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The inception of “Group Theatre (GT)” in India and Odisha

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ABSTRACT

Presently, “Group Theatre (GT)” of various States represents the mainstream theatre in India. There is hardly any Professional-Commercial Theatre. It has its history of inception in India and in other States.

Key words: IPTA, Bohuroopee, Group Theatre, Commercial Theatre.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of “Group Theatre (GT)” was incepted in America in 1929. Then it was spread all over the world gradually. It was incepted in India in 1944. It has its history of inception in India. Every State of India has its own history of inception of “Group Theatre (GT)”. Here, only the history of its inception in India and Odisha have been included.

The history of inception of “Group Theatre (GT)” in India:

The earliest form of theatre in India was Sanskrit theatre. The Classical Indian Drama or Sanskrit Drama was developed according to the ‘Natyashastra’ of Bharat Muni. Indian theatre was heavily influenced by the rulers in different periods who ruled over the country. During the Islamic rule in the country, theatre was mostly forbidden throughout the nation. However, in the 15th and 16th century, Indian theatre was encouraged throughout the villages of the subcontinent to spread indigenous values and ideas. During that period, Folk Theatre forms were developed by the common people. Indian Modern Theatre or historically, what can be clearly identified as the Western Proscenium style of theatre was introduced in India during the period of consolidation of the British Empire in various parts of India. The first Proscenium theatre was built in England in 1576 and It was followed in 1860 at Kolkata, West Bengal, during the Colonial period in India. Because, Kolkata was a center of the British rulers. It was through the British that the Western Proscenium style theatre reached Indian shores. It was the amalgamation of the Western and Indian culture that gave birth to ‘Modern Indian Theatre’ forms. Many theatre groups emerged in

the major cities of the country like Kolkata, Mumbai etc. Theatre started to become a means of entertainment for people.

The concept of “Group Theatre (GT)” was wide-spread after the devastating First World War. In 1935, ‘The World Writers Conference’ was organized in Paris with the effort of Maxim Gorky, Romain Roland, Adreis Malro and others. Being inspired by that World Conference, ‘The League of Left Writers’ was organized in China and ‘The League of Writers’ in America. In reflection to those events, ‘The Progressive Writers Association’ (Pragati Lekhaka Sangha) was formed in India at a conference held at Bangalore in 1940. The IPTA - Indian People’s Theatre Association (Bharatiya Ganantya Sangha) was a branch of ‘The Progressive Writers Association’ (Pragati Lekhaka Sangha). In 1942, ‘The Progressive Writers Association’ was reorganized in the name of ‘Anti-Fascist Writers and Artists Association’ in West Bengal. Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA) functioned as a front of this ‘Anti-Fascist Association’. “Group Theatre” movement was started by Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA) on the eve of Independence. Beginning with a path breaking play *Nabanna* in 1944 that dramatized the exploitation of peasants by land owners, IPTA followed up with *Zabanbandi* and Dance theatres like *Discovery of India* and *India Immortal* with music by Ravi Shankar, Choreography by Shanti Bardhan. IPTA movement was followed in Bengal by the powerful trio: Shombhu Mitra, Ajitesh Banerjee and Utpal Dutta. They produced plays which were different from that of Commercial Theatre of Bengal. IPTA was a Cultural front, guided by the Communist Party of India (CPI). So, the Government looked at it differently. Towards 1949, the rigid communistic principle of IPTA was not appreciated by sensitive creative artists of the Group. Committed theatre persons like Sombhu Mitra left IPTA and formed *Bohoorupee* Group in 1948 to present the experimental Bengali drama in unusual form.

The changing concept of “Group Theatre” from IPTA to *Bohoorupee* was a very important and a subtle difference. Its implication was that “Group Theatre” wanted to be free from any bondage of political bias. The artists could not be bounded by or identify themselves with a political ideology like political workers. Artists needed freedom to perform art as per their realization about life, society and culture. They wanted to treat art as art. No bias to any political ideology or no blind support to any Government. Committed theatre persons became concerned with contribution to Theatre Culture. But Communists remarked on it, “Freedom is a relative term; ‘Art for society shake’ is more meaningful than ‘Art for art shake’; That attitude of the artists was nothing but a reflection of opportunism and ultra-sense of freedom within seeking descent capitalism confusingly with kaleidoscopic nature like of Chameleons”.

However, that *Bohoorupee* nature of GT is now manifested in various States of India and so also in Odisha. Indian society is pluralistic and its contemporary Proscenium Theatre, in the post-independence era, is represented by thousands of such type of GT spread over in different States of the Country. They express unity in cultural diversity.

Inception of Group Theatre (GT) in Odisha:

Before going to discuss about the inception of the trend of Group Theatre in Odisha, let us first have a cursory look at the various trends of theatre in Odisha period wise.

- (i) From 1st Century A.D. to 19th Century - Period of Sanskrit Drama:
- (ii) In 1877 – The first Odia drama was written
- (iii) 1940’s to 1970’s – Period of Professional/Commercial theatre
- (iv) Since 1955 till now – Group Theatre

As discussed earlier, the first Proscenium theatre was built in England in 1576. It was followed in 1860 at Kolkata, West Bengal, during the Colonial period in India. This European model of Proscenium stage was introduced in Odisha in 1872 to present Hindi plays, Bengali plays and also English plays translated in to Odia. The first Odia play ‘*Babaji*’ was staged in 1877, written by Jagamohan Lala who was a Deputy of the Colonial Odisha. The play

was inspired by the trend of European realism percolated through Kolkata to Odisha. After the staging of the play, the trend of modernity in Odia theatre vis-à-vis Proscenium theatre was spread rapidly in Odisha. Many Proscenium Theatre Houses were built by kings and zamindars in many pockets of the State. Commercial Theatre repertories took the movement to a peak and ushered in the 'golden period' in the history of Odia theatre during the 1940's-1970's. Annapurna Natya Mandali" was established in 1933. It was named as "Annapurna Theatre" in 1937. In 1943, it could have a Statewide commercial network having permanent repertories at Puri (Annapurna-A), Cuttack (Annapurna-B) and Berhampur (Annapurna-C). Subsequently, Orissa Theatre, Janata Rangamancha and Ekamra Theatre et al joined in the movement. However, these Commercial Theatre Houses attracted the audience as an industry of entertainment by producing popular plays as per the tastes and demands of the common mass. Every evening, commercial theatre houses staged plays and the spectators were ready to buy the tickets. Some of them were touring repertories moving into suburban towns, villages. This movement inspired the potential amateur artists to form theatre groups in their localities. For a variety of reasons, Commercial Theatre repertories were declined during the Seventies, the two major ones being the inner conflicts of the groups and irresistible pull of cinema for the leading lights. Most of the artists migrated to the alluring cinema medium. The disintegration and total lockout of Commercial Theatre Houses created a decadent phase and lull period in Odia theatre.

Being inspired by the performances of Commercial Theatre repertories, many amateur theatre clubs/groups had already come into being in different corners of Odisha. But they were mostly reproducing the successful hit productions of the Commercial Theatre Houses. Legendary dramatist Late Manoranjan Das was the initiator of "Group Theatre" in Odisha in 1955 with the formation of the United Artists Club at Cuttack.

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