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TRADITIONAL FOLK THEATRES OF INDIA

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Abstract:

Traditional folk theatres of India are vibrant expressions of the country's cultural diversity, reflecting the values, beliefs, and traditions of various communities. Rooted in regional folklore, these art forms integrate storytelling, music, dance, and drama to convey social, moral, and religious themes. Each form is unique in its performance style, language, and thematic focus, yet they collectively serve as vehicles for preserving India's intangible cultural heritage. Notable examples include Yakshagana of Karnataka, blending classical and folk elements; Nautanki of North India, known for its melodious songs and dramatic plots; and Therukoothu of Tamil Nadu, a street theatre form performed during festivals. Similarly, Jatra from West Bengal and Odisha combines music with high-energy acting, while Bhavai from Gujarat uses humour and satire to address societal issues. These theatres are not just entertainment but also a medium of social commentary and cultural education. Despite the pressures of modernization, traditional folk theatres have displayed resilience, adapting to contemporary themes while preserving their historical essence. Their accessibility, improvisational nature, and ability to engage with local audiences make them a cherished part of India's artistic heritage.

Keywords: Traditional Folk Theatre, Indian Cultural Heritage, Storytelling and Drama, Regional Art Forms, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Social Commentary

Introduction:

India, a land of immense cultural diversity and rich artistic traditions, has long been celebrated for its vibrant folk theatre forms. Traditional folk theatres of India serve as a mirror to the country's socio-cultural fabric, reflecting its values, beliefs, and everyday life. These theatrical expressions are deeply rooted in regional cultures and have evolved over centuries as a potent medium for storytelling, entertainment, and social commentary.

Folk theatre in India transcends mere performance; it embodies the collective ethos of communities. Originating in the rural heartlands, these art forms are an amalgamation of music, dance, drama, and oral narratives. They often draw inspiration from ancient texts, mythology, folklore, and contemporary social issues, making them relevant and relatable to audiences across generations. Each region in India boasts its distinctive folk theatre tradition, enriched by local languages, dialects, costumes, and performance styles.

Some notable examples of traditional folk theatres include *Yakshagana* from Karnataka, *Jatra* from West Bengal and Odisha, *Tamasha* from Maharashtra, *Bhavai* from Gujarat, and *Therukoothu* from Tamil Nadu. While these forms differ in presentation and thematic focus, they share a common purpose: to educate, entertain, and engage communities. For instance, *Yakshagana* captivates audiences with its elaborate costumes and mythological themes, while *Bhavai* uses humor and satire to address pressing social issues. Similarly, *Therukoothu* combines exaggerated acting and music to narrate episodes from epics like the Mahabharata.

A significant feature of Indian folk theatre is its dual role as a source of entertainment and a medium for social reform. Over the years, it has addressed issues such as caste discrimination, gender inequality, and corruption, subtly weaving these themes into its narratives to evoke introspection and dialogue within communities. The use of humor, satire, and symbolism enhances its effectiveness in communicating complex ideas in an accessible manner.

1. Yakshagana: A Traditional Theatre of Karnataka

Yakshagana is a traditional folk theatre form that emerged in the coastal regions of Karnataka. Known for its elaborate costumes, intricate makeup, and powerful performances, it blends elements of dance, drama, and music to narrate stories, primarily from Hindu epics like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. The name "Yakshagana" translates to "songs of the Yakshas," referring to mythological celestial beings, and embodies a theatrical celebration of divine tales and moral themes.



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Performances usually start in the evening and continue throughout the night. A typical *Yakshagana* troupe includes the *Bhagavata* (lead singer and narrator), musicians playing instruments like the *maddale* (percussion) and *chende* (drum), and actors who portray various characters. The *Bhagavata* narrates the story in a rich, melodious style, while the actors bring it to life with expressive gestures, dramatic dialogues, and energetic movements.

One of the most distinctive aspects of *Yakshagana* is its visually striking costumes. Performers wear vibrant garments, heavy jewellery, and towering headgear, creating a larger-than-life representation of mythological characters. The makeup is equally dramatic, featuring bold patterns and vibrant colours that accentuate the actors' expressions.

Though rooted in mythology, *Yakshagana* has adapted to include contemporary social themes, making it relevant to modern audiences. Its interactive and improvisational nature adds a unique charm, keeping spectators engaged and entertained.

Traditionally performed in temple courtyards and open-air spaces, *Yakshagana* serves as both a spiritual offering and a communal event. Despite challenges posed by modern entertainment, this art form has survived due to the passionate efforts of dedicated artists and cultural enthusiasts. Today, *Yakshagana* remains a proud symbol of Karnataka's cultural identity, enchanting audiences with its timeless artistry.

2.Nautanki: A Vibrant Folk Theatre Tradition of North India

Nautanki is a traditional folk theatre form that has been a prominent cultural expression in North India, particularly in Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Haryana. Renowned for its captivating blend of music, drama, and storytelling, Nautanki has historically served as a medium of entertainment and social commentary, resonating deeply with rural and urban audiences alike.

The origins of Nautanki trace back to the Mughal era, with its roots in local storytelling traditions and Persian theatre influences. Performances are typically held in open spaces or makeshift stages, making it accessible to diverse communities. Stories in Nautanki are drawn from folklore, mythology, historical events, and contemporary social issues, often dramatized to highlight moral lessons or evoke emotional responses.

A Nautanki performance is a feast for the senses, characterized by lively dialogues, expressive gestures, and vibrant costumes. Music plays a pivotal role, with instruments like the harmonium, dholak, and tabla accompanying the actors. The songs, often composed in classical and folk ragas, are central to the storytelling, enhancing the dramatic impact of the narrative.

Traditionally, Nautanki troupes were led by charismatic performers, many of whom were women, a rarity in other forms of Indian theatre. Over time, the art form adapted to changing tastes, incorporating contemporary themes while retaining its traditional essence.

3.Jatra: A Traditional Theatre of Bengal, Odisha, and Assam

Jatra is a popular traditional theatre form that originated in the eastern regions of India, particularly in West Bengal, Odisha, and Assam. Known for its theatrical exuberance, Jatra blends folk music, dance, dramatic dialogue, and elaborate costumes to present stories steeped in mythology, folklore, and history. It has been an integral part of the cultural landscape in these states for centuries, evolving over time while retaining its essence.

The term "Jatra" is derived from the Sanskrit word "Yatra," meaning journey or procession. Traditionally, Jatra performances were held in open-air settings, often during religious festivals, fairs, or village celebrations. The performances usually depict stories from Hindu mythology, such as the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata, and regional legends, with a focus on moral teachings, heroism, and devotion.



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A typical Jatra performance features a combination of dialogue and songs, with live music accompanying the action. The performers, often in larger-than-life costumes, use exaggerated gestures and expressions to convey emotions, ensuring that even distant viewers can understand the storyline. The songs, typically set to regional folk tunes, are crucial to the narrative, enhancing the drama with their emotional intensity.

In West Bengal, the Jatra art form reached its peak in the 19th and early 20th centuries, with troupes performing in rural and urban areas alike. While it was once an exclusively male-dominated field, women gradually began to participate, especially in the roles of deities or female characters. In Odisha and Assam, similar traditions, such as "Jatra" and "Bhaona," share common roots and stylistic elements, though each region has developed its own unique nuances.

4.Ramleela: A Traditional Performance of the Ramayana

Ramleela is a popular and revered traditional theatre form in India, primarily performed during the festival of Dussehra, celebrating the victory of Lord Rama over the demon king Ravana. Based on the Hindu epic *Ramayana*, Ramleela dramatizes the life and journey of Lord Rama, from his birth to his eventual triumph over evil. The performances are staged in numerous parts of India, with notable traditions in Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and other northern states, as well as across the Indian diaspora.

The roots of Ramleela trace back to the 16th century when it was introduced as a devotional and theatrical portrayal of the *Ramayana*. The term "Ramleela" comes from the words "Rama" (the hero of the *Ramayana*) and "Leela" (meaning divine play or performance), symbolizing the theatrical retelling of Rama's life and his moral and spiritual journey.

The performance typically involves elaborate sets, vibrant costumes, and a large ensemble cast. Actors portray the key characters of the *Ramayana* such as Lord Rama, Sita, Lakshmana, Ravana, Hanuman, and others, with each actor performing roles with deep reverence and dramatic flair. In the traditional form, male actors perform both male and female roles, and the performances are usually outdoors, staged in community spaces or temporary arenas. The play unfolds in various episodes, including the exile of Rama, his battle with Ravana, and his return to Ayodhya, symbolizing the triumph of good over evil.

5.Raasleela: The Divine Dance Drama of Vrindavan

Raasleela is a traditional dance-drama form that holds deep religious and cultural significance, especially in the regions of Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and parts of Madhya Pradesh. It is a devotional performance that narrates the life and divine exploits of Lord Krishna, focusing particularly on his childhood and youth in the village of Vrindavan, where he performed the sacred *raas* dance with his female devotees, the *gopis* (cowherd women).

The origins of Raasleela are rooted in Hindu mythology, particularly in the stories from the *Bhagavata Purana* and *Vishnu Purana*, where Lord Krishna, known for his divine charisma, engages in playful and spiritual dances with the *gopis*. These dances symbolize the cosmic dance of divine love and devotion, where Krishna, as the ultimate lover, captivates the hearts of his devotees.

In its performance form, Raasleela combines dance, music, acting, and devotional singing. The key element of the performance is the *raas* dance, which is typically performed in a circle, with Krishna (usually portrayed by a young man) at the centre surrounded by the *gopis*. The dancers are adorned in traditional costumes, with the women often wearing bright, colourful sarees, and Krishna typically dressed in a peacock feather and yellow dhoti. The *raas* is accompanied by devotional music, including *bhajans* (devotional songs) that express the love and longing of the *gopis* for Krishna. The rhythm of the dance is complemented by the sounds of dholak, tabla, and other traditional instruments.



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Raasleela performances are often staged during festivals such as Holi and Janmashtami, which celebrate the birth of Lord Krishna. These performances are especially popular in the sacred towns of Vrindavan and Mathura, where the stories of Krishna's childhood are particularly cherished. In these areas, Raasleela is not just a performance but a spiritual experience, where the actors and audience alike immerse themselves in the divine play of Krishna.

6.Tamasha: A Traditional Folk Theatre of Maharashtra

Tamasha is a dynamic and vibrant folk theatre form that has been a cornerstone of cultural expression in Maharashtra for centuries. Known for its lively performances, it combines music, dance, and drama to tell stories, often rooted in mythology, history, and social themes. The art form is especially popular in rural areas and is deeply associated with the social and cultural traditions of the region.

The origins of Tamasha can be traced to the Peshwa era in the 18th century, where it evolved from the traditional folk dances and plays performed in the courtyards of Maharashtrian villages. It was initially a form of entertainment at local festivals, weddings, and gatherings. Over time, it became a professional performance genre, with troupes traveling from village to village to perform for audiences.

Tamasha performances are characterized by their vibrant music, which includes dholki, dhol, and shehnai, providing the rhythmic backdrop for the performances. The songs, often written in Marathi, are crucial to the narrative, with lyrics that convey emotions such as love, longing, and social issues. Performers sing and dance in highly stylized and expressive ways, using hand gestures, footwork, and body movements to enhance the storytelling.

7.Bhavai: A Folk Theatre Tradition of Gujarat

Bhavai is a traditional folk theatre form from Gujarat that combines music, dance, and drama to tell stories that are rooted in mythological, religious, and social themes. It is known for its emotional depth, vibrant performances, and its ability to engage the audience through expressive storytelling. Bhavai has been a significant cultural expression in Gujarat for centuries, particularly in rural areas, and continues to be an important part of the state's artistic and cultural heritage.

The origins of Bhavai can be traced to the 14th century, and it is believed to have evolved from earlier forms of religious and devotional theatre. Traditionally, Bhavai performances are based on stories from Hindu mythology, especially the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and local legends. The plays typically revolve around moral lessons, tales of heroism, divine intervention, and social themes that resonate with the audience.

A distinctive feature of Bhavai is its elaborate costume design, with actors donning traditional outfits and using dramatic makeup to portray various characters, such as gods, kings, and mythological figures. In many cases, men perform both male and female roles, with male actors dressing up as women and playing female characters such as queens, goddesses, or heroines. This gender role reversal is one of the most striking aspects of Bhavai..

8.Therukoothu: The Street Theatre of Tamil Nadu

Therukoothu is a traditional folk theatre form that originated in Tamil Nadu, deeply rooted in the rural culture of the region. Known as "street theatre," it is performed in open spaces, often during festivals, religious events, and temple celebrations. The performances are characterized by a combination of dramatic storytelling, music, dance, and ritual, with the main themes often drawn from Hindu mythology, particularly the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, as well as local folklore and legends.



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The name "Therukoothu" translates to "street play," with *theru* meaning "street" and *koothu* meaning "dance" or "performance." Traditionally, the performances are held in the streets or open grounds of villages, where large gatherings of people come together to watch the spectacle. The performances are particularly popular during festivals such as Pongal, Tamil New Year, and other religious celebrations, where the community gathers to celebrate the divine through dramatic art.

In a typical Therukoothu performance, actors are dressed in vibrant, elaborate costumes, often adorned with heavy makeup, masks, and jewellery to represent gods, demons, and mythological characters. The performances feature exaggerated body language, facial expressions, and dramatic dialogue, which helps convey the story even from a distance. The actors rely heavily on improvisation, using humor, physical gestures, and spoken word to entertain the audience while narrating the tale.

9.Ramman: The Ritualistic Folk Theatre of Uttarakhand

Ramman is a unique and ancient folk theatre and ritualistic performance tradition from the state of Uttarakhand, in the northern part of India. It is a sacred theatrical tradition that blends religious rituals, dance, music, and storytelling, often associated with the worship of local deities. Recognized for its cultural and spiritual significance, Ramman is practiced primarily in the villages of the Garhwal and Kumaon regions of Uttarakhand, and it has been designated as an Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO.

The core of Ramman is its deeply religious nature, with the performances dedicated to the worship of various deities, particularly in temples, during festivals or special occasions. The performances are typically held during important local festivals like Baisakhi and the Dussehra period, or as part of ritual observances linked to the worship of deities like *Bhumiya Devta* and *Jakh Devta*. The ritual is both an artistic expression and a way to connect the community with divine forces.

In Ramman performances, the story is often cantered around legends, mythologies, or local tales related to the deities. The rituals usually involve a variety of performances, including dances, prayers, chants, and theatrical enactments. The performance is led by a priest or a community elder, known as the *pujari*, who orchestrates the rituals and invokes the gods, while actors perform dramatic roles, embodying mythological characters or divine beings. The cast members wear traditional costumes and masks that symbolize the deities or characters they are representing.

10.Koodiyattam: The Classical Theatre Tradition of Kerala

Koodiyattam is a centuries-old classical theatre form from Kerala, recognized for its intricate storytelling, elaborate rituals, and exceptional use of language, gestures, and facial expressions. It is one of the oldest living theatrical traditions in India, with its roots tracing back to the 10th century, and has been designated by UNESCO as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.

Koodiyattam evolved in the temples of Kerala, where it was originally performed as part of the ritualistic worship of deities, especially during religious festivals. The name "Koodiyattam" translates to "acting together," reflecting the collaborative nature of the performance, which involves a combination of dance, music, and drama. The plays are typically based on stories from Hindu epics, primarily the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and *Natya Shastra* (the ancient Indian treatise on performing arts), and are structured to impart moral and spiritual lessons.

A hallmark of Koodiyattam is its use of Sanskrit as the primary language of performance, which is spoken and sung by the actors. The performances are highly stylized, and the actors make use of the *mudras* (hand gestures), elaborate facial expressions, and eye movements, all of which are crucial for conveying emotions and meaning.



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11.Swang: The Traditional Folk Theatre of North India

Swang is a vibrant and traditional folk theatre form practiced in the regions of Haryana, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh. It is a unique blend of dance, music, drama, and satire, often performed in the open air during festivals, fairs, and religious celebrations. The roots of Swang can be traced back to ancient folk traditions, and it has evolved as a highly popular and entertaining medium of storytelling, often incorporating elements of local mythology, historical events, and social commentary.

The term *Swang* comes from the word *swan*, which means “imitating” or “impersonation,” reflecting the central theme of the performance — the actors imitate various characters, including gods, kings, and everyday people, to create a captivating narrative. The plays are typically based on mythological stories from Hindu epics, such as the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and various regional legends, with plots focusing on moral dilemmas, heroism, and divine intervention.

A distinctive feature of Swang is its satirical and humorous nature. The performances often include comic elements, sharp wit, and clever dialogues that offer commentary on social and political issues, making them both entertaining and thought-provoking. The plays are usually accompanied by folk songs and music, performed using traditional instruments like the *dholak*, *harmonium*, *tabla*, and *sitar*, which help set the tone and rhythm of the performance. The songs, often in local dialects, are an integral part of the narrative, providing emotional depth and advancing the plot.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, traditional folk theatres of India are a testament to the country’s rich artistic heritage and the resilience of its cultural practices. They continue to inspire and educate, serving as bridges between the past and the present. As carriers of collective memory and regional identity, these art forms remain indispensable in preserving and celebrating the diversity of India’s cultural landscape.

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