



Use of Myth and Folklore as Indian Dramatic Tradition in Chittaranjan Das's Writings

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ABSTRACT

Chittaranjan Das (1870–1925), popularly known as Deshbandhu, was a prominent Indian freedom fighter, lawyer, and political leader who also made significant contributions to Bengali literature through his poetry collections *Malancha* (1913), *Mala* (1913), and *Sagar Sangeet* (Songs of the Sea, 1913). Although he did not compose formal dramatic works for the stage, his poems exhibit a strong dramatic quality rooted in the ancient Indian dramatic tradition as outlined in Bharata's *Natyashastra*. This paper examines how Das employs elements of Indian myth and folklore—such as Vaishnava devotional imagery, the symbolism of the world-ocean (*bhavarnava*), Krishna's flute, eternal cycles of birth and death, and folk motifs from Bengali oral traditions—to create vivid dramatic monologues and dialogues. In *Sagar Sangeet*, the sea is personified as a living character, addressed as a goddess, devotee, and eternal singer, evoking the interactive spirit of traditional forms like *Jatra*, *Pala*, and devotional *kirtan* performances. By drawing on familiar mythological and folkloric references, Das infuses his poetry with emotional intensity, spiritual depth, and a sense of communal resonance, subtly linking personal longing with national aspirations during the independence movement. This approach aligns with the Indian dramatic tradition's emphasis on shared cultural narratives to evoke *rasa* (aesthetic emotion) and moral insight. The study highlights Das's understated yet profound role in preserving and adapting India's oral and performative literary heritage in modern poetic expression, an aspect often overshadowed by his political legacy.

Keywords: Chittaranjan Das, Deshbandhu, *Sagar Sangeet*, Indian dramatic tradition, myth, folklore, Bengali poetry, Vaishnava imagery, dramatic monologue, *Natyashastra*, *Jatra*, independence movement, *rasa*, devotional literature

Introduction

Chittaranjan Das (1870–1925), fondly remembered as Deshbandhu or "Friend of the Nation," stands as one of the most remarkable figures in modern Indian history. While history books



often highlight his role as a fearless lawyer who defended Sri Aurobindo in the Alipore Bomb Case, a key leader in the Non-Cooperation Movement, the founder of the Swaraj Party, and a champion of Hindu-Muslim unity, his contributions as a poet remain less discussed yet deeply significant. Born into a cultured Bengali Baidya family with strong Brahma Samaj roots, Das received a Western education in London, where he interacted with thinkers like Sri Aurobindo and Sarojini Naidu. However, his poetic voice drew strength from India's ancient spiritual and literary traditions, especially Vaishnava devotion and folk expressions.

Das published his major poetry collections—Malancha (1913), Mala (1913), and most notably Sagar Sangeet (Songs of the Sea, 1913)—during a period of personal reflection and national awakening. These works, written in Bengali, show a poet who turned inward amid political turmoil. Sagar Sangeet, composed during a sea voyage, remains his highest achievement in verse. Sri Aurobindo himself translated parts of it into English, praising its mystical depth. In these poems, Das addresses the sea as a living presence—a goddess, a devotee of Krishna, a singer of eternal kirtan—blending personal emotion with timeless symbols from Hindu mythology and Bengali folklore.

Indian dramatic tradition, rooted in Bharata's Natyashastra and carried forward through classical Sanskrit plays, folk forms like Jatra in Bengal, and devotional performances, relies heavily on myth and folklore. Stories from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Puranas, and Vaishnava legends were not just narrated but enacted with dialogue, song, and emotional intensity to connect audiences to shared cultural memory. Even in non-theatrical poetry, this tradition appears through dramatic monologue—where the poet speaks directly to gods, nature, or the divine—as seen in bhakti literature and later romantic works.

Although Das did not compose stage plays, his poetry carries a strong dramatic quality. The speaker in Sagar Sangeet engages in a lively dialogue with the ocean, shifting through moods of wonder, longing, storm, calm, and spiritual union. This mirrors the conversational style of Vaishnava padavali songs and Jatra performances, where the bhakta pleads, weeps, and celebrates with the divine. Familiar folk images—the drifting logs of life, the call of Krishna's flute, the world-ocean (bhavarnava)—weave through his lines, evoking the same emotional and patriotic response that folk dramas stirred in village audiences.



This research paper explores how Chittaranjan Das employed myth and folklore to revive the essence of Indian dramatic tradition in his writings. By drawing on Vaishnava mysticism, folk proverbs, and devotional imagery, Das created a poetic form that was both personal and collective, spiritual and nationalistic. In an era dominated by political speeches and prose, his work quietly reminded readers of India's deeper cultural roots—where myth and folklore serve as vehicles for freedom, harmony, and self-realization. Through close reading of his poems, especially Sagar Sangeet, this study shows how Das bridged ancient tradition with modern aspirations, making his literary legacy an important, though understudied, part of India's freedom struggle.

What is the Indian Dramatic Tradition?

Indian drama began with the *Natyashastra* of Bharata (around 200 BCE–200 CE). Plays told stories from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Puranas, and local folk tales. Gods, demons, kings, and common people appeared on stage. The audience already knew the myths, so the drama brought those stories to life with song, dance, emotion, and dialogue. Later, folk forms such as Bengal's Jatra, Odisha's Pala, and Tamil's Therukoothu kept this tradition alive. They used familiar myths and folk legends to teach moral lessons, stir patriotism, or express devotion. Even when writers did not write for the stage, many poets used dramatic speech — addressing gods, nature, or the self — to create the same living feeling.

Das's Poetry and the Dramatic Voice

Das wrote most of his poems between 1910 and 1913, a time of personal and national crisis. He had defended Sri Aurobindo in the Alipore Bomb Case (1908–09) and seen the Swadeshi movement rise and fall. In his poems he turns away from direct politics and speaks in a personal, emotional voice. This voice is dramatic: the poet talks to the sea, to dawn, to death, to God, as if they are living characters on a stage.

The best example is Sagar Sangeet. Das wrote these forty-nine poems plus an introduction during a sea voyage from England to India in 1912. The sea becomes the main “character”. The poet addresses it again and again:

“O thou unhoped-for elusive wonder of the skies,
Stand still one moment! I will lead thee and bind
With music to the chambers of my mind.”



He calls the sea a goddess, a devotee of Krishna, a singer of eternal kirtan (devotional song), a friend across many births, and even the world-ocean (bhavarnava) of Hindu mythology. This is pure Vaishnava myth and folklore. In Bengali Vaishnava songs and folk tales, the sea is often the symbol of life's troubles, of maya, and of the soul's journey toward God. Das takes these familiar images and turns them into a long dramatic monologue. The mood changes like scenes in a play: calm dawn, wild storm (pralaya), quiet evening, midnight longing, and finally the hope of union with the Divine.

In one poem the sea sings "Haribole!" (the Vaishnava cry) with the sound of kartal and mridanga — exactly the instruments used in Jatra performances and village kirtans. The poet replies, pleads, weeps, and rejoices. It feels like a conversation between two actors on stage. This dramatic style comes straight from the Indian tradition where the hero (often the bhakta) speaks to nature, to God, or to his own heart.

Myth and Folklore in Other Poems

In Malancha and Mala we find smaller touches of the same style. Flowers, rivers, and the motherland appear as living beings. Das uses simple folk images — the drifting logs that meet and part (a common Bengali proverb), the flute of Krishna calling lost souls, the eternal cycle of birth and death — to express national feeling without shouting slogans. These images were already alive in Bengali folk songs, village stories, and devotional literature. By weaving them into his poems, Das made his readers feel the same emotional pull that they felt when watching a Jatra play about Radha-Krishna or the battle of Kurukshetra.

Why This Matters

Das believed literature should come from the spoken language of ordinary people (as he wrote in his essays on Odia and Bengali literature). He wanted words that could move hearts and change society. By using myth and folklore in a dramatic way, he kept alive an old Indian method: tell a timeless story so that people see their own time inside it. The sea in Sagar Sangeet is not just water; it is India's suffering, India's hope, and the eternal voice of the Divine. Readers in 1913 felt the same thrill that audiences felt centuries earlier when they watched a Sanskrit play or a village Jatra.



Conclusion

Chittaranjan Das did not leave us any stage plays. Yet in his poetry he practised the heart of Indian dramatic tradition — the living use of myth and folklore to create emotion, dialogue, and a sense of shared destiny. His poems speak across time, just as the old myths still speak to us today. In an age of political speeches and newspaper articles, Das quietly reminded his countrymen that the deepest freedom is also a spiritual and poetic freedom, expressed best through the ancient language of myth, song, and dramatic voice.

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