

Mapping Odisha's Indigenous Theatre

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Cultures are most fully expressed in and made conscious of themselves in their rituals and theatrical performances - Victor Turner

In mapping the historiography of Indian theatre, the State of Odisha is relegated to the periphery. Situated on the east coast of India, with the Bay of Bengal forming its eastern and south – eastern frontier, it is a colourful, vibrant region, a land of exquisite art and culture far ‘far away from the madding crowd’. My subsequent visit only resolved me into finding the source of this quietude. To a person from North India, it becomes difficult to comprehend the slow paced life, little becoming sufficient, lack of cut-throat competitive killer instinct still existing in the 21st century when the modern life is characterized with materialism, growing individualization, consumerism and superficiality. Odisha's over brimming serenity is the missing ingredient in major part of today's world. The intrigues and scruples concomitant with the present day life appear as non-existent or existing in near invisibility here. Vignettes of ‘The Great Tradition’ are still palpable here. This set me on a journey to demystify the root of the sense of overwhelming tranquillity, of satisfaction perceptible on the face of people who have relentlessly borne the brunt of natural calamity year after year. I could attribute this rare phenomenon to the rich, lively cultural dynamism interwoven and infused in the fabric of Odia daily life permeating the multi layered society from village to the cities. It has acted as a safety valve as well as have served as punching bag to vent their angst and frustration.

Odisha is in the news for all the wrong reasons. This paper, let me clarify at the outset, by no means holds a brief for Odisha. A close encounter with the State has somewhat resolved me to reiterate that while Kalahandi is a fact, Koraput is a fact and Graham Staines is a fact, nonetheless there still remains more to Odisha than just this, which unfortunately the outside world remains ignorant of. The interest by and large remains confined to Puri, Lord Jagannath, Konark or Odissi.

Before discussing the indigenous theatre of Odisha, let me share a realization that has started to trouble a lot. I feel that we are so stuck up in defining and redefining modernism/post- modernism; colonialism/post colonialism that somehow, somewhere miss to acknowledge vehemently the fact that modernism or post-colonialism or for that matter any ‘isms’ or avant- garde do not come into existence from a vacuum. It is built on strong edifice, on a past which is always vulnerable to erasure. Cities have grown out from and along the villages and countryside. Urban developed from the depravity of rural. Somewhere and somehow globalisation, materialism, consumerism and modernity have made us apologetic of our roots, forefathers and our origins. In an attempt to recast, reposition and re-supplant in the new milieu, in forging a new identity we have stripped ourselves of the essentials and have ended up being glossed persons and societies. An amateurish disdain and snobbery prevailed that led to the exclusion of undertaking any serious effort to document and critiques the traditional forms that permeate the culture of every nation, class and creed.

To ethno-symbolist Anthony D. Smith "what gives nationalism its power are myths, memories, traditions, and symbols of ethnic heritages and the ways in which a popular living past has been, and can be, rediscovered and reinterpreted by modern nationalist intelligentsias. It is from these elements of myth, memory, symbol, and tradition that national identities are reconstituted in each generation, as the nation becomes more inclusive and as its members cope with new challenges" (9).

Fortunately, of late, the need to rebuild the bridge with the lost world has made us scurrying back to retrieve the glorious past that had got buried under the debris of western domination. One such lost glory vigorously pursued is revisiting the folk forms spread across the length and breadth of the country, folk theatre being one of them. It is an absolute imperative. As Mulk Raj Anand puts "For in India, we have to begin almost at the beginning and come full circle if we are to build up an indigenous tradition rooted in the soil and in the consciousness of our people. They have remained, despite all the civilizing processes they have undergone and despite the sophisticated classical city dramas, the custodians of certain elemental forms" (21).

India has been home to a rich culture since antiquity. It is unfortunate that we always look to the West for every 'modern' idea without searching our heritage first. Our preference for West, a complex of being inferior to them has proved detrimental for us. We, ourselves have been selective in our areas of research subjects and internationally too, the major scholars have given it a miss when it comes to theatre studies. Helen Gilbert & Joanne Tompkins edited *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice and Politics* (1996), for instance bypasses Indian theatre "Since its history/practice is extremely complex, it is impossible to do justice to Indian drama . . . Moreover, the varieties of drama, dance, languages, and cultures that have influenced Indian theatre are too vast to consider in a text other than one devoted to just India" (7). More or less this has been a refrain and therefore a systematic recognition of Indian theatre in totality is seriously wanting. We either tend to study in the context of binaries – Sanskritic (*Margi*) tradition/Nativist (*Bhasha*) tradition, urban/rural divide, folk/classical, pre/post-independence or have confined to specific region and specific language. Besides having implications on scholarship on pan-Indian dramaturgy, it also resulted in two major fallouts. One, the traditional theatre got marginalized and two, some region/language obdurate other regions. Perhaps this is what troubled G.P. Deshpande, the Marathi playwright, critic and scholar:

When we speak of national theatre we do so with almost no knowledge of the various Indian theatres. Part of the reason for this ignorance could very well be the attitude or tendency to treat these concrete theatre traditions as "regional" or *pradeshika* against an *abstraction* of national or Indian theatre. It must be emphasized that this polarity is neither realistic nor useful in terms of our theatres

. . . It is essential for our self-understanding that the unity of Indian cultural expression is achieved through the plurality of linguistic (in this case theatrical) expressions. For that reason the terminology of "regional" is misleading when it comes to cultural. Each mode is uniquely important; each mode is uniquely Indian. In that sense there is no regional theatre in India. There are several, equally valid and legitimate theatres. (History, Politics, 95)

It is indeed a fallacy to ascribe colonialization as a rupture in the Indian tradition. Equally detrimental is the elitist snobbery that makes us privilege the urban over rural class in having aesthetically refined appreciation for art and culture. We debunk the masses as having neither aesthetic sense nor taste. This myth that has been demystified by true practitioners of theatre. Habib Tanvir, unabashedly lambasted such notions. As observed by Anjum Katyal, Habib acknowledged:

The educated lack the culture which...the villages possess so richly though/
They are illiterate...being more than compensated by the rich oral tradition of our
culture and who therefore are the more cultured.

The rural sophistication is not understood by the urban person and vice/versa
But I find the villager much more sophisticated...in many, many instances. In the arts
they are much more sophisticated.

I believe in the viability of the rich forms of the rural theatre in which they
have a tendency to incorporate the most topical, the latest local happening, the thematic
and formal flexibility by which we cannot claim this is how it was performed 200 or
2000 years ago...I believe that it is possible to usher in progress without demolishing
this culture. This environment should be preserved, this...rural environment most
conducive to the fullest growth of the folk theatre form, because this community life
which is so rich in its cultural expression can be transformed to a progressive
community in which this expression remains. (*Habib Tanvir*, xviii)

Badal Sircar, another theatre stalwart avers that though “the culture of our cities has its roots in the English system with an almost clear break from the traditional indigenous culture. The culture of the countryside however did not die; hence two cultural trends run parallel, giving rise to a fundamental dichotomy between rural and urban life, particularly in the cultural field . . . Theatre is one of the fields where this dichotomy is manifest most. The city theatre today is not a natural development of the traditional or folk theatre in the urban setting as it should have been. Rather, it is a new theatre based on Western theatre. The story, the treatment of the theme, the characterization, the stage, the lighting, the auditorium, the acting style – almost every aspect of Indian city has its roots in Western tradition, whereas the traditional village theatre has retained most of its indigenous characteristics and even thrived, in many cases. Both theatres exist today, each with its own strengths and weaknesses. It would be meaningless to valorize one and condemn the other” (1-2). Similar sentiment was expressed by Oriya critic Mayadhar Mansinha: “Comparing both varieties, any unbiased critic must feel that the differences are in their modes of expression, of degree rather than of kind, that by absolute standards of art and entertainment some of the mass dramas are as good as, if not better than, their opposite numbers in the classical variety. But prejudices die hard and, while we find third-rate formal plays being honoured as text-books for post-graduate studies, the finest of the mass plays are not even taken into the gracious consideration of the critics and the litterateurs” (205).

In fact, the traditional village theatre has kept to its own, successfully resisting, rebuffing the advanced ideas of the West and surviving in considerable degree to this day. Many forms have been successful in thwarting extinction and exist in varying degrees. It is in this context that Odisha offers best paradigm where folk art was/is in abundance even today. The creative instincts of Odisha can be estimated from the rock

inscriptions known as 'Hatigumpha Inscriptions' and the stage constructed in accordance to Bharata's *Natyashastra* since the time of Kharavela (1st century B.C.) at Khandagiri and Udayagiri. Paradoxically this State has suffered most from the culture of exclusion and neglect. Bengal's dominance obfuscated the emergence of Odisha in carving a distinct identity. As Prof Girija Shankar Ray in *Odia Natyakala* observes, "Since the beginning of British rule, many Bengali newcomers had come to Orissa in connection with administration and they were posted in high positions at different places of Orissa. They had no sympathy for Orissa and they had endeavoured in many ways to propagate Bengali language in this state. Some of them had shown great disregard for Oriya literature. The Bengalis had a tradition of '*Mujlis*' and hence they were staging Bengali *jatras* at times. Oriya *jatras* was declared as something of bad and uncultured taste and it was rejected" (Panigrahi21).

It is another story that Odisha never positioned itself in this race for supremacy and hegemony, battered by "the repeated invasions by the English, the religious pressures from the missionaries, the terrible famine at Ganjam and Balasore and Kranti Chandra Bhattacharya's slogan in Bengali '*Odia ektabhasanoe*' (*Odia is not a language*) were some of the major onslaughts that seemed to have attempted to subvert the socio-economic and cultural life of the state" (Panigrahi 20). They retreated inward, cocooned in its own world with their homemade ingredients to sustain it amidst the churnings taking place both at home and abroad. Jatindra Mohan Mohanty makes a pertinent observation and attributes Odiya language and literature as one of the support systems providing sustenance during various aggressions and natural calamities: "The great edifice of Oriya literature, from Sarala Das to Bhima Bhoi, took in its ambit many aspects of culture and ways of living-spiritual, religious, intellectual as well aspects of sheer joy and happiness, and considerations of individual's trials and tribulations. In short, Oriya literature, devotion to Lord Jagannath, and the pattern of living of a self-contained agricultural community sustained Oriya people through odds and adversity that could emerge once again as a strong nation in the beginning of the 20th century" (11).

But what accrued from this self-withdrawn imposition was the permanent, or partial erasure of the State's rich cultural heritage from the world scenario. It never got the recognition that it deserved. Today despite attempts, they remain negligible. Both the Indian and Western scholars have failed to fully capture the cultural richness of the multifarious indigenous forms of Odisha. Edward Gordon Craig's opinion that "If you go close to Indian theatre you may never return" is apt for Odisha.

It would not be presumptuous to assert that a taste of the cultural diversity of India could be gauged from studying the traditional form of Odisha alone. This is premised on the fact that in all the mutations and permutations, the soil was enriched much before the final contours of Odisha were drawn in 1936. The north-eastern areas bordering Bengal "have been influenced in dress, food habits, language, social customs and festivities by Bengali culture and language. The southern parts of Ganjam and Koraput have a sizable Telegu-speaking population and have been influenced in language, food habits, dress and marriage customs by the Andhra culture and language. The western districts of Sambalpur, Bolangir and Kalahandi may be said in many ways to be a cultural and, to some extent, linguistic continuum with the region

of Chhattisgarh of Madhya Pradesh, where many Oriya-speaking castes live even at present. The fourth region may be said to be the distinctive or typical, or at least the tone setting one, in cultural institutions, social customs and linguistic and literary sophistication. This region comprises roughly the coastal districts of Balasore, Cuttack and Puri and portions of adjoining districts. The remaining areas of the State extending from the northern districts of Sundargarh, Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj to the southern tribal areas of Phulbani, Ganjam and Koraput districts to a large extent, can hardly be pressed to the confines of a more or less homogenous cultural region" (Das11-12). Despite the rich fabric, Odisha's indigenous theatre foregrounds a fragmented representation in say highlighting *Chhau* of Mayurbhanj here or *Prahalad Nataka* there. Essentially *Yatra* is appropriated by Bengal, *Puppetry* by Rajasthan, *Ram Leela* and *Ras Lila* as belonging fundamentally to North India, *Moghul Tamasha* eclipsed by *Tamasha* of Maharashtra. The reality is that all these exist in Odisha albeit with minor modifications even today.

It becomes important to begin from the beginning to encapsulate the brevity of Odisha's contribution in enriching the cultural matrix of India, document its role in the national struggle, before evaluating the contemporary scenario. The marginalization of Odisha had not gone unnoticed by the Oriya nationalists, litterateurs and social activists. Godabaris Mishra addressing Utkali Sammelan as late as 1955 articulated cautious warning: "Of course we have to consider the unity of India first. Our independence came a short while ago. We have to establish the unity of this great country by developing goodwill and amity among different States. For that we have to get ready even to have the ultimate sacrifice. But the unity of India cannot be achieved by only our sacrifice. The way the limbs of Mother Orissa are scattered now, if that continues like that, we would only be slackening the knots of India, not strengthening them. A rich India can never be built on our burial ground. We should come out with strong determination to achieve our demands." (Mohanty 349-50).

A fascinating aspect in the study of Odiya theatre is that the richness of its cultural firmament lies in the fact that the majority of their rulers and kings themselves were not only connoisseurs of art but were either playwrights or poets or at least great patrons of dramatic literature and performances. For instance, the kings of Chikati, Dharakote, Khallikote, Manjusha, Tikkali, Talcher, Ali, Kanika, Bamanda, Mayurbhanj and Sareikellaall promoted traditional art.

Theatre begins in religion and rituals, so is true for traditional art forms too. We find in Odisha, a stream of folk theatre emanating from religious rituals like *Harijanma*, *Rushyasruna Baran* of Kalahandi district, *Thakurani Parva Yatra* of Koraput district, *Dhanu Yatra* of Sambalpur district, *Sahi Yatra* and *Sital Sasthi Yatra* of Puri. Much before the formulation of drama proper, it was *Rama Leela*, *Krishna Leela*, *Bharat Leela*, *Danda Nata*, *Suanga* who sourced entertainment for the masses. This is inevitable because "for peoples of every denomination of the Hindu faith there is a holy shrine of all-India renown on Orissa's soil. From the river Vaitarani in the north, to the Chilka Lake in the south, every inch of land in central Orissa is supposed to be holy according to Hindu scriptures" (Mansinha 2). The temple or the *maths* have provided space for cultural activity since antiquity. There is a popular saying that the gods wanted to be

treated to "drama in the evening, music and dance before going to sleep." Dance, drama and music are intrinsic and innate to Odias.

The indigenous theatre in Odisha is essentially a reaction to the elitism prevalent in theatre. As noted earlier, the majority of auteurs or patrons were kings themselves, the feudal chiefs or the landed aristocracy. The theatrical activity was heavily tilted in favour of the upper, sophisticated, privileged class. The sites for performances were the precincts of temple, the royal courts, *maths*, monasteries or the carved stages of Khandagiri hills. Clearly exclusionary tactics were being pursued. This fructified disconnect between the elites and the masses. The commoners then started exploring an alternate avenue for their intellectual and aesthetic entertainment. This quest led to concretization of "multiple forms of indigenous styles that were performed as parallels to the elitist, bourgeoisie productions in Sanskrit" (Panigrahi 8). It became a parallel stream in the life of villagers. The dramatic tools within the paradigms of the indigenous theatre also helped negotiate the asymmetries of class, caste and power. The evolution of *Sahi Yatra*, for example, vindicates this argument. It is believed that once the Shabar and Nishads (hunters and food gathering tribals) were denied permission to Lord Jagannath temple after Brahmin domination during the time of King Yayati Kesari, they turned to *Bhavana-rasa* and *Veera-rasa* for religious satiation. (Mukhopadhyay 149)

Odisha also boasts of what could be considered an equivalent to present day street theatre. There exist many mobile theatre presentations providing ample opportunities to the audience to keep shifting and adopting different positions during the course of the performances. *Sahi Yatra* is one such unique form performed in the lanes and by-lanes of Puri. Accompanied by music, amidst singing and dancing, the *Naga Saja*, the protagonist moves boisterously in a procession. Life in its varied manifestation, smattered with doses of humour and satire, moves on and interestingly culminates at the same place in the same street from where it had begun. The themes chosen from *Puranas*, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are interwoven with contemporary episodes. Cutting across class and caste, everyone becomes a part of this theatre as an actor, or instrumentalist or as an audience. The life-line of traditional theatre lies in its close affinity and proximity between the performers and the spectator.

To Ramesh Panigrahi, himself a reputed playwright, Odisha's folk theatre begins in 'simple enactments' in the form of collecting money, where playing 'dhudki' the actor would sing to his village community moving from street to street to 'ritualized enactments'. It is difficult to assign the exact date as to the origin of these traditional theatres. Many scholars assign it as 'self-evolved and self-contained' as Mayadhar Mansinha, and hence an attempt in futility to undertake the task of fixing a date. *Yatras* for instance, essentially a drama of the village street could be decoded from the friezes on the cave of Khandagiri near Bhubaneswar. Ranigumpha is considered by many to have served the purpose of 'semi-formal' during the period of Jainism and Buddhism. In support Mansinha referred to a radio talk of Dr. Charles Fabri: "The most fascinating of these is the two storeyed caves now called Ranigumpha, with some admirable second century relief carving, the meaning of which has not been made out. It is a complicated frieze of figures reclining, fighting, abducting a woman and of other subjects carved very much in the style of the Buddhist stupa of Bharhut. Some of the

figure work, though archaic, is simple and is excellently done and must be counted among the best sculptures of early Indian art. In other caves one finds such interesting scenes as a ballet performance by a ballerina in front of a pavilion, accompanied by the music of a number of musicians sitting alongside. Most probably these were attempts by early Oriya artists to depict mass entertainment which we undoubtedly find in the medieval art of Orissa, as one of the most favourite motif" (216). *Jatras* dating to 15th century grew out of Bhakti movement was exclusively a religious theatre that underwent modifications in the 19th century when prose dialogues were incorporated from time to time to the existing repertory of songs by the *Adhikari* (*yatras* equivalent of *Sutradhar*). The prose portions interspersed between acts are humorous, and an indictment of contemporary socio-political issues. Later *Juri* i.e. a team of singers was added. Then *Vivek* (conscience) replaced the *juri*. Some notable dramatists instrumental in the survival and promotion of *Jatra* are Jagannath Pani, Bhikari Nayak, Gopal Dash, Laxmikant Mahapatra, Krishna Prasad Basu, Balakrishnan Mohanty, Baishnava Pani and Ramesh P. Panigrahi. Baishnava Pani however is credited with modernising and revolutionising *Jatras*, there by ensuring its posterity.

Dhanu Yatra started in Bargarh in 1948, is a popular folk theatre. It is again based on mythology encapsulating the marriage of Devaki and Basudev, birth of Sri Krishna, his eternal love for Gopis, killing of Asuras, journey to Mathura and other Puranic events culminating in the death of Kansa. It initially started as an eleven day non-stop performance but post Indo-China war (1962-62), the schedule was restricted to nine days. The whole area of Vrindavan is transported to Odisha. Bargarh becomes Mathura, village Amapalli is the mystical Gopapur and the Jeera River is accepted as river Yamuna. The whole area spread over two kilometres and the grand scale on which it is mounted lends a resplendent spectacle. Along with main actors, the villagers of Bargarh and Amapalli adorn the character of *gopals* (milkmen) and *gopis* (milk women). The laudable thing about this performance is that it entails lot of improvisations. Since dialogues are not fixed, it keep on changing. This form, however, remains to be recorded and documented.

Suanga especially *Lakshmi Purana Suanga* written by Balarama Dasa, the 15th century author reflects the collective consciousness of Orissa. It is a part and parcel of their life and Thursdays of every Margashirsha is celebrated as a national festival.

The other forms prevalent as folk performances can be clubbed as 'ritualized enactments' and are conspicuous for the fusion of entertainment with controlled abstract or symbolic actions. *Oshakothi*, *Jhamu Jatra* and *Danda Nata* belong to this category. *Oshakothi* is performed by the untouchable communities during Dussehra in the district of Ganjam. There is a huge participation of women, singers and dancers who indulge in occasional dialogues with the audience making the performance interactive. *Jhamu Jatra* is steeped in primitivism and defies logic and reason in the age of rationalism. It is aquasi-tantric folk where the main protagonist walks in a procession to a ritualistic pole, 'sacrifice a cock, pierce iron rings on his back and walks on the fire-pit, putting on a black costume.'

Danda-Nata is practised in various parts of Odisha, especially in Ganjam, Puri, Khurda, Dhenkanal, Boudh, Phulbani, Keonjhar, Bolongir and Sambalpur districts. It

has both religious and dramatic overtones. The dramatic structures are composed of independent episodes loosely tied together. The total performance can be broken into several units of action. The ritual cycle extends over a number of days. The whole paraphernalia moves in a procession to the accompaniment of songs, drum beats, dances and acrobatics while the object of the ritual are carried and used in the dramatic performances of the group. The *danda*, the *prava*, the *dhol*, the *dandamuthi* are used both as props as well as the objects of the ritual.

Danda Nata performed at almost all places where Goddess Kali is worshipped is split into two parts. One part takes place in the day time and the other modelled on *Suargas* and *Jatra* tradition are performed during the night in open spaces in the playgrounds. The pole is not fixed. Rather it is carried in the form of sticks called *Gouribetra*, *Dandabetra* or is stylized 'danda' (stick) used by *Veenakar*, reminiscent of *Narada*, akin to *Sutradhar* of classical plays. There is a rustic touch imparted to *Bhoomi Danda* or *Dhuli Danda* as the name suggests. The performance consists of eight actors and an agricultural ambience is recreated. Rituals associated with the folk life are enacted completely with agricultural functions like tilling, sowing, weeding and harvesting. Lecherous, greedy landlords are integral part of village. The narrative, therefore, includes the malpractices of the landlord interspersed with comic interludes. The *Danda Nata* according to some scholars owes its origin to the influence of Babylonian civilization dating to 2nd century before Christ.

Odisha is home to many temple dances like *Gotipua* and *Mahari*, war dances like *Chau* of Mayurbhanj, and *Paika dances* that many scholars do not favour their inclusion as folk theatre because of the absence of dialogues. It is important to assert that normally the *Leelas* – *Ram Leela* and *Krishna Leela* are considered as North India specific traditional theatre form. There exists in almost all the parts of Odisha a variety of *Leela* as part of folk theatre. Majority of them owe their existence to the age of Bhakti Movement because they display close affinity with the *Rasagoshti Rupakam* of the Sanskrit tradition. So we have a *Ram Leela*, a month long pageantry held in Puri, *Radha Prem Leela* in Ganjam district, *Krishna Leela* performed almost all over Odisha in different forms. Yet another variant of *Leela* is the *Bharat Leela*, also known as *Dwari-Leela* enacted by the so called 'untouchables' of Ganjam district. It is performed in open air and has a *dwari* or the gatekeeper acting as the main protagonist. He is the conscience keeper. By investing the 'untouchable' with power in the *dwari*, the *Bharat Leela* is actually highlighting the 'tension between the mainstream and the subcultures. It is an attempt to rehabilitate the culture of the marginal people' (Panigrahi 4).

Ghoda-Natia another indigenous popular form has survived the modern technology. At present performed on proscenium stage but essentially meant to be performed in the open where the village dancer would go inside gigantic king and queen dolls. This is also known as 'horse-dance' and is popular in Chaudhwar. This exciting folk theatre has its origin in primitive time but still survives with interpolations. This traditional theatre is synonymous with the fishermen community. Guru Utsav Das, premising on Achyutananda's *Kaivarta Geeta*, locates the genesis to a myth. It encapsulates the metamorphosis of Kalpabata or banyan tree into a giant horse who stayed in the court of Fisherman king. Later on his request, Lord Vishnu build a wooden mask for the horse. Since then, the horse became the presiding deity of the fishermen

community and worshipped as *Aswini Baseli*. After the *Chaitra Poornima* is over, the fishermen carry the symbolic horse mask on their shoulders, dancing to the percussion of the *dhol*. This primitive form continuance with improvisations is a vindication of the participatory nature of folk form. This practical theatre has been institutionalized over the years in which the dummy horse is a mask, a stage property as well as a kinetic acting space.

Daskathia and *Pala* are 'story-telling performances'. Accompanied by chorus and actors, the performance includes songs, dialogues and gesture. The subject matter ranges from mythology to history. *Dasakathia* originated in the erstwhile undivided Ganjam district is popular all over Odisha. *Das* means devotee and *Kathia* are the two wooden pieces held in left hand and ticked together with fingers of the right hand to beat tune to the rhythm. It is performed with two artists - the *Gayaka* adorns the role of the main singer and his partner is *Palia*. With the tinklers tied to their ankles, the *Gayaka* plays on a pair of *Rama Tali* and the *Palia* on the pair of *Daskathi*. The *gayaka* begins narrating some story mainly from mythology using songs and verse and is joined by *palia* singing, repeating or responding or sometimes seeking clarifications. To engage the audience, *palia* also breaks into small repartee.

Pala is associated with the worship of Satyapir, God for Hindus and the Muslims and is dated to the Mughal period, when attempts were made for the unification of both the religions. The word '*Pala*' is derived from '*Pali*', the language used in ancient Kalinga. *Pala* is instrumental in popularising the ancient Oriya literature. The *Purba Ranga* of a *Pala* play bears resemblance to the *Purba Ranga* mentioned in *Natya Sastra*. *Pala* is supposed to retain the maximum requirements spelt out by the *Natya Sastra*, justifying the classical origin of this form. *Pala* performed with six persons has a high degree of literary quotient. The main actor - *Gayaka* holds a *Chamara* plays on a small pair of *Manjiras* while the *Palias* constitute the chorus. There is a *jester* or *Vidushaka*. The main theme runs in the form of a commentary, highlighting important portions in the real enactment of drama, each player turning into a character with dialogues. The *Gayaka* intermittently breaks his singing to explain certain nuances to the masses turning the performance into a literary discourse.

The *Prahalad Natak* and *Moghal Tamasha* continues to draw the attention of practitioners and scholars originated in mid-19th century. Gourahari Paricha (1829) is credited to be real author of *Prahalad Natak*. It bears close association with *Yakshagana* and is the oldest and most vibrant form dominating the district of Ganjam. Despite the availability of modern forms of entertainment, *Prahalad Natak*, also known as '*Raja Nata*' continue to enthral people. *Prahalad Natak* as was the case with other art forms too depended on royal patronage for its survival. In the absence of financial support and lack of sponsorship, the practitioners have become sceptical about its continuity. Gourahari Paricha wrote 120 songs in dedication to Raja Ramkrishna Chhotray of Jalantar. It consists of twenty male and five female characters played by boys along with a *Sutradhar* (*Gahaks*) singing '*padyalu*' in Sanskritized Oriya. According to Kamalakant Kar, scholar and critic of *Prahalad Natak* "unfazed by the onslaught of time and lack of patronage, mainly artists of *Prahalad Natak* include Hiranyakashipu popularly referred to as Raja, Rani, Kayadhu, Prahalad and Sutradhas, still chug on to keep the art alive with utmost dedication and perseverance. What mesmerises the

audience is the extraordinary skill of word power in the verses, swiftness in movement of the performers and the high pitched voice of presenting the theme." *Prahalad Natak* makes use of both vocals and instrumentals, elaborate costume and make up, stylized gestures to optimize the dramatic effects. It is performed in the open on a five or six tiered stage at the top of which the throne of Hiranyakasipu is placed.

Moghal Tamasha, written by Bansi Ballav is a popular form emerging from Bhadrak in the district of Balasore. The play captures 15th and 16th century period when Odisha was under the Mughal rule. It is full of humour and satire and is immensely popular even today. Songs are composed both in Odia and Persian. Dialogue is quite amusing and peppery. The other ancient form of folk theatre happens to be the shadow puppetry called *Ravan Chhaya*. Dr. Gouranga Charan Das traced the origin of shadow puppetry of Odisha to pre-Aryan period, much before the Sanskrit *Vyayogas* of Kharavela, *Danda Nata* and even the *Mahayana* of the Buddhists. Ironically Odisha is least synonymous with the theatre of puppetry.

Contemporary theatre practitioners like Manoranjan Das, Bijoy Mishra, Ramesh P. Panigrahi, Subodh Pattanaik and Rati Misra have assimilated folk elements in their modern plays. Undoubtedly, it is perseverance, dedication and commitment of the practitioners of these traditional theatres against all adversities who are responsible for the survival of art. As Mansinha observes: "Not the scholars, not the Government or aristocrats, not the printing press in Orissa, but it is these wandering Palawalas and Daskathias who have kept alive among the Oriya masses the keenest and enthusiasm for classical Oriya literature" (222). Moreover, as long as an alternative forum of mass entertainment eludes, such indigenous forms if and wherever they exist will continue to be the popular theatre for the common folks.

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