



The Voyage of Theatre to Drama and the Intermingling of Transitional and Experimental Phases in Tripura's Pre-Independence Drama Literature from 1900-1950

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Abstract

The history of theatre in Tripura dates back 150 years, with the royal family's close connection to Manipur and Manipuri society, influencing their culture through the popular Manipuri 'Giti-Natya' ballads and Radha Krishna's Rasa Lila. In the 18th century, the 'Kaliya Daman' Jatrapalawas performed in Udaipur under the patronage of Maharaja Ratna Manikya II. Meanwhile, the theatrical company "Ujjayanta Natya Samaj" had originally been established in Tripura in 1897 A.D. by Maharaja Radha Kishore Manikya, along with the Prince and other royal officials. Later, Ranbir Karta and Suren Karta's theatre company sparked the emergence of several theatre groups in Agartala, but none lasted more than two to four years. However, the young students formed new theatre troupes, including the Umakant Academy Student Drama Society, Edward Memorial Medical Institute Theatre, Sreepat's Tarun Sangh, the Students Association's Drama Branch, and the Belonia Student Drama Society. It was seen after some years that Tripuresh Majumdar, a prominent figure in Tripura's theatre practice, exemplifies the palace-centric style of theatre that extended to the common arena. Later, in the post-independence phase, the dramatists took inspiration from their predecessors and contributed to the field of theatre and drama with the ideology of deliverance and upliftment of the state's ancient artistic heritage.

Keywords: History, Pre-Independence Phase, Manipuri culture, Theatre, Drama.

Introduction

To trace the history of Theatre in Tripura, one has to go back to the beginning of the eighteenth century. The then capital of Tripura was Udaipur and the king during that time was Maharaja Ratna Manikya II (1685-1712). 'Kaliya Daman' Jatrapala was performed in Udaipur under the patronage of Maharaja Ratna Manikya. After that no specific information about Yatra-abhinaya was available. Under the reign of Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya (1862-1896), Yatra-abhinaya started again. However, various Jatra groups from East Bengal used to come and perform in Tripura. In 1894, Bishambhar Nath formed an amateur Jatra Team 'Shoukhin' in Ishan Chandra Nagar of the present Bishalgarh sub-division. This Jatra team performed two Jatrapalas namely "AjamilerVaikunthalabh" and "Parshuramer Matrhatya". During this time, Yatra Abhinaya was performed in 'Durgabari Natakmandapa' and 'Prabhu Bari'. Moreover, in the last decade of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th century, the Jatra team from Kashari Patti performed for around four to five years and then was not found more performing anywhere and then another Jatra team from Acharya Para performed for few years. After that gradually in various sub-divisions of Tripura, it was seen that various Jatra Teams and Opera Teams were getting developed and also preparing to come up namely - 'Lakshmi Narayan Opera Team' (1928), 'MadhavpurJatra



Party (1929), 'Jagannath Opera' (1931), 'Pramod Natya Sanstha', 'Biswanath Opera' and 'Radhapur Jatra Party' (1941-46). Slowly Jatra Abhinaya was taking a new place as the Natya Abhinaya of Tripura. Moreover, it can be seen that Jatra Abhinaya has come closer to drama. Therefore, many Jatra cabinets were also given the identity of 'Munshiana' in the Natya-abhinaya.

History of Tripura Theatre Arts

To trace the history of Theatre in Tripura, one has to go back at least one hundred and fifty years ago. Under the marital system, the Royal dynasty of Tripura was intimately associated with Manipur and Manipuri society at large. And the way relationships developed between the two, has a special influence on the culture of Tripura. Especially, Manipuri 'Giti - Natya' (Ballads) became particularly popular in Tripura. Especially, the 'Rasa Lila' of Radha Krishna based on Giti- Natya (Dance - Drama) influenced the theatrical practice and performance of Tripura.

Sri Anil Chandra Bhattacharya mentioned in his renowned article, 'Bangla Natyan Charcha in Tripura' (1975) that the existence of Manipuri ballads in Tripura is due to the neighbourly relationship between both states. There was no natural and religious taste or inclination only based on 'ballads' from Manipur. But, also due to the equality and establishment of matrimonial relationships between royal families of both kingdoms, there was a spread and establishment of Manipuri culture mainly in Tripura. The 'Gaudiya' and 'Manipuri' dramas amalgamated in various festivals and other occasions due to cultural synergy and therefore, dance songs and performances on 'Krishna Leela' started. It was primarily by Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya's initiative, that the dance songs on Krishna Leela were staged in Tripura. Later on, it was Maharaja Radha Kishore Manikya, who later patronized the literature and culture of the state. But he specifically, according to Anil Chandra patronized Yatra- abhinaya, Kobi(r) - Lorai supported traditional folk drama to bring richness. However, in 1897 A.D at the initiative of Maharaja Radha Kishore Manikya, some royal officials along with the Prince formed a theatre group named "Ujjayanta Natya Samaj" which was formed in Tripura.

'Panchanka-er-Pativrata' is the first play performed by Ujjayanta Natya Samaj. This play was written by Prince Mahendra Debbarman. This is a Tripura-born playwright's first original work. After that, the next play is a Historical play called 'Tripur Gaurav'. The manuscript of this play is no longer available and the playwright's name is not known. But 'Ujjayanta Natya Samaj' has performed this play and this can be traced. Moreover, under the enthusiastic instruction of Maharaja Birendra Kishore, the Ujjayanta Natya Samaj performs on two of Rabindranath Tagore's plays 'Raja-o-Rani' and 'Bisarjan'. The play 'Dol Lila' was composed by Maharaja Birendra Kishore and was also staged by Ujjayanta Natya Samaj. Further, it was seen in the state that on the invitation of Ujjayanta Natya Samaj, the Star Theatre troupe from Kolkata, Minerva Theatre troupe from Kolkata and some other theatre troupes and Opera performing groups from Dhaka were invited to perform. The famous troupes from Kolkata and Dhaka were impressed and amazed with Tripura's local theatre troupe performance. In his article, 'Adi-Juge-Ruprekha', Anil Chandra Bhattacharya mentioned that Star Theatre from Kolkata after watching Tripura's theatre group performance was overwhelmed with surprise and joy. And they freely admitted it. And was surprised to see that the smallest and remotest part was underdeveloped and therefore was called the unknown India. Moreover, artists from the smaller states can perform so beautifully. The great name and renown that 'Ujjayanta Natya Samaj' left in the Tripura theatrical scene up till 1920 is very praiseworthy. This level at which local actors raised the standard of drama



through experimentation paved the way for the next generation of drama to go much further.

Later, '*Pushpavant Natya Samaj*' was born under the encouragement and patronage of Maharaja Birendra Kishore Manikya. From the year, 1917, it was seen that several theatre groups were formed. In this context, Ranbir Karta's 'Theatre Party', Lebukarta aka Brajabihari Debbarma's theatre troupe needs to be mentioned. Ranbir Karta's Theatre Troupe was the second-largest theatre company in Tripura. Lebukarta's troupe experimented with how smoothly vocal music, instrumental music etc. can be used in drama which is seen as an accompaniment to acting in later drama. Meanwhile, the men formed 'Ujjayanta Natya Samaj' outside the palace, the preparations for the performance were going on in the palace. In the words of Anil Chandra Bhattacharya, mentions that the Raj-anthapurawas developed into Natya-Mancha as the advanced type of theatre stage. Moreover, Tripura's women's dance group practice started from this stage. Under the sponsorship of Maharaja Birendra Kishore Manikya and Ujjayanta Natya Samaj, Maharani Prabhavati Devi founded this theatrical group. Renowned stage artist Brajendra Mukherjee was in charge of the staging and scenery design. Lebukarta was in charge of music direction. Famous Manipuri dancer, Kumud Singh Thakur was the dance instructor. The princes were in charge of the background music and concerts. The women from outside who joined the theatre organisation of Brajaprasad's *Anthapura* were - Lady Doctor Mrs. Kazi, Chief Midwife Mrs. Michael and Elokeshi Acharya. The first dance drama to be performed on the stage of Anthapura was 'Vasant Utsav' by Swarna Kumari Devi. Sarla Kumari Chaudhurani, daughter of Swarna Kumari Devi travelled from Calcutta to Agartala on the day of the performance of the play on the invitation of the Royal family of Tripura and graced the seat of the chief guest. He was impressed by the performance of the dance and drama. Also, historical dramas were performed on the theatre stage of Andarmahal.

Various Theatre Groups

Around the same time, it was found that 'Ujjayanta Natya Samaj' and the emergence of Ranbir Karta's troupe, a third theatre company came into being under the patronage of Maharaj Kumar Surendra Debbarman (popularly known as Suresh Karta) in the Khosbagh area of Agartala city. This troupe mainly debuted as a dance troupe. But later it was seen that the group was further enriched with Bengali actors and artists in the urge of general theatre practice. This drama troupe disappeared after 5-6 years of drama. Encouraged by the performances of Ranbir Karta and Suren Karta's theatre company, several other theatre groups emerged in Agartala. However, none of the drama groups had lasted for more than two to four years. From 1923 onwards, enthusiasm spread beyond the palace-centred theatre practice. Several drama groups were formed. The young students came up with new troupes. The notable theatre groups in this phase are 'The Umakant Academy Student Drama Society', 'Edward Memorial Medical Institute Theatre', 'Sreepat's Tarun Sangh', 'Students Association's Drama Branch', and the Belonia Student Drama Society. It is the student society's theatre troupes that provide an opportunity for theatre lovers and general audiences to enjoy the plays. It was they who introduced the practice of acting with beautiful stage decorations at a low cost. Tripura Students Association was established in 1926. For about ten years, they popularized theatre practitioners and with their inspiration, theatre troupes were formed in various districts.

The Maharaja of Tripura Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya (1926-1947) was also a theatre lover. So he tried to re-start palace-centered theatre and for that purpose, he formed a theatre organization called 'Tripura NatyaSammilani'. The special feature of his theatre practice is the combination of two cultures. He composed several ballads incorporating Bengali and



Manipuri dance and music. Two of these ballads are notable: 'Chand Kumudini' and 'Sri Radha Kriya Lila Vilas'. In 1934, the ballad 'Sri Radha Kriya Lila Vilas' was performed on the stage of 'Tripura House' and was highly appreciated by the theatre critics of Calcutta. Maharaja Bir Bikram wrote a full-length play called 'Jayavati' and 'Tripura Sati' in 1926 AD. A special feature of this play is the use of dialogue language according to the characters. In one of the scenes of this play, 'Halam' language is used in the dialogues of Halam Sardar. From this, it can be said that for drama the King of the state was trying and giving his best to give proper realisation and upbringing. In the history of Bengali drama, this drama is probably the first to use the language of an indigenous people.

During the reign of Maharaja Bir Bikram, Jyoti Prasanna Sengupta wrote four plays namely '*Bangladesh-er Mati*', '*Arjya-Anarjya*', '*Tripur Gaurab*' and '*Chitor Sandhya*' between 1938 and 1944. Among these plays, only the play '*Bangladesh-er Mati*' was printed and published. Other plays, written for minors, remain in manuscript form. A prominent figure in Tripura's theatrical history is Tripuresh Majumdar, who was born on October 4, 1912. After graduating from high school, Majumdar entered the acting profession as a wife in dramatist Raj Krishna Ray's 'Lakshya Hira' during Durga Puja in 1930 on the stage of Tripura's elite theatre company, 'Tripur Natya Sammilani'. For thirty-three consecutive years from 1930 to 1963, he was said to be the lifeblood of Tripura's theatre practice. Anil Chandra Bhattacharya in his essay 'An Unforgettable Name Tripuresh Majumdar in Tripura's Theatre World' while discussing the role of Tripuresh Majumdar in Tripura's theatre practice rightly writes that Tripura's palace-centric style of theatre practice extended to the common arena. Although the first attempt was made by Ranbir Karta's Theatre Party, it has to be said that the first achievement of popularizing the genre as a whole is 'Shilpaayatan'. Tripuresh Majumdar has worked the most in it. Anil Chandra also wrote that 'Tripur Shilpaayatan' was the main theatre of Tripuresh. As one of the chief organisers of this theatre group, he acquired a well-deserved reputation.

Tripuresh Majumdar has become famous as a proverbial actor and theatre director by acting in more than half a hundred plays. Some of his famous performances which are still remembered today are: '*Digambar*' in the play 'Ritimat', '*Shah Jahan*' in the play 'Shah Jahan', '*Dr. Bose*' in the play 'Tatinirr Bichaar', '*Chanakya*' in the play 'Chanakya', '*Sangram*' in the play 'Sangram O Shanti', '*Raghupati*' in the play 'Bisarjan', '*Nilambar*' in the play 'Plabon', '*Shakuni*' in the play 'Karn Arjun' etc. His long-acting career ended on 21st March 1966. Apart from Tripuresh Majumdar, those who enriched Tripura's drama are; Sudhanshu Dutta, Barin Chattopadhyay, Kanu Bandyopadhyay, Swadesh Pal, Dhurjati Dasgupta, Shivdas Bandyopadhyay, Shishu Ranjan Sen, Hiralal Sengupta, Tapes Roy, Ranjit Bhowmick, Shakti Halder, Dr. Hemendu Shekhar Roy Chowdhury, Bimal Gupta etc. Many of them were good actors, theatre organizers and theatre directors. They followed the modern theatre style of Calcutta and at that time only successful dramas were performed on the Calcutta stage. Among them, Shakti Halder was not only the theatre organizer but also initiated the Jatrपाल competition for the revival of Jatrपाल. In the first phase, i.e. before the accession of Tripura to India, the plays written by Tripura's playwrights are: '*Jivan Mangal*' (1905) by Daulat Ahmad, '*Patibrata*' (1917) by Maharaja Kumar Mahendra Debbarman, '*Resham*' (1925) by Yogesh Chandra Chowdhury, '*Jayavati*' and '*Tripura Sati*' (1926) by Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya, '*Bangladesh-er Mati*' (1944) by Jyoti Prasanna Sengupta. Advanced groups like Shilpi Sansad, Lokshilpi Sansad, and Shilpayan entered the field commencing in 1948, bringing an amalgamation of folk, traditional, and modern forms. The biggest contribution made by the 1955-founded Lokshilpi Sansad was the introduction of female



performers to play female characters, which declared the beginning of a new period in Tripura's theatre culture. Even before that point, there was not a fixed dramatic stage or performance space, so the companies had to come up undertaking generated setups.

Conclusion

The Post Independence phase witnessed dramatists and theatre practitioners namely - Rakhil Ray Chowdhury, Agni Kumar Acharya, Sukhamoy Ghosh, Ajit Majumder, Kamal Ray Chowdhury, Ram Krishna Debnath, Manik Chakraborty, Chandan Sengupta, Pradip Acharjee, Rabindra Bhattacharya, Nanda Kumar Debbarma, Hirendra Sinha and Sanjay Kar. Furthermore, it was seen that the later dramatists namely - Shamsul Islam, Sudhangshu Bikash Saha, Ratish Majumder, Tamal Chakraborty, and Manju Rani Biswas played around with the rapidly evolving theatrical fashions throughout the post-independence era. To fulfil the needs of the day, they combined traditional forms of practice with modern styles and conventions, enabling aspiring and amateur writers, actors, directors, and enthusiasts to experiment with theatre and turn it into a popular cultural activity. Dramatists like - Prantosh Datta through his superstition plays – ‘*Dainike*’ and social plays like – ‘*Bacchao, Jinn*’ (2004) which portrays the brutish features found in a human being and Subhashish Chowdhury’s child plays – *Naithoukbi, Icche Burur Bagaan, Rajar Pala* gave a new fervour to the audiences of Tripura as, with the arrival of Independence, theatre in Tripura had finally emerged as a collective social entertainment from a mode of private entertainment which marked the establishment and initiation of democratic artistic heritage in the state. Since 1960, theatre in Tripura has evolved into a fully-fledged cultural movement, with multiple organisations rising ahead to participate into account festivals and events sponsored by government agencies of states and organisations. Lastly, it also gives a distilled summation and idea about the intermingling of transitional and experimental phases of Tripura's pre-Independence drama literature since its inception from the theatre.

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