

Traditional Theatres Genres: Veedhinatakam (Street Theatre)

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Abstract

India is among the world's most populous nations inhabiting a vast and contrasting land, with nearly 850 million people bordered on the northeast by the Himalayan mountain range, on the west by the Great Thar Desert and with the southern half of the country a peninsula the Arabian Sea on one side and the Bay of Bengal on the other. Indian civilization has been shaped over time by a multitude of social, political and religious forces because of its strategic location. This in turn, has had a direct bearing on the shape of its theatre. Understanding Indian theatre, it becomes necessary to investigate each stage of its growth separately, beginning from Sanskrit theatre continuing through the forms rural theatre and presently with modern theatre.

In Andhra Pradesh, South India, '*VeedhiNatakam*' was the most popular form of traditional theatre. Artists moved freely among the local populace, wherein they found patronage. Stories performed in '*Veedhinatakam*' were from the epics and the pureness. Troupes of players performed throughout the state in the open air, usually in village squares or before temples, from November to May. The challenge of Radio, film and television for audiences was overwhelming. Foreign, mainly western, films were extremely popular. Major efforts to protect the Indian Theatre, include provision of local theatre subsidies, constructing national theatre complexes, and establishing training institutions for the next generation performers, should be part of the government development plans. The government, Social and artistic organizations should create awareness, by educating people for preserving and invigorating traditional indigenous theatre, reflecting their cultural legacy.

1. Introduction

Sanskrit theatre was the earliest form of the theatre in India, developing after Greek and Roman theatre and before theatre development in other parts of Asia [1].

The Indus Valley civilization [2300 BC] was the culture to initially inhabit areas of the north, along the Indus River basin. But advancement of city-states that were subsequently formed, resulted in an abrupt and inexplicable halt by 1750 BC, and eventually India was populated by Indo-Aryans, migrating from Persia. Over the centuries, the Aryans developed a conglomeration of rituals and religious customs, which became Hinduism. The Sanskrit language was the medium of communication among the priests and kings who were socially dominant. Myths developed, reinforcing their ideas and society grew and prospered to world's great and ancient civilization. Sanskrit theatre

flourished, reinforcing the beliefs of the civilization during this relative peaceful period, 1st to 10th centuries AD.

India also served as the cradle for other great religions- Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, Even the Christian faith and Zoroastrianism manifested and flourished in parts of India. Introduction of Islam to Indian subcontinent had a major bearing, among the social and political influences on the development of Indian theatre. After an initial conquest, Middle Eastern people introduced Islam in the 10th and 11th centuries [2] and integrated with the Indo-Aryans produced powerful empires, centered in Delhi, such as that of the Emperor Akbar. Owing to religious convictions, followers of Islam discouraged or forbade entirely, the performance of the theatre. Under the threat of mass conversion of Islam, with the decline of Buddhism as a popular religion and the loss of social and political power, a new movement of Hinduism was born, known as Vaisnavism [3].

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As a result of renewed faith in the values and ideas which were essentially indigenous to India, Vaisnavism nurtured the growth of theatre in village settings throughout the subcontinent. Theatre grew to service the needs of millions of people in a multitude of regional languages. The period of development and growth of rural theatre began about the 15th century and continued through to the 19th century [4].

In the 17th century, British came to India, although they did not dominate the country until 150 years later. They established their presence at strategic locations on the subcontinent. Through their effort modern urban society was born. The colonial period extended from the mid 19th to the mid 20th century bringing with it the centralization of power, industrialization and the development of mass. Systems of transportation, communication and concomitant staggering growth population. Development during the colonial period modern theatre continues in all the major regional languages, reflecting the ideas and concerns of Urban Indian audiences [5].

2. Street Theatre

As a form of communication 'Street theatre' is deeply rooted in Indian tradition. It has been used to propagate critical issues, social and political messages, creating awareness amongst the masses. Street theatre breaks formal barriers and appeals to the people directly. Performing in the most unexpected places – behind the vegetable market, at the bus stop or on the street of your office. Consists of a group of people, acting out a short skirt or play, for anyone who might wish to stop and watch. For them, apart from philanthropy and free entertainment, these street theatre 'activists' create an awareness, amongst all strata, of events for changing their social ailments.

In Street theatre, the audience had no intention to watch a play, and may not have the time. These limitations determine the parameters of the plays, which are of short duration. The message exchange is close, direct and intimate and, to be more effective, usually loud and larger than life. The script and direction significantly draw crowds from all walks of life, the plays are humorous. Songs based on popular catchy tunes are included to enhance appeal. The choreography of the play varies from script to script. The play must be as inexpensive and mobile as possible, since no stage props are used. As Badal Sircar the noted playwright sums up, "the essential tool of the trade is the human body. The potentiality of the human body, the

ability to throw one's voice so that 4000 people can be reached without the aid of a mike, must be explored".

Tracing the need for the development of this form of communication is sometimes referred to as the 'third theatre'. Badal Sircar analyzed the two existing forms- the sophisticated urban theatre borrowed from British rooted in western culture and values and the traditional rural theatre. "In spite of the tremendous popularity of folk theatre in rural areas, the ideas and values it dealt with remained backward, whereas the city theatre could propagate progressive ideas and values to a sophisticated audience which would be mentally stimulated at best but would not or could not act upon them". So a means of communication which would break barriers of stage and paying audience was needed [6].

It would be wrong to claim that street theatre is a new form- the content and style perhaps are- but snake charm-ers, bear, monkey dances and also short dance and acrobatic sequences at fairs by trained performers, are all forms of street theatre. But that is professional theatre where the primary aim is to get money from the show. Apart from propagating social reform, street theatre is also a political weapon used during elections in particular or to get across an ideology. It has also been successfully utilized as a vehicle for inducing a scientific outlook in some people by bringing to them news from the world of science.

Themes on Women play an important for street plays. In 1980- the famous Mathura rape case instigated a lot of shows on the need to make the rape laws more stringent. "Om Swaha" dealing with dowry demands, resulting in harassment and sometimes death was an effective street play. There have been several productions giving a short summary of a woman's life in India, stressing on the female's marital dependence, and her ability to lead a purposeful life all by herself.

Street theatre is also used as a means to encourage literacy amongst villagers. Several plays expose the mechanism of black marketing and hoarding. Some talk of the use of political power for pressurizing people. Others highlight caste conflicts or ideas about hygiene and health. One effective play on environment projected a beautiful relationship of trust and friendship between a little boy and a tree. But do these plays bring about a change? According to Feisal Alkazi who teaches street theatre at the Jamia Millia University in Delhi, "If the communication has been worthwhile then there must be some tangible impact. What is important is that the plays make the people think. The play is seen by many people of different age groups

who then question and discuss the contents of the play. This evocation of questioning is by itself an impact". Alkazi recalled an interesting experience he had while travelling by bus, surprised to hear a passenger singing the words from his street play, based on a popular film tune. This indicated "At an unconscious level at least the message had got across". He claims most street theatre groups have had the audience coming up to them for discussion on the witnessed play.

For BadalSircar and his group the reward for their tireless efforts came in a different way. While touring the villages in Bengal, recalls a night performance for about three hours. During a continuous drizzle interspersed with heavy showers, when the enraptured 3000 audience sat through; when heavy showers came down, organizers called it a day and begged leave of the audience. That they were interested enough to sit through the rain meant that the message was getting across.

Since the voluntary organizations carry out work in the villages and need to forcefully communicate with the people, BadalSircar and his troupe organize workshops to teach them the mechanics of street theatre.

When talking about street theatre it is mandatory to talk about SafdarHashmi. Originally a stage actor, he moved on to street theatre adopting it as a cause, bringing about a social and political awareness. His group was attacked indicating the message of performance obviously hit home with the audience. He succumbed to his injuries a day later.

HabibTanvir and UtpalDutt used street theatre as a political catalyst in the 40s and 50s, revived in the 1970s and now the movement has spread all over the country. There are about 50 groups in the country, mainly in cities and its suburbs. Street theatre actors are mainly teachers and students committed to social change. Returns in terms of finances or fame are nil. The time that this form of theatre demands is considerable. All evenings and weekends are spent rehearsing or performing. In fact, BadalSircar was not able to attend the reception of his son's wedding because he had an important rehearsal to attend and "my son understood that" he explains. "We become social outcastes, but for us it is an addiction." In the dry season- November to April- shows are performed at a hectic pace. After a whole day's work this rehearsal schedule demands an ardent devotion to the cause.

The preparation for the play is a joint effort. Each member has to agree completely on the theme for a production to be accepted. The script is usually written jointly as the

play progresses, while different groups have varying aims. The Jana NatyaManch in Delhi for example performs plays on current topics. This demands that the play be produced as soon as possible to be relevant. BadalSircar's group however adopted themes having an appeal over longer period, as it takes six months to a year to prepare a play. A 'dholak' or choral song is used to attract people and once large enough crowds have gathered the play is performed in a circular area with the audience all around. The chorus sings or speaks out the script. Sometimes one person narrates while the actors mime. No make-up is used unless mime is the medium. When the face is painted white and the eyes an exaggerated black to highlight expressions. If the audience is very large and one person alone has to speak, a mike is used. There are no separate costumes for the actors. They might all wear a black robe but that depends on the theme. In this type of theatre there is not much scope for fine acting. The movements have to be exaggerated. Street theatre as a channel of communication is deeply rooted in Indian society. The modern form is different only in the themes enacted. The street theatre groups analyze the society as it exists, visualize its future, and then attempt to put the vision across.

3. Andhra Pradesh VeedhiNatakam

VeedhiNatakam is the most popular folk theatre form of Andhra Pradesh. It is called 'Bayalata' in the Rayalseema area and called VeedhiBhagavatham throughout Andhra. These were presented during the festivals of and in praise of 'Bhagavan', people who presented them were called 'Bhagatha' and performances as 'Bhagavathams'⁷. Originally the text Bhagavatham decided the name of the performance. Certain castes specialized in such performances-DasariBhagavatham and YanadiBhagavatham, MelatturBhagavatham, Toorpu Bhagavatham presented in the eastern Andhra are some of the different styles.

VeedhiNatakam-Veedhi in Telugu means street; an open place. So VeedhiNatakam is any dramatic performance presented in a street. When the temple procession moved out into the open places, they had to cater to larger number of devotees, especially on festival occasions. They performed on raised platforms facing the temples and facing the Lord's image called as the UstavaVigraha. Since the plays on Bhagavan were performed in an open place they were called VeedhiNatakam; also as VeedhiBhagavathams, and since they were performed by Bhagathas, who were devotees of Bhagwan.

Styles- In the long history of Telugu theatrical tradition, three different presentational forms are called by the same name 'VeedhiNatakam'. Firstly we have 'Veedhi', one of the ten types of drama (Dasarupaka) its theme is romance; and it is a narrative- descriptive medium through which a single man narrates his experiences to another character. Similarly the modern street play which is propagandist in its intent and often politico-satirical in its tone is not different in many ways from the traditional VeedhiNatakam, except in place of performance, the Veedhi (street). Origin VeedhiNatakam had its origin in the late 16th century and early 17th century, when the Bhakti cult especially the Krishna Cult was in ascendance in Andhra. It improved upon the earlier performing forms- the Yakshaganam and the Kalapam. Though Yakshaganam was originally a single performer's musical rendering of a story, later it introduced more number of characters.

But all through its four centuries of active existence, Yakshaganam was more narrative-descriptive than dramatic. When the same medium had to go into open out of the precincts of temples, it became more virile and theatrical and the form was called 'VeedhiNatakam'. That is to say that when Yakshaganam came into the open and when open air performances demanded a better theatre quality the VeedhiNatakams had their beginnings. Street theatre has been playing a significant role in spreading awareness, over the years.

After the city, now it is moving towards jails to spread awareness on issues ranging from sex education to social issues like corruption and terrorist attacks. City based theatre groups have been coming forward to spread awareness among prisoners by street plays. The Central Board

of Secondary Education (CBSE) has introduced Theatre Studies as in elective subject in Class XI from the current academic session. The subject is being introduced "as a pilot course on first-come-first-serve basis". "Theatre is one of the strongest mediums of expression...it is as old as mankind and has manifested itself in countless forms all over the world," says the letter from the board to school principals.

The challenge of Radio, film and television for audiences is daunting. Foreign, mainly western, films are extremely popular. Major efforts to provide local theatre subsidies, to build national theatre complexes, and to establish training institutions to assure transmission to the next generation of performers are to be a part of the government development plans to protect the Indian Theatre. The government as well as Social and artistic organizations should create awareness and educate the people in preserving invigorate traditional, indigenous theatre forms that reflect their cultural legacy.

4. References

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