

# Indian Folk Theatre: A Kaleidoscope of Culture



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### Abstract

The change of Indian political set up and the evolution of different regional languages in every part of India caused the emergence of the folk theatre being based on epics, *puranas*, legends, mythology, popular lore and the religious stories. It is also known as traditional theatre, based on rustic roots, quite simple in approach, immediate, unsophisticated, informal and basically rural-oriented. The peak period of folk theatre's emergence in different regions of the country was ranging from fifteenth to sixteenth centuries. In every region, it emerged in the same regional language. Initially; they were quite devotional in nature being based on religious and local stories and mythological tales. Later, with the change of time, they got quite secular in terms of their content, getting inspired by romantic folk stories and heroic deeds and biographical accounts of the local heroes. A detailed description of the prominent folk theatres belonging to different regions has been given as *Swang, Nautanki, Bhavai, Yatra or Jatra, Maach, Bhaona, Tamasha, BhandPather, Dashavatar, Krishnattam, Yakshagana, Khyal & Keertan* etc. During the eighteenth century, a new awakening in Indian theatre was marked with the establishment of British imperialism as the western influence on Indian life caused a new renaissance to emerge in Indian theatre being adapted into western theatrical art form.

**Keywords:** Folk Theatre, Indian Culture, Western Influence.

### Introduction

Talking of Indian folk theatre we get to know that by the twelfth century AD, with the establishment of the rule of Muslim invaders, theatre was restricted. About this time, the growing folk theatre replaced Sanskrit drama. The subject matter of the various forms of folk theatre was derived from the epics, *puranas*, legends, mythology, popular lore and the religious stories, etc. This second phase of Indian theatre evolved in the form of oral traditions. This kind of theatre was in vogue with its performances from about 1000 AD to 1700 AD with the further continuation upto the present time existing in almost all the parts of India. The change of Indian political set up and the evolution of different regional languages in every part of India caused the emergence of this form of theatre. The classical theatre being inspired by *Natyashastra* was basically urban-oriented with the great satisfaction of its form and nature. This folk theatre, known as traditional theatre, based on rural roots, was quite simple, immediate, unsophisticated, informal and basically rural-oriented. The peak period of folk theatre's emergence in different regions of the country was ranging from fifteenth to sixteenth centuries. "The folk theatre always belongs to a specific region, language, ecological cycle, and the participating community." (Dharwadkar 322) In every region, it emerged in the same regional language. Initially; they were quite devotional in nature being based on religious and local stories and mythological tales. Later, with the change of time, they got quite secular in terms of their content, getting inspired by romantic folk stories and heroic deeds and biographical accounts of the local heroes.

Steve Tillis says very well in the Introduction to his book *Rethinking Folk Drama*, "folk drama can teach us something not only about particular cultures, but about humanity at large" (Tillis 11). Though there are a number of forms of folk theatre existing in different regions of India with a slight or huge difference from one another, sometimes, sharing the same feature or having an interconnection yet a brief description of the most popular folk theatre forms should be given to have a better understanding of it.

For the performance of a modern drama in various theatres it needs a director. Along with the director, the importance of scenic

designers, backstage crew, etc. is also there. The prominence of the actor is not much in modern drama, but in the traditional theatre, the actor will have much importance. Without the actor, traditional theatre is lifeless, which means that the performance would not be possible. The actor plays all-in-one role in traditional theatre. The actor directs himself, composes songs, and even plays musical instruments also. They themselves are the choreographers of their dances. Sometimes they themselves erect the stage. Propaganda is also being done by the actors. Where there is no electricity in some of the villages, they arrange aiding lights themselves. In between also happens in addition, the actors paint the scenes, prepare backdrops themselves. The actors will not have a make-up man and they themselves do their make-up while the performances are on. This way folk theatre stands out differently from the urban or modern theatre.

*Swang* is the most popular folk theatre form of North India especially that of Haryana. This folk drama is basically musical enacting almost the similar stories with slight variations according to the related regions. These verse stories are presented with the help of related folk musical modes. Several musical instruments *asdholak*, *sarangikharta*, *ektara* and *harmonium* are also used in *Swang* to make the dialogue delivery quite effective. A major offshoot of *Swang* is found in the form of *Nautanki*.

Another folk theatre form known as *Bhavai* is popular in Gujarat and Rajasthan. The *Bhavai* of Gujarat is more theatrical and less musical in comparison to that of Rajasthan. Flute, *sarangi*, *tabla*, *manjeerabaab*, *bhungal* and *pakhaawaj* etc. are the instruments to be used in *Bhavai*. There is found a rare synthesis of romantic and devotional sentiments in this form of folk theatre.

*Yatra* or *Jatra* is the traditional theatre form of eastern India especially that of Bengal. Even in the different regions of eastern India including Orissa, Assam and West Bengal, it is presented in different forms. The literal meaning of *Yatra* suggests a pilgrimage or a procession moving from one place to another. So, its performance requires an open area. Being originated in Bengal, *Jatra* was basically a ritual theatre deriving its themes from the life of Lord Krishna. Chaitanya, the famous Vaishnava saint used *Jatra* as a medium to collect his devotees in a large singing and dancing group with the propagation of his teachings of Krishna. Along with the dramatization of Lord Krishna's exploits, the *Jatra* also presented folk-tales, *puranic* legends and various episodes from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.

*Maach* is the popular folk theatre form of Madhya Pradesh. The term *Maach* signifies both, the play and the stage itself. This form of folk theatre gives more importance to the songs which are played in between the dialogues. It originated in Ujjain about two centuries ago. Romantic folk tales or the mythological events are basically used as its themes.

*Bhaona*, one another folk theatre form presents the *Ankianaat* of Assam. Several glimpses of the culture of Assam, Orissa, Bengal, Brindavan

and Mathura are presented in *Bhaona*. The story begins with *Sutradhara*'s narration who first speaks in Sanskrit and later turns into Assamese or *Brijboli*.

The earlier forms of folk theatre existing in Maharashtra gave birth to a new form called *Tamasha*. "*Tamasha*, a Persian word, traveled to Maharashtra through Mughal armies. It means fun, play, entertainment." (Gargi73). It is full of humour, erotic songs and dance. In this traditional theatre form, women themselves play the feminine roles in place of men which is rarely found in any other folk theatre form. A *Tamasha* play always begins with some naughty episode of *Krishna-leela*. The erotic songs, sung during the performance of dancing, are called the *Lavani* songs.

Kashmiri folk theatre form, known as *BhandPather* is a combination of music, dance and acting with the inclusion of witty, satirical and parodical elements which add laughter to the performance. The musical instruments used in this are *dhol*, *nagaara* and *sumnai*. As *BhandPather* is performed by the local farmers, the influence of their life-style, sensitivity and ideals is marked in this.

*Dashavatar*, presenting the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu – the God of creation and preservation, is the folk theatre form of Goa and Konkan regions. The performers personifying these incarnations of the god wear stylized make-up and wooden masks.

*Krishnattam*, a folk theatre form evolving in seventeenth century AD, belongs to Kerala. It is a sequential performance of eight plays lasting for eight days. The themes of these plays are based on various events of Lord Krishna's life presenting the victory of good over evil. There is one another traditional form of theatre of Kerala called *Mudiyettu* being performed only in the Kali temples as an oblation to the goddess. It is celebrated in the month of November and December presenting the triumph of goddess Bhadrakali over the *Asura* Darika. It contains seven characters in the form of Shiva, *Bhadrakali*, *Darika*, *Narada*, *Koimbidar*, *Kooli* and *Danavendra*, all of them wearing a heavy make-up.

*Yakshagana*, a popular folk theatre form of Karnataka, gives the presentation of puranic tales and mythological stories. The prominent episodes of the *Ramayana* as *Raajyaabhishek*, *Baali-Sugreevayuddha*, *Lav-kushYuddh*, and of the *Mahabharata* as *Subhadravivah*, *Draupadiswayamvar*, *Karna-Arjunyuddh* and *Abhimanyuvadh* etc. are presented through it.

*Khyal*, belonging to Rajasthan, is such traditional folk theatre form which is full of music, songs and dance. In different regions of Rajasthan, it is known with different names as *Nautanki*, *Tamasha*, *Swang*, *Maachandrammat*. Thus, all these forms are similar, with the slight difference in their stylistic features, maintaining their particular identity.

*Keertan*, being presented in almost every part of India with different names, is the most popular narrative form of traditional theatre which is used in the exaltation and worshiping of the god by chanting and celebrating his praises with the help of music.

In eighteenth century, a new awakening in Indian theatre was marked with the establishment of British imperialism as: "It was only after the British set up their regime in India that the crippled Indian drama received new strength and witnessed a revival" (Reddy and Dhawan<sup>10</sup>). The influence of Western civilization on Indian life caused a new renaissance to emerge in Indian theatre. Along with this, the installation of English education also helped in making a critical study of western drama as well as the classical Indian drama. Some dramatic troupes from England and Italy visited the Indian cities like Madras and Bombay and performed there several English plays, especially those of Shakespeare.

Towards the end of the twentieth century, with the translation of two English comedies, *Disguise* and *Love is the Best Doctor* in Bengali, Lebedoff, a Russian music director is believed to produce the first modern drama in Calcutta. In this way, the influence of the west awakened "the dormant, critical impulse in the country to bring Indians face to face with new forms of life and literature, and to open the way for a fruitful cross-fertilization of ideas and forms of expression" (Iyengar 4). Therefore, the Indian folk theatre took a new turn and seemed to be transformed into western ways of theatrical arts.

#### **Aim of the Study**

This paper aims at raising awareness about the development of Indian Theatre in the form of folk theatre. Indian drama has undergone a number of changes since the time of its evolution taking different turns but the most significant and enticing transition of it is seen in the shape of folk theatre.

#### **Conclusion**

Now we find Folk theatre forms as a part of modern drama, either as an element to suit the plot and structure of the play or as a medium to spice up the performance. Thus, folk theatre is now not just a village affair but a part of a larger, non-spontaneous, well designed form of art called modern drama. According to Amitava Roy, "During the 1950s and 1960s, an awareness began to grow among our emerging young urban theatre workers of the complex and rich forms, streams and traditions of Indian folk theatre" (Lal 10). Definitely, it was after independence that folk theatre in India began to be a part of mainstream culture. Institutions like SangeetNatakAkademi set up by government for the growth of art and culture began the work of documentation. Probably, the need to search for native roots during the post-independence era and the sense of liberation from the colonial influence and this only was the motivation for this upsurge.

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