

Significance of Folk theatre as Communication for Development in Indian Context

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Abstract

Introduction

Theatre is one of the oldest forms of human communication. From the very beginning, it has been used for different purposes – religious, political, social. Its local approach and colloquial dialects makes it more personal and intimate and directly appeals to the heart and mind. In India, theatre is still largely accepted by different age groups in all areas. It is still considered more familiar and credible by the majority of the people. It is unique in effective communication because it has some specific cultural values. Theater has its different traditional forms in different regions which are known as folk theatre. Some of these popular forms are Tamasha, PowadaBhavai, Nautanki, Jatra, Therukoothu etc.

These folk theatres have many elements of entertainmentlike song, dance, drama, music etc. Folk theatre has deep root in tradition, culture and it has greater reach than other mass media.

Tamasha – It is a 400 years old folk theatre of Maharashtra. It has its two forms –Banavat (artificial) and assal (real). Every performance starts with a prayer to Ganesh. The Vag (story) starts in form of song, dance and dialogues. Stories can be myth or social problems. Tamasha groups are also now working to educate on government sponsored family planning programmes.

Powada or Pawala– This 16th century folk theatre form of Maharashtra are generally based on historical tales. Some musical props like Majra, Daph, Tuntune are used.

Yakshagana – This Karnataka’s folk theatre is basically “the song of the Yaksha”. The main narrator is Bhagvata who sings.

Nautanki – North India’s this famous folk drama is purely based on music. The main instruments used are makkara and dholak. This is made on contemporary social and political events.

Jatra – This is the folk theatre of Bengal and Orissa. It emphasizes on the episodes of Krishna and Radha. UtpalDutt used Jatra for political communication.

Bhavai – It is a popular theatre form in Gujarat. The main Characters are Ranglo and Naik. It starts with devotional song. Classical music is used in this form. Satire is an important element.

Therukoothu – It is Tamilnadu’s street theatre and a combination of prose (iyal) music (isai) and drama (natakam).

Puppetry – It is another popular form of folk theatre. Four styles are used generally Sutratharika, Rod Puppets, Shadow Puppets and Hand Puppets. It is widely used by different NGOs, government educational programs to make aware the rural people. Bihar’s ‘Yampuri’ puppetry is well-known for its activities.

Burrakatha– It is a integrated folk art form of narrative story. It is performed by a troupe of three artists – Kathakudu, Rajakeeyam and Hasyagadu. The musical instruments used in this form are tambura and dakki. This folk art belongs to Andhra Pradesh &Telangana.

Street Theatre- It is also a popular form of traditional folk theatre. It has been also referred as “nukkadnatak”. The nomenclature of this includes ‘street’ word as it is performed in street corners, markets, roads. Attention has been trying to be grasped of the audiences through different actions, gestures etc. Social problems are generally addressed in this form. Jana NatyaManch is very famous as a street theatre group. The name of a renowned Tamil street theatre is ‘Terukkuttu’.

Communication for Development

Communication that supports development activities is termed as Communication for Development. Nora Quebral (1975) explained Development Communication: “The art and science of human communication applied to the speedy transformation of a country from poverty to a dynamic state of economic growth and makes possible greater economic and social equality and the larger fulfillment of human potential.” At first, this term has come from agricultural communication.

The early thinkers of development emphasized on the economic growth of the country. The main focus was only on urbanization, industrialization and intensive capital growth. Rogers

(1960) called this western model of communication “dominant paradigm”. Later it was realized that this model is not suitable for the developing countries. Neo-Marxist scholars seriously criticized this model. Researchers and intellectuals were then trying to find some alternative ways for development. In the starting of mid-1970, E V Rogers played a significant role in the modernization of developing countries. He re-defined the meaning of development and explained development as “a widely participatory process of Social change in a society intended to bring about both social and material advancement (including greater equality, freedom and other valued qualities) for the majority of the people through their gaining greater control over their environment.” This new concept is focused on overall growth of the society including provision of basic need such as food, shelter, education etc. Dissanayake (1984) defined development as “the improvement in the quality of life”. Rogers (1976) outlined some goals for the development of third world countries:

- “A. equity in distribution of information and other benefits of development,
- B. active participation of people at the grassroots,
- C. independence of local communities (or nations) to tailor development project to their own objectives and
- D. integration of old and new ideas, traditional and modern systems, endogenous and exogenous elements to constitute a unique blend suited to the needs of a particular community.”

Wilbur Schramm was an eminent scholar, who first understood the importance of communication in the development of the third world countries. He expressed that mass media could improve the quality of life through illuminating more learning opportunities. Communication is very important for self development. Later other researchers also gave importance to interpersonal and group communication in villages for grass root level development. Paulo Freire said that “for development communication practice, the central focus should be on face-to-face emancipatory dialogue”. United Nations also put more weight on communication within the cultural values for national development.

Indian Perspective

Since independence in 1947, Government of India has made several development efforts through different plans, programs, schemes etc. These are all usually assigned for a five year time period.

A majority of people, especially the rural India have low coverage of media. But it is important for the upliftment of rural India because, 70% Indians reside there. Mass media doesn't have wide physical reach because of limited resources and technological growth and general rural mass doesn't have access because of low literacy level, low purchasing power etc.

In the 1970s theatre was used to educate the masses in Latin America, India and sub-Saharan Africa. Eckhard Breiting in his book "*History and theatre in Africa*" quoted that:

"The rise of Theatre for Development also marked a change in international relations. It was both the symptom and the result of the failures of 20 years of development policies that had insisted on the implantation of the materialist and technological culture of the north as the only possible road to the development, irrespective of the cultural and social environment."

MacBride Commission has also given importance on traditional media and in its report "*Many Voices, One World*" (1982) it is cited that:

"Extensive experience shows that traditional forms of communication can be effective in dispelling the superstitions, archaic perceptions and unscientific attitudes that people inherited as part of tradition, and which are difficult to modify if the benefits of change are hard to demonstrate. Practitioners of the traditional media use a subtle form of persuasion by presenting the required message in locally popular artistic forms. This cannot be rivaled by any other means of communication. Examples abound where song, drama, dance groups and the like are used to promote campaigns against social evils (such as alcoholism, burdensome dowries, discrimination against women, archaic taboos)/ or for advances in farming, health, nutrition and family welfare, agricultural reforms, national integration and similar national goals." (p. 81)

Folk theatre: vehicle of development

Song and Drama Division, an important unit of Ministry of Information & Broadcasting is often described as 'Live media wing'. It works for the grass root level development through using traditional folk media. It was set up in 1954. It has many troupes which perform in the various places. The performances are very effective means of inter personal and group communication. The main purpose is to create awareness and educate people on different issues for overall socio-economic development. It has its headquarter in New Delhi and 12 regional, 9 sub-centers in different parts of the country. Directorate of Field Publicity also use these old forms to disseminate various development messages.

Similarly, other governmental organizations and departments like Department of Science and Technology, Space Application Centre etc. are using folk theatre to inform the masses.

Along with the government departments, NGOs and SAGs (Social Action Groups) performs folk theatre for developmental purposes.

In 1971, Bank of India propagates a campaign through puppetry at rural areas in Uttar Pradesh on bank savings schemes. Ramaswamy used 'Tom-Tom' in the eradication of Leprosy. UNESCO and UNICEF even sponsor many hygiene awareness campaigns which are purely based on folk theatre.

Case Study

World Health Assembly has conceded for polio eradication in 1988. Pulse Polio Immunization programme was launched in India in 1995. Children in the age group of 0-5 years governed polio drops during National and Sub-national immunization rounds (In high risk areas) every year. The main objective was "of achieving hundred per cent coverage under Oral Polio Vaccine". It aimed to immunize children through better social mobilization. During the early years, this programme had little effect in West Bengal where parents did not consent to give polio drops to their children. Murshidabad is one of the prominent districts among those. The assumed reasons were poverty, illiteracy etc. To overcome this problem UNICEF and Kolkata Creative Art Performer jointly started campaigning for Pulse Polio. Kolkata Creative Art Performer was made up in 2000. Some students started working in this group with the hope of changing the society and bringing development. This group performed street theater in different "polio prone" blocks like Suti I, Suti II, Samsherganj etc. It got

good response and the performances were remained effective. It was widely accepted by large number of people. Parents went health centers for giving their children polio drops. After the performances, rigidity became 2-3% from 80%.

Conclusion

India is a big diversified country. Multiculturalism and Multilingualism is the specialty of Indian heritage. Every culture has its own unique traditional values. To get closer to the Indian masses, it is very important to touch their customs. To make them aware it is essential to appeal them through their language with proper dialectical touch. It is more applicable for rural India because of low literacy rate and lack of awareness. In this case, folk theatre can only be used for reaching them with the cultural approach. This deep rooted communicational instrument is very remarkable for bringing social change. The understandability power of folk theatre is really impressive. This social tool can be utilized community development as well as individual development. Many theatre groups like Rangshala, Nandikar, Mandap, Bohurupi, Indian People's Theatre Association etc. are also working on that. Folk theatre has also played an important role in creating strong cultural identity.

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