

## **Folk Drama of Odisha Versus Other Indian Folk Drama**

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**ABSTRACT :** Traditional Dramas or theatres are performed during different social and religious occasions in India. It is also known as rural or village theatre. It reflects the common men's social and cultural attitudes and perceptions. In India tribal sports, habit, tradition, culture, vigour, joy, even disguise for mockery become parts of traditional theatre. In this form of theatre there are special styles of dance which reflects the living and lifestyle of common men. Their cultural aspects are reflected through these plays. In India tribal sports, habit, tradition, culture, vigour, joy, even disguise for mockery become parts of traditional theatre.

**KEYWORDS** – Folk Drama, 'Bharat Muni' , Natyasastra', Daskathia, Geetinatya , Desia-nata, Palas, Suanga and Chhau, nukad natak, Gondhal, Jagran and Kirtan, Jatra, Pala, Mughal Tamsa

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### **I. INTRODUCTION:**

In Folk Drama in contrast to the static scripts of literary dramas, the dialogue and actions represented in these plays maintain a certain fluidity, especially when the "same" play is performed in two different communities. Variation is the rule rather than the exception in folk theater.

If we look to origin and evolution of folk theatre, we have to admit that this theatrical tradition is interlinked with human civilization. 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 1st dramaturgies codified the art of dramaturgy in his famous treatise called 'Natyasastra'. In Orissa, the historians and drama critics opine that arena theatre was prevalent in the days of Emperor Kharavela in 1st century A.D. Dhiren Das, a noted dramaturgist has deciphered the Hatigumpha inscription and categorically emphasized, that 'Ranigumpha' cave of Khandagiri was an arena theatre where people were staging plays from time immemorial in Orissa, the land of art and architecture. Many folk forms have been developed mainly out of celebrating religious and social ceremonies. Songs and dances are integral ingredients of these folk forms. Each folk form had its particular community, same language, area and way of life. We find some communality in each form. Religious movements like Saivism, Hinduism, Jainism and Vaishnaism have shaped thematic contents of these folk forms. The musicality is one of the greatest characteristics of these folk dramas. The musical instruments developed indigenously are peculiar features of these folk plays. The instruments used in Daskathia are different from Lilas or Chhaus.

Lilas, Daskathia, Geetinatya of Baisnab Pani, Mughal-Tamsa, Prallhad Natak, Dandanatya, Ravanachhaya (puppet theatre), Desia-nata, Palas, Suanga and Chhau are considered to be the major forms which are still popular in rural areas on festival occasions. The royal patronage by Kings and Zamindars gave moral boosting and incentive to folk artists to develop folk theatre troupes, but after abolition of Kings and zamindars these professional folk theatre troupes started languishing and some of them are at the verge of extinction. Many talented artists are deserting troupes and migrating to cities for some other employment. There are instances where some of the theatrical folk forms are no longer in vogue. On special occasion, sporadic efforts are made to stage folk play once in a year. As for example in north Balasore district to which I belong many Palas like Lalita-Pala, Kruna-lila which were being performed earlier are no longer staged frequently. Many troupes of Jaleswar, Kamarda, Bhogarai, Deula, Baliapal and Chandaneswar of Balasore district have vanished into oblivion. Palas and Lilas are no longer in vogue due to impact of electronic media and deteriorating financial condition of traditional folk theatrical troupes. Research scholars have restored many manuscripts of these Palas and Lilas in these areas of north Balasore.

Role of Theatre in addressing Social Evils in India Odisha has a rich heritage and culture that is more prominently palpable in the rural Odisha. Most of the social evils being faced by Odia society have its roots in the rural Odisha. It is also evident that in rural Odisha despite the vast opening out of the electronic media, theatre remains the predominant mass medium. Hence, in addressing the social evils, this medium has a great role to play. The message intended to be communicated to the target audience should be well narrated and well scripted. It should make the rural audiences to think and analyze the problem. Also, it is very important to have

an appropriate form of communication that deems fit to the audience interests. In order to note the effectiveness of the theatre communication in addressing the social evils, the feedback must be obtained. Often, theatre is misinterpreted purely as a source of entertainment. However, theatre can be so much more than just sequined costumes and pretty songs; in fact, it is often the perfect vehicle to provide education about current social issues and to inspire social and political change. In general, the communication process involves only sender and one or more receivers. But unlike in conventional model of communication, a theatre communications involves two or more stages of senders. The message intended to be passed to the audience involves coding and decoding at minimum two levels. Street theatre as a channel of communication is deeply rooted in Indian society. The modern form is different only in the themes enacted. The street theatre groups analyze the society as it exists, visualize its future, and then attempt to put the vision across. In recent years street theatre has picked up pace and has acquired an image of a more moral nature with just the right kind of fun. Better known as 'nukad natak' today, is perhaps the best way to connect with the common man and the youth.

These are much intimate, brief, direct and address the social/political message head-on with the help of drama. The catchy phrases and songs, crisp script, humor and loudness help in making a long lasting and powerful effect on viewers. These plays if targeted towards youth can really stir up emotions, create awareness and lead the way towards positive change. Nukad natak are an important tool in creating awareness, empowering the youth and utilizing our right to freedom of speech and expression positively. This colloquial form of drama connects with the youth instantly. The lack of properness and formal atmosphere adds to its appeal and gives it a real lifelike look. It not only enlightens people but gives us, the citizens to voice our opinion too. These plays have similar impact like Mark Antony's speech on Julius Caesar's death. The stirred up crowd and their displayed and fuelled up emotions may be considered parallel, plays having to do more with our mind. Similar to the results of Mark Antony's funeral speech, these plays have the strength to start a social revolution. This enthusiasm if used in the correct manner can lead to drastic changes in our society. Changes we wish for. Changes that make us blame the government for mishandling the affairs concerning our nation. It's all up in our head-right in our brain- the change. Changes in society does not mean only having enough capital for putting up street lights for women's safety but it is about thinking or better, having the attitude of not adding to the problem and helping people mitigating the situation. Change in society comes with the change in the mindset of the people and street plays can rightly achieve that goal. As youth is a country's tomorrow, making them the target audience is a great idea for bringing about a change. Hence, issues that parents miss out on discussing with their children or topics that haunt our youth in general can be tackled through these street plays and change the society slowly into a better place to live in.

Kapila Vatsyayan a great authority on performing art has analyzed various forms of Indian folk plays in her book 'Traditional Indian theatre - Multiple streams'. She has opined that there is great importance in reviving Indian folk plays as these plays have contemporary relevance. In her said book, 'Traditional Indian Theatre', she observed "The Yatra forms are an important branch of the parent tree of Indian literatures, languages and treatise forms. Its survivals appear to have thrown seeds, which have given modern Bengali theatre a new direction. Like the Bhavai and the Tamasa it has provided an Indian format to avant-garde theatre. Possibly this renowned interest in Yatra was conditioned by the advent of a new form of epic theatre from Europe. Be as it may, the European influence generated an interest in national traditions and this has been a return educational journey home-ward for the modern theatre of India" (Traditional Indian theatre - page 146, published by NBT, New Delhi, 1st Edition 1980). So it is to be admitted that folk plays of India, have played a great role in shaping Indian avant-garde plays.

In this direction, let us have a review of impact of experiments of blending rich of folk elements with modern Indian plays of three renowned playwrights viz; Vijoy Tendulkar, Habib Tanvir and Girish Karnad. Vijoy Tendulkar, a wellknown dramatist wrote a Marathi play - 'Ghasiram Kotwal'. When this play was staged, it charmed the audience, as proper blending of Marathi folk music, satire and chorus songs with thematic contents of the play gave rich entertainment to the audience with a dramatic message. This play was translated into Hindi and a repertory troupe travelled with this play to Europe to stage this play in European cities - like Berlin and London. This play could enthral the European audiences. 'Guardian', the widely circulated journal, praised that this Indian play could satisfy the twin parameters of good play - which is aesthetic pleasure with a forceful message. 'Guardian' remarked that in comparing with the modern Indian play, the European play looks like a broken mirror. This high appraisal of success prompted other playwrights of India to make such experiments of blending folk element skillfully with modern themes. Habib Tanvir the renowned director and actor made in-depth study of Chhatisgarh music of Madhya Pradesh and dance and he used it in his play - 'Charan Das Chor'. Once when this play was played at Paris, the noted directors from London flew to Paris to witness this Indian avantgarde drama. The critic and the spectators were charmed and praised the experiment of Habib Tanvir. This is a classic example of relevance and importance of folk plays, because in this play there was proper assimilation of elements both the traditional and the modern. Girish Karnad, a Gyanapitha Award winner

and a celebrated actor dramatist, has also made similar experiment with folk element in his play 'Haybadan' which has become a popular play among the people.

### **Some Folk Drama Forms of India:**

#### **1. Yatra/Jatra**

It is traditional folk theatre of eastern India. The origin of this musical drama or theatre intrinsically a musical theatre form, is traditionally credited to the rise of Sri Chaitanya's Bhakti movement, wherein Chaitanya himself played Rukmini in the performance of Rukmini Haran ("The abduction of the Charming Rukmini") from Krishna's life story, a first definite presentation of this theatrical spectacle. Music and drama are also added in Jatra of Odisha. Though started with traditional and rural style, today it has become commercial and suburban.

#### **2. Ramleela**

It was started by the Tulsidas during Mughal period in Kashi. It is similar to Yatra where religious music and dialogues are performed. The theme of this play is the story of Ramayana, played during Desersa. It is very popular among rich, poor, older or younger. Even it is famous in Java, Sumatra and Indonesia too.

#### **3. Raasleela**

It is part of the traditional story of Krishna described in Hindu scriptures such as the Bhagavata Purana and literature such as the Gita Govinda, where he dances with Radha and her sakhis. It is a combination of two words- **rasa meaning "aesthetics"** and **lila meaning "act," "play" or "dance"**. Hence, it is a concept from Hinduism, which roughly translates to "play (lila) of aesthetics (rasa)," or more broadly as "Dance of Divine Love". It is believed that Nand Das wrote the initial plays based on the life of Krishna.

This drama or theatre is two types: **Braj Ras of Mathura and Manipuri Ras of Manipur**. Braj Raasleela is different from Manipuri Rasleela in proposing dance, dialogue, costumes and style.

#### **4. Swang**

It is very famous traditional theatre in the state of Punjab, Haryana and Odisha. It was performed in rural area of Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Utrakhand and Bengal. The softness of emotions, sharpness of dialogue and specific costumes are some features of this theatre. The two important styles of Swang are from Rohtak and Hathras. In the Rohtak style, the language is used is Haryanavi (Bangru) and in Hathras, it is Braj Bhasha.

#### **5. Nautanki**

It is a famous traditional theatre of Northern India. It is said that this style was developed from 'Bhagat' form of theatre which is approximately 400 years old, while the word 'Nautanki' come into existence only in 19th century.

#### **6. Dashavatar**

It is the most developed and famous theatre of Konkan and Goa region. The performers personify the 10 incarnations of Lord Vishnu and performed during religious ceremonies.

#### **7. Kariyala**

It is the most interesting and popular folk drama of Himachal Pradesh, particularly in Shimla, Solan and Simour. It is an open air performance, comprising of an entertaining series of small playlets, staged during village fairs and festive occasions

#### **8. Khyal**

It is Hindustani folk-dance drama or theatre of Rajasthan. They are performed exclusively by men, are characterized by the powerful body movements of the performers, and include mime and chanting. Percussion (rhythm section) and stringed instruments accompany the khyal. The professional dancers of the khyal are known as '**Bhawani**'. It is based on social, historical, religious and love. However it is on the verge of extinction.

#### **9. Tamasha**

It is a traditional folk drama or theatre form of Maharashtra. It has evolved from the folk forms such as **Gondhal, Jagran and Kirtan**. Unlike other theatre forms, in Tamasha the female actress is the chief exponent of dance movements in the play. She is known as **Murki**. Classical music, footwork at lightning speed and vivid gestures make it possible to portray all the emotions through dance.

#### **10. Ottan Thullal**

It is a dance and poetic dance drama or theatre form of Kerala, India. It was introduced in the 18th century by **Kunchan Nambiar**, one of the Prachina Kavithrayam (three famous Malayalam language poets). It is performed with singing, stylised make-up and masked face. It is performed in open air of temple.

#### **11. Terukkutto**

The most popular form of folk drama of Tamil Nadu literally means '**street play**'. It is mostly performed at the time of annual temple festivals of Mariamman (Rain Goddess) to achieve rich harvest. It is a form of entertainment, a ritual, and a medium of social instruction.

## **12. Bham Kalapam**

It is a famous folk theatre of Andhra Pradesh. It was written by **Siddhendra Yogi** in the 16th century, to retain the sanctity of dance from the prostitute-dancers. It contains elaborate expressions and complex gesture adhered in by Kuchipudi dance.

### **Folk Drama of Odisha:**

**Jatra:** The 'Jatra' or opera still attracts thousands of people. The Jatra is held in the open field. The rectangular stage is set in the centre of the audience with the orchestra sitting adjacent to the stage. Beginning with items on the 'harmonium', 'clarinet', 'bugle', 'mridanga', 'jhanja', 'dubi tabla', 'dholki' etc. by the experts of the party, the opera starts with a party of dancing and singing boys appearing in female garbs. The King generally appears in a stereotyped dress and the themes are often historical or mythological. The male actors dressed up as females look artificial. The 'Duari' or 'Dagara' ( the messenger of the King) and the joker are the most interesting characters in the Jatra. In general, the Jatra in the villages has very little reference to real life and its problems. The Jatra parties adjoining the cities are trying to reform the Jatra on the model of the theatre and the cinema. They avoid too many songs in the play and select their characters from the social novels and use simple prose in the dialogue.

**Pala:** Pala is a popular cultural institution responsible for the popularisation of ancient Oriya literature. It consists of five or six persons. The drummer plays on the 'mridanga'. Others play on the cymbals, dance and help the chief singer - 'Gayaka', - to sing and explain the meaning to the audience. Depth of knowledge, sharpness of intelligence, oratory and keen memory power are put to a severe test when two well-matched groups challenge each other in a 'pala' competition. The drummer displays the skill of his fingers and relates humorous stories to please the audience. The dialogue between the singer and one of the attendants breaks the monotony of long speeches and jugglery of words in the song. Pala owes its origin to attempts at Hindu-Muslim unity.

**Patua:** Patuas sing songs, composed by the village poets who pick up the subject matter from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the puranas and more recently from novels. Some of the songs are simple in thought and language, while others have a deeper meaning and are shrouded in a jumble of words. 'Patuas' are of four kinds though all of them worship the same deity under different names. The difference lies in religious rituals and not in the aims and objects of worship. The 'Ghata patua' dances, sings and performs physical exercises in different villages. The best of the devotees leads a party of Patuas to walk on a fire of burning charcoal.

**Daskathia:** 'Daskathia', once a popular performance of Ganjam, has spread to all other districts of Odisha (Orissa). 'Dasa' means a devotee. 'Katha' means two wooden pieces played in tune with the prayer of the devotee. The party consists of two persons. One is the chief singer, the other is the 'Palia' who helps him in all respects in singing and acting. The two persons stage a whole drama, act all the parts, change their tone hour after hour. They introduce humorous stories to break the monotony.

**Mughal Tamasha:** The 'Tamasa' is a form of opera which reminds us of the 'Mughal' administration prevalent in Odisha (Orissa) and is a symbol of their culture. The songs are composed in both Persian and Oriya. Dialogue is quite amusing. The 'Tamasa' is peculiar to the Bhadrak area in the district of Balasore and is not performed in any other part of Odisha (Orissa).

**Karma:** The Karma dancers and singers have their professional party. They deal with puranic events or events in folk tales. Love songs are sung in the form of questions and answers between parties of young men and women.

It is now necessary to examine the impact of folk theatre on modern Oriya plays and to what extent playwrights have been successful in assimilation of folk elements in avant-garde Oriya drama. Let us evaluate this trend of experimentation in Oriya modern drama.

In Orissa, Manoranjan Das, veteran playwright in his play, 'Katha Ghoda' and 'Nandika Kesari', Bijoy Mishra's 'Jane raja thile', Ramesh Panigrahi's 'Mahanatak', Subodha Pattanaik's 'Yethu Ante', Rati Mishra's 'Abatar', all these modern dramas have used Oriya folk elements and also certain forms of folk drama for enrichment of the dramatic tradition with a view to attract larger audience. In the words of Niladri Bhusan Harichandan, a dramatist "the playwrights have been successful in bringing plays nearer to the audience through this new style. He further said - "The avant-garde or modernist Oriya drama of today is enriched with an assimilation of elements both traditional and the modern. The addition of the forms of various Oriya folk dramas even to this combination marks it off as different from similar developments in other parts of India" (Aspect of Oriya Drama, p.131). But some critics observe that this experiment in Oriya modern plays have not been successful to attract audience's attention, but in my humble opinion, though not all but there are plays which have succeeded in this experiment and got audience's clapping. I myself have taken audience's poll and came to conclusion that the majority of the spectators have liked Bijoy Mishra's "Jane raja thile", Subodha Pattanaik's 'Yethu ante', Rati Mishra's 'Abatar'. These modern Oriya plays have been quite successful because of the proper blending of the folk elements. I am of the firm opinion the richness of Oriya folk forms should be preserved and documented. Patronage should be given to establish professional troupes in Orissa. The steps taken in this direction in other States, like Bengal, Andhra, Karnatak are really praiseworthy. In Karnatak more than a dozen folk research

institutions have been established by Government Department of Culture. There the Government has taken measures to educate and develop new generation of artists. But in many states the development of folk theatre is neglected. It is pity that there are some ultra modernists in bureaucracy those who do not favour the preservation, documentation and promotion of folk theatre.

Now-a-days it has been accepted by scholars in performing art that there is great relevance in studying, knowing and preserving these treasure troves of our Indian folk theatres. If some may argue that these are old, archaic, religious and rustic, these are to be rejected on the ground of modern secularism and they openly utter - let them die, let folk artists perish. We have got VCR, films, enough entertainment in 24 hours channels. I think, this ultra modernist's negative attitude will cause immense harm to growth of humanistic culture for allround development of human personality. So it is high time that we should not allow further vulgarization of Indian culture by inertness, indifference and indolence and swayed away by the lures of electronic media. We the art loving Indians are now facing challenges of assault on our language, literature and culture due to westernized sensate culture. Let us not waste time only in theoretical debate as to whether an art form is folk, traditional, classical and modern. Let us understand the diversity of cultural tradition, which is to be reflected in the contemporary theatre.

### **Effectiveness of Theatre in Addressing Social Evils in India:**

In Odisha, over the years, street theatre has been playing a significant role in spreading awareness. One such success story comes from Nilgiri ITDA Block of Balasore district in Odisha . The tribal based theatre groups have come forward to spread awareness among the tribal people on such issues ranging from sex education to social issues like corruption and rude treatment. This is the best way to get a message across to the people in an effective manner for it is staged right in the middle of people and not on an elevated platform, creating distance between the performers and audience. More so, it could be staged at the shortest of notice, without the paraphernalia associated with organized plays staged at predetermined venues. Theatre actors believe that change is each and everyone's responsibility, and whoever wishes to see it, needs to add their bit, to see it. They believe in vocalizing and bringing to fore different issues that plague our society at large, and the few steps that can be taken towards larger and greater solutions. Till date, number of group , specially the nearby college students through their NSS units , have scripted and performed street plays that deal with issues such as women's empowerment, child labor, children's education, usage of solar energy, the need to vote, examining the state of democracy, antis edition etc. They have partnered with non-profit, grassroots organizations and conducted workshops not only in Nilgiri but surrounding rural areas – spreading awareness regarding decisive issues such as menstrual hygiene and post-natal care. In order to tackle serious issues such as child abuse, the group conducts workshops with children

## **II. SUGGESTIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Likewise like every other medium has its own advantages, the theatre medium has its advantages too in disseminating the information among the masses, especially the rural masses. Most of the social evils being faced by the contemporary Odisha are required to be addressed at rural areas; and for this the best suited medium is the theatre. The following suggestions & recommendations may be considered for effectively utilizing the theatre medium in informing and educating the rural masses. 1. The local bodies and government requires patronizing the artists and encouraging this medium. 2. The concept of street theatre has been proven very effective. Hence, due encouragement is solicited at all levels. 3. All concerned departments in universities across the country should be tasked to give performances in rural areas as part of their course curriculum. 4. Under National Service Scheme (NSS) at all colleges, performances through street theatre in educating social evils to the rural masses should be encouraged and promoted. 5. It is evident that a great threat has been imposed to theatre from various other media. In this prevailing situation, new innovative programs that utilize applications of both theatre and new media are to be derived.

## **III. CONCLUSION:**

In Odisha, the theatre has been used for addressing social evils, social progress and for bringing various changes in the society. Theatre for this purpose includes activist and grass-roots bodies, government and non-government organizations (NGOs), as well as socially-aware theatre groups or individuals. The groups working with Dalits, Tribal women, children, sex workers, and other marginalized populations, all qualify as practicing theatre for addressing social evils Administration should utilize the advantages of theatres for information dissemination in a country with low literacy and high population. Especially, theater group has been depending on the street theatre, which provides a low-cost and immediate means of reaching the illiterate in India.. The purpose was to include given social messages in their particular repertoires. The government's model of development was purely focused on education, family planning, hygiene, building of pit latrines, and other such national concerns. NGOs, non-partisan activist societies, and grass-roots groups all over the country

increasingly began to use street theatre as a means of social change. Throughout the history of Indian theatre for addressing social evils, there has been a belief that folk forms are uniquely suited to communicate to the multitudes. In contrast to the governmental approach of providing messages for distribution, some traditional performers themselves have taken up issues relating to social evils. So much initiative has been taken by the volunteer groups, groups patronized by the government and various groups of college students in addressing social evils, in Odisha.

But, it can be said with an assertion that the potentiality of theatre as a medium to diffuse information on addressing social evils has not been utilized, effectively. It should be an endeavour for all concerned stakeholders to promote this medium for effectively addressing social evils in contemporary Odisha and also to safeguard this medium from extinction.

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