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Folk Theatre in India: Role, Needs and Challenges

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Abstract

Folk theatre in the past was instrumental in channelizing newer ideas among the rural masses in their native languages. The ideals of freedom, messages of reform as against child marriage, favouring widow remarriage and girl education were reached out to masses via theater. Even Indian values as truth, sacrifice and love were disseminated via this mode. People in villages, today, do not feel attracted towards folk theatre and it has become an archaic entity representing a dead culture. The present research paper aims to study and examine the reasons for stagnancy in Indian Folk theatre, with relevant examples from folk theatres of some states. It shall suggest the changes that must be incorporated to make this form of art more acceptable, dynamic and progressive.

Keywords: Folk, Native, Truth, Sacrifice, Love, Education, Culture, Remarriage, Theatre, Progressive.

Introduction

Folk theatre has played a great role in infotainment in the past but failed in the present because it did not re-invent itself. It did not modernize its subject unlike its urban counterpart. People also want something besides tales of demons, gods and queens. Any dynamic and progressive change is readily accepted by the society, while static entities are bound to fail in long run. The present research paper traces historical influence of folk theatre on masses and present times with relevant examples from folk theatres of some states, and examines the reasons for stagnancy in present Indian Folk theatre,. It shall suggest the changes that must be incorporated to make this form of art more acceptable, dynamic and progressive.

Communication forms an important aspect of human behaviour and helps in the process of social, political and cultural transformation of a society. Communities and individuals have utilized a wide range of media-folk music, folk dance, folk theatre etc. for social purposes as a support to local development schemes for health and family welfare campaigns, for creating political awareness, etc. Ranganath (1980) described folk media as living expressions of the lifestyle and culture of people evolved through the years. Dissanayake (1984) defined it as a communication system embedded in the culture which existed much before the arrival of mass media, and which still exists as a vital mode of communication in many parts of the world presenting a certain degree of continuity, despite changes. Folk Lore and Folk Life fall into four categories, as Dorson grouped it as: 1) Oral Literature, 2) Material Culture, 3) Social Folk Custom and 4) Performing Folk Arts. Among them, Performing Folk Arts involve tradition to process artistic creation (3).

India has its complex social system which comprises different castes, classes, creeds and tribes. The high rate of illiteracy added to the inadequacy of mass media to reach almost 80 percent of India's 121 crore population who reside in villages. Traditional Media can be used to reach these people in the process of change and development of India. Even where modern media have penetrated isolated areas, the older forms maintain their validity, particularly when used to influence attitudes, instigate action and promote change. Extensive experience shows that traditional forms can be effective in dispelling the superstitions, archaic perceptions and unscientific attitudes that people have inherited as part of tradition, and which are difficult to modify if the benefits of change are hard to demonstrate. Practitioners of the traditional media use a subtle form of persuasion by presenting the required message in locally popular artistic forms. This cannot be rivaled by any other means of communication (MacBridge and Abel, 12). Theatre as an old form of Communication is a deep-rooted tradition in India's vibrant culture. Folk Theatre is a composite art in India with a fusion of elements from music, dance, pantomime, versification, epic and ballad recitation,

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graphic and plastic arts, religion and festival peasantry. The Folk theatre having roots in native culture, embedded in local identity and social values besides providing mass entertainment helped Indian society as indigenous tools of interpersonal, inter-group and inter-village communication for ages. Folk theatre has been used extensively in India to propagate critical social, political and cultural issues in the form of theatrical messages to create awareness among the people. As an indigenous form it breaks all kinds of formal barriers of human communication and appeals directly to the people. Each folk theatre form has a particular community, language, area and way of life (Das 2-3).

Initially these were purely devotional in theme 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. Most often the folk and traditional forms are mainly narrative or vocal, i.e. singing and recitation-based like Ramlila, Rasleela, Nautanki and Swang, without any complicated gestures or movements and elements of dance. Kathakali and Krishnattam of Kerala and actually qualify as dance dramas, while the north Indian forms emphasize on songs, like the Khyal of Rajasthan, the Maach of Madhya Pradesh, the Nautanki of Uttar Pradesh and the Swang of Punjab. The Jaatra of Bengal, Tamasha of Maharashtra and the Bhavai of Gujarat stress on dialogues in their execution, the latter two emphasize on comedy and satire. Puppet theatre also flourished at many places in India-Shadow (Gombeyatta of Karnataka, RavanaChhaya of Orissa), Glove (Gopalila of Orissa, PavaiKoothu of Tamil Nadu), Doll (Bommallattam of Tamil Nadu and the Mysore State and PutulNaach of Bengal) and String puppets (Kathputli of Rajasthan and SakhiKundhei of Orissa) are some of the popular forms in vogue (Parmar).

Folk theatre has its roots in native culture which is embedded in local identity and social values. Besides providing mass entertainment, it has helped Indian society as indigenous tools of interpersonal, inter-group and inter-village communication for ages. Folk theatre has been used extensively in India to propagate critical social, political and cultural issues in the form of theatrical messages to create awareness among the people. As an indigenous form it breaks all kinds of formal barriers of human communication and appeals directly to the people. Realizing the importance and powerfulness of the traditional medium, the First Five Year Plan projected that people in rural areas should be approached through traditional-folk forms of communication in addition to electronic media. The significance of folk arts in social and political communication was felt and recognized by Jawaharlal Nehru who once said, "I am greatly interested in the development of a people's theatre in India. I think there is a great room for it, provided it is based on the people and their traditions. Otherwise it is likely to function in the air. It is a people's approach. Nevertheless, I think an effort should be made in the direction."

In India, since independence in 1947, development efforts have been based on a conceptual scheme in Development Communication (DEVCOM); DEVCOM experiments and Government efforts to do development for people and people's efforts to assimilate and achieve development. Realizing the importance and powerfulness of the traditional medium, the first five year plan projected that

people in rural areas should be approached through traditional-folk forms of communication in addition to electronic media (Radio and Television). In 1954, the Song and Drama Division of the Union Ministry of Information and Broadcasting was set up by Government of India. It utilizes live entertainment media for creating awareness among the masses in rural India. The Division presents about 36,000 live field programmes on various aspects of national integration, communal harmony, domestic values and development activities (Mukhopadhyay). Special stress is laid on prohibition, eradication of untouchability, family planning, and women empowerment, principles of democracy, fundamental rights, rural health schemes, small-scale industries, agricultural technologies, adult education, and different aspects of socio-economic change. In comparison to the union government, state governments have been the biggest users of folk theatre for propagation of developmental programmes among the masses.

Similarly, the Directorate of Field Publicity and the Departments of Public Relations and Information in the states have employed these media extensively for the purpose of informing the people about services and programmes made available by the Government and make them persuaded to accept the modern ideas and change their attitudes and behaviours accordingly. The other Government Departments such as the Department of Science and Technology, the National Institute of Design and the Space Application Centre produced many programmes using folk theatres. Not only the government departments, but the Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) also use folk theatre medium for developmental purposes. Before Independence, Folk Theatre was effective in arousing the conscience of the people against the colonial rule of the British. It became effective in many political and social campaigns launched by Mahatma Gandhi.

After Independence the Union Government continues to utilize the Folk Theatre forms to convey messages and to generate awareness of the development programmes in the rural areas. In 1940s, Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), the cultural front of the Communist Party of India, successfully handled some of the popular regional theatre forms like the Jaatra of Bengal, Bhavai of Gujrat, Tamasha of Maharashtra and Burrakatha of Andhra Pradesh to increase social awareness and political education. Mukunda Das, Utpal Dutta used the medium of Jaatra for inculcating the spirit of patriotism and political awareness among the masses of Bengal. Jaatra is one of the most well-structural crystallised forms of folk theatre in India. Jaatra successfully projects the social and the cultural needs of the people in the region and serves as a vehicle of political education. Historically, the theme of Jaatra was morality projecting war between good and evil and this characteristic is well-preserved as well as utilized for specific ends through the decades. Rabindranath Tagore, in his famous SwadeshiSamaj speech in July 1904 advocated the use of Jaatra in order to reach the rural masses. In the earlier 20th century a distinct form of SwadeshiJaatra or nationalist form of Jaatra came into being. Mahatma Gandhi's non-co-operation movement and the removal of untouchability were favourite themes of these Jaatras. The trend has continued in the post-independence period where different types of burning social problems have been presented through this form.

Thus from a small beginning it became a powerful medium with the potential of communicating with the high and the low, the literate and the illiterate, the religious congregation and the popular masses alike. Even during recent elections in recent time Jaatra is one of the popular modes for campaigning. Nautanki of Northern India originated from religious and social preaching and mythological bhakti plays. This socially-conscious form of theatre of North India is being reshaped for Western system of communication, adult education and family planning. Social themes, value systems are exhibited through this form. Puppetry is another form of Traditional Folk Theatre in India. Since time immemorial, it has been a popular and appreciated form of entertainment in rural India. Government and NGOs used Puppet shows to promote the developmental processes. This theatre is integrated in the ritual observances and the social milieu of rural people in India. As a flexible form of traditional communication, it has been successfully used by Government departments, voluntary organizations for development communication, adult education, health and sanitation and family planning. Above studies and observations that stand as testimony to the relevance that folk theatre in contemporary scenario, there are also some major flaws that obstruct its passage into future. This traditional institution has lost its touch with the young generation of our time. Why is it so? The primary reason is that with a few exceptions, major performances in folk theatre have become aged. Artists still continue to perform on plots of religious folklore or local tale of the region. It is appreciable task that helps in conversation of tradition, which seems to be in danger amidst totalitarian expansion of globalization. But, art requires experimentation to sustain itself; otherwise it becomes static and grows distant from public.

As Kidd (1984) observes: "The plays grew out of the situations, experiences, and analysis of the actors who are themselves villagers...They create their own dramas out of their own collective analysis of their immediate situation and the deeper structures in which they are embedded. This is a genuine expression of the people" (117). Many national and international researches held on the role of Folk Theatre and Development suggested the integration of folk theatre forms with Mass Media for quicker transmission of information as it was motivating the rural audience. Also, the government cultural bodies must provide sufficient funds and grants to attract young talent both as professionals as well as amateurs towards this art. Moreover, research should also be promoted in folk theatre to foster progression, experimentation and novelty in this form.

Folk theatre has been instrumental in disseminating educational and welfare messages of the government. It has proved to be a tremendous success in the endeavour of the state. Though, with increase in literacy rate and enrollments in educational institutions, the traditional themes or social messages do hold relevance but partly. It does not mean that these messages have lost their significance among youth but they want something more that appeals to their senses, appeals to their intellect. And folk theatre is connected to hearts and emotions, more than any other medium. So it can have a significant progressive impact upon youth, or it shall become dated or archaic institution that is preserved simply as heritage. These lines by a famous American theatre artist Willem Dafoe underscore

the role a theatre should ideally play in society: "Great theatre is about challenging how we think and encouraging us to fantasize about a world we aspire to." Therefore, dynamism in folk theatre is necessity of the hour, only then it shall be connective as well as effective.

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