

The Context of *Jatrapala* as a form of Folk Theatre of West Bengal: An Analytical Approach

Silpi Maitra

Assistant Professor of English
Falakata College, Alipurduar, West Bengal.
Research Scholar,
Department of Cultural and Creative Studies,
North-Eastern Hill University,
Shillong, Meghalaya.

Abstract

India is a multilingual country; the multi-diverse aspects of the population give rise to a variety of folk institutions including folk theatres. Folk media is a popular form of entertainment that reflects the popular customs, traditions, and beliefs of a particular region. Folk media includes different folk performing arts which plays a vital role in motivating the rural masses. Theatre as a form of performance is conceptualized as a discipline in colleges and universities which becomes a platform for communication. The definition of 'Art', as a creative manifesto is consequential to the theories that are related to these concepts. One of the interesting varieties of folk performing arts is folk drama or folk theatres that are very popular in most of the Indian states. These regional artistic activities have tried to entertain the rural spectators for a very long time. If we take into an all-Indian perspective, these folk dramas are staged in different parts of the country. These days it is found that even foreign spectators are appealed to this form of local performance. These folk performing arts are a kind of medium through which the Indian culture and tradition are successfully represented. A concise reading has been attempted on the present status of Jatrapala and how it becomes a manifestation of the folk culture of West Bengal is analysed concerning the presiding scenario. Jatrapala provides a huge inter-textual proportion as it is not only examined or evaluated from a theatrical point of view but also from a folkloric aspect. The Jatrapala tradition of West Bengal has been classified as one of the engrossing formats of performance which has a rich lineage and has its roots in the Bhakti Movement. The performance structure has been judged through different levels of semantics which have led to an insightful study where along with the origins and development of Jatrapala, the deconstructed form as a part of the new modern Avant-Garde movement will also be shown in this paper. These days with the emergence of Glocalisation, Jatrapala has been modified as an experimental art form. Choosing a folk theatre as the basic area of study envisages not only an innovative format of scholarly rendition but it leads to every form of future study.

Key terms: Theatre, Folk media, Jatrapala and Performance and Performing Art.

Introduction:

India is a multilingual country; the multi-diverse aspects of the population give rise to a variety of folk institutions including folk theatres. Folk media is a popular form of entertainment that reflects the popular customs, traditions, and beliefs of a particular region. Folk media includes different folk performing arts which plays a vital role in motivating the rural masses. Folkloristicsⁱ as a discipline reflects the ideological, political and nationalistic aspects of people. The folk media not only convinces the rural masses but also positively influences their opinions and attitudes. Indian society which has different varieties of ethnic groups and clans has deep connections and associations with the folk culture.

One of the essential folkloristic phenomena is considered to be an act of communication. The employment of vocal, verbal, visual and musical folk art forms work as a form of interaction and communication on the part of performers and audience. This paper while analysing the theoretical speculations glances through the comprehensive folk theatrical traditions of India and shows how it is incorporated into the socio-cultural aspects of rural life. It includes elements of poetry, music, dance, drama, and mime etc. which is a reflection of people's beliefs and ideas. The theatre became a rising phenomenon in India with the progress of the 2nd century. It was during this time that the great Indian dramatic text *Natyashastra* was produced and was equated with Aristotle's *Poetics*ⁱⁱ in the West. *Natyashastra*ⁱⁱⁱ, covered certain aspects including 'dramatic structure', 'acting', 'costuming, staging and theatre architecture' (Carlson 2014: 6).

With the definition of theatre, comes the concept of life which is integrally related to it. Although the contemporary theatrical world is oblivious to the traditional Indian values and culture, it is the emergence of the two dramatic treatises on dramaturgy that presents different dramatic styles and aesthetic forms. The two dramatic texts include *Natyashastra* by Bharat Muni and *Abhinavabharati*^{iv} by Abhinavaguptapada. The origin of the 'drama' and 'Natya' has been clearly defined by Bharata in his first theoretical chapter of *Natyashastra*. It is assumed that the Hindu God *Brahma* created the 'Natya Veda by incorporating dramatic elements from four existing *Vedas*^v' (Maharishi 2000: 15). With the theatrical activities, came the concept of Performance Studies. The Performance Studies in the early 1970s have brought revolutionary ideas when analysed based on theatre. Interestingly, the concept of performance applied also to the 'body art', 'living art' and to 'performance art as well' (Carlson 2014: 75). It must be taken into due consideration that the 'performance', had an inextricable relationship with theatre from time immemorial. Although the term 'performance' has a connection with the Middle Ages, yet it was a renowned term in the Elizabethan Age. During the period of Shakespeare, this term was closely associated with the presentation of theatrical and musical works. The noun 'performance'^{vi} was said to be first used in 1709 by Richard Steele in an early issue of his journal *The Tatler* (Carlson 1996: 23).

Theatre as a form of performance is conceptualised as a discipline in colleges and universities which becomes a platform for communication. The definition of 'Art', as a creative manifesto is consequential to the theories that are related to these concepts. Art is considered to be 'a branch of creative activities which are concerned with the imitative and imaginative skills' (Eliot 2015: 24). As a branch of learning, art includes painting, music, writing, dance and other activities which can be a form of visual representation. Theatre as a visual manifestation is a collaboration between the artists and the audience through the medium of communication. In this particular framework, communication is not simply a procedure by which messages are derived but it also includes the constructive ideas which are presented through creativity and skills. A detailed discussion of these ideas and notions are presented along with a comprehensive approach with multi-dimensional perspectives. The multi-dimensional perspectives have compartmentalized theatre, performance, and communication and have analyzed it through the lens of different theories. The inter-relationship of the concepts will also depend on whether theatre as an artistic platform can communicate properly to the spectators or not. Apart from formulating the categories or parts of the theatre, the study also highlights the association of theatre with drama and the relatable issues associated with it.

Since time immemorial, the rich histories of theatre and drama have focussed on the context of presence. It is considered to be a collaborative product of actors, playwrights, designers, directors, and spectators with which the theatre achieves its uniqueness by living in the moment. The astounding quality of the theatre is achieved by the unique relationship between the audience-stage encounters. Unlike other forms of performing arts, theatre manifests imaginative content that is generally yearned for. One basic characteristic feature of the theatre is that it puts the world into live motion in real-time which is not framed. In a theatre, fiction is being represented in front of the eyes of the spectators where the actors through action, speech, gesticulations, music, and dance present a panorama of dramatic sequences. Through the lens of performance, the day to day events is fictionalised which take up the form of theatre. The actors who become the epitome of presentation makes the spectators aware of different layers of performance which includes recognition, imitation and the intensity of life woven passionately. The theatre is one of the artistic endeavours that can mesmerize the audience by its illusory appeal because, with the end of each performance, the presence is lost forever.

One of the interesting varieties of folk performing arts is folk drama or folk theatres that are very popular in most of the Indian states. These regional artistic activities have tried to entertain the rural spectators for a very long time. If we take into an all-Indian perspective, these folk dramas are staged in different parts of the country. These days it is found that even foreign spectators are appealed to this form of local performance. These folk performing arts are a kind of medium through which the Indian culture and tradition are

successfully represented. The immense varieties of dramatic forms are more like a spontaneous expression of folklife or a local device to entertain the rural masses (Mathur 1964: 26). In India, the lineage of drama can be traced back to more than 2000 years ago. Scholars have tried to trace the development of drama in Sanskrit right from the Vedic Age. A folkloric version of the performing arts represents the relationship between the individual and society. One aspect of folklore is that society with its wide variety of languages, worldviews, religions, dress codes, and food habits come under the domain of culture. Eminent critic Mark J. Smith has claimed that “culture is a suturing concept: it indicates a space within which competing visions of the role of human existence can be played out, all of which seek to fix the meaning of culture (Smith 2001: 123). The pertinent question that can be asked is “where does the word folklore (a word meant to denote culture of the folk) stand if culture is taken to represent peoples’ way of life in its entirety? What is the connotation of the term ‘folklore’? Or how is it to be distinguished from culture?” (Chakraborti 2010: 52).

The overwhelming aspects of folk performing arts in India add different hues of culture which helps the people to understand their rich heritage. The folk performing arts have several facets that have continued from a long tradition of performances. Scholars across India are trying to link the past and present phenomenon of performances which are rendering different dimensions of study. Art is an intrinsic part of our lives which not only ornate our existence but also exhilarates our soul. Theatre or drama is considered to be a living tradition that has its continuity from time immemorial. Drama or theatre in India becomes a compendium of poetry, dialogue, music, dance, and acting. The different regional theatres of India generate fellow-feeling among the communities which becomes a platform for their established ethos, emotions and sentiments. The snobbish section of India tends to disregard the language of the ordinary folk which is devoid of classical or grammatical aspects. But the creative aspect of these rural folks cannot be ignored. Their kind of creativity and performance is at times spontaneous. Their expressions, rhythms, and the intensity of their emotions are naturally reflected in these performing arts. These regional folk forms are classical renditions that are absent in the performances of the city. The most exquisite quality of the folk theatres is their simplicity. In these folk theatres, an intricate relationship can be formed between the performers and the spectators.

One of the major functions of folk theatre is to propagate critical, social, political and cultural issues to the people to create general awareness. Sometimes it is believed that popular music, locality, and identity have somewhat underlined the essentialist notions of locality and nationhood. Even though their positions have been marginalized, the traditional heritage of Tribal/Folk Arts and Culture has given rise to their creative magnificence. The rich cultural heritage of India gives immense evidence of a rich folk theatrical tradition. In the history of folk theatre, some of the developed forms of theatre are *Jatra* of Bengal, *Nautanki* of UP, Punjab, and Rajasthan, *Tamasha* of Maharashtra, *Ramlila* and *Raaslila* of UP, *Yakshagana* of Mysore and *Chau* of Bihar. *Mithila* in Bihar, *Kamrup Kamta* of Assam

and *Prahallad Natak* of Orissa are also very popular in their region. The stage construction, production pattern, notes on costumes and the modes of handling dialogues and music are the distinguishing features of every folk theatre mentioned above.

One important aspect of theatre is communication. Earlier in tribal societies, rituals became a major form of communication. Critics claim that these rituals form the earliest aspects of drama and theatre. These rituals of pre-modern days contained music, dance, performance, imitation etc. Hatlen, in one of his foundational books on the Theatre, claims that 'But not all rituals become a drama. Drama, cannot begin without the disciplined construction of an orderly sequence of words and actions representing a real or imaginary experience to which has been added impersonation' (Hatlen 1987: 55). In any form of dramatic performance, actors become involved with the drama. The dramatic performance often becomes a part of social activity. It is a form of collaborative work where the spectators, actors and the playwright each play a vital role. Apart from performance, the act of reception becomes very significant. As any form of drama is a communion between the performers and the receptors. The spectators at times are emotionally involved with any form of performance which makes their level of communication more effective (Jhanji 1984: 32).

The context of *Jatrapala*: A Study on Theatrical Communication

The present status of *Jatrapala* might be improved if it becomes more technology-oriented. The technical aspects of theatrical performances are missing whenever these rural forms are taken into account. As a traditional theatre of West Bengal, it is on the verge of extinction as the spectators are losing their interest in the thematic presentations. The gripping effects of *Jatrapala* on the minds of people are missing because the diverse themes of *Jatrapala* are absent. Most of the time, the actors who entertain the audience are uneducated or insufficiently trained. With the emergence of technology and the education system, most of the rural folks are finding it difficult to relate to such performances. To save the near extinction of these folk forms, the actors must be trained and should have some knowledge of theatre studies and performance. Another crucial problem for the performers is that they come from the lower section of the society and most of them reside below the poverty level. Theatre groups that are presided over by the Arts and Culture Department of the Government of India must take some sort of initiative. Some form of financial support needs to be provided to those people who have struggled through generations to save this traditional theatre of West Bengal.

Proper channelization of social issues through the medium of *Jatrapala* will make it a proper form of entertainment. The mere repetition of earlier themes can have a derogatory effect on the mindsets of the people. The propagation of social evils, taboos, and superstition that takes place with the repetition of earlier themes in *Jatrapalas* hampers the mental growth of the audience. With the progress of time, these social issues which have become a

dark chapter of history need to be eradicated. The religious stories and folktales must be restructured and reframed in such a manner that they can cater to the taste of the modern audience. Though the much-debated topic 'Catharsis', still can be related to any form of performing arts. Even after facing severe criticism, *catharsis* (purgation of emotions) forms an important part of every form of theatrical performance. The intimate relationship between the performer and the spectator is formed which shows that the performance exerts enormous influence on the minds of the people in general. Therefore proper selections of folk themes are needed as it is related to the upliftment of the people.

Conclusion:

One important dimension to the question of centrality, peripherality or marginality is the context of the history of a nation like India. India being a large geographic space comprises different regions and localities with wide diversities in terms of language, dialect, customs, rituals, institutions etc. If we view folk theatres through the lens of subaltern history then it can be related to the 'history from below'. We can refer to the *Jatra* actors as subalterns who belong to the lower spheres of society. They are defined as the actors of history who come from the lower levels. The folk theatre is always under pressure from urban culture. The space of the folk theatre has become the contested site of conflicting discourses that merge with identity and politics. The politics of identity might lead to several political arguments but focuses on the interests and perspectives with which people identify them. The construction of identities about the folk theatre raises questions of modernity, minority influence, and marginality. Even though folk theatre is relegated to a marginal position, the *Jatrapalas* become the vortex of competing discourses that inextricably link culture with politics, language, and identity. The theme of multiculturalism merges with the participants of *Jatrapalas* as they embrace religious diversities and the roles of the Gods and Goddesses are played irrespective of the religious binarism. The ongoing conflicts between the elite urban classes and the rural classes lead to several problems of identity with the postmodern space.

If we view *Jatrapalas* through the lens of cultural studies, the emphasis will be more on the discursive aspect of it, its construction, space, and communication. Culture earlier was derived from the word 'cultura' and 'colere', meaning to cultivate. Earlier, culture was only associated with some 'exotic rituals' of some primitive societies but with the onset of Globalisation, the culture has moved to the central stage of the western discourses. Nowadays the culture is associated with pre-modern societies but has been successfully accepted as a variation of global discourse. However, now culture becomes the mode of generating meanings and ideas. The elite culture proclaims the non-elite cultures on life and art as 'tasteless' and 'useless'. What becomes evident is that certain components of culture

get more visibility and significance. *Jatrapala* is considered to be a form of popular culture dealing with the everyday life of the common people. However, the elite members of the society term it as 'inferior', which is unable to parallel the standards of modern art. The 'culture' of a particular society often includes various aspects like economic, spatial, ideological and erotic. Bengali *Jatrapalas* focuses on certain objects and themes which acquire meaning and value in a community.

Jatrapalas stand in a hybridized condition today. Being influenced by the mass media, it has adapted some of its features thus diverting from its authentic roots. Embracing the global and local versions of folk theatre, the *Jatrapalas* stand in an in-between state. This study focuses on certain issues that can be raised through the theme of glocalisation. The in-between state of *Jatrapalas* as a global and local project and the impact it holds on the 21st-century audience is dealt with by taking into consideration of identity construction, tradition and the relevance of folk cultural ethos during this present era. In spite of the granted fact that the *Jatrapalas* is confined to certain boundaries yet it is a cultural practice that reconstitutes the experiences and customs of a particular community. This study with a very positive effort tries to promote all the possible and probable hidden discourses lying beneath the structure of the primitive performances of *Jatrapalas*.

Notes:

ⁱ Folkloristics is a relatively new discipline in Social Science which studies various interdisciplinary aspects in relation to various subjects. This paper tries to present the essence of Bengali *Jatrapala* as a form of folk theatre of Bengal through the lens of Folkloristics.

ⁱⁱ Aristotle's *Poetics* is considered to be the oldest surviving treatise on dramatic arts.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Natyashastra* is considered to be a primary text on the performing arts by Bharat Muni.

^{iv} As a monumental work, *Abhinavabharati* is the commentary on the grand dramatic treatise of *Natyashastra*

^v The Sanskrit root word is known as *Veda* or knowledge. The oldest form of Sanskrit Literature is attributed to Lord Brahma. The four forms of Vedas are the *Rigveda*, the *Yajurveda*, the *Samaveda* and the *Atharvaveda*.

^{vi} Performance, when defined, is considered to be a 'civic-political ritual demonstrating and confirming royal prerogatives and it reflected the highest literary and artistic values. It is a manifestation of culture's highest literary and artistic values' (Brandon 1993: 3).

References

Carlson, Marvin. 1996. *Performance: A Critical Introduction*. Routledge, London: 23.
2014. *Theatre: A Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, Oxford : 6, 75.

-
- Chakrovorti, Bikas. 2010. *Folk, Folklore and Folkloristics: Interpretation of Society and folklore*. Mitram, Kolkata:52.
- Eliot, T. S. 2015. *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*. Martino Fine Books, New Delhi: 24.
- Hatlen, Theodore W. 1987. *Orientation to the Theatre*. Prentice Hall, London:55
- Jhanji, Rekha. 1984. *Communication and the Arts*. Ajanta Publications, New Delhi: 32.
- Maharishi, Anjala. Dr. 2000. *A Comparative Study of Brechtian and Classical Indian Theatre*. National School of Drama, New Delhi: 15.
- Mathur, J.C.1964. *Drama in Rural India*. Indian Council for Cultural Relations, New Delhi: 26.
- Smith, Mark J. 2001. *Culture: Reinventing the Social Sciences*. Open University Press, Oslo: 123.