



Inter-Relation between Traditional Street Folk Theatre and Contemporary Street Theatre: Its Increasing Importance in Modern Time

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Abstract

What is 'Folk'? What is 'Street'? Or What is 'Street Folk Theatre'? What is 'Street Theatre'? In oxforddictionaries, Folk means - "(n)'People in general', 'Of or relating to the traditional art or culture of a community or nation". 'Folk' word derived from Germanic word 'fulka' meaning "people" or "army".

On the other hand the drama performs on the street is street theatre. It is a theatrical performance which has socio-political issue. So how to define folk theatre from street theatre where both are perform in open space or street? In Tamilnadu, Therukoothu is a folk theatre which is performs in front of a temple under the sky. Theru means 'street', koothu means 'play'. Also Veedhi natakam is a folk theatre of Andhra Pradesh which is perform in open space. Veedhi means street; an open air place. It is a dramatic performance presented in a street. Both are enacted mythological stories.

We could not ignore the social significance of traditional street Folk theatre and Street theatre as a communication and developing expression in modern time. In 1970s both Folk theatre and street theatre have used as a tool of social awareness throughout in India.

Many Indian theatre directors, playwrights acquire the strength of folk theatre in their work. Folk theatres are our own roots and these are close to way of our life. We also believe that folk theatre has strength to address modern context. Folk theatre is a 'total theatre' or a 'composite art' that perform with verbal and visual aspects. It covers all of the elements of theatre such as dance, dialogue, mime, song, make-up, music, improvised acting, dress, humor, stylized acting and acrobatic. So audiences get a complete emotional experience. All folk theatres have different styles of performance with their respective regions. Actors communicate with audience through direct and immediate participation. Folk theatre's stage is usually a bare space.

In this paper we just tried to find out the potentialities of street theatre and folk theatre. How they connect with modern context. Street theatre differs not only in the context of performance in the open place but also with the subject matter which is more political in nature. It mobilizes people to particular issue.

In India, the journey of street theatre was started with Indian Peoples Theatre Association (IPTA) as a tool for anti-establishment that was categorized as by the people and for the people. It has expressed common people's feelings, problems, day to day life. It has brought a social change that is downtrodden. By its nature, it is based on communist ideology. Habib Tanvir noted 'Street theatre is a theatre of protest'. He said,

"The fact that the street theatre to an extent has been recently appropriated by educational, health and social welfare departments, and here and there also by political activists of the right wing, ought not to be allowed to confuse us about the issue of street theatre – a force born of necessity out of social and economical compulsions. Street theatre far more economical in terms of production costs thrives on public goodwill and donations. Proscenium theatre, on the other hand, which by and large depends on government aids or sponsorships or as in most cases on both, is far more expensive. . . So street theater is a theater of protest, which must always be on the left. It has to be always anti-establishment. We have in our country by and

large a right wing establishment –a capitalist regime. In varying degrees we have always had it right from inception. So right wing forces dominate the country in so far as governance is concerned. If you sell your theater to these forces, which also enjoy money power, being endowed with most of the national wealth, then you can't be doing theater of protest, which constitutes the very nature of street theater.” (Tanvir Habit, *Janam Comes of Age*, Edit. - Deshpande, S., *Theatre of the Streets: The Jana Natya Manch Experience*, 2007, p. 64)

Street Theatre has had a history of serving as a tool for social change and revolutionary politics. Safdar Hashmi was killed in 1989. He noted,

“It is basically a militant political theatre of protest. Its function is to agitate the people and to mobilize them behind fighting organizations.”(Hashmi Safdar , *The First Ten Years of Street Theatre* , Edit. - Deshpande, S., *Theatre of the Streets: The Jana Natya Manch Experience*, 2007, p. 13)

Street theatre performs between crowds like in the street, marketplace, at the university, in the subway. Its important potentiality is to reach to non-theatergoing audiences. It is much simpler, direct, brief, intimate and effective theatrical expression. It creates direct sociopolitical action through provocation and agitation. In India basically at Kolkata, street theatre judges as ‘agit-prop’ and ‘political theatre’.

In Encyclopedia of Social Movement Media,

“Street theatre is a combination of theatre and activism , performed in open space such as street , open lot , slum , in front of a factory or worker’s quarters , a temple , church , ware house , tent , exhibition site , university campus , park or railway station , where actors can contact directly with the audiences.” (In *Encyclopedia of Social Movement Media*, edited by John D. H. Downing, John Derek Hall Downing, p.513)

In India, many folk theatres translate directly ‘Street Theatre’, those are Veedhi Natakam in Andhra Pradesh and Therukoothu in Tamil Nadu. But they do not convey to common definition of street theatre. So how does contemporary street theatre distinguish from traditional street theatre? It has certain characteristic which should be distinguish it from traditional street theatre. The basic common factor between contemporary street theatre and traditional street theatre is it performs in open air. There are also commonalities both of them: two-way communication by wiping out the line between the actor and the audience, ‘face to face’ presentations to the audience, spread widely information, audio-visual medium, provide entertainment and instant improvisation. But there is a dividing line between contemporary street theatre and traditional street theatre: contemporary street theatre is more political than traditional street theatre. Mainly communist party in India promotes their views through street theatre. Leaders are used to transmit messages to provoke people for support in election. It is more propaganda.

But, there is confusion the meaning of the term ‘folk’. ‘Folk’ consists with a group of people who live in a local place and each family consists with particular tradition. There is not any distinction between art and life. It is considered as integral part of their daily lives. Its characteristics defers from place to place. Folk theatre is transmitted orally person to person. Folk Theatre is basically performed in local area. Every folk theatre has its different style based upon its local performers. It is theatrical entertainment for the rural masses. There do not have any written text. When it has written or printed it will be fixed one text or unchanging text that is not referring as folk. Folk theatre is always anonymous. No one knows who is created first. In this way we can differ it from street theatre. Here we can know who wrote the street play. There are no boundaries between the performers and the audiences. Thus, the performances are for the people and by the people. People can go into the acting area during performance to give money to performers. Folk theatre is characterized by belief in the equality of all people, especially in social, political or economic life. There are common virtues: egalitarian, entertainment value, actor-audience direct communication, audience participation in the performance, local language, flexibility, traditionally race-based affirmative action and socially accepted form.

Define basic opposition of folk theatre and street theatre

<u>Folk Theatre</u>	<u>Street Theatre</u>
Unwritten Text	Written Text
Oral	Written
Anonymous	known author
Rural	Urban
Mother of Theatre	One Type of Theatre
Variation /flexible	Fixed / Rigid

Stories take from puran, epic **Stories take from social issue:** There are different folk theatres of different regions in India. All folk theatres have individual characteristic, criteria, taste and flavor that can render distinctive each others. In festivals or special occasions, whole communities come together to enjoy collectively and express their feelings.

VeedhiNatakam is one of the famous folk theatre in Andhra Pradesh. The word Veedhi Natakam is a combination of two Telugu words 'Veedhi' and 'Natkam' that stands for an open place and the other for a performance. The drama performs anywhere in the street or open place such as the square in front of a temple. Thus, The Veedhi Natakam means 'street theatre'.

The main theme of Veedhi Natakam is romance. Stories take from Mythological episodes and pouranic Literatures. The performers perform the plays throughout the state from November to May on the festivals. Artists deliver their dialogue in a more narrative way.

Theru koothu is a traditional street theatre in the northern districts of Tamilnadu . Koothu means dance or performance in Tamil. The term 'Theru' literally means street. Therukoothu is street dance or street play or street drama. It has a great social and religious importance relevant to agriculture and village life to educate them about religion and their history. Nadakam (Drama) has roots in the rural folk theatre Therukoothu.

Normally it is conducted during temple festivals of Rain goddess Mariyamman and Draupathyamman during the months of 'Panguni' i e, in March-April and Aadi i, e, July-August. It is mostly performed during the summer months when they have a little agricultural work.

The performance is held in an open air called 'shabai' It performs in the village squares, a junction of three or four streets. In Therukoothu performance, villagers gather around the kolari, where they talk, eat, sleep and celebrate. Sometimes marriage arrangements are also done.

Only six or seven men take part in this form and they enact the female roles. It is a belief that women can "pollute" the religious ritual if they participate in performance.

The play starts in the late evening and goes till the next day morning for more than 10 hours. Sometimes it takes more than 10 days.

Therukoothu is generally based on stories from the great epics of Mahabharata and Ramayana, puranas and also local tradition. People know the stories well , same stories are performed year after year. Audiences sleep and eat during the long length performances and wake up in funny or important scenes. It is an integral part of Theru Koothu and Veedhi Natakam and also many folk forms.

Theru Koothu and Veedhi Natakam have democratic appeal where audiences don't have barrier on cast, religion and age.

Folk theatre has potential to deliver strong messages. It has a socially significant role. At Veedhi Natakam , Vidhushaka takes part for social criticism. Gambhira is also a socio-political folk drama presentation in West Bengal. Veedhi Natakam is Therukoothu are an important source of mass communication.

Mass media like newspaper, film, radio, TV could not sufficiently perform the role of mass communication because those do not reach enough to remote area of the villages. Local folk theatre is capable to deliver the relevant and credible information or bring social awareness when it is adopted as mass media. Some folk theatre does not based only on spoken words. They have non-verbal approaches: nominal dialogues, mime, gesture, song, music. So they easily disseminate modern messages.

Let's explore to ignite the power of contemporary street theatre and traditional street theatre for social change. It is adopted as a tool of expression. It spreads awareness and inspires take action on sexual violence. After the performance audience are invited to a conversation and encourage them to protest or participate on particular issue. Street theatre organizations are paid sums by government or

non-government organization to spreads social news, issues to target audiences. Same as folk theatre is used by the government. In 1954, the government of India established the 'song and drama division' that organize such type of program with help of local theatre groups or folk artistes. It's headquartered in New Delhi and has eight regional centers in the country. They promote the issues like health and family welfare, prevention of drug, abuse girl child, small family norm etc. Life Insurance Corporations are used to publishing their plans. The messages are transmitted by sender (actor) to receiver (audience) and taken receiver's opinions or feedback for further uplifting the messages or products.

Source - sender (artiste) -> target - receiver (audience): The popular forms of traditional theatre are Tamasha of Maharashtra, Jatra in Bengal, Bhavai in Gujarat, Therukoothu in Tamilnadu, Veedhi Natakam in Andhra Pradesh, Nautanki of northern part, Vaand Pather in Kashmir are carried social messages and values along with entertainment. Normally those forms allow lot of spontaneous improvisation and innovations on performance. It uses humorous and satire to understand difficult messages across easily.

Folk theatre is changing its structure to needs of the society. It is making itself relevant day to day life. Its appeal is universal. NGOs are meaningfully utilizing folk theatre for dissemination of HIV/AIDS, health, education, family welfare messages. UNESCO and United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) are use folk theatre and street theatre for motivational purposes. Nrityanjali Academy of Andhra Pradesh uses folk theatre to address various social issues such as population control, women abuse, child labor, adult education dowry, and environment. They conduct literacy campaigns and workshops for several issues.

Women welfare organizations, religious groups, political parties, student unions, motor companies involve in presenting street theatre to render their messages as well as generating awareness to the public. More than six thousands street theatre groups engage on such theatre in India. IPTA is the pioneer to conduct street theatre basically first in West Bengal. But for this purpose, groups or organizations must be aware and maintain the balance between entertainments and deliver messages: firstly discuss about their entertainment value, and then input messages as a specific way.

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