

Scrutinizing The Role And Challenges To The Folk Theatre In Maharashtra

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Maharashtra has a rich cultural heritage. It is inhabited by the various social groups, marked by differences in ethnic origin, religious beliefs and practices, dialects of language/ languages they speak, social customs they observe, personal laws by which they are governed and their artistic traditions which are best portrayed through the unique art of the Folk Theatre. It indicates that each Folk Theatre performance in Maharashtra is a unique representation of the regional culture, its value and its people. It is a mixture of song, dance and dialogue and 'it is marked by simplicity of staging, costumes and language.' (Wadikar 5)

The Folk Theatre in Maharashtra has developed various traditional folk forms representing culture in Maharashtra. These theatrical forms are – Tamasha, Gondhal, Povada, Swang, Dashaavatar, Nautanki, Bharud, Ramlila, etc.

Tamasha:

Tamasha is the principal form of the Folk Theatre of Maharashtra consisting of song, music and dance. It flourished during the period of Moghals and Peshwas and is still performed. According to Mirajkar, 'Tamasha has its roots in certain religious rites and the dramatic entertainment performed on certain occasion.' (Mirajkar 19) The song-dance troupe and the folk drama troupe are two modern Tamasha troupes. *Tamasha* incorporates three basic elements— the entertainment tradition, the propagandist tradition and the devotional tradition. It includes a love song that is lavani sung to the accompaniment of dance and musical instruments like *dholki*, *tuntuna*, *daf*, *halgi*, etc.

Gondhal:

It is a religious folk theatre form practiced in many castes in Maharashtra. Its function is to educate and entertain. It is performed to reduce the sufferings of family, caused by negative energy.

Jagran:

It is all-night awakening, songs and dance in honour of various Hindu deities, Shiva as well as

various folk deities like Khandoba and Devnarayan. Devotees worship the deity throughout night by reciting a religious hymn and listening to legends of the deity.

Swang:

It is the folk-dance theatrical form. It lays importance on theatrics and mimicry accompanied by song and dialogue. A group of ten or twelve people performs an act surrounded by the audience. It deals with the subject-matter— morality, folk tales, lives of inspiring personalities, stories from Indian mythology, health, literacy, etc.

Dashaavatar:

It is related to the ten avatars of Vishnu. It is said that Vishnu came on the earth to maintain cosmic order. These ten avatars are—Matsya, Kurma, Varaha, Narasinha, Vamana, Parashurama, Rama, Krishna, Buddha, and Kalki. The concept of these Avatars rises from the lowest level of life through the fish, the tortoise, and takes over to the perfection of humanity.

Nautanki:

It is also form of the Folk Theatre in Maharashtra enacted to provide entertainment and to render social messages to the audience. It is generally in verse incorporating the meters like *Doha*, *Chhappal*, *Chaubola* and *Behartabeela*. The play begins with a prayer like many other forms. *Ranga* plays a role like chorus of setting the scenes and the time of action and introducing the main characters.

There are several other forms of the Folk Theatre like Bhagwat, Kirtan, Povada, Jalasa, etc. These Folk Theatre forms existed in all over Maharashtra reinforce light on ethnicity, religion, social structure, customs, practices, and so on representing a panorama of Maharashtra's life.

The Role of the Folk Theatre

The Folk Theatre is a medium which mirrors life with its various facets. Social, cultural, political, economical and official (government) condition is

directly and indirectly associated or influenced by it or vice-versa. It channelizes the new ideas that bring the changes in society. Its role is as follows:

Social Awareness:

The Folk Theatre plays a significant role in social awareness. There are number of evil practices were performed and are still performed. It functions to cease the practices such as child marriage, dowry, slavery, untouchability, discrimination, corruption and superstition, and to favour the ideas of independence, self-existence, equality, liberty, fraternity, girl education and sacred life. Even morality, truth, sacrifice, love, lives of inspiring personalities, stories from mythologies are preached through this medium. It can reach to every individual from lower to upper classes, castes, creeds, religions and races. For example, Ambedkarite Jalsas were performed to bring forth social inequality and to establish new social order in which each entity is equal.

Representation of Culture:

It is the best medium of a representation of culture. In this regard, Dissanayaka asserts 'It is 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'. The Folk Theatre forms such as Ramlila, Gondhal, Dashavatara, Jagran, Bhagwat, etc. revolve around the religious themes. It creates a religious atmosphere in society. Various traditions, customs, rituals, doctrines, values and principles occupy a significant place in it. It is a live expression of the lifestyle and culture of people evolved through the years. In other words, through the representation of culture, it is easy to comprehend the social structure of the contemporary society.

Recalling History:

It is said that the Folk Theatre emerged with the Classical Sanskrit Theatre. It portrays a panorama of life from an ancient to a modern period. The lives of the historical personalities like Shivaji Maharaj are excellently presented through the medium of Povada. In Bhagvat, an orator speaks about lives and works of the saints like Eknath, Namdev, Tukaram, Gadge Maharaj, Janabai etc. It brings forth the

history of the past of their contemporary era whether it is social, political, economical, cultural or religious situation. So the historical thematic concerns occupy a pivotal place in it.

Depiction of Politics:

There are number of political parties in Maharashtra. It is very complex to understand the ideologies and practices of these parties to common people. Here, the folk theatre can reinforce light on the situation. Even the political parties employ the folk theatrical forms to disseminate their political agenda and ideologies to reach to all corners of the state effectively. Through them, these parties endeavour to convince the people and to form the opinions that favour to them. In 1940s, Indian People Theatre Association, the cultural front of the Communist Party of India, handled the regional folk theatre form like Tamasha in Maharashtra to increase social awareness and political education. Sometimes these forms are oppositely used to highlight the corruption and malpractices in the political parties by the social activists. It has positive and negative effects on the political parties.

Communication of Government Policies and Acts:

Government forms the Policies and the Acts to make development of state. These Policies and Acts need to be communicated among the people, and here, the Folk Theatre is useful to convey the information. Understanding the importance of the traditional medium, the first five year plan projected that people in rural areas should be reached through the traditional folk theatre form of communication. In 1954, the Song and Drama Division of the Union Ministry of Information and Broadcasting was set up by the Government of India to create awareness among the masses of the rural India. It functions to create national integration and communal harmony and to emphasize on eradication of untouchability, family planning, women empowerment, fundamental rights, ideals of democracy and the aspects of socio-cultural phenomenon. It is really useful to propagate the development programmes of government among the masses.

Source of Employment:

The Folk Theatre is also a source of employment. There are many families or *gharanas* performing certain forms of the Folk Theatre. They

have made it their profession hereditarily and earn the bread and butter for them. There are many professional troupes of the Folk Theatre all over Maharashtra, they are hired to perform and they can earn from such performances. Surekha Punekar is a professional tamasha dancer who not only earns money but also achieves popularity all over the world. Babasaheb Purandare was a professional povada singer. Thus, it provides an employment if not to many individuals, certainly to some individuals.

Thus, its role in social, political, economical, cultural and religious spheres of life is exceptionally significant.

Challenges to the Folk Theatre

The Folk Theatre is a part and parcel of the society of Maharashtra handling various issues with the purpose to entertain and to educate the people however, its popularity is decreasing day-by-day because of certain reasons and challenges. These challenges are follows:

Static Entity:

It is a medium of entertainment and education in the past and the present but has not changed and reinvented itself. It has not modernized its subject-matters like its urban counterpart. Most of the forms like Tamash, Ramlila,, Gondhal, Jagran, Kirtan, etc. operate the similar themes of mythology, history, devotion and love. These forms have woven a constraint around that has made them the static entities. Any form of entertainment needs to undergo a constant flux, and dynamic changes are expected to be taken place however, it is a forlorn issue for the Folk Theatre.

Lack of Novelty in Tools and Techniques:

The Folk Theatre is a traditional theatre. It has been employing the traditional tools and techniques for performances. In the modern age, other forms of entertainment are so advance in using the tools and techniques that has diminished the craze of the people towards the theatre. *tuntuna*, *dholti*, *halgi* and *manjeera* in Tamasha, *tabala*, *peti*, *khanjeri* and *tal* in Jagran and almost similar instruments in Gondhal and other forms are used which are tradition whereas orchestra, musical concert and other forms are using the advance instruments and techniques to pacify the ears and

eyes of the audience. So Lack of innovation in tools and techniques is also a cause of lingering behind the modern forms and it is a challenge to sustain its popularity and existence.

Lack of Patronage:

The Folk Theatre forms require a patronage. In past, Tamasha was patronized by the King of Sangali, similarly other forms were getting a patronage from kings, sardars, and nababs but in the present, there is almost no patronage or too much less patronage. Only Government and NGO are endeavoring to support these forms to some extent however, it is not sufficient to gain popularity and sustain it existence in the world of competition.

Emergence of Modern Media:

The electronic media and the print media are easily accessible and affordable medium of information, education and entertainment. Through them, one can collect information about the happenings taking place all over the world and as a form of entertainment; they are certainly better and affordable too. One can sit on a place and get everything. It really stands as a challenge to the Folk Theatre.

Invention of TV and Radio and Establishment of Cinema Theatre:

The 20th century was a period of invention. The inventions of television and radio took place that have brought the revolutionary changes in broadcasting and information. Since post Independence era, the cinema theatres are established. It has attracted all classes of people. In the modern age, the popularity and craze for the film industry has reached to the peak. The cinemas from various regional languages and on different themes are screened and the use of advance technology makes the world of Bollywood more fascinating. The inventions of TV and Radio and the establishment of cinema theatre have stretched parallel line to the Folk Theatre in Maharashtra; it seems to be more concrete and firm.

Less Inclination of Performers and towards Performances:

There are less number of performers of the Folk Theatre. People are not generally taking an interest in it for it does not offer enough money to

them and taste of people (audience) has also changed but, being a static entity, the Folk Theatre does not vary as per audience taste. So an absence of interest of performers and audience really hammers the Folk Theatre. It is a challenge before the Folk Theatre to rejuvenate an interest of the performers and audience.

Occasional Performances:

The Folk Theatre forms are occasionally performed. Tamasha is generally performed in fair, Jagran at the time of marriage, Gondhal at the time of some religion event, Povada at the time of Shivaji Maharaj Birth Anniversary, etc. Such irregularity in performances obviously goes in negation to these theatrical forms.

Exploitation of Performers:

The performers are treated just as puppets in the hands of the *Folk Theatre troupes* owners. Bandopadhyay's term 'little men, marginalized men' (Alekar 286) exactly describes the essence of their lives. The theatre owners often sexually and economically exploit them. In the regard of economic exploitation in Tamasha performers, Shanta Gokhale asserts 'Gradually I came to understand the economics of their lives. Half of their Baithake earning would go to the owner. Once I offered to pay them directly, but they would not hear of it.' (Gokhale 355) They experience insecurity, frustration, despair and pathos. In Tamasha, women and men dancers are physically and sexually oppressed. The movie 'Natrang' throws light on sexual exploitation of *Nachya* and women performers. Sartre diction 'for many, life begins on the other side of despair' matches well to describe their lives. It abstains them from the Folk Theatre.

These are some of the challenges to the Folk Theatre that need to be solved soon to gain popularity and to function for educating and entertaining people from all sections of the society.

To conclude, the Folk Theatre reinforces light on the contemporary society. It functions to educate and to entertain the people. It significantly influences the society in formation of lifestyle, art of living and opinion. It brings a social awareness among the mass, represents culture of the region and recalls the historical happenings of the past that makes the people proud of their ancestor. It is helpful

for the government to communicate its policies and for the people who has made it as their source of employment. But it certain inbuilt and outer variables like its static nature, lack of novelty in technique and tools, lack of patronage, less interest of performers and towards performance, modern media—TV, radio, theatre, mobile, computer, etc. rare performances and exploitation of the performers have certainly hampered the popularity and has raised a question to its sustenance against such challenges in the modern time. In spite of this, some changes in themes, techniques, tools, stage direction and government policies can be made to create an interest and to attract the audience towards it.

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