Indian Folk Theatre: History and Relevance of its Revival

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India is a land of history and heritage. Our vibrant and rich culture is as diverse as its people. Literature, specially drama and theatre, lives in the soil of our land since the beginning of civilization. Folk theatre is a non-commercial, rural pageantry based on folk traditions and local history. At one time, it was the biggest source of entertainment in the Indian villages. But post-independence, this art form was unable to keep up with the changing times. In my research paper, I propose to trace the history of Indian folk theatre and its current status. I would also attempt to draw attention to its significance for the modern generation vis-a-vis electronic media.

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“The theatre is the only institution in the world which has been dying for four thousand years and has never succumbed. It requires tough and devoted people to keep it alive.”

- John Steinbeck, Once There Was a War (1958)

Indian Folk Theatre is an amalgamation of music, dance, drama, stylized speech, and spectacle with deep roots in local identity and native culture. This form of theatre is an important indigenous tool that reflects the social-political realities of its time. India has a long, rich and illustrious history of folk theatre. In ancient times, Sanskrit dramas were staged at seasonal festivals or to celebrate special events. Later, actors, singers and dancers were given special places of distinction in the courts of several Indian kings. For instance, the tamasha folk theatre was

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patronized by the Peshwas of the Maratha kingdom. The maharaja of Banaras was the chief patron of grand ramlila, a play based on Ramayan.

If we look to the origin and evolution of folk theatre, we have to admit that this theatrical tradition is interlinked with human civilization. India, in the backdrop of its rich cultural context, has the longest tradition in theatre dating back to at least 5000 years. Developing after its Greek and Roman counterparts, Sanskrit theatre is the earliest form of Indian Theatre. In the Vedic period, people had developed potential artistic qualities, like songs, dances and many religious rituals to express their emotions, hopes and aspirations. Bharat Muni, the ancient Sanskrit Scholar and the first dramaturge, propounded the theory of Indian theatrical art forms in the ‘Nayya Shastra’, a treatise on the performing arts. The encyclopaedic text consists of 36 chapters with a cumulative total of about 6000 poetic verses describing performance arts and their aesthetics. The subjects covered by the book include dramatic composition, structure of a play and the construction of a stage to host it, genres of acting, body movements, make up and costumes, role and goals of an art director, the musical scales, musical instruments and the integration of music with art performance. The elaborate text hugely inspired Sanskrit theatre, in particular and later folk theatre, in general.

Folk theatre in India made its initial appearance in oral tradition, where it was used to narrate the stories of human lives in real context. Historically speaking, it was during the 15th -16th century that the folk theatre developed influentially 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. Songs and dances also became integral ingredients of these folk forms.

Over the next few centuries, folk theatre played an important part in the growth of modern theatres in different languages. Bhartendu Harishchandra, the 19th-century drama writer who is also known as the father of Hindi theatre, used to combine folk conventions with Western theatrical forms that were popular at that time. Rabindrabath Tagore’s plays reflect the influence of Baul singers and folk theatre too. Now, each folk theatre has its particular community, same language, area and way of life. This has led to the infusion of local myths, costumes, and masks into the ancient form of drama, resulting in the evolution of diverse regional styles of folk theatre. The musicality is one of the greatest characteristics of these folk dramas. The musical instruments developed indigenously are special features of these folk plays. Religious movements like Shaivism, Hinduism, Jainism and Vaishnism have shaped thematic contents of many of these traditional theatres.
According to Indian playwright and critic G. Shankara Pillai, “To understand the various types of folk theatre in a diverse cultural landscape like India, one has to examine all its aspects ... sociological, ethnic, ecological and cultural layers of tradition must be examined in detail, and the backgrounds of traditional forms analyzed in all their multiplicity. These forms (I refrain from calling all of them theatre) have their own idioms of expression, obviously based on the nature, conditions, and ultimate aims of performances.”

Keeping this observation in mind, while studying various folk theatrical styles, one finds that each has its own unique form dependent on its 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 emphasize on dance forms like Kathakali and Krishnattam of Kerala and actually qualify as dance dramas, while the north Indian forms emphasize on songs, like the Khayal 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 - Ravana Chhaya of Orissa, Gopalila of Orissa, Kathputli of Rajasthan and Sakhi Kundhe of Orissa are some of the popular forms in vogue. When we talk about the history of our country, we cannot ignore the contribution of folk theatre. Historically, it was not just a source of entertainment in Indian history; it contributed immensely in creating social consciousness as well. During our freedom struggle, Folk Theatre spearheaded in arousing patriotic fervour in 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. Realising the importance and powerfulness of this traditional medium, the first government of our independent country, planned that people in rural areas should be approached through traditional-folk media for conveying messages for Social, Economic and Cultural Development which ultimately helps in overall National Development.

But, after the initial boost, folk theatre fell off the grid due to lack of steady political and royal patronage. After abolition of Kings and zamindars the professional folk theatre troupes started languishing and some of them were dangerously close to extinction. Many talented artists deserted troupes and migrated to cities for some other employment. There were instances where some of the theatrical folk forms were no longer in vogue due to impact of electronic media and deteriorating financial condition of the sponsors. Only on special occasions, random efforts were made to stage folk plays.

Drowned in the noise of globalization during the 1980s and 90s, these precious art forms declined to pitiable conditions. The Ideas and tastes of the people changed fast with the march of the time. The popularization of radio,
television and cinema as source of entertainment diminished the loyalty of the people towards the folk plays. Aggressive consumerism mesmerized the people’s mind due to advent of electronic media. At this stage, one began to ask the question of utility and relevance of reviving the out-dated, multiple streams of folk plays when cinema and television were giving enough entertainment to the people. Their popularity dwindled as they could not compete with the instant reach and popularity of internet and television and were dismissed as cheap entertainment.

Now, the question arises: Why do we need to keep this dying art form alive? What purpose can it serve in the future of our nation?

The answer is: Because it is our responsibility to preserve an important part of our national heritage. As Kidd (1984) observed: “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.”

Padam Shri awardee, Hindi theatre personality Bansi Kaul dispels the misconception about folk theatre, “Most of the folk forms are not cheap entertainment ... They provide us with social wisdom.” The folk drama has got twin purpose of both entertainment and education. “Our country has a very complex social system which comprises of different castes, classes, creeds and tribes. Maximum population of our country still resides in villages. Electronic media has made a foray in villages but it is still considered impersonal and unbelievable in contrast with the performance of traditional artists whom the villagers can identify with because they speak familiar languages. Traditional art forms and folk theatre 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, initiate 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. These ideas are difficult to modify if the benefits of change are hard to demonstrate and due to the general distrust of outsiders in the mind of common populace. Being insiders, practitioners of the traditional media use a subtle form of persuasion by presenting the required message in locally popular artistic forms. This cannot be rivalled by any other means of communication.”

In the last twenty years or so, a new interest in regional cultural expressions and folklore has developed in India, leading to the rediscovery and re-evaluation of indigenous forms of literature and the performing arts. Nowhere is this more apparent than in folk theatre. The traditional theatres such as Yakshagana, Tamasha, Ras Lila, Nautanki, Bhavai, Jatra, and Khayal have gone through a revival. Once considered distasteful and largely forgotten, these regional theatres have received
attention and support from the Sangeet Natak Akademi. Their status has been enhanced by an intellectual reappraisal, which views them as the surviving fragments of the ancient Sanskrit dramatic tradition. As a result, greater familiarity with folk theatre forms has developed in the cities, and the urban attitude has shifted from scorn to curiosity and respect. Kutiyattam, the only surviving specimen of the ancient Sanskrit theatre, thought to have originated around the beginning of the Common Era, is now officially recognized by UNESCO as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.

Today, folk theatre is considered an art form that keeps the basic elements of a drama intact, while taking on the stories and flavours of the region its stems from. This very aspect makes folk theatre a vibrant and vital aspect of India’s intangible cultural heritage. These folk forms are widely used as the source of media for propaganda Health, family planning, adult education, anti-dowry programmes etc. Another asset of using folk media is that it is comparatively cheap. They belong to the community and not to individuals, state or private industry. They do not have to be imported and, therefore, there is no threat of cultural colonialism and foreign ideological domination. Also local talent and localized message would have more credibility. That is why theatre is finding new avenues to negotiate between tradition and modernity.

Over the years, some dramatists took interest in incorporating folk elements in their plays. Vijay Tendulkar, a well-known dramatist, wrote a Marathi play - ‘Ghasiram Kotwal’ (1972) which had a blend of Marathi folk music, satire and chorus songs with thematic contents of the play. Habib Tanvir, the renowned director and actor, made in-depth study of Chhatisgarh music and dance and used it in his play - ‘Charan Das Chor’ (1975). Girish Karnad, celebrated actor-dramatist, has also made similar experiment with Kannada folk element in his play ‘Nagamandala’ (1990). The contemporary litterateurs and dramatists of our country need to actively revive this connection between folk theatre and Indian literature. This will be a healthy way of drawing the attention of young, urban Indians to traditional art forms.

To conclude, the interest in revival is certainly a positive sign for folk theatre. The first step is to help the actors and performers of these art forms. If artists are in good condition, socially and financially, then only they can do their best for the development of the traditional forms to flourish in future. Seminars should be conducted for professional artists, and workshops and training camps should be organized for the amateur artists. Through these efforts, they can establish genuine interest towards their performances. Hopefully, this renewed attention will soon reflect in new patronage, positive coverage and younger artists willing to join folk theatre.
References


