal expectations surrounding masculinity and femininity. In some performances, female characters—though played by men—display wit, intelligence, and assertiveness, subtly challenging patriarchal notions of female subservience. By highlighting the performative nature of gender, *Alkap* foreshadows contemporary feminist and queer theoretical discourses that interrogate the rigidity of gender identities.

***Alkap* as a Platform for Social Commentary**

Beyond its vibrant and carnivalesque appeal, *Alkap* served as a compelling medium for social commentary, addressing critical issues that affected rural communities. Rooted in local traditions and folklore, *Alkap* performances provided an artistic space where pressing concerns such as poverty, superstition, gender inequality, and communal harmony were explored. Through humor, satire, and dramatic storytelling, *Alkap* engaged audiences in discussions about societal flaws, encouraging reflection and change.

One of the key strengths of *Alkap* lay in its ability to reinterpret traditional narratives, particularly mythological and religious tales, in ways that resonated with contemporary realities. A notable example is the *Krishna Leela* segment, a recurring theme in *Alkap* performances. Rather than merely celebrating *Krishna's* divine exploits, these performances often juxtaposed his actions with the daily struggles of ordinary people, drawing attention to themes of justice, morality, and social responsibility. This blending of the mythic with the mundane allowed audiences to see parallels between sacred texts and their own lived experiences, making the performances both engaging and thought-provoking.

Satire played a crucial role in *Alkap's* function as a social critique. Many performances incorporated comedic skits that exposed the absurdities of social norms and questioned entrenched traditions. Issues such as dowry, child marriage, and caste discrimination were openly ridiculed, challenging the audience to reconsider these practices. By using wit and irony, *Alkap* performers could address these sensitive subjects without direct confrontation, making the critique more palatable and effective. The ability to mock powerful figures, including landlords, religious leaders, and corrupt officials, turned *Alkap* into a space for resistance against social injustice. Md. Nurul Islam observes (2001):

Ordinary people's pain and sorrow are presented by artists in the form of satire and mockery in their rhymes. They indirectly protest against the prevailing discriminatory system or anti-establishment. In this way, *Alkap* artists highlight the various problems of common people through their songs, sometimes symbolically and sometimes directly, voicing their protests. Therefore, *Alkap* is a form of satire, mockery, humour, or parody. (p.7; self trans.)

Another distinguishing feature of *Alkap* was its interactive nature. Unlike conventional theatrical performances, *Alkap* involved the audience in a dynamic exchange of ideas, often improvising based on their reactions. This participatory aspect made the performances feel more immediate and relevant, fostering dialogue between performers and spectators. The audience's laughter, cheers, or disapproving murmurs were integral to the experience, reinforcing a sense of collective engagement with the issues presented on stage.

Moreover, *Alkap's* fusion of entertainment and education made it a powerful tool for social awareness. Unlike formal lectures or sermons, which could be rigid and didactic, *Alkap* conveyed messages through engaging storytelling, music, and dance. They often try to keep the social fabric united regardless of religion, caste, or creed. For example, one of the compositions declares:

In the golden Bengal, why did we become humans?
We are neither Hindu nor Muslim.
In our race, everyone is equal. (Islam, 2001, p 53; self trans.)

This ensured that even complex or controversial ideas were absorbed effortlessly by audiences, making the performances an effective means of spreading awareness and inspiring social change. In essence, *Alkap* was more than just a folk theatre tradition—it was a reflection of the socio-political landscape of its time. Through its humour, satire, and reimagining of familiar narratives, it provided a space where the rural populace could engage with critical social issues in a meaningful and entertaining way. By blending art with advocacy, *Alkap* remained an influential force in shaping public consciousness and promoting reform within traditional communities.

CONCLUSION

Alkap, with its carnivalesque character, embodies a unique blend of humour, satire, and subversion, serving as a dynamic platform for social commentary and cultural expression. Rooted in the rural traditions of Bengal, it transcends mere entertainment, offering a space for marginalized communities to critique power structures, challenge societal norms, and voice dissent. Through its lively performances, *Alkap* has historically functioned as a tool for social cohesion,

fostering a sense of collective identity while addressing issues of caste, class, and gender. Its ability to blend critique with entertainment underscores its significance as both an art form and a medium for grassroots empowerment.

However, the decline of *Alkap* highlights the profound impact of socio-cultural transformations, including urbanization, shifting entertainment preferences, and the dominance of mass media. As rural populations migrated to urban centres, the traditional audience for *Alkap* diminished, while the rise of cinema and television offered more sophisticated and accessible alternatives. The commercialization of folk arts further marginalized indigenous traditions like *Alkap*, which lacked institutional support and patronage. Compounding these challenges was the absence of systematic documentation and archival efforts, leaving *Alkap* to survive in fragmented forms, performed sporadically during local festivals and fairs.

Despite these obstacles, *Alkap* remains a testament to the resilience and creativity of Bengal's rural communities. Its enduring spirit of humour and subversion continues to offer valuable insights into the dynamics of power and resistance. The tradition's potential for fostering critical dialogue and social transformation remains undiminished, even as it struggles to adapt to modern realities. Preserving *Alkap* is not merely an act of cultural conservation but a means of empowering marginalized voices and celebrating grassroots resilience. By revitalizing this vibrant tradition through institutional support, documentation, and innovative adaptations, we can ensure that its cultural critique and artistic richness continue to inspire future generations. In doing so, *Alkap* can reclaim its role as a vital force for social and cultural renewal, bridging the past and the present in meaningful ways.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

None.

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None.

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