

EVOLUTION AND IMPACT OF 'JATRA' AS COMMUNITY MEDIA ON CIVIL SOCIETY

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Abstract:

India is filled with ancient art forms which leave people in awe of its cultural heritage. One such ageless visual art form is *Jatra* predominantly found in the states of Orissa and West Bengal. Its history can be dated back to the 15th century. During ancient times mythic and religious themes were used to spread awareness of the spiritual way of life like the *Ram Leela* exhibiting the life of Lord Ram. Accompanied by music, dance and actions they were contentment to the eyes. Through the concerned paper, we are trying to explore the evolution of the *Jatra* over the years from ancient to present and its impact on the society. This art form is still found but in different adaptations in many parts of the state. The radical change in this 'dying art' has raised our interest to understand the present status and dimensions of the transformation.

Keywords: jatra, ancient, modern, change, impact, society

India is a land of rich and ancient cultural heritage. Over the years this inheritance has passed down the generations, optimizing the need to appreciate and preserve the glorious history. Every state has its own tale of pride. What is interesting are the ancient forms of entertainment. They are not only forms of recreation but a reflection of the socio-political, cultural and traditional lineages of the centuries. They were also a means of communication in the civil society. A brief overview of these works of art brings to light the diverse culture prevalent in the local communities. These art forms worked as community media which were independent of political influences. The local art forms communicated and presented the contrast and distinctness of their places of origin. They were a privy to the mainstream changes taking place in the society. They can boast about the linguistic diverseness, intercultural acceptance, being non-ethnocentric, promoting tolerance and also intrinsically exhibiting coexistence of people, society and media during times of cultural and social upheavals.

The carriers of these art forms had no idea that they were the flag bearers of the present media and community media industry. Had these folk arts been consciously groomed in those days the history would have reflected a different society maybe more progressive and structured in nature. When Aristotle stated the phrase 'civil society' as 'kolnoria politike' in his book *Politics*, he actually states –“*political community*”, commensurate with the Greek city-state (polis) characterized by a shared set of norms and ethos, in which free citizens on an equal footing lived under the rule of law”. But over the years the term itself has been subjected to alterations and varied usages in

different contexts. Community media thus has gone through similar or drastic changes in its subsistence.

The art forms could probably survive because they started their journey as folk arts, taking religion and mythology as their sources of projection. Some parts of this, created path for the modern theatres to come into existence in different languages. Infused with music, songs, drama, costumes and even masks, they were a pure source of entertainment in their prime days. One such art form was the *Jatra*. This art form is found in the states of Orissa, West Bengal and Assam. The roots of this form of art are ancestry finding its way right to the Puranic scriptures.

The term Jatra is derived from the Sanskrit word 'यात्रा' (yatra) meaning procession or journey. This was the name given to the moving musical theatre folk art form. Jatra is popular in rural Orissa by the name of Opera or Gananatya also. We find references of this in the Vaishnaism cult of Hinduism, set in the era of Bhakti movement in the 16th century. Sarala Das, a 15th century poet writes in *Virata Parva*:

"Ahe Virata je dese rangasabha nahin Jatra Utsaba Yebana dese na huai Yebana deshare puni nahin yaga yagana Janiba se desha nische asurankabhogya"

(Epic-“VirataParva”)

The above verse explains: “O Virata, a country which is devoid of jatra or theatre houses, that enacts aesthically, colourful plays, and rich with emotional extravaganza and thereby uplift cultural activities, where scared rites are not being held, must be a country inhabited by uncivilized demons.”(Panigrahi, 2018)

This gives proof of its presence in the 15th century and maybe even before. That is a hundred years before the Bhakti movement. As per temple culture in Orissa, in the 12th century *GeetaGovinda* by Jaydeva was performed in the temple premises for Lord Jagannath, kings and priests. The form had artistic dance form and music (Panigrahi , 2018). It had royal patronage also. The musical resonances of lyrics along with songs and dances to appease Lord Krishna had formed the backdrop of further development in the Jatra. The cult is an integral part of eastern India specially Orissa and West Bengal. Sri Chaitanya’s depiction of Lord Krishna’s life was an attempt to bring social reform by devotion and gain the ultimate salvation irrespective of caste and gender. The movement finds its mention in the *Bhagvad Gita*, *Bhagavata Purana* and *Padma Purana*. It should be noticeable that the reform itself was trying to bring about social change by challenging the caste and gender inequality at those testing times.

With the changing facets of the society the expressions of these moving theatres also changed. The Jatra is also known as opera in Orissa. It was a popular form in Bengal and reached Orissa in the late 19th century. Though there are some evidences of its existence even before the Bengali Jatra entered Orissa, we have not been yet able to find concrete proofs of their acts. The initiators of the earliest form of Jatra were Baishnad Pani, Gopal Das, Jagannath Pani and Balakrishna Mohanty. Then the Jatra’s were performed in open fields with the stage right in the centre of the audience. The musicians with their instruments sat beside the stage. Only male artists performed, even the parts of the female were played by the male. The themes were mythological and historical. The situations and problems of real life were rarely displayed on the stage. The aim was to suit

the requirement of entertainment and religious awareness in the audience. Various drama forms are found in 'Jatra' as per the districts they are performed- Suanga, Leela, Danda Nata, Sakhi Nata, Dhanu Yatra, Sahi jatra and Jatra itself. With little or major differences between their act, the layout is still the same. For example- *Suanga* is in the form of Geetabhinaya (where the character sings the dialogues). Orissa's Temple Literature is full of such descriptions and forms the major theme in this drama. Bibra Nilambar's *Deulatola Suanga* and Balaram Das's *Laxmipurana Suanga* are some illustrations.

Another famous and updated form is the *Dhanu Jatra*, which is celebrated in the areas of Bargarh to Sambalpur. It has become a ritual in itself maintaining the traditional structure, form and performance style. It is observed for eleven days, displaying the *leela* of Lord Krishna's life. It takes place in a moveable vehicle which actually is the theatre. The parts of Lord Krishna's life are enacted by stopping in public places or *chowks*. The character playing the 'Kansa' (maternal uncle of Lord Krishna) is allowed to rule the districts for those eleven days. (Panigrahi, 2004) The *Leela* and *Sahi jatra* are other forms which display the important life incidents of Lord Krishna, Lord Rama and Lord Jagannath. The exhibit is like a street demonstration. Jagannath Das was the pioneer of *Leela* form. *Sahi Jatra* is a popular form in the Puri district. The lanes of Puri are filled with Lord Jagannath's stories and this forms the basis of this Jatra. The local drama forms have maintained the regional cultural heritage effortlessly in the states.

The societal changes forced the themes, stories, characters and even the names of the plays to be changed. Gradually the Jatra at its peak transformed to meet the requirements of the modern day audience. Politics, awareness about social issues and exaggerated music, acting and dialogues found its way in the moving open theatres. Hero worshipping, patriotism, romance, local myths and tales were added to the surprise of the audience. It was quite similar to the *Nautanki* and *Tamasa* of Maharashtra, *Ramlila* and *Raslila* of Uttar Pradesh, *Bhavai* of Gujarat, *Terukkuttu* of Tamil Nadu and even *Yakshagana* of Karnataka. Except *Tamasha* none of these art forms took women to stage. It was as late as 19th century, when women were allowed on stage. Earlier the characters of the Lord were hereditary but this changed with conceptual changes taking place in the structure itself. From the lyrical version of the dialogues, we find thrilling dialogues and even songs taking their place more like the cinemas then. Every play has a centralized 'conscience' character who acts as a bridge between the body and soul of the characters.\

With the passage of time, the commercialization of the Jatra took place. In 1869, Baikuntha Nath set up a group called 'Natta-der-Dal' subsequently called as the Natta Company. Famous for its grandeur and music, it became an instant attraction for the people as a source of entertainment. They started with mythology and religious themes playing in temples and sponsored courtyards and ventured into nearby villages and towns. In course of their journey, the content, language and themes also got enhanced. They tried to hit with the masses with better stories and new subjects, as the demand of the hour being subtle and yet strong in their momentum.

Professional and freelance writers, singers, actors and musicians were hired. Many troops of Jatra came into existence. Companies had their own set of people and moved on hired and contract basis. The seasonal festivals like Durga puja or Kali puja were business seasons for the Jatra groups. A period of nine months was the work month of people in the group. Lack of drastic advertisement measures and replacement of popular mediums of entertainment started modifying the authenticity of the art. The obsession of Jatra at times was like addiction in rural India where the troops, actors and their characters competed to find higher sources of crowd and popularity. It became an industry to recommend giving employment to many a livelihood. Baretendu Harishchandra, a 19th century dramatist became the pioneer of Hindi drama theatre by using folk and western contemporary themes to manipulate and hype the audience. Even Rabindranath Tagore, joined the force, when he was motivated by the *baul* folk singers. He combined all in his capacity to create opera which he believed could help people become enlightened and improve the community and patriotic feelings. Late in 1950s, Kali Charan Pattanaik of Banki, decided to venture into this business. He settled at Cuttack and established the *Annarnapura Rangmanch*. (Chhotaray, 2013) He introduced regular screen and stage performances at particular intervals of time, quite similar to the screening time for movies. This in itself was a new beginning. With him, came the women artistes for female characters. Bijaya Mishra, Sachi Das and few others dramatist experimented with secular and colonial themes to bring refined topics in Jatra. Orissa gained momentum in Jatra for reshaping itself in the late 1980's. Banirampur Opera, Nagespur Opera, Tulasi Ganantya, Shivani Ganantya, Eastern Media, Tarpur Opera, Uttarakhand Opera, Dhauri Ganantya are only few names which made fame. They were immensely popular both in cities and even drawing larger audiences in rural districts. The development in the conception of the dramas has also changed. Lights, music, moving stages with precise backdrops made Jatra enthusiast and even non enthusiast attracted to the stage. The double stage and revolving stage were a highlight for these operas. Winter to summer being the seasons of performance, the excitement was evident in people. Professional artists added to the pleasurable experience adding to a dominating feel. Dramatic actions and dialogues created an awe inspiring session for the audience. The Jatra usually started late at night and ended by dawn; still it remained one of the important traditional forms of entertainment. At the height of its success, some Oriya film and television industry people also were attracted to its popularity and joined the troops even if on temporary and character basis. Anubha Mishra, Hara Pattanaik and many more joined the stage for fame and its rage among audience. The pay, popularity and fame were too high to ignore. With the infusion of technology, further modifications were incorporated to create better vibes and attract more to the shows. Some troops and artists become so popular that they had to be pre booked in sessions. For a brief amount of time the annual turnover of this industry reached 100 crore, where it left behind the *Ollywood* which had only 20 crore revenue. This also helped to maintain some standard and incur good management helping in growth and stability. The vibrant and lively atmosphere in the Jatra is hard to ignore. To attract more audience, record dance and melody slowly found its way to Jatra. Record dance is an interesting concept. The group of dancers perform on hit and popular songs of movies. Since, people had limited access to the national

television show times then and songs could be listened on the radio only. However, the time and visual access was limited. The next option was buying the cassettes or records of movies. Record dance gave the audience, the thrill of watching a dance number with all its visual and audio treats. It was a new kind of experience for the rural people where modes of entertainment were limited. The actions and body movements along with the flashy clothes creates a memory hard to forget. Since it was live, the experience was hands-on. Making deep impacts was easy and went a long way to manipulate audience for popularity and house-full tents.

Initially, Melody (song and music concerts) was not a part of the Jatra culture. But catering to the need of the hour, professional singers found their way to only sing songs. Famous melody singers made guest appearances to hype atmosphere.

There were approximately 300 Jatra troops in Orissa alone with 2000-3000 artists and non-artists. The audience percentage could be close to 87 % with revenue of millions to counts. Some Jatra troops performed for over 200 approx. nights. All for the popularity of the groups, artists involved in this profession rarely deviate from their characters. Increase in competition among Jatra groups keeps them updated to follow social trends of the times. There are three classes of Jatra troops – as A-Class, B-Class and C-Class. Popular A-Class troops can earn upto 50 lakhs or more per year depending on the number of booking and ticketing.(Chhotaray, 2013)

The field of Jatra has greatly increased since 1994. Earlier good stories and superb acting skills used to hold audience. But presently when it comes to maintain standards an awkward trend is seen. Derogatory names for plays, obscene dialogues, even sensual dances are included to attract audiences. The level of acting has also deteriorated. But technology can't be ignored. Despite the mushrooming TV entertainment channels and cinema, Jatra continues to be the most popular mode of entertainment in the state. Things have changed completely from back in the 90s where men were preferred to play role of women. Now Jatra offers money and respect to all. Jatra has glamour and is a different medium altogether and can not to be compared with cinema. Here, we get to see actors live and can connect with them unlike in cinema. Many issues like casting couch, sexual advancements, and gender exploitation are rumors which are mere perceptions. Girls are safe here and live with dignity. One is under constant surveillance so that no one can be exploited. It depends on the girls if she wants to be exploited for fame and money but this happens everywhere. It is wrong to point fingers at Jatra when such exploitations can be anywhere. The Jatra is also subjected to bias in profession. Many families do not believe that it is respectable and only ideals become artists was the preconceived notion. On the other hand Jatra was also considered as a hereditary business and profession. It used to pass down the generations. The women producer of Tarapur Opera is an example of the very system. Many are even unaware that 'theater –culture' is a profession and an industry with recognition.

Women entertaining the world were looked down for a long time especially in the 90's. Many girls did join Jatra out of monetary needs and wanted to be independent. It is tough for women to continue in Jatra because of constant travelling, odd and long work hours. But, passion and interest

to excel keeps them going. Many women quit Jatra industry after marriage because of hectic schedules. Some even marry in the same profession, to make it easier to keep working. But all these are makeshift arrangements to continue in their desired job.

Whatever, the artists working in the Jatra lives a life of excitement tasting both fame and dejection. It's physically tiring and mentally staining to keep up with the constant demands. The rest and back stage of the jatra troops are an eye opener for understanding adaptability and enthusiasm. Since the operational seasons are from the September to May, they face winter and summer, the harshest months. The tent houses provide little or no relief to neither hot nor cold. With make-up, glittery costumes and hairdos, it takes all the patience one has to come back to the same time and again. Still, it is enthralling to be in the profession where people admire you and your talent openly. Many depended small scale individuals and families earn their livelihood from the Jatra. The costumes, tents, posters, lights, decoration, advertisements, projectors, music every other sector is depended on this industry as a subsidiary.

The television industry has now started streaming Jatra in particular channels. But, it does not carry the same excitement as open theatres used to give but it is a good relief to the Jatra lovers. In such scenarios, the Jatra not only is advocating its presence but also creating its stand as a form of entertainment, much deserving of its very nature. Centre and state government should take some concrete steps worthy of the melioration. Some local bodies have come forward to make some contributions for the boost but the efforts are still not enough. Sangeet Natak Academy and Patitpaban Sanskrutik Parishad had tried to organize some festivals for awareness. Jatra troopes are a must in some festivals like the Khandagiri Mela in Bhubaneswar, Durga Puja in Angul District and Ganesh Puja in Talcher areas. Some rare cases like the Panchasakha Jatra Academy bestows award to expert jatra artists for their contributions. Being adaptable in nature, it has kept evolving keeping the dynamics of 'survival of the fittest'. Magazines like *Jatra Duniya* are a reminder to the public about the popular artists and characters.

Jatra has come a long way from the Vedic devotional stream to the modern day theatre. From praising hymns of gods to becoming a part of large mass festivals in rural India, it never failed to entertain its audience. There were times when the Jatra as a source of entertainment ruled the industry with a turnover of 1.8 million annually. Even before the concepts of channels were thought about, the demands of entertainment for the heterogeneous audiences was fulfilled by Jatra. Modernization and civilised society where social media and OTT platforms now rule the industry, the future of this folk art form is diminishing. A few aspiring and determined faces still struggle to keep this moving theatre form alive. The experiments and their successes are commendable to let the tradition survive. The survival is at the cost of losing the sanctity of its very essence. Jatra as community media in the 16th century was trying to bring religious awaking. In 17th century it tried to advocate equality in caste and gender. In 18th century it changed its lyrical mode and tried to make place for fresh topics. Though religion, mythology were still the themes still the portrayal of characters was different giving them new light. 19th century saw an introduction of new themes like patriotism, hero worship, and even modern day to day affairs. Though the change was subtle, the effort was evident. The understatement was to give assistance

and create awareness for the sacrifices during the freedom struggle .20th century brought commercialization and serious themes into practice. Common man topics became themes. The face of open theatres underwent further change with modern equipments. Dramatic dialogues and action marked the essence. The modifications were indeed attractive. Modern musical bands, professional artists and a secure stability, gave people hope to join Jatra as a full time profession. It created livelihood and became an industry.(Parhi , 2017) Companies like Eastern Media, Konark Ganantya , Bharati Ganantya paved way for professional development. These efforts probably helped Jatra receive the national Award in 2006.

As 20th century progresses towards its end and the world gets ready to welcome a new millennium, the technological advancement is overpowering. This may give a new light to the age old Jatra form but how long, is yet to be seen. The gradual entry of new entertainment channels and new film-making techniques along with easy access to them, added to the woes of the Jatra troops. With the advent of the 21st century, Jatra was no longer an entertainment source. It rather appeared like survival of the traditional folk art. Conservative societies with narrow outlooks may affect the income source but Jatra is a hard to die art. The powerful scope of live theatre is simply awe inspiring. The exaggerated dialogues and actions may seem funny to the modern audience, but it is the genius artist who dares to play convincing characters on an open stage with no scope of re-takes. Jatra as an entertainment industry in Orissa is embedded in its culture and life of people. It may become dormant, change, modify or even become a rare folk art in course of modernization, but it will never cease to exist. Despite all the conflict and problems, it is a replica of Orissa's culture and traditions, a carrier of heritage. It gave trust, ambition and possibilities to millions of people. It did its part to awaken, educate and support during times of instabilities. It joined people together by giving them pure entertainment when there was no other source. Poverty, illiteracy, discrimination, struggles and barriers in outlook had only strengthened the stance by constant self reforms. The debate still lives the same. The impact on society was like a butterfly effect- small yet powerful. Probably, providing an official status would allow the Jatra to continue making waves and giving more causes to admire its existence among us and in the coming generations.

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