

## The Growth of Oriya Drama and Theatre

KALINDI CHARAN PANIGRAHI

Utkal, as the name of the region indicates, was once an abode of the best and the finest arts. Even today the famous shrines of Konarak, Bhubaneswar and Puri bear testimony to this. The master artists of these monuments reveal to us, through their arts, a world of wonder rare to find. Men, women, and children, wearing lovely attire and ornaments, living in beautiful buildings, or moving on decorated cars and boats, bear evidence of the progress in fine arts which the land enjoyed seven or eight hundred years ago. The inscriptions on the walls of the temples are like songs of the soul of Utkal stilled on hard granite. And yet they seem to be songs as fresh as songs sung only yesterday.

Dancers and musicians, ploughmen and weavers, horses, elephants, cows, and herds of deer are carved with the utmost skill to appear as though throbbing with new life. The art and sculpture of Orissa also depict wonderfully in various forms the ancient but native arts of Utkal—dance, drama, and music. Recent developments in Oriya theatre are, however, still more striking. The drama has undergone a quick change in texture and technology. Its performance has been modernized by co-starring men and women, while formerly only men had a monopoly of the whole show. Themes, plots, and characters—mostly from stories of kings and courts found in mythology and history—are being replaced by present-day social conflicts and reflections of contemporary life.

There are two permanent stages at Cuttack today giving regular performances, and two more in the district towns of Puri and Berhampur. Though they are still lacking in up-to-date equipment, the theatre-going population has increased considerably. With strict punctuality followed in every detail of stage setting, the duration of each performance is never more than two-and-a-half to three hours.

A rapid development of the modern theatre-play thus took place during the present century. But the genesis of the Oriya drama goes back to the fifteenth century A.D. King Kapilendra Dev of Orissa is said to have written a one-act play named *Parasuram Vijay* and his illustrious grandson, King Prataprudra Dev, is credited with the authorship of another one-act play, *Abhinaba Benisangharam*. Rai Ramananda, the Governor of South Orissa, and the celebrated disciple of Sri Chaitanya, wrote a full-fledged drama in several acts named *Jagannath Ballav*, in which devdasis or dancing girls of the temple of Jagannath took part as actresses. The author had himself mentioned these actresses.

The beautiful garden at Puri named today as Jagannath Ballav Math or monastery had accommodated the stage and the auditorium of Ramananda Rai's play. Plays written by the kings Kapilendra and Prataprudra used to be staged in their palaces on the occasion of the Dashera festival. One finds that no less than twenty-four one-act plays were written for performances given at the several palaces of Orissa. The language of these one-act plays was simple Sanskrit which could be easily intelligible to, and appreciated by, the common

people. Besides, songs in Oriya language were introduced as interludes to make the performances more attractive.

The plots of these plays were drawn from stories of the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, and other Indian mythologies relating to human love and heroic deeds of the ancients, with a view to keeping them in tune with the festive occasion of Dashera. These one-act plays written in Orissa six hundred years back dispel the wrong notion that ancient India had no one-act plays excepting those that came from the mighty pen of Bhasa.

As the people grew more art-conscious, the achievement of Oriya language and literature also became spectacular, to cater to their intellectual needs. Folk plays or open-air performances depicting the stories of Radha and Krishna came to be popular in the countryside, while the courts of kings presented Sanskrit plays to select audiences composed of courtiers and intellectuals. The earliest folk plays in Oriya are the Ramlila and the Raslila of Radha and Krishna. The Ramlila depicted the fight between Rama and Ravana in which Hanuman, the king of monkeys, appeared with his troops followed by Jambavan, the king of bears, and his troops, all dancing to the loud applause of the audience.

Dandanata or the dance of Siva and Parvati describing their marriage is also an early type of performance. The Chhau dance of Seraikella, which has acquired an international reputation, as well as the dance of the Mayurbhanj school, are folk forms that reflect recreated stories from the epics. As they are mask dances, they are open to diverse interpretations. Some say that the word Chhau means Chhabi or mask, while others maintain that it is derived from the word *chhauri*, meaning camp, as it was originally a war dance performed in the camps of soldiers and the courts of kings. Both the Dandanata and Chhau are performed during the Chaitra Sankranti in mid-April, preceded by fasting and the worship of goddess Durga and god Siva.

The Raslila in which Krishna, the eternal lover, would appear with Radha and the gopis used to be played during spring and autumn, the performance known respectively as Basantarasa and Sarat-rasa. The songs for the Rasas were written in lucid Oriya by the well-known poet Pindiki Srichandan, and boys were generally engaged to sing these songs.

Another popular folk performance is known as the Ranga Sabha or the colourful court of the most powerful demon-king Kansa, who had hatched a plot to kill Krishna after inviting him to attend a conference. But instead, he himself fell down at the very sight of the irresistible player of the eternal flue and breathed his last. The Ramlila is often a mute performance to songs of the Ramayana, sung by one or several persons sitting at a fixed place with the book open before them. The Rasa and the Ranga Sabha are also performed similarly. But generally the songs and speeches are recited by the players themselves, accompanied by dances and indigenous musical instruments. The production of Ranga Sabha is very costly, reaching several thousands of rupees. The amount is raised by means of subscription from the villagers to erect a vast auditorium accommodating thousands of visitors. It is an awfully imposing sight revealing a fantastic reproduction of the magnificent court of King Kansa, with huge drums, cymbals, trumpets and bugles being used as musical

instruments. Artificially prepared figures representing life-size elephants and horses, terrible, demonic cranes and dragons, and the dresses of heroes and soldiers and their weapons all together create the atmosphere needed for such a play. The production part alone requires a tremendous creative effort, no less the performance. A performance lasts for over a month, played through every night.

As the saint poet Kabir stood as the symbol of the unification of Hindu and Muslim culture in India, so did the folk songs known as Palas, relating to stories of the god Satyapir, stand as specimens of a cultural union of the two communities. The Pala songs are sung jointly by a party of four or five persons in typical tunes of their own and are impregnated with a poetic fragrance created by the ancient bards of Orissa. The performances interpret the songs for the masses, making it easier for people to understand them.

Daskathia is the simplest form of Pala, performed only by a pair of singers. The musical instrument used is also simple, a pair of wooden cymbals, which the singers hold between their palms. Like the Pala performers, they recite songs and poems to thrill the audience with awe and amazement.

Acting and dialogue in prose became a feature of the Oriya folk play in the last century. Jagu Ojha and Gopal Das are names well known to lovers of Oriya folk plays. Ranga Sabha, as already described, was improved to a great extent by Gopal Das and received wide appreciation throughout the country.

Baishnab Pani is claimed to be the most popular writer of Oriya folk plays in the present century. He differed significantly from the past traditions by depicting the present-day social life of our people and has to his credit the largest number of folk plays. The unwholesome influences of modern education, the sad contrast between urban and rural life, the poverty, hopes and ambitions of the rural population seeking employment in Calcutta as workers in jute mills, received a touch of reality and sympathy through his pen.

Baishnab Pani's satire is unexcellable. His lively puns against the educated class are often recited:

I shall read and read to be called an educated person,  
And then shall I pay millions of salutations  
To my wife;  
And give all the beatings to my mother.

Baishnab Pani breathed his last at the Cuttack General Hospital on 10 May 1956 at the age of 74. He has left behind him his adopted son, numerous folk plays, and a thrilling autobiography with the confessions of a true artist. He was followed by Balkrushna Mohanty and others. Balkrushna was himself an actor and he earned a name even in far-off Bengal as a true artist of rare gifts. But he confined his subjects more to mythological stories than to present-day problems. His folk plays, performed in the open air, are enjoyed mostly by illiterate men and women. The operas or Lilas, Suangs and Jatras, being well-known forms of folk play, are produced by numerous writers who preceded and succeeded Baishnab Pani and Balkrushna.

Mention may be made of the name of Bhikari, Bandhu, Maguni, Duskar and Padmanav, besides a host of other folk poets, who produce operas and are paid for each play by the opera parties which still serve as a medium of instruction and entertainment for the illiterate masses. Generally, the opera writers organize their own parties, appearing as players, and move about giving performances from village to village. Some of our well-known writers also contributed largely to this section of mass literature, of whom mention may be made of Shri Krushna Prasad Basu. Besides being a successful opera writer, he used to appear as a player in his own plays and so did Baishnab Pani and others. Krushna Prasad was the first among educated people to appear as an opera player. The late Laxmikanta Mahapatra had also written a number of opera plays which used to be performed by his own party.

In 1885, a stage in a crude form was built in the precincts of the Kothapada Math near Cuttack by Mahanta Raghunath Puri Goswami. The stage served primarily for performances of Jatras of Baishnab Pani, and lasted for several years.

Gopinath Nanda and Harihar Misra dramatized the two epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, which were read with interest. But there was little scope for their performance since the dramatic versions were almost as lengthy as the original epics.

Ramasankar Ray's *Kanchi Kaveri* was the first historical play in Oriya. Accepted as the father of modern Oriya drama, Ramasankar wrote fourteen plays including two farces and two lyrical dramas. He followed the Shakespearean form and used blank verse to give expression to deeper emotions. By a happy compromise with the technique of Sanskrit plays, particularly in retaining the prologue, he gave his dramas an Indian colouring. He was a severe critic of social prejudices with an abounding love of his country and his people. Besides historical, social and mythological plays, Ramasankar also wrote plays with biographical themes.

The Usha and the Basanti pavilions at Cuttack were temporarily built for occasional performances with thatches over both the auditorium and the stage. *Sitabihah* by Kamala Misra, dealing with the marriage of Sita of the Ramayana, was well received because of its arresting style and the beauty of its language. Kamala, who died a premature death, had also written three more plays and was a playwright of great promise. Shri Bhikari Charan Patnaik followed in the footsteps of Ramasankar Ray. He was a patriot and a moralist with didactic ideals. Bhikari Charan's *Katak Bijay* and *Nandikesari* are well-known plays on historical themes. *Kanchi Kaveri* dealt with the conquest of Kanchi in the South by the king of Orissa who had proposed to marry Padmavati, the beautiful daughter of the king of Kanchi. But the ruler of Kanchi rejected his offer by saying that he would rather give his daughter in marriage to a Chandala or a sweeper in preference to the king of Orissa. A war broke out in consequence and Kanchi was defeated. The vanquished king sought an alliance and found the king of Orissa sweeping the car of Lord Jagannath, a custom every king of Orissa has to observe during the car festival. Thus, he performed the duties of a Chandala, i.e., a sweeper, and Padmavati was offered to him by her father. The subject-matter had been later used by Shri Godabaris Misra in his play *Purusottam Dev* and lastly by Shri Kali

Charan Patnaik in his *Abhijana. Kanchi Kaveri* by Ramasankar did not prove a stage success as it was more a Jatra or popular opera than a regular play. It was followed by *Banabala* (Girl of the Forest), an attempt made after Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. But it was a greater failure than its predecessor. *Kalikala* was his third play, which attacked the social evil of alcohol.

Babu Jagmohan Lala's *Babaji* written in 1887 is considered by some critics as the first social play in Oriya. His second play, *Sati*, painted the tragic character of a chaste lady who protected her chastity with great skill and intelligence from the villainy of a ruling chief, and was finally forced to kill herself. The theme was original and aimed at social reform.

Madhusudan Das, the foremost leader of Orissa, praised this play highly in the then weekly Oriya paper *Utkal Dipika*. Madhusudan's name appears in the play *Sushila* and also later in *Desh Daka*, the only person in modern times who has ever been named in any Oriya play. Madhusudan had built a permanent stage in his own residence at Cuttack. The rajas of Kanika and Dhenkanal also took great interest in theatre and had built stages in their own palaces.

Another stage was built later in 1902 at Paralakemidi by Padmanav Narayan Dev for the performance of *Banadarpadalan* ('Crushing the Pride of Bana', the demon whose daughter Usha had married Aniruddha, a son of Srikrushna), written by himself. The play ended with the defeat of the demon, and the audiences used to express their satisfaction with such enthusiasm that the players used to invite them to a feast.

Padmanav Narayan Dev's elder brother Gour Chandra Gajapati Narayan Dev, the Raja of Paralakemidi, had also written *Dhruba* and several other mythological plays, some of which were performed on the same stage.

In the year 1903, Kabibhusan Ghanasyam Misra wrote a social play named *Kanchanmali*, about a Brahman girl who read Sanskrit in her childhood, was married at the age of seven, and widowed after three years. The tragic sufferings of this unfortunate girl was the subject of this play, which was a distinct departure from the themes followed hitherto by the Oriya playwrights.

The Yuvaraj of Khariel estate wrote an essay on Oriya drama in 1904. The book was named *Natak Rachana Pranali* (Methods of Writing a Play), which was the first contribution to our literature on the subject. The latest contribution in the field is a comprehensive study titled *Oriya Natyakala* by Professor Girija Shankar Ray, the son of Ramasankar Ray.

Raja Radhamohan Rajendra Dev, the Raja of Chikital, had also constructed a stage for the performance of his own plays which he wrote in strict conformity with the techniques adopted by Sanskrit dramatists. His themes were mainly from epic stories; his style was also old. Radhamohan's plays were mostly put on the stage constructed by himself and seldom went beyond it.

Pandit Godabaris Misra and Natyasamrat Aswini Kumar Ghose are two well-known playwrights of Orissa. But the plays of Godabaris were not as successful on the stage as those of Aswini Kumar, who wrote quite a number of social, historical and mythological

plays. He was for some time unrivalled in the field. He produced one play after another, mainly performed by the Balanga Dramatic Party. After the Balanga Dramatic Party had dissolved, a permanent stage, Annapurna Ranga Mancha, was set up at Cuttack. It gave some scope to younger playwrights, though Aswini Kumar was its principal playwright. Started and managed by the late Banamali Pati of Balanga village, the troupe was chiefly responsible for making the people of Orissa theatre-minded.

Aswini Kumar wrote a large number of full-length plays with forceful dialogues which were of a declamatory nature. His *Konarak*, the story of the fourteen-year-old sculptor who staked his own life to complete the construction of the pinnacle of the Black Pagoda, is considered to be a masterpiece. Aswini Kumar was followed by the Sabuja (Green) group of writers who were inspired by Western writing.

*Goud Bijeta*, a historical play by Rama Ranjan Mohanty, though not published by the Sabuja group, was a contemporary play dealing with the ruler of Orissa conquering Bengal. *Deshar Daka* by Harishchandra Badal, *Muktipathe* by Baikuntha Patnaik, *Pujarini* by Mayadhar Mansinha, and *Priyadarsi* (the first play written in Oriya on the conquest of Kalinga and acceptance of ahimsa by Ashoka the Great) by the present writer, did not appear on the stage. *Goud Bijeta* was played at different places mostly by amateur parties. *Lal Chabuk* (Red Whip) by Laxmidhar Nayak was a success on the stage.

With the growth of Oriya drama, the Raslila form too came to be more popular as the people preferred dramas with songs and dances to those which had dispensed with them altogether. The opera party of Gobinda Chandra Surdeo was formed in 1917 and at once became popular all over Orissa. Young boys were trained by Surdeo to play the roles of Radha, Krishna and Gopis, and he was a pioneer of a highly improved form of Raslila.

Mohan Sunder Goswami followed in the footsteps of Surdeo and organized another opera party of Raslila. He was as popular as his predecessor. The speciality of Mohan Sunder Goswami's opera were the songs composed by Oriya Vaishnava poets. Mohan Sunder was followed by Kabichandra Kalicharan Patnaik as an organizer of Raslila, who later emerged as a regular playwright and organizer of the Orissa Theatre party. Himself a gifted music artist, Kalicharan was the first to introduce on the Oriya stage women artists to play female roles. Well-versed in dramaturgy, he produced his own plays and also worked as the stage manager. His theatre became the most popular temple of dramatic arts in the post-independence era.

His social plays dealing with the problems of untouchability and hunger were presented before crowded houses on successive nights. *Bhata* (Rice) was a popular play. It refers to the problem of food scarcity during the period of depression after the War. Its appeal was irresistible as it showed the change of heart of an exacting landlord, whose son and daughter joined hands with a Congress worker. *Raktamati* (Red Earth) is a more brilliant production in which the hero, a revolutionary poet, selects his mate from the untouchable class and hand-in-hand the pair march forward to effect revolutionary changes in society. Kalicharan also attempted biographical plays about the lives of saints and he was at his best in *Jayadev*,

a play about the celebrated Sanskrit poet-saint.

The Annapurana Theatre rapidly grew into a professional party. *Jahar*, written by Gopal Chhotray, mirrored the character of an author and a revolutionary thinker, surrounded by profiteers and blackmarketeers, Congressmen and Communists. The play portrays his reaction to their professions and practices and his determination to eradicate social evils by the force of his pen. *Feria* is a similar socio-political play which propagates the ideals of returning to the villages for reconstruction work. It closes with the national song sung by a band of social workers, girls and boys, marching towards the countryside with the national flag flying aloft. But *Feria* and *Jahar* were failures, like *Bhata* and *Raktamati*, as tangible themes, which is the common fate of writings done with the purpose of propaganda. The first two plays reflect the degrading condition of our society during the period of transition to India's freedom.

Ramachandra Misra and Advaita Charan Mohanty are already conspicuous as successful playwrights. Their knowledge of stagecraft and abilities of artistic representation of characters and caustic wit have crowned them with glory. Gopal Chhotray's *Parakalam* (meaning, a quill pen or a foreigner's pen) is a satire on the present Ministry of Orissa. It was presented at the All India Drama Festival of 1954 in New Delhi. The quill pen was the symbol of a political party which formed government but failed to do justice to the voter. The play has a double purpose. It satirizes the pen wielded by outsiders who constitute the Orissa Secretariat, to show that the Orissa Government is actually managed by non-Oriyas. There is no direct reference to this in the text, but the theme is implied in the play.

Ramachandra Misra outshines many of his contemporaries as a popular playwright. His *Ghara Sansar* (Home and the World) made him famous overnight. His plays are primarily set in a rural background and the main characters are generally drawn from the class of cultivators whom he treats with a touch of tenderness and emotion. *Ghara Sansar* deals with a family feud and ends happily with the great sacrifice made by the hero.

One after another, he produced new plays and gained new victories. The plots and themes of his plays are chiefly based on today's life with new twists and turns. His *Saiparisa* (Neighbours) is another social hit that brings about a pleasant compromise between urban and rural societies through good neighbourly relations. *Bhai Bhauji* (Brother and Sister-in-law) is another stage success. Bound by deep affection and love of the elder brother, the younger one gives up all his happiness for his brother's sake. The story is artfully woven, ending on a happy note for all concerned.

Manoranjan Das, Laxmidhar Nayak, Bhanja Kishore Patnaik, and Narasingh Mohapatra can also be mentioned as promising and modern playwrights. Laxmidhar Nayak's *Lal Chabuk* (Red Whip) is a sympathetic delineation of the character of a proletarian poet whose sufferings and aspirations bear the stamp of reality. Narasingh Nayak appears to be the youngest of the group. His *Gopal Krushna*, a biographical play on the life of the celebrated Vaishnava poet of Orissa, created some interest on the stage.

*Matira Manisa* (Man of Clay), a well-known Oriya novel by the present writer, has

several dramatic versions. The last dramatic version was done by Pranabandhu Kar and was performed by artists of the National Music Association, Cuttack, in early 1955. The play was well received. Pranabandhu has also dramatized a few novels of Fakirmohan Senapati and Kanhucharan Mohanty.

It must be remembered that audiences are, to a large extent, responsible for the quality of a play. The standard of a play always depends upon the high or low taste of the audience for which it is written. The present audience belongs to that section of the intelligentsia which likes to be pandered to. Cheap humour and dances and songs are still found to be indispensable for the popularity of a play. And it is almost inconceivable to do away with them. A number of professional actors and actresses have come to understand their art more thoroughly than their predecessors.

Playwriting is subordinate to the stage arrangement and also to the type of actors and actresses available. It must be said to the credit of the Oriya stage that it gives a systematic account of quickly changing contemporary events. The events that followed the attainment of Independence—communal strife, the problem of refugees, rationing, profiteering and blackmarketing, famine and scarcity—did not go unnoticed. There is definitely a mass appeal in the modern play though it rarely provokes thoughts good enough for the intellectuals.

In the past, itinerant professional groups used to receive aid and encouragement from the then rulers and landlords. The Utkal Nrutya Natak Sangeet Akademi, since its inception, has done very little to encourage the players and playwrights of the State, though financial aid on a small scale is granted to some professional parties. The first necessity is the establishment of a fully equipped theatre to render all necessary help to players and playwrights for the improvement of their arts. Such a theatre should serve as a training ground for young artists since we already have a number of experienced veterans to train them on proper lines. Some of the reputed players are almost starving or seeking temporary engagement with the A.I.R., Cuttack. No art can be expected to thrive so long as artists are starving.

The day-to-day problems of life and government programmes in the post-independence period—the Five-Year Plans, the construction of dams and hydro-electric plants for the liquidation of poverty, ignorance and disease, and other ways to achieve peace, prosperity and happiness—are yet to be effectively reflected on the stage.

There is also little to be said regarding children's theatre in Orissa. A children's theatre having the noble aim of educating and moulding the character of future citizens is admittedly an urgent need. Under the auspices of the Orissa Sangeeta Parishad, a series of children's plays was staged at Annapurna Theatre, Puri, in the second week of January 1956.

It is a happy sign that the public is now sympathetic and more active in joining hands with artists in building up a modern theatre—a truly national theatre which, crowned with the glories of the past, must provide inspiration and joy at the present hour and create a radiant dawn tomorrow.