

## A Brief Introduction to Traditional Theatre of India

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### **Abstract**

*Our country has a rich cultural heritage of traditional Arts forms like music, dance, drama, sculpture, paintings, puppetry etc. to name a few. Indian theatre has a glorious Sanskrit dramatic tradition with great poetic qualities. In the art of the presentation of drama, theatre was in a developed form. After the Natya Shastra a number of scholarly books were written up to the 16th century on the theory and practice of drama. This unique theatrical tradition is one of the oldest in the world.*

*There is a great variety of forms and production styles in Folk theatre and every region of the country has its own distinctive feature. From the grand spectacular pageant Leela - plays - Ramleela and Rasleela - to the higher plays of farcial nature, there is an amazing variety of dramatic forms. From the processional style of production adopted in Leela plays to the arena style for social and higher play there is an equally large variety of production styles.*

*There are large numbers of plays prevalent in every region which are operatic in character. These seem to have evolved out of the ballad singing and dancing and are essentially secular with themes drawn from popular history, mythology, legends and topical events. These operatic play are rich in musical content. The Nautanki of Uttar Pradesh, the Khyal of Rajasthan, the Swang of Haryana and Punjab, the Maach of Madhya Pradesh, the Tamasha of Maharashtra, Bhavai of Gujarat, Veethi Natakam of Andhra Pradesh etc. all fall into this category.*

*Ankia Nat of Assam and Ramleela, Rasleela of Uttar Pradesh can be cited as illustrations. Yakshgana and Terukoothu are among other forms of traditional theatre of South with religious Association. Here I am going to give the brief introduction of the traditional theatrical forms of India through my paper.*

### **Keywords**

*Epics, Ramleela, Rasleela, Nautanki, Swang, Tamasha, Khyal, Maach, Bhavai, Veethi Natakam, Yakshgama, Terukoothu, Jatra.*

## **Introduction**

With the disintegration and decadence of the Sanskrit theatre during the 9th and 10th centuries we can begin our story of the traditional and folk theatre of India. We use both the words traditional and folk because many forms of theatre placed under this category are rich in literary content and also highly developed in the techniques of presentation and therefore all of these forms cannot be put under the category of folk.

The traditional theatre emerges from the 10<sup>th</sup> century after the disintegration of the Sanskrit theatre. It will however, not be correct to presume that the traditional theatre did not exist before this. As in other fields of art, in theatre also the two traditions namely the classical and the folk coexisted. This kind of coexistence of the arts of classical and folk traditionals and relationship of mutual exchange between them is a special feature of our artistic and cultural history.

It is interesting to observe that many traditional and folk forms prevalent in different regions of the country bear close resemblance to the uproopakas or the minor forms mentioned in Sanskrit dramatic tradition. This indicates that the folk forms of drama coexisted with the classical forms. The traditional theatre is linked with the Sanskrit theatre with several artistic bonds. Both the traditional themes are mainly from the two epic, the Ramayan and the Mahabharat and the Pauranik literature the traditional theatre also follows several conventions and practices of Sanskrit theatre.

Before discussing the traditional theatre in detail it is necessary to know that after the break up of classical theatrical tradition we find a colourful variety theatre of the medieval period it was a theatre of travelling actors presenting Farcial plays and skits around stock situations or dramatic recitation of epics and ballads of civic and royal pageantry and most interesting for the puppet theatre in many forms many elements of the medieval theatre survive in the traditional theatre.

There is a great variety of forms and production styles in folk theatre and every region of the country has its own distinctive features. From the grand spectacular Pageant Leela plays like Ramleela and Raslila to the lighter plays of Farcial nature, there is an amazing variety of dramatic forms. From the professional style of production adopted in the Leela plays the arena style for social and lighter plays there is an equally large variety of production styles.

There are large number of plays prevalent in every region which are operatic in character. These seem to have evolved out of the ballad singing and dancing and are essentially secular with themes drawn from popular history, mythology, legends and topical events these operating plays are rich in musical content and some of them also are equally rich in dance content. The Nautanki of Uttar Pradesh, the khayal of Rajasthan, the Swang

of Haryana and Punjab, the Maach of Madhya Pradesh, Tamasha of Mharashtra, Bhavai of Gujarat, Veethi Natakam of Andhra Pradesh etc. all fall into this category.

Apart from the secular forms there are other forms of traditional theatre which have distinct religious association and which were evolved during the medieval period in and around temples. Ankia Nat of Assam and the Ram Leela and Raasleela of Uttar Pradesh can be cited as illustrations. Yaksh gana and Terukoothu are among other forms of traditional theatre present in the south, which have religious association.

### **Themes of Traditional Theatre**

Folk plays of all regions and of all types generally draw their themes from the two Epics and the Purans, the heroic tale with religious over tones and high sense of drama make ideal story material for the folk drama with its emphasis on poetry, music and dance. The Rama and Krishna legends are so commonly used in all types of folk plays that they would account for more than half of the repertoire of folk theatre. Next to those drawn from the Epics and mythology one finds plays with popular romantic tales of all Nations. The historical episodes, as current among the people through the oral tradition, medieval legends, local and topical events of social life, deeds of sacrifice and tyranny are used as story material, there are also plays with a rich social thematic content.

### **Theatrical Forms of Different States of India**

After having given this very brief historical background of the traditional theatre. We will now discuss some of the major forms prevalent in the different regions in a little detail. Let us visualise the map of India and we can begin our theatrical tour from the **Eastern Zone**. In this region of the major part theatrical form is called **Jatra**. **Jatra** is prevalent in **West Bengal, Orissa, Assam and Manipur**. Structurally though, Jatra as prevalent in these different areas is the same, there are no distinct regional variations in the nature of music and styles of presentation. Jatra literally meaning procession is perhaps has the oldest form of traditional theatre. It was originally religious spectacle performed during temple festivals on important religious occasions beginning as a religious drama. Jatra, because of its dynamic characters has today become a prose drama with the themes of secular character. The acting in Jatra is powerful and impressive with broad and sweeping gestures and movements. Jatra has played an important role in the social and cultural life of people of these regions. It has also influenced and enriched the theatre of literary tradition.

Another important form of this region is the **Ankia Nat of Assam** performed on the special occasion in the Jatras of the Vaishnav monasteries. It was during the 16th century that the great social reformers Shankardev used theatre as an instrument for propagating Vaishnavism and in the process evolved this unique lyrical dramatic form. These plays deals with the Krishna and Ram themes. The theatre has often served as an

instrument for propagating ideas of social reform and change. During the medieval centuries the temple became the centre of all the arts, poetry, music dance, sculpture and painting. In many temples all over the country there are theatre all attached to the temple meant for dance and music recitals and for presenting theatrical shows. The temples based drama with religious association greatly cultivated the art of poetry, music and dance. Some minor forms like Videshiya and Chhau dramatic dances in Bihar can also be mentioned.

Uttar Pradesh has the three important dramatic forms, **Ram Leela**, **Rasleela** and **Nautanki**. Ramleela is a kind of religious drama perform during Dussehra celebrations in many forms and styles all over the northern part of the country. The entire story is presented as a social drama. The text used in Ram Leela plays is generally drawn from the Hindi Epic Ramcharitmanas of Tulsidas written some 500 years ago. Ramleela performances are given either as processional drama with scenes mounted on cards and moving from one place to another or they are presented as localised drama, as Opera dance drama or as a prose theatre. Mass audience attend these shows and also participate in many rituals and ceremonies connected with the performance. Rasleela plays present 80 episodes. Raslila is an operating ballet and all the dialogues are in songs and there are also brief dancing sequences presented by the characters, from the life of Krishna. The centre of Raslila shows is Mathura, Vrindavan some miles from Delhi and the main occasion of Rasleela performances is around Janmashtami, the birthday of Lord Krishna. There are a number of Raslila parties which keep travelling all over the country giving performances in the temple premises, gardens, rivers, ghats and courtyards. The text of the rasleela shows is based on padas composed by poets like Surdas and Nand Das. Rasleela text is intrinsically poetic. The songs are set to the classical ragas. Both these theatre forms, the raslila and Ram Leela are highly developed forms of the traditional theatre with a continuity of several centuries. Apart from the Leela plays the other major Folk form of Uttar Pradesh is Nautanki. The music in nautanki is essentially theatrical and drum is the soul of its music. Nautanki companies are travelling companies of performers usually performing during various fairs and festivals. Similar to Nautanki are the **Swang of Haryana** and **Punjab Khayal of Rajasthan** and **Maach of Madhya Pradesh**. These social operatic forms were evolved some 300 years ago with the dramatic singing of ballad and other forms of folk songs.

In Kashmir the most popular form is **Bhand-Jashna**. It is a social drama based on stock situations.

In **Gujarat** the traditional dramatic form is called **Bhavai**. These plays deals with various social situations and historical legends. In these plays prose dialogues and songs are inter-mixed in a dramatic manner along with short dance sequences.

In **Maharashtra** the most important theatrical form is known as **Tamasha**. There are a large number of Tamasha groups all over the Maharashtra which keep travelling and

giving performances. Tamasha plays are written by the writers who are often themselves Tamasha actors. The plays deal with social themes and satirise mal-adjustments with very powerful attacks on social evils and injustices. These are normally contemporary in approach and treatment of the social subjects. Tamasha like Bhavai has prose dialogues intermixed with songs. The **Lavani** songs typical of Tamasha are sung with great dramatic fervour. In Tamasha women of a particular community do the female roles and they are good singers and dancers. Normally in most of the traditional forms of different regions female roles are acted by male actors by tradition. But for the last decade or so actresses have joined the Nautanki also the Jatra theatre.

In **Andhra Pradesh** the operatic form **Veethi natakam** is a musical drama like Nautanki of Uttar Pradesh, Veethi Natakam literally means street theatre. Veethi Natakam plays deal with the episodes from the two epic, the Puranas medieval history and legends. The music in Veethi Natakam play is highly developed and has classical flavour. It is also very dramatic. In Andhra Pradesh there are number of traditional forms of theatre and dance drama which have greatly enriched the traditional theatre.

In Tamil Nadu the operatic traditional drama is called Terukoothu meaning street play, it also falls in the same category as Veethi Natakam and Nautanki etc. the deal with the episodes from the Mahabharat and also popular themes like Harishchandra, Prahlad. In fact Harish Chandra and Prahlad are the two themes which are performed all over the country in different regions in different forms of folk theatre.

**Mysore** is famous for its highly developed traditional theatre form **Yakshgama**. Yakshgama has great vitality and combines all the elements of traditional theatre. The Yakshgama plays deal with the episodes from the two epics and the song dialogues are set to classical ragas.

The main vocalist called Bhagawat, recites and sings the entire text of the play, the actors join the singing from time to time and also present important prose dialogue. The actors move in dance like movements according to their character and social status and in many situations they collectively present dance sequences with gusto. The drum in Yakshgama plays a very important role. The costume and the makeup are highly stylish and the actors wear huge fantastic headgears. Their faces are painted in different colours and the makeup is so complicated that it takes 2 to three hours for an actor to do his makeup. In presentation, as in some other forms a half curtain is used, lifted by the stagehands to manipulate the entry and the exit of actors.

In **Kerala** there are number of highly developed forms which have attained the stature of classical forms and therefore we can make only a passing references here. There is the classical dance drama **Kathakali** which has evolved a gesture language of great beauty. Also there is the **Kudiattam** the only surviving form of Sanskrit drama.

Along with this varied human theatre we also have a long and living tradition of **puppet theatre** in our country. According to scholars India is the home of puppetry and it is from here that this art along with epic themes, migrated to countries in the South-East Asian region. There are references to the art of puppetry in the literary works of early centuries B.C. Almost all types of puppets are found in India such as marionettes, red puppets, Glove puppets and leather puppets.

In puppet theatre just as in the traditional human theatre, most of the themes are drawn from the epics Puranas and medieval legends. There has always been a close contact an exchange of themes, music costumes and other elements between the puppet theatre and the traditional human theatre.

### **Aims & Objectives**

After this theoretical journey around the country showing the main forms of the traditional theatre, we will now summarise some of the main points made earlier. As we know that the traditional theatre is an important element of the traditional culture and that it has a very old living tradition. Some of the forms like Jatra of West Bengal and other areas of eastern region. Tamasha of Maharashtra and Yakshgama of Mysore are professionally organised. The traditional theatre draws its themes from the two great epics the Ramayan and the Mahabharat the Puranas and the history of legends. These forms can be placed under two broad categories: one, that temple based forms which were evolved in the temples and other the community based forms which are secular in nature and are practised by various communities. The temple based forms are rich in poetic content and their music and dance is also highly developed.

The traditional theatre is a composite art. Apart from the dramatic speech, it has music dance, an mime. In some of the forms music has dominant classical flavour. Dance though limited in range, is very dramatic and it gives the performance of choreographic character. Both music and dance are integral to the traditional theatre and serve multiple dramatic functions. The music specially the drum music, helps in acquainting the actors gestures and movements and heightens the tempo of the drama.

The traditional theatre is a non realistic theatre it follows many conventions of the classical and medieval theatre. As in the classical Sanskrit theatre so also in traditional theatre, there are elaborate preliminaries or Purva Ranga. There is a musical prelude an formal presentation of the characters of the play. Sutradhar and Vidushika the two stock characters of the Sanskrit theatre are also found in almost all the forms of the traditional theatre of different regions. In most of the forms there is a chorus or a group of singers and they sing two narrative text of the play and also accompany the actors in singing their dramatic dialogues. Since the traditional theatre is a non realistic theatre there is no stage setting. There is a practice of using a small curtain in many forms lifted by two stage hands

for managing the entire entries and the exists of all the characters. This is a very simple but effective device. In most of the forms the actors perform on a raised platform, audiences sitting on the three sides of the stage. In some forms they do not use even the platform and perform on the level ground.

### **Conclusion**

The traditional theatre is the actor's theatre and the actor is most important in this form. He is a skilled performer, well versed in all the arts of the theatre, mime, dance, recitation, music and acrobatic. He is all the time busy demonstrating his skill in various arts, switching over from one art to another with the greatest ease and facility. The audience are fully familiar with the stories and are interested in the arts of dance and music. Therefore their real interest is in the actor's performance, in the display of their acting and singing talent. In many forms colourful and elaborate makeup is done. The costumes in many forms like Yakshgama and Rasleela are also very elaborate and colourful. The theatre has a great charm and a festive gaiety.

There has been a renewed interest in the traditional theatre during the past three decades or so. Central Sangeet Natak Academy, the state academies and many other theatre organisations have taken an interest in the revival and encouragement of the traditional theatre.

They organise festivals surveys and seminars on the traditional theatre. The most exciting feature of the contemporary theatre is that it has developed now new links with the traditional theatre and many young playwrights and directors are utilising the elements and the techniques of the traditional theatre in their play and production. This has made the contemporary theatre very rich.

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