

Folk Theatre Techniques: Communication of Folk Life and Culture

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Abstract: The present paper attempts to analyses folk theatre techniques of performance as a strong way of communication of the folk culture and life with special reference to *Pandvani*. *Pandvani*, which is a monodrama, is popular in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh and deals with tribal life and culture since ancient times. Theatrical devices, techniques including dialogue and the entire spectacle focus on effective communication in which the thematic content is tribal culture and life. 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 has roots in native culture and is embedded in local identity and social values. Besides providing mass entertainment, it helps Indian society as indigenous tool of interpersonal, inter-group and inter-village communication for ages. When we watch folk performances, we acquire a familiarity with Folk Media, the particular people, and their culture. For instance, when we watch *Pandvani*, the folk theatre of Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, we come to know more about the tribal heroism, the *Gond* tribes, and their optimistic approach to life. Folk theatre, like all other folk media, is highly spontaneous and participative. It is the traditional theatre — the dance-drama, the operatic ballads and folk plays which continue to entertain audiences of seven hundred thousand villages of India.

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INTRODUCTION

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. Vasudha Dalmia says,

Folk theatre was now being drained as a source of vitality for the urban stage. These plays fuse folk/ traditional mythological and ritual material and forms with contemporary language in a conscious attempt to draw on traditional dynamics in contemporary context; the issues they address are highly relevant in contemporary India, but the narrative derives from traditional tales and epics and the performance include folk modes e.g. song, dance and comic repartee (228).

The life of Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh people is inspired by folklore. All genres of folklore are created in their breath. In these genres, whether it is folk song, folk dance, folk tale, folk theatre,

and folklore, all these folk colours emerge from the village *chaupal* and cross the boundaries of city, metropolis, province, are hoisting the flag of their development and fame. Out of these, the folklore is sometimes like the rhythm of a song sung on the parapet of a high mountain, sometimes like the beat and rhythm emanating from the gurgling of rivers and sometimes like the melodious sound of a bamboo flute, without pen and ink, the story is realized with affinity in the public mind. Does it? It is not certain when the tradition of writing and singing the saga started, but it can be said with certainty that the saga remained safe in the throat from the beginning. N. K. Das explains Chhattisgarh tribal community in his article *Adivasi Theatre Pandvani and Persona of Bhima in Folklore of Chhattisgarh Gondwana Region* "In Chhattisgarh, tribal communities such as *Bhima*, *Pando* and *Korwa*, tracing their lineages from *Bhima*, *Pandava* and *Kaurava* respectively live side by side. The *Bhimas* spread in the Mandala-Chhattisgarh region and regard *Bhima* as their progenitor. The *Bhima*, a small sub-tribal group of the Gonds, like the Pradhan's, the Gond-Bards, are musicians and dancers" (80).

Due to its natural beauty and abundant natural resources, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh remain a centre of attraction for the residents of other provinces. In this holy land, Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and Sikhs live together in mutual brotherhood and harmonious environment. People of all religions and sects celebrate festivals like *Hariyali*, *Pola*, *Nagpanchami*, *Holi*, *Diwali*, *Dussehra*, *Eid*, *Christmas* etc. in a peaceful manner with enthusiasm and excitement. These people came to Chhattisgarh, the workplace of people from various provinces like Punjab, Haryana and Bihar, in connection with business and got mixed with the soil here. Chhattisgarh in its cultural identity is the home of coordination, harmony and good values.

Situated in central India, the vast Gondwana (Chhattisgarh-Dakhin Kosal-Bastar – Dandakaranya) region boasts of a collective Adivasi legacy and its shared Mahabharata heritage. Chhattisgarh has been derived from the name 'Chedisgarh', the then political seat of the Chedis. Chhattisgarh, where Gond chiefs formed a good number of chieftaincies, was part of Gondwana [Garha Katanga]. The 'Gondwana culture region', spreads today in states of Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and partly in Andhra and Maharashtra. The existence of *DakhinKosala*, inclusive of Chhattisgarh and western Odisha, can be traced back to fourth century AD. In the Hindu epics, *DakhinKosal* is described as a part of "Dandakaranya". The entire contiguous region of Odisha and Bastar today form Dandakaranya, but this nomenclature is not in consistency with historical Dandakaranya mentioned in Hindu epics (Das 80).

Folk saga is the oldest genre in Chhattisgarhi folklore and within it, mythological folk saga and *Pandvani* within it has been presented with its uniqueness from the local stage to the foreign stage with its originality. This is the genre in which the trinity of drama, dance and dialogue flows - through which justice and truth are established in the hearts of the public with great ease and simplicity. It has the ability to be expressed from a very simple style to a special style and like a Mugdha heroine, she also knows the secret of making the audience, listener and social audience one's own. Chhattisgarhi community shares love and harmony among themselves like a family through folk deity, *Navadharamayan*, *Mandai fair*, *Pandvani* and *Panthi*.

The Folk theatre has roots in native culture and 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. When we watch folk theatre, we acquire a familiarity with Folk Media, the particular people, their culture. For instance, when we watch *Pandvani*, the folk theatre of Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, we come to know more about Tribal heroism, the Gond

Tribes, their optimistic approach to life. Folk theatre, like all other folk media, is highly spontaneous and participative. It is the traditional theatre — the dance-drama, the operatic ballads and folk plays which continue to entertain audiences of seven hundred thousand villages of India. The theatre of roots movements was “the first conscious effort to produce a body of work that synthesized modern European theatre and traditional Indian performance- creating a new, hybrid theatrical form” (Mee 5).

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. 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 *Jatra* of Bengal, *Tamasha* of Maharashtra and the *Bhavai* of Gujarat stress 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, *Pavai 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.

Folk theatre helps us to understand the culture of the region. This can be best depicted with the help of the example of folk theatre form *Pandvani* (lit.: Songs and Stories of the Pandavas) is a folk singing style involving narration of tales from the ancient Indian epic Mahabharata. The singing also involves musical accompaniment. This form of folk theatre is popular in the central Indian state of Chhattisgarh and in the neighboring areas of Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh. Jhaduram Dewangan and Teejan Bai are the most renowned singers of this style. Among contemporary artists, Ritu Verma is popular along with others such as Shantibai Chelak and Usha Barle. *Pandvani*, literally means stories or songs of the Pandavas, the legendary brothers of Mahabharat, and involves the lead singer, enacting and singing an episode (called prasang) from the epic with an ektara or a tambura (stringed musical instrument), decorated with small bells and peacock feathers in one hand and sometimes *kartal* (a pair of cymbals) on another. Influences of *Pandvani* can be clearly seen in the plays of Habib Tanvir, who used folk singers of Chhattisgarh in his plays, creating a free-style story narration format, typical of *Pandvani*.

Pandvani is one of the famous folk theatres of Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. It is a unique folk theatre in India. As in other folk theatres, there are a number of characters, stage settings, heavy makeup, different costumes, and multiple dialogues are there but in *Pandvani* it is a kind of monologue, there is one main character, or we can say the ‘narrator’ who narrates the story of Mahabharat. *Pandvani* as the name indicates “*Pandvaki Vani*” is a story of the five Pandavas brothers. The reciters of *Pandvani* narrate the story of Mahabharat. There is total eighteen episodes/ chapters (parva) in Mahabharat. *Pandvani* artists are using the Mahabharat written by Sabal Singh Chauhan which was written in *doha* and *chaupai* (couplet and quatrain). Mahabharat is also known as *Panchama Veda*.

Mahabharat is a book of culture and heavy instructions to lead a healthy life based on Dharma. It highlights the concept of nation-states which existed more than 5000 years ago. There was a huge propaganda created through media and corrupt Gurus in India, that Mahabharat should not be kept in homes because it creates fights in the family. But Bhagavad Gita is a part of *Mahabharat* which is directly the words of Bhagavan Krishna. It has been scientifically and traditionally proved to be beneficial to the entire humanity. If such an important work is part of *Mahabharat*, then how come the

rest of *Mahabharat* be ignored? Why such little is known about the characters of Pandavas? *Mahabharat* gives us spiritual consciousness, the highest standards of culture and a sense of responsibility that automatically promotes happiness & virtues in human society. Every character in *Mahabharat* represents a particular mindset in the human race today. Each character in *Mahabharat* is a historical personality and through their life they show how dharma can be practiced in every situation of a human experience. *Mahabharat* sets a golden standard of human interaction and virtues which every human in the world must strive to attain.

During my field visit to village of Durg district, gathered the information in personal interview with some famous *Pandvani* artists that, earlier *Pandvani* is a monodrama it not meant for stages, it is sung at village level, generally people sing like a song, while rendering from one place to another. The song they sing was *doha* and *chuapai* of *Mahabharat*, which they narrate like a story. The first singer of *Pandvani* was Narayan Lal Verma and his nephew plays the role of Ragi. Ragi is another character who supports the main singer or narrator of *Pandvani*. He gives reply in the middle and ask questions also in short forms like *Hao, Ha, Kaise, Accha*. This folk theatre is like a talk between the two character one is the storyteller and second one is *Ragi*.

Pandvani is an artist performance. It is a sort of monologue or mono play, which has been developed from *Kathavachan* (storytelling). "A team of *Pandvani* performers is composed of one main narrator-singer, one or two co-singers, who also play on musical instruments like table and harmonium" (Varadpande 89). The role of *Ragi* (co-singer) plays a significant role which sits with the musical team. He is like a *sutradhar* who supports the leading performer by nodding and speaking 'hun', 'hao', 'haho', which means (yes). The reciter of *Pandvani* uses his string instrument *tambura* as a prop and, with appropriate postures, gestures, and facial expressions, suggests a variety of actions like riding on a chariot, holding a bow and arrow, fighting, etc. Apart from this "there are four to six music accompanists. The musical instruments used in *Pandvani* are harmonium, table, cymbals, banjo" (Mahawar 32) were used in the main performance.

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.

The folk is both a static and a dynamic entity. Folk theatre is shown to be continuously evolving yet retaining a part of its original features. Folk, in essence, deals with the choices and tastes of the masses, and also with the demands of the time, space and the audience that it responds to. Therefore, the constructs of the folk evolve over time to appeal to and include most of the people.

Historically, folk art has preceded classical literature and art. Cave drawings and primitive hunt mimes can be seen as precursors of painting and dancing. Just as Greek tragedy and comedy had their origin in Classical Indian theatre and dance likewise developed from pageants, memes, and old rituals, as did fertility rites and Dionysus worship. The formal history of Indian folk drama may date back to five or six hundred years, but it has its roots before the classical Sanskrit drama.

Hence, it is not surprising that the folk theatre as it is, stands indebted to many of the conventions of classical drama. "The *Sutradhara* (Stage manager) of Sanskrit drama appears in vernacular folk forms such as the *Ranga*, the *Bhagavatha*, the *Vyas*, or the *Swami*" (Gargi 4). According to Balwant Gargi,

The purvaranga (stage preliminaries) is an essential feature of both Sanskrit and folk theatre.

The musicians take their positions on the stage, tune their instruments, and play a melody; the dancers perform a few dance numbers; the cast sings a *mangalacharana* (a vernacular form of the classical invocation). Some of the folk theatres also use a benediction at the end of the play. They employ music, dance, stylization, verse dialogue, exaggerated make-up, and masks with the same lavishness as the classical drama. Scenes melt into one another. The action continues despite changes of locale and scene. Asides, soliloquies, and monologues abound (5).

In India, folk theatre mirrors the variety and unity of its folk life. More than 130 crore people who inhabit it from Kashmir to Kanyakumari, speak 22 official languages, more than 720 dialects, and have important religions and numerous castes and creeds. Their physiological features, eating habits, social customs, rituals, religious beliefs, and dressing sense differ from region to region but people are bound by a common impulse embedded in their philosophy, music, arts and tradition, the folk theatre captures this panorama of life and presents the unity in diversity of India. It represents the people in their natural environs with all their contradictions and multifarious involvements, be they social, cultural or political.

M.L. Varadpande explains in his book *History of Indian Theatre* that Folk Theatres are broadly divided into two main parts:

Religious and Secular. The religion-mythology oriented forms emerged as a result of the Bhakti movement in medieval India. Interestingly enough many saints such as Mahapurusha Shankaradeva, ChitanyaMahaprabhu, Tulasidas, Swami Haridas, Siddhendra Yogi, Tirtha Narayan Yati and other took great interest in dramatic activity and founded many dramatic traditions, taking elements from older tradition. The secular folk theatre form, which belonged to the Swang tradition, took upon itself the task of the folk entertainment and there emerged a theatre of entertainment. The two forms functioned together influencing each other (4).

Every type of folk theatre reveals a lot of information about a particular community's dialect, music, dance, attire, mannerisms, proverbs, wit, and traditional knowledge. It is full of chivalric tales, medieval romances, mythological heroes, and societal mores, beliefs, and legends. Marvin Carlson said in *Places of Performance*, "places of performance generate social and cultural meanings of their own which in turn help to structure the meaning of the entire theatrical experience" (Carlson 2). If someone wants to interact with India's vibrant diversity and cohesiveness, one can just see the performances of the different folk theatres in the country, perhaps no historical or sociological documents can express the real India as construed through these performative arts scattered in all parts of the nation. Mulk Raj Anand said in his book *The Indian Theatre* "There can be no denying that there is a great positive factor in our favour: our people are still possessed by an inordinate love of drama and often display the natural histrionic talent of a high order" (15). Folk Theatres are still live, and they are the oldest form of entertainment on wide world.

Theatre techniques or conventions are the devices which are employed by the playwright in the play text (work) and in its representation on the stage before the live audience to make both (i.e. text and performance) more effective to attain the desired objectives. It combined "specific traditional Indian performance practices with Western theatrical conventions to create modern plays for urban audiences" (Mee 26). Apart from Classical and Modern theatre techniques, folk theatre conventions still in existence in different parts of India enjoy popularity: *Ramlila*, *Raslila*, and *Nautanki* of North

India, *Tamasha* of Maharashtra, *Jatra* of Bengal, *Akai-naat* of Assam, *Yakshagana* of Karnataka, *Teerukoothu* of Tamil Nadu. We can conclude that the traditional folk theatrical forms have kept alive the diversities and the specificities of India's socio-cultural life. These forms have still a lot to offer to the Indian theatre in terms of the methods, conventions and the traditions followed.

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