

FOLK DRAMA ON THE DECLINE: MUGHAL TAMASHA

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ABSTRACT

My article is an in-depth study of the folk theatre in Odisha which is now in its decline. Folk theatre in Odisha is as old as its recorded history. It reflects the culture and tradition of the rural Odisha reflecting the elements of joys and sorrows of their lives, emotions, beliefs, traditions, songs and dances, rituals, customs, religious and social behavior. It was the medium through which the communal harmony of that time was preserved. Mughal Tamasha appealed directly to the people as it was as an indigenous art form. It was one of the unique forms of folk theatre which satirised the feudal system of Mughal Administration. The uniqueness of Mughal Tamasha lay in its multilingual mode of dialogue delivery which included languages like Persian, Urdu, Hindi, Bengali, and Oriya. It is presumed that this form evolved during the initial period of the eighteenth century when the Mughals were defeated by the Marathas. In the present times, this theatre form is on the decline due to the revolution of digital technology. Art lovers, social reformers and researchers now should take the initiative of restoring this dying art form.

KEYWORDS: *Folk, Culture, Songs, Theatre Form, Decline*

INTRODUCTION

The history of folk art in any country is obscure and therefore it is extremely difficult to determine the exact time or period when it came into existence. It is also because folk arts are evolving in nature, continually adapting themselves to changing times and needs. It is only through research, studies and repeated performances that we attempt to trace their original form and historical evolution.

If one wants to understand the spirit of rural India, one needs to explore the various forms of folk-art in the country that has evolved over the centuries and which forms the nucleus of the cultural ethos of the rural people. Folk theatre is an art form in which there is the fusion of elements from music, dance, pantomime, epic, ballad recitation, graphic arts, religion and festival peasantry. Despite rapid urbanization folk theatre still remains the art of people, means of living both in urban and rural areas. Among the folk tradition, folk theatre is a popular form which has preserved, rejuvenated and given impetus to the cultural achievements of the people. Folk theatre spreads all over India and is popular among people because of its aspect of communication and the relationship it establishes between the artist and the audience. It is like a celebration or festivity that involves the massive participation of people. Mughal Tamasha is appreciated because of its simplicity and not because of its technical aspects. Earlier the theatre forms were of two types: the 'Great Tradition' which involved formal literary plays and the 'Little tradition' which is the other name for the theatre of the masses. Both these forms of theatre existed side by side and perhaps borrowed from each other, complementing each other. The early formal plays mostly in Sanskrit, were performed in formal settings with themes drawn mainly from

religion and mythology. The loka Nataka or the popular theatre on the other hand was performed in villages under the open sky to the accompaniment of folk music and instruments and was meant for the masses.

FOLK THEATRE OF ODISHA

Theatre in Odisha is as old as its recorded history. The inscriptions at Khandagiri and Udaigiri are evidence enough of its antiquity. Odisha has over 400 folk art forms in dance, music, theatre, ballads and others. We may not be able to enlist all our folk arts for posterity, as many of them are dying a slow death, day by day because of diminishing audience and lack of patronage. In the present era when there has been the invasion of the electronic media; cinema and TV, there arises a question whether it is necessary to revive such a traditional art? The answer is that Mughal Tamasha beautifully intertwines the twin purpose of education as well as entertainment, which helps in arousing the social and cultural consciousness among the people. Das, Sheelita the critic (2013) is of the opinion that folk theatre is an indigenous form that dissolves the formal barriers of human communication and easily touches the heart of the people. (7) Wang and Dissanayake (1984) believe that the art form is integrated with the culture and has secured its place much before technology has arrived and tries to replace the old form of communication system. Still today folk art remains a popular and sustainable medium of interaction in many parts of the world and preserves a certain degree of continuity, despite the developments and technological changes in the society. (9)

If we view historically, we find that the rise of Vaishnavism in the 15th century and the influence of saint Chaitanya in the 16th century gave impetus to folk dramas such as Rasleela, Rasdhari and Ankiyanat depicting the life of Lord Krishna. There is ample evidence that these plays were performed within the temples, even monasteries. The Natya Shastra of Bharat provides guidelines for classical Indian Drama, but apart from some reference to popular folk drama like Rasaka and Charchari, nothing much is said about the folk forms. They were considered elementary and underdeveloped because of their limited number of characters and their total dependence on music and dance. The Krishna cult in course of time lost its spiritual flavor and became an instrument of youthful expression as evident in Kathak and other forms of dancing. The Jatras of Bengal and Odisha also lost their spiritual dimensions and slowly became forms of mass entertainment. Starting from devotional the folk forms moved on to social and other themes. The most important is the collective conscience they produced.

DIVERSITY OF FOLK TRADITION

Varied forms of folk dramas are performed in different states of the country having diverse themes and forms. To cite for instance, Yakshagana and Sannata are some of the significant examples of folk theatre in Karnataka. The splendor and rich heritage of folk Drama as a means of entertainment is also visible in Tamil Nadu like the Therukkuthu that is performed as an invocation for rain and is accompanied by musical instruments like the Mridungam, Harmonium, and the flute. In Maharashtra the famous folk dance is Nautanki which is presented as a medley of folk songs from mythology and dance. The folk dramas of Haryana and Bihar which deserve mention are Karyala and Bidesia. It is observed that Odia dramatists have tried to return to their roots through various folk forms. The folk culture of Odisha speaks of the richness in the tribal culture of the state. These folk dramas are lucid; simple that affects the sentiments of the village folks and hardly has any intellectual overtone. Truth, justice and religious values are the main themes which represent the core values of the Odishan culture. They intertwine music, dance, earthy humor and emotional outburst. Myth, legend and history are used to add color. In the recent times, Odia theatre has undergone a massive alteration

Folk drama forms of Odisha are closely associated with the religious culture of Odia people and it consists of different types of theatrical performances. Among these Mughal Tamasha is an epigrammatic and farcical play reflecting the Mughal administration in Odisha. Historically speaking in the latter half of the 18th century, Mughal Tamasha evolved in the Sangat village of the Bhadrak region in Odisha as a variation of the traditional Chaiti Tamasha and then it became popular, spreading to other areas like Sahapur, Januganj, Garadpur and Kuansa. The creator of the seven works of Tamasha was Banshi Ballav Goswami out of which the most prominent was the 'Mughal Tamasha', written in 1728 A.D. Even today this art form is surviving but its performances and patronage have declined. The other six forms have become obsolete and they are: Bhil Tamasha, Radhakrushna Tamasha, Chauda / Chahoda Tamasha Jogi Tamasha, Fakir Tamasha and Lolin Mazabai Tamasha. The language of Mughal Tamasha is in dialogue form and it is a beautiful blend of Odiya, Urdu and Persian. The musical instruments played in Mughal Tamasha are Violin, Pakhavaj, Jodinagara and Kubji. The Tamasha opens with an invocation to the God or Goddess and is followed by group dance and the purpose of this folk Drama was to establish communal harmony. The other types of folk drama of Orissa includes suanga, Leela, , Nata, Sakhi Nata, Dhanu Yatra and more. Suanga is in form of a farcical interlude that used to be performed between two scenes in Jatra, mostly narrating the quarrels ensuing between lord Jagannath and Goddess Laxmi or between Jagannath and his elder brother Balaram. Dhanu Yatra is a dramatic presentation of the Krishnaleela and it is performed on 'push purnima' continuing for eleven days Leela enacts interesting episodes from the life of Lord Rama and his heroic exploits and Lord Krishna's romancing with the village Gopis .Prahlad Natak originally grew in south Orissa and it is in the form of songs of different Ragas .It has twenty male characters and five female characters. As regards Jatra , it is performed in an open field which can accommodate thousands of people . The stage is rectangular in shape and the orchestra sits adjacent to the stage playing instruments like the harmonium, clarinet, bugle, dubitabla, dholki etc. The male characters appear in the garb of the female and the jatra has no specific social relevance. Once very popular the Daskathia that originated in South of Odisha slowly spread to the other areas and in this two main performers sing and act, changing the tone and pitch of their voices and playing the tunes with two wooden pieces called Kathi and narrating humorous incidents from mythology and social life. As regards Karma, it is performed in a question form of dance and song narrating the love between the lovers or some romantic tales from the Puranas. Besides the above there are other forms like Pala, Patua, Sahi jatra, Chadheya Nata and others.

THE UNIQUE FORM: MUGHAL TAMASHA

Of all the folk forms we observe the Mughal Tamasha is the most unique due to many reasons. It has preserved the indigenous tradition of the folk culture of Odisha. Due to its multilingual mode of dialogue delivery in Urdu, Bengali, Hindi, Odiya and Persian it has reached the nook and corner of society and has been able to withstand the vagaries of social and political changes. It also acts as a mirror reflecting the socio-political climate of the Mughal Times. Mughal Tamasha originated in Bhadrak in the later half the 18th century, which was the centre of all activities of trade and commerce for Odisha during the Mughal as well the Maratha period. Eventually this folk drama spread to other places like Sahapur, Januganj, Garadpur and Kuansa.

Of the two forms of Mughal Tamasha, the Badshahi Mughal Tamasha is being staged. It is presented in both Oriya and Urdu and is accompanied by various musical instruments like Violin, Pakhavaj, Jodinagara and Kubji .The social milieu of the Mughal period characterized by political disturbances, chaos, corruption disintegration and disharmony in the society have been vividly presented in Mughal Tamasha. Bhadrak is the only district in Odisha where the

performance of Mughal Tamasha has been maintained for the last two hundred years. If we make a historical survey we find that the Hindu chief of the Mughal emperor, Akbar after defeating the Afghans had set up the Mughal rule in the kingdom of Odisha. The defeated Afghan officers were brought under the administration of the Mughal emperor and they stayed as residents for the rest of the years under the Mughal Rule that lasted for nearly two hundred years. The Persian language prevailed as the Court language. However during the latter half of the Mughal rule people became bold and fearless and they started criticizing the slackness of Mughal Administration and the indulgent lifestyle of the emperors. The satire was primarily aimed at the pompous living and immoral accumulation of wealth of the Mughals. The folk drama was staged in front of the temple of Lord Shiva on the occasion of Maha Bishuv Sankranti. The principal character of the play was the Mirza, while the other characters were the Chopdar or guard, Zamindar, Vestiwala or water bearer, Hukawala or hookah bearer, Pankhawala or fan bearer, Bhat or panegyrist, Daptari or clerk, Bhandari or storekeeper, and Guwalin or milkmaid. The Chopdar summons all the characters one by one as ordered by Mirza and they introduce themselves through farcical songs. Each couplet is repeated by a chorus. After the performance of the characters was over they used to ask for baksheesh (tips) from Mirza and on departing puts a question to the Chorus leader, 'What is happening here?' and then he explains about the importance of celebrating the festival of lord Shiva. Then they all sing in praise of Lord Shiva and leave the stage. Mughal Tamasha is performed under the open sky with no screens. Before starting the folk drama in order to engage the audience a loud music is played with Sahnai, Dhola and Jodi Nagara which continues for an hour or so. After the orchestra is played then a long song in praise of Lord Shiva is sung and thereafter, the Chopdar enters announcing 'Dabe Khade Ho' (stand still), 'Hat Khade Ho' (stand at distance) which is indicative of Mirza Sahib's entry. Once the Mirza sahib is seated on the throne first enters the Chopdar and salutes the king thereafter the other characters are introduced and thus starts the Mughal Tamasha. All these characters leaving aside Mirza Sahib and the Chopdar sing and dance, communicating in prose which is a funny blend of Persian, Urdu, Hindi, Bengali and Odiya. There is a milkmaid (Dudhwali) who speaks in Odiya language and she appears Mirza Sahib is enthralled by her beauty and he proposes to marry her. But she doesn't concede to his allurements of wealth and declares that she is already married; there upon she leaves the stage. The Mirza upon hearing her reply is shocked and crestfallen. Here ends the folk drama and all the characters get their Bakshish (tips) from Mirza Sahib. The costumes worn by the characters are gorgeous and colorful. While the Chopdar and Mirza sahib are dressed in Muslim tradition, the Zamindar wears a simple dress like a Vaishnavite Hindu.

THE PRESENT SCENARIO

In the recent times, the technological revolution has resulted in a consumerist society where the tradition of art and culture has been greatly affected relegating art forms to insignificance. Alternatively Media in form of films and advertisements have started occupying the centre stage. Now the issue is when people are getting easy and immediate entertainment in varied forms; is revival of the folk plays relevant? Kapila Vatsyayan a great authority on performing arts has observed in her book, 'Traditional Indian Theatre' that "The Yatra forms are an important branch of the parent tree of Indian literatures, languages and theatre 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). It can

therefore be established that the folk plays of India, have immensely contributed towards shaping the Indian avant-garde plays. In the neocolonial times, we find that due to immensity of an invasive global culture, slowly the local and indigenous cultures are getting wiped out leading to the uprooting of folk traditions. The invasion of cinema and other urban forms of entertainment in e-platforms have taken a toll over the existence of many traditional art forms some of which are extinct, some nearing extinction and some languishing their last. The growth of materialism in societies are gradually minimizing the importance and continuity of the local culture, myths, beliefs and rituals. Thus the traditional artists due to economic pressures are forced to change their occupation for their survival. It is high time that we should not allow such indifference towards the folk tradition and get swayed away by the lures of electronic media. We should realize the magnificence of our multi cultured tradition, which can be ideally reflected through contemporary folk theatre. It is therefore necessary to make efforts to preserve the various Folk drama forms of Odisha and along with the Governmental efforts take efforts toward their revival. The Odisha Natak Academy along with the NGOs is making serious efforts to salvage the dying art form from further downfall so that it can resurface with a new and fresh appeal.

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