

## **ROLE OF THEATRE AND FOLK MEDIA IN PROMOTING SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT**

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### **Abstract**

Theatre, music and dance are the three traditional art forms which have been part of human culture. The beginning of the modern theatre can be traced to the building of the Calcutta theatre in 1779. In 1795, a Russian dramatist, Gerasim Lebedev along with Goloknath Das staged the Bangla translations of two English comedies, 'Disguise' and 'Love is the best doctor' in Calcutta.

The first all-women enactment of a full-length play occurred in 1888 when the ladies of the Tagore household performed all the roles in Rabindranath Tagore's "Mayar Khela". With the foundation of Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), theatre became even closer to the people. Theatre continued to flourish in Bengal as a result of the dedicated efforts of Girish Chandra Ghosh, D.L. Roy, Rabindranath Tagore, Bijon Bhattacharya, Utpal Dutta, Shambhu Mitra, Sishir Bhaduri, Soumitra Chatterjee, Balraj Sahani, Habib Tanvir and several others.

Indian theatre reached a new high under the influence of Badal Sircar, who conceptualized and practiced “Third Theatre”, beginning with small rooms and parks in Kolkata from 1972. Many women started acting and giving performances in Calcutta Public Theatres. However they did not come from high social status.

Traditional media, like theatre command immense credibility and impact. They are the most appropriate channels for changing the traditional Indian mind towards modernization. They inform, educate and entertain the masses. Folk media, in fact can be used to convey the very ideas of the new communication systems and prepare the masses whole-heartedly to accept the electronic media when they are ready to go full stream.

***Keywords: Traditional Media, Mass Media, Folk Media, Development, Modernization.***

### **Theatre goes back to.....**

Theatre, music and dance are the three traditional art forms which have been part of human culture. They are performing arts which create great impact on the human mind. Traditional media by nature are those indigenous forms of communication which have their roots in the cultural tradition of the country. Theatre in India is supposed to have begun with gods. Brahma himself commanded the first dramatic representation. As the oldest holy books say, it appears that in heaven, long before the world was created, when good and evil lived side by side, the gods fought and defeated the demons. In celebration of this victory, Brahma asked the gods to re-enact the battle among them so that it would cause delight to both the eye and the ear.

After centuries of oral transmission, ‘Natyaveda’ was finally recorded in writing around the fourth or fifth century A.D. The composition of this ‘Sastra’ was brought about by taking the element of recitation from the Rig Veda, song from the Sama Veda, gestures from the Yajur Veda and sentiment from the Atharva Veda. Panini, the Sanskrit grammarian of the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. refers to the class of actors and codifies a manual of acting. Patanjali---2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.- makes some references which indicate the existence of dramatic representation. Nearer our

times, the theatre began around one hundred and seventy-five years ago, and it is axiomatic to recognize that it stems directly from the West, and this was true as well of the rest of Asia.

In his 'Natyashastra', Bharata 'Muni' describes the purpose of such representation as one of imparting instruction to people to follow the moral code of life and living as well as providing wholesome entertainment.

Going down the line, Calcutta (Kolkata) was the first city in India to have a modern Indian-language play enacted on a proscenium stage, as far back as 1795. The growth of the city as an economic and political centre in the heyday of the East India Company is implicitly connected to the advent of industrialization in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and its impact on colonial Bengal's cultural, social and political life. The shift in taste that followed the introduction of some of these mechanical innovations in the middle ranks of the populace and the market opportunities that opened up is a fascinating history of how the colonized mastered some of these 'alien technologies' and how often imitation gave way to invention to foster a new sense of national identity.

After 1795, the Russian adventurer and musician Herasim Lebedeff or Gerasim Levedev staged a play translated into Bengali along with the help of his teacher, Goloknath Das. The first Bengali theatre company to be formed was the Lebedeff's Bengali Theatre in 1795. The players, both male and female were Bengali. Lebedeff translated Paul Jodrell's *The Disguise* and *Love Is The Best Doctor*.

As early as 1662, David Garrick (1717-79), an actor formed the Drury Lane Theatre, in Calcutta and formed it for those who loved theatre. Early public theatre was done by the British and it was in the later years (second half of the nineteenth century) that theatre developed under the Bengali speaking Indians. *The Playhouse*, one of the earliest theatres was established as early as 1753. This company was helped by David Garrick. However after the attack of Siraj ud Daula, the ousted Nawab at Calcutta in 1756, this theatre went out of existence. Mrs. Emma Bristow started her residential theatre at her Chowringee residence in 1789 and this opened with the production of "The Poor Soldier" on May 1, 1789. Some of the important productions were

*Julius Caesar, The Sultan, The Padlock*. Ladies did male role as well. When Mrs. Bristow left for England in 1790, this theatre was closed. In 1812, the *Atheneum theatre* was founded and on 30<sup>th</sup> March with the performance of the *Earl of Essex*. However, *The Atheneum* withdrew from the theatrical scene of Calcutta within two years.

The best known English theatres in Calcutta were the Chowringee Theatre, 1813-39. This was formed as the united effort of a large number of celebrated men such as Horace Hayman Wilson (1786-1864), the renowned Sanskrit scholar, Prof. D.L. Richardson and Dwarkanath Tagore (1794-1846), the grandfather of Rabindranath Tagore, who was the only Indian to be associated with this theatre. This theatre was inaugurated on 25<sup>th</sup> November, 1813 with a tragic drama, *Castle Spectre*, that was followed by *Cleopatra, Sixty third letter* amongst the few important ones.

The growth of the Public Theatre in Calcutta can be traced to the complex cultural relationship between the colonists and western-educated urban Bengalis. English education had thrown open the doors of social, economic and cultural emancipation to this new class of educated Bengalis, and one of the ways in which colonized Bengalis could become Macaulay's 'anglicised subjects' was to emulate the Europeans in their theatre. In their amateur theatricals, actors and directors mainly chose to stage adaptations of Sanskrit play, farces, or a few scenes from Western Classics like Shakespeare. Theatre was a new medium in that it involved the import of a new technology--the proscenium stage, the emphasis on illusionism/ realism that meant elaborate stage settings, the introduction of actresses on the public stage; all these were radical departures from traditional modes of performance.

Under the influence of this new technology, the form as well the content of theatrical presentations changed. The early dramatic performances were the jattras, the half-akhrai and the kabi-gaan. The new theatre brought in Western classics, pantomimes and 'opera'-style musicals. Where the content remained the same, as in plays with mythological themes, the use of technology gave a new lease of life to the old subject. The new medium explored the possibilities of using varied ways of presentation and one of the ways in which European playhouses could be emulated was to hire actresses. They were women who came from the red-light districts of the

city, daughters of prostitutes who looked at theatre as an alternative livelihood. The raging debate that took place about this highlighted the ambiguous tone of the theatre people. The noted religious reformer Sri Ramakrishna was an ardent fan of the theatre and often termed it an important instrument of Lokshikshya or public education. His admiration for the famous actress Binodini playing the role of Chaitanya in the religious play Chaitanya Leela (1884) was important in helping the theatre gain acceptability among the masses.

The first businessperson to invest in was Pratap Chand Johuree who bought off the National Theatre in 1880. A true businessperson, Pratap Chand tried to streamline the rather unorganized sectors in theatre and gave it a more professional look. Star Theatre was formed at 68, Beadons street in 1883. After a dispute with Pratap Johuri, Girish Chandra Ghose founded his own theatre company called the Star Theatre Company. At the end of 1883, the Star Theatre was taken over by Amritalal Mitra for sum of 11,000. Stiff competition and rivalry existed amongst the many theatre companies of that time.

Bengali theatre which was already rich as an art form by then became a vehicle of mass education, an effort in reflecting the then society. Bengali theatre again in the 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a colossal change as the rich, young Bengalis of Calcutta started to write plays based on British realistic manikins whilst ideally weaving them with Indian songs, classical dance and music to add that little extra. Rabindranath Tagore's *Raktakarabi* and *Raja* became an important part of this effort. At that time the works of William Shakespeare were also widely translated and adapted in the Bengali theatre whilst redesigning Bengali theatre to benefit the Indian urban tastes. The first decade of the twentieth century saw several new playwrights flourishing in Calcutta. Girish Chandra Ghosh towered the fame, and besides being a pioneering producer, he was also the greatest playwright. He was a director, actor, composer and playwright. He wrote more than 40 plays, historical, social and mythological and had deep social commitment. He wrote two of his most dramaturgically correct play, *Siraj Ud Daula*(1905) and *Mir Quasim* during that time. He wrote the some major social plays like *Balidan* in 1905 and historical ones like *Chhatrapati Shivaji* in 1907.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Tagore authored the first outspoken Indian rejection of Western theatrical models in his essay *Rangamancha* and built the foundation of the first art theatre, producing an entirely original open-air indigenous concept from 1908 at his Santiniketan school, often bringing those productions to Kolkata audiences, indoors. Simultaneously, he trail-blazed children's educational theatre, ecologically-conscious drama, the first play without any male characters at all ( Natir Puja,1926) and the hybridization of cosmopolitan dance drama using traditional Indian and southeast Asian forms.

The history of Bengali theatre is thus the saga of changing tradition. Bengali theatre soon became a strong medium of expression to mirror the socio-political and contemporary issues to the common Indians. The main aim was then to make the mass aware of the then socio-political scenario. One such play of that time was *Nil Darpan*, which depicted the misery of the indigo cultivators.

Kolkata manifested the first Communist influences on Indian theatre in 1944, when the Bengal unit of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) mounted Bijon Bhattacharya's *Nabanna* against the backdrop of the terrible Bengal famine. The history of Bengali theatre now took a new turn became even closer to the people. The famous stages of Bengali theatre like the *Girish Mancha* and *Star Theatre* then witnessed a huge change in order to befit the requirement where the aura of the "Classical dance drama" was no more and on the contrary emerged a whole new concept of theatre---"Peoples Theatre" which was definitely "for the people and by the people". This also launched the amateur Group Theatre Movement, which since the 1950s gradually took over serious theatre from the professionals. Indian theatre's break with the proscenium arch in the 1970s assumed a national scope under the influence of Badal Sircar, who conceptualized and practiced "Third Theatre", beginning with small rooms and parks in Kolkata from 1972. Theatre continued to flourish in Bengal. D.L.Roy, Girish Chandra Ghosh, Sishir Bhaduri, Bijon Bhattacharya, Soumitra Chatterjee, Utpal Dutt, Shombhu Mitra, Balraj Sahani, Habib Tanvir and several others contributed to its maturity.

It was much later the very concept of Bengali Theatre as the representation of the age-old British colonialism gradually faded away and theatre became lot more naturalistic. However, right after

independence the very demand of the realistic theatre approach was so much vibrant that famous theatre personalities like Utpal Dutta, Sambhu Mitra and Badal Sircar designed a whole new concept --- Realistic theatre in Bengali.

### **Status of Women In Indian Theatre**

The male and the female are not seen as exclusive entities, separated into water-tight compartments, in Indian metaphysical thought. Early Indian history has been a period of equality of sexes and celebration of femininity. However, 1000 years of Muslim and later British rule changed this position drastically, and women were hidden behind a repressive purdah, or veil and their freedom and rights were curtailed. Later, the participation of many woman leaders of great stature in India's struggle for independence were reflected in the theatre that evolved in the post-independence India. The contrast in modern Indian theatre as against western theatre is manifest in the manner in which the powerful and highly individualistic female characters in Indian plays are comfortable with their femininity while in western plays woman characters are compelled to attain male characteristics in order to exert their influence in the society. Modern theatre in India is in some ways craving to restore the ages old position of women in Indian society where they could not only enjoy but also celebrate their femininity and not feel compelled to be apologetic about it. Women re-entered the Indian theatre scene in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in a gradual and rather disrespectful manner. India gained independence in the year 1947. The participation of many woman leaders of great stature in India's struggle for independence gave a new confidence to our women folk who moved forward in the process of nation-building as equal partners of their male colleagues. All these leaders, be it Rani Lakshmi Bai, Sarojini Naidu or Vijay Laxmi Pandit, were women of extreme grace and poise who fought a bitter battle against the British rule while retaining all their feminine traits. All this had been reflected in the theatre that evolved in the post-independence India.

Theatre is one such domain where women playwrights are not very prominent---in the history of literature and theatre, we hardly notice any names of women. It is towards the twentieth century that we witness a rise in the number of women dramatists---both in India and in the West. Critics like Tutun Mukherjee and Helene Keyssar talk about the general scenario which has made this

possible---there are even major theatre groups dedicated to encourage women dramatists, staging their plays. What is seen is not the mere presence of women in the scenario, but the difference that presence makes in terms of projecting women's issues and problems, the difference in their discussion of sexes and desire, the difference in the gaze they assume and encourage---the ways in which they position women as subjects, along with their contexts. Mukherjee points out, "...drama belongs to author, theatre belongs to people." She goes on to discuss various factors that could have been responsible for marginalization of women in theatre--denial of education to women and exclusive male control in print culture being the two most obvious of all. She also points out that the oral culture or the ritual system which are devalued (after the advent of writing culture and the printing press) are known to be the roots of any theatre system. Also, women are generally associated with rituals, oral and folk culture and the domestic space they are characterized by. Theatre stands out to be a public space and given the understanding of the way women have been isolated from many domains that fall into public space, the lack of presence of women in theatre does not come as a surprise. Even as actors/performers, women haven't been a part of theatrical performances. With the expansion of colonial control on India, women characters were being dealt with as an entity or community that needs to be reformed. Under the conflicting influence of the reform system introduced by the British on the one hand, and the rise of Indian nationalism on the other, women's issues and problems became one of the highly debated concerns of Indian national (male) leaders and (male) writers and playwrights. It is important to emphasize that the centuries-old tradition of equal and participatory role for women in all walks of life is in many ways reflected in the modern Indian theatre. If this tradition is not a reality today, at least our theatre certainly craves for it and is striving to attain this goal.

### **History of Theatre Movement in India with Special Reference to Bengal**

Although Indian history is not lacking in great dramas from the time of Kalidasa and Bhasa, the social milieu in which this classical culture developed did not endure till the modern times. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the cultural impact of British rule and English education, modern drama made its appearance in Bengal, Maharashtra and South India. But even then it had no roots in



contemporary reality, being mostly costume dramas drawing upon historic romances, Puranic tragedies and romantic stories from the Indian epics, “Social realism” was yet a far cry.

It required the cruel jolt of the Second World War, with famines and starvation deaths in the country on the one hand and repression by the colonial masters in the wake of the Quit India Movement and the aggression by the fascist powers on the Soviet Union on the other, to awaken the Indian middle class to the harsh realities. This found expression in the All India People’s Theatre Conference in Bombay (now Mumbai) in 1943 under the auspices of the IPTA. Its stated objective was to portray through the stage and other traditional arts the internal and external crises facing Indian society and polity and to enlighten the masses about their rights and the proper way to fight the twin evils of imperialism at home and fascism abroad. The conference set up not only an all-India committee, with N.M. Joshi, general secretary of the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), as President, but also provincial committees in Bengal, Punjab, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu.

IPTA brought about a sea change in the prevalent concepts about Indian Theatre. It was formed to co-ordinate and to strengthen all progressive tendencies that had so far manifested themselves in the form of drama, songs and dances. Its roots lay in the cultural awakening of the masses of India, seeking to revive the cultural heritage of the country. Its initial impact was so powerful that a new form of expression took shape. It was to leave a lasting impression, making the arts an expression of the people’s yearning for freedom, economic and social justice and a democratic culture. IPTA is one of the oldest performing art groups in the country. Indian cinema, performing arts like music and theatre and now even television have drawn their many personalities from IPTA. IPTA was founded by stalwarts like K.A. Abbas, Dr. Bhabha, Anil de Silva, Ali Sardar Jafri and Dada Sharmalkar. Over the last six decades many prominent artistes, writers, musicians, directors, dancers and singers have been a part of IPTA. These include Amar Shaikh, Shambhu Mitra, Homi Bhava, Utpal Dutt, Ritwik Ghatak, Balraj Sahani, Kaifi Azmi, Habib Tanvir, Salil Chowdhury, Shabana Azmi, Sudhir Pande, Aanjan Srivastava, Mulk Raj Anand and many others.

The new movement was reflected in a wave of realistic performances in the field of theatre, music and cinema. The most important among them were the plays “Navanna” by Bijon Bhattacharya, “Naba Jiboner Gaan” by Jyotirinda Moitra and the film Dharti Ki Lal by K.A.Abbas. The common feature was the vivid portrayal of stark reality, especially of the toiling masses.

“Navanna” was a turning point in the history of the cultural movement of Bengal. The play, directed by Shambhu Mitra, depicted in four acts the grim tragedy of the Bengal peasantry during the 1943 famine. Professor D.P.Mukherjee of Lucknow University, aptly summed it up by saying that he had only “imagined the presence of social realism in art”, but after seeing “Navanna” in the People’s Theatre he was full of hope for the future.

As a result of the work of the IPTA in the late 1950s and early 1960s, a number of theatre groups emerged. They launched what is known as the Group Theatre Movement which, in its turn, took the New Drama movement to different realms and updated Bengali Theatre with what was happening in the West. New Drama, however, did not produce as many original playwrights, since it was mainly interested in bringing the best of Western theatre---Ibsen, Chekhov, Pirandello, Brecht, Wesker, Miller and others----to the Bengali audience rather than creating its own. However the playwrights who adapted foreign plays in great profusion also wrote a number of significant original plays.

Utpal Dutt was a dramatic writer who prolifically wrote original plays in Bengali. In an amazing display of versatility as producer-director-actor-writer, Dutta wrote more than 30 original plays in Bengali on subjects ranging from the Sepoy Mutiny, 1857 to the Germany of Second World War II. Some of his celebrated plays include Angar, Kallol, Tiner Taloar, Barricade etc. Two important playwrights came into prominence in the 1970s---Manoj Mitra(1937) and Mohit Chattopadhyay (1935). Some of Mitra’s major plays are Chakbhanga Madhu (1972), Narak Guljar (1976), Sajano Bagan (1977) etc. Mohit Chattopadhyaya will be best remembered for his play Rajkarta (1971) and Socrates (1986).

These writers i.e. Utpal Dutt, Mitra and others, were writing mostly realistic plays that were meant for the stage, the Bengali alternative avant-garde theatre was fed by Badal Sircar, who

started with the proscenium stage but rejected it in favour of the arena form that he identified as the “third theatre”. Badal Sircar (15 July 1925-13 May 2011) a pioneering figure in street theatre as well as in experimental and contemporary Bengali theatre with his egalitarian “Third Theatre”, prolifically wrote scripts for his Aanganmanch performances and remains one of the most translated Indian playwrights. Though his early comedies were popular, it was his angst-ridden *Ebong Indrajit* that became a landmark play in Indian Theatre. Today, his rise as a prominent playwright in 1960s is seen as the coming of age of modern Indian playwriting in Bengali, just as Vijay Tendulkar did it in Marathi, Mohan Rakesh in Hindi and Girish Karnad in Kannada.

Though he continued to hold his job till 1975, as a playwright he rose to prominence in the 1970s and was one of the leading figures in the revival of street theatre in Bengal. His plays reflected the atrocities that prevailed in the society, the decayed hierarchical system and were socially enlightening. He is a proponent of the “Third Theatre” movement which involved street plays, with actors being attired no differently than the audience. Also the formal binding of the proscenium theatre was given up. Sircar’s “*Bhoma*” is an example of a third theatre play, set as always, in an urban background. Starting with *Sagina Mahato*, which marked his advent into arena stage, his subsequent plays, *Michhil*, *Bhoma*, *Basi Khabar*, *Spartacus* based on Howard Fast’s historical novel by the same name, were performed in parks, street corners and remote villages with the audience sitting all around.

Here it will be appropriate to mention the National Theatre Festival which Nandikar has been organizing since 1984. Nandikar is, in fact, the standbearer of the other theatre of Calcutta, so much so that its story tends to epitomise the history of the Group Theatre Movement in Bengal. As is well- known, the movement started from the days of IPTA in the forties and gained national and international recognition through the work and commitment of Shombhu Mitra and his troupe, *Bohurupee*.

On June 29, 1960, under the inspiring leadership of Ajitesh Bandopadhyay, a bunch of youth school and college teachers, students, a postal peon, a shopkeeper, a tailor, a number of jobless young men formed Nandikar as a unit of IPTA. Almost unknown then, most of them are today

household names, known for their historic contribution to theatre in Bengal. Right in the sixties, the group threw up a bunch of competent directors like Ajitesh Bandopadhyay. Rudraprasad Sengupta, Manik Chowdhury, Leela Bandopadhyay and produced such artistically rich plays as “Natyakarer Sandhane Chhati Charitra”, “Manjari Amer Manjari”, “Sher Afgan”, “Tin Poyshar Pala,” “Char Adhayay”.

Nandikar could do all this because its predecessors had built a tradition as well as an audience. In this situation, Ajitesh directed *Bhalomanush*, an adaptation of *Brecht’s Good Woman of Setzwan*. It was a leftist, sentimental, lacrimose kind of production, but it helped Nandikar survive. More important, it was a turning point because it spelt the change of guards. Rudraprasad Sengupta, who used to do odd jobs in the sixties and who had been adapting the plays and occasionally acting or directing, now took over the reins of Nandikar and he has been at the helm ever since. Of course, he claims to be just a theatre worker, an activist but he is an activist who thinks. Anyway, it was his *Antigone* and *Football* that catapulted Nandikar on to the national scene and earned the creator the prestigious Sangeet Natak Akademi award.

### **Folk Art as an Effective Mass Media**

The word tradition implying customs, habits and way of life existed in a society from time immemorial and practiced from one generation to another. It can be transmitted through written scriptures or by word of mouth. The nomadic primitive people sharing a common cultural heritage based on oral tradition are generally said to have a folk culture. Folk implies the people’s participation and spontaneity. Folk culture in a society is seen in four different forms:

1. Oral tradition: These include mostly verbal arts or expressive literature consisting of spoken, sung and voiced forms of traditional utterances like songs, tales, poetry, ballads, anecdotes, rhymes, proverbs and elaborate epics.
2. Material culture: These are visible aspects of folk behaviour such as skills, recipes and formulae as displayed in rural arts and crafts, traditional motifs, architectural design, clothes, fashions, farming, fishing and various other types of tools and machinery.

3. Social folk customs: These are areas of traditional life, which emphasize the group rather than the individual skills and performances. They include large family and community observances and relate to birth, marriage, death or annual celebrations, festivals, fairs, ritual and ceremonial gatherings, market occasions and rural meets.

4. Performing arts: These consist of traditional music, masquerades, dance and drama.

Among these, the oral tradition and the performing arts appear to be the main media of communication. Storytellers, singers and other kinds of folk entertainers have acted for centuries as sources for the transmission and dissemination of news and information through face-to-face live communication. The values, attitudes, beliefs and culture are depicted in the form of satire by the folk artists for curing societal evils.

In the recent years educationists, media experts and development practitioners have realized the tremendous potential of folk art forms as means of communication with people. Folk media are primarily concerned with appealing to emotions and include strong dimension of communication of message. They constitute an integral part of the culture and tradition of the people and they have instant mass appeal. They function within the cultural framework of the society, which appeals to the audience and thus folk media acquire credibility among masses. Folk media provide for face to face communication. Thus they envisage an audio visual impact as well as maximum audience participation and instant feedback. These media have three major objectives.

1. Aesthetic expression

2. Expressional

3. Communicational

These objectives are realized during performance with simultaneous audience involvement creating a live and direct dialogue with the audience. Folk media convey developmental and

educational messages through entertainment, colour, costume, dance and music remain the heart of the folk theatre. Thus, on one hand it gives expression to the life style and values of the people in spoken word and song, rhythm and spontaneous choreography, on the other hand it acts as a most persuasive communicator and an effective corrective force.

Folk media can play a vital role in communicating to and with the people, particularly, in rural areas, including the modern messages. They can be effective mass media for preventing the tribals and the illiterates from continuous exploitation, as they do not understand, the language of modern communication. In India folk forms have special significance as mass media. People in remote rural and tribal areas do not have an access to the modern media do not reach these target groups. Here folk forms of communication can help immensely in dissemination of the messages emitted by the electronic media.

### **Using Folk Arts and Traditional Media Involving Theatre For Development**

The urge to express, communicate and share something beautiful gave birth to performing arts such as folk and traditional media. In the process, the living progressive impulse to the timeless universal got a coherent shape in creative designs. Folk performing arts have changed structure continuously over centuries, modifying to the needs of changing situations, yet continuing to be functionally relevant to society.

For social change and development, what is required is a change in the beliefs and the value systems of individuals, thus making them more adaptive and responsive to organic evolution and growth. Folk media particularly theatre offer an important apparatus in the process of inspiring rural masses towards accepting social changes, which also establish a constructive means for the overall development of the common people and can build a scientific temperament among the mass. Folk media imply the people's participation and spontaneity. The communication potential of Indian traditional performing arts has been proven time and again throughout history.

The first significant international recognition of the traditional media in the communication and development strategies of the developing countries came in the year 1972 when the international

parenthood federation and UNESCO organized a series of meetings in London relating to integrated use of folk and traditional media in family planning communication programmes. The interest generated by this meeting and the continued efforts to highlight the folk media as effective form to convey developmental messages resulted in a number of seminars and workshops around the world. It has been found that Alha, the popular ballad of Uttar Pradesh, and its counterparts like Laavani of Maharashtra, Gee-gee of Karnataka, Villupaattu of Tamil Nadu and Kabigaan of Bengal were effective in arousing the conscience of the people against the colonial rule of the British; traditional media became effective in the many political and social campaigns launched by Mahatma Gandhi; and, after independence, the Union government continued to utilize these traditional performing arts to convey messages and generate awareness of development programmes in the rural areas.

Many development planners in the third world have appreciated the value of using traditional or folk media, of which theatre is a part, as an alternative communication strategy in development programmes. There is a renewed interest in the use of the folk media for development as newer concepts of development advocated such themes as local participation and integration of indigenous media and mass media.

Historically, the folk media involving theatre have often a role in the communication and promotion of new ideas and the adjustment to a new social or political order, apart from its traditional role of preserving and teaching established values. For example, in India, Indonesia and the Philippines during colonial times or wartime, when the mass media were under the control of foreign rulers, the folk media have been used to ridicule the oppressors, present strategies for resistance and rally popular support for rationalist and independence movements.

One type of folk art, puppetry, is indigenous to India; from time immemorial, it has been a popular and appreciated form of entertainment throughout India. The stylized vocabulary of puppet theatre in India carries relevant messages of social awareness, historical and traditional identity and moral value systems.

The 1974 New Delhi seminar of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) focused specifically on the potential of the various forms of traditional media and the technique of their production as well as their integration with mass media for motivational purposes. This particular seminar was notable because it generated a number of guiding principles on how to use traditional or folk media for motivational purposes and for promoting development programmes. Folk media should be an integral part of any communication programme for rural development. Wherever possible, these should be integrated with mass media but in all cases, integration with ongoing extension work is vital.

The significance of folk arts in social and political communication was felt and recognized by Jawaharlal Nehru who once said, "I am greatly interested in the development of a people's theatre in India. I think there is a great room for it, provided it is based on the people and their traditions. Otherwise it is likely to function in the air. It is a people's approach. Nevertheless, I think an effort should be made in the direction."

In the mid fifties, the dramatic medium was effectively used to tell villagers the story of Independence, the programmes of Five Year Plans and other specific projects for village improvement. In the first two decades of experimentation with traditional media, the Indian communicators often mishandled the medium by overloading it with modern message or by not matching the natural theme of the medium with the modern message. They failed to achieve balance between the natural entertainment value of the medium and the deliberately crammed information, and no evaluation of the impact of these media was carried out scientifically.

The Ramaleela of Ramnagar near Varanasi is one theatrical genre which currently provides an opportunity for the young and old, rich and poor to come together for 16 to 20 days preceding Dussehra to witness a vast pageant of human life. Each section of the city constructs raised platforms or transforms streets, terraces or gardens into palaces, woods and streams. The whole city is the stage, the arena of the performance. The play moves sequentially day after day and the audience moves with it from locale to locale.



Puppets are increasingly being used as a strategy for addressing varied development issues such as educating children, encouraging scientific methods of farming, promoting the use of fertilizers, etc. The Song and Drama Division of the Government of India makes wide use of puppets in its campaigns to promote various government projects, and Life Insurance Corporation of India used puppets to educate the rural masses about life insurance.

During the general elections, members of the various political parties used folk songs for campaigning and presented humorous skits to ridicule the opposition's candidates and win support for their own candidates. Swang and Ragini have been used by IPTA groups to support candidates of the communist parties in Bengal. Tamasha and Lavani in Maharashtra have been extensively used for political propaganda in the State.

The utilization of folk media including theatre in communication programmes should be viewed not only from the perspectives of political and socio-economic development but also from that of cultural development. Folklore needs to retain social authenticity. The folk forms have evolved gradually, and wherever they are flexible they retain their appeal to the rural people. Not all folk forms can be used for development communication purposes. Folk media productions should be consistent with the needs of the social context and related to the customs and beliefs of the local communities. Since folk media have sociological roots, their utilization should be related to local events and their function in the local communication strategy should be properly assigned.

Efforts should be made to preserve the originality of each folk form; adaptation need not alter nor destroy the form. For effective community-level communication strategies, the integrated and planned use of both folk and mass media is necessary for achieving optimum impact and for obtaining desired feedback. Collaboration between the folk artists and the media producers is absolutely essential for the successful integration of folk media and mass media communication strategies for development purposes. Peasants, agricultural labourers, bonded labourers, women, tribals and other oppressed groups are rediscovering the potential of folk and traditional performing arts as a weapon in their struggle for land, better health status, better working and living conditions, and human rights. Government agencies, international organizations and donor

agencies should progressively use this important and powerful communication tool as a means for mobilizing people for economic and social development.

Being ancient forms of art, the folk media is very close to the heart of the people. Its appeal is universal and its understanding is direct and at personal level. So the folk media can effectively be used as mass communication among ruralites and urbanites. The folk media have played a very important role in solving emotional problems and channelizing the destructive forces into constructive ones. In India folk music, folk dances and folk dramas have always played an important role in combating destructive elements and in harmonizing emotional outbursts relating to caste, creed, religion, and language issues. Several folk forms of entertainment prevalent in different parts of India were powerful media of public instruction and unifying force for emotional integrity. Various organizations, movements and government bodies can effectively make use of these folk arts for developmental activities.

While folkway of communication dominates in remote and rural areas, they are present in various forms in urban centers as well. One of the main problems and objectives is to consolidate the relationship between the two forms of communication without disrupting either the traditional roots or the necessary trend towards modernity. Outside its usual context, folk media of communication have also been largely used during recent events occurring in the political and social life of many developing countries. In the industrialized countries, vestiges of folk communication survive in varying degrees.

Almost all of the developing countries show a mixture of traditional and modern communication. There is a constant interplay and reciprocal influence between them. It seems very important to maintain their co-existence and mutual relationship. As regard to folk arts, it is very clear that the revival of such forms of arts can very well be utilized for reconstruction of new ideas and building up of our nation in a better way.

Folk media are most effective in changing the unscientific attitudes, superstitions, etc. inherited as a part of tradition by the people in rural areas. In the course of folk performance, they transmit

information and project ideas that may influence attitudes and behaviour as well as entertainment.

Studies have proved that the hold of the folk media on the rural and semi-urban masses is still strong. Realizing the potentialities of folk media, some State Directorate of Public Relations and non-official organizations make imaginative use of the folk art, live entertainment movements has made several experiments by employing many of these forms for dissemination of ideas and innovations. Therefore, these folk forms should be kept up. With the advent of technology and other faster forms of communicating media, the folk/traditional media have started decaying. At present, the rural audience of India is receiving neither of them in adequate and in effective proportion. With the slow disappearance of the folk performing arts and the lack of new mass media in the villages, a kind of communication gap has developed. The traditional media have become more or less ineffective, no other medium is available for communication and even if it is available, the people do not know how to use it. Therefore, it is essential to establish modern communication media with an effective network covering rural areas and also to make use of decaying folk performing arts for communicating the message and disseminating information and knowledge.

## **Conclusion**

With multiple theatrical forms in multiple languages, contemporary Indian theatre is in search of its true identity. That in a way is the biggest strength of the theatre in India, and also its biggest weakness. The diversity makes it difficult to determine the identity of an Indian theatre. When the theatre was being performed in one single language like Sanskrit, it had a national identity of its own. But today the picture is completely different. India, being a multi-cultural nation, cannot be associated with a unique trend and feature in its theatres. In India, the concept of National Theatre has to be seen purely in regional terms. All the regions have their own language, history and culture and their theatre is also deeply rooted in those circumstances.

Theatre in India has never been professional in the true sense of the word. Artists associated with the production and presentations of theatre have not been entirely dependant on it for their livelihood. It has always been a passion, at best a vocation but hardly a profession. Though it seems that the theatre in India has been a continuous activity, yet in reality it has not been so. Theatre has by and large been performed as part of festivals or such other occasions. Even the professional theatre groups perform for about six to eight months a year. In the rest of the year, the people remain engaged either in agriculture or other vocations. They are involved in some job or the other during daytime and only in the evenings they come to rehearse or perform. But this is changing. India is moving away from agrarian economy. People need to give more time on a daily basis to earn their livelihood. Theatre on the other hand has become more demanding in terms of skill level. It requires artists to invest more time and energy, which the artists need to earn their livelihood. This conflict could be resolved if the theatre persons earn their livelihood through theatre. This could be done in two ways. One, by state sponsorship and two, by making people pay directly.

Both have problems. If the State sponsors theatre, there is an apprehension of the State appropriating the creative freedom of theatre and using it for its own purpose. If theatre is made to survive and make money out of common people, there could be problems related to aesthetics. When theatre has to survive on money collected from the viewers, the obvious aim is to gather more audience. The easiest way to achieve that is to play to the gallery, to cater to the 'want' of audience. In the process of attracting more audience, it targets 'lowest common denominator' and aesthetics is compromised.

During any discussion about the future of theatre in India, people talk about its marginalization by the film world. The exodus from the theatre to films is not a new phenomenon. But of late, television, video, film and the satellite channels have attracted the maximum number of people from the theatre to these options because of more money, glamour and market opportunities. As a result, theatre activities have suffered a severe setback in the last 15 years or so. The situation, however, has started changing slowly again. The audience appears to be fed up with the small screen. Theatre being a live and direct medium and always operating on human level with its

audience can never die. Even after innumerable obstacles and upheavels in history, it has always emerged as winner in the end.

Today, it is not uncommon to find leading companies and organizations supporting efforts like holding a theatre festival or carnival of plays. The Prithvi Theatre has so far run twelve such festivals called the Prithvi festivals. It was also able to organize the “Bol Jamoore”--- the national festival of Street Theatre--- with the help of organizations like Child Relief and You (CRY). These festivals are set to move from Mumbai to other parts of the country like Bangalore, Delhi, Calcutta and Chennai. Nandikar, Rudra Prasad Sengupta’s well-known Calcutta group, has also been putting up festivals of Indian plays for the last 12 years.

Although the emergence of cinema had given an elbow jerk to the popularity of theatre as the main medium of popular entertainment, several film personalities themselves had contributed for the growth and promotion of theatre. They include Arvind Deshpande, Vijaya Mehta, Jabbar Patel, Satyadev Dube, Girish Karnad, Soumitra Chatterjee, Amol Palekar, Shashi Kapoor, Satish Kaushik, Naseeruddin Shah, Shabana Azmi and others.

Theatre continues to attract a new brand of young and talented actors, directors and playwrights. Anahita Oberoi, who is the daughter of the legendary Marathi theatre artist, Vijaya Mehta, is one such upcoming and talented theatre personality who has acted in several noteworthy plays like *Glass Menagerie*, *Seascape with Sharks*, *Dancer* and *Going Solo*. Sanjana Kapoor, daughter of Shashi Kapoor, is another such artists who manages the Prithvi Theatre and provides a platform to several newcomers. Her children’s play *The Boy Who Stopped Smiling* has recently completed 100 shows throughout India. Rajat Kapoor, who is associated with Chingari, a leading theatre group of Delhi, has translated into Hindi *Waiting for Godot*, *The Taming of the Shrew* and others.

The All India Radio was also instrumental in popularizing drama for a long time through its national and regional broadcasts. The television also provided the much-needed succor to the theatre artists by way of Tele-serials and Mega-serials and Soap Operas. Some serious theatre groups like the Indian National Theatre, the Prithvi Theatre, Chingari and others are contributing

greatly to popularize theatre. Some of these companies, like the Prithvi Theatre have gone online, making themselves known globally by utilizing the explosion in the information technology.

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