

The Zhadipatti Theatre of Vidharbha: An Unheard Melody

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Abstract: The researcher of the present paper intends to focus on a theatrical movement, initiated by certain indigenous tribal communities in the remote jungles of the districts like Gadchiroli, Chandrapur, Bhandara and Nagpur in Vidharbha region of Maharashtra. The earlier plays were limited to the indomitable faith of the tribes in gods, goddesses, and local deities. The theatre has been dealing with the realistic issues like political and cultural oppression of the tribals, growing corruption in government schemes, terrific poverty, and sustaining inclination of adivasi youth towards Naxalite Movement. 'Consider us human beings and not beasts' this is what *The Zhadipatti Theatre* urges.

Keywords: Zhadipatti, indigenous, stage, performance, hideouts.

The term tribe is applicable to an ethnic group of people who have distinct social, economic, and cultural traditions and practices. The tribal communities like the Gonds, the Santhals, the Mundas and the Great Andamanese have been inhabited in India for centuries. The present research paper is an attempt to introduce an indigenous theatre in the dense jungles of Vidharbha of Maharashtra state. The theatre is about to complete one hundred and fifty years of its formation but yet it is an unheard melody for the outside world. The researchers like Dr. Ajay Joshi are doing their level best to let this glorious theatrical tradition be known to the budding theatre talent in our country. But it will take time to account the actual impression. The first performance on Zhadipatti's rostrum was staged around 1870-80. But the first top to bottom Zhadipatti performance took place in the year 1960 with the staging of *Khedychi Mansa* (Village People). Since then this theatre has been captivating the minds of the tribes in this region and striving for social integration among the different social segments. The highly claimed postcolonial perspective of finding voice by reclaiming own's past is indisputably applicable to this *theatrum mundi*.

The villages where the theatrical performances under the banner of Zhadipatti take place, are located about 200km from Nagpur, one of the metro cities in Maharashtra. The distance between these villages and Naxalite hideouts is absolutely modest. These villages are comprised in the districts like Chandrapur, Nagpur, Bhandara, Gondia, and Gadchiroli. The natives in the region are either illiterate or less-educated. They are superstitious and unaware of the rapidly changing World.

Amidst forests and wild animals and away from towns and cities, the Zhadipatti artists have been doing justice with one of the oldest arts of our country. The tribes in this area belong to Kosti, Gund, Wanjari, Manja, Dhiwar, Govari, Dhangar, Kunli, Mali, Teli, and Chattisgarhi community. Agriculture is their major pre-occupation. But at the same time, their indomitable passion for theatre cannot be kept aside. The performances under Zhadipatti's banner are being carried out further with the help of several groups working in the villages and small towns. Wadsa, one of the villages in Gadchiroli district has surprisingly more than thirty-three groups as such. These groups perform at different places and on different occasions. The theatre, in this way, has been exerting to preserve the heritage of these communities. The predominant influence of folk forms like Tamasha, Gondhal, Dandhar, Chattisgarhi Nautanki and Ghotul is observed clearly while watching the performances. Etymologically zhadi means jungle whereas patti stands for a piece of land. If we take both the words together, loosely it can be a Jungle Theatre. The Zhadipatti Theatre generally does not follow any conventional norms of presentation. The dictum *Art for Art's Sake* hence has a bit modification as *Art for Audiences' Sake*, in this regard. Total entertainment is the sole purpose of the performances staged under its banner.

It is quite interesting to know the system these performances generally follow. The performance has to be booked well in advance, loosely 6 to 8 months earlier with paying at least half of the amount. The remaining amount is to be paid between the break in two acts of the performance. Failing which means the show to be shut down midway! The performance is taken for wider popularity by sticking the posters at the prominent places in the nearby villages. The performances take place generally between October to the end of February. Being the post-harvest period, the farmers afford to pay easily to watch the show. For the remaining months, the artists work in farms and the writers keep themselves busy in writing the new scripts for new seasons. The period of these performances coincides annual Bullock race-the Shankar pat. The race participants gather in the night at performance place and spectacle it through out the night. The performance locations are considered as perfect match-making places as most of the match-makings happen here.

The earlier Zhadipatti performances were limited to the stories of gods, goddesses, and local deities. One of the indigenous Zhadipatti writer Chudaman Ballarpure's *Mahamritunjaya Markandeshwar*, a one-act play, is the best example of this kind. In course of time, the performances underwent a noticeable change. At present, the performances are being staged on the cardinal issues like economical exploitation of adivasis, suicides of farmers, naxal activities, growing corruption in government schemes, and cross-fire between the naxalite

and the police. One of the important features of this theatre is an intact liberty for women to take part in the performances. The actors and actresses are their own people that's why they reciprocate affection for everything that is part of this theatre. The theatre geared for a change with the formation of All India Zhadipatti Academy in 2002. Its first conference held in the same year. The growing Television and Cinema culture has no way affected the over-whelming response being noticed by this theatre for more than hundred years now. The performances were free of cost till the end of nineteen seventies. But the rapidly changing socio-political-economical equations have brought a sea-saw change in this regard. The ticket rates are between Rs.20-100 at present. But there is no change in the response registered then onwards. The turnover at the end of a season is more than any professional theatre company's annual income in Maharashtra.

The Zhadipatti theatre is a kind of mobile theatre, similar to Tamasha of Maharashtra or Jatra of West Bengal. The theatre directly or indirectly intertwines with Augusto Bual's *The Theatre of the Oppressed* and Brecht's *Epic Theatre*. The stage is erected in a large open space with a piece of land in front of the stage. The spectators into accommodate chairs would then do not obstruct the people sitting at the back on the ground. Light setting and mike system is required to be operating well. The back stage has a make-up and resting room. The make-up rooms are separate for males and females with essential security for women. The performances usually take place under a huge *shamiyana* (a tent). The show generally creates a siman-pure impression on the mind of audience. It happens sometime that one who has viewed the on going performance earlier; stands up and demands for a change in the script. The organizer has no option instead of making the expected or demanded change.

The use of local dialect is pre-dominant in these performances. The script is pre-censored carefully before the actual performance. Special insistence is given for removing obnoxious part from the manuscript. Now a days, script writers are preferring urbanized language due to sustaining television soap and cinema influence. As mentioned overhead, the script is loosely-structured for editing convenience. Editing at the level of language is done according to the requirement. The response of the spectators to both funny and serious subjects is one and the same. They take similar interest in watching both kinds of performances. The subjects of these plays mostly tackle their problems. The performances on different issues compel general audience to learn more about the different factors leading to their day to day living.

Aristotle, in his magnum opus, *Poetics* illustrated *melos* (melody) as one of the essential requirements for any dramatic presentation. The indigenous Zhadipatti theatre has been following it strictly. Whatever may be the subject of the play, the use of songs is mandatory. It shows, in this way, an association with the *Natyasangeet*, (Musical Drama) a

celebrated dramatic tradition in Maharashtra. The performance is taken to a great height with the help of songs. Each play starts with the *Nandi*, an invocation for the blessings of deities. The conventional folk songs are also used effectively to serve this purpose. More than one thousand artists of different tribal castes are working under the banner of Zhadipatti, presently. Noted Marathi artists have performed their celebrated plays on the Zhadipatti stage. This stage has produced its own playwrights, actors, and technicians. The local actor, playwright and director Chudaram Ballarpure has produced plays like *Ha Khel Savalyancha* (Shadows' Play) *Navare Zhale Bazware* (The Confused Husbands), and *Atmahatya* (Suicide) etc. His highly acclaimed play *Special Report* strikes at how the cheap politics is destructing the small villages. Sadanand Borkar, one more local theatre personage, is the producer of the plays like *Satichi Satvapariksha* (A Virtuous Wife's Trial), *Mahakavi Bhasavar* (Bhasavar: The Great Poet), and *Hostelchya Kholit Khansaheb* (Khansaheb in a Hostel Room) etc. He has been doing his level best to enhance the quality of these native performances.

This mini industry has been putting its best for years, now. It has been a favourite for skillful handling of different subjects. Without any aid from government, the theatre is doing well without any concern of the outer world.

A tribal song unfolds precisely the genuine urge of this theatre.

What is the use?
 You have taken my figures
 Now I can not use a bow
 You have taken my tongue
 What is the use?
 Now I don't have a bhasha
 What is the use?
 You have taken my ears
 Now I can't hear my heart
 What is the use? (Khare)

Note: *Conversation with Dr. Ajay Joshi Pune, and Navneet Deshmukh, Wardha helped immensely to prepare this research paper.*

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