

## INDIAN FOLK THEATRE: A MEANS OF DEMOCRATIZATION

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Folk theatre is a popular form of mass entertainment, therefore some scholars have not thought it worthy of serious consideration. Very few good books are available on the subject. Actual performances in their natural settings form a spectator's theatrical perceptions and understanding of a particular dramatic form. The acting, dancing, music, stylized projection, masks, make up and costume give important dimensions to each dramatic form and a spectator is enriched with the history, life, customs, beliefs, rituals, music, landscape and the background which give a particular identity to each form. When the city theatre modeled on the 19<sup>th</sup> century picture frame stage offers little new and the classical dance dramas with their thick textured music and gesture language become esoteric, it is the folk theatre lying scattered in rural areas of India which promise exciting forms of powerful entertainment and social awareness. The paper argues how different forms of Folk Theatre have since years fulfilled the dreams of a democratic society-bringing together people of classes together for a purpose of exchange of ideas and social regeneration.

When after the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the classical Sanskrit language declined owing to foreign invasions and gave place to the rise of the vernacular languages, the Sanskrit drama was replaced by the growing folk theatre. Old legends, Puranic tales, mythological lore, philosophy and stories of Sanskrit plays became popular among the masses by the tradition of folk theatre. But the relationship between the classical and folk theatre is a complex one. Both are not anti-thesis of each other, they have co existed and have lent and borrowed from each other in the history of mankind.

Historically, folk art has preceded classical literature and art. Cave drawings and primitive hunt mimes can be seen as precursors of painting and dancing. Just as Greek tragedy and comedy had its origin in the fertility rites and from the worship of Dionysus, the classical Indian drama and dance have also been evolved out of forms of pageants, mimes and ancient rituals. The formal history of Indian folk drama may date back to five or six hundred of years but it has had its roots before the classical Sanskrit drama.

Hence, it is not surprising that the folk theatre as it is, stands indebted to many of the conventions of classical drama. The Sutradhara (Stage manager) of Sanskrit drama appears in vernacular folk forms as the Ranga, the Bhagavatha, the Vyas, or the Swami. The Buffon, the counterpart of the classical Vidushak, is the most favourite character of the folk theatre. He appears under different names in various regional forms- Konangi, Komali, Hanumanayaka, Joothan Mian. He speaks in rustic prose or dialect. He has the freedom to connect the past with the present and relate the drama to the contemporary scene. He also acts as a link between the audience and the players. The Purvaranga (stage preliminaries) is an essential feature of both Sanskrit and folk theatre. The musicians take their positions on the stage, tune their instruments and play a melody, the dancers perform a few dance numbers, the cast sings a Mangalacharan (a vernacular form of the classical invocation). Some of the folk theatres also use a benediction at the end of the play. They employ music, dance stylization, verse dialogues, exaggerated make up and masks with the same glamour as classical drama did. The scenes melt into

one another ,the action continue in spite of changes of locale and scene, asides ,soliloquies and monologues very much like the classical drama.

In India, folk theatre mirrors the variety and unity of its folk life. More than 130 crore people who inhabit it from Kashmir to Kanyakumari , speak 22 official languages, more than 720 dialects, have six important religions and numerous castes and creeds. Their physiological features, eating habits, social customs, rituals, religious beliefs, dressing sense differ from region to region but the people are bound by a common impulse embedded in their philosophy, music, arts and tradition, the folk theatre captures this panorama of life and presents the unity in diversity of India. It represents the people in their natural environs with all their contradictions and multifarious involvements, be they social, cultural or political .Each form of folk theatre opens up a treasure house of one community's style of speech, music, dance, dress, behaviour, humour ,proverbs, wit and age old wisdom. It contains a rich store of mythological heroes, medieval romances ,chivalric tales ,social customs ,beliefs and legends. If anyone wishes to be interfaced with the colorful diversity and unity of India ,one can just see the performances of the different folk theatres in the country, perhaps no historical or sociological documents can express the real India as construed through these performative arts scattered in all parts of the nation.

## **NINE WONDERS OF INDIAN FOLK THEATRE**

### **JATRA**

Though the Jatra form is equally popular in Orissa and the eastern parts of Bihar, it originated in Bengal. Its towns and cities have developed a middle class with an intellectual edge which is characterized by the strong impulse of their tradition ,language and folk culture. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, when the Bhakti movement swept Bengal, devotees went singing and dancing in processions. They sang in temple courtyards , narrating the events of their

patron god's life, and expressed their devotion with frenzied acting. The collective singing amidst the clang of gongs and fumes of incense produced a mass hypnosis and sent these singers into an acting trance. This singing with dramatic elements gradually came to be known as 'Jatra', which means "to go in procession" .If Chaitanya Dev's singing and dancing in the streets, playing Rukmini,Krishna's wife added to the existing Jatra, the elements of make-up and costume in the 18<sup>th</sup> century,Jatra had a sweeping popularity in the hands of ' Pala' writers on the Krishna theme such as Parmanand Sen, the two brothers Sreedan Das and Subol Das, the singer actor Badan Adhikari and Sisuram Adhikari who brought structural perfection to the Jatra. The masses were hungry for this intensely emotional musical form. Those who did not believe in the Krishna cult were fed on Rama,Shiva,and the Goddess Kali.These Palas were called Rama Jatra, Shiva Jatra, and Chandi Jatra. Historical romances and love stories were added to the repertoire. The most famous was Bidya Sundar, the story of Princess Bidya and Prince Sundar. By the close of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Jatra repertoire swelled with love themes, mythological heroes, historical romances and tales of legendary characters. As the political consciousness grew, its religious color diluted, and Jatra writers gave political coloring to their palas. The Jatra actor has a sense of composition and speech delivery, he is aware of four side of audience. Now a days, Jatra is highly organized and controlled by private individuals.

### **NAUTANKI**

North India has two extremes of folk theatre:the secular Nautanki and Naqal and the religious Ramlila .Nautanki,an operatic drama, is profound in U P,Punjab and Rajasthan. The earliest drama of this form were called sangeet(musicals).One such musical 'Shahzadi Nautanki'(the story of Princess Nautanki) became so popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the people started calling the form 'Nautanki'.According to another theory, Nautanki evolved out of Ballads and the recitals of Bards, The Ballad singers ,as they unfolded their stories, gesticulated and dramatized the emotions of the

various characters. Gradually, in addition to the narrator, other singers were introduced to play the different roles. The stories of saints, robbers, kings, lovers and knights popular in the folklore have been carried on by Nautanki performers who in many cases use most of the verses of the original Ballads.

Nautanki is performed on a waist high platform surrounded by the audience. After introductory songs in praise of the Guru, the stage and the deity (Krishna, Shiva, Saraswati, or some other god), the Ranga (stage-manager) sings out a dramatic event of the story and ushers in the characters. Generally, the play starts with a King's court, a robber's den, or a queen's palace, providing the occasion for dancing and singing. After the Bhaint (invocation song), the Ranga sings a couplet. It is followed by the Chaubola, a four line song, each line with twenty eight beats. The Chaubola singing is concluded by the 'daur' which has four lines, the last line of the daur is synchronized with a loud stroke of the Nagada which clatters with a brilliant ferocity. The Nautankies are mostly written in Urdu with a mixture of Braj, Hindi and Rajasthani. Stories of Nautankies are full of noble bandits, brave fighters and truthful lovers, they centre on tales from history or religion or from folk heroes, even robbers. Bhagat, an old form of operative drama, was in its earlier stages a dramatized Keertan singing with a thin story. Nautanki owes its birth to this old form and is called its 'daughter'. Because of its commercial character, Nautanki has attracted women characters. Its secularism has wiped out almost all the religious elements and it has become increasingly lewd like Tamasha in Maharashtra. Nautanki has the same dominance of music as Khayal of Rajasthan and Maanch of the Malwa region in MP.

### **RAMLILA & RAASLILA**

Ramlila and Raaslila are the oldest and most popular forms of religious folk performances in whole of North India. If Ramlila is performed in almost all small and big places by different committees by professional as well as non-professional artists at the time of Vijaya Dashmi, enacting Lord Ram's life right from his birth to his coronation as King of Ayodhya. It

starts late in evening and continues late in the night. Like other folk performances, it starts with Ganesh Vandana or Mangalacharan, the characters are introduced by the Sutradhaar and the characters enact the stories/events of the Ramayan with variations of place and language in well ornamented dresses to mesmerize the audience. Every day the stage is changed as per the setting. The dialogues are often presented with accompaniment of musical instruments like harmonium and tabla, with interludes of religious songs (bhajans). It can be organized with makeshift stages in open public places, mostly demarcated in villages and cities as Ram Lila Maidan where every year a Mela (fair) is organized to burn the effigy of Ravan, the most attended event of Ramlila on the auspicious occasion of Dusherra or Vijaya Dashmi. On and around Vijayadashmi, the event of Ram's victory over Ravan is dramatized in different folk performances in most of the parts of India with regional flavour of art and music, thus making Ram's story most popular in all parts of India among the educated and the uneducated people from all classes and creeds. Even in an age of electronic media entertainment, thousands of people of all ages and classes gather to watch Ramlila that speaks volumes of its popularity as a folk form.

Unlike Ramlila where action and narration dominate, Raaslila is integral to dance and music. In and around Mathura, Vrindavan and Govardhan, the places of Lord Krishna's birth and childhood (Brij), are the places which mostly have the performances of Raaslila. In Raaslila, professionals and Bhaktas enact the stories of Lord Krishna's life from Shri Madbhagwat with dance and music. It is often organized over a month in the Hindu month of Falgun around Holi with all fanfare and enthusiasm. Raaslila is performed in chorus, with one character playing the role of Krishna with the flute and many women characters as his Sakhies (friends) headed by Radha, the love and inspiration of Lord Krishna. It focuses on Krishna's pranks and the complaints of his Sakhies, celebrating the love as most direct and easy way to please God. Now a days, Raaslila is not only organized by religious

organizations of temples, it is specially organized by affluent people in social gatherings and even hotels to entertain the foreigners in and around Mathura round the year. Over the years, it has become more a cultural icon than merely a religious performance. There are number of itinerant companies run by professional artists who charge hefty amount for the performance with latest equipments of sound and light at cultural fairs and events all over the country. The amateur artists of Ramlila and Raas lila, often suffer from financial crisis and struggle for survival like these age old religious folk performances in the present age of electronic media and films which have provided in door entertainments to the comfort loving young generation. The impact of cinema has been largely responsible to corrode the original form and flavour of these folk performances and bringing a drastic change in the expectations of the audience from such performative arts.

### **BHAVAI**

The Bhavai is performed during Navratri – 9 nights coinciding with the Dusshera festival, in front of the shrine of Amba Mata. The players are convinced that the goddess attends the performance.

The Bhavai was started in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century by Asaita Thakor, a Brahmin of the Audichya clan (there are 84 sub-castes of Brahmins in Gujarat). He recited scriptures, singing the texts and explaining their meaning to the devotees in the precincts of a temple, in the town of Sidhpur. Asaita had been ostracized by his Brahmin community because in order to get back a farmer's daughter Ganga from a Muslim's captivity, he had taken food with Ganga. For this, he left his village with his three sons and decided to earn his living by singing and acting. He composed playlets attacking social injustice, prudery and caste system. His family was called 'Trigala' meaning 'three houses'. Today, 'Trigala' itself is a caste and inheritor of Bhavai drama. Asaita left 360 Veshas (playlets) of Bhavai, most of them are still performed by the Bhavai troops. 'Veshas' means 'dressing up', 'masking' or 'a scene', it lasts for half an hour to three hours, depending on the

performers. In spite of the deep devotion of the players to the goddess, the Bhavai, is secular at its roots. Its jokes, dances, themes and songs deal with the life of the common people, mythological heroes are rarely represented. It is the saucy maid, the miserly merchant, the betraying wife, the romantic stranger, the lascivious old man, the braggart who regale the audiences, are the most popular characters. The players sing a devotional song 'Garbi' invoking the goddess and then walk to the arena where the Naik draws a circle with a 10 foot radius on the ground, using the point of his sword, this is the acting area called 'pauadh' or 'chanchar'. Modern Garba dance has its origins from 'Garbi' an invocation to the goddess.

### **TAMASHA**

It is said that originally Tamasha performances in Maharashtra initiated in the times of Mughal emperor Aurangzeb when his imperial army camped in the South India at the Western Ghats to quell the rebel chief like Shivaji and other Maratha warriors. Singing girls and dancers were imported from North India to entertain the bored Mughal soldiers. The Domhari and Kolhati, acrobats and the tumblers of the local communities, leaned the Northern dance style readily and joined the entertainers. The local poets composed songs in Marathi. The traditional Gondhalis who sang and danced in praise of the goddess Parvathy, influenced the newly developing form of entertainment Tamasha, which in Persian meant 'fun, play, entertainment'. The Gondhal singers used the 'Tuntuna' (a one stringed instrument) and 'Manjeera' (a pair of small metal cymbals), when the Tamasha form was evolving, these two instruments were incorporated in it. After the death of Aurangzeb in 1707 the power in Maharashtra passed directly to Shahuji, Shivaji's grandson at Satara and the Peshwas, Bajirao I, who was a great warrior and hunter, was fond of dancing. He had been gifted with a beautiful dancing girl Mastaani by Chhatrasal, the Raja of Bundelkhand. Singers, poets and Tamasha dancers thrived during the reign of Bajirao I and II.

Because of its erotic elements, Tamasha was in general spurned by the upper class. The first people to join in this form of entertainment were Mahars and Mangs, two outcast communities. The dark skinned Mahars form the backbone of Tamasha. Their women have swarthy sleekness. In Poona, Tamasha performances are dominated by them. Because of its low social status and lewd associations. When in later half of 18<sup>th</sup> century, some Brahmin Tamasha composers like Anant Fandi, Ram Joshi and Prabhakar joined it, they were disowned by their community. Today there are 800 full fledged Tamasha troupes, 40,000 people- actors, dancers, instrumentalists and their families make living in this way. 3000 women actresses on tour perform in the village squares, most of them come from Pawala's community. In cities like Pune, The Arya Bhushan Theatre on Luxmi Road offers a Tamasha performance every night. In villages squares, Tamasha opens with two drummers, the Dholkiwala and the Holgiwala who tune to the singer's voice and can take any religious or social issue to demonstrate with the Lavani-a narrative poetical composition expressing vigour and love. It is the spine of the play.

### **THERUKOOTHU**

In South India, the classical and the folk theatre have a stronger link. Both have the same kind of preliminaries, musical instruments, invocation songs, and both make use of a small curtain from behind which the actor reveals himself. They use towering headgear, jewelry, crowns, opulent costumes and make-up. Though in the heavily classical land of Tamil Nadu, a folk theatre form like Therukoothu stands neglected, it has a long tradition, and has existed for centuries. In the slum areas of Chennai, there are at least 50 amateur Therukoothu troupes, but few people know of them. Therukoothu in Tamil means 'Street Play'. It is performed on a fourteen feet squared stage at street level. The spectators sit on three sides. The fourth is reserved for the pinpattu (background music) where instrumentalists sit on a wooden diwan.

The play opens with the worship of Ganesha. An actor wearing an elephant-head mask dances while the musicians, sing an invocation song. After the dance, he sits on a small wooden bench and is worshipped by a priest. Then the Chorus invokes Shiva, Meenakshi, Dakshinamurthi (one of Shiva's forms who always sits facing South), Saraswati and finally Trimurthi (Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva). After this brief introduction, the Kattiakaran (stage manager) sings from behind a curtain held by two stagehands. He comes forward and describes himself in the third person. He wears a gold headdress, necklaces, bracelets and a flowering tunic with a sword tucked into a silken girdle. He announces the play, comments on it, and links up the scenes. The Komali (Baffoon) always makes a starting entry. He enters slapping and beating the spectators with a cloth whip and announces himself with a song in the third person, shifts to prose and makes fun of the highest and the noblest. While most dance dramas have richly embroidered silk curtains, the Therukoothu uses a length of white cotton cloth. The face and feet of the character are visible as the curtain conceals him only from chin to the knees. He dances and sings and explains his entry in a song. This introduction is in the third person, giving an element of abstraction, a sense of detachment as if another man were speaking for the characters. "Meenakshi Ammai Natakam", "Lava Kusha Natakam", are famous Therukoothu plays which use dance form Kathakali.

### **YAKSHANGANA**

Yakshagana means music of the heaven. As an operative dance-drama of more than three hundred years, its temperament is tandava, full of valour and anger. Its songs-literary compositions set to a distinct type of music- were sung and danced in temple courtyards and village squares. Slowly the form took the name of the style of musical composition. The themes are taken from The Ramayan, The Mahabharat and The Purana, mythological heroes and demons appear on the stage. All the plays have battle scenes, even those dealing with marriage and diplomatic missions as in "Girija Kalyana", there is a fierce battle between

Shiva and Daksha. In "Subhadra kalyana", the valiant Arjuna fights Subhadra's cousins and brothers.

About a dozen professional troupes tour the coastal lands of North Karnataka and hold performances in a village square. A Yakshagana play starts at 9 in the evening and lasts till morning. The stage is 16ft square and at ground level. A pole is fixed in each of the four corners with plantains tied to them, their large leaves form a feathery canopy. Two metal lamps brim with coconut oil, burn whole night and people in the audience sit in the three sides glued to the performance. The Bhagvatha (director and singing chorus) sits up stage, holding tiny cymbals with other instruments. Lord Ganesha with whose worship, the play begins, is revealed from the behind the curtain, he is never impersonated. After the prayer, the Hanumanayaka (buffon) enters. He plays the announcer, the messenger, the servant- anything. He puts questions to each incoming character and draws him out. His remarks are disrespectful and meaningful. Both Bhagvatha and Hanumanayaka quote from the scriptures and link audience with the plot in particular and folk tradition with the classical, in general.

### **CHHAU**

Chhau is a unique form of masked dance drama, popular in the area of Saraikela, presently a part of Jharkhand. It was formerly the capital of the Odia Saraikela Princely State. Saraikela rulers have always been actively associated with the Chhau as patrons as well as performers. In Chhau, the dancer impersonates a character-god, animal, bird, human-being, rainbow, night-flower-and acts out a small theme. These dance drama snippets are performed annually in April at Chaitra Parva Festival at Saraikela. The festival has elaborate rituals in the honor of Kali (the Red and Black Kalies are impersonated by the Head priest of the main Shiva temple), and celebrates the glory of Lord Shiva in his "ARDHA -NARISHWAR" form-Shiva and Parvathi in one. The entire village, Royal family, priests, musicians, chanters, shop-keepers, farmers-participate in the ritual. The Chhau

dances are performed in an area of religious worship. But Chhau themes and methods of presentation have little to do with religion.

All the above folk-forms and innumerable other, in different parts of India, hold a mirror to the socio-cultural traditions of India. They strengthen our democratic ideals- unity is diversity and diversity is unity. Any discourse or theory that aims at their universal nature and character would be infeasible and largely an attempt to ignore the fact that no homogenization is possible as it blinds us to their specific evolution in time and space. It can safely be argued that each form of the Folk drama is the representation of the voice of the common people, the Other of our main cultural stream that has not been elitist in the choice of form, technique and language. It has been traditional as well as innovative but it has always been rooted in the tastes and interests of the masses. It is, in a sense, a people's response to the esoteric, aristocratic and very organized forms of literary forms and expressions of the educated class. So, if it often lacks refinement and variations in the re-tellings of our myths and legends, it owes to its oral tradition and its target audience being largely uneducated. The audience of folk theatre reminds us of Gray's description of the villagers, the 'grandeur' of main stream drama with its latest dramatic techniques must not "hear with a disdainful smile" the achievements of Folk drama. If India has a reputation of a spiritual leader owing to its rich scriptures -The Ramayana, The Mahabharata and Puranas, the credit goes to different folk forms that have enacted their stories with gusto and have enlivened them to the future generations with local color and fashion of speech. The adage Unity in Diversity, very often used proudly with regard to India, seems to deconstruct when we comprehend the nitty gritty of each folk performance, and an image of multicultural-multi-layered-multi-lingual India emerges, that makes us more sensitized towards the individual attributes of a particular sect or community, which have survived because of these folk forms. The fact these folk forms have survived without much patronizing by the Govt.

organizations, speak volumes about their art content, and draw the attention of all those amateurs who have either been active participants in the performance of these folk forms or have patronized them by making small organizations in small or big places in different parts of India. A very special feature of the folk performances has been the participation of the lower castes and women as actors, singers or musicians, it has largely promoted eradication of caste discrimination, all sort of people sit together and enjoy such dramatic performances. In the history of folk drama, we hear of Asaita Thakur, a Brahmin (later, ostracized,) for promoting and performing Bhavai in Gujrat, and the active roles done by Gondhal singers, Mahars and Mangs, in Tamasha, who hailed from the lowest sections of the society. In this sense, Indian Folk

forms have always been successful in bridging the gaps of caste and creed not only in the making but among audience also. Its localized forms imbibe the democratic spirits of our people. We can feel the pulse of India enjoying the different folk forms, spread in different parts, presenting the collage of Indian core sensibility which has been as varied and unified as Reality itself.

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