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Withering Goan Hindu Folk Theatre Forms

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As the monsoon recedes yearly, giving way to the October heat and chilly winter, it marks the new season of feasts and fairs, when Goa's folk theatre comes back to life. It entertains people and helps them recall their rich heritage. The performances are ancient and their peculiar feature is that though neither themes nor structure change, they are still popular in villages and, on feast days, beat all electronic media in popularity. From November to May-end, the itinerant groups which present and sustain the age-old theatre forms continue with a missionary zeal at all fairs, though rewards they reap are not at all enough to ensure a decent living. These groups consider their art traditional, coming down over the centuries, but for a number of years now, fresh blood has not been in evidence. At most, the odd new generation of a family which is not attracted to lucrative jobs joins its parents, but the virtual absence of new entrants has reduced the number of groups drastically.

The folk theatre groups of Goa, even though participating in annual festivals and contests of the Kala Academy, have remained amateurish and even, with changing times, refuse to become professional. The elites do not scoff at the folk performances and at some places are even their patrons. But they do not think in terms of helping make these performances contemporarily professional. States like Maharashtra and Karnataka have made splendid use of folk theatre to convey modern messages and thus ensured its rejuvenation and longevity. Writers like Girish Karnad (who is a most successful man

The author is the former Director of Information of the Goa government. This rare article in the local English press on an important but endangered part of Goan cultural tradition appeared in Sunday Navhind Times (Dec.11, 1994).

today) have not only brought contemporarised folk forms to the urban upper classes, but also achieved success at the box office. In fact, Karnad has set new records in income and new trends in folk theatre. His two plays "*Hayavadan*" and "*Nagamandala*" linger in the popular memory and have evoked a great deal of interest abroad. Bengal too has been ahead in this field. The late Utpal Dutt and Badal Sarkar, by elevating folk traditions to the contemporary stage without modifying their structure, have helped immensely the survival of our Indian heritage. But, in Goa, folk theatre continues to sulk and the day does not seem so far off when it will fade away totally.

Goa's folk dramas are hilarious, humorous and enjoyable by all means in spite of some crude elements stuck to them. For example, women's roles are performed by men. They are ritualistic and confined to the temple pavilion. They apply so much upon faces specially thick talcum powder that looks so bad.

Among Goa's foremost folk theatre forms, known for centuries, is the *Zagor*. It focuses on a myriad stories. These include: a widow's complaint against her nephew who killed his uncle; a woman's complaint that her daughters have been kidnapped by a goldsmith's sons; a coquettish woman searching for her Don Juan; and a wife crying about her husband's liquor addiction. Then there is a story of Tendlo in search of a female companion and, of course, a handful of stories about government authorities, each having names like *parpati* (prajapati) and *nikhandar* and *havaladar*, who are all always smartly dressed full of brocades and with crowns on their heads.

Zagor present all sections of the populace, but the uniqueness in style of presentation is that groups of characters move within themselves. There is no coordination between stories and therefore there is no cohesive effect. Two young boys of a goldsmith's family kidnap a woman's daughters. Police lock them up. Then another weeping woman comes on stage and says that her nephew has killed her husband. (Most probably the uncle-nephew clash has been taken from the story of Lord Krishna and Kauns). Next comes a coquettish woman wearing a skirt and holding a colourful umbrella in search of her lover. Then comes a *Mahar* with broom, basket and bottle. What they say is hardly understood. So is their interconnection.

Zagor are performed by itinerant groups. They move from place to place, but only where there are their own established traditions. *Zagor* has its own music as all the actors dance on the stage. They dance to the accompaniment of musical instruments like *Mrudangam*, and *tal*, cymbals which create good effects of rhythm as well as melody. In the old days, *Zagor*, would continue through the

night, but nowadays *Zagor* present few characters and wind up early.

Zagor, despite its limitations, is very enjoyable and the Kala Academy has played a vital role in sustaining popular interest by organising annual contests. If improved upon by removing some of its crudities, *Zagor*, like *Nautanki* in northern India could attract a flood of Goan *afficianados* and tourists. And the artistes too would have work throughout the year with ample opportunity to improve their living and professional standards.

***Perni Zagor*—A Blighted Form**

Of all the forms of Goan folk theatre, *Perni Zagor* has passed through the worst vicissitudes for want of patronage. It is a form restricted to few families known as 'Perni' found in Molkornem and a few other places in Sanguem taluka. It is also the worst sufferer for want of new entrants. Perni who belong to the older generations can perform only with those of their young who cannot get jobs elsewhere. Their third compulsion is that they have been allotted lands by *Comunidades* and *Devasthans* for which they must perform.

Perni Zagor has not remained the same as of yore. The form has lost its old charm of presenting a complete story. Nowadays they also use masks as a result of which nobody knows whether the character on the *Mand* (public place used as stage) is Lord Shiva or Parvati, his consort. Nobody can understand their dialogue either because of the masks. Characters, whether Shiva or Parvati or some other come one by one and go off stage and people go home with totally blank faces. *Perni Zagor* is fading fast and will disappear unless someone with creative sensibilities undertakes research and revives the form.

Ranmale—A Lively, Colourful Form

If proper encouragement is given to this form, it can become an experience of splendid colour and activity. *Ranmale* is an open-air drama primarily based on the *Ramayana*. It has three parts, the central part of which is when the *Ramayana* story is told. The second part is for the entertainment of children and consists of characters with masks of tigers, lions and other animals. Children watch their fights with awe and wonder. The third (and most important!) part is also entertainment, but with 'A' certificate, though children continue defying the stricture on viewing.

After the story of *Ramayana* and the masked animal act, all actors come together and dance holding a white cloth by its four corners. The accompanying song goes, "Ago! Ago! Sakhu var bhag

lakdank vaita tevaham. Bhavojin tuka malear bolealam. Rupea tuka cholyek thaila" (Ah! Sakhu look up at the attic while going to collect firewood. Your brother-in-law has called you there, as he wants to offer you a rupee for a blouse). This is only a sample, but at times vulgarity scales peaks which people enjoy avidly. A characteristic of this folk theatre form is that human beings replace the conventional (or should we say modern?) curtain. No sooner must a scene change say from Panchavati to Ashokvan, than all actors turn their backs to the audience and the human file is used as the 'curtain'. When the new scene is 'ready' the actors resume their performance.

Kalo—Krishna and the Purana

Kalo actually means temple fair, but *Kalo* is also an open-air drama. *Kale* are of two types. One that is staged at night is called *Sankasur Kalo* and next day, in the afternoon, is staged a drama called *Govalan Kalo*. The latter is all *Gokul* atmosphere where *Krishna leela* are played. Lord Krishna teases the *Gopis* along with friends and then is punished by Yashoda. The *Sankasur Kalo* staged on the previous night presents a story from the *Purana* which shows prominently war between Gods and Asuras.

There is yet another form called *Dhashawatar* and it is presented by itinerant groups called Mochemodkar. Mochemad is a village in Sindhudurg district in Maharashtra. But it would not be correct to ignore this form because it is 'from Maharashtra' since historical records indicate, there were such groups also in Goa. Either Goa's groups fled and settled in Mochemad or the local groups have given up the tradition. Whatever it be, *Dhashawatar* forms part of our heritage and unless sustained interest in this form is maintained, our study cannot be complete.

Mochemodkar choose any interesting (but not too lengthy) story from Maharashtra or from the Ramayana and present it to the audience. People enjoy this. But what they do enjoy more, going into peals of laughter, is when two actors express their personal animosity or grievance on stage, mid-performance. Envisage this. The audience is holding its breath anticipating the battle between Jarasandha and Bhima and Lord Krishna is worried about the ignorance of Bhima about the only way in which Jarasandha can be killed. At that very moment, to everyone's surprise, going counter to the epic, Jarasandha thunders at Bhima: "I am not going to be killed today! On the contrary, I will trash you!" And he immediately reclines on his mace with a 30 Number bidi in his mouth. After a long puff, he asks Bhima: "Who ate my share of mackerel from the frying pan?" And at once, he strikes Bhima who collapses flat on the ground. Such epi-

sodes are purposefully interspersed to provide relief to audiences from serious scenes like the battle of Bhima with Jarasandha.

Mochemodkar too are a fading folk theatre genre. Their performances have become rare. They face the twin challenge of mighty electronic media and a fully developed modern stage.

This beautiful land is blessed with half a dozen folk forms entertaining people every year during fairs and festivals. Some of them like *Perni Zagor* are disappearing. *Zagor* is an impressive form and can be further improved to make it attractive even to tourists by raising it to professional commercial standards.

Similarly, the best available form is *Ranmale*, which, if encouraged properly can attract even the younger generation from schools and colleges and make the form an effective medium to push through the messages of the modern world. The Kala Academy can definitely play a strategic role in rejuvenating these forms to suit the tastes of modern audiences without destroying its inherited intrinsic structure and flavour.