

Desia Naat of Koraput : An Expression of their Cultural Artifacts

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Inhabited by over a billion diverse racial groups, India presents a colourful assortment of Folk culture, best portrayed through the unique art of Folk Theatre. Various known as the *Jatra* (Bengal, Orissa and Eastern Bihar), *Tamasha* (Maharashtra), *Nautanki* (Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Punjab), *Bhavai* (Gujarat), *Yakshagana* (Karnataka), and *Therubuttu* (Tamil Nadu), folk theatre reaches out to a large cross-section of the population. The decline of Sanskrit Drama saw the emergence of the Folk Theatre in various regional languages from the 14th and through the 19th century. Maintaining the basic conventions like, stage preliminaries, the *Sutradhara* (the narrator), the *Vidushak* opening prayer song etc pertaining to its predecessor, it achieved a quick mass appeal.

The actors perform in the open with gangways attached to the make-shift stage. This helps immensely since the actors frequently converse with the audience in the course of the play. Audience participation is an essential part of Indian Folk theatre. The stage is often a huge empty space which the actors deftly manipulate accordingly with their dialogues and symbolic gestures. Loud music, dance, elaborate use of make-up, masks, and singing chorus are its hallmarks marking its difference from Modern theatre. Folk plays provide a valuable insight into the local dialect, dress, attitude, humour and wit of the regions in which they are staged. Although mythological and medieval romances are their main thrust, folk theatre acquires a timeless appeal by improvising with symbolic relevance to the current socio-political happenings.

Forms of folk drama rooted in the villages could give new impetus to modern Indian theatre Indian folk theatre is a composite art with a composite set of skills practised by artists who stage a total performance through the creation of verbal, spatial and visual patterns. Folk theatre forms such as *Jatra* from Bengal, *Tamasha* from Maharashtra, *Nautanki* from Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Punjab, *Bhavai* from Gujarat, *Yakshagana* from Karnataka, *Therukuttu* from Tamil Nadu and *Palla*, *Daskathia*, *Danda Nata*, *Desia Nata*, *Ghoda Naach*, and *Chahu Naach* of Orissa feature a wide range of make-up, song, dance, mime, improvised repartee, slapstick or stylized acting, and even acrobatics.

These folk theatres give a glimpse of styles of speech, music, dance, dress, behaviour, humour, legend, proverb and wit in their respective regions. The actors, who

are often very talented performers, speak directly to the audience - audience participation is the hallmark of Indian folk theatre - and often improvises. They are apt to mix up several moods and disciplines, from time to time bursting into song and dancing with gusto when the chorus sings their dialogue. The result is a form of drama which springs from an exhilarating freedom of expression and provides the villagers with a complete emotional experience in an environment in which ideas can be effortlessly communicated.

Folk forms have their own stage conventions and production styles. The scenography is nonrealistic and the stage is usually a bare space manipulated by the actors through the use of stylized and symbolic make-up and by codified gait, choreographic acting, and symbolic hand gestures. Change of location is denoted by movement and by word of mouth rather than by change of set and decor.

Folk theatre has inherited many of the classical conventions of Sanskrit theatre. The classical *Sutradhar* or narrator is used in several vernacular theatres, and the classical *Vidushak* appears under different names in different regions as Konangi, Komali, or Joothan Mian. Other stock characters are found in different regions.

India's genius still lies in its dance-dramas, which have a unique form based on centuries of unbroken tradition. There are very few professional theatre companies in the whole of India, but thousands of amateur productions are staged every year by organized groups. Out of this intense experimental activity, the Indians hope a contemporary national theatre will emerge, influenced by Western techniques but distinctly Indian in flavour. Many centres for theatrical training have been established in the 20th century. Among the most important are the National School of Drama and the Asian Theatre Institute in New Delhi, *Sangeet Natak Akademi* (National Academy of Music, Dance, and Drama) in New Delhi, and the National Institute for the Performing Arts in Bombay. *Bharatiya Natya Sangh*, the union of all Indian theatre groups, was founded in 1949 and is centered in New Delhi. Affiliated with UNESCO's branch of the International Theatre Institute, it organizes drama festivals and seminars, as well as serving as a centre for information.

ORISSA is a colourful region, with the blue ocean lapping its eastern shore in foaming tides, and the land studded with verdant green hills, at times rising almost from the sea; its rivers meander weaving an intricate pattern of water mosaics in the coastal delta, while the plateaus and hill-slopes present a gigantic chessboard mosaic of yellow

and green in the rainy season. Orissa, famous for its fine arts, folk painting on walls, *patta-chitra* (painting on cloth), *chhow* dance, *Odissi* music and *Odissi* dance, and architecture and sculpture (*Konarka*, *Lingaraj*, *Jagannath* and *Khiching* temples, etc.) has justly been called *Utkala*, the land of exquisite arts.

The official language of the state, spoken by the majority of the people is Oriya. Oriya belongs to the Indo-Aryan branch of the Indo-European language family. It is closely related to Bengali and Assamese. A few tribal languages belonging to the Dravidian and *Munda* language families are still spoken by the Adivasis (original inhabitants) of the state. The state has a very opulent cultural heritage, one of the richest in India, and the capital city of Bhubaneswar is known for the exquisite temples that dot its landscape. The famous classical dance form, Odissi originated in Odisha. Contemporary Orissa has a proud cultural heritage that arose due to the intermingling of three great religious traditions - Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. The culture of the Adivasis (the original inhabitants of India) is an integral part of modern Odishan heritage. Orissa has a population of 32 million. About 87% of the population lives in the villages and one third of the rural population does not own any land other than homesteads. The aborigines or tribes, known as *Adivasis*, constitute 24% of the population, belonging to 62 different ethnic communities. Their traditional way of life centers on the forest ecosystem. Over the years, collection of forest produce, hunting and persuasion of other traditional ways of living have become increasingly difficult, influencing socio-cultural life. Issues with modernization and industrial activities, such as mining, construction of dams, roads, railways have grown to become a concern affecting their very traditional livelihood and have displaced the *Adivasi* communities.

Folk theatre which is an integral part of folk culture elucidates the richness of tribal cultural life. Performed by the folk artist and nourished by the folk artist it has a unique tradition and expression. With no intellectual overtones it is performed in a very lucid manner which affects the heart and the soul. Truth, justice and religious values are the main themes which are also the core values of their culture. *Desia Nata* which is a beautiful blend of classical and traditional form is not mere entertainment but a sacred ritual for the performers where the *natyaguru* has a very significant role. The dance and music in *Desia Nata* is very loud and expressive. The utterance, modulation and accent of the local dialect make it more vibrant.

Objectives:

- Do the folk plays influence the behaviour and life style of the community?
- How far this form of expression has enriched the composite culture of tribals of Koraput?
- Does this performance give expression to their inner feelings, their joys and sorrows, their natural affection and passion and their appreciation of beauty in nature and in man?
- Is the style of traditional presentation of *Desia Nata* on the wane?

Methodology

- Data were collected through observation, interview and case study methods from the local groups and artists of Borigumma, Kundura and Kotpad blocks of Koraput district of Orissa

Origin

Rama Chandra Deva, IV, the king of Jeypore started this trend when he wrote an Oriya play following a Sanskrit play and performed by the local people. Plays written by him are:

1. *Kumbhasura Baddha*
2. *Indrajeet Baddha*

Bikram Dev Verma followed the trend and started an association named "JAGAN MITRA".

Plays written by him are:

1. *Banasura Baddha*
2. *Jalandhara Banddha*
3. *Radha Madhaba*
4. *Kundamala*

Initially only mythological themes were performed but gradually social, imaginary and historical themes are depicted through the *Desia Nata*.

- Some of the important mythological plays are:
 - *Ravana Baddha*
 - *Kansa Baddha*
 - *Sita Chori*
- Some of the important social plays are:
 - *Peta Parasu*

- *Dhoba Kumuti*
- *Jhalaki Rama*
- *Damu Khangar*
- Some of the important imaginary plays are:
 - *Sadhava Raja*
 - *Nagabali*
 - *Banakuma*
- Some of the historical plays are:
 - *Laxman Nayak*
 - *Birsa Munda*
 - *Bharata Chhada*
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Stage Craft and Performance

The Third Theater, the epic theater and classical theater is based on certain rules and regulations and has certain fixed boundaries. The style of presentation is predictable. But in *Desia Nata* the performance is extra ordinary, bold, independent & dynamic. The script writer, Director, Artists and Audience, all are native and depict folk culture.

The performance zone or the stage is stepped. For the main character, there is a chair in one side of the stage. At the other side, the musician, the *Natyaguru / Sandhi* and the *Palia* (Chorus Party) sit. The *Duari* sits with the audience and he is free to move anywhere. Without any written script he acts as a bridge between the performer and the audience. After worshipping the stage, there is *Ganesh Bandana*; a masked *Ganesh* usually comes to the stage. The *Sutradhar* or narrator sings praising the lord and seeking his blessings for the smooth conduct of the play. *Desia Nata* has established a closer relationship between the theater and the people. It projects the social aspirations, ways of life, cultural patterns and problems of the people.

- Usually after the harvest, the rehearsal starts at the *AKHADA GHAR*
- It takes four to six months to complete the play
- The performers use local dialect, so the modulation and accent is unique
- The *Sutradhar* (Narrator) sings praising lord *Ganesh*

- The *Natyaguru* seeks the blessing of the Lord for the smooth conduct of the play
- It is not mere entertainment for the performers but a sacred ritual.

Lighting and Music

Desia Nata is a beautiful blend of classical and traditional form.

- Initially, Lighting was done with *Mashaal, Dihudi & lantern*
- Now a days, Petromax, generators & modern lights are used
- Initially, Musical instruments like *ginni, mardala, mahuri, tidibidi*, and flute were used
- Now a days, harmonium, Casio, *dholak* etc are used

Key Players

There are many performers but the major players in *Desia Nata* are:

- *Natyaguru*
- *Sandhi*
- *Sutradhar*
- *Duari*

Each of them has some definite roles to play and the success of the play solely depends on their performance.

Natyaguru

- He is an outsider
- Beside writing and directing, he sometimes also acts as *Sutradhar* and *Sandhi*
- In the beginning of the play, he interacts with the masked Ganesh and seeks his blessing
- He is a multi-talented person who is highly respected among the actors

Sandhi

- He is a person with musical knowledge

- He sings the theme, and the situation of the play
- He narrates the sequence of entry of different characters
- Usually the *Natyaguru* plays this role

Sutradhar

- He is the narrator who acts as a coordinating character between the audience and the performer
- From the beginning till the end, he has an important role to play

Duari

- He can be compared with the classical *Vidushak*
- He is without any written script
- He acts as a bridge between the performer and audience
- He sits with the audience and free to move anywhere and interfere with the sequence

Audience

Audiences in the *Desia Nata* are the people from the village, where it is staged and the neighbouring villages. People come with their children, straw mats, and snacks, making themselves feel at home. At these performances there is a constant inflow and outflow of spectators. Some go to sleep, asking their neighbours to awaken them for favourite scenes. Stalls selling betel leaves, peanuts, and spicy fried things, adorned with flowers and incense and lighted by oil lamps, surround the open-air arena. The clown, an essential character in every folk play, the *Duari* in case of *Desia Nata* comments on the audience and contemporary events. Zealous spectators offer donations and gifts in appreciation of their favourite actor or dancer, who receives them in the middle of the performance and thanks the donor by singing or dancing a particular piece of his choice. The audience thus constantly throws sparks to the performer, who throws them back. People laugh, weep, sigh, or suddenly fall silent during a moving scene.

Concluding Remarks....

- The performances in *Desia Nata* are refreshingly novel in their appeal.

- Cosmic or symbolic battles between the forces of good and evil, mythological stories and legendary romantic tales are sprinkled with commentary on current social or political conditions.
- One reason for the survival of folk plays, in fact, has been their capacity to gradually adapt old themes to changing ways of life and satirize the latest local happenings.
- With the disintegration of the traditional culture and the growing impact of industrial society, however, folk theatre is gradually losing its artistic character and vitality.
- Urban influences have a weapon of matchless power - the TV and cinema - whose shadow is falling over village drama.
- Many theatre persons realize that theatre forms borrowed from the West are inadequate to project the social aspirations, ways of life, cultural patterns and problems of the people of India as a whole. Since, like theatre artists all over the world, they are interested in establishing a closer relationship between the theatre and the people, there is every reason why they should make greater use of the living tradition of indigenous theatre which has enriched their composite culture and given expression to their inner feelings, their joys and sorrows and their natural affection and passion.
- Some leading theatre groups in Calcutta, Bombay and Delhi are involved in experiments of this kind, but they are relatively few. Ultimately, the outcome of their work will depend on the resilience of the theatre form itself to withstand and coexist with the powerful invasion of commercial cinema and television sitcoms and serials.

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