

Shadows Speak: A Need to Revive the Shadow Theatres of India

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Abstract

The Shadow Theatre or Shadow Puppetry or 'Chhaya Natak' of India is an ancient yet powerful example of folk theatre. On the basis of available evidences it has been found to be a predecessor of human theatre. This ancient form of leather puppetry in India is surviving through ages but it is sad to note that today in the age of film, television and internet, it is merely alive in few regions in India. Since these 'Shadow Theatres' signify our Indian culture, it becomes our duty to preserve and promote such art forms for generations to come. Against this background, the present paper aims to highlight the significance of shadow theatres in modern India with special reference to 'Ravana Chhaya' of Orissa.

Keywords: Folk Theatre, Shadow Theatre, Leather Puppets, Ravana Chhaya, Liminal Zone.

Shadow Theatre is an ancient form of storytelling and entertainment which uses flat articulate figures to create the impression of moving humans. Shadows might seem transitory and temporary in nature, but they can be a powerful mode of artistic and theatrical representation too, if utilized artistically. Technologically, in Shadow Theatre the articulated figures are illuminated from behind the screen to create an illusion of moving characters. And then this illusion is adjusted skillfully to depict various stories from the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Puranas*, and the folktales. In this way, they not only enhance our understanding of the Indian cultural tradition but also cast a profound social appeal on the viewers. As Stanley Hochman says, 'it is more than just a performance; it is a social and religious

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event, eliciting the atmosphere of a community ritual' (1984). Here, in this paper, an attempt has been made to study the relevance of such ancient theatres in contemporary India by focusing on the Oriya Shadow Theatre *Ravana Chhaya*. It also purports to understand how the micro-narratives of folk theatres can potentially compete with the meta-narratives of film, media and mainstream theatre.

Evolution of Theatre in Ancient India

It is true that theatre with its live artistic appeal has always been an important medium for the depiction of Indian tradition but as far as its origin is concerned most likely it 'evolved over time as a form of cultural expression and has no specific moment of creation. The need to tell a story, to imitate, to play, and to perform repeated acts that ensure the continuation of a community are so vital to the human psyche that cultures everywhere have developed some form of enactment. Since these activities predate recorded history and leave no tangible trace, their precise origins of theatre are cloaked in mystery' (Felner 2006: 26). Our deeper study about the origin and evolution of theatres in India takes us first to the sage Bharata's *Natyasastra* which presents an organized discussion on Sanskrit Theatres in India. This origin however has a mythical story that Lord Brahma created the fifth Veda *Natyaveda* for the amusement of deities. And on his instruction Bharata composed *Natyasastra* in which he not only codified the art of dramaturgy but also deliberated extensively on the comprehensive and encyclopedic nature of Indian drama. Thus, to be enacted on the celestial stage architected by Vishwakarma, Bharatamuni conceptualizes drama in the following manner: "The combination called Natya is a mixture of *rasa*, *bhavas*, *abhinayas*, *dharmic vrittis*, *provrittis*, *siddhis*, *svaras*, instruments, song and theatre-house" (Gupt 1994 86).

The other wing of cultural scientists informs us that the glorious journey of Indian theatre began with the celebration of ancient rituals and seasonal festivities of the Vedic Aryans later followed by the Sanskrit plays. There are ample references to drama in Patanjali's *Vyakarana* and *Mahabhashya*, *Aagam* literature of Jainis, Vatsyayana's *Kamasutra*, Kautilya's *Arthshastra*, and Panini's *Ashtadhyaya* that prove the origin of Sanskrit drama in remote past. Along with the classical Sanskrit drama, the village or folk theatres have also been an important mode of entertainment in India. It is believed that the village theatres or folk theatres came systematically into being in an attempt to re-assert indigenous values and

ideas among the masses. Inhabited by over a billion diverse racial groups, India presents a colourful panorama of folk theatre variously known as the *Jatra*, *Tamasa*, *Nautanki*, *Bhavai*, *Yakshagana*, *Ramleela* and so on that represent the manners and mores of different regions of India. Undoubtedly, these folk theatres reach to a large cross-section of society by staging the unedited play amidst its pits, galleries and *diyas* that chant the tale of India and its tradition.

Origin of Shadow Theatre

As far as the genesis of Shadow puppets is concerned, it is one of the most ancient art forms of India. 'It derives its present form from variety of visual art performances like the *Chitra Katha* (Scroll Painting) of the South India; the *Jadano Pat* (rolled painting) of Bengal; the *Chitrakathi* of Maharashtra; *Yampat* of Bihar; and the *Phad* painting of Rajasthan' (Ghosh and Banerjee 2006: 53). Shadow Theatre is somewhat related to the Puppet Theatre of India. But it is different from human and puppet stages in the sense that they are performed through two-dimensional structures. Here, the actor – manipulator presents a projection of his thoughts through shadows and expects the viewer to reassemble and interpret them.

Scholars hold diverse opinion on the subject of the origin of Shadow Theatres. For instance, in view of the Western Indologists such as Pischel, Lueders and Winternitz, the well known Sanskrit Theatre or 'Great Drama' itself evolved out of puppet theatre and Shadow Theatre (*indianetzone.com*). On the basis of available evidences it has also been regarded as the predecessor of human theatre. According to Coomarswamy, Panini, the 4th century B.C. Sanskrit Grammarian, and Patanjali, the philosopher and author of the *Yogasutras* in 2nd century B.C., alluded to puppets in their works ("Introduction". *Asian Puppets*, 1976). Historically, the tradition of *Chhaya Natak* (Shadow Theatre) is believed to have existed in Gujarat a thousand years ago. William Ridgeway in his *The Dramas and Dramatic Dances* (Reprint 2010) affirms Subhata's *Dutangada*, as *Chhayanatak* or shadow drama presented at a festival in the honor of Kumar Pala Deva, a Chalukya King who ruled in Gujarat during 12th century. It appears that later this theatre form migrated from Gujarat to Rajasthan, Maharashtra, the South of India, and finally to the Southeast Asia. *Cilappatikaram*, a Tamil classic too contains mentioning of Shadow Theatres in India (*indianetzone.com*).

We also find evidences which confirm that Shadow Theatres flourished well during the 9-11th century Chola dynasty. The most convincing evidence

appears in the *Mahabharata*. For instance, the *Udyog Parv* of Mahabharata clearly mentions wooden dolls manipulated by the strings (Udyog 32.12) and its *Shanti Parv* refers to ‘*rupopajivanam*’ which means a person living by performing shadow plays:

vānījyaṃ pāśupālyam ca tathā śilpopajīvanam |
sūdrasyāpi vidhīyante yadā vṛttirna jāyate ||

raṅgāvatarāṇam caiva tathā rūpopajīvanam |
madyamāmsopajīvyam ca vikrayam lohacarmaṇoḥ ||

(*Shanti Parv* 294.4-5 p.5202)

This certifies that during the *Mahabharata* period both string and shadow puppet shows were in existence. The famous scholar and critic on Indian theatres, Suresh Awasthi estimates its origin to the time of Indus valley civilization from where it is said to have traveled to China, Malaysia, Cambodia, Java, and Indonesia through silk route. These documents indicate that India has a continuous history of Shadow Theatre for about 2000 years.

Shadow Theatre as Folk Theatre

Performance is the soul of theatre and folk theatres of India enact the realities of Indian life in an unsophisticated manner. They are generally modeled on the stories drawn from epics, *puranas*, myths and biographies of divine or semi-divine figures. It is mainly narrative in form in which the narrator (*sutradhara*) sometimes adds visual art, music and dance too to make it more entertaining. It is usually performed by a group of entertainers who often move from place to place and illustrate the Indian myth, dance, history, song, culture, mores, tradition and beliefs through their performance. Thus, they are not only entertainers but also the preachers of value, philosophical tenets and religious cult. As Hanne M. de Bruin writes, it “helps to confirm cultural practices and values, which are socially and psychologically important to maintain local cohesion, self assurance, pride in one’s own culture, and personal and group identities, in particular during a time of rapid change” (2003 7-8).

Indian folk theatre can be broadly divided into two categories- religious and secular. While the religious folk theatres mainly evolved around the aspects and stories from history, myth and religion; the secular folk theatre emerged as a typical form of entertainment among the mass. Artistically, it

is very rich and it potentially exemplifies all the eight *rasas* mentioned in Bharatamuni's *Natyashastra*. Themes of life, death, love, virtue and vice are effectively presented on these make-shift stages. The stage of folk theatres is usually a colossal empty space which is complemented by the dialogues and symbolic gestures of the actors. It is remarkable to note that there is a direct and continual interaction between the actors and the audience during the course of performance. Elaborate make-up, masks, chorus, loud music and folk dance are few other essential hallmarks of the folk theatres in India.

The unselfconscious, spontaneous and boisterously naïve folk theatres serve as an effective means of mass communication. Whereas the classical Sanskrit theatres aimed at amusing the chosen few, folk theatres amuse the vast community comprising of both literate as well as the illiterate masses. Similarly, if the former creates barriers, the latter removes all the barriers of class, region and religion. Folk theatres present people in their natural habitat by offering a glimpse of regional style of speech, dress, behavior, humor, proverbs, wit and wisdom. Thus, we see that it does not present life in slices but offers a panoramic view of human culture. They are not episodic in nature; instead there is always continuity in theme, structure and presentation. Apart from these the dialogues are delivered in high pitch and there is always a scope for improvisation and incorporation of new references.

The Shadow Theatre or Shadow Puppetry or 'Chayya Natak' of India is an ancient yet powerful example of folk theatre. The philosophy conveyed through Shadow plays is the good overpowering the evil. They have ritualistic relevance too. For instance, they are often held to bring rain, induce fertility to the soil, remove epidemic, and celebrate occasions of life such as birth, marriage and death in the village. Different episodes are played on different themes like *Krishnaleela* (play on Krishna), *Girija Kalyan* (Wedding of Parvati) or *Swargarohana* (ascent to heaven by Pandavas) as befitting the occasion.

Ravan Chayya Tradition in Odisha

Ravana Chayya is a specific name given to the shadow plays of Orissa (present day Odisha). It is a rare form of Shadow Theatre which utilizes flat two dimensional pictures. The traditional performers of *Ravana Chhaya* were from the community of *bhats* who used to receive the patronage of the local Rajas of Pallahara in the form of land grants (Sharma and Singh *Akhyan*: 38). This specifically traditional Shadow theatre is found popular in the Dhenkanal district of Orissa. Kathinandan Dash and Jivan Pani have been

its leading practitioners and preservers in India. Presently, Kolha Charan Sahu, Gourang Das, Dhiren Patnaik and others are making remarkable efforts to maintain this folk dramatic tradition. Shri Kolha Charan Sahu has remarkably kept this tradition alive through the institute 'Ravan-Chhya Natya Sansad'.

For the enactment of shadow play, the two dimensional flat figures (usually made up of deer skin) are lightly pressed against a translucent screen with a strong source of light behind. Estimating the necessity of these figures for the enactment of Shadow plays Mrazek states that "Pictorial representation is an essential element of the Shadow puppet theatre" (2005: 74). The audience sitting on the other side of the screen sees the shadows moving when the figures are manipulated. Amidst the heightened darkness all around, the images are projected on the screen to articulate the stories. Shadow puppet figures, therefore, are pre-requisites to such performances. In terms of its evolution, 'a shadow puppet figure is essentially a cut-out from a narrative picture scroll' (Victor H. Mair 1988, as qtd in Jan Mrazek). Meher Contractor also details the development of shadow puppet figures in these words:

Shadow theatre gradually evolved from picture dramatization to cut-out figures. These were stuck on a length of cloth with thorns, in a sequence of the scenes, and a lantern was passed behind it, moved by the narrative as the story unfolded. Soon these cut-outs were given mobility and the figures came to life on the white curtain with lamp-lights, music, song, narration and even sometimes a dance rhythm" (as quoted in Jan Mrazek 67).

Ravana Chhaya, executed in the Dhenkanal district of Orissa, usually delivers the text of *Vichitra Ramayana* by Vishwanath Kuntia, a well known medieval Oriya poet. A single performance of *Ravana Chhaya* needs minimum of 7 nights and almost 700 puppets to perform. The puppets are 6-8 inches tall flat bamboo figures covered with deer skin with no movable parts. The immovable limbs of Shadow puppets in *Ravana Chhaya* are the toughest challenge in the stagecraft of this dramatic form. Stanley Hochman also says that "there is a great variety in size and design of the figures, and the decorative arts and crafts of the region have a strong influence" (1984: 33).

Rama, Sita and Lakshmana departing to the forest (The Ramayana)



Taadaka Demoness - Old and New (The Ramayana)



Performance, Imagination and Appeal

Performance begins ritually when a coconut is broken and a sacrifice invokes the blessings of the elephant god Ganesha. The leader of the troupe steps to the side of the acting area in view of the audience and offers a prayer to the central deity Rama. Artistically, it begins with the act of singing with loud roar. The *Khanjani* then starts beating furiously and the one line of verse is sung in one go. The soul of the play is music especially the *channda* form which is accompanied by *Khanjani* and *Ginni*. Besides these, a pair of wooden castanets called *Daskatthi* provides percussive support to the singing. Thus the poetic language of the recitation and songs are the matter of important attraction for the spectators. Then the narrator (*sutradhar*) recites the lines mouthed by the local barber puppet known as *Bhandari* and his grandson and thus the play begins. These puppets are treated very piously and once they have outlived their usefulness, they are ritualistically 'cremated' and cast into a river.

It is performed mostly in the rural areas of Orissa and is exclusively based on the legends of Lord Rama. It is interesting however to note that the name of this art form is based on Lord Rama's adversary Ravana. There are two accepted reasons behind this name: one, it is believed that since Rama is divine and luminous being, he cannot have a shadow. Therefore, it is named after Ravana, the evil and shadowed entity. The second reason is that Ravana, assumes a dignified persona in the Jain version of *the Ramayana*, and as there was a considerable impact of this on the state, this theatre form is called *Ravana Chhaya* (Subodh Kapoor: 6069-70).

In Shadow Theatre, clowns play a very seminal role through their performance. They are intermediaries and often remind us of *Vidushak* of Indian Sanskrit theatre. They comment directly, in a highly colloquial language about the social and political issues of the day and force the members of the audience to reflect upon their day to day concerns. This view is reinforced by Hochman who observes that "the shadow puppets include clowns, who provide much desired humor and contribute substantially to the atmosphere of a puppet performance" (1984 33). The well known anthropologist Victor W. Turner considers clown in a Shadow Play as the only performer who can take the liberty to parody the high and the mighty of society. According to him the clowns thus create 'a liminal zone'. This liminality experienced by the clowns in Shadow Theatre provokes 'reflexivity' which is the capability "to stand aside not only from one's

personal social position but from all social positions” (2008). This proves that these shadow plays are not only a folk means of entertainment but they are a powerful mode of social criticism too.

Impact of Modernization on Folk Theatre

Theatre, unlike television, is often imagistic and metaphorical, so the most important thing to bring to the theatre is audience’s imagination (Felner 2006). But today, the Indian society is changing very fast and so is the cultural taste of its people. In the age of media entertainment, traditional theatres in India have to fight a tough battle for their survival. In the era of multimedia, the consumerist tendencies are overshadowing the cultural system of India which consists of its rich religion, music, painting, costume, literature, handicraft and theatre. These changes have not only challenged the regional and local culture of India but also tried to push its rich folk art to the back stage. Thus, it becomes necessary to prevent these folk traditions from extinction for future generation. It is urgent to revive and reinforce the polyphonic voices of Indian folk culture in order to resist the grand narratives of the modern media culture.

Shadow puppetry is merely alive in few regions of Orissa as *Ravana Chayya*; in Andhra Pradesh as *Tholu Bommalatta*; in Karnataka as *Togalu Gombetta*; in Kerala as *Thol Pava Koothu*; in Tamil Nadu as *Tholu Bommalattam*; and in Maharastra as *Chamdyacha Bahuliya*. The consumerist tendencies reinforcing the glamorization and vulgarization of entertainment sources are not only threatening the very existence of our native art-tradition but also confining theatres at chosen art-conscious canters. We should not forget that they can be a very powerful art medium for social amelioration. As a saga of Indian drama, even today, the folk theatres are efficient enough to break the barriers of orchestra and gleaming DJ lights. In this context, it would be pertinent to quote Martin Esslin’s view who says that the native theatres are the guardians of the individuality of culture:

In an age where the world is flooded by a deluge of cheap commercially motivated material on television, the live theatre, the guardian of traditions and individuality of cultures, threatened by this avalanche of triviality and become more vital to the continued richness and variety of human culture than ever before in the history of mankind. (1989)

Certainly, the Shadow theatres and all other forms of Indian folk theatre are of immense contemporary relevance because they are the repertoires of human cultural civilization. We have a moral responsibility too towards our

cultural heritage therefore we should not let them perish. Revival of our indigenous theatre should be encouraged because they can play an important role in the process of decolonizing Indian stage. The hemlock of cultural colonization is far more lethal than the political colonization because it threatens the entire consciousness of the mass and hampers the growth of human tradition. The need of the hour is to urgently revive our folk theatres so that artistic hegemony can be subverted and multiple folk voices may be strengthened in order to face the challenges of the grand voices of media and commercialized mainstream theatres.

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