

Daskathia: Narrative, Performance and Cultural Significance in Odisha's Folk Tradition

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ABSTRACT:

Odisha, a state in eastern India, is home to the unique narrative performance tradition known as Daskathia, which is a dynamic fusion of music, storytelling, and social criticism. It is usually performed by a couple, consisting of a main storyteller and a supporting vocalist, who use rhythmic wooden clappers (kathi) to complement their passionate delivery. It has its roots in oral traditions. Within the larger context of Odisha's folk history, this article examines Daskathia's narrative structure, performing methods, and cultural relevance. In order to reach a variety of audiences, it explores how improvisation, comedy, and informative aspects are intertwined across mythical stories, historical narratives, and moral tales. The study also emphasizes how Daskathia serves as a vehicle for cultural transmission and community education, reflecting social conventions, religious beliefs, and local values. Its performance dynamics such as voice modulation, gesture, and audience interaction are highlighted since they all contribute to its allure in rural and semi-urban settings. This paper also examines current issues and revitalization initiatives to protect this intangible cultural legacy in the face of modernity and dwindling patronage. The report highlights Daskathia's ongoing significance as a living tradition that connects the past and present by placing it within Odisha's changing cultural environment.

KEY WORDS: Daskathia, Odisha's folk tradition, narrative performance, cultural heritage.

1. INTRODUCTION:

The Indian culture is well-known for its variety of folk traditions, most of which has been traditionally transmitted orally since many years ago, makes up for the wealth of cultural ambiance in India. Odisha is a state in India that has a considerable number of tribes and a rich tribal folklore culture. Its uniqueness lies in its unique folklore as well as art form. Among these Daskathia, a special and vivid story-telling art form in the state of Odisha, is notable for its uniqueness. This is an art form usually done by two performers, expresses religious, ethical, and social issues through the art of storytelling, songs, rhythms, and dramas.

Besides incorporating regional folklore and sociocultural issues, Daskathia primarily draws its subject matter from mythology and religion, particularly the Indian epics such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. As a result of the oral art form's heavy dependence on memorization, improvisation, and

audience participation, each presentation is unique and lively. As it is often lyrical and clear, it can be easily understood by rural people.

Daskathia is a substantial cultural tool that conveys the values, beliefs, and common identity of the Odia people apart from being a form of entertainment. In the past, it was a means of involving the community in social and religious affairs, educating them on moral issues, especially in rural areas where there were no educational facilities and literary works available to educate the masses.

But then again, factors like modernization, changing tastes of the audience, and lack of patronage are some major barriers faced by Daskathia, just like other traditional art forms in today's modernized India. Even with all these barriers, efforts are being made through cultural movements and patronage to revive and preserve this art form.

In this paper, an attempt has been made to understand the various structural features, creation process, and importance of Daskathia as a form of art that involves both narration and performance. In this paper, an effort will be made to highlight the importance of Daskathia in the folklore of Odisha from its traditional origin to the present context.

2. ORIGIN AND HISTORY

Daskathia is an oldest popular form of art in southern Odisha. It is believed that Daskathia was invented in the 15th century. The term "daskathia" is derived from the word "dasha," which implies follower or devotee, and "kathi," which refers to wooden pieces. It performed with the accompany of these two wooden percussion instruments. According to Bayamanu Charchi, who is an authority on the folk theater, the earliest artist who popularized the folk theater form called Daskathia was named Agadhu Sahu of Khandara. Soon after this, both Binayak Sabat and Krishna Chandra Gayakratra, the elder son of Binayak, became devoted to this traditional theater form.

Most of the artists who performed the Daskathia music belonged to the southernmost district of Odisha, Ganjam, which has been known as the birthplace of many Odia poets during the medieval times. According to many scholars of folk history and theater, Daskathia had originated in the village of Khandara and later spread in the entire region. Other writers see its emergence associated with the Bhakti movement of medieval times, whereby rural people were educated about morality and religion through songs, stories, and plays enacted by folk artists.

The narratives used in the past were those based on the hindu mythology, myths and legends from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and stories of Lord Shiva and Jagannath, among others. In the performance of the Daskathia music, there were two performers known as the gayaka (the lead singer) and palia (the supporting performer). Through songs, dialogue, jokes, and rhythmic clapping of the wooden stick, they taught the audience important religious values and principles. While the accompaniment player uses the Laxmantala, the solo vocalist uses the Ramatala. The subjects in these performances, which reflect the spiritual and cultural heritage of Odisha, are mostly based on the Indian epics and myths. Moreover, some of the practitioners relate mythical concepts to the origin of Daskathia. It is stated in folklore that Lord Viswakarma had made the wooden instrument used during the performance of the story between Lord Rama and Ravana. This highlights the deeply religious and cultural backgrounds of the Daskathia culture.

3. PERFORMANCE STYLE

As we discussed above, the Gayaka (narrator-singer) and Palia (accompanying artist) are the two artists who perform Daskathia regularly. Whereas the Palia provides assistance in the form of repetitions, rhythms, humor and comments, the Gayaka leads the performance by narrating episodes, performing dialogues and singing verses. Their engaging dialogue, which usually includes sarcasm, comedy, and spontaneous improvisation, engages the spectators and gives each performance its unique identity. Without requiring an elaborate stage arrangement, Daskathia performances take place in the evening in village streets, temple premises or courtyards of their benefactors under open skies. To mesmerize the crowd, both artists perform all roles in the drama, changing their voice and facial expressions skillfully using their extensive knowledge of the Puranas and mythological customs. Wooden clappers, known as Kathis, whose rhythmical banging helps maintain tempo and emphasize dramatic moments in the narration, are one of the most distinct characteristics of Daskathia.

The performance begins by invoking of Hindu gods and goddesses such as Jagannath, Lord Rama, and Lord Krishna by entertainers. Sources for the narrative include religious literature such as Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagavata, and other Puranic stories. Entertainers incorporate contemporary and regional issues into the social and moral themes. The rural community can easily understand the stories because they are in simple regional language and the lyrics containing many proverbs and idioms. Characteristics of Daskathia include dramatic voice modulation, dramatic gestures, facial expressions, and interaction with the spectators. Questions posed rhetorically to keep audiences' attention and answers to their queries, as well as allusions to regions, are examples of this flexibility. This tradition of orality and spontaneity is seen in this performance practice. In the intervals, the singer (Gayaka) answers the queries raised by Palia through simple dialogue. This makes the story musical narrative exciting to the general public. The ability and skills of the Gayak are very important in making Dasakathia prosperous. The most repeated line by the singer is jayarama je – Nabinsundarashyama je' (meaning victory of lord rama and Krishna).

Example:

Eka dine Stuti Devi mane bicharile
Radha krushna shobha ke hen dekhante kunjare
Radha krushna Milana prabha kede shobha
Darshana hebaku mane baluachi lobha
Gayak- Gayakaratna Baidyanath Sharma
Palia- Bhimsen Shatpathi
Vishaya – Rai Darabara

4. CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Daskathia is a traditional form of storytelling, moral teaching, and community involvement, and thus has a major place in Odishan cultural heritage. Daskathia is an oral tradition that employs song and storytelling to preserve the religion, culture, and traditions of the rural Odia community.

The gayak and palia's long, silky robes, turban, ghungur, and other forms of dress common in the village setting make up the Odissi dancers' attire and provide a sight truly breathtaking for the audience. The attire of the Odissi dancer evokes rural Odisha and resonates easily with the audience.

The Gayak starts the story by singing, and the Palia repeats it, causing the audience to burst into laughter. The Gayak demonstrates his skill in the art by using both hands to clap two sets of clappers simultaneously. But the Palia had placed the clappers next to his right hand, with the thud hitting the upper one sharply, while the lower one was struck with both his hands, holding four fingers between them to separate them. Poems from Upendra Bhanja, Kabisurya Baladeva Rath, and Gopal Krushna Patnaik have been used for the entertainment purpose of Dasakathia with the help of chand, choutisa, and chaupadi poems. Moreover, Dasakathia also plays an important role in sustaining the cultural heritage of Odisha. There have been many idioms of the Odia language, proverbs, folk songs, and poems that have been heavily relied upon in Dasakathia for highlighting the linguistic abilities and creative aspects of the local populace. Being a part of an oral tradition, one is always able to update their stories according to local needs.

Apart from the spiritual and education importance of Dasakathia, it also emphasizes the creative side of Odisha's rich traditional culture. Dasakathia entertains people by showcasing creative body movements, lively conversations, singing with music, rhythmic clapping (the Kathis), and stories. Through the Gayaka and Palia, there is a blending of musical, theatrical, and oral arts into entertaining art forms. As a result, Daskathia remains important in the state's folk traditions and serves as a living example of artistic heritage and community expression. The lyrics of Daskathia songs spread awareness and laughter among the general public, teach Hindu mythology, raise awareness of social issues, and express care, love, sympathy, and respect among the folk. It tells the victory of kings and great personality of Odisha.

5. TRANSFORMATION AND CHALLENGES

Due to modernization and social, economic, and technological changes, traditional folk arts forms are fading. Daskathia, the art known for its narrative storytelling, community celebration, village gathering, and spiritualism, has been lost in the swarm of social media, reels, and shorts.

Earlier, performances focused solely on mythological stories such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, or on regional folk tales about deities. However, with the transformation, the theme shifted to social awareness, political commentary, social reform, environmental concern, health issues, and so on, demonstrating the art form's flexibility and evolving nature.

Before, it was a performance by two people directly interacting with the rural audience, which has now become a television program, a cultural stage program, and folk festival shows, presented in some government-sponsored cultural events for a wider audience beyond the rural people.

Also, many challenges face the artists. With this transformation in urbanization, artists are not showing interest in this profession due to a lack of financial support, recognition, and audiences. Electronic and digital media dominate the new generation, while others turn to television and other online platforms, which reduces interest in traditional folk arts. Audiences prefer fusion-style art over authentic traditional art.

This art form also suffers from inadequate preservation and documentation. Although it is an oral tradition, it can be documented by the researchers and performers through their positive involvement.

These are some of the many ways through which Daskathia is being revived. The fact that folk festivals, academic research, digital archives, and campaigns to raise awareness of culture all play key roles in the

revival process means that the art is gaining greater recognition within Odisha's intangible cultural heritage. Preservation, involvement of the general population, and younger people studying the art will ensure its survival.

6. CONCLUSION

Daskathia, a vibrant oral folk tradition of Odisha, has a unique musical style and rhythm that leaves the mind blown. Historically, this oral storytelling tradition was used not only for entertainment but also as a medium of communication. Through this performance, it conveys social values, moral instruction, mythology, devotion, literature, spirituality, idealism, and so on. Besides the mythology, the recital of love, romance, marriage, social criticism, and ethical reflection remains relevant to contemporary society.

Its performance techniques, such as rhythmic dialogue, dramatic expression, and gestures, showcase Odisha's living cultural heritage. This folk tradition fosters communal harmony and community bonding among rural people. Dasakathia has a close resemblance to Harikatha and Burakatha of Andhra Pradesh, and to baul or Kabigana of West Bengal.

However, this folk tradition is now in danger because of the serious challenges it faces. Due to changing preferences, the modernization of artists, and declining patronage, this art form is losing its identity. It will affect Odisha's cultural repository. To maintain and reinvigorate the legacy for future generations, rigorous documentation, scholarly investigation, institutional support, and cultural preservation measures are urgently needed.

Daskathia represents the folk aesthetic and importance of cultural consciousness. Preserving Daskathia is about protecting Odisha's historical memory, artistic creativity, and socio-cultural image; it is like giving shelter to old sweet memories. It can be seen as a living embodiment of Odisha's folk culture. It helps us to understand the importance of storytelling through performances in Indian folk culture.

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