The Mass-Cultural Hybridized Jatra Industry: A Comparative Study of Traditional & Modern Form of Theatre in Odisha

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ABSTRACT

Jatra, the traditional form of multifaceted theatre of Odisha that is now being adapted by Television media industry has been proved to be a powerful form of cultural entertainment. It used to mirror the potential rural folkways and mores of Odia society rich with mythological or religious sentiments and continues to do so in modernised area with a variation in it’s content with addition to patriotic, historical and secular themes with melodramatic potential. This paper scrutinizes changing trends of the hybridized form of Jatra culture while interpreting making a comparative analysis on both of it’s traditional and modern form. It argues that traditional Indian art forms while competing with it’s westernised modern entertainment media struggled hard to survive in post-colonial era without proper economic infrastructure coupled with a negligent attitude of the central and state government that caters to the secular outlook of a confused democratic political set up.

KEYWORDS: Gananatya, Jatra, Mass-Culture, Folkways, Hybridized form, Bhagavat Ghar, Naam Ghar

INTRODUCTION

Jatra is a popular folk-theatre form of Odisha. As a composite art form or as a theatre of mixed means – song and dance, acting, and recitation – historians declare that Jatra is a combination of multiple performance forms of other Odia folk theatre arts that emerged in different times and has emerged as the most practised form of entertainment in rural Odisha. The term Jatra derives it’s root from the Sanskrit word Yatra meaning processions or journey in Sanskrit or in local usages it means a joyous congregation. It is otherwise called as Gananatya, which means collective presentation of any art form through multi-staged multi-emotional pattern. Thus, It has been capable of depicting a range of diverse and complex stories – mythology, secular themes, humour, valour of heroic characters and melodramatic events. As a blend of religious sentiments, chauvinistic spirit and social instincts, folk and historical legend articulated nationalism and emerged ‘as a powerful symbolic capital’ for cultural and political mobilization in the pre-British India.

Jatra has come to be known as an industry of entertainment on a medium scale for its production and transmission in an expanded market structure. It has it’s distinct social reality and organisational structure that demands to be studied in order to understand the transition of art form of Odisha. The survival of the form over such a vast period of rapidly changing social milieu, while catering to a heterogeneous audience, has been credited to its innate malleability and ways of adapting to changing social dynamics, and thus staying not just relevant and alive, but also thriving.

Review of Literature- Discourse Regarding The Origin of Jatra

My review of literature is basically centred upon the historicity of the origin of the Odia Opera called Jatra. And in that connection, I would stimulate a discussion based upon supporters and critics related to origin of Jatra as Odisha.
To M.L. Varadpande the trace of Jatra is found in 'Dev Jatra' mentioned in Vishnu Dharmottar Purana. By 'Dev Jatra' he means religious festivals such as Rath Jatra, Chandan Jatra and Sahi Jatra of Puri where the deity Lord Jagannath, Lord Balabhadra and Goddess Subhadra are taken outside of the temple in a ritualistic procession with accompaniment of dance, music and drama. Subsequently, this has taken the shape of Jatra or folk theatre.

Some critics like Balwant Gargi Kapila Vatsayan are of the opinion that Jatra traces it’s origin to Bengal culture. A boastful Gargi declares that though Jatra is popular in Odisha and Bihar, it was originated in Bengal. And a somewhat confused Vatsayan confesses that though the dramatic performance and theatrics of Jatra is developed in Bengal, the ancient Odia poet Jaydev’s Gita Govinda (12th Century AD) the famous sacred and romantic epic that narrates Lord Krishna & Sri Radha’s legendary love story provided the ‘real foundations for the purpose.

Thus, it can be concluded that Jatra was originated in Odisha as a religious dramatic procession and theatrical performance in temple i.e. Shri Kshetra Puri Jagannath Temple during the time of King Kharvela. The much renowned Vaisnavite Sri Chaitanya Dev, the famed devotee of Lord Jagannath and the religious saint of Bhakti Cult had given a new shape to it through 'Krishna Yatra' or 'Krishna Kirtan'. Sri Chaitanya was a high rated devotee of Lord Jagannath. In his eyes Lord Jagannath is Lord Krishna. He has left Bengal forever to stay permanently in Puri Srikshetra where he died taking 'sajal-samadhi' 'ichha-mrutyu'. Chaitanya Dev arranged a yatra-play called Rukmini Haran (Abduction of Rukmini) in the house of one Chandra Sekhar where he himself took the role of Rukmini. in 1507 A.D. After this, Chaitanya's followers like Ray Ramananda and Rupa Goswamy wrote their dramas based on this theme. Gajapati Pratapendra Dev, the then ruler of Orissa was also encouraging these activities of the Vaishnavas. 'Jatra owes its origin to this atmosphere,' opines Varadpande.

According to Varadpande, this performance gradually created a friendly atmosphere for various Sanskrit dramas, based on Krishna theme. Gita Govinda was being enacted in the temple premises from 12th century onwards regularly in Puri. Shankar Dev, the saint poet of Assam, visited Puri during the 15th century. He witnessed these performances there and conceived Ankya Nat in his own land. He wrote six plays called Chinna Yatra, Kalidaman Yatra, Kaligopal Nata, Rukmini Haran Nata, Parijat Haran Nata and Patni Prasad Nata — mostly based on Krishna theme — and staged all these there. Also he carried with him Hemant Kumar Das / 167the idea of Bhagabat Ghar — a place for community gathering in Orissa — to his state and renamed it as Namghar and established them throughout Assam which still exist.

This is known from his 'Hatigumpha' (Elephant cave) inscriptions where he declares: "Truteeye punah varsh gandharva vedavudhah 168 / Indian Literature : 231darpa nrutyageeta vaaditra sandeshakaishtuv samaj karanaabhishhya kreedayati nagarim". This is the description of the emperor's activities during the third year of his rule, where he has openly declared himself to be proficient in the dramatic art and also an arranger of 'Samajas' throughout his kingdom. Also in the next few lines of this inscription he has told how he erected the pandals (chatvar) for these regular activities. In this connection we may say that 'Samaj' is still used in Orissa as a synonym for dramatic performances. Moreover, in the Charyapadas, references regarding Budha Natak, Nata Petika and Swang Charyapadas, references regarding Budha Natak, Nata Petika and Swang indicate how during the 9th—12th centuries, theatrical activities were indicate how during the 9th—12th centuries, theatrical activities were rampant in Orissa. Sarala Das, the immortal poet of the 15th century, has referred to dramatic performances in his voluminous work Mahabharata in various places. In 'Virata Parva' he writes:

"Ahe Virata je dese rangasabha nahin
Jatra Utsaba Yebana dese na huai
Yebana deshare puni nahin yaga yagana
Janiba se desha nische asuranka bhogya"
(Epic—"Virata Parva")

O Virata, a country which is devoid of Rangasabha
means Jatra or a theatre house
that enacts aesthetically colourful plays
rich with emotional extravaganza and
thereby uplift cultural activities,
where sacred rites are not being held,
must be a country inhabited by uncivilized demons.”

This proves that Jatra was not unknown to this area in the 15th century. Long before Vaishnavism found its roots in the stage, theatrical activities were regular phenomena here—whether it was known as 'Samaj' or 'Jatra' is not important. Of course, evidence regarding theatrical performances to be known as 'Jatra' are available. Jatra of Orissa is not an imitation of the Bengali Jatra. At least history does not support this view. Unfortunately, no drama of the time is traceable for it was all in oratory format.

In order to prove the relation of Jatra with Sri Chaitanya some scholars have misrepresented the real fact. They claim that Chaitanya inspired Ramananda to write his maiden play Jagannath Ballav Natak. But this statement is not true. Krishna Das Kaviraj, the author of Chaitanya Charitamrita, clearly indicates that the saint Chaitanya was deeply charmed with the devotional works of Chandidas, Vidyapati, Gitagovinda and especially the dramatic work of Rai Ramananda. Evidence is also there for the fact that Jagannath Ballav was performed in the temple premises and the saint took active part in it. Chaitanya came to Orissa in 1510 A.D. where as Jagannath Ballav was written in 1509. Rai was then the governor of Rajmahandri — the southern border of the Gajapati kingdom. The saint could meet Rai only after 1510. There is no evidence that Rai was inspired by the saint to write this drama.

We have tried here to trace the origin of the Oriya Jatra. We do not know exactly when this powerful medium of mass entertainment came to be known as Jatra. But at least one thing is clear— that it was widely known under that name during Sarala Das's time (15th century). This was at least a century before Chaitanya's arrival in Puri and the appearance of Krishna Jatra in Bengal. Puri was a centre of cultural activities much before Chaitanya's visit and at least from Jayadev's time, theatrical performances were undertaken here and in its adjacent areas.

Jatra was just a part of the rich and ancient cultural tradition of Orissa. Hence, there is no reason why it should be treated as a parallel creation of Bengali Jatra which actually originated much later i.e. during the advent of Saint Chaitanya Dev, as has been admitted by the Bengali scholars. The Oriya Jatra neither grew up under the protective shadow of Bengali Jatra, nor was it influenced by the same. However it must be admitted that Oriya Jatra came in contact with Bengali Jatra during the 19th century and since then it has always depended upon it for inspiration. But then, that is a separate issue.

The traditional Jatra has undergone substantial changes in its rise and development brought about by colonialism, modernism and developed into a tradition in its own right. The revival of the glory of Odia culture, tradition and language through modern prose literature of Senapati, Ray and Rao inspired semi-educated Jatrakaras as well as the modern Odia dramatists. Geetinatyas of popular poets (e.g. Vaishnaba Pani) emerged as a resistance to Bengali dominated European type theatre, and modern Bengali Jatra of the social/secular themes. Instead, they adopted episodes from popular Hindu literature/vernacular translated epics, Puranas, folk and historical legends. Through musicals, farce, satire and allegory, poets criticized the oppressive zamindari system and anti-Odias (Bengali) for a nationalist cause. It is mostly concerned with the traditional value system, idealism of Indian culture – the nature of ‘moral virtue’, conflict between love and family, the rural urban conflict, class, marriage, heroism of men and women, sentiments and plight of women; all with a combination of fictive and live experiences.

Research methodology
An extensive ethnographic comparative study of the Annapurna Rangamancha as traditional art form & Shivani Gananatya as modern art form of Odisha has been undertaken in the form of unstructured interviews with 100 producers, distributors, actors and audiences were chosen by stratified random sampling method.
Results & Findings

**Table 01**

The Comparative Analysis of Inclusion of Modernised Technology in Annapurna & Shibani Theatre

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl.No.</th>
<th>Technological Inclusion</th>
<th>Name of The Theatre</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Inclusion of Modern Musical System</td>
<td>Annapurna Rangamancha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>34.09%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Inclusion of Revolving Stage</td>
<td>Shibani Gananatya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>65.91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>High Paid Actors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>23.02%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Linkage to TV as Serial</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>12.07%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Linkage to TV as One-time demonstration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Linkage to Music Album, Cassette Industry</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>23.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Promotion through Social Networking Sites</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>32.07%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Promotion through Press Media</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>41.08%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Intellectual Discussion

Jatra as an industry has surpassed the modern Odia cinema, and it has been catering to the entertainment needs of the common masses in both urban and rural areas. Providing the entertainment needs of 85 per cent rural population through its cultural presentation, the form is seldom consecrated by the Odia intelligentsia. Although for the last five years the business of Jatra parties is facing an economic challenge vis-à-vis new private television channels, the form still struggles and continues to dominate. More than 200 small and large Jatra troupes, nearly 20,000 performers and more than 30,000 non-artists entertain 40 per cent of the rural Odia population. On an average two lakh spectators in a day watch Jatras. Among 50–60 Jatra parties, some parties have performed regularly for nearly 300 nights in certain years. The new generation performers choose it as their profession. The buying and selling of actors by a competitive market of different troupes is characteristic of contemporary professional Jatra industry. It not only provides livelihood to a large number of artists, and non-artists, but also to nearly 25 established writers and 25 directors (some of them have chosen it as their sole profession) who regularly create and compose plays for Jatra parties. The professionalization of the art form fosters competition and rivalry between the various classes – large and small – to achieve a higher status through acceptability.

Class structure

Traditionally the Yatra class structure was composed of poor artists, poets, novelists, religious hymn singers and was patronized by Zamindars in Pre-British and post British period. In the middle age it suffered the worst to establish its identity and structure in the society. However, in this modernized era, new rich peasant and business class are involved in consolidating and exploiting their positions in the field of production. They invest money in the Jatra troupe from the personal business – government contractors, owning mines business, transport business, cassette companies, prawn business, film productions, etc. Politicians are no exception. A few of them have been exclusively into the Jatra business. Thus, the political affiliation, business status and other respectable positions reinforce the class status of Jatra owners.

Kali Charan Pattanaik of Banki moved to Cuttack and started commercial theatre with regular stage and screen for the first time in the early 1950s. He was also the one who first brought women artists to Odia theatre. The most professional and commercial urban modern stages like Annapurna Rangamanch. Trained dramatists and directors like Bhanja Kishore Patnaik, Kartik Kumar Ghosh, Bijay Mishra and Sachi Das of modern theatre groups started
experimenting with traditional Jatra. With the introduction of technology and television media the Jatra theatre have taken a different turn in it’s performance. It no longer portrays any rural or religious acts. Rather is more focused with mirroring the modern day society. In Odisha there three levels of Jatra troupes are found- higher, middle and lower grades. Competition is very high among actors or technical persons to access the high echelon.

**Jatra as a taboo**

However, Jatra could not develop with it’s full potential, because the contemporary Odia society does not support art as a full-fledged career for the new generation. Table 02 displays how parents believe it is a waste of time and children might go astray if they get into this line. They are not liberal parents like Bengalis and South Indians. For this reason, Jatra as a folk culture is suffering in Odisha. It is a belief that - Only those persons who could not do anything in their life or are failures to peruse any career adopt theatre, - is being put into practice-. So theatre is full of already failed people. As, it is in Bengali society, intelligent middle class children adopt theatricals as their career, in Odisha, it is a taboo.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Permission To Join in Theatre As a Career</th>
<th>Social Taboo To Join in Theatre As a Career</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Odisha Youngsters</td>
<td>37.06%</td>
<td>62.94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Indian Youngsters</td>
<td>74.92%</td>
<td>25.08%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bengali Youngsters</td>
<td>82.78%</td>
<td>17.22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CONCLUSION**

The contemporary Jatra industry is mass-cultural, ‘presenting similar materials to a wide range of audiences’. The record companies, television producers and the live Jatra creators supply diverse materials through their market channels. The newly emergent hybridized Jatra serves the refined tastes of the growing middle class well. The synthesis of cinematic technique and traditional play structure present a combination of styles of film, television, modern theatre and the existing repertoire. However, in comparison to other states, it has not flourished much as an entertainment platform due to the conservative cultural outlook of the Odia people who views Theatre as low level of career and that shows an absence of intellectual middle class convergence in Jatra Theatre. To conclude, this paper highlights a correlation between culture and economy that came true in this analysis of Odia Jatra where the social taboo and lack of technological inclusion has worked against the ultimate success of Jatra Theatre as an entertainment industry.

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