



FOLK THEATRE: A POWERFUL MEDIUM OF DISSENT IN INDIA

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Abstract:

This study examines the role of folk theatre in India as a significant form of dissent, used to expose societal issues and drive social awareness. Theatre worldwide has long been a tool for revealing societal truths and inspiring audiences to act for social change. In India, folk theatre has communicated themes of oppression and misuse of power, shaping a new understanding of social realities. Beyond simply informing audiences about injustices, it urges them towards immediate action. Folk theatre in India has addressed both social and political issues; while socially it may highlight community issues without directly challenging authority, politically, it often critiques or supports certain ideologies (Kumar, 2000). In the 1930s, forms like Jatra, Nautanki, and Tamasha were adopted by activists to discuss socio-political topics, making a strong impression on audiences. Artists such as *Bijon Bhattacharya*, who staged the play *Nibanna* in 1944 to highlight worker exploitation, and *Safdar Hashmi*, regarded as the father of street theatre in India, used this medium to address political and social concerns. Similarly, *Habib Tanvir*, *Utpal Dutt*, and Kashmiri artists like *Ghulam Ali Majboor* utilized folk theatre to encourage socio-political awareness. This paper employs a descriptive and qualitative approach, analyzing secondary sources such as books, journals, and research papers, supplemented by internet research.

Keywords: Dissent, Folk theatre, India, Protest, Traditional media, Culture

1. Introduction

There is a long history of using folk theatre performance as a tool of activism, from the road mediations of ‘Bread and Puppet Theater’ to the mystery shows of ‘Belarus Free Theater.’ And from the anti- Trident rally in London to the Umbrella protest in Hong Kong people have used performances to put forth their point (Lee & Chan, 2018). As the performing art form theatre is

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considered a literary art which includes a plot, characters, and exchange. It displays or mirrors contemporary society. The main element is to draw out the nature and estimation of individuals and society. Every theatre performance is the reflection of society, its inclination, and contemporary circumstances. Each society has its own particular way of thinking, growth, expression, and growth in creating literature. No artwork can profess to be unopinionated or apolitical. All art forms have ceaselessly advanced with society's social and political issues (Sundar, 1989). Art has been utilized as a tool of protest, both deliberately or unknowingly, by artists since times immemorial. From Latin America to the Philippines, various types of folk theatres are utilized as a tool for raising conspicuous feelings on health, work, and rights of women, essentially dependent on the theatrical structure named 'Theater for the Oppressed' as created by Augusto Boal, influenced by Paulo Freire's work. When in 1968 Freire laid out his hypothesis – 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' – to fundamentally scrutinize the regular scholastic framework and converse the top-down methodology of training into a participatory procedure, another type of social instruction and growth for the underestimated and the minimized came to execution and got worldwide acknowledgment (Saxon & Vitzthum, 2012).

"No pedagogy which is truly liberating can remain distant from the oppressed by treating them as unfortunate and by presenting for their emulation models from among the oppressors. The oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption" (Freire, 1970).

The need for genuine information is not the need as it already exists among individuals. Freire accepted that the change in the world could not be only brought by information delivery to the oppressed. However, there is a need for dialogic exchange, essential speculation, and empathy for humankind, practice, and activity. Based on the Marxism and anti-colonialism ideology, Freire accepted that education is not free from the impact of political thinking. He affirmed that somehow, how students are educated and, furthermore, the subject of the instruction is not liberated from any political motivation. In this way, a fundamental comprehension of the legislative issues is vital for educators and understudies. As Freire accepted, education is the liberation of the oppressed, and the oppressed themselves must actively participate in their liberation.

"Libertarian action must recognize this dependence as a weak point and attempt to transform it into independence through reflection and action. However, not even the best-intentioned leadership can bestow independence as a gift. The liberation of the oppressed is the liberation of women and men, not things. Accordingly, while no one liberates himself by his own efforts alone, neither is he liberated by others. Liberation, a human phenomenon, cannot be achieved by semi-humans. Any attempt to treat people as semi-humans only dehumanizes them." (Freire, 1970)

Like Freire, Boal also accepted that the individuals in his plays are not a negligible activity, with fewer onlookers; however, they are simply the whole 'theatre' – the on-screen characters and the perspectives typified in one. He stated, "The Theatre of the Oppressed is the theatre in this most archaic application of the word. In this usage, all human beings are Actors (they act) and Spectators (they observe)". According to his theory, we - the individuals - by experiencing the encounters of seeing ourselves in various activities, can change and revise our own activities and of the world. Theatre of the Oppressed flips the method of a direction dramatic introduction. It makes indigenous theatre a medium for social communication by connecting with the people through basic reasoning

and logical thinking, dialogic exchange, and disclosure for freedom. Among the tools and strategies the characters can use to lift the audience from exploitation and prompt development. Though their treatment of theatre performances has changed over the years, the key ideas have stayed predictable (Project, 2011). Art need not be fundamentally political, yet looking at it outside politics would be futile. Also, the shared change in works of art and society mirrors a correlative relationship at play. Apart from being an instrument of entertainment, folk arts have likewise been used as a voice to express socio-political concerns in subtle and direct ways.

1.1 Historical Background of Resistance through Folk Theatre in India

Indian folk theatre dates back thousands of years. Initially, it functioned as an amusement; nevertheless, it rapidly evolved into a medium for communities to contemplate their lives and surrounding situations. It evolved as a medium for articulating individuals' challenges and realities, particularly in social and political contexts. Comprehending this history elucidates why folk theatre emerged as a significant medium for individuals to articulate dissent and engage with their communities. India has a rich history of folk theatre, which is over 5000 years old (Das, 2013). Various folk theatres have been utilized over centuries to either bring a change or spread a specific belief system. Different administrative and social groups have been utilizing folk theatre across India as a compelling medium to engage individuals with performances and information and awareness about different socio-political issues. Folk theatre has been utilized widely in India to inform individuals about social turmoil, fight the rulers' mistreatment, and amuse the majority. As a multilingual and multicultural country, India has various types of folk theatre forms that are performed at celebrations, supplications, and fairs, mirroring the social texture and ideologies. The different folk theatre structures used as a form of protest are subtly discussed below.

1.1.1 Nukkad Natak: Another name for Street theatre in India is Nukkad Natak. Theatre performances are mostly at marketplaces, street corners, colleges, and universities. According to Jan Cohen-Cruz (1998), street theatre is "an expression of a revolutionary political and nationalist movement that not only entertains its audiences but has a deep-rooted role to play in social change." One of the pioneers of theatre in India and a famous theatre activist, Safdar Hashmi, sees street theatre as "a tool to spread political ideology, especially to propagate communism and draw the masses of people into the anti-colonial struggle" (Deshpande, 2007). Post-Independence, Safdar Hashmi and his theatre group Jana Natya Manch (JANAM) have been instrumental in advancing street theatre (*Nukkad Natak*) in India. JANAM oversaw from multiple points of view to take the performance center to the majority and took up issues like caste, class, and gender in their performances. JANAM's performances were in a wide range of open spaces, such as universities, working-class settlements, factories, ghettos, etc. In a time when the government used the street theatre to bring the issues to light about social and wellbeing concerns, for example, AIDS, family planning, etc. JANAM was an attempt by Hashmi to mobilize the people to pursue political desires. Some of the recent street theatre performances by JANAM are –“*Yeh Dil Mange More Guruji*” (on the rigidity of Hindutva to obliterate India's 13 democratic frameworks and secularism), “*AakhriJuloos*” (on the right to protest for all, against injustice), “*Yeh Bhi Hinsa Hai*” (on violence

against women), “*Honda ka Gunda*” (on the condition of workers in Gurgaon), “*Naarey Nahin To Naatak Nahin*” (on industrial laborers), “*Rehri-patri Nahin Hatenge*” (on the issues of concern for hawkers’ union), “*Kafila Ab Chal Pada Hai*” (on AIDWA).

1.1.2 Bhand Pather: This is a folk theatre form of Kashmir and has been used as a medium of protest for more than 200 years. It has been used to protest the atrocities of Dogra, Sikh, and Afghan regimes. It has constantly endeavored to deliver the struggle of marginalized classes of society at various degrees of mistreatment by foreign rulers. Deliberately or unintentionally, the Bhand Pather has been used as an artistic expression to raise the voice against various forms of social injustice. Bhand Pather artists in Kashmir have staged many performances across the valley of Kashmir to protest, inform, and educate the people about the hostile approach of the people at the helm of affairs and social disruption (Fayaz, 2008).

1.1.3 Puppetry: Puppetry has been used in India to protest against wrong social practices. Shows have been organized to raise the voice for violence against women, endangered species, and communal harmony. Puppet shows in Rajasthan delivering the message about famine relief workers and what they should get as minimum wages provoked the rural women to go on strike, and their efforts led to the Famine Relief Act being declared illegal by the Supreme Court (Ghosh, 2009). Different activists across India have used puppetry to raise the issues about evil practices in society and protest the same. In the Shaheen Bagh, New Delhi protest of 2019, apart from songs, poetry, paintings, and students from different universities staged shows using puppetry and Nukkad Natak as a medium to protest against the Citizenship Amendment Act.

1.1.4 Jatra: A folk theatre form of Bengal and Orissa that depicts individuals' social and cultural issues and has been regularly utilized as a mode of political awareness. At first, Jatra was increasingly melodic; however, components of solid discourse were additionally presented later. Its fundamental style and structure incorporate sharp exchanges and boisterous music. Utpal Dutt, the famous theatre artist, has extensively used Jatra performances to raise awareness among the people about various political issues. He used it as a tool for Leftist political ideology and wrote the first professional Jatra named *Rifle* in 1968. Some of his famous written Jatra scripts are *Jallianwala Bagh*, *Sanyasir Tarobari*, *Aranyer*, *Ghum Bhangchhe*, *Dilli Chalo*, *Simanta*, *Ferrari Fauj*, and many more which talked about which dealt with different political and social issues (Barman, 2014). Utpal Dutt says, “We do not have another medium like the Jatra. It is much more powerful than the theatre, a medium which reaches out to many more people. Therefore, we should keep on fighting (politically) with Jatra” (Dutt, Natak Samagra). Dutt’s interest in Jatra can be seen in the light of his utmost dedication and love towards People Theater, which connects it with the progressive belief system of Marxism and dynamic mass developments. He has consistently viewed Jatra as a political weapon and outlined his explanation for Jatra as follows:

“We want to create plays, songs, ballets, to recapitulate for the people the important episodes of their past when they took up arms against landlords and the British army. We try to tell that non-

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violence and passivity are recent interpolations that are alien to nature and history. Several plays by various groups have carried this idea to the workers and peasants in the hope that the strength of previous generations will reassure them that violence in a just war is their birthright."

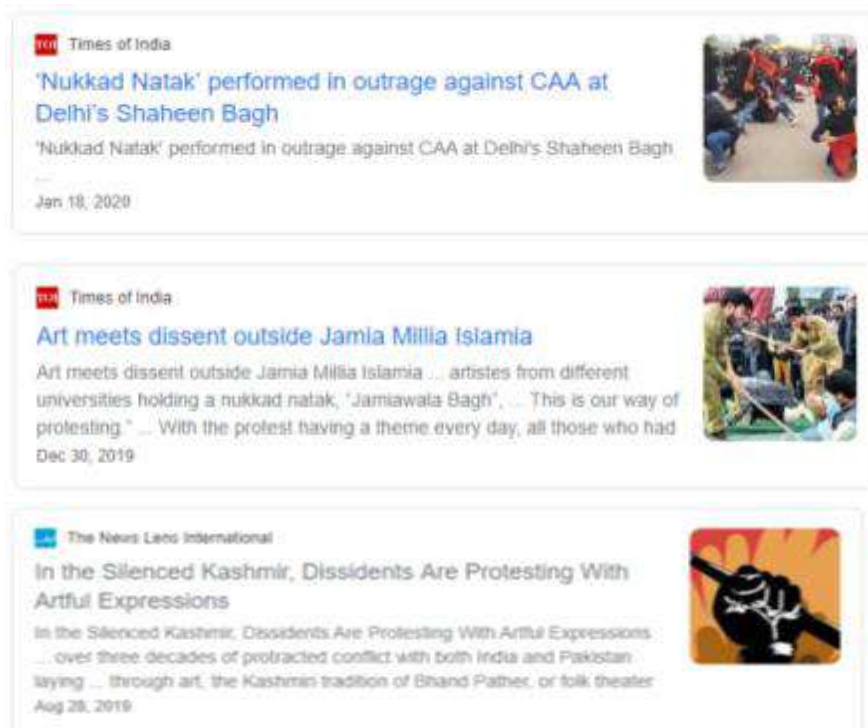
(Gunawardana, 1971).

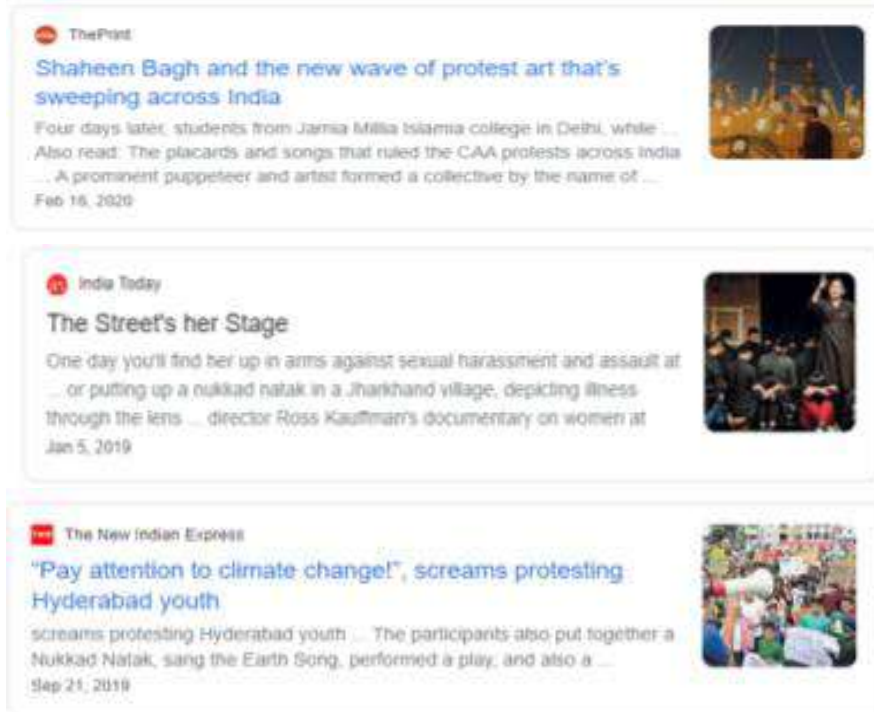
1.2 The Future of Folk Theatre as a Medium of Protest

As society evolves, folk theatre can adjust and engage new audiences. Digital media may assist performances in reaching a broader audience, yet urbanization might provide new themes and challenges. To maintain its relevance, folk theatre must preserve its historic foundations while discovering innovative methods to connect with audiences. This section may explore the potential of folk theatre in India to persist as a medium for communal engagement and the pursuit of social transformation.

1.3 Folk Theatre's Role in Modern Movements

Folk theatre continues to play a significant role in several contemporary social movements. In recent protests, such as those at Shaheen Bagh, the street theatre has been employed to enhance awareness and inform the public on significant topics. This section may examine the efficacy of folk theatre in engaging audiences and motivating action despite societal and technological transformations (Shaika et al., 2021). Media has been covering news about the use of folk theatre and other art forms by different groups in India as a strong tool of dissent. The power of performance can be established well by the powerful headlines given to the coverage of news using art as a medium to protest. Following is the coverage of protests through folk arts in India by different media units from 2019-2020.





2. Objectives of the Study

This study aims to explore the importance of folk theatre as a powerful medium for protest and social change in India. It seeks to understand how folk theatre has historically given voice to the public's concerns and aspirations, particularly in relation to the state and pressing social issues. By examining various forms of folk theatre, the study intends to reveal the ways in which these performances raise awareness, engage communities, and inspire action, ultimately contributing to the process of nation-building.

3. Research Questions:

1. How has folk theatre functioned as a medium of protest in India, especially concerning socio-political issues?
2. In what ways does folk theatre reflect and influence the public's aspirations and expectations from the state?
3. How effective is folk theatre in raising awareness and inspiring action on community issues?

4. Methodology

This study utilizes a qualitative research approach, focusing on an in-depth analysis of secondary data to explore the role of folk theatre as a medium of protest and social change. The qualitative nature of the study allows for a comprehensive examination of the ways in which folk theatre has historically been used to express dissent and mobilize communities on socio-political issues. To achieve this, data has been collected from various scholarly resources, including research

papers, academic websites, peer-reviewed journals, and books, and supplemented by extensive online searches for relevant historical and contemporary examples.

The data collection process has involved the systematic gathering of information from trusted sources in communication studies, cultural anthropology, and sociology, with an emphasis on literature related to traditional media and performance arts as forms of activism. Each source has been carefully evaluated for reliability and relevance to ensure a robust and accurate foundation for analysis. Furthermore, historical records and previous case studies on folk theatre's role in social movements and political dissent have been closely examined. A descriptive methodology has been employed to analyze and interpret the findings from these diverse sources. Descriptive analysis allows for the detailed unpacking of complex cultural practices and provides insights into how folk theatre is a powerful communicative tool in rural and urban settings. This method is especially suitable given the rich cultural variations in folk theatre across India, each with unique historical, social, and political contexts.

This study's methodological framework also incorporates comparative analysis elements, looking at different forms of folk theatre (e.g., Jatra, Nukkad Natak, Bhand Pather, and puppetry) to understand their specific contributions to public discourse and mobilization. By comparing these forms, the study identifies patterns and shared strategies across different regions and performance styles, highlighting folk theatre's adaptability and enduring relevance as a form of resistance. After systematically reviewing and analyzing the data, an interpretive approach has been taken to discuss the findings. This discussion delves into how folk theatre facilitates a dialogic exchange between performers and audiences, encourages critical thinking on social issues, and often results in heightened awareness and community-driven action.

| Step | Description |
|--------------------------------|---|
| <i>Data Collection</i> | Gathered secondary data from academic articles, books, journals, and we |
| <i>Evaluation of Sources</i> | Assessed the reliability and relevance of each source |
| <i>Descriptive Analysis</i> | Interpreted data to understand the role of folk theatre in activism |
| <i>Comparative Analysis</i> | Compared different folk theatre forms across regions |
| <i>Interpretive Discussion</i> | Developed insights on the cultural and social impact of folk theatre |

Figure 1: Methodological Framework

5. Discussion

Folk theatre in India has long served as a vital, down-to-earth way for people to share and respond to the issues they face, acting as a bridge between everyday life and larger social movements. Rooted deeply in local traditions, folk theatre has always been more than just entertainment. It is a way to speak up, to build understanding, and to bring people together. Unlike traditional theatre confined to formal stages, folk performances occur in everyday settings – like streets, marketplaces, and village squares – making them accessible to all, including those who might not otherwise have the chance to engage in these conversations.

What makes folk theatre so effective is its highly interactive nature. The audience is often part of the performance, breaking down the barrier between actors and viewers and fostering a sense of community involvement. This unique setup helps people not just watch a play but also feel connected to its message and inspired to act. Whether addressing social issues like caste discrimination or political topics like labor rights, folk theatre gets to the heart of what people care about and allows them to see their own experiences reflected in a relatable way.

The use of humor, satire, and symbolism in folk theatre also plays a huge role. By approaching sensitive topics indirectly, performers can speak to people about controversial issues without directly provoking authorities. This subtle approach is particularly valuable in regions with strict social or political controls. For instance, the Bhand Pather form in Kashmir uses humor to convey the difficulties faced by the local population under different regimes, allowing people to discuss these issues in a way that feels safe. Similarly, in Bengal, Jatra has historically been used to comment on colonial rule and social inequality, using powerful storytelling that audiences can easily understand and relate to.

Groups like Jana Natya Manch (JANAM) have shown that folk theatre is not just a relic of the past but remains highly relevant today. By bringing Nukkad Natak (street theatre) into urban areas and addressing contemporary issues, JANAM has revitalized folk theatre's role as a tool for social awareness. Their performances have tackled various pressing issues, from women's rights to workers' struggles, showing that folk theatre can still be a force for change in modern India.

In summary, folk theatre continues to be an influential means of spreading awareness and uniting communities. Its accessibility, engaging format, and cultural relevance make it a unique platform for sparking dialogue and inspiring change, bridging the gap between local traditions and social activism.

6. Conclusion

The essence of folk theatre has always been to entertain, educate, and inform the audience about societal issues. However, it is often a left-centric art movement dedicated to bringing social change and prompting people to take the desired positive action. Folk theatre has a participatory approach of involving its audience in the performance, which is deeply rooted in their culture and hence enjoys full acceptance from the people. In any case, theatrical performances ought to be blended in with long-term development goals to use their capability to the ideal and affect the general public. For this, the folk theatre should know its locale, recognize the issues of concern, interweave the common articulation with amusement, invite audience participation, and call for action. Theatre for growth in a positive direction, by its very nature and especially on account of its communality and its functionalized circumstances, gives a discussion whereby communication can undoubtedly happen without the conflict that would typically happen in a legitimately practical circumstance. As a component of an instructive and executive procedure, folk theatre can play the following roles as a medium of protest:

- Bringing individuals together and making settings for combined reflection and activity.
- Drawing out interest and expression of popular concerns and investigation.

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- Overcoming individuals' feelings of trepidation and defenses; building certainty and personality.
- Stimulating conversation and a basic comprehension of problems, inconsistencies, and structures underlining ordinary reality.
- Clarifying the potential outcomes and methodologies for action.
- Stirring individuals' feelings and preparing individuals for action.

It is significant for folk theatre to create and clarify why it got changed over to protest theatre in a specific period and specific locales than in others. It is because of significant political and social issues that unsettle society at some random time or spot and call forward protests from creative, thoughtful people. It is quite evident that the political folk theatre performances are part of those locales where political and economic conditions are the most exceedingly awful and change is most urgently required. Though, it is not necessary for every deprived nation to start a protest through theatre. In India, theatre is mainly used for entertainment, with some exceptions where protest through folk theatre is used to stir patriotism. The works of different Indian folk theatre artists identify that protest theatre has the capacity to bring changes with the added advantage of being entertaining at the same time, provided it is made widely acceptable to the masses and allowed without any restrictions. It is hard to measure whether there is more protest through folk theatre in India than elsewhere. Perhaps compared to the magnitude of change required, quantity is not enough.

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