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VOICE OF RESISTANCE:AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY ON 'DHULIA' AS ONE OF THE FOLK ART FORMS OF ASSAM

KEY WORDS: dhulia, social message, satires, folk art, dialects, resistance

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ABSTRACT

"The soul of folk art lies in its simple rusticity and rawness in movement, rhythm and form."
Lt. Hemanga Biswas, Folk Art Scholar and Social activist

The use of folk art in communicating social message is there across different media platforms. Folk art, in its different forms, sometimes, works as alternatives to the discourses of mainstream-media and society. As an art of the grassroots, it has its own place among the voices that shoot-up from the margin and periphery. Dhulia is one of such traditional art forms in Assam that has a special significance as it uses satires in different forms to resist the dominant social norms. This art form, not only challenges the tyrannical values with the help of satirical verses critiquing the dominant social structure, but also, it puts up an energetic display of different acrobatic skills which are performed by both young and old performers in a theatrical fashion. The reason why, such an art form has a greater connect with the audience belonging to all the sections of the society of all ages. Besides, the uses of local dialects in their performances help in keeping such an art form alive as an alternative to the language and art of the elite and the mainstream. Performed mostly by a section of our society who are poor and oppressed both economically and socially, this folk art is always a reflection of the ongoing struggles of this section of the society. In this backdrop, the paper seeks to explore Dhulia as a medium of expression and resistance in the present society of Assam.

Introduction:

Folk art communication or mediation is as old as living beings. In ancient times primitive people, with their nomadic way of life, were concerned mostly with food. They travelled from one place to another to gather roots, fruits, and to prey upon beasts. On the way of their movement, when they found the area ideal for habitation and learnt the art of agriculture and cattle rearing, they began putting up huts for shelter. Gradually they moved to plains and came to know the art of building hours. Thus began the villages and the village communities, especially on the banks of rivers. These primitive hunter-gatherers, farmers and villagers sang songs and danced to overcome their worries, and express their emotions. In such a way they found artistic fulfillment and entertainment, and folk art was born. As such folk arts do not involve any formal training. People pick up the songs and dances as they pick up their mother tongues. Materials used in folk art are locally collected. These art forms are closely connected to the soil, linked up with the customs and beliefs of the people, and based on their socio-religious life. Folk culture in a society or region is found in different forms due to geographic disparities, socio-economic-religious differences. Folk performing arts comprising traditional music, masquerades, dance and drama along with the verbal forms like songs, tales, poetry, ballads, rhymes, proverbs etc. constitute the bulk of any folk culture. Such arts have been the media of communication down the ages. Singers, minstrels and story tellers have acted over centuries as agents of transmission and dissemination of news and information through face-to-face, live communication. The values, attitudes and beliefs of the people have been propagated and reinforced these folk forms. Thus, mass media and folk performing arts form the fundamental level of mediation.

Folk performing arts of Assam:

India is a land which is full of diverse cultures and traditions. Each part of the country has its unique culture and this culture is prominently visible in its different art forms. India is rich by its folk culture that almost all the regions of the sub-continent have their specific folk dance forms and music. This proves to be a wonderful way of expression of their community and its traditions. The folk art forms are very beautiful because of their rawness.

The folk performing arts practiced in Assam since time immemorial, have broadened and brightened the beauty of the society. As in other parts of the world, such arts began their journey here in the forms of acting, dancing and singing associated with socio-ritualistic activities.

Bihu is the national festival of Assam. It denotes a set of three different cultural festivals and celebrated by the Assamese people around the world. It is originated to ancient rites and practices. But it takes definite urban features and has become popular festival in urban and commercialized atmosphere in the recent decades. Bihu is also used to imply Bihu dance and Bihu folk songs. The Rongali Bihu or the Bohag Bihu is an important festival of Assam which is celebrated by the Assamese people irrespective of caste, creed, and belief. In our state Rongali Bihu draws from many different traditions- Austro-Asiatic, Sino-Burmese and Indo-Aryan-and is celebrated with great fervor.

Dhulia is a folk dance of Assam which makes others to learn & know more about the cultural part of the state. It is a dancing drama which performed as a theatre art. These dances verging on acrobatics are performed to tunes of vigorous music provided with drums and cymbals. Masks are sometimes used by the performers.

Puppetry in Assam has an antique history. The puppetry of Assam was known as Putala Nach & later as 'Putala Bhaona'. The similarities of theory & practice of 'Dhulia Bhaona' & 'Putala Bhaona' cannot be denied. It is also an equally important fact that the Putala Bhaona follows the characteristics of Dhulia Bhaona in the form of puppetry. Puppetry is close to the hearts and minds of the people, as it has a personal and intimate appeal, along with a familiar format & content, because of the colloquial dialects used. But, puppetry is not given due dignity as a folk art though India is the birth place of puppetry. It is rather derisively dismissed with the label 'child's play'. However, the response of the people towards puppetry shows has been quite positive always.

Ojapali is an ancient folk function of Assam. It is a form of classical dance, representing the rich tradition and cultural heritage of Assam. Here Oja is the leader and Palis are regarded as his assistants. Oja-Palis are performed with narrative songs and 'dramatic interludes to depict the stories of the epics Mahabharata, Ramayana and the stories of Manasa, the goddess of Padma Purana. Dance & gestures of hands and fingers are the most attractive features of these functions where the only musical instrument 'Khuti - tal' is played by the Palis. The Daina Pali is treated as the chief assistant of the function. The stories are depicted through three art-forms i.e. song, dance & dialogue & is positively responded by the audience.

Nagara Naam, Thiya Naam, Bhaona etc. are also the performing arts of Assam through which people are binding together.

In addition, the state abounds with traditional dance forms like *Bihu dance, Jhumur Nach, Ali Ai Ligang, Deodhoni Nritya, Bhortal Nritya, Bagrumba, Khmba Lim* and others. It can be said that folk dances are the best manifestation of diversity and dynamism of

Assamese folk culture.

Dhulia

Chinese traveler Hiuen Tsang, during his visit to India in 642-43 AD, wrote that Dhulia artists have occupied an important space in the cultural sphere in the Pragjyotishpur Kingdom ruled by Kumar Bhaskar Barma.

The numerous copper plate inscriptions found in all over North East India denotes of Kamrup, Kamata, Pragjyotishpur who ruled for the period from 7th century to 12th century AD donated land to the folk artists and people related to the folk art performers and people temples. The Ahom kings also patronized such folk art performers. An inscription issued by Ahom king Lakshminath Singha in 1774 AD indicates the act of offering land to the Ojapali (another form of folk performing art of Assam).

A dhulia artist is he who plays the dhol (made of wood and leather). But in the context of Assam dhulia refers to a particular folk performing art which is called also Dhulia Bhaona. This form of folk art is quite old in lower Assam (Western Assam) and is known well as Kamrupi Dhulia. This form of art, since ancient times has been accorded a distinct place in the tradition of folk drama of Assam. This form of folk art has assumed a significant identity of its own over the centuries, because it has blending of humor, acrobatics, play- acting, dance and instrumental music etc. There are twenty or more members in a Dhulia Party who perform, beat dhols and do everything own selves. The leader of the troupe is called Bayan or Oja. Some of the artists play cymbals, kartals and kalis (a kind of wind instruments indigenous to Assam).The performers use simple and crude dresses made from old, worn out canvas and decorated with colorful patchwork of clothes. The artists wear masks of God and Goddesses, birds and animals and decorate their faces with powders. The performance usually takes place during fair and festivals. The performers entertain the audience with their humor, gestures-posters, adaptation and improvisation of known narratives to shed light on contemporary socio-political scenarios. The performance becomes colorful and during this event people of all sects, castes and religions come together to enjoy and join in the merry-making.

The spectacular, showy and startling performance by dhulia artists is known as *Kusti, Khat/ Khut diya* in the dialect of Kamrupia which commonly means voluntary body movement like bounce and spring in an inverted way. *Kusti* performed by Dhulias requires mastery in kinesthetic awareness, artistic dexterity, feats of physical agility and above all unquenchable zeal for accomplishing risky and raw showmanship. The member of the troupe who excels in acrobatics is called *Khuidar* or *Khuitar*. Dr. Maheswar Neog in his book "Satria Nritya Aru Satria Nrityar Tal" observes, "There is a custom of performing Khar in Satriya Nritya also. For example- *Khar, Luti khar, Chit khar, Olota khar, Kaati khar*, *Tamol mochara khar* etc." Remarkably an unsophisticated version of tamol mochara khar is still prevalent in the repository dhulia which is locally termed as *Tangal mochara* or *Tangal musra* etc.

Contrary to this, folk arts have the innate advantage of real time interaction with audience which has helped it to reduce fictional accounts in their stories. For example Dhulia artists construct a dramatic structure out of their simple conversation from their journey starting at home to venue within a very short time and present it as "Chong" (Assamese word meaning an 'Act'). These conversations are mundane, dealing with household chores. Since the artists have to be preoccupied to earn a living rather than refining their craft; therefore, the resultant rendition also tends to be earthy.

This dhulia tradition in Assam is associated with Hindu religion. Dhulia troupes are invited to perform in different parts of the state in various festivals and rituals. Practice of religion was not evident in the earliest societies in the state of Assam. Only work (karma) to live for benevolence of self and society as a whole was the prevailing system here. Thus in such folk societies, people created Dhol and played and enjoyed it. In a class based society, the people at the lower strata of society does all kinds of work themselves, generally the people of upper class of the society did not practice it. The class lords looked to new ways for ostracizing the lower class people. Anyway religion is such a tool where the Gurus are found giving instruction to be followed. It has never vouched for an open, liberal way of life. Hence, this folk art is always a reflection of the ongoing struggles of this section of the society.

The Crisis and Resistance

The people still engaged in this art form are simple, illiterate or semi literate who hail from these villages and most of them belong to scheduled caste tribes. Their primary occupation is fishing and agriculture; performance of Dhulia being a part time job. As social patronage is decreasing day by day these people are finding it more and more difficult to cling to this art. Younger generations are least attracted to this tradition. This is evident from the fact that out of the four Dhulia troupes of Kaihati only one has members below the age of thirty. Some members of the older generation are still carrying on not because of any material profit but because of some kind of emotional, existential involvement. This is clear in the words of Ratan Das (a dhulia artist), "I won't die of hunger or pain. I am accustomed to all these since from childhood. I will die if you stop inviting me to perform." At the same time, the paucity of young and athletic players has forced the troupes to dispense with the acrobatic part of their performances. It is clear that Dhulia Bhaona as a folk art form is counting its days. A robust form of community entertainment, a medium of disseminating information and knowledge, a tool of resistance and reformation through socio-political satire and a powerful pedagogical instrument stands on the verge of disappearance. However, it is sad to note that in last 15 years 20 out of 25 troupes have given up performance. Dying artist Gajiram Das of Roumari Dhulia troupe of Nalbari district of Assam cried when his application for artist pension was refuted repeatedly, "Deserving artists don't get artist pension, influential and fake artists get it." One is more saddened when one remembers that in the 14th and the 15th century, Mahapurusa Srimanta Sankardeva took elements from Dhulia Bhaona to create his Angkia Nata. No wonder, Prof. Ram Gopal Bajaj of NSD inaugurating the first show of the above cited play at Chamata (Nalbari) said, "Two very important aspects of drama - dialogue delivery and rhythmic flexibility taught over a period of three years at drama schools including NSD can be learnt by watching Dhulia's act. Their performance is so immaculate and spontaneous. I was clueless wondering where and how they have mastered all these."

The people still engaged in this folk performing art are illiterate or semi literate, simple who hail from villages and most of them belong to scheduled caste. They have to look for other livelihood options as fishing, rikswa pulling, daily labour etc. So, the question comes for its existence.

The folk arts are the products of the folkways and culture of the society. They are inseparable as they form a part of the society that they belong to. It can't be denied that folk art is the most effective way of communication. People live and die with folk arts, hence, they become easy to decode and understand it. They are easy to understand by the common masses because of their nature of origin.

The development of rural India is certainly associated with the dialogue or communication that we are providing them. Our tradition plays an important role in a creative artistic process particularly in the field of folk performing arts. Folk art is functional and spontaneous. Every part of the state is full of music, dance or theatre. The folk performing art is changing its structure continuously over centuries modifying itself to the needs of the changing situation making it functionally relevant to the society.

Tradition is the process of the transmission of age- values and the contextual manifestation and interpretation of the universe. Biswa Kabi Rabindra Nath Tagore, in his famous "Swadeshi Samaj" speech in July, 1904 advocated "all traditional structure of art must have sufficient degree of elasticity to allow it to respond to varied impulses of life, delicate or virile, to grow with its growth, to the traditional performing art is an aesthetic object, the concept of

belongingness and affinity in cultural context." The folk art forms satisfy our innate need for self expression, for moral instruction combined with entertainment, and for the dramatic and lyrical. The traditional forms preserve and disseminate the tradition and culture of our forefathers in lively manners.

There is an ample scope of establishment of folk art as an interface of media, at least in the space of start off. Realizing the potentiality and life oriented outlook, the Song and Drama division of Govt. of India designed a programme during 2006-08, where Dhulia troupes of Kamrup, Nalbari, and Darrang Districts travelled the entire state to spread awareness against malaria disease. They performed drama, street play, impromptu awareness rally focusing the preventative measures and causes. However, the programme was highly successful due to unsurpassed popularity of Dhulia in rural sphere. The life oriented content and the simple and humble way of communication can actually establish Dhulia art as a primary mode of socio-cultural tool which strive to balance the harmony of our society intact and thus it may resist.

Conclusion

There is need for debate or discussion at various level of administrative, civil organization about elevation of folk arts as a driving force of mass media. Due to its closeness to community and alienation with seemingly proliferative contemporary media apparatus might have imparted it a dormant outlook, but in reality it has much greater potential. In this regard I would like to quote Robert Bressonl "Cinema, radio, television, magazines are a school of inattention: people look without seeing, listen in without hearing."

Rightly, all these media tools despite its penetration to all walks of life, their fictional content has influenced the audience to develop passivity while enjoying the presentation, they neither question nor object. They even engulf the most myriad illusory stories although in real life they encounter hard edged events. Gradually audiences become acclimatized to this inattention. The mass media at present times is mostly centered on leveraging marketing benefits through propaganda creation. According to Marshal McLuhan "All media exist to invest our lives with artificial perceptions and arbitrary values". Contrary to this, folk arts have the innate advantage of real time interaction with audience which has helped it to reduce fictional accounts in their stories. For example, Dhulia artists construct a dramatic structure out of their simple conversation from their journey starting at home to venue within a very short time and present it as 'Chong' (Assamese word meaning an 'act'). These conversations are mundane, dealing with household chores. Since the artists have to be preoccupied to earn a living rather than refining their craft; therefore, the resultant rendition also tends to be earthy. Like Dhulia artists, the Dainapali (the comedian member of Ojapali) would often go to an audience, interact with him, and out of the comical elements of the dialogue, he would mock the character of the story they are essaying. Likewise the puppetry artists humanize the olden kings and their sidekicks as plain characters to impart some contemporary social message.

There is ample scope of establishment of folk art as an interface of media, at least in the rural space to start off. This has been a casual and subconscious affair in the long history of the folk art forms vis a vis the contrived policy of Mass Media and Advertisement to consciously propagate to the audience's mind. The confused time of Indian independence, the emergency of 1975, Indo-china war of 1962 are all depicted with remarkable depth through all such performing folk arts. But lack of serious practice, archive and documentation, financial freedom that would have allowed the folk artists to devote their skills for the sophistication have denied this tradition the right place as a media interface that it deserved. More recently, renowned media houses have adopted the strategy of word of mouth publicity in a bid to reach newer audience who remained unperturbed by hype of electronic and print media publicity. Whereas traditionally, the publicity for the performance of Folk arts have always been garnered by word of mouth. Established knowledge about certain seasonal socio-religious events where some elements of folk art is traditionally considered obligatory has helped in awareness generation among the community. Considering the above aspects it is necessary that folk forms like Kamrupia Dhulia deserve utmost attention regarding its preservation, promotion and proliferation.

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