



Knowledge Consortium of Gujarat

Department of Higher Education - Government of Gujarat

Journal of Humanity

ISSN: 2279-0233

Continuous Issue - 19 | August - September 2015

Theorizing Indian Folk theatre in the Context of Performance, Practice and Tradition

The Folk theatre in India is known as 'Lok-Nāṭya', 'Village Drama', 'Show of the Common for the Common' 'Rustic Theatre' and with other similar nomenclature that pinpoints different perspectives of the spectators who have witnessed it. To form theory of the Indian Folk theatre is to study its rudiments and features and from them to expound a theory covering all of its constituent elements and facets that contribute to the making of the Indian Folk theatre. In his book 'History of Indian Theatre', M.L. Varadpande writes:

Folk theatre is the theatre which originated and evolved among, and has been transmitted through, the common people. Its relation with the common people is deep, multiple and multi-layered. It is a kind of entertainment which is not entertainment alone. It carries within it the entire folk culture with all its social and religious institutions.¹

The Indian Folk theatre, historically speaking, forms the second phase of the great tradition of Indian theatre:

This was the second phase of the evolution of theatre in India which was based on oral traditions. This form of theatre was being performed from about 1000A.D. and continued further until today in almost every part of India. Emergence of this kind of theatre is linked with the change of political set up in India as well as coming into existence of different regional languages in all parts of the country.²

Broadly, the Indian Folk theatre has widened itself and has been associated with the rituals, culture, politics and society. It is the theatre that has made people cry and laugh; it is the theatre that has endeavoured to open the eyes of common people against the social evils and political corruption. The Indian Folk theatre itself is a vast field of activity; for it includes a number of forms that are to be put up by actors through plot, dialogue, dance and music and also a set of other forms that are narrated in a way so as to produce a theatrical effect. The Folk theatre in India has been primarily associated with the rituals and has been traditionally considered to be a ritualistic act in honour of Gods and Goddesses. Explaining ritual, M. L. Varadpande notes:

It is an established or prescribed procedure for religious, magical or other rites, a system or collection of religious or other rites and observance of set forms in public worship. Basically, ritual means certain action or set of actions which give certain results.³

The elements of the Indian Folk theatre seem to have been derived from the rituals. From linguistic view-point, recitation of poetic lines, songs and dialogue and from the literary view-point, myth in the Folk theatre comes from the rituals. Action in the Folk theatre in India comes from the symbolic gestures, dance and mudras in the rituals. Similarly, external accessories like masks, body painting and body decoration and music also come from the rituals. If the performers of the Folk theatre are actors, then the performers of the rituals are the religious priests. Theatre becomes purified arena in the Folk theatre tradition and this idea again comes from the rituals. Audience in the rituals is the community and in the same way audience in the Folk theatre is community.

The Indian Folk theatre does not have a concept of well- built theatre. It is the village square yard or the open place from the four sides on which the Folk actors perform surrounded by the village people. The place of performance is purified with Kumkum and prayers, and after initial rites, the actual performance takes place. This physical situation where the performers and the spectators are placed on the same holy ground removes the distance between the actors and the spectators and establishes oneness between the two during the performance. The psychological distance between the actors and the spectators lessens from the very start on account of the arrangement of such a rustic theatre. In the performances like those of Raja Harishchandra and Patai Raja, the spectator easily identifies himself with the ones who play the roles before him.

Sutradhāra, meaning holder of strings, is the central person responsible for the effective execution of a dramatic piece for the audience. Since ages, the Indian theatre has developed the tradition of Sutradhāra both in the Sanskrit theatre and also in the forms of the Folk theatre. It is believed by many Indian scholars that the

concept of Sutradhāra comes from the ancient art of Puppetry wherein the Puppet Master holds all the strings in his hands. Metaphorically, Sutradhāra holds all strings of a performance and actively devotes himself to the performance from the inception to the end. However, a person having extraordinary qualities is qualified to be Sutradhāra as the function of Sutradhāra is not a child's play. Sutradhāra must be virtuoso, a man well versed in arts and especially in the art of theatre; he must be a good orator and singer; in other words, he must be a remarkable aesthete. He must be able to provide commentary on the thematic aspects of the performance to deepen the interest of the spectators and above all he must inter-connect all actors and parts of performance under his leadership. Sutradhāra has to engage himself in a number of functions during the course of a performance. He would conduct Purvaranga with the rituals; he would introduce the dramatic piece and characters; he would suggest change of scenes and narrate details which cannot be staged; he would externalize through his commentary the internal stream of characters' thoughts and thus he would conduct and control the entire dramatic performance.

The Indian Folk theatre relies on costumes and make-up that are essentially rustic. The Folk theatre performers move from place to place and arrange their performances for their survival; they cannot afford expensive costumes and make-up. Besides, the target audience of the Folk theatre is ordinary village people living life bereft of comforts and luxuries. Expensive costumes and make-up can create distance between the actors in gaudy apparels and the spectators living simple life and consequently they can affect the communicative aspect of the Folk theatre. Costumes include various Indian dresses like dhoti, kurta, sari, half pants and monkey caps in order to reflect the social types like the Brahmin, the Baniya, the Carpenter, the Sipoy and others and the make-up kit includes whitening powder, Kumkum powder, charcoal powder, cheap colours, lipsticks and other cheap things. The actors who impersonate mythological characters, however, put on gaudy dresses and glittering ornaments and frequently use excessive make-up in order to fill the acting arena with the Gods and the Goddesses, kings, princes and princesses.

The Folk theatre in India is devoted to entertainment. Its chief function is to entertain common people and lessen their burden of life. It has entertained the farmers who have laboured a lot on their farms and awaited rains; it has entertained working class—the blacksmith, the cobbler, the tailor, the carpenter; it has entertained women and children. With beautiful performance including dance and songs along with the plot, the Folk theatre in India has entertained the common people living with simplicity in small villages. Interesting stories, spectacular performance full of dance and songs, humour, satire—these elements have set the imagination of the rural spectators on fire and have entertained the ordinary people of the rural India. The Indian Folk theatre has brought in the materials and the modes in order to satisfy the aesthetic thirst of less sophisticated audience located in the rural areas of India. The Sanskrit theatre was the theatre of the elite and therefore it did not cater the interests of the ordinary people, while the Folk theatre of India centred on the en-masse as its target audience.

The Folk theatre in India is the theatre of the common people. Its ritualistic acts are connected with the faith of the common people. It deals with the lives of the common people, especially the village people or rustic people. The Folk theatre of India, as its name suggests, indeed centres on common folk culture, its beliefs, customs and festivals. In the Folk theatre forms like Bhavāi, the Brahmin, the Baniya, the Blacksmith, the Sipoy, the knife-sharpener, the Bengal-dealer and other social types are projected. The immediate result of such performances is that the rural spectator identifies himself with the characters of the Folk theatre forms like Bhavāi and feels oneness with them. The spectator feels that his own emotions are reflected or reverberated in the Folk theatre forms like Bhavāi. This factor then establishes concord between the performance and the target audience and leads to the success of the Folk theatre forms among the village people. The Sanskrit theatre deals with great heroes and supernatural beings and its target audience is the limited class of the cultured city-dwellers. The significance of the Folk theatre lies in the fact that it brought to the centre-stage the characters which were earlier avoided and it targeted at the rural audience of India.

The Indian Folk theatre happily includes all elements and forms of the folk performing arts like acting, dancing, singing, magic, jugglery, acrobatics, martial arts, bottle-dance, stick dance (Rasa), Garba (in Gujarat) and other such items. The resultant effect on the audience is very pleasing; for the audience feels that it is witnessing a spectacular show which makes their eyes dazzled with wonder and their ears filled with mellifluous songs and music. The Folk theatre has attracted the village audience since ages as it has always reached successfully to the expectations of its target audience which consists of illiterate people or half-literate people. For such audience, the Folk theatre is an apt medium for entertainment as it includes the folk tradition, folk devices, portrayal of popular heroes, use of common musical instruments and folk songs and other songs in a very communicative use of language and dialects. The Sanskrit theatre, on the other hand, included religious philosophy, political philosophy, abstruse imagery and too high and extremely embellished language which did not interest the common people. The Sanskrit theatre was intended for the elite, for the well-read audience which could exult in witnessing the sublime thoughts expressed in highly ornamental style and action of great heroes who could even conquer the unconquerable.

The Folk theatre in India abounds in dancing, singing, music and chorus and these elements collectively contribute to the entertainment for the audience. The village people come to witness the shows for

entertainment and not for preaching and therefore the Folk theatre, for its success and survival, is bound to cater the aesthetic expectations of the village people. In fact, the Sanskrit theatre also included dancing, singing and music, but these elements did not completely conform to the Folk tradition in India. In the Folk theatre in India, the principal emphasis is on the folk tradition in dancing, singing and music. The Folk theatre in India includes the elements of folk dances like Kathak and Garba, includes also the bird movements and animal movements; it includes the folk songs and songs in dialects and it heavily relies on village musical instruments like Dholak, Nagara, Khanjari, Bhungal and others. Often the village spectators, inspired by the shows full of visual and audible beauty, participate in dancing and singing and feel completely absorbed in the performance before them. The spectators, then, do not remain 'passive' witness or the 'receivers' of the performance; they actively add something of their own and contribute to the 'living' Folk theatre tradition in India. The relation between the performers and the spectators in the Folk theatre is not that of 'givers' and 'receivers'; it is the relation celebrating exchange of ideas, emotions and mutual responses.

The themes of the Folk theatre are borrowed from the Puranas, the 'Ramayana', the 'Mahabharata', mythology, legends and fictional or historical biographies of local heroes. The Puranas and myths have been sources of the Sanskrit theatre, but along with them, the Folk theatre includes legends, fictional or historical biographies of local heroes, social and political incidents and other materials. What is noticeable and worth-appreciating is the mode of presentation in the Folk theatre of India; for these themes are presented in the 'folk' style of narration and acting heavily relying on dance, songs and music. This creates a contrast of the Folk theatre with the Sanskrit theatre which employs highly poetic language often touching the boarder of erudition and pedanticism.

One of the greatest contributions of the Folk theatre is its immense support in the development of the regional languages in India. The medieval period witnessed the rise and gradual development of the regional languages spoken in various parts of India like Gujarat, Maharastra, Bengal, Punjab and Manipur. The Folk theatres in India picked up such regional languages and especially relied heavily on the regional dialects in contrast with the earlier Sanskrit theatre which used Sanskrit language as a vehicle of expression. The Folk theatre forms in India like Bhavāi, Gondhal, Daskathia and Chaiti Ghoda, Jātra, Manch and Nautanki contributed to the development of various regional languages and popularized local folk expressions like idioms, proverbs, songs, doggerels, stuti and others. The principal factor behind the great status of regional spoken languages and their wide-spread popularity in today's India is obviously the Folk theatre tradition which still continues the use of the regional languages as the effective vehicle for theatrical communication.

The Folk theatre, being completely dedicated to the 'folk', depends on the masses for patronage and financial aids. Its aim is obviously to entertain the masses and therefore for its survival, it is bound to depend on the patronage of the masses. The Folk theatre performers generally travel extensively from place to place and arrange their shows in various villages and towns in India. Therefore, they seek patronage from the en-masse as reward of their service and people assist them not only monetarily, but also give them grain, oil and Ghee and vegetables for their survival. The Sanskrit dramatists and actors depended on the kings and courtiers, while the Folk theatre performers depend on the common people both for appreciation and monetary help. It is a mutual understanding of 'give' and 'take' in which the performing party would give entertainment and take in return whatever is given by those who are entertained. In the recent years, the various state governments in India have started to assist the Indian Folk theatre artist groups, yet many theatre groups deplore on the trivial financial help provided to them by the state governments.

The Folk theatre in India has been typically male-dominated. In all theatre styles, whether the Theatre of Rituals, the Theatre of Entertainment or the Theatre of Narration, the male performers occupy the performing arena. In almost all forms of the Indian Folk theatre the female roles have been played by the male actors. The obvious reason behind it is the hardship the Folk theatre artistes undergo during the course of their career; for they have to travel from village to village and town to town to put up their shows; they have to live in temples or in tents or in small rooms provided by the village-head; they have to depend on people for shelter, food and patronage for their survival. Most of the shows last from the dusk to the dawn. In such adverse condition, it is neither considered apt nor advisable to include the female performers in the group. Therefore, the traditional arrangement has been to play female roles by the male actors. However, in several Indian Folk theatre forms, the female performers have started participating and have taken lead roles since the 20th century. In performances like 'Tamāsha', the female participation has been remarkable and in Pandavani, Teejan Bai has been internationally acclaimed.

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