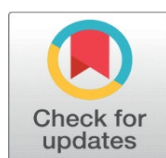
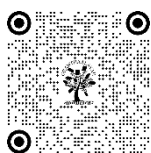


STAGING HERITAGE: UNVEILING THE SOCIO-POLITICAL ROLE OF FOLK ARTS IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Theatre serves as a potent medium for conveying ideas and providing entertainment through creative experiences. India boasts a long and rich theatrical tradition, with its origins deeply intertwined with ancient rituals. The foundational text of Indian theatre, Bharata's Natya Shastra, attributes a divine genesis to this art form, linking it to the natyaveda. Initially, Indian theatre emerged as a narrative art form that integrated recitation, singing, and dancing as essential components. Over time, it has assimilated various forms of literature and fine arts into its physical presentations. Indian theatre can be categorized into three distinct phases. The second phase was characterized by oral traditions, during which folk theatre flourished across different regions and languages. This vibrant folk theatre emerged forcefully, reflecting the diverse cultural narratives and practices inherent in various Indian communities.

Keywords: Natyashastra, Natyaveda, Lokadharmi, Natyadharmi

1. INTRODUCTION

The folk and traditional arts of India have historically served moral, religious, and socio-political functions, rather than being utilized solely for entertainment. While these art forms often exhibit spontaneity and humor, they have also functioned as educational platforms, venues for justice, and forums for public discourse. In contrast to modern mass media, traditional media are characterized by their personal, familiar nature and are perceived as more credible, resonating with both literate and illiterate audiences through their diverse formats, genres, and content. However, it is crucial that these forms are approached with understanding and sensitivity. The potential for vulgarization increases if they are left in the hands of urban elites, as deliberate distortions can alienate the masses. Interfering with folk forms that do not align with contemporary communication topics demonstrates a lack of respect for their cultural significance. It is essential to recognize that folk art forms are often specific to particular religions, communities, castes, cultures, and languages or dialects. These unique values and associations must be considered in any efforts to adapt or modernize them. Theatre, in particular, is a powerful medium for communicating ideas and entertaining audiences. Theatre programs facilitate the process of creating performances while offering a range of creative experiences. Students majoring in theatre develop skills as communicators, problem-solvers, and collaborators (Madhu, 2013).

2. ORIGINATION

India possesses a long and rich theatrical tradition that dates back at least 5,000 years, with its origins intricately linked to ancient rituals and seasonal festivities. The *Natya Shastra*, authored by Bharata Muni between 2000 BCE and the 4th century CE, stands as the earliest and most comprehensive treatise on dramaturgy in the world. This foundational text attributes a divine origin to Indian theatre, connecting it to the *natyaveda*, a sacred scripture of dramaturgy said to have been created by Lord Brahma. In the *Natya Shastra*, Bharata Muni systematically consolidated and codified diverse traditions encompassing dance, mime, and drama. The text outlines ten classifications of drama, ranging from one-act to ten-act plays, making it unparalleled in its exhaustive study of dramaturgy from ancient times. It is directed toward playwrights, directors, and actors, as Bharata Muni viewed these three roles as inseparable in the creation of a theatrical work. The term for drama in Sanskrit, *nataka*, is derived from the word meaning "dance," highlighting the integral role of movement in performance.

Traditional Hindu drama achieved expression through music and dance alongside acting, resulting in a form that combined elements of opera, ballet, and drama. According to legend, the first play was performed in heaven by gods celebrating their victory over demons. Early Hindu theorists categorized plays into two primary types: *lokadharmi*, which focused on realistic portrayals of human behavior and natural presentations of objects; and *natyadharmi*, which utilized stylized gestures and symbolism, regarded as more artistic than realistic. Theatre in India initially emerged as a narrative form, with recitation, singing, and dancing as fundamental components. This focus on narrative elements established Indian theatre as inherently theatrical from its inception. Consequently, Indian theatre has integrated various forms of literature and fine arts into its physical presentations—encompassing literature, mime, music, dance, movement, painting, sculpture, and architecture—collectively referred to as *natya* or theatre in English (Rajendra, 2013).

3. CLASSIFICATIONS

Indian theatre can be broadly categorized into three distinct types: classical or Sanskrit theatre, traditional or folk theatre, and modern theatre. The second phase of Indian theatre's evolution, which emerged around 1000 AD and continued until approximately 1700 AD, was primarily based on oral traditions and persists in various forms to this day across the country. The rise of this theatrical form is closely associated with shifts in the political landscape of India and the development of different regional languages throughout the nation.

Classical theatre, grounded in the principles outlined in the *Natya Shastra*, was characterized by its sophistication and urban orientation. In contrast, traditional theatre evolved from rural roots, exhibiting a simpler and more immediate connection to the rural community. This divergence highlights the distinct cultural contexts from which each type of theatre emerged, reflecting the diverse social and artistic landscapes of India.

4. DIFFERENT FORMS

Historically, the emergence of folk theatre in India gained significant momentum during the 15th and 16th centuries, manifesting across various regions and utilizing local languages. Initially, these performances were predominantly devotional, centered around religious themes, local legends, and mythology. However, as time progressed, the content became more secular, focusing on folk tales of romance, valor, and biographical accounts of local heroes. Indian folk theatre can be broadly categorized into two main types: religious and secular. These categories give rise to ritual theatre and entertainment theatre, respectively. Both forms coexisted and influenced each other significantly. While they are classified as folk traditions, many of these forms exhibit characteristics typical of classical theatre. Folk and traditional performances often emphasize narrative or vocal elements—such as singing and recitation—seen in forms like *Ramlila*, *Rasleela*, *Bhand*, *Nautanki*, and *Wang*, which typically do not involve complex gestures or extensive dance elements. Additionally, India has a rich tradition of ballad singing, exemplified by *Pabuji-ki-phar* from Rajasthan and *Nupipaalaa* from Manipur. Each theatrical style possesses unique characteristics shaped by local customs and traditions, resulting in variations in execution, staging, costumes, makeup, and acting styles. South Indian forms emphasize dance elements, as seen in *Kathakali* and *Krishnattam* from Kerala, which qualify as dance dramas.

In contrast, North Indian forms focus on song-based performances like *Khyal* from Rajasthan, *Maach* from Madhya Pradesh, *Nautanki* from Uttar Pradesh, and *Swang* from Punjab. The *Jatra* of Bengal, *Tamasha* of Maharashtra, and *Bhavai*

of Gujarat prioritize dialogue in their performances, with the latter two often incorporating comedy and satire. Puppet theatre also flourished across various regions in India. Popular forms include shadow puppetry (Gombeyatta from Karnataka and Ravana Chhaya from Odisha), glove puppetry (Gopalila from Odisha and Pavai Koothu from Tamil Nadu), doll puppetry (Bommalattam from Tamil Nadu and Bengal's Putul Nautch), and string puppetry (Kathputli from Rajasthan and Sakhi Kundhei from Odisha). Dramatic elements are also present in several solo forms of Indian classical dance such as Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Odissi, and Mohiniyattam. Folk dances like Gambhira and Purulia Chhau from Bengal, Seraikella Chhau from Bihar, and Mayurbhanj Chhau from Odisha also incorporate dramatic content. In some regions of Kerala, dramatic art is interwoven into ritual ceremonies such as Mudi yettu and Teyyam (Kathryn).

5. FOLK THEATRE AND DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION IN INDIA

Folk theatre has played a significant role in development communication in India, particularly in rural areas. Recognizing the power of traditional mediums, the First Five-Year Plan emphasized the need to engage rural populations through folk forms of communication alongside electronic media such as radio and television. In 1954, the Government of India established the Song and Drama Division under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. This division utilizes live performances to raise awareness among rural communities, operating 12 regional centers and 9 sub-centers across the country, with 41 departmental troupes and 500 registered private troupes. Annually, it presents approximately 36,000 live programs focused on national integration, communal harmony, family values, and various development initiatives. The focus areas of these performances include prohibition, eradication of untouchability, family planning, women empowerment, democratic principles, fundamental rights, rural health schemes, small-scale industries, agricultural technologies, and adult education. State governments have been significant users of folk theatre for promoting developmental programs.

Various government departments, including the Directorate of Field Publicity and Departments of Public Relations, leverage these mediums to inform citizens about available government services and encourage acceptance of modern ideas and behavioral changes. Historically, folk theatre was instrumental in mobilizing public sentiment against British colonial rule before Independence. It effectively supported many political and social campaigns led by figures like Mahatma Gandhi. Post-Independence, the Indian government continued to utilize these forms to disseminate messages about development programs in rural areas. The Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), aligned with the Communist Party of India, successfully adapted popular regional theatre forms such as Jaatra from Bengal, Bhavai from Gujarat, Tamasha from Maharashtra, and Burrakatha from Andhra Pradesh to raise social awareness and political consciousness.

1) Jaatra

Jaatra is one of India's most structured forms of folk theatre, reflecting the social and cultural needs of its audience while serving as a vehicle for political education. Traditionally centered on moral themes depicting the battle between good and evil, Jaatra has evolved to address contemporary social issues. Rabindranath Tagore advocated for its use in reaching rural audiences during his Swadeshi Samaj speech in 1904. In the early 20th century, a nationalist variant known as Swadeshi Jaatra emerged, focusing on themes like Gandhi's non-cooperation movement and untouchability eradication. This trend persists today, with Jaatra remaining a popular medium for political campaigning.

2) Tamasha

Originating in Maharashtra, Tamasha combines satirical verses with storytelling and interactive dialogue. Notably unique among Indian folk theatre forms for featuring women in leading roles, it incorporates Lavni—a semi-erotic song—and Wag as foundational elements. During the non-cooperation movement in the 1920s, Tamasha plays became crucial for spreading ideologies and government propaganda while reflecting urban intellectuals' inner conflicts.

3) Nautanki

Nautanki emerged from religious and social preaching traditions in Northern India, often reshaping mythological narratives into socially conscious performances. This form has adapted to modern communication needs by addressing adult education and family planning through its themes.

4) Puppetry

Puppetry is another traditional folk theatre form that has long been cherished in rural India. It integrates seamlessly into local rituals and social contexts. Various puppet types—string puppets, rod puppets, shadow puppets, and glove puppets—are prevalent across different regions. Government agencies and NGOs utilize puppet shows to promote development initiatives effectively. In summary, folk theatre serves as a dynamic tool for development communication in India. Its ability to engage diverse audiences—literate or illiterate—makes it an invaluable asset for conveying messages about socio-economic change while preserving cultural heritage.

Several traditional folk theatre forms in India, such as Lilas, Daskathia, Geetinatya of Baisnab Pani, Mughal-Tamsa, Prallhad Natak, Dandanatya, Ravanachhaya (puppet theatre), Desia-nata, Palas, Suanga, and Chhau, continue to thrive during festivals in rural areas. Historically, the support from kings and zamindars provided a significant boost to folk artists, encouraging the establishment of various theatre troupes. However, following the abolition of these royal patronages, many professional folk theatre troupes have struggled to survive and are now facing extinction. A number of talented artists have left these troupes to seek employment in urban areas, leading to a decline in participation. Consequently, some folk theatrical forms have fallen out of favour, with only sporadic performances being staged on special occasions throughout the year.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The convergence of mass media and traditional art forms, particularly folk theatre in India, highlights a multifaceted relationship that significantly influences cultural preservation and development communication. Folk theatre has historically been an essential medium for expressing social, political, and moral messages, especially in rural areas where it resonates strongly with local communities. The creation of initiatives such as the Song and Drama Division illustrates the acknowledgment of folk theatre's capability to complement modern mass media in advocating government programs and facilitating social transformation.

However, the rise of mass media has also introduced challenges for traditional art forms. Although folk theatre has adapted to address modern issues, the reduction of royal patronage and the migration of skilled artists to urban centers for better job prospects have jeopardized its sustainability. Many folk theatre troupes are now on the brink of extinction due to dwindling participation, resulting in an irreplaceable loss of cultural heritage. Despite these obstacles, the resilience of folk theatre is evident. Forms like Jaatra, Tamasha, Nautanki, and puppetry still engage audiences during festivals and special events, albeit infrequently. These performances not only provide entertainment but also educate and motivate communities regarding significant social issues. As mass media continues to develop, it is vital to find a balance that honors and nurtures traditional art forms while utilizing their unique strengths within contemporary communication strategies.

In conclusion, while mass media has reshaped the communication landscape in India, it is essential to recognize the lasting significance of folk theatre as a tool for development communication. By encouraging collaboration between traditional artists and modern media professionals, there is an opportunity to revitalize these art forms, ensuring they flourish alongside contemporary communication methods. This partnership can enhance community involvement, foster cultural identity, and contribute to the socio-economic advancement of rural areas while safeguarding India's rich artistic legacy.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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