

Application of *Prahlad Natak* in Development: A Study

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Prahlad Natak: The Origin

Prahlad Natak, also known as Raja Nacha in common parlance is such type of dance which symbolizes the culture of Odia people particularly of Ganjam district of Odisha. This dance is song-based in character which is being played throughout Odisha with different names like Prahallad Natak, Raja Nacha, Nrusingha Avatar, Hiranyaasur Baddha, Stambhabatar and Nrusingha Bheta etc. Its birth is estimated to be during the 1870s in South Odisha particularly in Paralakhemundi region. It was written by one Gourahari Parichha, a dramatist and musician at the Court of King Ramakrushna Chhotray of Jalantara (now in Gajapati district of Odisha). Ramakrushna Chhotray can be regarded as the founder of the Prahallad Natak tradition. The king wrote the script of Raja Nacha which was lost after the end of their dynasty. But it was recovered in 1938 from a library at Madras. After that the script was read all over the state and some people started dramatising it. The important feature of this dance is that some it has similarities with contemporary traditional dances of other states like Ramleela (North India), Krushna Natyam and Mudi yettu (Kerala), Krishna Parijata and Sangya Balya (Karnataka), Dashavatara(Goa) and Nrusingha Leela (Mathura). Though the scripts are different the themes are almost same in all the dances. The scripts are followed according to the books written by the regional writers. Similarly, the Script of Raja Nacha in Ganjam district is imported from the book written by Raja Ram Krushna Chhotray of Jalantara Taluq.

According to the script the Hiranakshya and Hiranyakashipu are two sons born from born from sage Kashyap and Deeti Devi. Both sons were Rakshasas in character and created havoc in three Puris (mentioned in the Puranas as Swarga, Martya and Patala). Lord Bishnu took the incarnation of Varaha and killed Hiranakshya. It created hatred in the mind of Hiranyakashipu against Lord Bishnu and he worshipped Lord Shiva instead. But his son was reverse to his father and was a staunch worshipper of Lord Bishnu. As a result Hiranyakashipu tried everything to kill Prahallad by following different tricks but fails always with the interference of Lord Bishnu. Prahallad says that Lord Bishnu is omnipresent

and savior of all. Hiranyakashipu, in anger breaks a pillar of his courtyard enquiring whether Lord Bishnu is present there also. To his surprise, Lord Bishnu emerges from that pillar with a new incarnation. It is half man and half-lion, with fire coming out of the mouth and the eyes are burning with anger. It is famous as the Narasingha Avatar of Lord Bishnu. He drags Hiranyakashipu, lays him on his thigh and tears the chest of the Rakshasa.

When shown at the stage the audience becomes still bound. When Lord Narasingha emerges from the pillar the audience starts worshipping the Lord along with Prahalad. Tears come out of their eyes as if they had got the opportunity of watching the Lord in their naked eyes. The characters are so much involved in this drama that they also feel themselves as Gods, goddesses and demons. The supporting staff including the musicians, singers and other staff feel themselves proud to be a part of such a nice religious fervour. The songs are very pleasant to listen which is the combination of Karnataka and Hindustani music. The theme songs and other songs are sung by a group of singers with a leader. The musical instruments include Table, Pakhwaj, Ginni, Harmonium and Madala. The actors also toil hard to perform in front of a large audience during the performance. In the absence of prompting system in front of the audience they have to prepare beforehand. For the purpose the rehearsal procedure starts almost 4-5 months before the stage performance. It is done inside village community halls known as *Akharas*. Even after public performance they restart rehearsing for the next season.

The Raja Nacha is performed all the season but rainy season. Due to incessant rain the stage performance is stopped for four months. The Nacha is performed during the other days. The time limit of a single performance is not fixed. Sometimes it takes 4-5 days for a complete show. The audience come and go according to their convenience, but the actors continuously perform the show. But they also take rest for a short period of time during day time. The normal period of a single show is 12 hours. The costumes are made according to the characters. The costume of Lord Narsimha is so heavy that the character feels too much pressure wearing it. The costumes of Raja Nacha resembles that of the costumes used during the *Mughol* period.

The stage is prepared under the open sky. It is the tradition of starting the preparation of the stage with seven wooden plates. At that place the crown of Hiranyakashipu is prepared. It is made at a higher level with wooden steps attached to it. The audience sit in front of the crown of Hiranyakashipu as if sitting at the court of the King. At the beginning a group of singers

inaugurate the Nacha with ode to Lord Ganesha. The Nacha is anchored by one Sutradhar who narrates the story throughout the show. He works as a string to the characters. The background music is an important aspect of Raja Nacha. The Mukhaveena is completely used for the music. The play starts with the character of Lord Ganesh who sings song and blesses the audience. Then King Hiranyakashipur comes with his ministers and courtesans. Then comes Prahallad with Chanting mantras of Sri Hari (Lord Bishnu). After that the show runs with arguments and counter arguments from Hiranyakashipu and Prhallad.

Lord Nrusingha plays a special role in this Nacha. His costumes, mask and other belongings are regarded as godly and worshipped before the show. Before Lord Nrusingha emerges from the tomb his mask is worshipped before it is wore by the character who plays Lord Nrusingha. The crown of Hiranyakashipur and Prahallad is almost 3 feet in length. The audience watch the incarnation with much affection and devotion. When the Lord gets angry the audience remain spellbound with fear and apprehension. Even the characters are too much involved in the play. The character who acts for Lord Nrusingha is so much involved in the play that he feels himself as Lord Nrusingha and sometimes runs after Hiranyakashipu to kill him. He have to kept in control by a group of people.

Communication through *Prahlad Natak*

Prahlad Nataka or Prahlad Drama is a stylized form of Oriya theatre widespread in Ganjam district, southern Orissa. The tradition is not very old. In the late nineteenth century, Raja Ramakrishna Chhotaraya, an Oriya feudatory ruler of Jalantar, conceived the first performatory edition. The first text was written in Sanskritized Oriya by Gopinath Parichha. He was a poet-dramatist who received generous patronage from the Raja. As a gesture of gratitude he not only dedicated the work to the ruler but also ascribed its authorship to him. Within a few years of its birth, Prahlada Nataka became so popular that it inspired rulers of neighbouring princedoms to prepare other versions. No matter which version, the plot remains the same, based on the myth of Narasimha, Vishnu's man-lion avatar. Thus Prahlada Nataka has only one play in its repertoire. Similarities of make-up and costume suggest that Terukkuttu of Tamil Nadu and Yakshaganam of Andhra Pradesh influenced Prahlada Nataka. But the theatrical style is close enough to Suanga and Yatra of Orissa. It takes place as arena theatre, presented open-air and on level ground sometimes temple precincts. But a must for performance is a five- or six-tiered wooden platform some 2 m high. The top has an area of

about 2 m by 1 m, on which rests the throne of Hiranyakasipu. Hiranyakasipu was a demon whom Narasimha kills at the end. The platform is usually collapsible, easily erected before and dismantled after a show. The acting area of about 4 sq. m is enclosed with ropes in front of the platform. About 6 m to the left from the platform there stands a hollow structure representing the pillar Hiranyakasipu smote. The accompanying musicians take their places to the right of the acting area, close to the platform. The band normally comprises three instruments. The names can be mentioned as a harmonium, a double-ended drum called mardal, and gini i.e. a pair of small cymbals. A few groups have started using violin and trumpet, adding a touch of glamour, but actually enhancing the aesthetic appeal of the music. This is the life-breath of Prahlada Nataka. It not only provides the base but also determines the dramatic structure. Both vocal and instrumental music at appropriate points intensify the impact. Dialogue winged with music takes the emotive intent farther than realistic delivery. Prahlada Nataka draws heavily upon traditional Odissi music, with over 100 songs. Each of these songs set to a raga and tala.

Since music dominates that the director must be a good singer. More often than not, he serves as the lead vocalist i.e. a 'singer'. This is not quite a character in the drama, yet the pivot on which the performance turns. Primarily, he leads the chorus, but acts also as interpreter, commentator, and conductor of the band. Although, usually, he does not wear make-up or formal costume, he has specific songs and dialogue. He sings eulogies of gods and narrates events preceding a dramatic situation or pertinent to the plot but not enacted. At times, he speaks a character's asides and comments on his or her mood and thoughts. He is entrusted with the responsibility of explaining to lay spectators the cryptic, pithy lines. His role resembles that of the Sanskrit sutradhara. Although songs predominate, there are also long prose passages, besides prose dialogue linking the sung passages. The demonic role of Hiranyakasipu is the most demanding. The way he goes up and down the tiered platform with vigorous dance-like movements is indeed a treat for the eyes. The audience enjoys it a lot. More than one group at times, hires a professional actor who excels in this part. Though Narasimha appears only in the last, climactic scene and is seen onstage for only around fifteen minutes, his is also a difficult role. The actor fasts on performance days. Putting on the lion mask and tapered nails simulating claws, he stands amazingly transformed. The choice of an actor for this role is made with much care.

In some villages like Bokagaon near Chhatrapur, Narasimha's mask is worshipped in a temple and believed to have divine powers. Hiranyakasipu wears no mask, but his face is painted bright red to suggest ferocity. His moustache consists of thick ropes of black thread twined with golden zari or brocade and runs across the full expanse of the cheeks down to the nape of the neck. There it is tied in a knot. Both he and Prahlada wear colourful skirts and huge magnificently crafted headgear embellished with glittering glass beads. The major male characters sport shoulder decorations and artificial ornaments. Apart from female and minor characters, all are costumed in such an exaggerated manner that they seem masked head to foot. In keeping with the stylized make-up and dress, the acting is choreographic, having a strong dose of dance. Prahlada Nataka is so popular in Ganjam that there are now more than thirty troupes. But this should be mentioned that all of these are not equally good. Simanchal Patro made a name as Hiranyakasipu, and Raghu Nath Satapathy as a singer-musician. To watch a performance by a really powerful unit is an unforgettable experience. Tuneful music, operatic songs, poetic dialogue, dramatic dance, vigorous acrobatics, stylized mime, elaborate spectacle, colourful costumes, and sumptuous decorations all combine to induce a hypnotic state of consciousness between wakefulness and dream. All these qualities have made Prahlad Nataka a unique one.

Application of *Prahlad Natak* for Development

Traditional media is otherwise called as participatory media because in this form the people can participate in a discussion or programme. Traditional media is the oldest media which is being existed since the civilization itself. Its familiarity with the people makes it more powerful.

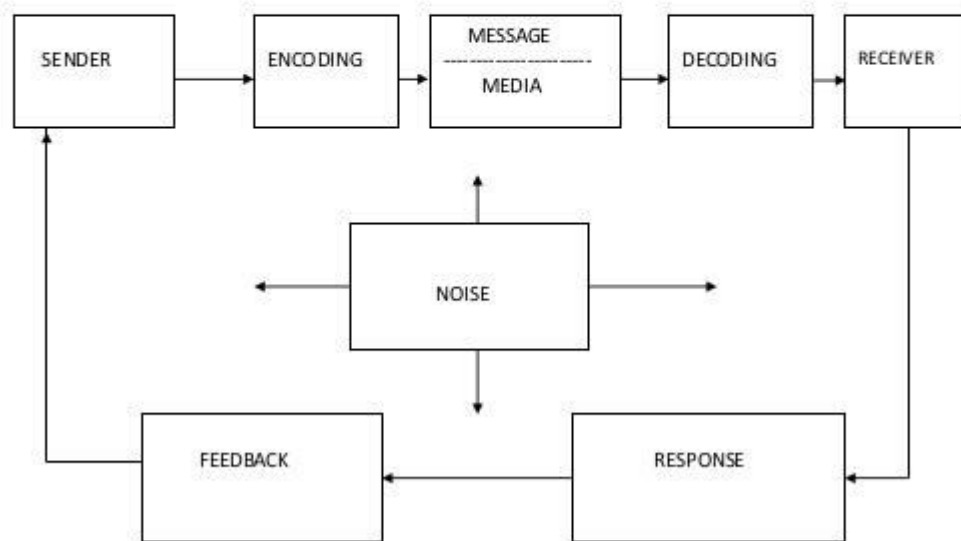
Participatory Approach to Communication

While most of the models of communication are based on an approach to using Mass Media for development the application of a cultural art form like Prahlad Natak would require a participatory approach to development. The communication process in development is heavily laden with technological and semantic noises or barriers to effective communication which may may be nullified in using a local art form with which the target audience i.e. the villagers can relate & identify.

Let us take look at the conventional model of communication:-

A View of the Communication Process

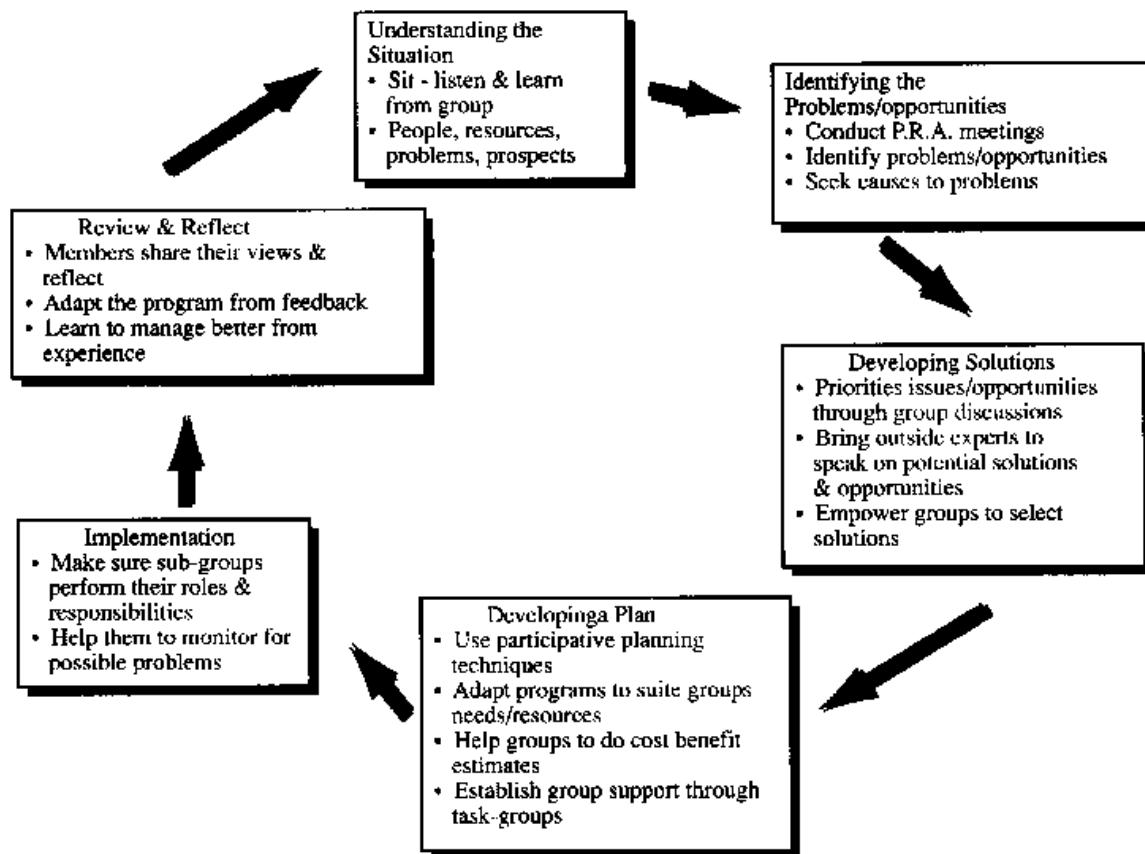
The Communication Process Model



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Thus, we can see that Noise may play a spoilsport in achieving the desired result or response from the audience. The factors range from lack of electricity to lack of media literacy. This is where Communication for Development in a Participatory Approach can be useful where live involvement and participation of the audience is very important. People can simultaneously enjoy the performance value of Prahllad Natak, a form well known to them and also seamlessly receive the messages of development embedded in the art form. An ideal model for this kind of participatory communication for development may be found in the following design:-



Conclusion: The Importance of Folk Media

Every country in the world has its own variety of folk dances. Even in civilised nations wherein highly developed classical and modern dances with complicated technique are to be found, folk dance and music also play an important part in the life of the people, because while the former can cater only to the artistic taste and needs of a few, the latter are a matter of necessity to the masses at large. In short the latter have been from time immemorial the mainstay of the cultural pastime of the vast masses of people. India is no exception to the rule. From the earliest time a rich variety of folk dances has been in vogue in almost all parts of India. Classical and folk arts have always been influencing each other and some of the chief systems of classical dance in our country have been developed in their present forms from folk arts. Folk dance is always used for social as well as secular integration. All dances have been intended and utilized in India not merely for serving as a cultural pastime but also for refining and ennobling at large an abiding faith in and love of God, a sense of beauty and good conduct in life. Folk dances in India have always had a spiritual purpose and religious

background and through them the fundamental principles and philosophical truths of the dominant religions in our country have been enabled to permeate into the minds of the masses.

So the government and the other organization should use folk media, folk songs and dances to involve the common people in different activities. The use of traditional media will very much be helpful for the rural people who constitute 70% of the total Indian population. The important feature of folk media is that the information sent, directly reaches the heart of the audience. As women are tortured more in rural areas, the use of traditional media is very much helpful in bringing development to the womenfolk. For this purpose the government should chalk out an appropriate plan to use folk media in empowering women and uplifting their living standards.

It is examined and proved that traditional media is the most suitable media for development particularly for India. Thus we can achieve development if we can utilize the content and message of the traditional media in a systematic and meaningful manner. According to media specialists there are two types of traditional media. i.e. conservative and liberal media. The contents of conservative media can not be changed. But the contents of liberal media can be substituted with development messages. Raja Nacha is one of such types of liberal media where the messages of Indian development can be added and can be disseminated to the people. It can be utilized as a mediated communication for development. Without changing the theme, we can add some development messages during the song time like Pulse Polio Immunisation Campaign, Malaria Eradication Programme, AIDS Awareness etc. thus it can be concluded that theatre is not meant for entertainment only it can be a powerful weapon for development in developing nations.

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