

TRADITIONAL AND FOLK THEATRE

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ABSTRACT

Theatre is a powerful tool for communication ideas and entertaining people with creative experiences. India has a longest and richest tradition, the origin is closely related to ancient rituals. Bharata's natya shastra giving a divine origin to Indian theatre, attributing it to the natyaveda. It started as a narrative form, with recitation, singing and dancing becoming integral elements of the theatre. Theatre in India has encompassed all the other forms of literature and fine arts into physical presentation. It is divided into three distinctive kinds. The second phase of theatre in India was based on oral traditions. The folk theatre emerged forcefully in different regions and different languages.

KEYWORDS: Natyashastra, Natyaveda, Lokadharmi, Natyadharmi, Media Wing, SAG

INTRODUCTION

The folk or traditional arts of India have from ancient times been used for moral, religious and socio-political purposes. Rarely have they been resorted to for pure entertainment alone, though they are often packed with spontaneity, and humor. Indeed they have been down the ages schools of learning, courts of justice and discussion for a representative of the public sphere. In contrast to the modern mass media the traditional media are personal, familiar and more credible forms, with the majority of literate and illiterate identifying with their formats, genres and contents. However, these forms need to be used with understanding and sensitivity.

Vulgarization could set in if they are left to the mercy of urban elites. A deliberate distortion of the forms could easily alienate the masses. Meddling with folk forms which are alien to the idea of communication on contemporary topics shows scant respect for them. It must also be noted that folk forms are religion, community, caste, culture and language/dialect-specific and bear values and associations often unique to them, these need to be taken into account in any attempts at adaptation or modernization. Theatre is a powerful tool for communication ideas and entertaining people. The theatre program teaches the process of creating theatre and provides a variety of creative experiences. Theatre majors grow as communicators, problem-solvers and collaborators. (Madhu, 2013)

Origination

India has a longest and richest tradition in theatre going back to at least 5000 years. The origin of Indian theatre is closely related to ancient rituals and seasonal festivities of the country. **Bharata's natya shastra** (2000 BC to 4th century ad) was the earliest and most elaborate treatise on dramaturgy written anywhere in the world. The traditional account in Bharata's natya shastra gives a divine origin to Indian theatre, attributing it to the **natyaveda**, the holy book of dramaturgy created by Lord Brahma.

In natya shastra, Bharata muni consolidated and codified various traditions in dance, mime and drama. Natya shastra describes ten classifications of drama ranging from one act to ten acts. No book of ancient times in the world

contains such an exhaustive study on dramaturgy as natya shastra. It is addressed to the playwright, the director, and the actor because to Bharata Muni these three were inseparable in the creation of a drama. The Sanskrit word for drama, *nataka*, derives from the word meaning "*dance*". In traditional Hindu drama, expression was achieved through music and dancing as well as through acting, so that a play could be a combination of opera, ballet and drama.

According to legend the very first play was performed on heaven when the gods having defeated the demons were enacting their victory. Hindu theorists from the earliest days conceived of plays in terms of two types of production: **lokadharmi** (realistic), which involved the reproduction of human behaviour on the stage and the natural presentation of objects and **natyadharmi** (conventional) which is the presentation of a play through the use of stylized gestures and symbolism and was considered more artistic than realistic. (www.culturopedia.com)

Theatre in India started as a narrative form, with recitation, singing, and dancing becoming integral elements of the theatre. This emphasis on narrative elements made our theatre essentially theatrical right from the beginning. That is why the theatre in India has encompassed all the other forms of literature and fine arts into its physical presentation: literature, mime, music, dance, movement, painting, sculpture and architecture - all mixed into one and being called '*natya*' or theatre in English. (Rajendra, 2013)

Classifications

Roughly the Indian theatre can be divided into three distinctive kinds: the classical or the Sanskrit theatre, the traditional or the folk theatre and the modern theatre. This was the second phase of the evolution of theatre in India, which was based on oral traditions. This form of theatre was being performed from about 1000 AD onwards up to 1700 AD and continued further until today in almost every part of India. Emergence of this kind of theatre is linked with the change of political set-up in India as well as the coming into existence of different regional languages in all parts of the country. The classical theatre was based on natya shastra was much more sophisticated in its form and nature and totally urban oriented. On the contrary, the traditional theatre evolved out of rural roots and was more simple, immediate and closer to the rural milieu. (www.iloveindia.com)

Different Forms

Historically speaking, it was during the 15th and 16th century that the folk theatre emerged forcefully in different regions. It used different languages, the languages of the regions in which it emerged. Initially these were purely devotional in tenor and typically revolved around religion, local legends and mythology. Later, with changing times it became more secular in content and began to focus on folk stories of romance and valour and biographical accounts of local heroes.

Indian folk theatre can be broadly divided into two broad categories - religious and secular- giving rise to the ritual theatre and theatre of entertainment respectively. The two forms thrived together, mutually influencing each other. Although they are considered as folk theatre traditions, some of them have all the attributes of a classical theatre. Most often the folk and traditional forms are mainly narrative or vocal, i.e. singing and recitation- based like Ramlila, Rasleela, Bhand Nautanki and Wang, without any complicated gestures or movements and elements of dance. India is also rich in ballad- singing, traditions such as Pabuji-ki-phar of Rajasthan and Nupipaalaa of Manipur. (www.chandrakantha.com)

Uniqueness

While most of these theatrical styles have their own unique form dependent on their local customs, they differ from one another in execution, staging, costume, make-up and acting style, although there are some broad similarities. The south Indian forms emphasise on dance forms like Kathakali and Krishnattam of Kerala and actually qualify as dance dramas, while the north Indian forms emphasise on songs like the Khyal of Rajasthan, the Maach of M.P, Nautanki of U.P and the Swang of Punjab. The Jatra of Bengal, Tamasha of Maharashtra and the Bhavai of Gujarat stress on dialogues in their execution, the latter two emphasise on comedy and satire. Puppet theatre also flourished at many places in India. Shadow (Gombeyatta of Karnataka, Ravana Chhaya of Orissa), Glove (Gopalila of Orissa, Pavai Koothu of Tamil Nadu), Doll (Bommalattam of Tamil Nadu and the Mysore State and Putul Nautch of Bengal) and string puppets (Kathputli of Rajasthan and Sakhi kundhei of Orissa) are some of the popular forms in vogue.

Dramatic art can also be found in some of the solo forms of Indian classical dance like Bharat Natyam, Kathak, Odissi and Mohiniattam and folk dances like the Gambhira and Purulia Chhau of Bengal, Seraikella Chhau of Bihar and Mayurbhanj Chhau of Orissa. Dramatic content is even woven into the ritual ceremonies in some areas, particularly those of Kerala, with its Mudi yettu and Teyyam. (Kathryn)

Advantages of the Folk Media

The folk media are close to the hearts and minds of the people, so their appeal is at a personal and intimate level. Further, their familiar format and content as also the local and colloquial dialects used make for clarity in communication. Cross-cultural communication hurdles are not encountered here. The numerous groups and different forms available for specific homogenous groups and for specific purposes can be exploited to cater to people of different regions, on home ground as it were. Rapport is immediate and direct, the barriers to communication almost non-existent.

Folk media are available to all and sundry and enjoyed by persons of different age groups - all at a very low cost. The greatest advantage of the folk media over the electronic media is their flexibility in accommodating new themes. For instance, comments on current events can be introduced into the traditional form of the tamasha or the jatra or even the keertan. These are hardly ever interpreted as interpolations, as they are not pure forms. Indian folk forms have a generous mix of dialogue, dance, song, clowning, moralising and prayer. They cater to small audiences at a time, but these audiences are so completely caught up in the folk forms that the impact on them is at a much deeper level. Folk media unlike the electronic media involve and often invite audience participation. The Keertana, Alha and various street theatre genres are good examples of this. The folk art forms satisfy our innate need for self-expression, for moral instruction combined with entertainment and for the dramatic and the lyrical. The folk media preserve and disseminate in a lively manner, the traditions and cultures of our forefathers. (Kumar, 2011)

From a country-wide perspective the folk and traditional media are still the only mass media in the sense that they have their roots in the tradition and experience of a large majority of the population and also that they have a reach much more extensive than any of the modern technological media. It must be noted however, that the numerous religious, caste and linguistic groups across the 25 states of the country have their own distinctive folk and traditional media though there has been liberal intermingling and interaction among them. With the advance of the communication technologies in the country there has been some interaction between the traditional and the technological media, the traditional have introduced film-style songs and other elements of the cinema into their folk forms and the technological media like cinema

and television have integrated folk themes and formats into their techniques. The beginnings of cinema and TV suggest that there is often continuity between the folk and the audio visual media. The first Indian film, Raja Harishchandra was a mythological; the earliest soaps were the Mahabharata and the Ramayan a.

Media Wing

Public and private organizations use the folk and traditional media on a large scale in their efforts in community and national development. The largest public body thus involved is the song and drama division, a unit of the ministry of information and broadcasting. Ministry publications describe the unit as its live media wing which utilises the traditional folk and contemporary state forms like puppets, plays and dance-dramas, ballads and harikathas for purposes of social communication, projecting the development activities in the country especially in the rural areas.¹ The division functions at three levels at its headquarters in New Delhi at eight regional centres in various parts of the country and at nine sub-centres at district headquarters. The division has over 40 departmental troupes, several sound and light units and registered parties which are made up of eminent performers in the folk arts. (www.indianetzone.com)

Social Action Groups (SAG)

The majority of private organizations utilizing the folk and traditional media are social action groups (SAGs) owing allegiance to various political, social and religious bodies. Marxist and Christian groups are perhaps the most active groups here. It is difficult to estimate the number of such groups or the nature of their use of the folk media. What is also difficult to investigate is the manner in which they are funded. Several foreign funding agencies are actively involved in the social work of these SAGs with assistance of central government which desperately needs foreign exchange. (www.yakshagana.com)

The folk popular genre shares two important features that distinguish them from other genres.

- Whatever their origin they depend for patronage on the masses.
- They are given more to entertainment and profane rather than sacred purpose.

The folk theatre persisted as popular entertainment for less sophisticated audience to which the Sanskrit theatre did not cater. Each region has its own particular variety. The forms are essentially alike but are known under different names in different regions such is the case with nautanki, khayal, manch and bhagat all of which are variants of song. The latter is a north Indian theatre form which places primary importance on singing. **Khayal** of Rajasthan is a combination of song, dance and drama and is thought to have originated in the early 18th century. **Manch** literally meaning "stage" is native to Madhya Pradesh region. It probably originated in 17th century. Song and music are predominated and is played in open air with minimum theatrical accessories.

The stage is unique in its height which may be as much as 12 feet. There are two other important regional genres which share the basic form with the above. They are **Jatra** and **Bhavai**. **Bhavai** is Gujarati folk theatre, which dates back to the 14th century. It consists of a series of play of varying lengths and on a variety of themes, which are performed through acting, dancing and singing. **Jatra** has its home in Bengal but is also performed in Bihar and Orissa. It is an open-air performance. It has been described as "sacred opera". Traditionally all roles are played by male actors. Recently some women actresses have been included in jatra troupes. (www.rangvarta.com)

Tamasha is the principal form of folk theatre of Maharashtra. It emerged in the 16th century. It served as "*bawdy lascivious diversion*" for both Moghul army and Marathas. The bawdy strain still remains today but has modified to suit the wholesome family tastes of the middle and upper middle class. Modern Tamasha troupes are of two varieties: song-dance troupe and folk drama troupe. The philosophical and aesthetic scheme of tamasha incorporates three basic elements: the Entertainment tradition, the more serious Propagandist tradition and the Devotional tradition.

Three other forms of folk theatre prevalent in South India are Burrakatha, Cavittu Natakan and Veethi Nataka. Burrakatha is a form from Andhra Pradesh. "*Katha*" means story and Burra is a long-necked, pumpkin headed, stringed instrument used by the leader to accompany his singing and dancing. Cavittu Natakam is Christian dance drama which dates from the latter half of the 16th century. It is performed by certain companies of central Kerala. The name literally means "*foot stamp drama*", a reference to the vigorous, strong, high arching steps that pound the traditional wooden platform stage when male characters dance. Veethi Nataka which means "*street drama*" is very popular form of Andhra Pradesh. It is an open air show. It originated in 12th century and in course of time was influenced by the Vira Savite. Stories from Siva legend Puranic Tales make up for the content (Kar, 2011)

CONCLUSIONS

Today these forms continue to attract large audiences in some locations, especially in small towns. Modern theatre has been drawing from these age old forms. Perhaps one of the most important resources available to India's communicator's, and one that remains virtually untapped, are the folk performers themselves. Folk performers are powerful agents of change. They must be convinced of the validity of the message they are conveying. Perhaps not enough of an effort has been made to make the folk performers realize the importance of the new messages. Offering a monetary incentive to produce an item with a specific message will not result in meaningful communication. If the performers themselves are not completely committed to the new idea, they will not be able to put it across effectively.

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