

Performance, Identity and Exposure: Representation of Tribal and Folk Culture in the Theatre of Contemporary West Bengal

Sougata Chakraborty

Research Scholar, Department of English, University of Kalyani

Abstract: *There is no denying, in my opinion, that what we understand as tribal folk culture and performance is vastly different and distinguishable (formally, visually and aurally) from the popular and prolific cultural forms and performances that take place around us and that we constantly consume as audiences all the time. Besides the Institutional approach intended to promote and showcase the cultural heritage of the tribes of India (like the organisation of such festivals as "Aadi Mahotsav" an initiative of The Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Govt. of India), the medium of Theatre practice in India (which mostly follows the convention of the Proscenium theatre) has also been seen turning towards these socially marginal cultures in terms of themes, aesthetics, borrowing myths, using actors/performers, style of performance etc. So the interaction of folk or rather tribal folk performance which brings with it its own sensibility and style with say the proscenium stage that has its own set of rules prepares the ground for study of a relationship that ought to be critical in nature. This paper attempts to add to the discussion of the theatrical stage being a meeting ground of disparate cultural practices and to understand the tribal culture's place in it, with reference to a few instances of theatre practices of present day West Bengal. The paper will also deal with the issue of the identity of a tribal performer, the politics of representation and the possibilities of representation. I have followed the ITRANS unicode for transcribing the names of the theatre productions and Bengali words mentioned in this paper.*

Keywords: tribal, folk culture, performance, proscenium, representation

1. Introduction

In the book *Subaltern Studies IV, Writings on South Asian History and Society*, Swapan Dasgupta, While talking about the Adivasi politics in Midnapore (1760 - 1924), refers to what the colonial masters and missionaries thought about the tribal community in Bengal using Henry Stanley Newman and H. H. Risley's imperial and elitist view point of categorising the Adivasi santals as a lesser community. This at once reflects and suggests the assumption of a qualitatively different and superior cultural position in the mind of someone who does not belong to a particular ethnic group inherently. The presence of a sense of difference amongst various cultures is acceptable, even justifiable owing to the difference in socio - political existence, topography, lifestyle and cultural expressions applicable to any and every culture all around the world. This provides the base upon which the existence of terms and concepts like cultural heterogeneity (or homogeneity), cultural exchange, interculturalism etc. rest. But a qualitative approach at classifying cultures, on the other hand, suggests the dominating endeavour (power politics of the dominant culture) of a particular culture. The cultural experience that India as a single country provides is quite fascinating and most definitely heterogeneous in nature. An attempt at defining India's cultural identity would manage not only to find out that it is impossible to lay down/pinpoint any single tradition or culture as 'the' Indian but also to acknowledge the multiple rural or ethnic minorities as a part of that identity. It is a fact that the numerous folk or tribal cultures have not reached the broader demography or the state of a larger social and cultural cognition or acknowledgement. We can trace the reason of such a marginalised state of the cultures and their cultural forms in its minority, in terms of number of people practising them or belonging to such a group (genealogically) and the absence or very little amount

of exposure that they have in the contemporary cultural scene (pan Indian or even global). A possible change in that stasis was initiated by the representational politics in postcolonial condition at a national level in post independence India. The quest for an Indian identity in the field of theatre too became very important at this moment making it a site of postcolonial practices; one of reactions, rejections, assimilations and negotiations. And it has paved the way to some sort of a "new" theatre according to Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker who observes the theatre of the post independence years as "a product of new theoretical, textual, material, institutional, and cultural conditions created by the experience of political independence, cultural autonomy and new nationhood." (Dharwadker 2) This is where the prospect of the cultural minorities (tribal folk and folk in general) and their exposure comes in.

As part of the great cultural renaissance of the post - Independence period, there has been a most meaningful encounter with tradition in various fields of creative activity. The return to and discovery of tradition is inspired by a search for roots and a quest for identity. This is part of the whole process of decolonization of lifestyle, social institutions, creative forms, and cultural modes. (Awasthi 48)

This is what Suresh Awasthi writes while talking about the post independence theatre scene in India. The new sensibility that emerged from a postcolonial stance in the field of theatre in post - independence India can be exemplified by the works of Habib Tanvir, K. N. Panicker and others who have achieved a canonical stature where ideas like theatre of the roots and 'Indian Theatre' is concerned. The engagement of these intellectuals and theatre persons with what might be called an indigenous approach towards defining Indian theatre goes in line with the

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devising of the process of intellectual decolonization elaborated and advocated by Ngugi wa Thiong'o's in his book *Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African literature* (1992).

This perspective allows us to look at the instances of theatre practices of present day West Bengal involving or addressing the issue of the representation of the local, folk or tribal elements as an extension of the sensibility of that 'new' theatre which Dharwadker talks about or that Awasthi advocated with the added elements of a new cultural atmosphere initiated by technological advance and cultural globalisation in contemporary times (the extreme prospects of homogeneity and differentialism). The study considers the theatre practices (especially in the proscenium space) that make use of the folk or the tribal rather than the actual folk or tribal performance to address the spectator - performance dynamics and space - orientation, authentic cultural representation, cultural interaction and possible cultural implications of a performance that is already syncretic in nature to further understand how the workings and the nature of representation becomes important in asserting identity.

Instances of the 'New' in Contemporary Theatre Practices in West Bengal

The idea of the 'new' theatre is being explored further and played with presently by numerous directors in West Bengal like Tarun Pradhan of Sarabhuj, Kallol Bhattacharya of Ebong Amra, Manish Mitra of Kasba Arghya to name a few along with the performers involved. Tarun Pradhan, the founder - director of Sarabhuj Dance Theater, was born in west Midnapore and had intimately interacted with the local tribal culture while growing up. His introduction to the proscenium happened much later when he came to Kolkata to study. In an interview to Kaahon, Tarun Pradhan says,

I found that our theatre was quite different from the theatre I got to see in Kolkata even though I did not have any definitive concept of 'our theatre'. The only thing I knew was that it was a rural form of theatre or dance or music. And I realised that it was much stronger in appeal than the proscenium. And when I began working, right from student life, I started bringing in those elements here. (Pradhan 2: 30, translated by the author)

This shows the artistic and ideological standpoint of introducing indigenous elements that the director has, having its root into the concept of better communication, as he stresses on the 'appeal' of the rural forms. The syncretic nature of Tarun Pradhan's theatre also gives the rural or tribal actors the opportunity to participate and shine. As the theatre productions are always performance oriented, full of movements and visually engaging, the actors like Shambhu Soren gets ample opportunity to show their energetic physical skills. So, the abilities of a tribal actor get the exposure which it deserves. Another example of a new kind of approach of post - colonial theatre practices can be traced in the creation of the theatre village Tepantar. Motivated by the urge to create a theatre that is much rooted in the local, rural and tribal culture, Kallol Bhattacharya conceived and

founded the theatre group *Ebong Amra* working out of the theatre village of Tepantar situated in the Burdwan district of West Bengal. Kallol Bhattacharya in an interview talks about a 'real' kind of theatre that comes from a very human approach and that can only happen outside city based commercial theatre practice. His theatre group consists of mostly local and tribal performers. So when *Ebong Amra* stages an adaptation of *Oedipus* it becomes a whole new play devoid of the European sensibility that the original play possessed. The open air space of the performance, the involvement of tribal performers and the appropriation and recreation of the story in a tribal community and the use of local tribal handicrafts (self made) in costume and set design create a theatrical experience/cultural performance that adds to the discussion of the possibilities of representation of the local and the tribal. Given the fact that the work produced by these groups comes out of a creative space that is not a purely urban one allows these works to be read as results of a more integrated approach. So the creative combination of disparate cultural and theatrical elements happens on equal terms. A kind of spatial, representational and cultural experimentation exemplified by Tepantar provides the audience with a platform for interaction, exploration and engagement with the local culture and cultural possibilities. Apart from these, urban intellectual theatre directors such as Manish Mitra or Debesh Chattopadhyay also are seen turning towards the rural and ethnic either in using stories concerning the ethnic identity (*debi sarpamastaa* directed by Debesh Chattopadhyay) or as a result of experimentation with theatre space (*urubhangama*, *debi mangala kaabya* directed by Manish Mitra). The Minerva Repertory production of the play *debi sarpamastaa* (*The Snake - headed Goddess*), in its presentation of a story written by Manoj Mitra, consists of the representation of a tribal community; their beliefs, fears, food habit, livelihood, their disconnect with the mainstream culture and their exploitation in the hands of the British and the privileged. The stage design does not follow the realist tradition. The play not only involves, as one of its themes, the immense cultural exploits suffered by the tribal community but it also uses the Adivasi *jhumura*¹ tunes and dance form, the playing of instruments like *dhaamasaa*, *maadala*² etc., successfully bringing out the issue of marginalisation and disconnect of the Adivasi community on a 21st century Bengali theatre stage.

Nature of Representation and Signification: the Performance of *Tusumani*

An act of exposure need not or may not build up to an interaction. This is what happens, mostly, in a proscenium. The folk or tribal cultural forms, owing to its space and aesthetic, are inclusive and democratic in its approach. So it welcomes participation of the spectators and creates a platform for interaction through its formal designs. A proscenium theatrical performance, on the other hand, due to its preordained structure of communication (the elevated stage, the fixed frame for viewing etc.), is bound by certain laws that the performers need to keep in mind and prepare the performance accordingly. In the latter case, the actions taking place on stage assume almost an authoritative position dictating the reception. Hence, the performance of a form (a form that is culturally different or nuanced), for the

audience sitting in the dark place of the theatre hall, may get limited to exposure not amounting to interaction. Thus for the audience the performance might turn out to be an 'interesting' presentation or it might rekindle the feeling of looking at something 'exotic' or 'strange' (as a result of the estrangement initiated by the proscenium theatre space itself). This shows how the performance space can become critical in shaping the nature of representation and reception in the syncretic theatrical practices we are discussing about.

The performance of *Tusumani* directed by Rishi Mukherjee and produced by Kaliaganj Bichitra NatyaSanstha helps us have a critical view on the nature of cultural transaction and representation in a proscenium. This is a case which we may call a study into a lifestyle and culture. The content of this theatrical production deals with the *Tusu parab* (the *Tusu* Festival) and the myth regarding the local deity's origin. Celebrated amongst the ethnic and social minority communities of eastern India (Jharkhand, Odisha, West Bengal) the festival, in West Bengal, takes place mainly in the districts of Purulia, Bankura and Midnapore during the harvest season. The performance of *Tusumani* deals with one of the many versions regarding how the *Tusu* festival became a part of the lives of a community. In the case of the performance itself, the stage decoration is kept minimal and free of fixed set giving the stage - space the freedom to change its identity according to the performance of the actors. So, the character's activities become the focal point of the performance. In the process of creating an atmosphere that should remind or inform the audience of an agrarian, rural Bengal of a point in time in the past (that is where the story takes place), the play uses many tropes. The use of a particular dialect by all the actors, the costumes worn by them, the use of *jhumura* songs throughout the performance and the aspect of the presence of kings and king's guards, work in unison in situating the events or the story in a, more or less, particular time and space. To create an atmosphere that aptly captures the cultural nuances of this Bengal in the story, the performance begins with the blowing of conch shells, *uludhoni*³ and a song dedicated to *Tusu*. The whole action of the performance is steeped in exploration of a community and its culture. The very human story and interactions coupled with frequently breaking into *jhumura* songs prepare the stage for a version of the *Tusu* myth to be conveyed and communicated through the performance. When looked at as a present day cultural event, it can be described as an instance of a performance that is more of a work of exploration than a mere promotional event, which as a byproduct recreates and promotes a cultural memory. One can deduce from the performance of *Tusumani* that it does not depend heavily upon any kind of static stagecraft (set, light, electronic music etc.) and it draws heavily from *jhumura* dance and also *yaatraa* (the character of the king and the *bibeka*⁴ - like intervention of the singer - actor). So, it acquires the element of mobility and freedom from fixed - space orientation of a performance. The participation of the audience, which seems to remain an important point of discussion regarding the proscenium, is also addressed by the performance as it takes place within a proscenium structure. The nature of engagement between the audience and the action on stage becomes critical as the performance uses *dhUpa*⁵ (a flammable substance producing incense and smoke). In a way, the audience is made a part of the

domestic environment (the household where the actions take place) as the smoke (also the fragrance) of the *dhUpa* travels and spreads across the whole auditorium working almost as a physical agent to bridge the audience - actors gap that characterises the proscenium experience. As one goes further into the performance, the stage - audience dynamics goes through a sudden shift as the idea that what is happening on stage is a performance/ representation and not the actual thing, is suggested and reminded, literally, by the singer cum narrator cum actor providing the audience with the idea behind the play's production. These usages make the internal critical functions of a theatrical performance and the critical nature of representation apparent. So from the performance of *Tusumani*, what can be inferred is that it is not a tribal or folk performance happening. Rather it acknowledges being a representational practice that welcomes both the performers and audience to participate. So the performance does not limit itself to being an example of a cultural (or intercultural) exercise, but adds to the discussion related to the problematic of authenticity in representation and of the 'organic' in theatre. So, in a way, the performance succeeds in extending the 'new' in theatre through a more explorative and educative nature of representation by adopting a more subjective and interactive approach (in the sense that the actors directly address the audience) of presenting a local myth.

2. Conclusion

It's a complete package. It's a story of the tribal lifestyle, the economics and how they take care of or sort of go on with their lives. So it's a complete, complete package. We need to understand that we don't need to teach the tribals, we need to learn from them. The hard work they do the quality of things that they produce. And what we can do is to promote that. (Krishna 1: 20)

This is what Pravir Krishna, the managing director of TRIFED, had said while describing the event of *Aadi Mahotsav 2017* held in Delhi. The organisation of festivals and cultural exhibitions like the *Aadi Mahotsav* by the Ministry of Cultural Affairs shows the efforts at a state and institutional level (government of India) to promote the various regional, rural, tribal cultures. The use of words like 'package', 'story' and 'promotion' establishes the *Mahotsav* as a grand socio - cultural performance (and the representation of the marginal in it) and the importance of representation in a performance for a greater exposure of the tribal cultures (where developing a national identity is concerned). A very recent popular cultural phenomenon that boasted of representing Indian culture at a global level - the two installments of *Bahubali* (movies that came out respectively in 2015 and 2017) incorporate the representation of tribals. But the nature of representation not only does not involve any kind of cultural exploration; rather it presents the tribal as monstrous screaming attackers and outright 'savages'. So the apparent inclusion of the tribals in a project that talks about exploring Indian tradition, in its performance and story (though fictitious/imaginative) re - enacts the othering mechanism through a derogatory representation. For a sense of belonging and inclusion to grow, the idea that "Representation matters", as articulated very recently by Lee Unkrich, the director of the animated

movie 'Coco' (2017), becomes pivotal. But it can be inferred that the nature of that representation should also be treated very carefully (keeping in mind the medium and the inherent politics of that medium). So even in the case of *debi sarpamastaa*, which has been discussed before and which most definitely is a very important and well performed play; the creative choice of adopting "an over - the - top acting style", as pointed out by Ananda Lal, carries the potential of falling into the trap of stereotypical, elitist representation and cultural violence, that would in turn jeopardise the whole idea of the story. As any type of performance would have political implications, the relationship between the process of shaping up an identity and the modes of exposure (i. e. representation) would always remain critical making the "empty space" of theatre a ground of constant conflicts and negotiations and also one of investigation and possibilities.

Notes

- 1) A folk and tribal form of dance and music in Bangladesh and Eastern part of India.
- 2) Folk and tribal percussion musical instruments.
- 3) a particular kind of sound production using frequent tongue movements, specific to and a part of the conventions of Bengali rituals.
- 4) A customary, stereotypical character unique to the folk theatrical form of Jatra. The word can literally be translated into 'conscience'. The character mostly sings and functions as a moral guardian and commentator.
- 5) A flammable substance that produces incense and smoke when burnt and it is used mostly in a ritualistic performance.
- 6) Abbreviation for Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation of India (established in the year 1987 by the Ministry of Welfare)

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Author Profile

Sougata Chakraborty, a resident of West Bengal (India), is currently working as a research scholar at the Department of English, University of Kalyani, India. He completed his Post Graduation in the year 2013 from the same department. His area of interest and work involves theatre studies, study of performance, culture and media representations. Email Id: sougata.chakraborty55[at]gmail.com
Phone No.9775996885