



The Role of Folk Theatre in the Development of Aesthetic Excellence and Social Values

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Abstract:

Folk theatre, as a vibrant and indigenous art form, has served for centuries as a powerful medium for cultural expression, education, and moral instruction within traditional societies. Deeply interwoven with rituals, festivals, and everyday life, folk theatre embodies the collective imagination, aesthetic sensibilities, and ethical consciousness of the communities that nurture it. Rooted in oral traditions, it harmoniously integrates music, dance, dialogue, and symbolism to communicate profound social and moral truths in an accessible and engaging manner. This paper explores the role of folk theatre in cultivating aesthetic excellence through the creative interplay of artistic disciplines and its enduring capacity to reinforce social values such as empathy, justice, and community solidarity. Drawing upon historical, anthropological, and performative perspectives, it highlights how folk performances not only preserve cultural identity but also act as vehicles of social critique and transformation. Moreover, in the face of globalization and digital modernity, folk theatre continues to evolve—bridging the gap between tradition and innovation while inspiring new approaches in contemporary education and performance studies. Ultimately, the study underscores the enduring relevance of folk theatre as both an aesthetic pursuit and a moral compass for society.

Keywords: Folk Theatre, Aesthetic Excellence, Cultural Continuity, Social Values, Moral Education.

Introduction:

Folk theatre represents one of the most vibrant and enduring forms of cultural expression in human civilization. Emerging from the heart of rural communities, it serves as both a repository of tradition and a living art that adapts to changing times. In India, folk theatre encompasses a range of regional forms such as Jatra in Bengal, Nautanki in Uttar Pradesh, Yakshagana in Karnataka, Tamasha in Maharashtra, and Burrakatha in Andhra Pradesh. Each form encapsulates local myths, legends, social issues, and ethical ideals, transmitted orally across generations (Handoo, 1986).

Beyond its entertainment value, folk theatre has historically functioned as a vehicle for social education and moral guidance. Its performative language—rich with music, dance, costume, and dialogue—creates a sensory experience that elevates aesthetic appreciation and stimulates ethical reflection. As Schechner (2002) asserts, performance is not merely a mirror of culture but a “transformative act” that redefines social values through participation and emotional engagement. Thus, folk theatre stands as an essential cultural pedagogy

that nurtures aesthetic sensibilities while cultivating virtues such as compassion, justice, and communal responsibility.

Historical Evolution of Folk Theatre

The origins of folk theatre can be traced to the intersection of ritual, myth, and social narrative. Long before the advent of formal drama, communities performed ritual enactments to appease deities, celebrate harvests, or commemorate historical heroes. These performances gradually evolved into structured narratives combining music, dialogue, and movement, forming the foundation of what we recognize today as folk theatre (Bharucha, 1990).

In India, classical traditions such as Sanskrit drama coexisted with vernacular performances that catered to rural audiences. While the *Nāṭya Śāstra* codified aesthetic principles for elite theatre, folk performances democratized art, ensuring participation across social strata. The *Bhakti* and *Sufi* movements further infused folk theatre with devotional and egalitarian ideals, emphasizing love, devotion, and moral righteousness. As Dharwadker (2005) notes, folk theatre “bridged the gap between the sacred and the secular,” functioning as a cultural continuum that connected divine themes with social realities.

Aesthetic Dimensions of Folk Theatre

The Concept of Aesthetic Excellence: Aesthetic excellence in folk theatre emerges from the organic fusion of diverse art forms such as music, dance, literature, costume, and oratory, creating a holistic sensory experience. Each performance is not just an act of entertainment but a celebration of beauty, emotion, and collective creativity. Rooted in Bharata’s *Nāṭya Śāstra*, the theory of *Rasa* emphasizes the attainment of *Rasanubhava*—a state of aesthetic pleasure and emotional transcendence achieved when artistic elements are harmoniously balanced (Ghosh, 1951). Folk theatre embodies this principle by transforming daily life experiences into artistic expressions that invoke empathy, joy, and moral contemplation.

Unlike classical drama, which often adheres to structured conventions, folk theatre draws its aesthetic vitality from spontaneity and improvisation. Performers employ gestures, songs, and dialogues that resonate with local idioms and emotions, ensuring that the audience feels both represented and emotionally engaged (Bharucha, 1990). The sensory integration of music, rhythm, and dramatic tension fosters an immersive atmosphere, allowing both performers and spectators to transcend the ordinary and experience a higher form of artistic communion. As Schechner (2002) notes, performance in its truest sense transforms both the doer and the observer, merging aesthetic enjoyment with cultural introspection.

Elements of Folk Aesthetics: The aesthetic appeal of folk theatre rests on its simplicity, immediacy, and symbolic richness. Although devoid of elaborate stagecraft, folk theatre employs minimal props—such as a lantern, drum, or mask—to evoke powerful imagery. The beauty lies in its economy of means and the performers’ ability to transform limited resources into profound artistic statements (Bandyopadhyay, 2002). Folk songs, regional dialects, and idiomatic expressions form the linguistic backbone of these performances, anchoring them firmly in the cultural soil of the community.

Allegory, metaphor, and satire are fundamental aesthetic tools that allow folk theatre to comment on social realities while maintaining its entertainment value. For instance, in *Jatra* performances, exaggerated characterizations and rhythmic dialogues not only amuse but also serve as moral commentary on human folly and virtue (Bose, 2007). Humor, therefore, becomes a means of catharsis, leading the audience from laughter to reflection. The rhythmic cadence of folk music—often produced by instruments like the *dhol*, *ektara*, and *mridanga*—infuses the performance with vitality, while dance gestures amplify emotional expression. As Bhatia (2011) observes, “folk aesthetics lies not in perfection, but in the authenticity of collective emotion.” Hence, the aesthetic value of folk theatre derives from its ability to fuse beauty with truth, art with life, and expression with meaning.

The Collective Aesthetic Experience: Folk theatre distinguishes itself from classical and modern forms by its interactive and communal aesthetic. It is not a spectacle viewed in silence but a participatory event that blurs the line between performer and audience. Villagers often gather in open spaces or temple courtyards, where they engage directly through singing refrains, chanting responses, or offering spontaneous reactions (Kumar, 2014). This interactivity transforms the performance into a communal celebration, reaffirming cultural solidarity and shared emotion.

The collective aesthetic experience of folk theatre also fosters aesthetic literacy among the masses. Through repeated exposure, even non-literate audiences develop an intuitive understanding of narrative structure, symbolism, and moral subtext. Such engagement democratizes art by making it accessible to all, irrespective of class, education, or social status. As Dharwadkar (2005) asserts, folk theatre “replaces the proscenium with participation,” transforming the act of viewing into an act of belonging.

Moreover, the communal aesthetic encourages emotional empathy and moral awareness. When audiences witness the dramatization of virtues like honesty, courage, and compassion, they internalize these values through shared experience. Thus, the aesthetic in folk theatre is inseparable from the ethical—it is through beauty and performance that moral consciousness is collectively awakened (Schechner, 2002).

Folk Theatre and the Formation of Social Values

Moral and Ethical Instruction: One of the primary functions of folk theatre has been to inculcate moral virtues and ethical consciousness. Stories drawn from epics like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, as well as local legends, illustrate the triumph of truth over falsehood, virtue over vice, and justice over tyranny. These performances serve as moral classrooms, teaching integrity, respect, and empathy through dramatic representation (Handoo, 1986).

Social Critique and Reform: Folk theatre has also been an agent of social change, often critiquing injustice, superstition, and patriarchal norms. For instance, the Bengali *Jatra* has historically addressed issues such as caste discrimination and colonial exploitation, using satire and melodrama to raise social awareness (Bose, 2007). Similarly, *Nautanki* performances in North India have portrayed women as powerful agents of justice and reform, thereby challenging gender stereotypes (Lal, 2009).

Community Cohesion and Identity Formation: Folk theatre strengthens social bonds by creating shared experiences that reflect collective histories and aspirations. Performances during festivals, fairs, or communal gatherings reinforce unity and a sense of belonging. In rural societies, these performances serve as instruments of informal education, transmitting communal ethics and fostering intergenerational solidarity (Kumar, 2014).

Pedagogical and Cultural Relevance in Modern Times

Despite the proliferation of digital entertainment, folk theatre continues to hold pedagogical significance. In modern classrooms and cultural programs, folk theatre techniques are increasingly used for value education, language learning, and social awareness campaigns. UNESCO (2003) recognizes traditional performing arts as intangible cultural heritage, emphasizing their role in preserving diversity and promoting intercultural dialogue.

AI-based and multimedia-enhanced folk performances are also emerging, blending traditional narratives with contemporary concerns such as environmental awareness, gender equity, and public health. These adaptations ensure the relevance of folk theatre in the 21st century while maintaining its moral core. According to Chatterjee (2018), “the fusion of folk aesthetics with modern pedagogy creates a transformative space where art becomes a catalyst for critical thought and social empathy.”

The Role of the Performer as Cultural Educator

In folk theatre, the performer embodies a multifaceted role that extends far beyond mere entertainment. They function simultaneously as storyteller, educator, philosopher, and social critic, serving as the medium through which collective memory, moral instruction, and cultural continuity are transmitted. The performer is both a mirror and mediator of society—reflecting its joys, anxieties, and contradictions while guiding audiences toward moral and aesthetic awareness. As Dutta (2010) notes, folk performers in traditional societies are often revered as “keepers of wisdom,” whose artistic expressions preserve the ethical fabric of the community through narrative art.

Central to this pedagogical function is the figure of the Sutradhar or narrator, a traditional device in Indian folk and classical theatre who bridges the world of performance and the audience. The Sutradhar not only introduces and interprets the narrative but also provides commentary, thereby directing the audience’s emotional and intellectual engagement (Bhatia, 2011). This role fosters reflective participation, transforming passive spectators into active co-creators of meaning. In many folk traditions such as *Jatra*, *Yakshagana*, or *Therukoothu*, the Sutradhar contextualizes the story in contemporary social realities, using humor, irony, and moral exhortation to connect ancient wisdom with present-day life (Rangacharya, 2013).

Moreover, the folk performer serves as a moral guide and social reformer, employing artistic expression to critique social injustices, question authority, and advocate for ethical conduct. Through allegory and satire, performers address issues such as caste discrimination, gender inequality, and corruption in ways that are accessible to the common people (Bandyopadhyay, 2002). This intertwining of pedagogy and performance aligns with Paulo Freire’s (1970) idea of “critical pedagogy”, where learning emerges through dialogue, reflection, and collective awareness. In this sense, the performer becomes a “teacher of life” who transforms the stage into a site of cultural education and social transformation.

Furthermore, the performer’s oral artistry ensures the transmission of intangible cultural heritage across generations. Their mastery of dialect, gesture, song, and rhythm sustains linguistic and aesthetic diversity, reinforcing communal identity and belonging (Schechner, 2002). By invoking myths, local legends, and historical narratives, they cultivate a shared consciousness that unites individuals through cultural memory. As Sharma (2015) asserts, “the folk performer’s body is the archive of civilization”—a living repository of values, emotions, and traditions.

Thus, the performer in folk theatre is not merely an actor but a custodian of culture, a vessel through which aesthetic excellence and moral wisdom flow. They embody the ethical pulse of their community, transforming every performance into a lesson in empathy, resilience, and human dignity. As Schechner (2002) aptly observes, the performer “teaches by being,” merging art and life into a seamless continuum of cultural education.

Conclusion

Folk theatre stands as a timeless testament to humanity’s creative and moral spirit. Through its unique blend of entertainment, education, and ethical discourse, it nurtures aesthetic excellence and social consciousness simultaneously. It offers audiences not only beauty and pleasure but also guidance, empathy, and a deeper understanding of communal harmony.

In a world increasingly dominated by technology and individualism, folk theatre reminds us of the enduring value of collective creativity and shared moral experience. By revitalizing and recontextualizing these art forms, educators, policymakers, and artists can ensure that folk theatre continues to illuminate the human condition—bridging the past and present, art and life, aesthetics and ethics.

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