

THE GROWTH OF ORIYA YATRA AND EARLY PIONEERS

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Yatra, connoting a folk-play was unknown to Orissa till the beginning of this century. The indigenous forms of the region were the *Leela* and *Suanga*. Though *Yatra* literally means a 'procession', a 'pilgrimage', 'to set off' etc, it loosely means a festival and a fair in Orissa, such as *Dola Yatra*, *Makar Yatra*, *Bali Yatra*, *Ratha Yatra*, *Chandan Yatra*, *Jhoolan Yatra*, *Sahi Yatra*. Therefore, it is assumed that the tradition of *Yatra* as 'folk-play' came to Orissa from Bengal. But it came not as a blind imitation. It came as a development of the prevailing folk-form *Suanga* during the last quarter of the 19th century. Most of the pioneers of Oriya *Yatra* like Gopal Das, Jagannath Pani, Baishnab Pani, Bandhu Naik were originally *Suanga* playwrights. On the emergence of *Yatra* with its popular appeal, they were forced to adopt the *Yatra* form. Its growth and development in Orissa came as an improvement over the prevailing forms and the main development was the introduction of dialogue in blank-verse. However the sung-dialogue was not dispensed with. At the initial stage of introduction, the blank-verse dialogue remained almost redundant inspite of its forceful application,. Later, it was put into proper form and style. The added attraction of *Yatra* was its orchestra with foreign musical instruments such as clarionet, cornet, kettle-drum; and the use of dazzling costume, and gas-lamps.

Orissa was the last province in India to come under British subjugation which was completed in the year 1803 A.D. The British were followed by a large band of Bengali officers who by manipulation evicted a large number of Oriya *zamindars*. Between 1806 and 1816, within a period of ten years 1011 estates out of 2340 were sold by public auction. These estates were purchased directly by the Bengali officers in their names or indirectly by their relations. In the years 1905-1906 under a sun-set-law more than two hundred estates were again auctioned at Calcutta and this time also they

were largely held by Bengalis. Most of the important *zamindaris* of the sea-board districts of Cuttack, Puri and Balasore were occupied by them.

The Bengali *zamindars* brought with them the culture of Bengal and introduced worship of Durga during the Dusserah festival. They arranged and patronised the festival in their own premises. For entertainment also, they did not employ Oriya entertainers. They invited *Yatra* parties from Bengal. For a number of years the Bengali *Yatra* with its loud orchestra of foreign musical instruments attracted the attention of the general public. It was a heavy onslaught on the prevailing folk-drama *Suanga* which was fully musical. The growing popularity of *Yatra* with its new dimension rather compelled the existing *Suanga* parties to adopt the *Yatra* form. But the *Suanga* parties called themselves "Opera" or "Natya Mandal". Peculiarly enough till today none of the *Yatra* parties associate their names with "Yatra". All the parties are associated with words "Opera" or "Natya".

There are records to prove that the first *Yatra* troupes of Orissa were formed in the district of Balasore. In the year 1878, there were three *Yatra* parties in Balasore town. Those parties were organised at Manikhamb, Makalepur and Barabati Sahi. Within a very short time they were comparable to the visiting *Yatra* troupes of Bengal and received much admiration from the press and public for their performances. Subsequently two more *Yatra* parties sprang up at Shyamsundar Sahi and Sunhat of Balasore. By 1876 A.D. there were five parties in the town. Among all these groups the Sunhat troupe was the best under the noble patronage of the Oriya *zamindar* Ray Bahadur Radha Charan Das. *Sita Haran* and *Duryodhana Urubhanga* were their most popular productions.

In the year 1876 A.D. two *Yatra* troupes were formed at Kandrapara in the district of Cuttack under the patronage of Radhashayam Narendra and Rama Govinda Jagadeb, Oriya *zamindars* of this area. On festive occasions like *Dolyatra* the two groups were performing plays in a competitive manner. A number of other groups also sprang up in the districts of Cuttack and Balasore, but none of them was professional. Each group was patronised by a *zamindar* or a rich man. As such, they had no scope to travel for professional earning. They toured only when another *zamindar* or a rich man invited them through their patron. This was the time when *zamindars* took pride in maintaining *Suanga*, *Yatra* and *Gotipua* troupes. This was necessary perhaps, due to the lack of other sources of entertainment for them and for the people as well.

Professional Troupes

Jagu Ojha of Raghunathpur formed the first professional opera party between 1850 A.D. Sri Ojha was not a play-wright like others, but earned immense popularity for acting, singing and directing the song-dramas. He mostly performed *Suanga* plays written by a number of folk playwrights,

He also introduced farces in the performances of his plays and gradually adopted the *Yatra* form. This Ojha party is still operating in a fluid tradition and remarkably has, maintained its identity for a period of more than hundred years. Perhaps this is the oldest *Yatra* party in Orissa and the oldest folk-theatre group in India. It is a wonder how this group has been maintained so efficiently for over a century.

Among the pioneers of *Yatra* in Orissa, Jagannath Pani stands out as eminent. He formed his party during the last quarter of the 19th century and earned immense popularity. He belonged to the village Nalanga of Bhadrak sub-division in the district of Balasore. Himself an accomplished playwright, musician, director and actor, Pani had a deep influence on the later play wrights of Orissa. He had to his credit twenty-five *Suanga* and *Yatra* plays and ten farces. Of all this plays *Dakshya Yagnya*, *Parijat Haran*, *Bhuta Krida*, *Rukmini Parinaya*, and *Laxmana Sakti Bheda* are worth mentioning. Among the farces *Babu-Babuani*, *Kela-Keluni*, and *Mogal-Gouduni* were most popular. With his rich repertoire Pani could end the visits of the *Yatra* groups from Bengal.

Gopal Das was one amongst the many early pioneers of *Yatra* in Orissa. Like Jagannath Pani he also had a deep influence on later folk-playwrights, especially, Baishnab Pani the foremost figure of Oriya *Yatra*, who was greatly influenced and indebted to him.

Gopal Das, a resident of village Nasadipur in the Kendrapada Sub-division of Cuttack district formed his own troupe. Like Jagannath Pani, he himself was an accomplished playwright, director, actor and musician. Mostly he appeared in the pivotal roles of his plays. The language of his plays, though not common, was simple and enchanting and easily grasped by the rural folk. His troupe was immensely popular in the State and even travelled beyond the boundaries of Orissa to Calcutta and other industrial cities. Like his contemporaries he also introduced farces in his plays. Though a correct list of his plays and farces have not yet been made he is credited with having written more than twenty plays and a number of farces. Among his plays *Kanchi Kaberi*, *Sashirekha*, *Ranga Sabha*, *Sweta Basanta* and *Rangabati Haran* are worth mentioning. After his death his son managed the party but as he was not as versatile as his father, the party was soon disbanded.

In the history of Oriya *Yatra* Balakrishna Mohanty (1900-58) is a great name. Like his predecessors he himself was a versatile playwright, director, actor, musician and a painter. He belonged to the village Palasol in the Jagatsingpur sub-division of Cuttack district. He founded his professional opera party 'Jay Durga Natya Mandali' in the year 1921. Till 1933 he kept touring with his troupe to different places in Orissa, Bihar and Bengal. In 1933 he came to Calcutta and performed in a hired *pandal* for several

nights. There, being influenced by the Calcutta theatre parties he converted his *Yatra* troupe to a theatre company began performing his plays in improvised *pandals* with scenes, sets and lighting equipment. He invested all his earnings in building up this theatre unit. It proved too much for him.

Within two years of his tireless effort, the theatre party could not survive and he was reduced to penury. He realised his mistake and again started his *Yatra* party. He tried desperately to maintain the troupe till 1950 but then it was disbanded. He died in 1958.

Balakrishna was a versatile genius. For his plays he did not only depend on mythology. He created stories out of his own imagination. He divided his plays into acts and scenes. He is credited with having written thirty-six plays and a number of farces. *Amar Bilas*, *Bijaya Basanta*, *Kula Lakshmi*, *Karnajuna*, *Sushila Malati*, *Kedar Gouri*, *Karna Badh* and *Harischandra* are his notable plays. Most of his plays have an inner motive to educate and enlighten the masses with acceptable moral values. Though Mohanty modernised his *yatra* to a great extent, he could not evade the influence of prevailing *Leela* and *Suanga*. In his early years of activity he organised *Leela* and *Saunga* performances. The *Duari* of *Suanga* continued to be a stock-character for humour in his plays.

Govind Chandra Sur Deo is remembered for his reformatory work in the field of Oriya *Yatra*. The tradition that was being established on the basis of the prevailing forms, was changed by Sur Deo to a cultivated form of dramatic enjoyment. In his efforts at reform he got the support and assistance of the famous Narendra family of Kendrapara in Cuttack District. He first turned his attention to the prevailing *Krishna Leela*. He gave it a dramatic form dividing the whole story into several plays. His plays on Krishna-Leela were *Man Bhanjan*, *Rasa Leela*, *Sudama*, *Subala Milan*, *Gopeshwar Puja*. In these plays, being an able singer and musician he fully exploited Oriya traditional music. With the tremendous success of his experiment Sur Deo wrote plays based on stories from mythology, history and legend. A considerable number of his works still remain unpublished. The plays which raised him to the heights of glory are *Maya Shabari*, *Indra Sabha*, *Mebar Patan*, *Handola Vijay*, *Dhruba Charita*, *Utkala Ramani*, *Narak Sura Badha*, *Sakhi Gopal* and *Naramedh Yagna*. The last is acclaimed as his best creation.

Sur Deo did not confine himself to mythological, historical or legendary plots. He made a bold attempt to dramatise the popular stories and novels of Fakir Mohan Senapati, the pioneer novelist of Orisa. These plays with common social characters marked a turning point in Oriya *Yatra*.

Among all his predecessors and contemporaries Sur Deo showed, greater refinement in taste in selecting plots for his plays and in their artistic pre-

sentation. This was because, he belonged to a royal family and had had a college education. Dramatic suspense was so artistically built up that the audience was kept spell-bound till the end of the performance. Sur Deo had a message to give to society i.e. to refine taste in all walks of life for happy living. He completely avoided crudity and the vulgar taste that was rampant in the prevailing *Yatra* and *Suanga* plays. His dramatic treatment of *Yatra* chastened it in such a way that it received the approval of both rustic as well as sophisticated society.

Krishna Prasad Basu, a graduate of his time started a *Yatra* party of his own under the patronage of Bhuyan Bhaskar Mohapatra, a well-known wealthy *zamindar* of Bhadrak during the early twenties of this century, Sri Basu belonged to the village Kaunspur in the Jajpur sub-division of Cuttack District. Like his predecessors and contemporaries he was also an accomplished playwright, poet, actor, director and musician. He had to his credit more than 50 plays. His party was immensely popular in the districts of Balasore and Cuttack and by dint of the quality of performance was able to completely stop the visit of the Bengali *Yatra* parties to Orissa. His style of presentation was near to the theatrical pattern. Sometimes he performed his plays on an improvised stage. He only used a back-drop, wings and the proscenium. No front curtain or painted scenes were used. In most of his plays he appeared in the central roles. He earned a high reputation for his commendable performances as 'Kansa' in *Ranga Sabha*.

In the early years of this century Baishnab Pani (1888-1956) emerged as the most powerful and popular figure in the field of Oriya *Yatra*. He was a man of versatile genius and a man of high historic talent. His multifaceted genius made him a successful playwright, actor, director, singer, dancer, instrumentalist (violin and harmonium), poet and writer. He occupied the highest place in the domain of rural theatre.

Baishnab Pani is largely credited with having modernised and revolutionised the *Yatra* in Orissa. His contribution to the growth of mass culture in Orissa is of inestimable value. The secret of his crowning success lies in the unique assimilation of styles and technique of old the Sanskrit drama, the prevailing folk drama and western opera. Originally he was a *Suanga* writer. His first plays were *Meghnada Badh Suanga* and *Raban Budh Suanga*. With his own *Suanga* plays and also the plays of Jaganath Pani he widely travelled all over the State. When he came to Calcutta with his party, he was deeply impressed by the progress of Bengali *Yatra*. This inspired him to build up Oriya *Yatra* on more prominent lines. He developed the *Suanga* form and introduced prose dialogue in blank verse. He called these plays *Gitabhinay*. He never designates any of his plays as *Yatra* as the term was quite foreign to the soil.

The chief characteristics of his plays were the introduction of subtle humour and the use of rustic language. Up-to-date humour in *Yatra* was

crude and sometimes extremely vulgar. But Pani purified it as his audience comprised both sophisticated as well as rustic people. His comic characters were generally the traditional *Duari* and a village couple. For their dialogue, Pani took the colloquial media, the language of the village. Besides, he also introduced farces as tradition demanded.

Though a correct list of Pani's plays and other writings has not yet been made, it has been stated by a compiler of his works, that he wrote one-hundred-and-nine plays (*Suanga*, *Geetabhinay* and *Yatra*) nineteen farces and sixty-five books on different topics. Orissa had never seen such a prolific writer. Through his lucid style he propagated spirituality, nationalism social and civic-mindedness and many other things that come under the purview of social revolution.

Pani is remembered as a great revolutionary in the field of Oriya *Yatra*. A versatile genius and an adept in a number of arts he rendered tremendous service for the growth and uplift of folk theatre. His devotion and keen pursuit of the profession amidst suffering and pecuniary hardship is commendable. He has made a daring confession of virtue and faults in his autobiography. He was endowed with such rare qualities that he could write frankly in all circumstances. The legacy he has left is of immense value to posterity.