

FOLK THEATRE-ITS RELEVANCE IN DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION IN INDIA

Sheelita Das

Lecturer

Department of Journalism & Mass Communication
Victoria Institution (College)
(Affiliated to University of Calcutta)
Kolkata-700009, West Bengal, India
Email: sheelita.das@gmail.com
Website: www.victoriacollege.co.in

Abstract

Folk Theatre is a composite art form in India with a fusion of elements from music, dance, pantomime, versification, epic and ballad recitation, graphic and plastic arts, religion and festival peasantry. The Folk theatre having roots in native culture is embedded in local identity and social values. Besides providing mass entertainment, it helps Indian society as indigenous tools of interpersonal, inter-group and inter-village communication for ages. Folk theatre has been used extensively in India to propagate critical social, political and cultural issues in the form of theatrical messages to create awareness among the people. As an indigenous form it breaks all kinds of formal barriers of human communication and appeals directly to the people.

Realising the importance and powerfulness of the traditional medium, the First Five Year Plan projected that people in rural areas should be approached through traditional-folk forms of communication in addition to electronic media. Different forms of Folk Theatre in India are traditional way of Communication and constitute a potential source for conveying messages for Social, Economic and Cultural Development which ultimately helps in overall National Development.

Key words: Development Communication, Theatre, Participatory Approach, Traditional Media, folk Performing Arts, Dominant Paradigm.

Introduction

Communication embodies an important human behaviour and helps in the process of Social, Political and Cultural transformation of a society. Each and every society around the world evolves its own appropriate systems of Communication to perform the function of societal transformation which ultimately gave birth to various performing arts. In this process, tradition plays a vital role to create the artistic processes-the indigenous tools of human communication.

The Traditional forms of communication constitute a potential source for conveying messages for economic and social development. Communities and individuals have utilized a wide range of media-folk music, folk dance, folk theatre etc. for social purposes as a support to local development schemes for health and family welfare campaigns, for creating political awareness. *Ranganath (1980)* described folk media as living expressions of the lifestyle and culture of people evolved through the years. *Wang and Dissanayake (1984)* defined it as a communication system embedded in the culture which existed much before the arrival of mass media, and which still exists as a vital mode of communication in many parts of the world presenting a certain degree of continuity, despite changes. Folk Lore and Folk Life fall into four categories, as *Dorson (1976:2-5)* grouped it as: 1) Oral Literature, 2) Material Culture, 3) Social Folk Custom and 4) Performing Folk Arts. Among them, Performing Folk Arts involve tradition to process artistic creation.

India has its complex social system which comprises different castes, classes, creeds and tribes. The high rate of illiteracy added to the inadequacy of mass media to reach almost 80 percent of India's 121crore population who reside in villages. In spite of various national literacy campaigns with 74.04 percent literacy rate, to most of the people, mass media proved impersonal and unbelievable in contrast with the familiar performance of traditional artists whom the villagers "could not only see and hear but even touch". Traditional Media can be used to reach these people in the process of change and development of India.

Even where modern media have penetrated isolated areas, the older forms maintain their validity, particularly when used to influence attitudes, instigate action and promote change. Extensive experience shows that traditional forms can be effective in dispelling the superstitions, archaic

perceptions and unscientific attitudes that people have inherited as part of tradition, and which are difficult to modify if the benefits of change are hard to demonstrate. Practitioners of the traditional media use a subtle form of persuasion by presenting the required message in locally popular artistic forms. This cannot be rivaled by any other means of communication. (*Many Voices, One World, Communication and Society: Today and Tomorrow, 1982*)

Theatre as an old form of Communication is a deep-rooted tradition in India's vibrant culture. Folk Theatre is a composite art in India with a fusion of elements from music, dance, pantomime, versification, epic and ballad recitation, graphic and plastic arts, religion and festival peasantry. The Folk theatre having roots in native culture, is embedded in local identity and social values besides providing mass entertainment helped Indian society as indigenous tools of interpersonal, inter-group and inter-village communication for ages.

Folk theatre has been used extensively in India to propagate critical social, political and cultural issues in the form of theatrical messages to create awareness among the people. As an indigenous form it breaks all kinds of formal barriers of human communication and appeals directly to the people. Each folk theatre form has a particular community, language, area and way of life. But music is the only binder which attaches all the forms together. Many religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Vaisnavism, Saivism have a great influence on the thematic structure of various folk theatre forms.

Theatre and its Folk forms

India, in the backdrop of its richest cultural context, has a longest tradition in theatre dating back to at least 5000years. Developing after Greek and Roman theatre, Sanskrit theatre, closely related to ancient rituals, is the earliest form of Indian Theatre. '*Natya Sastra*' in which Bharat Muni, the first and famous dramaturge, codified the art of dramaturgy is the earliest and most elaborate treatise on dramaturgy of the world. It gives the detailed account of Indian theatre's divine origin. Theatre in India started as a narrative form, with recitation, singing and dancing becoming its integral elements. This emphasis on narrative elements made our theatre essentially theatrical right from the beginning. That is why the theatre in India has encompassed all the other forms of literature and fine arts into its physical presentation: literature, mime, music, dance,

movement, painting, sculpture and architecture - all mixed into one and being called 'Natya' or Theatre in English.

When we delve into the finding process of India's folk theatre's origin it shows that this theatrical tradition is inextricable part of our human civilization. It involves the traditional use of music, dance, drama and religious rituals to express human emotions and feelings. Folk theatre in India made its first presence in Vedic and Buddhist culture. Based on oral tradition, it was used to disseminate the stories of human lives in real context.

Emergence of Folk Theatre is linked with the change of political set up in India as well as the coming into existence of different regional languages in all parts of the country. The classical theatre was based on '*Natya Sastra*' was much more sophisticated in its form and nature and totally urban-oriented. On the contrary, the traditional theatre evolved out of rural roots and was more simple, immediate and closer to the rural milieu.

Historically speaking, it was during the 15th -16th century that the folk theatre emerged forcefully in different regions. It used different languages, the languages of the regions in which it emerged. Initially these were purely devotional in tenor and typically revolved around religion, local legends and mythology. Later, with changing times, it became more secular in content and began to focus on folk stories of romance and valour and biographical accounts of local heroes.

Indian folk theatre can be broadly divided into two broad categories -- religious and secular -- giving rise to the Ritual Theatre and Theatre of Entertainment respectively. The two forms thrived together, mutually influencing each other. Although they are considered as Folk theatre traditions, some of them have all the attributes of a classical theatre. Most often the folk and traditional forms are mainly narrative or vocal, i.e. singing and recitation-based like Ramlila, Rasleela, Nautanki and Swang, without any complicated gestures or movements and elements of dance. India is also rich in ballad-singing traditions such as Pabuji-ki-phar of Rajasthan and Nupipaalaa of Manipur.

While most of these theatrical styles have their own unique form dependent on their local customs, they differ from one another in execution, staging, costume, make-up and acting style,

although there are some broad similarities. The south Indian forms emphasize on dance forms like Kathakali and Krishnattam of Kerala and actually qualify as dance dramas, while the north Indian forms emphasize on songs, like the Khyal of Rajasthan, the Maach of Madhya Pradesh, the Nautanki of Uttar Pradesh and the Swang of Punjab. The Jaatra of Bengal, Tamasha of Maharashtra and the Bhavai of Gujarat stress on dialogues in their execution, the latter two emphasize on comedy and satire. Puppet theatre also flourished at many places in India-Shadow (Gombeyatta of Karnataka, Ravana Chhaya of Orissa), Glove (Gopalila of Orissa, Pawai Koothu of Tamil Nadu), Doll (Bommalattam of Tamil Nadu and the Mysore State and Putul Naach of Bengal) and String puppets (Kathputli of Rajasthan and Sakhi Kundhei of Orissa) are some of the popular forms in vogue.

Dramatic art can also be found in some of the solo forms of Indian classical dance, like Bharat Natyam, Kathak, Odissi and Mohiniattam, and folk dances like the Gambhira and Purulia Chhau of Bengal, Seraikella Chhau of Bihar and Mayurbhanj Chhau of Orissa. Dramatic content is even woven into the ritual ceremonies in some areas, particularly those of Kerala, with its Mudi yettu and Teyyam.

Development and Communication and Participation

With the Countries liberated from the Colonial rule after the Second World War, the newly independent nations were formulating their own policies of national development. When these policies were taking practical shape, Experts and Communication Researchers believed that Economic Development through Modernisation was the quickest way to Development. This Western Model of Development termed as “Dominant Paradigm” of development was brought to focus and Traditional Media was neglected between 1950s and 1970s as according to the model anything that was even remotely connected with the indigenous culture was to be eschewed. Traditional Media was regarded as vehicles that would discourage modern attitudes and behavioural patterns and instead reinforce cultural values of the community. *Lerner (1958)* proposed that the direction of change in communication systems in all societies was from the oral media to the technology-based mass media. Also the modern mass media were considered as indices and agents of modernization. Thus, all resources in Third World nations were devoted to promote the growth of radio and television, to the neglect of traditional media.

In the Third Development Decade there was a shift from the dominant paradigm model to people-centered development model, newer concepts of development such as self-help, grassroots participation, the two-way communication, development support communication etc. came to be used. It led to the use of traditional media as vehicles of information, education, persuasion and entertainment of the vast indigenous people in Asia, Africa and Latin America. In India, since independence in 1947, development efforts have been based on a conceptual scheme in Development Communication (DEVCOM); DEVCOM experiments and Government efforts to do development for people and people's efforts to assimilate and achieve development. Indian Development context particularly suggests that the development communication efforts are focused on three aspects of development: 1) Development of quality of life for all through basic development projects of education, health, nutrition, housing, 2) Development of poor, marginal by poverty elimination projects by creating employment opportunities and providing subsidies, 3) Development of rural population live in rural areas and have limitations of economic resources, literacy and constraints of reaching target audience.

The Communication Perspective for development such as communication policies, strategies, messages and channels to do development is specific to each country. These depend on number of factors which are availability of communication technologies, physical and social access to these technologies, literacy, people's self-reliance and participation and material-social resources. During the first development decade the stress was on national development through social growth. The models of community development and Panchayat Raj were in essence participatory communication and Basic Needs Models, though they were not anything like that. Most of the international development communities were going with the Dominant Paradigm. In the Second development decade India gave stress on Dominant Paradigm –modernisation through industrialisation. In the 70's and also currently, the two development models of Participatory Communication and Basic Needs Model commonly known as New Paradigm and Basic Minimum Needs model by the international development community are operating in India.

Post-structuralism, post-modernism and communitarian theory provide an assumptive basis for participatory strategies. *Diaz-Bordenave (1989)* states: “Participation is not a fringe benefit that authorities may grant as a concession but every human being’s birthright that no authority may deny or prevent”. Communication is inextricably related to participatory approaches. If development is to have occurred in real sense it must perceive the people’s real own needs, their problems and solutions of these in their own terms.

Folk Theatre and Development Communication in India

Realising the importance and powerfulness of the traditional medium, the First Five Year Plan projected that people in rural areas should be approached through traditional-folk forms of communication in addition to electronic media (Radio and Television). In 1954, the Song and Drama Division of the Union Ministry of Information and Broadcasting was set up by Government of India. It utilizes live entertainment media for creating awareness among the masses in rural India. It has 12 Regional centres and 9 Sub-centres in different regions in the country, 41 department troupes, and 500 registered private troupes. The Division presents about 36,000 live field programmes on various aspects of national integration, communal harmony, domestic values and development activities. Special stress is laid on prohibition, eradication of untouchability, family planning, women empowerment, principles of democracy, fundamental rights, rural health schemes, small-scale industries, agricultural technologies, adult education, and different aspects of socio-economic change. But in India, State Governments have been the biggest users of Folk Theatre for propagation of developmental programmes among the masses. Similarly, the Directorate of Field Publicity and the Departments of Public Relations and Information in the states have employed these media extensively for the purpose of informing the people about services and programmes made available by the Government and make them persuaded to accept the modern ideas and change their attitudes and behaviours accordingly. The other Government Departments such as the Department of Science and Technology, the National Institute of Design and the Space Application Centre produced many programmes using folk theatres. Not only the government departments, but the Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) also use folk theatre medium for developmental purposes.

Before Independence, Folk Theatre was effective in arousing the conscience of the people against the colonial rule of the British. It became effective in many political and social campaigns launched by Mahatma Gandhi. After Independence the Union Government continues to utilize the Folk Theatre forms to convey messages and to generate awareness of the development programmes in the rural areas. In 1940s, Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), the cultural front of the Communist Party of India, successfully handled some of the popular regional theatre forms like the Jaatra of Bengal, Bhavai of Gujrat, Tamasha of Maharashtra and Burrakatha of Andhra Pradesh to increase social awareness and political education. Mukunda Das, Utpal Dutta used the medium of Jaatra for inculcating the spirit of patriotism and political awareness among the masses of Bengal. P.L.Deshpande, Shahir Sable used theatre form in Maharashtra as a technique of generating national identity and social awareness among the masses. Analysis of some of the Folk Theatre forms like Jaatra, Tamasha, Nautanki, and Puppet Theatre shows that its reach is very high and effective potential has been proved time and again by many instances of national importance.

Jaatra is one of the most well-structural crystallised forms of folk theatre in India. Jaatra successfully projects the social and the cultural needs of the people in the region and serves as a vehicle of political education. Historically, the theme of Jaatra was morality projecting war between good and evil and this characteristic is well-preserved as well as utilized for specific ends through the decades. Rabindranath Tagore, in his famous Swadeshi Samaj speech in July 1904 advocated the use of Jaatra in order to reach the rural masses. In the earlier 20th century a distinct form of Swadeshi jaatra or nationalist form of Jaatra came into being. Mahatma Gandhi's non-co-operation movement and the removal of untouchability were favourite themes of these Jaatras. The trend has continued in the post-independence period where different types of burning social problems have been presented through this form. Thus from a small beginning it became a powerful medium with the potential of communicating with the high and the low, the literate and the illiterate, the religious congregation and the popular masses alike. Even during recent elections in recent time Jaatra is one of the popular modes for campaigning.

Tamasha in Maharashtra originated from satirical verses, long winding story-telling and parody based on interacting dialogue. This is the rare folk theatre form of India in which the feminine

roles are played by the women. Lavni a kind of semi-erotic song along with the Wag is the basis of Tamasha. Various Tamasha plays were produced in the 1920's during the non-co-operation movement in India. Tamasha with its variation has become an important tool for spreading ideologies, government propaganda and presenting the inner void of urban intellectual.

Nautanki of Northern India originated from religious and social preaching and mythological bhakti plays. This socially-conscious form of theatre of North India is being reshaped for Western system of communication, adult education and family planning. Social themes, value systems are exhibited through this form.

Puppetry is another form of Traditional Folk Theatre in India. Since time immemorial, it has been a popular and appreciated form of entertainment in rural India. Government and NGOs used Puppet shows to promote the developmental processes. This theatre is integrated in the ritual observances and the social milieu of rural people in India. There are four different types of puppet theatre like string puppets, rod puppets, shadow puppets, glove puppets found in different parts of India. As a flexible form of traditional communication, it has been successfully used by Government departments, voluntary organisations for development communication, adult education, health and sanitation and family planning.

Conclusion

As *Kidd (1984)* observed: The plays grew out of the situations, experiences, and analysis of the actors who are themselves villagers...They create their own dramas out of their own collective analysis of their immediate situation and the deeper structures in which they are embedded. This is a genuine expression of the people (*p.117*). Many national and international seminars held on the role of Folk Theatre and Development suggested the integration of folk Theatre forms with Mass Media for quicker transmission of information as it was motivating the rural audience. For this purpose various recommendations are made. Like - Folk artists and craftsmen should be supported in maintaining original form and should be given recognition in the form of award; Resources should be provided to set up national level organisations for utilisation of Folk Media in Communication programmes; Special assistance programmes should be produced for

involving youth, women's organisations, rural co-operatives and other village level organisations.

Folk Theatre forms in India are traditional way of Communication and enriched cultural heritage. It constitutes a potential source for conveying messages for Social, Economic and Cultural Development which ultimately helps in overall National Development. Henceforth, it is our soul duty on the part of the Communication Researchers, Policy Makers, Government and the participants-the People to shoulder the responsibility of preserving and propagating the forms of Folk Theatre.

References

- 1) Bhagavat, D.N. (1958). *An Outline of Indian Folklore*. Bombay: Popular Book Depot.
- 2) Dissanayake, W. (1977). New wine in old bottle: Can folk media convey modern message? *Journal of Communication*, Spring.
- 3) Kidd, Ross (1984). The Performing Arts and Development in India: three case studies and a comparative analysis. In G. Wang and W. Dissanayake (eds). *Continuity and Change in Communication systems* (pp. 95-125). New Jersey: Ablax.
- 4) *Many Voices, One World* (1982). New Delhi: Oxford, IBH.
- 5) Melkote, S.R. (1991). *Communication for Development in the Third World: Theory and Practice*. New Delhi: Sage.
- 6) Mukhopadhyay, D. (1994). *Folk Arts and Social Communication*, New Delhi: Publications Division.
- 7) Parmar, S. (1975). *Traditional Folk Media*. New Delhi: Geka Books.