

# FOLK DRAMA FOR THE CONTEMPORARY STAGE

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The *Natyashastra* of Bharata provided guide lines to our classical Indian drama, but said very little about the folk forms. Only some references to popular folk drama like *Rasaka* and *Charchari* are made. They were considered as elementary and undeveloped, because of their limited number of characters and the total dependence on music and dance. The classical Indian drama, because of its association with temples and aristocratic families remained cut-off from the mainstream of Indian life, where as folk drama, on the other hand, was mainly oral and enjoyed the patronage of the common man. Their increasing popularity, however, earned the contempt of the aristocratic and sophisticated classes of society.

The only rightful place folk drama received was in the Jain *shastras* where they were vividly described in the context of ceremonies and festivities. The Jain priests spoke the language of the masses and became one with them. They took an interest in all aspects of their life and therefore these folk forms received their utmost attention.

The classical Sanskrit drama began degenerating from the 10th Century on because of uncongenial social conditions while folk drama received greater attention by the interest of the masses. The rise of Vaishnavism in the 15th Century gave an impetus to folk drama and folk forms, such as *Rasleela*, *Rasdhari* and *Ankiyanat*, depicting the life of Krishna, were its outcome. The influence of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in the 12th Century could also be seen in the dance-forms of Manipur and the singing and dancing squads of Bengal, later known as *Jatras*. In the 16th Century the Tulsi *Ramayana* came into existence. The *Rasdhari* folk drama of Rajasthan was perhaps the product of the 16th and 17th Century which, though totally different from the *Ramleela* and *Rasleela* of U.P., was definitely influenced by the Rama and Krishna cults.

The Krishna cult which initially influenced the *Rasleela* also, lost its spiritual depth in due course of time and became an instrument of youth-

ful expression as evinced in Kathak and other forms of dancing prevalent in the courts of the Nawabs. The *Jatras* of Bengal and other *Leela* forms of North India also could not escape this influence. They gradually stepped down from their high pedestal of devotion and acquired a social base. The *Khyal* of Rajasthan, the *Bhavai* of Gujarat, the *Tamasha* of Maharashtra, the *Swang* of Haryana, The *Bhand Jasan* of Kashmir and the *Mach* of M.P., though initially inspired by these devotional folk forms got inspiration from social and other themes, touching the day-to-day life of society, in the 18th and 19th Century. These forms became so popular that they enjoyed their sovereignty in the region in which they were firmly rooted. In the beginning of the present Century, the Parsi Hindi drama flooded the urban audience of the Hindi speaking areas of India but could not last long because of its diversity from other popular forms.

The *Bhavai* folk play of Gujarat, the *Jatra* of Bengal and the *Tamasha* of Maharashtra are still receiving patronage from the masses and are popular even today. The *Khyal* of Rajasthan, though static in growth has retained its originality and vigour to a great extent. The *Mach* of M.P., as compared to Rajasthani *Khyal*, has shown better prospects and is becoming popular in the northern region of that State.

Experiments in modern theatre are being conducted in several parts of India but in very few cases is folk technique being properly used as a source-material in the development of modern drama. It is, at present, mainly deriving its inspiration from the west, with the result that it is tending towards extreme intellectualism and showing an utter disregard to its thematic value. It is totally cut off from the Indian tradition and lacks in emotional appeal. Its audience is limited and it is still unable to catch the imagination of the Indian masses. It is in its infancy and is looking for a stable base.

### Regional character of Folk Drama

Folk drama is regional in character and has its roots much deeper in the Indian tradition and so is appreciated by all. Folk forms have their stable patrons and their audience too is emotionally attached to them. Those folk plays which are still in their community form are fostered and nurtured by the people themselves. Both these professional and the community types of troupes, therefore, have not suffered because of their close affinity with the people and the family-like patronage they receive from them. Some of the modern theatre enthusiasts, today, consider themselves much nearer to the folk tradition and claim to be inspired by them. In several seminars of a national and regional level this point has been stressed and its relevance for modern use has come in for much discussion. Many experts believe that if the modern theatre has to develop, it has to derive its inspiration from the folk tradition. Some of the modern street-play-enthusiasts consider themselves much nearer to the folk tradition. The free expression of movement and word, as common in folk drama, and the tendency to become 'earthy' to express a deeper meaning seems to have inspired most of the 'absurd' drama players today. All these tendencies and assumptions have to be examined very thoroughly and we have to see whether they have in any way assimilated the spirit behind a folk play. Mere absence of stage settings, curtains and light effects and the informal ways of acting, singing and dancing do not make street play folk-based. The traditional folk drama is not a stage play alone. It is a way of living and a partnership between both the performer and the audience. Economic

gain and earning of prestige are not its ultimate aim. They are its logical conclusion.

The folk drama germinates and flourishes in a regional language and in regional ways of living. Once we try to dislocate it from its region and take it to a place uncongenial to it, it is bound to fail. The spoken word is not its only medium of communication. The dance, the song, the facial expression and the varied bodily movements are equally potent instruments of communication in a folk play. Modern drama on the contrary depends solely on its spoken word which is invariably an outcome of intense and varied mental activity. Before it is used as a communicative media it has to undergo a process of strict selection and intellectual examination. Every word is so carefully selected that there is no scope for alteration or replacement afterwards. If the performer, while performing misses a word, the whole link of the drama is seriously disturbed and his counterpart on the stage feels terribly embarrassed. But in a folk play the performer has the fullest freedom to make additions and alterations not only in the spoken word but in the musical and the thematic content also. The performer has his counterpart not only on the stage but in the audience also. He has to be a man of extraordinary guts, proficient both in dancing and singing. Even in his personal life he has to be a friend and a loving object for all. Can we conceive of this in modern theatre? Can we avail of such an all-round performer having the guts to speak and sing as the situation demands?

Folk drama and the modern theatre are opposed to each other in regard to the principles involved in each of them. If the folk play is altered to such an extent that the performer has absolutely no freedom to improvise or behave in an informal manner, will it be accepted by the audience as a folk play?

#### Intimate Contact

The intimacy of the folk performer with the audience is not limited to the stage alone. It is a life-long process and is earned through love, understanding and constant contact with the people. The folk performer has never to face the problem of his food and other comforts while he is on his performance tours. The place of his performance is familiar to him and the people too take pride in entertaining him in all possible ways. Even when he happens to come to that region in the off-season, he receives the same affectionate treatment from them. This very intimacy and lovable familiarity puts the performer and the audience in a most favourable position and gives colour, depth and charm to the show. Because of his familiarity and intimacy with the people of the region, the performer is aware of the problems and knows perfectly well as to who can be a target of his improvisation when the show is on. This awareness makes the show lively and gives the performer an opportunity to comment on the problems of the region and give a realistic colour to the show.

This is also true of the audience. There are many such occasions when the audience craves to see the performer in his off-the-stage-personality, percolating through his stage personality during his performance. In *Amarsingh Rathore Khyal* of Rajasthan the Hadi Rani stops her husband from going to the Moghul court and enters into a lengthy dialogue with him and the audience is terribly bored. At that very opportune moment Hadi Rani removes his veil from his moustachoed face and gives a little wink of the eyes to the audience. This creates instantaneous laughter and

removes the boredom in no time. The audience is clever enough to discriminate between these two phases of Hadi Rani. It ignores the moustachioed image of the queen and accepts the one which moved the audience to pathos, even though for a short while. Such situations arise several times in a folk play. That is why a folk drama keeps the audience busy throughout the night and does not bore them in spite of its unusual length. If this technique is adopted in a modern play and the performers are allowed to improvise and show their off-the-stage-personality off and on, will it be accepted by the audience?

The theme and the dramatic content of the folk play provides a basis and in no way is it everything for the performer. It provides only an outline and the details are filled in by him. In this process of filling in details, several new compositions in the form of songs, dances and wit spring up and are gradually absorbed into the play. The performer and the audience both have a big role to play in this process. Every moment they are contributing something or the other. This freedom, allowed to the performer and the audience, gives rise to several imaginative compositions and gives a perfect shape to the play. Sometimes the play gets stuck to a single episode and song, after song is sung for hours together, both by the performer and the audience. Everybody is spellbound and takes pleasure in this joint venture. This is why a folk drama never gets old and the audience always feels fresh and keeps itself engaged all the night.

Can this improvisory element be made permissible in a modern play? The performer of a modern play is mostly unknown to the audience. He or she is in no way emotionally attached to them. The impression that the audience gathers is short lived and the play therefore gets stale in no time.

But this experience is reversed in a folk play. The public is never tired and can see it again and again, because each time it is performed, a tradition behind it is being created. Like a rivulet it starts with a scanty stream which gets broader and deeper every day by joining with several other streams. Thus the interest is sustained for days and months. *Ram Leela* is performed today and was performed one hundred years ago also. The *Bharatrhari* play of Rajasthan is being enacted for more than 200 years and it is still fresh. The main reason is that they are being recreated and revitalized every day and the nourishment they receive makes them ageless.

Folk drama is essentially a personality-centred-drama while modern drama is problem centred. The folk drama has to move round a spectacular and conspicuous figure of extraordinary merit. He may be a deity, a hero, a lover or even a dacoit. But in a modern drama it is not so. The "personality cult" is not at all important. The wishes of the playwright, his whims, his ideology, his views about certain problems form the "personality" of the play and the performers have to move around it. Thus the play often lacks in visual representation. It has to depend solely on the subtle expression of the performer and his delivery of speech and acting. The audience in the modern theatre too has to adapt to all these subtleties.

The spoken word in a modern play is the most powerful medium of expression. The sound and light effects add to this effect but dance and song have no place. It can be made as simple as possible. Stage settings, the

sound and light effects and other formalities of presentation in it may be left out. It can be performed in streets and *chaurahas* without any raised platform or a formal auditorium, but still it cannot be accepted as a folk play. Many such experiments are being conducted in our country. The performers suddenly emerge from a crowd. They speak their dialogue at the top pitch of their voice. It appears as if some quarrel has sprung up. Hundreds of passers-by collect out of sheer curiosity. The whole mystery is revealed in a moments' time and people start realising that it is a sort of a drama, and not a quarrel. They see this extraordinary and off-the-routine-show out of sheer curiosity but the play has almost no impact on them. At that very movement a few *Bahurupias* in their varied costumes are seen in the market moving from shop to shop. They act and sing and pass witty remarks and go on. Hundreds of passers-by collect round them and create a problem for the traffic.

There are those traditional artists who visit the city annually to perform for their usual patrons. They are masters of their art and are best at dancing, singing, and mimicry. They are great improvisers and can fool a man at any time and can make him laugh at all odd moments. They accept money only on the completion of their month-long-assignment and that too from their patrons alone. These traditional performers are well known and their annual visits are anxiously awaited by their patrons. They are loved and honoured and are never considered as a burden to any one. Their dramatic presentation leaves a memorable impression. But on the contrary the modern street plays have almost no impact and are some times considered a nuisance to the traffic police.

If this loose and elastic type of dramatic presentation, as seen in a folk play is restricted to a fixed and formal type of presentation and tied to a fixed theme, it is bound to lose its impact. The lyrical presentation of the theme, the description given by the clown and the initial prelude given by different stock characters in a folk play are meant for eliminating the uninteresting parts of the story and still connecting them with the main theme. The undramatic part of the play is thus narrated by these characters and only such episodes are presented on the stage as are capable of drawing the attention of the public.

### Symbolic Character

The logical development of a theme or a character in a folk drama is not essential. It is also not necessary to place all the episodes on the stage and place before the audience all that happened in the case of a particular person. If a child is born it is not necessary to show all the phases of his growth. He is immediately shown as a fully grown youth leaving all the intermediaries to the imagination of the audience. Instead of showing all the situations, which make a good man bad, he is straight away shown as bad. The stage of renunciation from the stage of worldly bondage in the case of a saint can come up abruptly. Love, and hatred can be depicted in a single person all at a time, without entering into its psychological details. A bad man in a folk play becomes good in no time and vice versa. The joyous situation can be brought in immediately after a death scene. All these discrepancies make a folk play lively and interesting, whereas they would be a set-back in a modern play. A character in a folk play lying dead on the stage can immediately get up and slip out without creating an impression that he has come alive. Rama while discoursing with Sita can pick up a *beedi* and start smoking. A male performer can cover himself

with a *chadar*, and become a woman. Lord Rama along with Sita and Lakshman can traverse a few steps on the stage and cover the distance from Ayodhya to Chitrakoot in no time. Crossing of rivers and climbing of mountains can be shown by giving a few jerks to the body and lifting the clothes a little.

All these situations may look childish and amateurish to the modern eye but it is not so in the case of the patrons of folk art. Their technique and intricacies of presentation today has attracted the attention of several scholars and experts and have become a subject of intensive research. It is, therefore, unkind to consider a traditional play 'rustic and undeveloped' as in our classical *shastras*. All these amateurish situations may seem so to a casual reader but when we go deeper into these plays and see them in their proper context all these extraordinary situations become significant. The Rama smoking a *beedi*, then will cease to be looked upon as Rama at that particular moment. The man with a *chadar* on his head will appear a beautiful woman. Rama going to Chitrakoot while crossing the stage will appear as though penetrating through dense jungles.

Will modern drama be able to create these mental illusions? In a folk drama all these inconsistencies are turned into logical ones by creating certain psychological reactions in the minds of the audience. These illusions are created in the habitual rural audience because of their emotional attachment to such plays and their performers. The most important psychological factor is that these plays and their characters do not evolve on the stage but develop on the mental and emotional plane of the audience. They do not speak in words alone. They speak through dance, music and rhythm.

Can a modern play create such an emotional plane? Such a form does not have an unlimited scope. It is limited to a particular type of emotionally integrated people of a particular region from where the particular folk play is evolved. It has close links with a people having uniform beliefs, uniform language and uniform cultural traits. This is why the folk play has regional affinity and regional characteristics. It evolves in a particular region and caters to a particular type of audience mostly belonging to that very region. That is why the *Jatra* of Bengal cannot flourish in Rajasthan or Punjab. Even in the same state the regional character of a folk play has a very prominent part. The *Shekavati Khyal* of Rajasthan cannot be popular in Mewar and the *Mewar Rasihari* is unknown to Bikaner and other regions. There are some forms, which on account of their maturity and patronage received from modern enthusiasts have enlarged their regional and cultural dimensions. The *Tamasha* of Maharashtra is one such striking example. It has given up its regional links because the State itself has developed into one powerful cultural and linguistic unit, unlike Rajasthan, U.P., and M.P. The different folk forms of Rajasthan, therefore, have very little in common. The *Rasleela* and *Ramleela* of Uttar Pradesh have also the same regional links. They are popular in western U.P. but not in its eastern part. The *Mach* of M.P. too is popular only in Malwa and is almost unknown in Mahakaushal.

The above aspect of folk drama is to be kept in view while producing a folk-based modern play. In whatever language this experiment is conducted this aspect has to be kept in mind. If Rajasthan is chosen for this experiment, the use of Hindi will not be helpful. In the same way Hindi

drama can never be popularised in Maharashtra, Gujarat and other non-Hindi speaking States. Though Hindi has been accepted as the spoken language of Rajasthan, U.P. and Haryana, it is not their cultural and regional language. And that is why all the folk plays of these states are not in Hindi. All experiments in modern theatre based on folk theatre, therefore should be in the regional language and not in Hindi.

### Female Roles

The female roles in most of the Indian traditional forms are done by males, not because of social and other reasons, but because of their robust and vigorous nature. There is no distinction between a male and a female character in a folk play except in their costume. The dialogues of folk drama are mostly lyrical and are accompanied by complicated dance patterns. The performers' voice has to be sharp and high pitched because of the enormous audiences and the way they are spread out in the place of performance. The sound propulsion, in folk drama through mechanical means, is highly detrimental. If the performer, in a folk drama, delivers his dialogue in a localised position as in the case of the modern play, the audience sitting all round the stage will feel ignored. It is, therefore, necessary that a folk performer should have a thunderous voice. This can alone create an impact on the audience. These voices behave like a shining sword in the initial stage and become sharp and pointed like arrows towards its end. Due to the high pitch and the range of these voices the accompanists have to change their basic notes often. The accompanists have to pick up the changed notes instantaneously, because the performer starts singing on which ever note he is inspired to sing from. That is why the final selection of a performer in a folk play is done through the process of elimination in which the fittest survives and the rest have to quit. The feeble voices of women and their delicate physique and inborn shyness are the main factors debarring women from participation in folk plays.

In a Rajasthani type of a *Bhavai* play, the performer, doing a female role has to create his own dance-patterns at such a terrific speed that female participation becomes out of the question. The improvisational nature of the folk play and its acrobatic dance-patterns make several demands on the performer. He has to create his own dialogue wherever need be and react favourably to the queries made by the audience when the play is on. Several delicate and embarrassing questions are asked and several exciting jokes are exchanged between the performer and the audience, with which a female could not cope. Even if a woman is brought on the stage for a role the audience would feel dejected at the very outset and a strange gloom would spread all over.

In a U.P. Nautanki a very interesting thing happened. An actress was brought on the stage for the first time with a view to attract larger audiences. She was to do the main role in the famous *Nautanki* play *Siaposh*. But at the very outset the audience reacted in a very strange manner and created a revolting situation. The lady had to quit and the popular Ghansyam was brought to do 'her' usual role. The colour and the glamour of the play, lost due to the entry of the lady, who was turned back in no time. The writer of this article was also present on that occasion. This boy Ghansyam had a sharp and melodious voice, feminine movements and a capacity to dance like lightning for hours together. He had the guts and insight to give proper eye-gestures to the audience whenever required.

The audience of a folk play views the performer in a quite different perspective and refuses to see him in a realistic manner. In a modern play the realistic presentation of a character is a must. But in folk drama the audience wants to see the performer first in his worldly personality and then in his dramatic one. These two aspects of a folk character, jointly create an impact on the audience and are each other's components. Raja Harishchandra, for example, has two aspects when he does his role in a Rajasthani folk play. His worldly personality is put in action when he smokes a *beedi* on the stage but when he asks for tax from Taramati for performing funeral rites of her son Rohitasva, he is looked upon as Raja Harishchandra. In a modern play this worldly glimpse of the performer is unimaginable. The audience of a folk play knows that a particular person, doing a female role, is not a female. He is the same man who eats and plays with them every day and knows that he is doing a particular role. The manner in which he creates the illusion of a woman, through his false breasts and illusory voice is all praise to him; but in the case of an actual female performer this possibility is almost zero and the audience-performer relationship is totally lost.

Any performer, while fighting with a real sword in a folk play, is ridiculous. Its imitative or symbolic presentation can alone be effective. But in a modern play if sword-fighting is not realistically done it will have no effect at all. Hill climbing in a folk play can shown by a little jump on the ground, where as in a modern drama hills are to be created with stage settings. A beggar, in a modern play, has to be made up like a beggar with torn clothes and clumsy looks, but in a folk drama any character holding a begging bowl will be taken as a beggar. This symbolic feature of the folk character alone impresses the audience. Creating an effect of a sword, without a real sword, looking like a woman without being a woman and presence of hills in the absence of actual hills are the characteristics of a folk play. If the characters are presented in their realistic manner and the stage-settings are symbolic, the expected effect will be totally lost.

#### Personality of a Folk Character

The folk character thus has two functions. One is to emphasize his dramatic personality through symbolic representation and the other to peep through his worldly personality whenever the need arises. This very blend of realism and symbolism is the life of the folk play. It is because of this fact that a folk play never looks like a drama to a modern eye. Anybody doing any thing within the frame work of a folk play any where in a street or a village-*choupal* will attract huge crowds. Such a massive impact of a folk play is still not understood by modern drama critics.

Religious characters like Rama, Krishna, Sita, Yashoda are attached to the audience more through the performers who represent them on the stage than the religion which creates a sort of an awe for an average man. These characters are honoured by the people even when they are not on the stage and are worshipped like deities. Even evil characters like Ravana, Kansa, Duryodhana and Dushashana are given all respect because of their superb performance on the stage.

If some salient features of a folk drama are to be adopted to a modern play a thorough study of folk tradition is to be made. The folk theatre as for example, has no formal stage. It has many exits whereas the modern drama has few. The actor working on a folk stage has to move like birds



to be able to be visible from all sides. The dialogue, songs and mode of movement in a folk drama is never rigid. The actors are free to act, speak and sing and move whenever they feel like doing so.

The performers have to sing and dance on the demand of the audience when the show is on and make the play colourful and interesting. These improvisory situations lend new life to the folk drama. All these characteristics of a folk drama should find place in modern theatre if experiments are to be conducted in right earnest. The theme of a folk drama is loose and elastic. The climax is generally never achieved. The characters are sometimes left undeveloped and several situations are left to the imagination of the audience. The audience too is a participant of the folk drama and shares its merits and demerits as an equal partner.

In a folk drama it is not difficult for the audience to understand the time lapse. Miles distance can be covered by traversing a few steps on the stage. Years are covered through narration of the clown. Only a vigorous jump on the stage can be taken as crossing the seven seas by Hanuman in quest of Sita. But in a modern play all these situations and time lapses are shown through the miracle of lights and dimmers and the use of heavy and complicated stage crafts. Can the modern drama adopt these folk devices?

#### Modification in Folk Drama

If the folk drama has to be altered or modified according to modern needs the following conditions are to be fulfilled. The first is, not to disturb its basic principles. If any experiment is to be made it should be first done with traditional artists. Experiments conducted with artists other than folk can succeed only in an audience unknown to them.

For the sake of the artists-audience participation, the folk play performed in the place of its origin will require artists of the same region. The artist employed in such experiments should have full freedom to improvise on the stage. One thing which can be achieved with ease is shortening the length of the traditional play and editing it to the needs of the modern audience. One such experiment was conducted by me in editing the famous play *Jaydevkankala* of the *Chidawa* style. It was successful with the urban audience but failed with the rural one.

It is the emotional affinity of the audience with the theme which adds to the success of the play and therefore any alteration in the theme of the folk play is not free from danger. If this experiment is to be done with altogether new artists and for a new audience it can be attempted. The traditional techniques of course can be applied for convenience, novelty and freshness. These modified folk plays can become popular with the urban audience which generally has no attachment to tradition in any way.

The first thing that can be adopted from a folk play is its informality in approach and presentation. In a folk drama the actors' entrance to the stage is left to his choice. If he feels like coming from amongst the audience or from a nearby house he can do so. The physical distance of a performer from the audience should be the minimum possible so that there may be a feeling of contact between them. The modern stage should be constructed in such a manner that it goes right in the heart of the audience so that the performer has the opportunity of feeling the pulse of his audience (as in the arena or thrust-stage).

The informal acting and the wide stage coverage of a folk play can well be utilised by a modern performer. The sets used can also be made simple and symbolic. A branch of a tree can be used as a full fledged tree and a portion of a wall should be sufficient to represent a fully constructed house.

Contemporary drama is word-oriented while folk drama is dance and music oriented. The folk technique can be adopted for creating modern opera or music-based drama. The use of various locations as prevalent in some folk plays can also be tried out in contemporary theatre. Several locations can be constructed or improvised at one place in such a way that they are visible to the audience from all sides.

A traditional Indian play is an integrated form of opera and dance-drama. A contemporary experimentalist can produce an integrated drama involving all these forms. Folk drama can be of immense help in this. Such a production will not be as simple and cheap but it will be worthwhile as an experiment even if it is a sophisticated production.

While producing folk-based modern-plays one has to take precaution against presenting them as folk plays. We may be able to acquire all the qualities of a folk play but still it cannot be placed in the same category.

It is very often said by several drama experts that the *Tamasha* of Maharashtra and *Jatra* of Bengal have given up their tradition and still have remained extremely popular. This requires a thorough study and survey. We have to find out whether their themes are still traditional. Are they popular only in cities or in rural areas also? Have they utilised traditional artists or new ones? Is the emotional and conventional attachment of the masses with them still in tact? Are they part and parcel of the rural life? Do they carry their audience with them in all their difficulties? Does the audience consider itself a participating unit along with the performer?

Some enthusiasts undertook an experiment with a Gujarat *Bhavai* some time back. Their main theme was National savings and Life Insurance. They used the *Bhavai* technique in all its aspects. It was a fairly successful production for an urban audience. But when it was performed in a rural area before traditional *Bhavai* lovers it could not succeed.

Several new *Krishnaleelas* have been produced in India but in spite of their sophisticated production they are not able to catch the audience as the traditional one does. The same has happened with a modern *Ram-leela*. They are not able to arouse the devotional sentiment of the audience. The performers are unknown to them and have no personal relationship. They are suited to a modern theatre with modern accessories and modern audience but are most unsuited to a rural audience, emotionally and devotionally attached to these forms.

Traditional plays do change and acquire new forms as society advances but the process is so slow that the change remains almost unperceived. It is like a natural stream which flows from a mountain and joins hands with several other streams to become an integrated one. This is an effortless process which goes on for generations.