

Mughal Tamasha, Vibrant Folk Theatre of Odisha

Sony Parhi

Abstract

Folk Theatre is an art form in with a fusion of elements from music, dance, pantomime, epic and ballad recitation, graphic arts, religion and festival peasantry. The Folk theatre provides mass entertainment, helps Indian society as indigenous tools of interpersonal, inter-group and inter-village communication. Mughal Tamasha as a unique, satirical form of folk theatre in Odisha is distinct for its flavor and purpose. It is the outcome of the cultural interaction between the locals the migrant representative of the Muslim rulers in 18th Century A.D. It develops and promotes communal harmony and also provides social criticism of state of affairs prevailing at that time. This paper discusses this folk theatre form and need to popularize this form.

Key words: Folk theatre, Interpersonal communication, Participatory, Documentation

Introduction

Theatre is a collaborative form of [fine art](#) that uses live performers to present the experience of a real or imagined event before a live audience in a specific place. The performers may communicate this experience to the audience through combinations of gesture, speech, song, music, and dance. Elements of art and [stagecraft](#) are used to enhance the physicality, presence and immediacy of the experience. (1)

India lives in her villages. At a time when modern means of entertainment were yet to penetrate the borders of our villages. Artistic expressions in the form of folk theatre gripped performers and audience alike. TV and cinema becoming all pervasive mass media, we still root for familiar *jatra*, *pala*, *daskathia* or a theatre performance with flavors of the rural and the rustic. A few prominent folk theatre forms of Odisha are *Suanga*, *Mughal Tamasha*, *Leela*, *Jatra*, *Danda Nata*, *Sakhi Nata* and *Dhanu Yatra*. This study shall look at Mughal Tamasha form of folk theatre.

As long as India lives, the traditional media of communication will exist. It is almost an impossible task for any government which comes to power to transform the sixty percent of the villages in such a manner as to usher in the electronic era overnight. India is a developing and fast progressing nation. It is on the backdrop of factors as the economic, industrial, social and cultural background that the traditional media of communication will continue to be more effective than the electronic media.

Das, Sheelita (2013) opined that folk theatre is an indigenous form and it breaks all kinds of formal barriers of human communication and appeals directly to the people. (7)

Wang and Dissanayake (1984) defined it as a communication system embedded in the culture which existed much before the arrival of mass media, and which still exists as a vital mode of communication in many parts of the world presenting a certain degree of continuity, despite changes. (9)

Kidd (1984) opined that 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. (10)

Theatre is a composite art in India with a fusion of elements from music, dance, pantomime, epic and ballad, recitation, graphic and plastic arts, religion and festival peasantry. The Folk theatre having roots in native culture is embedded in local identity and social values besides providing mass entertainment helped Indian society as indigenous tools of interpersonal, inter-group and inter-village communication for ages. Folk theatre has been used extensively in India to propagate critical social, political and cultural issues in the form of theatrical messages to create awareness among the people. As an indigenous form it breaks all kinds of formal barriers of human communication and appeals directly to the people.

History:

Raja Mansingh defeated the Afghans and established Mughal rule in Odisha. However, he did not dismiss the Afghan officers who surrendered before him. These officers became the Muslim residents of Odisha. For more than two hundred years that the Muslims ruled, Persian remained the court language. Afghan Officers who remained in power indulged in a luxurious lifestyle. This affected in the administration. Mughal Tamasha deals with loose and slack

administration of the Mughal officials in a comical way. When the Marathas ruled over Odisha in the second half of the 18th Century A.D, people became open and fearlessly criticized and made mockery of the Muslim rulers, their style of rule and administrative slackness. The satire was primarily aimed at the luxury and display of wealth that Mughals indulged in. The form did not promote communalism, since it ridiculed the filthy rich rulers and their oppressive mannerisms which put both communities at a receiving end. Mughal Tamasha was popular amongst both Hindus and Muslims and both communities participated in it.

Mughal Tamasha in Odisha is distinct for its flavor and purpose. Satirical in nature, the art form is very unique to Odisha. Mughal Tamasha is unique in the annals of Folk Drama in India. It is the outcome of the cultural interaction and confluence that took place between the local inhabitants and the migrant representative of the Muslim rulers in 18th Century A.D. While attempting to develop and promote communal harmony, it also provides social criticism of state of affairs prevailing at that time which is of relevance. The incredibly fertile imagination of a single genius poet Banshi Ballav Goswami had created seven works of Tamasha; the most outstanding and unique amongst them being ‘Mughal Tamasha’. This form is the only that is still alive but struggling for survival with ever decreasing performances and patronage.

The other six forms like Bhil Tamasha, (2) Radhakrushna Tamasha (3) Chauda / Chahoda Tamasha (4) Jogi Tamasha (5) Fakir Tamasha and (6) Lolin Mazabai Tamasha, ceased to exist long ago and are virtually lost to posterity except for manuscripts in incomplete form.

Reach:

Historically speaking Mughal Tamasha evolved in Sangat village as a variation of the traditional Chaiti Tamasha in Bhadrak region of Odisha in the late half of 18th century. Subsequently, it spread out to other places like Sahapur, Januganj, Garadpur and Kuansa. It remained confined within the region though sporadic attempts were made to perform the same in some other areas of Northern Odisha.

Keeping in line with the tradition and a continuation of Odisha’s indigenous regional version of Tamasha, a specific version which is identified as Mughal Tamasha is possibly unique, unprecedented and unparalleled in the annals of theatre on account of its simultaneous employment of five different languages within course of the performance of a single play –

Odia, Bengali, Hindi, Persian and Urdu. The uninhabited use of language spoken by people in actual life is another aspect which is indicative of the realistic daring which guided the composition of this popular genre, while the creative use of his mastery over the different languages is unbelievably unique feature of Mughal Tamasha.

Couched in the form of a musical farce, music and songs play a predominant role in advancing the action in an epigrammatic manner and a confluence is noticeable in the use of indigenous musical instruments along with their more exotic counterparts. Mughal Tamasha is the outcome of the cultural interaction and confluence that took place between the local inhabitants and the outsiders when historical forces brought in to their midst.

The plot of Mughal Tamasha:

Tamasha in local language can be loosely translated as farce. As had been customary with large empires in the past, the rulers based at their capitals ruled the distant regions through representative who from time to time visited the different localities placed under their charge. The inhabitants of these territories became the victims of exploitation by many of these representatives whenever they visited such localities. In Mughal Tamasha, the Mirza Sahab is one such regional representative who is on a visit to a particular locality placed under his disposal.

The inhabitants of these territories became the victims of exploitation by many of these representatives.

“In Mughal Tamasha, the Mirza Sahab is one such regional representative who is on a visit to a particular locality placed under his disposal. Through the various interactions amongst the different characters of the play, it is sought to portray that if the moral fabric of any society is not discreetly and judiciously protected and preserved by its ruling fraternity, the decay and destruction of values- both social as well as personal will percolate to every level of the social hierarchy from the top to the bottom. As such Mughal Tamasha has no definite plot. Most of the characters are un-related. They are mostly the Sebayats (people who render personal service) of the rulers or administrators. They are Vestiwalla (Waterman), Jhaduwalla (Sweeper), Farras (person arranging beds), Hukawalla (person who arrange Huka for Smoking), Pankhawalla (one who fans), Bhat (person who recited praises), Nanakshai (Followers of Guru Nanak), Daptari (Peon), Khansama (Cook), Zamindar (Landlord), Gumasta (Manager of the Landlord), Bhandari (Barber or Hair-dressers), Doodhawali (The

Milkmaid) and others. All these characters are summoned to the stage one by one summoned by the Chopdar as desired by the Mirza, the Mughal administrator. All of them sing songs to introduce themselves and their profession. Family life is also delineated. Most of the songs are farcical and arouse humor. While singing the songs, they also indulge in mild dancing and gesticulations. Unlike other folk theatre the costumes plays an important and integral role in Mughal Tamasha. The characters like Chopdar, Vestiwala, Farras and Totibardar are dressed with Muslim dresses. Mirzasahab uses the costumes of royal style, which are decorative, glaring and garish. The dress of Zamindar is very simple like the Vaishnavite Hindu. The costume of milkmaid is like the typical rural Hindu lady with saree and who enters the stage with a milk pot in her head. The performance of Mughal Tamasha continues throughout the night. The people enjoy the entire drama sleeplessly”. (3)

Ambience with music:

A confluence of indigenous musical instruments and their more exotic counterparts is noticeable. The use of different musical instruments like Kubuji, Violin, Sitar Pakhawaj, Duggi- Tabala, Harmonium along with the indigenous Kahali (Desi Clarinet), Jodi Nagara or Dhola- Mahuri create an atmosphere that takes the audience to the period depicted in the play. The music is played prior to the commencement of action on the stage. Before the beginning of the play loud music is provided with Sahanai (Mahuri), Dhol and Jodi Nagara. The music continues for hours to attract the crowd. When the audience settles down the members of the orchestra come to the stage and occupy their seats, just in front of the acting area.

Challenges:

“The same is the pitiable condition of folk theatre form of 'Mughal-Tamasha' of Bhadrak, though it was once enjoyed and accepted by the people as the most thrilling and popular folk form. Ideas and taste of the people are changing fast with the march of the time. The popularization of radio, TV and VCR as source of entertainment has diminished the loyalty of the people towards the folk plays. Now aggressive consumerism has mesmerized the people's mind due to advent of electronic media. At this stage one may ask the question of utility and relevance of reviving the traditional multiple streams of folk plays when cinema and TV are giving enough entertainment to the people. The folk drama has got twin purpose

of both entertainment and education. Folk theatre has contributed immensely for creating social consciousness". (2)

With urbanization of the country, industrialization, globalization and development; folk culture is no more cradled in the rustic hamlets of the country side. One does get to see some forms frequently manifested in city suburbs largely because of a huge section of the rural audience has moved to the city in search of a new life and better livelihoods. Therefore, in spite of the rapid urbanization folk art still remains the art of 'people' living both in urban and rural areas.

These art forms are faithful to rural life, have an authenticity and a charm of their own and are amongst the most valuable legacies of our long and varied rural heritage. Folk arts in form of have nourished a rich tradition. The coming of popular mass media like television, cinema and the internet and other urban forms of entertainment has posed challenges to folk theatre forms.

The old order changeth yielding place to the new. Influences from around the world and impact of globalization are one and many. Intercultural communication has, in its wake influenced theatre forms of our nation. A western influence is evident in our performing arts.

Role of media:

Mughal Tamasha with its visual elements, quick witty delivery and lessons in socialism and religious unity and amity is food for thought for audiences and media alike. There are advantages of using such traditional media and even integrating them into the mass media. In India, such media have played a role in the communication and promotion of new ideas and the adjustment to a new and evolving political situation. Interpersonal exchanges are the key points in the area of changing ideas and behavior. Folk media are flexible, familiar and participatory.

Conclusion:

India is a treasure trove of folk theatre. Media can make citizens aware of the amazing variety of our folk theatre. Folk theatre like Mughal Tamasha with its unique flavor can bridge religious divides. It can be used as an effective tool in promoting behavior change communication. Integrating the concept, themes and musical scores in electronic media will be a wise blending of both media.

It is a matter of concern that many in the generation of today in our nation have no knowledge of a form of theatre called Mughal Tamasha. The youth especially in the internet era have no idea of this form of folk theatre. Jingles in radio and television and characters in print media could boost popularity of dwindling folk theatre forms and at the same time promote development ideas. Family welfare, small savings schemes, no to dowry, no to female infanticide, drive against liquor consumption, health hygiene, road safety and education are areas where folk theatre can create awareness. To advocate the use of folk media is not to take a stand against modernism. Again, invoking the folk does not mean that the electronic media must be relegated to the background.

According to noted film maker, Shyam Benegal, the government should bring more authenticity to their efforts of using folk media. Artistes belonging to the area where the form is popular should be selected instead of asking members of Song and Drama Division to play a role. The indigenous media will be accepted better because of the various parameters of familiarity, accent, mannerisms etc than the person who has been 'groomed' to perform.

"Folk theatre or culture has flourished when the rich or urban middle class population has turned their attention to it. Now time has come, to bridge the gap between modern and traditional forms. We must rescue our identity from the challenge of being rootless and remain floating in the mono-cultural idea of the West", said theatre activist Subodh Patnaik.

(6)

Dhira Mallick, theatre activist stressed that the unique feature of folk theatre is spontaneous. One can derive a lot of significant lessons from the rural drama. There is more focus on performance with minimal use of mechanical support. Moreover, they serve the dual purpose of entertainment and education. Folk theatre has been a tool for creating social consciousness for ages.

There is diversity of media in each region. A sincere effort on the part of government media units NGOs and cultural groups is the need of the hour. However care should be taken that the form is not vulgarized. Sentiments and intelligence of the audience must be respected.

Folk media are indeed the most effective form of communication in developing nations. Efforts to document and research the rich repertoire will go a long way to promote the development of nations like India. Given institutional and social support these forms can be

revived, preserved and fostered as unique art forms for both rural and urban populace. Institutions that teach the art of drama at the national and state level have prepared courses influenced by western drama and its practices.

“A happy combination of the modern and traditional media would make for a practical approach, though it must be seen to it that folk media are not crushed in the unequal competition with the new media”.(5)

Folk arts are evolving in nature. They continually adapt themselves to changing times and needs and thus continue to lose a bit of their original form. Therefore it becomes difficult to recall the history of their form and existence. It is only through studies, research, methods of recall and repeated performances that we attempt to trace their original form and historical evolution. There is hardly any significant feature in the syllabi to know and understand our own indigenous culture or theatre or names of experts. It is not surprising that this situation prevails due to negligible efforts in documentation or failure in giving an academic shape to our folk forms.

References

1. www.wikipedia.org
2. Kar, Indu Bhusan. Orissa Review, January 2008. Relevance of Folk Theatres in Modern Times.
3. Rath, Rabi Sankar. Orissa Review, June 2013. Odisha's Unique Theatre Form – Mughal Tamasha.
4. Rayudu, C. S. Media and Communication Management. New Delhi: Himalaya Publishing House.
5. Kumar, Keval J. Mass Communication in India. New Delhi: Jaico Publishing House.
6. www.telegraphindia.com/1140818/jsp/odisha/story_18730691.jsp
7. Das, Sheelita- 'Folk theatre-its relevance in development communication in India'/ Global Media Journal-Indian Edition/ISSN 2249-5835/www.caluniv.ac.in/Winter Issue/December 2013/Vol.4/No.2
8. Dissanayake, W. (1977). New wine in old bottle: Can folk media convey modern message? Journal of Communication, Spring.

9. Kidd, Ross (1984). The Performing Arts and Development in India: three case studies and a comparative analysis. In G. Wang and W. Dissanayake (eds). Continuity and Change in Communication systems. New Jersey: Ablax.
10. www.telegraphindia.com/1150327/jsp/odisha/story_11021.js
Sony Parhi is Lecturer at Department of Journalism & Mass Communication of Central University of Orissa, Koraput. She may be reached at sonyparhi@gmail.com