Drama and Theatre in Orissa

MAYADHAR MANSINHA

Professor Girija Shankar Ray, the scholarly and thoroughgoing historian of the Oriya stage and drama, in his authoritative book *Oriya Natyakala* or The Art of Oriya Drama, first published in 1943, wrote rather mournfully:

> But it is Orissa's misfortune that in spite of tremendous enthusiasm of the people for dramatic performances and thousands of rupees being spent over these shows year after year, Orissa has not got a permanent theatre as yet. [p. 85]

But in a period of little more than a decade since the learned drama critic expressed his pessimism, miracles, it seems, have happened. Where there was not one permanent theatre ten years ago, there are now three, running with considerable professional prosperity in spite of keen and ever-increasing competition from the cinema. Now there is a growing class of professional actors and actresses solely devoted to the stage and already creating traditions of their own in the histrionic art. A band of young playwrights is also in the field, enabling producers to present a fresh play almost every month. The condition of the Orissa stage, which can trace its beginnings many centuries ago, is quite hopeful at present; the theatre will be quite stable and prosperous in future if only disabling factors such as the entertainment tax are not allowed to cripple it financially.

The Masses and Stage Plays

The play and the theatre in Orissa, as in all other civilized languages and lands, originated with or have been intimately associated with religion. And this too has manifested from the two opposite poles of the masses and the aristocracy. These two categories, entertainment for the masses and the classes, have continued to exist side by side for centuries and have been influencing each other in their efforts to adjust to changing tastes. I shall deal with both the categories in this short paper, but first let me speak of the classical variety which is supposed to be artistically of a higher quality, representing true literature and the true intellectual character of a people. Comparing both varieties that I have been seeing since my schooldays, I very much doubt the validity of such conclusions and feel that the differences are only of modes of expression, of kinds rather than degrees, and by absolute standards of art and entertainment, some of the mass dramas are as good as, if not better than, their counterparts of the classical variety. But prejudices die hard, and whereas I find third-rate formal plays being honoured as textbooks for post-graduate studies, the finest of the mass plays are not even taken into the gracious consideration of critics and litterateurs.

Orissa, the Land of Glorious Art

Orissa has all along been a glorious homeland of art, architecture, sculpture, dance, music

and drama, with surprising individuality in each. About her Odissi dances, some varieties of which were shown to Delhi audiences during the first National Dance Festival, the distinguished art critic of *The Statesman* says:

> It is obvious now that we have seen Odissi dances five times, that [it] is a distinct school of Bharatanatya, or more correctly a survivor of some proto-Bharatanatya, some ancient Indian dance from which sprung not only Bharatanatya, but all sorts of varieties . . . Kathakali, Kuchipudi, a number of Attams, some ancestor of present-day Kathak, and presumably the dances of Greater India: Siam, Java and Bali. As it is, Odissi is a lovely dance, with a large vocabulary of finger and hand gestures, not as *punditic* as Bharatanatya but rather like the pure dance (nritya) form of it.
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> [*The Statesman,* Republic Day Supplement, 26. 1. 56]

This is about the dance in Orissa which is still an inseparable and integral part not only of the Oriya drama but also of Oriya social life. And each of the magnificent temples of Orissa is an eternal theatre in stone. The design of the world-famous shrine of Konarak as a chariot of the Sun God, colossal in size and delicate in artistic creativeness like exquisite jewellery, is nothing less than a gigantic theatre, with life-size fascinating *apsaras* dancing, singing, and playing musical instruments all along the aerial journey of the Sun God. The chariot is sculpted all over like a replica of the universe, representing the animal, the vegetable, human and ultra-human creatures in all their bewildering varieties. If a play is a mirror held up to Nature, Konarak is indeed a colossal play in stone conceived and executed by colossal playwrights for all the world to view at any hour of the day or any time of the season. And what is true of Konarak is more or less true of other famous shrines of Orissa too, like the Raja-Rani, the Brahmeshwar, the Parasurameswar and the Mukteswar shrines, celebrated not so much for their deities, but worthy of reverence and worship for the grand artistic heritage they carry by any connoisseur of aesthetic expression from any part of the world. In other words, before I speak of plays in the Oriya language, I would like to tell the world that the people speaking that language have left behind magnificent permanent plays in stone. And as a matter of fact, literary plays in Orissa had found in these artistic treasure-houses their first cradle. It is learnt from literary and historic documents that the first regular and formal plays in Orissa were enacted either in the precincts of the temples at Puri and Bhubaneswar, or in the neighbouring *mathas* and monasteries, or in the carved theatres on the Khandagiri Hills where religious heads or pious Jain, Buddhist, or Hindu monarchs got episodes from the Puranas and the epics enacted.

Sanskrit Plays

There had been a long tradition of Sanskrit plays in Orissa from which the local Oriya drama gradually came up in the nineteenth century. Till the early years of the twentieth century, no playwright could free himself from the Sanskrit tradition. In all Oriya plays of this period, the prologue with *nata, nati* and the Sutradhara was inevitable. And as a matter of fact, the early plays in Oriya include a large number of translations of Sanskrit plays. Pandit

Mrutyunjaya Rath, Gopinath Nanda Sharma, Harihar Misra and others have left behind translations of almost all the important Sanskrit dramas in Oriya. Orissa has the credit of creating and enacting some celebrated original Sanskrit plays on her own soil, which may be taken as her small contribution to the grand sum total of Sanskrit dramatic literature. And the tradition of these theatres and plays goes back to the twelfth century according to the records in the temple of Jagannath. We all know Jayadeva to be the poet of the enchanting *Gitagovindam*. But few realize that he was essentially a playwright. The *Gitagovindam* is nothing but a lyrical play. The only manuscript of his regular play *Piyusha Lahari*, or Wave of Nectar, has been found in Orissa, and from temple records of Puri it is known that this play of Jayadeva written in the twelfth century was enacted in the courtyard of the temple of Jagannath itself. The well-known Vaishnava play *Lalita Madhaba* was staged in the Radhakanta Math, famous as Chaitanya's home at Puri. This appears to be a command performance as it is on record that all the expenses for the performance were met from the state treasury. The ruins of the stage where this play was performed still exist. The play *Jagannatha Ballava Natak* by Roy Ramananda was enacted once in the courtyard of the temple of Jagannath, and again after three years in the monastery of Jagannath Ballava, a favourite resort of Chaitanya while he was in Puri. It is on record that Ramananda had himself played the hero and Devdasi Mukta the heroine in the performance at Jagannath Ballav Monastery. Ramananda resigned his viceroyalty of the southern provinces after Chaitanya contacted him, and arranged plays and dances based on the romance of Radha and Krishna to please his spiritual master.

King Kapilendra Deva of the Solar Dynasty of Orissa was a great conqueror and ruler. His reign in the fourteenth century may be called the Golden Age of Orissa. He extended his kingdom right from the Ganga to Rameswar all along the east coast of India. It was during his reign that the first great poet of Orissa, the peasant Sarala Das, wrote his unique Oriya Mahabharata. There is a Sanskrit play named *Parasuram Vijay* to the credit of this triumphant monarch. In all probability this semi-religious play, in thin disguise Kapilendra Deva's own panegyrics as a great conqueror, was acted in the courtyard of the king's palace or that of the temple of Jagannath. But what makes it interesting and valuable in the history of Oriya drama is that in this play, in lieu of songs in Prakrit, as prescribed in Sanskrit poetics and as practised by all Sanskrit playwrights from Bhasa onwards, we find songs in genuine Oriya. This was certainly a daring experiment in that age and earns the play not so much literary merit as the credit of being the harbinger of the formal play in Orissa.

Plays of the Pre-British Period

Out of the confused darkness of Orissa's history under the Muslims and the Marathas—a nightmarish story of invasion and counter-invasion, looting, arson, and extortion—one finds factual evidence of a few more plays, suggesting that in spite of the highly unsettled conditions, playwriting and play-acting were a living tradition in Orissa long before British rule and English education arrived here. In the middle of the eighteenth century, some

unknown author wrote a play called *Gouri Haran*, which was staged at Puri with Hindi songs in it for the convenience of the Maratha ruling class of the time. This gives excellent topical value to this play. Then one Khadga Prasad of Dhenkanal, which was once a vigorous centre of Oriya literary culture under the patronage of its feudal chiefs, seems to have produced a play called *Padmavati Harana* in 1834. In 1868, Raghunath Parichcha produced *Gopinathballava Natak;* the peculiarity of this play was that though its language was Oriya, all the verses in it were written in faultless Sanskrit metres. This style was practised by many in Orissa, most prominent of whom was the late Pandit Gopinath Nanda of Parlakemedi, without doubt a great scholar though not so great a creative writer. This style, however, is now extinct.

This indeed closes the chapter of Oriya plays of pre-British days. The story of the modern play begins in 1877, seventy-four years after the British conquered Orissa.

The Modern Period

The British came to conquer and rule Orissa in 1803, nearly half a century after British rule was established in the neighbouring province of Bengal with its concomitant benefits.

To start with, newly conquered Orissa was tacked on to the tail-end of Bengal, and to help the British administer the newly acquired territory, streams of Bengali officers flowed into Orissa. By that time, in imitation of the English plays and theatrical performances given by the British residents of Calcutta, the Bengali drama and stage had begun a vigorous life. Bengali officers in Orissa, in imitation of the Bengali stage in Calcutta, started arranging performances of Bengali plays on social occasions like Dashera. And for many years, the formal stage in Orissa in towns like Puri and Cuttack, barring mass plays and amateur attempts in the outlying areas, was really Bengali as the educated upper class in Orissa till the other day was but Bengali through and through.

Ramasankar Ray, the Pioneer

Ramasankar Ray, the father of modern Oriya drama and also father of Professor Girija Shankar Ray, the learned historian of the Oriya stage and drama, in his introduction to the first modern Oriya drama, *Kanchi Kaveri*, which he wrote in 1880, said that sick of the performance of Bengali plays in Orissa, his mind revolted and he wanted to produce plays in Oriya depicting the glories of the Oriya people. At that time, Ramasankar was a young man of twenty or so and had just passed his First Arts Examination. Three years earlier, in 1877, Jagmohan Lal had published *Babaji Natak*, a four-act play which anticipated Gandhi and the Nehru Government in making a case for prohibition. But unfortunately, ethics overwhelmed dramatic art in this play, and in spite of the fact that he came on the scene three years later, Ramasankar's play, unlike *Babaji Natak*, became an instantaneous success from all aspects of the theatrical art. He is thus considered the father of modern Oriya drama for the simple reason that from the very beginning he wrote plays in Oriya with the same commendable patriotism as the Elizabethan playwrights wrote plays in English, and with the idea of making Oriya language as great as Bengali and other Indian languages. Besides, his plays were

excellent specimens of dramatic art as far as contemporary tastes and standards went.

Kanchi Kaveri dealt with the most romantic episode in Orissa's history, the story of King Purushottam Deva conquering the southern kingdom of Kanchi or Canjeevaram and bringing away the pretty Padmavati, the Kanchi princess, to get her married to an untouchable in revenge for the insult her father had meted out to him, but ultimately marrying her himself by the clever stratagem of his chief minister. This story has been the theme of many a poem, ballad and play in Orissa.

A Bengali litterateur, Shri Rangalal Banerjee, had also published a *kavya* in Bengali based on this royal romance, titled *Kanchi Kaveri*. Young Ramasankar took up the same theme of perennial interest to the Oriyas and produced a play of the same title.

This play, *Kanchi Kaveri*, has had great influence on dramatic arts in Orissa for nearly three decades. Although Ramasankar wrote nearly thirty plays of diverse character, this first play of his is accepted as his masterpiece and still enjoys a reputation as a high-class literary product. For many later playwrights, *Kanchi Kaveri* of Ramasankar became the very norm of dramatic production in Orissa.

Ramasankar is not only the father of the modern Oriya play but also of the modern Orissa stage. Paradoxically enough, the young playwright, failing to get either patronage or appreciation in high quarters at Cuttack, discovered an enthusiastic and discerning drama-lover in a Mahanta of a distant rural *matha* in the district of Cuttack. To this little-known but highly patriotic Mahanta of the *matha* of Kothapada, whose resources were by no means plentiful, Oriya literature and the Orissa stage owe eternal gratitude. For forty years continuously, this Mahanta maintained a permanent theatre in his distant rural *matha*, and kept on producing newly written Oriya dramas year after year on festive occasions, spending considerable amounts of money. Without this Mahanta's enthusiastic patronage, the infant Oriya drama might have died a premature death.

In the mean time, the performance of Oriya plays had gradually spread to all the important towns and villages of Orissa. It became a matter of social prestige for the rajas, maharajas, and aristocrats in towns and country to invite theatrical parties for shows on occasions like marriages and other social functions. The late M.S. Das, Orissa's great political leader, was one of the most important among such patrons. In his famous garden house at Cuttack, he set up a permanent stage where for many years good shows were given by amateur parties of the city. Similar permanent or semi-permanent theatres grew up almost simultaneously at Parlakhemidi, Baripada, Nilgiri, Chikiti and a host of other places under the patronage of rajas and zamindars and other rich Oriyas.

Many interesting incidents of the stage of those early days and the reactions of contemporary society would appear highly curious to the modern reader. When new plays were produced on improvised stages, without professional actors and actresses, school children were brought in to play female roles and perform dances. Storms of protest in the contemporary Oriya press were raised against 'schoolboys dancing as professional women'. In one play, the well-meaning author had put in one or two scenes with drunken men to

depict the evil of the bottle which was fast spreading among the educated classes. But when two college boys appeared on the stage with unsteady steps, bottles in hand and incoherent in their articulation, the prudish among the audience started leaving the auditorium with loud protests. In one performance, mythological characters like Rama and Lakshmana, while wandering in the forest, appeared not only in Banaras brocade but also had immaculately-starched Western collars around their necks.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the new Oriya drama had come to stay. Many professional theatrical parties had been started, and although they were all short-lived, their mushrooming growth indicated the growing enthusiasm of the people for the new type of entertainment. Even principles of dramaturgy were now discussed and debated in the contemporary press. The place and the need for song and music in drama were discussed in the *Utkala Sahitya*, the then leading Oriya monthly magazine. The Yuvaraj of Kharial, Shri Bikram Dev, himself a playwright, published his *Natak Rachana Pranali* (Process of Playwriting) around this time, drawing the attention of dramatists to the 'unities' to bring plays closer to life. But not to speak of others, these principles were not adhered to by the Yuvaraj himself in his own plays.

A large number of plays famous in those times are now completely lost. But amongst the works of all our writers, those of Shri Ramasankar Ray still remain outstanding for their distinct literary qualities as well as their historical importance. For a pioneer, and considering the unpropitious environs in which he worked, his continuous experiments appear quite amazing. He has not left any genre of drama untouched—historical, mythological, social, comic, satirical or romantic plays—woven out of his own stories. He gave songs their appropriate place in drama and used blank verse and prose with effect for the first time. He was, besides being a playwright, also a pioneering novelist in Oriya.

Contemporary with Ramasankar and immediately after him, we meet a host of playwrights in Orissa. Theatres sprang up in all important towns and villages in Orissa from Mayurbhunj to Parlakhemidi and with cinema not having made itself a part of social life as it has today, the theatre was the in thing. Pandit Gopinath Nanda of Parlakhemidi, Pandit Mrutyunjay Rath of Cuttack, Pandit Harihar Misra of Puri, and Raja Rammohan Rajendradeva of Chikiti in Ganjam district carried on the classical Sanskrit tradition. This celebrated literary and social aristocrat, the Raja of Chikiti, wrote plays which carried the stamp of his idiosyncrasies. The title of all his plays began with the letter 'P', such as *Prakruta Pranaya* and *Pratapa*. He wrote in a stiff, ornamental prose with songs in the unfamiliar Carnatic style. All the plays of the Raja have become obsolete but to the historian of Oriya drama, these are milestones which he cannot afford to ignore because of their individuality. Besides retaining the old tradition, Oriya drama was now widely used as the pulpit for social reforms such as widow remarriage, love marriage, abandonment of caste prejudices and abolition of dowry. I have already said that the very first play in modern Oriya tried to expose the evil of drinking. The most important of the reformist dramatists was Shri Bhikari Charan Patnaik, who was also well known as a satirist and a champion of cottage industry.

In his plays, he satirized mostly the snobbery of the early generation of English-educated Indians, casteism, ultra-modern ladies and those Indians who preferred to be called Sahibs rather than Indians. He also wrote two noted historical plays but the satirical ones remain his main contribution to Oriya drama. Besides the traditionalists and the reformists, there were also the revivalists, who tried to re-establish in the minds of the people the old social order based on bhakti in numberless dramas made up of episodes from the Puranas, such as the stories of Dhruba, Prahlada and Sudama.

Patriotic Plays

But the most dominant type for nearly fifty years, from the last quarter of the nineteenth to the first quarter of the twentieth century, were plays trying to instil the patriotic spirit in readers and the audience. The objective was patriotic, both of the local and the all-India variety. All through the British period, Oriyas were living a dismembered existence, suppressed and exploited in each of the four different provinces in which they were scattered. Patriotism in Orissa, therefore, in those fifty years was naturally more parochial and less Indian. Indeed, as I have said above, the first great Oriya dramatist, sick of performances of Bengali plays on Orissa soil, resolved to write plays in Oriya. But the other variety, i.e., those depicting a pan-Indian patriotism, was no less intense though less in numbers. The first and foremost need of the Oriyas of those days was to counter the contempt and exploitation of their neighbours. Hence, poets and playwrights in Orissa made it a point to rouse intense feelings in the hearts of Oriyas to exist as a united and resurrected people, by recounting to them their past glories. Therefore, while Bengali poets and playwrights went mostly to the annals of Maharashtra and Rajasthan and Mughal history for materials for their historical plays, poets and playwrights in Orissa focused on their Kharavela and Kapilendra, Purushottam, Mukunda and Narsingha Devas. The most important figure in this category was Pandit Godabaris Misra, who like his erstwhile friend and colleague Pandit Nilakanta Das, affected a fine literary career with the poison of politics. He was essentially a poet who has earned literary immortality in Orissa through his enchanting semi-historical ballads. He wrote only two plays, *Purushottam Deva* and *Mukunda Deva*. Not connected with any stage at any time in his life, Pandit Misra could not by the nature of things make his plays perfectly stageworthy. But his plays are distinguished for two reasons: firstly, for their excellent poetic quality and felicitous language, and secondly for their strong patriotic feeling. It is mainly for these merits that both the plays, particularly *Purushottam Deva*, were once the rage in schools and colleges of Orissa. A song in Pandit Misra's *Purushottam Deva* could be the marching song of any victorious army returning from the battlefield with flying colours. I paraphrase below a few lines from it:

> We have inscribed victory on the forehead of the Motherland with swords painted with the blood of the enemy. The enemy has been routed, his pride dashed to the ground. Incised on his thousand faces are the curses of Death. Come ye brothers, dedicate your lives to the service of the Motherland. And you will reap the reward of a hero on the

other side of life. The Mother, whose history is both holy and glorious, ye Brothers, embellish her with garlands of fresh glory.

Aswini Kumar

The next man to dominate the stage is Shri Aswini Kumar Ghosh. Like the Mahanta of Kothapada monastery who patronized Shri Ramasankar Ray, a new patron now comes into the field in the person of Shri Banamali Pati, a rich moneylender from the district of Puri. This village Shylock was later cruelly murdered by a group of his victims. But perhaps as a sort of profitable investment of a fraction of his accumulated wealth, he helped to start the Art Theatre which, so to speak, has been the mother of the modern stage in Orissa. For nearly a quarter of a century, this Art Theatre with the repertoire of Aswini Babu's plays made up the entire professional theatrical world of Orissa. After the proprietor's tragic death, the Theatre broke up, was entirely eclipsed for some time, and then came up again as the Annapurna Theatre, which is now running in a state of comparative prosperity with permanent stages both in Cuttack and Puri, each with its own band of actors and actresses.

Shri Aswini Kumar Ghosh established the prose-drama style on the Orissa stage. Closely connected with the Art Theatre, Shri Ghosh created in all his plays excellent stage effects. He has nearly thirty plays to his credit and he still writes for the stage occasionally. But his plays suffered from a too 'stagey' atmosphere and excessively theatrical speech, and his speeches and dialogues lacked literary grace.

The man who supplied these correctives to Oriya drama had no difficulty in driving Ghosh's plays out of the Orissa stage in no time. He is Kali Charan Patnaik, a noted musician and an excellent director. He has now nearly thirty plays to his credit, one of which, *Bhata* (Rice), ran for a hundred nights consecutively when it was first staged—a record in Orissa. Kali Babu, though now retired, is still the centre of the present-day Orissa stage. He ran his own stage for nearly two decades and practically moulded all the actors and actresses who are of any importance in Orissa's theatre today. Actors, actresses, musicians, and even young playwrights in Orissa all look up to him as their friend, guide, and philosopher in all matters concerning the stage.

Kali Babu has made acting a natural art on the Orissa stage—a much more difficult thing than the artificial, formal, and stereotyped performances of the old days. He has made the dialogue natural too and used music for excellent stage effects. As a matter of fact, Kali Babu's plays have become attractive and popular more for the musical part of the plays than for the real dramatic art they display. Swayed by an impulse to cater to the tastes of the masses, Kali Babu's plays suffer as literary works because of a preponderance of the elements of Jatra and Suang, including their vulgarities in dialogue and situations. Unfortunately, this Kali Babu tradition now reigns supreme on the Orissa stage, a mixture of the horseplay and rough humour of the cinema and the operatic qualities of the Jatra grafted on to a so-called dramatic form. Character development and high seriousness, literary dignity, classical taste and idealism are pooh-poohed as unacceptable highbrow stuff.

The lowbrow have to be told plainly that it is not the popular drama but the real literary drama that stays and earns the glory of representing a language. Such plays are few and far between in Orissa as no stage manager would touch them with a pair of tongs. But a few writers quite unconnected with and caring little for the stage, and guided by pure literary impulses, have produced literary and poetic plays which will long outlive the present and past sensations of the Orissa stage. Plays deserving mention in this class are *Sita Bibaha* of Kampala Mishra, *Purushottam Deva* and *Mukunda Deva* of Pandit Godabaris Misra, *Priyadarsi* of Kalindi Charan Panigrahi, *Muktipathe* of Baikuntha Patnaik, and *Pujarini, Rajakabi Upendra, Nastanida, Barabati* and *Buddha* [of Mayadhar Mansinha]. It seems to be in the fitness of things and a challenge to the vulgar sensations of the contemporary Oriya theatre that the highest praise of a single literary piece has been heaped by Professor Girija Shankar Ray, the learned historian and critic of Oriya drama, in his book *Oriya Natyakala*, on one of these closet plays. Says he:

> [Mayadhar Mansinha]'s *Rajakabi Upendra* is an intellectual and symbolic play. In it, new light is shed on some episodes of the royal poet Upendra Bhanja's life, and the play has been made charming with many songs. But it is no easy matter for actors and actresses to make it intelligible to the groundlings and express it in acting, the way the poet's soul is touched by the call of the unknown, the way the royal genius has abandoned the throne for the life of a common man, the way the old man in the play gets rejuvenated in contact with youth, or the way Upendra has accepted the lyre from Saraswati refusing the temptations of Rajlakshmi in this playlet. The book is really enchanting, the songs are charming, the subject is highly interesting and imaginatively planned, but it requires a highly cultivated audience to appreciate it. And the conflict that we find in this book is entirely psychological. It is expressed in and through actions of the *dramatis personae*, and not through any external incidents.

I hope this appreciation of a closet play, denied to any successful play on the stage in Professor Ray's work, may be the necessary corrective for the self-conscious group of catchpenny dramatists of the contemporary Orissa theatre.

Dance-dramas

In the last few years, dance-dramas have made rapid progress as an assiduously cultivated art among educated boys and girls of Orissa. A healthy tendency has been to develop the indigenous Orissa dance, so long confined to the devadasis of the temple of Jagannath and to the boy dancers of south Orissa and to ballets based on Orissa's history and legends. The most famous of these in recent years is one named *Konaraka Jagarana* (Awakening of Konarak) and another, *Pujarini*, both based on the poems of a contemporary Oriya poet. Dr C. D. Deshmukh, India's scholarly Finance Minister, after witnessing the ballet on Konarak during one of his visits to Cuttack, is reported to have said: "This might have created a furore in any capital of the world—Paris or London."

Contemporary Playwrights

The contemporary playwrights who deserve mention are Bhanja Kishore Patnaik, Rama Chandra Misra, Gopal Chhotray, and Manoranjan Das, who have as a matter of fact grown up under the wings of Kali Charan Patnaik. They are all young and very busy in their creative work. Assessment of their contributions to Oriya drama will have to wait till critics get a suitable perspective on their work and the dust of passing sensations and controversies dies down.

But before I finish this little account of mine about stage plays in Oriya, I would like to point out one important fact; and that is, though not as extensive as it might be in other languages, Oriya, considering her long dismembered existence for over four hundred years, has plays of which she need not be ashamed. The number of such plays is already considerable, and practically all types of plays are available in the language. Plays written on strictly Sanskrit lines by Pandit Gopinath Nanda, Harihar Das, and Raja Rajendra Deva of Chikiti are there, plays written on Elizabethan models are of course there, and so are pure farces, tragedies, comedies, tragi-comedies, social, historical, political, and psychological plays. Recently, one-act plays are making quite a stir. So, as I said at the start, drama in Orissa, in spite of the crippling inhibition of the entertainment tax and in spite of the lack of even one good-sized city in Orissa, is doing quite well considering all the disadvantages it is labouring under.

Mass Plays

I will now try to give a short account of mass plays and entertainments before I finish this paper. The masses of Orissa have evolved their own intellectual and artistic entertainments which are intensely peculiar to the soil and whose history is intriguingly and mysteriously uncertain. There has been no accepted theory as to their origin and development. They seem to be self-evolved and self-contained. They consist of pure dances, dance and music, and dance, recitation, music and acting combined. The pure dances are those of Adivasis, the horse dances and lathi-dances of cowherds performed in the month of Chaitra. The devadasi dances in the temple of Jagannath are the pristine form of genuine Odissi dance, unchanged for centuries. The Gotipua or boy-dances of south and east Orissa are a combination of song and dance, a sort of makeshift substitute of the devadasi dances of the temples in the beginning but now representing a complex dance culture and requiring prolonged musical training.

But the masses would soon get tired of mere gyrations and whirling of limbs if these did not tell a connected story. Gotipua dances are popular not so much for their merit as dance as an art, but more for the highly spiced romantic love songs relating to the love of Radha and Krishna which they enact. Story, dance, music and histrionic art are all admirably combined in the Jatra, which therefore becomes the most popular form of entertainment in the villages. The Jatra may be described in other words as the drama of the village folk, staged under the open sky without a formal theatre. And these Jatras have been flourishing

in Orissa since the earliest times in her history. In the friezes over some of the caves of Khandagiri near Bhubaneswar, many historians decipher representations of mass entertainments. The double-storeyed Ranigumpha cave is supposed to have been a semi-formal theatre in Jain-Buddhist times. Referring to these caves in a radio broadcast, Dr Charles Fabri said:

> The most fascinating of these are the two-storeyed caves called now Ranigumpha, with some admirable second-century carving, the meaning of which has not been made out. It is a complicated frieze of figures, reclining, fighting, abducting a woman, and other subjects carved very much in the style of the Buddhist stupa of Bharhut. Some of the figure-work, though archaic, is simple, is excellently done, and must be counted among the best sculptures of early Indian art. In other caves, one finds such interesting scenes as a ballet performance by a ballerina in front of a pavilion accompanied by music by a number of musicians sitting alongside. My humble reading of these carvings is that these are attempts by early Oriya artists to depict mass entertainments, which we find undoubtedly in the mediaeval arts of Orissa to be one of the most favourite of motifs of these artists.

The Lakshmipurana Suang

These mass plays in Orissa are generally described by three names according to their subjects. These names are Lila, Suang and Jatra. Lilas such as Ramlila, Krishnalila, and Bharatlila speak for themselves. Suang, the earliest variety, is associated generally with some particular god or goddess. Jatra is the general term covering secular and mythological subjects, full of rough humour and plenty of songs and melodramatic incidents like fights, murders, abductions and rescues of pretty women. All the three varieties, particularly the first two, seem to have been flourishing since very early times. I cannot resist the temptation of giving a short account here of one Suang of the fourteenth century for its highly intriguing, modern attitude towards the position of woman at home and in society, to the caste system, and towards general social standards. It is called *Lakshmipurana Suang*, written by Balaram Das of the fourteenth century, the author of the Ramayana in Oriya. The theme and the spirit of this Suang has become an integral part of the national life and consciousness of Orissa, an indication of the powerful influence mass literature can exercise over the mind of the people. Now, the story of *Lakshmipurana:*

Thursdays in the month of Margashira are supposed to be the day of Lakshmi worship in Hindu households in Orissa. On that day, ladies are expected to clean and decorate their houses and worship Lakshmi in the form of newly harvested paddy and paddy-measures. Now, on the eve of one such day, Lakshmi, the consort of Jagannath and the busy housewife in that huge shrine of his, begged leave of her husband and his elder brother to go around the city to see how the holy Thursday was being observed by the people. The permission was easily granted and the two brothers, Jagannath and Balabhadra, also desired to have an outing and some time off that day. The two parties took their own ways. Lakshmi in the guise of an old Brahmin lady, with her faithful maids, called at many doors

such as those of ministers, the Barapanda, and the local merchant princes. Everywhere she was disgusted with the sight of lazy men and women, still snoring in their beds, their houses unswept and in disorder, oblivious of her worship. At last, she came to the outskirts of the city of Puri and there she was surprised to find Sria Chandaluni ready at the early hour for the day's fasting. She had cleaned her little cottage, decorated it with mural paintings, and had painted at her doorstep with rice paste the hundred-petalled lotus with the feet of Lakshmi in it. The living goddess in disguise was charmed to see such true piety, such purity of devotion in a Chandal woman, and she entered her cottage, blessed her, and lo and behold—the humble cottage was turned into a magnificent palace! Exactly at this time, the two brothers Jagannath and Balabhadra were passing that way and saw Lakshmi in the Chandal's house. Balaram, the irate purist, became furious and told his younger brother, "Look here Jaga, Lakshmi, your wife, is very fickle; she is a disgrace to our family, she lacks the dignity of a virtuous woman; and see with your own eyes—she is now in a Chandal's house. And soon she will return to the temple and enter our kitchen and soil the sanctity of our holy precincts. I certainly cannot tolerate such irreligious conduct. She must not enter the temple again. If you are fond of your wife, you may live with her in the Chandal colony in a separate home." Poor Jagannath mildly protested that it would be difficult to get another woman like Lakshmi as wife but nothing could assuage the irate and sanctimonious elder brother. They returned to the temple where the brothers thought they would live peacefully without a woman.

Lakshmi returned in time to the temple and met Jagannath who was guarding the main door; when the great lady wanted to enter, she was prevented by her own husband. A very interesting battle of words followed. Lakshmi protested against the orders of the elder brother and asserted that she hadn't done anything wrong by visiting the home of a Chandal. Jagannath replied that her offence apart, on the whole she was an undesirable woman, whose reputation was that she was ever in the habit of breaking a hundred homes to build one, and again breaking up that one home to build many. Such a capricious woman, said Jagannath, was not to be accepted any longer in his home, and so he was going to divorce her forthwith. Lakshmi, the great lady, was equal to the occasion. She behaved 'manfully' and looked squarely at her husband, rebuking him loudly for obeying his brother and sheepishly accepting his accusations against his devoted wife forgetting his marital vows. She said that he was no better than a cowherd and she, the daughter of the King of the Sea, could not accept lectures from a cowherd on the dignity of caste. When Jagannath asked her to take all her precious jewellery and return to her ever-howling, asthmatic father, the Ocean King, the wily lady replied that she would rather leave behind all the jewellery for his worthy prospective wife and that she need not return to her father's place as a helpless divorced woman as she could look after herself. So she went away beyond the limits of the city and called Biswakarma to build her a home and lived there with her retinue. And she engaged Betalas to steal all the food and wealth from the temple so that the two brothers would wander like beggars without food till the time they realized her importance. She

thought that if the two brothers could live comfortably without her, no man in the world would care for a woman; she was determined to ensure that such a thing never happened. The brothers woke up the next morning to find that the whole temple was empty. They felt hungry and went to the kitchen but there was nothing to eat. Driven by increasing hunger, they came out on the street in the guise of old Brahmins to beg for food, but from each door they were driven away like scamps and scoundrels. After many a pathetic, frustrated experience, the two unfortunate men at last came to Lakshmi's new home beyond the city limits. There, they had a bath and food in the way they were accustomed to in Lakshmi's old home, the Jagannath temple, and their suspicions led at last to mutual recognition and reconciliation. Lakshmi, however, agreed to return to the temple on two conditions: that she would be now free to visit any house irrespective of the caste of its owner, and secondly, her *prasad* would be enjoyed by people of all castes, from Brahmins to Chandals, which is the practice even today.

Thus ends the *Lakshmipurana Suang* written in the fourteenth century by the great poet Balaram Das and enjoyed by vast masses in Orissa for six hundred years. As a matter of fact, this Suang has turned the Thursdays of Margashira into a national festival of Orissa. This shows the tremendous influence these street plays and Puranas have been exercising on the mass mind in our country. And apart from being folk entertainment, what a charming little human and sociological document, what a fine, imaginative piece of literature is this *Lakshmipurana Suang* of the fourteenth century! Here is, I believe, a fine substantiation of my statement in the beginning of this essay that some of our folk plays have a much higher artistic level than many formal plays today.

The Modernized Jatra—Baishnav Pani

Suangs, Lilas and Jatras have all been greatly modernized in recent times. As I said in the beginning, folk plays and literary plays have been influencing each other to a considerable extent. The literary play, particularly from the time Kali Babu appeared on the Orissa stage, has absorbed a good many Jatra elements to attract the masses. Those who had shown the path long before Kali Babu are Govind Surdeo and Mohan Sunder Dev Goswami. By bringing Raslila on to the formal stage, they created a terrific sensation in their time and proved the irresistible attraction a combination of the Jatra and modern theatre would have on the mass mind. On the other hand, Jatras have assimilated a lot from modern theatre and plays in order to cater to modern tastes and to handle modern subjects. Blank verse and prose dialogue are copiously used in present-day Jatras, with the plays divided into acts and scenes. Modern costumes and recent methods of acting are readily absorbed. Among persons who have modernized the Jatra in Orissa, the most celebrated name is Baishnav Pani, recently deceased. He started his career as a boy-dancer on the stage of the Mahanta of Kothapada where the very first Oriya plays of Ramashankar were enacted. There are nearly fifty Jatras to Pani's credit, some of them going into thirty to forty editions. Pani ran his own Jatra party for a long time and the gift he made to the mass culture of Orissa is of inestimable worth. I may be permitted to give one or two excerpts from one of his Jatras just

to show how he has modernized the Jatra and also how intrinsically beautiful his creations are as literary pieces.

The story of Kedar-Gouri is the Oriya equivalent of the stories of Laila-Majnu, Romeo-Juliet and Pyramus and Thisby. Baishnav Pani wrote a Jatra or *giti-natya* on this romantic and youthful theme. The events behind the story are supposed to have taken place in the time of King Lalatendu Keshari in the eighth century. But Pani, the poet, has completely ignored the historical period and introduced in his play pieces of interesting topicality. So when King Lalatendu comes in and enquires of his minister about conditions in his state, the latter replies: "Your Majesty, as you have established hospitals and engaged doctors, everybody is enjoying good health, and through excellent schools and hostels, a river of education is flowing in the country. The conduct of our officers is also blameless."

The King then expresses his desire to visit a local school, which he does, and there meets both Kedar and Gouri, the pre-adolescent hero and heroine; thus the play begins in a modern way. In the next scene, the conventional *doota* or messenger comes in singing a song which is a telling satire on present-day elections. Says he: "Watch the fun in the present-day world, ye brethren, see how small folk rise high winning votes, and how those fools who cast votes fail to distinguish between the straight and the crooked! After the ballot paper is cast into the box, the candidates forget all those appeals and promises and pretend not to know us!" Baishnav says, "Do not get yourselves involved in this muddle."

Kedar and Gouri, prevented from meeting each other by their family members, decide to meet at night in a jungle outside the town of Bhubaneswar. As ill luck would have it, there is a misunderstanding, and Kedar imagines that Gouri has been devoured by a tiger and kills himself. Soon after, Gouri returns, and finding her handsome lover dead, kills herself too. Before killing himself, thinking Gouri has been devoured by a tiger, Kedar bursts into a song full of poignant feeling. He says: "Ah, cruel tiger, where are you? Why don't you come and satisfy yourself eating me? Don't delay. My beloved Gouri is now in your stomach. Mix up my flesh and bones with hers. We could not be united in life, may you unite us in death. As children we were never separated; a moment's separation was intolerable. She, whose body was like lightning, would have been in loving embrace with this body of mine. But now I am wallowing in this mire of agony. We left our homes and families to meet here, and you took my loving fair bride from me. This indeed breaks my heart."

Thus, the denouement of this tragic story reaches dramatic and artistic heights in the hands of Baishnav Pani, the great folk poet of Orissa. I hope the excerpts given above will have convinced my learned readers that folk plays in Orissa today are not only keenly alive to the demands of modern times and can tackle contemporary problems, but that they are also of high literary merit.

There are two folk forms peculiar to Orissa which I shall mention before I end. One is Pala, quite different from the Pala of Bengal, and the other is Daskathia. Both these forms are devoid of vulgarities and are highly intellectual. They, in their own ways, keep the rural masses enchanted and enthralled by their musical recitation of classical Oriya poetry, inter-

preting ideas with quotations from different authors in Oriya and Sanskrit, interspersed with humour. Generally, Daskathias (where the musical accompaniment is provided by two small blocks of wood—hence the name) narrate a story with plenty of literary digressions. But the Pala performers generally take up themes like war, love, devotion, separation, and display their wealth of knowledge of classical literature sometimes singly, but more often in competition with another party. It is not the scholars, the aristocrats, or the printing press, but these wandering Pala-walas and Daskathias who have kept alive among the Orissa masses the love and enthusiasm for classical Oriya literature.

DISCUSSION

Kalindi Charan Panigrahi: In the beginning of my paper, I have stated that if we analyse the Oriya play as it is now staged, we shall have to go back to the sculpture of Orissa—to the temples of Orissa, the Black Pagoda, the temple of Konarak, the temples at Bhubaneswar and Puri—wherein we find records of acting, music and dancing. It is a world of figures, and there we also find the dances of Orissa, the *natyagars*, the dancing girls and their different poses, which are now being imitated by the dancers and dancing girls of Orissa. Previously, about six hundred or seven hundred years ago, we find that drama in Orissa was written in one-act form. These one-act plays were written by kings like Kapilendra Deva and Prataprudra Deva. They were staged in 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 several palaces of Orissa. Songs were also sung in these plays. These songs were in Oriya and the dialogue was in simple Sanskrit, so simple that it could be understood even by common people who did not know Sanskrit. That was the shape of the earliest drama in Orissa.

Charles Fabri: What was the period?

Kalindi Charan Panigrahi: These plays were written about six hundred years back.

Mayadhar Mansinha: I have emphasized the living drama of the Oriya masses. The majority of the people are interested in it. If you try to trace its origin, you may have to go back to the fourteenth century. About contemporary drama, as Mr Panigrahi has referred to it, the predominance of song and dance is no doubt there. In my opinion, if we have to revive the pattern of Sanskrit drama, we should see that all the three arts, namely, drama, music, and dance, should be developed separately. Last year, I remember, I was invited to see an Oriya social drama on the Cuttack stage. There was a scene where all the members of a Panchayat sit together. Then the entire Panchayat starts singing and dancing. It was something of a horror to me, and such things should be avoided. In Kalidasa's play, there is no place for dancing; there is only one song and no dance at all. Why should we mix song and dance at all? This is one point about which I feel very strongly.

Then the other is folk poetry. It is a very living thing in Orissa without any relation to the

formal stage, which is limited to the cities. The masses watch Jatras, etc., and there are several varieties of them. Nobody knows their history and origin but they are still living without any guidance from educated people. I will also say that a modern touch is given to all these plays. Old plays are being changed to make them attractive to the masses. It should be seriously considered whether drama is itself an art without the aid of music and dance. Drama in itself should be developed, and that requires a professional stage not excluding folk plays. Folk plays have to exist in order to make things attractive to larger audiences. If we wish that highly intellectual plays should survive, then it is necessary to give them state support and keep them apart.

V. Raghavan: On a point of mere information, the historical portion of one of these papers contains a reference to *Piyusha Lahari*. Can you tell me something about it?

Mayadhar Mansinha: You will find it in the historical portion of my paper, which is divided into three parts—pre-British, British, and contemporary drama. The last part is devoted to translated plays, etc. In the pre-British part, I have said that in the courtyard of Jagannnath Temple, Sanskrit plays were staged. But when Chaitanya came to Orissa, there was a reorientation to a certain extent in these plays. Chaitanya was very fond of songs and people wanted to please him. *Gitagovindam* was his favourite. So plays imitating *Gitagovindam* were composed and played. One such play is *Piyusha Lahari* (Wave of Nectar), and from the temple records of Puri it is known that Jayadeva wrote it in the twelfth century and that it was enacted in the courtyard of the temple of Jagannath. He also wrote other plays.

V. Raghavan: The evidence is that *Piyusha Lahari* is not Jayadeva's work.

Snehlata Sanyal: It has become a reality today that the arts should be developed in three directions: drama, dance, and music. The question of introduction of music in drama is something I find in many other papers. I want to understand how this musical tradition in the form of drama in Oriya has developed. Is it being developed along the lines of what is being done in this direction in other parts of the country?

Mulk Raj Anand: The question of opera is one case and the objection to the use of music is another. I do not think that it can be settled in the way Mrs Sanyal suggests. Music and dance are mixed in the folk as well as the sophisticated theatre. The town theatre can utilize music and dance to increase the effect of a play. I think there is no reason why some writers and theatrical producers should not experiment in the future with a new, distinctive style of utilizing music and dance in plays. What I want to recommend is the judicious use of all the three elements in any social or historical play. Judicious use should not be banned.

Delegate 1: I wish to ask a fundamental question about Oriya plays. What happens to plays like *Bhata*, which are meant to convey a picture of a certain existing situation, after the period in which the situation arose has passed by? I think such plays are then no longer popular. They are created to meet a particular situation. I want to know whether they are still popular?

Mayadhar Mansinha: I had occasion to witness some plays staged in Orissa and I was

struck by the popularity of these plays. They are drawing thousands of people not only from towns but from the countryside as well. That shows the vitality of the Oriya stage. It has lived as an institution in Orissa particularly because there has not been a keen competition from the Oriya film. Therefore it has continued to entertain and amuse the elite as well as people from the countryside. It is this link with folk drama which we find is absent in amateur theatre in other parts of the country. How this link can be preserved is a problem which faces Orissa today. I strongly warn against any immediate importation of intellectual elements into this theatre, which has found a place in the hearts of the common people. That in itself is its greatest asset. I think there should be no attempt now to drop songs and dances. There may be discretion in the selection of songs. I am afraid the cinema is largely thriving on that aspect. Whatever has been there from the very inception should not be disturbed now.

Delegate 2: It is a question of the particular form you select. This is a very important problem and we should not select each and every form. We may not have the time. The Gujarati play is coming up and we can seriously think about it to realize our objectives and also to crystallize our ideas about various forms of drama.

K.M. George: I have to say something against the strict demarcation of drama, dance, and music. If you say pure theatre should not include music, I disagree with that position because you can create dramatic moods and do various other things in a play by adding music and dance to it. Then I remember my own experience of working in a theatre as well as seeing some plays in Europe where dance and music are being introduced to bring out reality more sharply. But certainly I am against injudicious use of these arts, making a hotchpotch of the theatre.

I want to say one more thing in relation to this. A play which has been a great success in Karnataka in the last four or five years and has been enacted about five hundred times is, if I can translate the title roughly, 'You Have Made My Success'. It has been a most outstanding success mainly on account of the music in it; because the music is not of the old type—it is a different type of music. It is folk music recaptured, and even the diction of the songs is taken from the old folk music. Therefore, when we discuss the question of the place of music and dance, though I quite agree with the need for their judicious use, they should not be completely barred. The drama as it is should be in the foreground, and as an aid we can and we should use both dance and music.

Snehlata Sanyal: I would like to know the progress in the direction of opera.

P.V. Rajamannar: They will give a reply at the end.

A Delegate: Regarding social plays, as Mr Mansinha has pointed out, they are so direct that they do not have a permanent value. I would like to know what is the scope of the plays which are being enacted?

Kalindi Charan Panigrahi: This is a problem we are facing.

The Delegate: In this connection, I would like to ask another question. I gather the impression that there are great masters of drama in Orissa because Dr Mansinha and

Mr Panigrahi are both literary men. I would like to know exactly about the quality of writing achieved in Oriya in comparison with Bengali or any other language; I ask this because the papers we have received only give a general idea about the achievements of the Oriya theatre.

Kalindi Charan Panigrahi: I should invite him to come to Orissa.

Charles Fabri: I have had the privilege of travelling in Orissa. Orissa is a particularly fertile place for the survival of folk dance in its crude form. Let me use the correct word—the backwardness of many of the places helps these forms to survive in their original form. There should be some kind of study of how the survival of the living arts, which have died out in more accessible and more motorable parts of India, can be ensured. I would like to say that Orissa is one particular State where it would be worthwhile to conduct such research, and Kerala is also another similar place—that is a recent discovery. Your own dance is surviving—surviving in the villages astonishingly. It is like meeting angels.

Mayadhar Mansinha: The opera has developed well. My point is, how do music and dance affect the drama proper? We have developed our drama as in other regions. Every action of a drama is performed through music. From the beginning to the end, it is all music. It is only recently, as I have observed, that the Jatra which has existed from the fourteenth down to the nineteenth century wanted to modernize itself by taking in new elements from the formal stage. In the beginning, it was all verses—questions and answers in verse, in poetry and music combined. Later on, they introduced blank verse. My point was about the purity of the different arts. From the few papers that I have seen and from the other speakers, I have got the impression that that is the case all over India. We were discussing the drama proper. If you have the goal of development of drama, let us have a clear conception of what is drama and what we are heading to. If you take as examples the great dramas in the world, you get songs at appropriate places. But not so many as you find in our social plays, in the new plays on the Indian stage. We have to examine how these operas could fit into Indian folk drama. There are many plays which we could place on the same level as works of world drama, like for instance the plays of Tagore.

K. Narain Kale: We have nothing of that kind. We cannot start praising ourselves and keep ourselves ignorant of facts. No doubt we are all proud of Tagore, but in my humble view, I feel that he has written plays in which there is no song, no dance. Dr Raghavan has observed in his paper one of the important features of the Sanskrit drama, namely, to create happiness in the mind of the audience. The ultimate object of drama, I believe, as propounded by Keith and Aristotle, is to create a disturbance, a stir in the mind. Not merely happiness. Otherwise, we will not go forward. There will be no progress at all otherwise. From the fundamental we may go to the general, and we may also go back. It is the same problem in all regions. We have to face it. If we have to maintain purity, then we must keep music and dance at a respectable distance from the drama proper.