

In Tandem for Survival: An Exploratory Study on Integration of Folk Media into New Media with reference to Folk Theatre in West Bengal

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Abstract

There has been paradigmatic shift in terms of media content and consumption in past few decades which can be attributed to new media technologies and platforms that have forced other media forms such as Print Media and Electronic media to integrate and converge into it. Even Folk Media which doesn't require technology but rather face to face or group communication, has been evolving parallelly. Changes in terms of audience interests have compelled Folk Media to adopt several strategies to remain relevant in era where audience already has plethora of content at their disposal- be it tv serials, news, web series, social media, newspaper etc. But even after this, it is struggling to maintain its mass appeal. This is the reason why governments are trying hard to revive and preserve these art forms by patronizing them. Under such circumstances, when Folk artists were already fighting for survival, COVID-19 pandemic hit the world and afflicted them badly. The pandemic mandated lockdown made live performance impossible which was the only way for these artists to earn bread. It is in this regard several questions arise such as- Is Folk Media relevant in today's Digital era? Can Folk integrate into New Media? Whether nuances and aesthetics of Folk Art are preserved or are they lost in conversion to a new format? Can New Media aid the revival of Folk Media? Does archival of Folk Art help in monetizing it or not? Keeping in mind the technological changes, rise of Digital Media and COVID-19 pandemic, a study was conducted to assess the present status of Folk Theatre in West Bengal. For this purpose, Unstructured Interview Method was utilized to elicit response from Theatre Artists of West Bengal on various aspects such as- evolvement of performance over the years, economics of survival, adaptation strategies, and role of new media as a helping hand. The findings of the study divulged that new media usage among Theatre artists is limited to infrequent attempts of online promotion of their shows/performances even though they are well acquainted with digital technologies. On enquiry, it was also found that the idea of preserving and in turn

monetizing Folk Theatre is afar-fetched idea that hasn't come to fruition and probably would remain so even in near future.

Keywords: Folk Theatre, New Media, Survival, Archival, West Bengal

Introduction

A nation aiming for developing its rural areas mostly focuses on projecting its initiatives and approaches towards covering social, political, economic, and cultural development to enable the rural population a comfortable life. While emphasizing the development of the rural population on multiple aspects, strengthening the communication in multiple statures and aspects is essential to look into. In 1972, UNESCO along with the International Planned Parenthood Federation arranged a series of meets to discuss the scopes of both mass and folk media in the communication programs related to family planning, which proposed the folk media to be an effective channel to convey the message across the audience. While folk art is considered a vital communication platform for information dissemination, most of the villages have their unique music, dance, drama and other forms of folk art that is a mere reflection of their age-old culture and tradition which are been sanctioned and descended through generations. Nobel laureate and renowned poet and writer Rabindranath Tagore advocated folk art, a medium to satisfy our innate needs that enables us to explore and exhibit our expressions. In India, folk art has taken vivid and vibrant shapes, however, the relevance is prominent across the landscape with different names as a form of folk song 'AHLA', which is quite popular in Uttar Pradesh can be compared with 'LAAVANI' of Maharashtra, 'VILLUPAATTU' of Tamil, 'GEE-GEE' of Karnataka and 'KAVIGAN' of West Bengal(Kumar, 2006).

In 1975 the term 'coalition' was used to refer to the interface that joins mass media's efforts with the folk media. The idea behind the integration was to combine the efforts of both these media platforms in societal development. One such implement was materialized in 1954 through the full-fledged drama and dance to encourage the developmental communication and performing arts under the supervision of 'Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India. The inter-regional workshop-cum-seminar was partially funded by UNESCO besides other regulatory bodies. One of the major suggestions that came out of the seminar was to combine the impact of mass and traditional media and produce content like

the puppet film produced by 'Ek thiLacchi' by the Indian Institute of Mass Communication, New Delhi (Rajendra Chapke, 2002).

Various folk media content represents the diverse culture of the state and nation and carries the traditions with them. This is why it is essential to preserve and archive them in the proper format for further usage and research. 'Institute of Ethnomusicology is considered as one of the oldest reserves and scientific research centres under the 'Slovene Academy of Sciences and Arts'', established in 1934 that hold an enormous amount of Slovenian musicalfolklore and also created a digital repository for further analysis (Matija Marolt, 2009).The advantage of technology demands to connect various aspects of society with the digital platform and folklore was not an exception. Interestingly, the folklore now are been played through Firewire along with the traditional setup around a campfire. Ethnographical and psychological analysis to separate the fantasies from real is also a potent way of identifying differences between folk and official. The intrusion of technologies made many alterations to the dissemination of the folklores which according to Simon J. Bronner is called the 'transgressive folk web'(Bronner, 2009).

Folk Culture in Bengal

Bengal has been a hub of folk culture in the entire nation and has been nurturing the culture for ages. In the local language, 'Loko Sanskrit' represents the amalgamation of a wide variety of different folk cultures that can be a subject of study from psychology, anthropology, and many more. When referring to folk culture, it includes the music or dance and expands its richness to customs, skills, institutions, and dress to represent a unique way of life, especially for the rural community. Some factors help in growing a folk culture over a period of time and provide a perspective to the people who are following that culture which is also based on certain social, economic, and physical characteristics that are experienced by a group of inhabitants. While popular culture generally spread across the territory of multiple nations, folk culture is mostly confined by a narrow territory with an anonymous source. Dr. Falguni Dey in his paper 'Folk culture of West Bengal' illustrated a chart explaining the diversity of folk culture that covers various avenues of folk culture(Dey, 2012). A website named daricha.org illustrates the folk and tribal traditions spread across the state of West Bengal through 18 different districts, broadly categorizing the forms into seven genres crafts, dance, instrument, music, puppetry, theatre, and visual art, explaining the diversity of folk and tribal culture of the state (DARICHA, 2022).

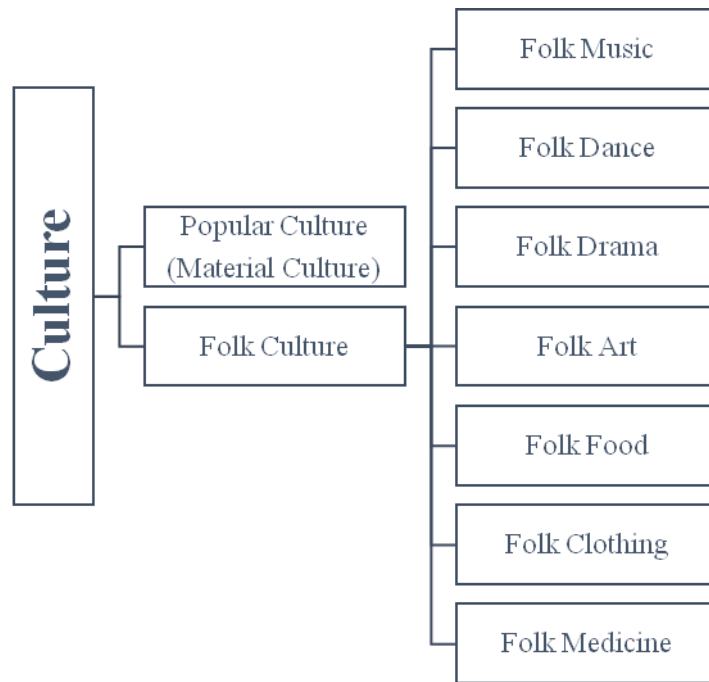


Figure 1. Types of culture, adopted from ‘Folk culture of West Bengal’ by Dr. Falguni Dey (Dey, 2012)

Another form of folk media is folklore which is very popular in the literary circle, especially for its illustrious and imaginative ways of storytelling. A popular example can be found in ‘ThakurmarJhuli (Grandmother’s Bag of Tails)’ by a renowned Indian writer with a profound contribution to children’s literature, Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumder. While the popular epics like ‘Ramayana’ and ‘Mahabharat’ have primarily emerged from folklore which hosts a range of tales from different parts of the land, the folklores have also taken a long route to reach modern society. Sometimes it is not also being used as a part of pedagogy to pass on social or moral education. The new media helps in replicating and illustrating the old folklores in much more appealing ways and helps in reproducing the content through different media surfaces (Bajpai, 2008).

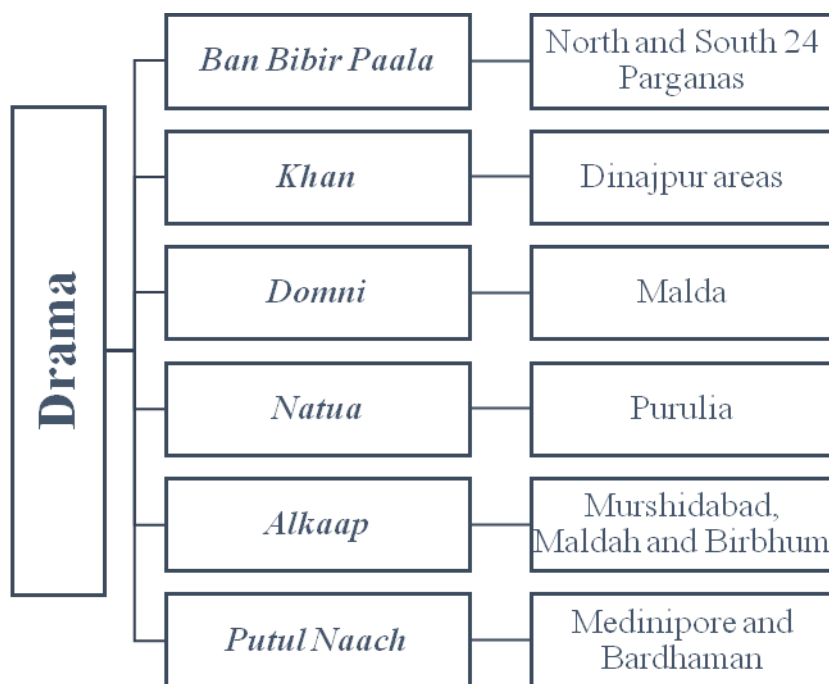


Figure 2. Different types of drama and the districts they are originated from (Dey, 2012)

Dr. Falguni Dey has also classified different forms of drama, that is an integral part of folk culture into six categories ‘Ban BibirPaala’; ‘Khan’; ‘Domni’; ‘Natua’; ‘Alkaap’ and ‘PutulNaach’ according to the districts or parts of the state where they have originated. These varies are only a glimpse of the entire repository of folk culture that belongs to the state of West Bengal (Dey, 2012).

Jatra in West Bengal over the years

Jatra is yet another section of folk art that has long been rooted in the eastern part of the subcontinent has hardly any well-documented histories, however, this folk art form has its linkage with ‘Rigvedic rituals’, ‘tribal festivals’ and also with the ‘classical Indian theatre’. The earliest shreds of evidence of jatras are found in eighteen centuries in the form of ‘Paalas’ from Bengal. The reason behind the long-lost history of jatra might be seeded into the tradition of oral literacy in the pre-British era, which enables the old and native forms to fade out with time. The sixteenth-century saw the tremendous popularity of jatra where ‘putulnaach’ (puppet dance) was also added to increase the element of entertainment and indeed this form of folk culture become the centre of entertainment for quite some time. Another popular use of jatra is found among the followers of ‘Chaitanya’ and himself to spread the light of their faith by using elements like music, dance, and acting (Sarkar, 1975). The earlier form of jatra in West Bengal would mostly be based on the religious and

moralistic and instructive nature. In the late 18th century, jatra was massively influenced by western theatre. The art form was reborn in the 20th century by the 'swadeshi movements' that used it as a way to increase the number of followers. Rupika Charaverti in her article 'Evolution jatra in Bengal' proposed the segregation of the entire period of evolution of jatra into four stages 'imperial hegemony', 'mimicry', 'translation and localization', and 'adaptation and transformation' that explains the fall of jatra in the first two and the revival of the jatra through 'translation and localization', and 'adaptation and transformation'. Modern society made a clear distinction of jatra which is divided among urban and rural forms while both of them failed to impress the audience of others, therefore remaining separated by the two distinct sets of audiences (Chakraverti, 2018).

Objectives and Methods

The study intends to assess various aspects of Folk theatre in West Bengal such as- present status and future, impact of Digital Media and technologies, changes in practise of the art form during and post COVID-19 pandemic. Also, the study explores the possibility of integrating Folk Theatre into Digital Media so as to increase its longevity (archival), revenue generation, reach and popularity. To achieve this, Unstructured Personal Interview were conducted among Bengali Theatre Artists and practitioners. They were asked questions on evolution of Folk Theatre over the years, survival strategies, and role of New Media in preservation of Folk Theatre. Once done with the recordings of the Interview sessions in audio form, the data was transcribed from verbal Bengali to written English and later appropriate inferences were drawn from it.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Theatre artists such as Mr. Prasenjit Chakraborty, Bedanta Bandyopadhyay and theatre enthusiasts- Arijit Sahu and Ranit Sarkar were personally interviewed. Other theatre enthusiasts and practitioners were also interviewed briefly to get further insight on the topic. In the beginning, questions related to their background such as age, educational level, monthly income, occupation, source of income etc. were asked. Later questions on specific aspects of the study like- Government Support, Origin and Evolution of the Folk Theatre,

Strategies for Survival, Impact of Digital Media technologies, Role of Digital Media in preservation, Folk Theatre during and Post COVID-19, and Future of Folk Theatre were asked.

Government Patronage/Support- The artists were asked about assistance (if any) that the government provided and its nature. There varied opinion in this regard. Mr. Chakraborty was of opinion that earlier people were doing Folk theatre as they liked it while today theatre artists are doing it to get funds. Even when there was paucity of funds, he and his group members used to spend from their pocket. Sometimes, situations were so tough that they had to spend entirely from their pocket and also collect from audience through shows. Presently, in absence of regular funding, theatre artists are planning to create a regulatory body that would create 'Natya Gram' (Drama Village) where they will perform theatre along with other activities such as farming so as to keep the Folk Theatre alive. Another renowned theatre artist, Mr. Bandyopadhyay (a Post Graduate) while discussing government's role in preserving Folk Art forms stated that when he was with a renowned theatre group, the group received funding. But now when he has started a new theatre group, he doesn't receive any kind of fund and instead relies on donation given by locals.

Origin and Evolution of the Art Form- Questions were asked regarding how Folk Theatre is changing or rather evolving over the years. Mr. Bandyopadhyay illustrated how Folk Culture in Bengal and in India is getting influenced by European culture and this has led to westernisation of performance that people are witnessing in today's time. From its humble beginnings in Doltala 250 years, Folk theatre has evolved over the years by including several western and contemporary elements. Mr. Prasenjit Chakraborty (a Graduate) from Howrah who has been performing Folk Theatre for more than 4 decades expressed that his desire to express his introvert self, pushed him into the theatre. He felt that Folk Theatre will never lose its popularity and relevance as it is 'Lok Natak' and taps the nerve of the audience by highlighting their problems and relevant issues. Also, he pointed out how Jatra over the years has transformed by adapting to the latest trend and culture to remain relevant in contemporary times. The depiction of the society in Jatra is an apt reflection of present society.

Strategies for Survival- Mr. Chakraborty explained how theatre artists are keeping up with present times. In order to supplement income from theatre, he has taken up the profession of Tax Consultancy and also has a Distributor Business which is his secondary profession. As his primary profession i.e., being an artist doesn't keep him economically sound, that is why he

has taken up another profession. He felt that apart from theatre one must also prepare for another profession that will help them in survival as income from theatre is sporadic/infrequent. He suggested that if schools and colleges can include religious texts such as Ramayan, BhagwadGita in school curriculum, they should also include Folk art forms as well. He explained how he teaches budding theatre artists to create savings. For instance, if they get some money for lunch, he asks them to save at least a rupee or two from it and then put it in piggy bank. Later this money is used to fund activities of 'Natya Dal'. They also collect money and visit orphanages, old age homes and entertain them as well. Arijit Sahu a theatre artist from Medinipur got the inspiration from his father to join theatre who actively practises Folk Theatre. He acknowledged that for survival theatre as a profession is not enough and that is why he preparing to become a doctor which will be his alternate career.

Impact of New Media technologies- There was question related to how Folk Theatre is faring in Digital Era. Mr. Bandyopadhyay mentioned how the changes brought by Digital Media is not all Black or White but rather shades of grey i.e., to an extent it has some advantages and some disadvantages as well. Most of the interviewees agreed that Folk Theatre has its strengths which can't be copied by Digital Media and that is why they both will survive and thrive without disturbing each other in a major way.

Limitations of New Media- While highlighting limitations of New Media, Mr. Bandyopadhyay pointed that audience is rather passive on New Media and communication is one way as it elicits only reaction. On the other hand, theatre is face to face, physical and there is direct response/interaction which is the best form of feedback. Ranit also pointed out another limitation of Digital Media i.e., interactivity which is superficial and limited by screen. One can't simply emulate face to face interaction through Digital Media. He agreed that one might view Digital Media as an alternate option for display of Theatrical performance but the aura and essence of live theatre can't be emulated on Digital platform. The option of breaking the fourth wall and interacting/connecting to the audience can't be exercised on digital screens. A live performance has no dubbing or retakes. He believes that if folk theatre if transformed for Online platform would be more dramatized just like soap operas.

Preserving the Art through New Media- In a Digital environment where everything happening around the world is available on Internet, it is obvious that one might expect Folk theatre performance to be on Digital devices which might ultimately help in the archival of

these art forms. This statement was also put in front of the interviewees. While Mr. Bandyopadhyay was all praise for role of New Media in survival, revival and preservation of Folk Theatre yet he cautioned that it might lead to Boomerang Effect i.e., preserving the theatre performances through video/images/audio could provide universal access of a particular culture to the world audience. But this in turn might discourage audience from attending the live performance as they would be gratifying themselves digitally. He himself has a YouTube channel named “Prasenjit Alokanda Pathway Vlogs” <<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCKITQNk-jkwFe5aGLaFUwvg>> where he puts clips of his trips and performances.

Ranit Sarkar whose family has been related to some art form developed interest in theatre in early age. While talking about his Social Media presence, he mentioned that he uploads short clips of his performance and ‘Abrati’ (poem recitations) which helps him in garnering views and well-deserved applause. He feels that even though those who can dance or sing can easily put their performance on Social Media but when it comes to theatre it becomes a bit difficult as the video seems out of context and thus doesn’t get lots of attention. Thus, Social Media benefits only some form of Folk Media and not all forms that includes theatre as well. But on a positive he reflected that promo videos of performance can put on the Internet which might help in promoting the show and in turn will bring in more audience.

Arijit mentioned how he uses Social Media to promote his shows. He believes that Social Media can be used to increase reach and also create an identity for oneself. He frequently posts on where he is going to perform next and shares poster of the show as well. He shared his insights on importance of New Media by stating how print media promotion cost a lot and promotes on a small level but with Social Media global audience could be targeted and that too for free. He believes that sharing own experience about Folk theatre on Social Media can inspire other to also join the profession or at least appreciate the aesthetics of the art form. He is of view that instead of putting entire show, only short clips of the show should be put as a teaser on the Social Media platforms for purpose of promotion. He confessed that earlier he had a YouTube channel but in order to focus more on medical career, he deleted that account.

Folk Theatre during and Post COVID-19- On being asked about the impact of COVID on theatre, Mr. Bandyopadhyay said that the pandemic brought an economic downturn which made many quit the profession entirely. COVID-19 put an end to live performance and performers took to Homebound recordings which didn’t elicit a favourable response. During

COVID-19 pandemic, Ranit acknowledged that Digital Media was of little help to Folk Theatre as none of the artists were able to discuss or perform in that period. Several shows were cancelled due to lockdown restrictions. After pandemic was over and relaxations were in place, they got permissions to do shows, yet there were very few audiences. Open Theatre was also tried but due to pandemic fear, people are not coming to these events. According to Arijit, during COVID-19 pandemic, when earning through theatre dried up, artists started focusing on their secondary career which helped them in surviving. He agreed that artists do not entirely depend on theatre for earning bread and they have other source of income as well. During the pandemic, though he didn't have any online shows but he did attend online meetings with fellow artists in order to remain in contact. During covid all shows were closed, all were earning through primary job everyone in this field had this as secondary career, so none of them suffered. Artists don't depend on theatre 100% they have other source of income as well. During COVID period, they didn't have online sessions. But they did have online meetings.

Future of Folk Theatre- While commenting on future of Folk theatre, Ranit reflected that nowadays people want everything on their smartphone, and don't want to go to watch the live performance. Even while attending they have a habit of recording rather enjoying the performance and living in the moment. According to understanding of Ranit, until and unless, Folk Theatre is not well monetized, it would not survive and New Media to an extent might help in this endeavour. Most of the interviewees were uncertain about the future of theatre and were of opinion that until and unless Folk Theatre doesn't adapt or integrate with New Media and changes brought due to it, the art form won't be able to survive. To make things worse, even the governments didn't try to help out the theatre artists during the COVID-19 situation.

Discussion and Conclusions

The present study was conducted by interviewing Theatre artists to ascertain their opinion on pertinent questions related to Folk Theatre. Intellectuals around the world discuss role of New Media in reviving Folk Media and stress on importance of archiving the folk-art forms so as to preserve the local culture and traditions. It is in this regard, the study was carried out to find out response of theatre artists on various aspects such as- government assistance,

evolution of Folk Theatre, strategies adopted for survival, impact of New Media technologies, archival of Folk art through New Media, folk theatre amidst pandemic and its impact etc.

Through study, it came to researcher's knowledge that most of the artists are using New Media platforms and technologies (and are proficient in doing so). But they are not using it to promote their art to the fullest. Their efforts in promotion of their art are rather very infrequent. They just sometimes upload posters/clips of shows but it is not done extensively and that is why they have to settle just with likes. The interviewees accepted that only a few of the people made up their mind to watch the show live after seeing its promo on their Social Media accounts.

The utility and relevance of Folk theatre can't be undermined in today's time. In Fact, Folk Media has become even more relevant in today's time as most of the media forms are highly commercialized and rarely highlight people's issues as they serve interest of only few (i.e., stakeholders). To add further, New Media is unable to capture the nuances and aesthetics of Folk Theatre as it is interaction intensive and doesn't work well on platform where audience is mostly passive. In Live performance, theatre artists are able to connect with audience more than television and cinema as they are able to break the fourth wall.

Most of the folk-art forms including theatre were severely affected by the pandemic as live performances came to a halt. The artists acknowledged that rather than adapting most of them waited for the pandemic to get over. They were clueless regarding ways to adapt to digital platforms and technologies. As far as monetization of Folk theatre through New Media is considered, it is merely an idea that has not been explored yet. During COVID-19, when singers were unable to perform live, they started performing online and earning money through tickets but theatre artists did not implement this idea.

Few theatre artists predicts that a Symbiotic relationship between the New Media and Folk Theatre could help in survival of the art form. There are chances that a Hybrid form of Folk Media might exist in future as it has flexibility to evolve unlike Classical art forms which are purely focused on aesthetics and hence rarely change even after centuries of practise. Another suggestion for keeping Folk Theatre alive was that governments should patronize it and make efforts to preserve it by taking care of artists who practise this art form.

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