

## FOLK DRAMA ON THE DECLINE: MUGHAL TAMASHA

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### **ABSTRACT**

*My article is an in-depth study of the folk theatre in Odisha which is now in its declining stage. Folk theatre in Odisha is as old as its recorded history. It reflects the culture and tradition of the rural Odisha reflecting the elements of joys and sorrows of their lives, emotions, beliefs, traditions, songs and dances, rituals, customs, religious and social behavior. It was the medium through which the communal harmony of that time was preserved. As an indigenous form it broke all kinds of formal barriers of human communication and appealed directly to the people. The Mughal Tamasha was one of the unique forms of folk theatre which satirised the feudal system of Mughal Administration. It was a multilingual improvised play with songs and dialogues in Persian, Urdu, Hindi, Bengali, and Oriya. Most probably it was created during the early part of eighteenth century when the Marathas wrested power from the Mughals locally. In the present times, the theatre form is on the decline due to the revolution of digital technology. Art lovers, social reformers and researchers now should take the initiative of restoring this dying art form.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Folk, Culture, Songs, Theatre Form, Decline*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The history of folk art in any country is obscure and therefore it is extremely difficult to determine the exact time or period when they came into existence. It is also because folk arts are evolving in nature, continually adopting themselves to changing times and needs. It is only through research, studies and repeated performances that we attempt to trace their original form and historical evolution.

If one wants to understand the spirit of rural India, one needs to explore the various forms of folk-art in the country that has evolved over centuries and which forms an integral part of the life and culture of the rural population. Folk theatre is an art form in which there is fusion of elements from music, dance, pantomime, epic and ballad recitation, graphic arts, religion and festival peasantry. Despite rapid urbanization folk theatre still remains the art of people, living both in urban and rural areas. Among the folk tradition, folk theatre is a popular form which has preserved, rejuvenated and given impetus to the cultural achievements of the people. Folk theatre spreads all over India and is liked by people not because of its production value, but because of its communicability and the relationship between the audience and the performer. The informal manner of presentation, the simplicity and freedom from all technicalities are the salient characteristics of folk dramas. The organization of folk drama in villages till date remains a great event accompanied with festivals, community singing, dancing and ceremonial feasts. Earlier the theatre forms were of two types: the 'Great Tradition' which involved formal literary plays and the 'Little tradition' which is the other name for the theatre of the masses. Both these forms of theatre existed side by side and perhaps borrowed from each other, complementing each other.

The early formal plays mostly in Sanskrit were performed in formal settings with themes drawn mainly from religion and mythology. The *loka Nataka* or the popular theatre on the other hand was performed in villages under the open sky to the accompaniment of folk music and instruments.

## FOLK THEATRE OF ODISHA

Theatre in Odisha is as old as its recorded history. The inscriptions at Kandagiri and Udaigiri are evidence enough of its antiquity. Odisha has over 400 folk art forms in dance, music, theatre, ballads and others. We may not be able to enlist all our folk arts for posterity, as many of them are dying a slow death, day by day because of diminishing audience and lack of patronage. In the present era when there is the advent of electronic media; cinema and TV, one may ask the relevance and need for reviving the traditional folk theatre; it is because folk drama has always got the twin purpose of entertainment and education and has contributed immensely towards creating social and cultural consciousness amongst the people. Apart from creating cultural identity, folk-art forms have other great social missions creating awareness among the people. 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)

If we view historically we find that the rise of Vaishnavism in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and the influence of saint Chaitanya in the 16<sup>th</sup> century gave impetus to folk dramas such as *Rasleela*, *Rasdhari* and *Ankiyanat* depicting the life of Lord Krishna. There is ample evidence that these plays were performed within the temples, even monasteries. The *Natya Shastra* of Bharat provides guidelines for classical Indian Drama, but apart from some reference to popular folk drama like *Rasaka* and *Charchari*, nothing much is said about the folk forms. They were considered elementary and underdeveloped because of their limited number of characters and their total dependence on music and dance. The Krishna cult in course of time lost its spiritual flavor and became an instrument of youthful expression as evident in Kathak and other forms of dancing. The *Jatras* of Bengal and Odisha also lost their spiritual dimensions and slowly became forms of mass entertainment. Starting from devotional the folk forms moved on to social and other themes. The most important is the collective conscience they produce.

## DIVERSITY OF FOLK TRADITION

Many states of India have been performing various folk dramas in different colours and themes. *Yakshagana* and *Sannata* are some of the prime examples of folk theatre in Karnataka. Tamil Nadu has also a rich heritage of dramas as a medium of entertainment. Several types of dance-dramas were frequently staged in temples. These dramas were generally performed during religious festivals. The folk dramas of Tamil Nadu involved musical instruments such as the *Harmonium*, *the Mridangam* and *the flute*. The *Therukkuthu* is performed during the annual festivals or to invoke rain. *Nautanki* consists of folklore and mythological plays blended with folk songs and dances in Maharashtra. Karyala is a prominent folk form of Himachal Pradesh while Bidesia is the prominent folk drama in Bihar. It is observed that odia dramatists have tried to return to their roots through various folk forms. Folk theatre in Odisha which is an integral part of folk culture elucidates the richness of tribal cultural life. Performed and nourished by the folk artist it has a unique tradition and expression. With no intellectual overtones it is performed in a very lucid manner which affects the heart and the soul. Truth, justice and religious values are the main themes which are also the core values of the Odishan culture. They intertwined music, dance,

earthy humor and emotional outburst; myth, legend and history were used to add color. In the recent times, odia theatre has undergone a massive alteration. In the absence of professional theatre amateur groups form the only source of hope for Odia theatre.

Folk drama forms of Odisha are closely associated with the religious culture of Odia people and it consisted of different types of theatrical performances. Among these Mughal Tamasha is an epigrammatic and farcical play reflecting the Mughal administration in Odisha. Historically speaking in the latter half of the 18th century, Mughal Tamasha evolved in the Sangat village of Bhadrak region of Odisha as a variation of the traditional Chaiti Tamasha . Subsequently it spread out to other places like Sahapur, Januganj, Garadpur and Kuansa. Banshi Ballav Goswami had created seven works of Tamasha; the most outstanding and unique amongst them being 'Mughal Tamasha' which was written in 1728 A.D. This form is still alive but it is struggling for survival with ever decreasing performances and patronage. The other six forms like Bhil Tamasha, Radhakrushna Tamasha, Chauda / Chahoda Tamasha Jogi Tamasha, Fakir Tamasha and Lolin Mazabai Tamasha have lost their identities. The Mughal Tamasha is divided into two parts, i.e., 'Badasahi' and 'Soudagari' Tamasha. Nowadays only the Badasahi Mughal Tamasha script is available and is being staged. It is a folk play. The dialogue is in a hybrid language of Oriya mixed with Urdu and Persian. Violin, Pakhavaj, Jodinagara and Kubji are the main instruments used in the Tamasha. The Tamasha begins with a prayer to the God or Goddess and is followed by group dance. There is innocent parody of Muslim rulers in these plays. These plays went a long way to establish communal harmony. The other types of folk drama of Orissa includes suanga, Leela, , Nata, Sakhi Nata, Dhanu Yatra and more. Let me briefly describe the forms:

## **FORMS OF FOLK DRAMA**

### **Suanga**

It is a form of Geet abhinaya in which all the characters sing the dialogue. There are two types of Suangas found in ancient Oriya literature. Suanga started as an independent play but afterwards it turned out to be light-hearted interludes between two scenes in a Jatra. Now it stands for farcical acting. The 'Deulatola Suanga' by Bipra Nilambar is about the construction of the famous Jagannath temple. Another Suanga, 'Laxmipurna Suanga' by Balaram Das narrates the quarrel between Goddess Laxmi on the one hand and Lord Jagannath and his elder brother Balabhadra on the other. In the beginning of a Suanga, Nata and Nati appear to introduce the plays.

### **Dhanu Yatra**

Dhanu Yatra is the theatrical presentation of Krishna Leela. In Pusha Purnima, Dhanu Yatra is observed in Bargarh near Sambalpur district for eleven days. It is a moving or mobile theatre. It starts from Ambapali and slowly moves towards Bargarh town while enacting scenes on the way. One who plays the role of Kansa is treated as a real ruler of Bargarh city for those eleven days.

### **Chadheya Nata**

Chadheya Nata is a folk play prevalent in the districts of Mayurbhanj and Balasore. In this play there are mainly three characters, namely the Chadheya, the Chadheyani (wife of Chadheya) and Banku Bhai, the joker. It is a musical form, the songs of the characters being repeated by a choral group with musical instruments. The chief of the play is called Mause

who controls the performance and interprets the whole play.

### **Leela**

In this form of opera a chorus group narrates the everyday acts of God in his incarnation as Lord Krishna or Lord Rama. Various episodes from Lord's life especially Rama's heroic acts and Krishna's frolicking with the Gopis and Radha are played in Ramlila and Raslila respectively. Jagannath Das was the first pioneer of the Leela tradition.

### **Sahi Jatra**

Sahi Jatra is special form of folk theatre of Orissa. This Jatra is mainly performed in Puri district. The word 'Sahi' means 'alley' or street. Sahi Jatra refers to a street procession. During the first month of spring, Sahi Jatra is performed continuously for three days. The characters like Kela-Keluni, Shabara-Shaburuni, etc. play their role behind huge unusual, hollow human figures. The figures are mobile and unusual with big head, long nose, huge tummy and long legs. In the front row of this procession, the musicians, drummers and singers march. The main character is the Naga. He represents a manifestation of Lord Jagannath.

### **Prahlad Natak**

Prahalad Natak, literally meaning a play about Prahlad, belongs to Ganjam district in south Orissa. It is more or less in the form of Suanga. The play has twenty male characters and five female characters except the Gahaka - the main singer leader and Sutradhara of the play. There are a hundred and twenty songs in the play. Each is composed in a particular Raaga and Tala.

Jatra: The 'Jatra' or opera still attracts thousands of people. The Jatra is held in an open field. The rectangular stage is set in the centre of the audience with the orchestra sitting adjacent to the stage. Beginning with items on the 'harmonium', 'clarinet', 'bugle', 'mridanga', 'jhanja', 'dubi tabla', 'dholki' etc. by the experts of the party, the opera starts with a party of dancing and singing boys appearing in female garbs. The King generally appears in a stereotyped dress and the themes are often historical or mythological. The male actors dressed up as females look artificial. The 'Duari' or 'Dagara' (the messenger of the King) and the joker are the most interesting characters in the Jatra. In general, the Jatra in the villages has very little reference to real life and its problems.

### **Pala**

Pala is a popular cultural institution responsible for the popularisation of ancient Oriya literature. It consists of five or six persons. The drummer plays on the 'mridanga'. Others play on the cymbals, dance and help the chief singer - 'Gayaka', - to sing and explain the meaning to the audience. Depth of knowledge, sharpness of intelligence, oratory and keen memory power are put to a severe test when two well-matched groups challenge each other in a 'pala' competition. The drummer displays the skill of his fingers and relates humorous stories to please the audience. The dialogue between the singer and one of the attendants breaks the monotony of long speeches and jugglery of words in the song. Pala owes its origin to attempts at Hindu-Muslim unity.

### **Patua**

Patuas sing songs, composed by the village poets who pick up the subject matter from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata

and the puranas and more recently from novels. Some of the songs are simple in thought and language, while others have a deeper meaning and are shrouded in a jumble of words. 'Patuas' are of four kinds though all of them worship the same deity under different names. The difference lies in religious rituals and not in the aims and objects of worship. The 'Ghanta patua' dances, sings and performs physical exercises in different villages. The best of the devotees leads a party of Patuas to walk on a fire of burning charcoal.

### **Daskathia**

'Daskathia', once a popular performance of Ganjam, has spread to all other districts of Odisha (Orissa). 'Dasa' means a devotee. 'Katha' means two wooden pieces played in tune with the prayer of the devotee. The party consists of two persons. One is the chief singer; the other is the 'Palia' who helps him in all respects in singing and acting. The two persons stage a whole drama, act all the parts, and change their tone hour after hour. They introduce humorous stories to break the monotony.

### **Karma**

The Karma dancers and singers have their professional party. They deal with puranic events or events in folk tales. Love songs are sung in the form of questions and answers between parties of young men and women.

## **THE UNIQUE FORM: MUGHAL TAMASHA**

Among all the folk dramas, Mughal Tamasha has placed itself in the heart of people of Odisha and is singularly unique, keeping in line with the tradition of Odisha's indigenous folk tradition. 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. Perhaps this is the reason why Mughal Tamasha could withstand. It gives a vivid picture of the social, political and religious condition of the Mughal period. 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 as it was the epicentre of trade and commerce during Mughal and Maratha rule. 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. The Mughal Tamasha is divided into two parts, i.e., '*Badasahi*' and '*Soudagari*' Tamasha. Nowadays only the Badasahi Mughal Tamasha script is available and is being staged. The dialogue is in a hybrid language of Oriya mixed with Urdu language and Persian. *Violin, Pakhavaj, Jodinagara and Kubji (Gini)* were the main instruments used in the mughal Tamasha. This unique tradition is performed in *Sangat, Banka, Gardpur, Kuansa, Mirzapur, Chhadaka, Mahala, Santhia, Sapur, Jhauganja, Agarpada, Charampa* villages of Bhadrak District. It is believed that Mughal Tamasha originated from the coastal belt of North Odisha especially in the Bhadrak which was the epicentre of trade and commerce during the Mughal and Maratha rule. The Late Bansiballav Goswami had initiated the Mughal Tamasha in 1728 A.D. The Mughal Tamasha is divided into two parts, i.e. Badasahi and Soudagari Tamasha. Nowadays only the Badasahi Mughal Tamasha script is available and being staged. It is a folk play. The dialogue is in a hybrid language of Oriya mixed with Urdu language and Persian. *Violin, Pakhavaj, Jodinagara and Kubji (Gini)* were the main instruments used in the mughal Tamasha. Mughal Tamasha presents a vivid picture of the social, political and religious condition of the Mughal period when disintegration, disharmony, un-equanimity had set in and there was no discipline in social, political and administrative spheres Bhadrak is the only district where the performance of mughal tamasha has been maintained for the last two hundred years. Others are Bhila Tamasha, Radhakrushna Tamasha, Chauda Tamasha, Jogi Tamasha, Fakir

Tamasha, Lolin Mazabai Tamasha. If we look at the history we come to know that Raja Mansingh the Hindu chief of Akbar had 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. When the Marathas ruled over Odisha in the second half of the 18th Century A.D, people became open and fearlessly made mocked at the Muslim rulers and their administrative slackness. The satire was primarily aimed at the luxury and display of wealth that the Mughals indulged in. It was conventionally staged in front of the temple of Lord Shiva on the occasion of Maha Bishuv Sankranti. The play did not have a definite story. Mirza, the pivotal character, remains on stage right through while each of the other character i.e. *Chopdar* or guard, *Zamindar*, *Vestiwala* or water bearer, *Hukawala* or hookah bearer, *Pankhawala* or fan bearer, *Bhat* or panegyrist, *Daptari* or clerk, *Bhandari* or storekeeper, and *Guwalin* or milkmaid come and go. The Chopdar summons them one by one as desired by Mirza, and they introduce themselves through mostly farcical songs. Each couplet is repeated by a chorus. After the performance the characters ask for baksheesh from Mirza and, while leaving the stage, ask the chorus leader, 'What is happening here?' He replies, 'The festival of Siva is being celebrated,' then they all sing in praise of Siva and make an exit. Mughal Tamasha in Odisha is staged in a pandal facing the main gate of the temple. It is also performed under the open sky having no screens. Before the commencement of Tamasha there is loud music played with Sahnai, Dhola and Jodi Nagara. The music continues for an hour to attract or keep the audience engaged. After the orchestral music is played a long delineative song is sung in chorus in praise of lord Shiva. Thereafter, Chopdar enters with shouting 'Dabe Khade Ho (stand still), Hat Khade Ho (stand at distance).' This indicates Mirza Sahib's arrival. After Mirza Sahib is led to the throne the *chopdar* salutes. Thereafter *Sebayatas* are summoned one after another and then the Tamasha begins. Apart from Mirza Sahib and Chopdar all other characters sing as well as dance. They indulge themselves in prose dialogue which is prepared with mixture of Persian, Urdu, Hindi and Bengali language. Only Zamindars and *Dudhwali* speak Odia language. At the end of Tamasha every character asks for Baksish (tips) from Mirza Sahib. The most vital message is that Tamasha critically analyses the state of affairs existing at that time. The climax is when the, *Dudhwali* (Milkmade) enters the stage. *Mirza Sahib* gets mesmerized with her beauty and proposes her. But, she does not give consent. When Mirza Sahib allures her of giving her good life and wealth she objects and tells that she is married and instantly leaves the stage. Mirza Sahib gets the shock, his desire is thwarted and that is when the Tamasha ends. At the end of Tamasha every character asks for *Baksish (tips)* from *Mirza Sahib*. Unlike, all other folk Theaters the costumes are decorative and gorgeous. The Chopdar, Vestiwalla, Farras are dressed in Muslim tradition while the Zamindar's dress is very simple like Vaishnavite Hindu.

## THE PRESENT SCENARIO

With the changing times aggressive consumerism has mesmerized the people's mind due to the 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. Kapila Vatsyayan a great authority on performing arts has analyzed various forms of Indian folk plays in her book 'Traditional Indian theatre - Multiple streams'. She has opined that there is great importance in reviving Indian folk plays as these plays have contemporary relevance. In her said book, 'Traditional Indian Theatre', she observed "The Yatra forms are an important branch of the parent tree of Indian literatures, languages and theatre forms. Its survivals appear to have thrown seeds, which have given modern Bengali theatre a new direction. Like the Bhavai and the Tamasa it has provided an Indian format to avant-garde theatre. Possibly this renowned

interest in Yatra was conditioned by the advent of a new form of epic theatre from Europe. Be as it may, the European influence generated an interest in national traditions and this has been a return *educational journey home-ward for the modern theatre of India*" (*Traditional Indian theatre* - page 146, published by NBT, New Delhi, 1st Edition 1980). It is therefore admitted that folk plays of India, have played a great role in shaping Indian avant-garde plays. A globally endorsed monoculture is silently creeping into the mind of the common people thus effacing the interface between locality-defined cultures which had constituted our identities. Distinctions of culture and society are wiped off through a homogenous global culture. Moreover with the advent of globalization materialistic culture has outpaced mystic culture. Many community-based religious rituals, where the devotion towards the deity was offered through folklores, have ceased to exist. Thus the traditional artists are being left in the lurch. Under tremendous economic pressure they are being compelled to make an occupational shift. 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 invasion of cinema and other urban forms of entertainment in e-platforms have taken a toll over the existence of many traditional art forms some of which are extinct, some nearing extinction and some languishing their last. It is high time that we should not allow further vulgarization of Indian culture by inertness, indifference and indolence and get swayed away by the lures of electronic media. Let us not waste time only in theoretical debate as to whether an art form is folk, traditional, classical and modern. Let us understand the diversity of cultural tradition, which is to be reflected in the contemporary theatre. It is, therefore, necessary to make efforts to preserve the various Folk drama forms of Odisha that are slowly dying and the Governmental efforts to revive them is called for. In this context it is pertinent to mention that the Odisha Sangeet Natak Academy is doing its best to save the dying art with support from the Union Ministry of culture and various other organizations.

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