

***Maach*: A Folk Drama Form Revolutionizing the Society with New Experiments**

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ABSTRACT

Maach is an extremely popular folk drama form of *Malwa* region in Madhya Pradesh. Based on the study this folk drama form finds its existence in the region from the late 18th century. The social, economic, cultural and literary richness of the region gave enough scope for the artiste and writers of *Maach* to flourish in the region. The literature of the region has been represented by many but one poet mesmerized the world by his divine expressions and he was none other than Kalidasa. Similarly, *Malwa* region allowed the folk drama *Maach* to represent and comment on the peasant society, on the nature and habits of the people of the region, historical aspects of the region, on the follies and pretensions in humorous and satirical way. *Maach* form has not only been preserved by the *Maach* Gurus and *Maach* Akhadas but they have also promoted this unique folk drama form to maintain its continuity by adapting to the new changes in the society. Today this folk drama form has grown into a new way of enlightening the people with messages related to importance of education, child birth, hygiene, and many more aspects related to society. In this way this drama form has undergone new experiments to achieve new directions and heights.

Keywords: *Maach*, folk, drama, new experiments

Maach, a folk drama form of Malwa region of Madhya Pradesh, is a lyrical folk drama and a form of operatic ballet. The term *Maach* comes from Sanskrit folk form *Manch* (stage) or place of performance. This distinctive and traditional folk drama style of

open stage has been the source of folk entertainment in *Malwa* region for more than 200 years. This indigenous folk-form is believed to have its birth in the holy city of Ujjain.

The origin of folk-drama is quite ancient in India. *Natyashastra* by Bharat Muni dates back to almost 500 years B.C. *Natyashastra* laid the classical rules for performing dramas. The development of dramas is like the growth of any language. In India the various forms of folk dramas are prevalent in different states and are known by different names i.e. *Jatra* in Bengal, *Rasleela* and *Nautanki* in Uttar Pradesh, *Khayal* in Rajasthan, *Ramleela* in Delhi, *Lalit & Lavani* in Maharashtra, *Ottam Thullal* in Malabar, *Therikoothu* in Tamilnadu, *Veethi* in Andhra Pradesh similarly *Maach* which is a form of operatic ballet is very popular in *Malwa* region of Madhya Pradesh.

After independence there was an immense need for revival in virtually every field of life. People in very village, city and distance areas were trying to revive their culture and traditions. *Maach* played vital role in this regard and was always driven by public welfare. The *Maach* writers were trying to make people in the society aware about Community Development Programmes, National Development Policies like Five Year Plan etc. Some of the important plays in this regard were Mohan Singh's *Badalta Gaon*, Siddheshwar Sen's *Panihaarin* and Sevaram's *Nayo Prabhat* etc.

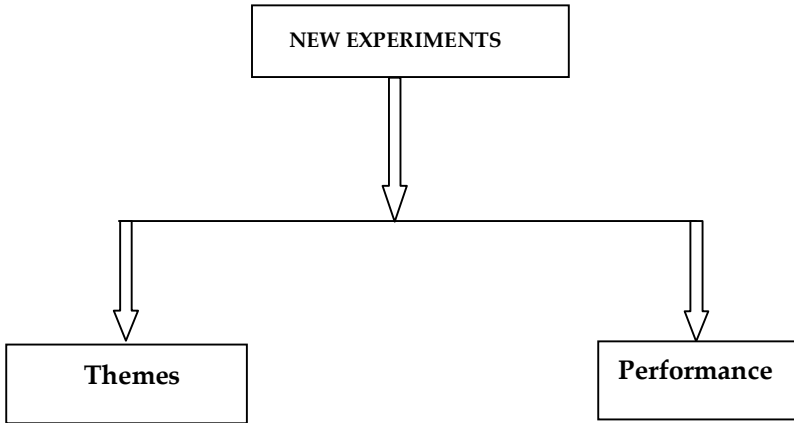
There has been revolution in *Maach* writing because *Maach* writers incorporated the modern spirit and modern subjects in their writings. Subjects which were of local importance were picked up as themes by the writers like Panchayat, cooperatives, agriculture, irrigation and cooperative farming to inculcate the spirit of nationalism and nation building. *Maach* plays like *Badhata Kadam* by Mohan Singh promoted the message of cooperative farming and improving the living standards in the *Malwa* region in a very effective way. These plays not only reflect the contemporary society and history of the region but at

the same time they escape the direct propaganda of government policies also and upheld the high standards of *Maach* tradition. *Maach* provided platform for entertainment and public education for the people in the region.

Maach performances and writings have always been driven by the sense of creating social awareness. This unique dramatic style not only delights the audience but also creates a kind of awareness amongst them. The writings of legendary *Maach* writers Siddheshwar Sen, Shri Sewaram, Shri. Mohan Singh etc. have voiced the social awareness. In order to provide solution to the land problem these *Maach* writers and their writings have supported the 'Bhodaan Andolan' (a great social revolution led by noted philanthropist and social worker Shri. Vinobha Bhave. People were made aware about this revolution and as a result of which this revolution was one of the most successful social revolution of modern India. So, *Maach* writers did not only write for seeking and conveying pleasure through their writings but they also used it to convey strong messages and enlightened the people in the society in many ways.

NEW EXPERIMENTS

Folk art, on one hand is connected with the tradition and on the other hand it is always ready to accept the new changes taking place in the society. They are not like still water but like free flowing rivers. This is the reason why the folk forms have been alive and inspiring in all ages. *Maach* plays have also experienced new changes and made experiments from time to time. Over the last decade the changes and experiments have occurred in folk drama *Mach* and they can be seen in two major aspects:



NEW EXPERIMENTS IN THEMES

The biggest change was seen in the area of themes. Initially religion, wars & warriors, love, chivalry and folk legends were the major themes of *Maach* writers but now-a-days social and ethical subjects are gaining momentum. New vision is seen in the formation of plots. Now, *Maach* plays are not written on imaginative themes. Historical background appears in the storyline of *Maach* writers. In the presentation of historical facts the *Maach* writers are very careful so that there is no lapse in the historicity of events. There has been emergence of new themes like religious tolerance, social unity and human welfare etc.

NEW EXPERIMENTS IN PERFORMANCE

In the stage performances of *Maach* there has been tremendous changes over the last three decades. *Maach* plays are not only seen on the stage but they can be heard on radio also, as *Akaashwani* has been instrumental to broadcast the plays on radio. Dr. Shyam Parmar and Dr. Shivkumar Madhur have made use of this medium of telecast as producers of *Maach* plays which

have made them reach millions of people through air which was earlier confined to limited people. Doordarshan has played valuable role in making *Maach* performances reach the viewers in better and effective manner.

Maach has reached to the bigger cities from the villages. The *Maach* plays (*Raja Bhartihari* and *Veer Tejaji* of Siddheshwar Sen have been staged in the 'Lok Natytsava' organized by Bhartiya Natya Sangha at Firozshah Kotla Madian in New Delhi during 12-19 May 1956. People from India and abroad praised these performances. The interviews of the *Maach* artistes got tremendous coverage in the national newspapers of both Hindi and English languages. *Nav Bharat Times* wrote that "This is probably the first time that the audience of the capital enjoyed the *Maach* performances from the artistes of Madhya Pradesh" (*Nav Bharat Times* Bombay, 20 May 1962). The other newspaper *The Statesman* published that "audience was completely mesmerized by watching the *Maach* performances. These plays are testimony to the fact that folk art is not confined only to the villages but they are equally important for the city life" (*The Statesman* 21 May 1962).

Earlier women characters in the *Maach* plays were performed by men but with the passage of time there has been a change and now women artistes are seen to enact the roles of female characters. Women artistes like Pukharaj Pandey, Kanchanbai Sen and Sharadabai Dighe have performed the roles of female characters very effectively and skillfully. During *Natya Mahotsava* organized in Talkatora stadium in New Delhi in 1962 the roles of female characters in the plays of leading *Maach* writer Siddheshwar Sen were played by the women performers. Similar experiments were done in the play entitled *Raja Bhartihari Khel* which was performed in the open space theater of Malwa House of Akaashwani Indore and was directed by Dr. Shiv Kumar 'Madhur'. This play attracted the attention of the audience because the role of king Bhartihari was played by a

male actor Narhari Patel and the role of queen Pingla was performed by a woman actor named Suman Dharmadhikari. Although women actors like Pramila Charegaonkar, Premrata Bhabhara, Swati Sen, Vidyapati Rao etc. showed their exceptional theatrical skills in performing the role of female characters yet the tradition of men performing the role of women characters still continue to dominate in *Maach* performances. However, attempts are going on to bring the trend of same gender performing their roles.

Aristotle also believed that the grandeur and magnanimity of any dramatic art form can be achieved through embellishments and *Maach* can be no exception to this. Today a lot of emphasis is laid on the dresses of the characters. Use of gold and silver ornaments were not seen in the nature of artistes and neither it is possible to procure the old-styled ornaments today. Earlier a lot was left on the power of imagination of the audience while now-a-days the *Maach* plays are becoming more realistic in their dresses and makeup rather than being pretentious.

FORMAL SENSE VS INFORMAL SENSE

The presentation style and technique of the *Maach*, its various thematic elements, and suitable music and gaudy costumes all contribute in making this play a unique one. All of this is followed by a rich tradition. Actors are absolutely free to move in any direction at the time of performance. There are no rigid rules to follow and stage formalities to worry. They sometimes even sit amongst the audience when there is no stage work. However, sometimes, the characters do not leave the platform for the whole play and they just move at the back and front for their turn. There are also cases, when the certain characters make their entry from a distance walking through the audience. In this way earlier *Maach* plays were very informal source of recreation in the region but now with new experiments and changes they

have become more formal in their nature. Earlier the character after completing his part used to sit on the stage and could smoke without intervening the pleasure of the audience but now-a-days a very formal line of conduct is drawn with actors which are to be adhere to without any concession. A lot of experiments and changes are doe in *Maach* plays looking at the interest and tastes of rural and urban audiences. Leading theatre artists and director Dr. Prabhat Kumar Bhattacharya could attract the attention of theatre goers towards these changes in ten-day 'Maach Mela' organized in 1980 at Ujjain. These new changes and experiments were observed and analyzed by the artistes of M.P. Lok Kala Academy Ujjain and Panchayat and Social Welfare Directorate with the help and supports of various *Maach Mandalis* (*Maach* Groups) conducted under the aegis of National School of Drama, New Delhi.

Publications and research have made *Maach* plays reach even wider than before. The rich tradition of research and writing started Pt. Soorynaryan Vyas, Dr. Shyam Parmar and Dr. Chintamani Upadhyay in 1950s. It was extensively enhanced by Dr. Shivkumar Madhur when received Ph.D. Degree from Agra University in 1964 on the topic 'Malwa Ka Loknayta: Maach' which was later on published in the form of a book in 1980.

Research papers and articles were published in various journals and magazines by Dr. Shivkumar Madhur, Dr. Pyarelal Shrimal, Dr. Ranjana Mandloi and Dr. Vijaya Kharikar.

The trend of research in the field continues. Researchers from English language and literature are writing their research papers on various aspects of *Maach*. These research papers in English are read in International and National Conferences and Seminars. Even they are published in noted journals of the country also.

Maach is getting, and very deservingly so, various platforms where various dimensions of this unique folk drama form is

getting popularity. Radio Talks, Interviews with *Maach* writers and performers etc. are efforts to revive and propagate this form amongst the art lovers, theatre goers, readers etc. Different organizations and institutions like Madhya Pradesh Adivasi Lok Kala Parishad, Bhopal; Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal; Madhya Pradesh Natak Lokkala Academy, Bhopal; Kalidas Academy, Ujjain; Lok Manas Academy, Ujjain have been playing key roles in promoting *Maach* by their constant support. Many classical dramas in Sanskrit have been translated in regional dialect *Malwi* that are staged by *Maach* artistes therefore the reach of the folk drama is becoming ever wider.

Thus, like many folk forms have undergone changes with new experiments with the passage of time. So has also been the case with folk drama *Maach*. To cater to modern tastes and emergence of new technologically advanced mediums of entertainment it was necessary for the folk drama to evolve from the traditional modes and to enter into new realms. Lovers of *Maach* have also desperately tried to bring newness into its various aspects in order to revive it.

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