

Reviving Folk Theatre Traditions as a Tool for Social Inclusion

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Abstract

Folk theatre traditions have historically functioned as significant cultural institutions preserving collective memory, oral narratives, spiritual values, and social identity. In Western Odisha, folk theatre forms such as Pala, Daskathia, Dand Nata, and Sanchar represent dynamic artistic traditions deeply rooted in rural life and indigenous cultural practices. These performance traditions combine storytelling, music, dance, ritual practices, and dramatic narration to create participatory community experiences. However, modernization, urban migration, technological entertainment, and declining patronage have endangered these traditions. This research paper examines the role of folk theatre revival in promoting social inclusion, cultural preservation, emotional well-being, and community participation. The paper analyzes the historical significance of Western Odisha's folk theatre traditions, their therapeutic and educational dimensions, and their relevance in contemporary society. Through a qualitative and analytical approach based on secondary sources and performance studies, the paper argues that folk theatre revival can strengthen social cohesion, preserve indigenous knowledge systems, and promote inclusive cultural development. The study further proposes strategies for the preservation and revitalization of folk theatre traditions through education, policy support, documentation, and community engagement.

Keywords: Folk Theatre, Social Inclusion, Western Odisha, Pala, Daskathia, Dand Nata, Sanchar, Cultural Heritage, Community Theatre, Traditional Performance.

Introduction

Folk theatre traditions represent one of the oldest forms of collective artistic expression in human civilization. Unlike commercial or institutionalized theatre, folk theatre emerges directly from the social, cultural, and spiritual life of ordinary communities. These

traditions function not merely as entertainment but also as systems of communication, moral education, ritual expression, and cultural preservation. Across India, folk theatre traditions have historically served as vital mediums through which communities transmitted myths, ethical teachings, historical memory, and social values from one generation to another.

Western Odisha possesses a rich heritage of folk theatre traditions deeply connected to rural society and indigenous cultural practices. Folk forms such as Pala, Daskathia, Dand Nata, and Sanchar have historically occupied an important place in village life. These performances are characterized by the integration of music, storytelling, dance, dramatic narration, ritual symbolism, and audience participation. Folk theatre performances are usually organized during religious festivals, agricultural celebrations, seasonal rituals, and social gatherings where communities collectively participate in cultural expression.

Pala combines poetic narration, devotional music, and philosophical discourse to communicate religious and ethical themes. Daskathia uses rhythmic storytelling and satire to educate and entertain audiences. Dand Nata functions as a ritual theatre tradition involving devotion, discipline, and dramatic enactment associated with Lord Shiva and Goddess Kali. Sanchar represents folk communication traditions that use storytelling and performance for social awareness and community interaction. Together, these traditions reflect the cultural diversity, artistic creativity, and collective consciousness of Western Odisha.

In recent decades, rapid modernization, technological advancement, urban migration, and changing social lifestyles have weakened the relevance of traditional folk theatre. Digital media and commercial entertainment dominate public attention, particularly among younger generations. Traditional performers face economic insecurity, declining audience participation, and lack of institutional support. As a result, many folk traditions are gradually disappearing from public cultural life.

Despite these challenges, folk theatre continues to possess immense social and cultural relevance. Folk performance creates spaces for collective participation and emotional

connection that are increasingly absent in modern urban society. These traditions encourage dialogue, empathy, social interaction, and cultural continuity. Folk theatre can therefore play an important role in promoting social inclusion, strengthening community identity, and preserving indigenous knowledge systems. Reviving these traditions is not merely a matter of cultural preservation but also a strategy for promoting community well-being and inclusive social development.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the cultural and historical significance of folk theatre traditions in Western Odisha.
2. To analyze the role of Pala, Daskathia, Dand Nata, and Sanchar in promoting social inclusion and community participation.
3. To explore the educational, emotional, and therapeutic dimensions of folk theatre traditions.
4. To identify the major challenges faced by traditional performers and folk theatre communities.
5. To propose strategies for the revival and sustainability of folk theatre traditions in contemporary society.

Literature Review

Scholars from folklore studies, anthropology, theatre studies, sociology, and cultural studies have consistently emphasized the significance of folk theatre as a medium of collective expression and social communication. Folk theatre traditions are understood not only as artistic performances but also as social institutions that shape community identity and preserve cultural memory.

Richard Schechner, one of the pioneers of performance studies, argues that traditional performances are “restored behaviors” through which communities preserve social meanings and ritual practices. According to Schechner, performance traditions create collective experiences that reinforce cultural continuity and social interaction. Similarly,

Augusto Boal's concept of the "Theatre of the Oppressed" demonstrates how participatory theatre can empower marginalized communities and encourage social transformation through collective expression.

Kapila Vatsyayan's studies on Indian theatre traditions highlight the integrated nature of folk performance in India. She argues that Indian folk theatre combines music, dance, ritual, poetry, storytelling, and dramatic enactment into holistic cultural experiences. Folk performances therefore function as educational and spiritual practices rather than merely aesthetic entertainment.

Research on Odisha's folk culture indicates that traditions such as Pala and Daskathia historically played important roles in preserving oral literature and moral teachings among rural populations. Pala is often described as a sophisticated narrative tradition involving philosophical interpretation, poetic recitation, and devotional music. The Gayaka or lead performer acts simultaneously as narrator, singer, philosopher, and social educator.

Daskathia has been recognized for its rhythmic storytelling style and use of humor and satire. Researchers note that Daskathia performers traveled from village to village communicating social values and ethical lessons through dramatic narration. The use of humor allowed performers to address sensitive social issues in ways that audiences could easily accept and understand.

Dand Nata has attracted scholarly attention because of its ritualistic and devotional dimensions. Anthropologists describe Dand Nata as a form of ritual theatre involving physical discipline, spiritual devotion, communal participation, and dramatic performance. The performance tradition creates emotional solidarity among participants and reinforces shared cultural identity.

Contemporary studies on expressive arts therapy and community theatre suggest that traditional performance arts contribute positively to mental health and emotional well-being. Participation in theatre activities has been associated with improved confidence, emotional expression, communication skills, empathy, and social bonding. Researchers

further argue that community used performance traditions create spaces for collective healing and emotional resilience.

The concept of social inclusion has also become important in recent cultural studies. Social inclusion refers to ensuring equal participation and representation of diverse social groups within social and cultural life. Folk theatre inherently supports social inclusion because it depends on collective participation and shared experiences. Traditional performances often involve marginalized communities, tribal populations, women, and economically disadvantaged groups in communal cultural activities.

Although significant research exists on Indian folk traditions, there remains limited scholarly work specifically examining the role of Western Odisha's folk theatre traditions in promoting social inclusion and community well-being. This paper therefore contributes to existing scholarship by analyzing folk theatre revival as both a cultural and social necessity.

Pala: Musical Storytelling and Cultural Identity

Pala is one of the oldest and most respected folk performance traditions of Odisha. It originated as a devotional storytelling tradition combining poetry, music, dramatic narration, and philosophical interpretation. Today, Pala continues to flourish across several districts of Odisha, including Sambalpur, Bargarh, Balangir, Subarnapur, Cuttack, Puri, Khordha, and Jagatsinghpur, where it remains an integral part of religious festivals, temple rituals, village ceremonies, and community celebrations. The lead performer, known as the Gayaka, narrates stories from mythology, religion, folklore, and moral literature while accompanying performers provide rhythmic support, chorus singing, and musical accompaniment that enrich the dramatic presentation.

Traditionally, Pala performances were organized during religious festivals, village ceremonies, temple gatherings, and social celebrations. Depending on the occasion and the narrative, performances generally continue for several hours and, particularly in rural Odisha, often extend throughout the night, allowing audiences to experience the complete

devotional and philosophical discourse. The narratives focus on themes such as devotion, morality, ethical conduct, spirituality, and human values. Performers frequently interpret mythological episodes and religious scriptures in ways that connect with the everyday experiences of rural communities, thereby making complex philosophical ideas accessible to audiences of all ages.

One of the distinguishing features of Pala is its harmonious integration of music, literature, dramatic narration, and audience interaction. Performers traditionally wear colourful attire consisting of dhoti, angavastra, decorative turbans, garlands, and symbolic ornaments appropriate to the devotional context, while subtle facial makeup enhances stage presence without overshadowing the spiritual character of the performance. Musical accompaniment is provided through instruments such as the mridanga, manjira, ghini, harmonium, and hand cymbals, creating a rhythmic foundation for narrative singing and dialogue. Stage properties are intentionally minimal and generally include ceremonial seats, oil lamps, sacred cloths, and symbolic religious objects that transform the performance area into a devotional space. Unlike proscenium theatre, Pala is usually performed in an open arena or temple courtyard where performers and spectators remain in close proximity, encouraging spontaneous interaction, collective participation, and emotional engagement throughout the performance.

One of the most significant features of Pala is its ability to combine entertainment with education. Audiences not only enjoy the musical and dramatic aspects of the performance but also acquire knowledge of religious philosophy, ethical principles, cultural traditions, and indigenous wisdom. In many rural communities, Pala has historically functioned as an informal educational institution, transmitting oral literature, moral values, historical narratives, and traditional knowledge from one generation to another. The improvisational ability of the Gayaka, combined with humour, philosophical debate, and audience participation, further distinguishes Pala from many other Indian folk theatre traditions.

Pala also played a significant role in promoting communal harmony and social integration. Historical studies suggest that some Pala traditions incorporated the worship

of Satyapir, reflecting the cultural interaction between Hindu and Muslim communities. Through such narratives, Pala encouraged values of unity, compassion, mutual respect, and peaceful coexistence, demonstrating how folk performance could become a medium for strengthening social cohesion beyond religious boundaries.

The participatory nature of Pala creates strong emotional connections among performers and audiences. The performance environment encourages collective listening, dialogue, reflection, and community participation, thereby strengthening interpersonal relationships and reinforcing shared cultural identity. In the contemporary context, reviving Pala can contribute significantly to preserving Odisha's rich intangible cultural heritage, strengthening cultural identity, encouraging youth participation in indigenous artistic practices, promoting intergenerational transmission of traditional knowledge, and fostering social inclusion through collective cultural participation.

Daskathia: Folk Communication and Social Awareness

Daskathia is another important folk theatre tradition of Odisha characterized by rhythmic storytelling accompanied by wooden castanets known as Kathia, from which the art form derives its name. It is believed to have evolved as a popular medium of devotional and moral storytelling and continues to be practiced in several districts of Odisha, particularly in Cuttack, Puri, Khordha, Nayagarh, Jagatsinghpur, Kendrapara, and parts of western Odisha. The performance is usually conducted by two artists who combine narration, music, humour, satire, and dramatic improvisation. One performer assumes the role of the principal narrator while the other complements the presentation through dialogue, rhythmic accompaniment, comic interjections, and musical responses, creating a lively interaction with the audiences.

Historically, Daskathia performers travelled from village to village entertaining audiences while simultaneously communicating moral teachings and social messages. Traditionally presented in village squares, temple courtyards, community gathering spaces, and cultural festivals, a typical performance lasts between two and four hours, although longer presentations may be organised during religious festivals and special cultural occasions.

Stories often focus on mythology, village life, ethical behaviour, and human relationships. Because of its simple performance structure, Daskathia could easily reach rural audiences with limited access to formal education and mass communication, making it an effective medium for disseminating knowledge and preserving oral traditions.

One of the distinctive features of Daskathia lies in its simplicity and immediacy of presentation. The performers generally wear traditional attire consisting of dhoti, kurta, angavastra, and turbans, while makeup is kept minimal to preserve the natural and intimate character of the performance. The most significant performance property is the pair of wooden castanets (Kathia), whose rhythmic sound provides both musical accompaniment and dramatic emphasis. Additional instruments such as the mridanga, harmonium, and manjira may also accompany the performance depending on local traditions. Unlike elaborate theatrical productions, Daskathia requires very few stage properties and is usually performed in an open circular performance space without elaborate scenery, allowing performers to establish direct eye contact and continuous interaction with the audience. The spontaneous dialogue, expressive gestures, improvisation, and audience participation make each performance unique and contextually relevant.

The use of humour and satire distinguishes Daskathia from many other folk traditions. Performers creatively employ wit, irony, songs, and dramatic dialogue to address social issues such as greed, injustice, corruption, superstition, caste discrimination, gender inequality, and social exploitation. By presenting serious concerns through entertaining and emotionally engaging performances, Daskathia encourages audiences to reflect critically on social realities while remaining deeply connected to their cultural values. Its flexibility enables performers to incorporate contemporary issues without compromising its traditional narrative structure.

Daskathia remains highly relevant in contemporary society because of its communicative effectiveness. Folk communication traditions are often more accessible, culturally familiar, and emotionally persuasive than formal awareness campaigns. Consequently, Daskathia can be effectively adapted for public education on literacy, health awareness,

environmental conservation, women's empowerment, child rights, sanitation, disaster preparedness, and social justice. Government agencies, educational institutions, and cultural organisations can utilise this traditional medium to communicate development-oriented messages in culturally meaningful ways, particularly among rural and semi-literate communities.

Reviving Daskathia can also contribute significantly to preserving regional language, oral literature, indigenous artistic creativity, and Odisha's rich intangible cultural heritage. Supporting traditional performers through cultural festivals, documentation projects, workshops, educational programmes, and institutional recognition can ensure the continuity of this valuable tradition. At the same time, encouraging younger generations to learn and perform Daskathia will strengthen community participation, promote intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge, and reinforce social inclusion by preserving a folk theatre form that has historically united communities through collective learning, entertainment, and cultural dialogue.

Dand Nata: Ritual Theatre and Collective Healing

Dand Nata is one of the most spiritually significant folk theatre traditions of Odisha. Rooted in the ancient Shaivite and Shakta religious traditions of eastern India, it is predominantly practiced in the districts of Ganjam, Gajapati, Kandhamal, Boudh, Nayagarh, Balangir, Subarnapur, and several parts of western and southern Odisha. Performed during the Chaitra festival, usually in the Hindu month of March–April, Dand Nata combines ritual worship, dramatic enactment, dance, music, and physical austerity dedicated primarily to Lord Shiva and Goddess Kali. More than a theatrical performance, it represents a sacred ritual tradition that integrates religious devotion with collective cultural expression.

Participants, known as Danduas or Bhaktas, undertake rigorous physical and spiritual disciplines as acts of devotion. These include fasting, ritual processions, dancing, singing devotional hymns, dramatic performances, and various forms of physical austerity performed as offerings to the deities. Traditionally, Dand Nata is not confined to a single

performance but extends over several days, and in many regions continues for nearly three weeks throughout the Chaitra festival. Villagers collectively participate in the rituals and performances, transforming the event into a powerful expression of communal faith, cultural identity, and spiritual discipline that strengthens social bonds within the community.

One of the distinguishing features of Dand Nata is its rich ritualistic symbolism and visually striking performance tradition. Performers generally wear saffron or red traditional costumes symbolising devotion, accompanied by sacred threads, garlands, anklets, and symbolic ornaments associated with religious observances. Facial makeup and body painting are applied according to the mythological characters or ritual significance of individual performances, enhancing the spiritual and dramatic impact of the enactment. Musical accompaniment is provided through traditional instruments such as the dhola, mahuri, nishan, jhanja, and mridanga, whose rhythmic sounds create an atmosphere of devotion and collective participation. Ritual objects including bamboo staffs (Danda), ceremonial flags, earthen lamps, sacred pots, tridents, and symbolic religious offerings serve as important performance properties that reinforce the sacred nature of the tradition. Unlike conventional proscenium theatre, Dand Nata is performed in open village spaces, temple premises, and processional routes where performers and spectators actively participate together, dissolving the boundaries between ritual, theatre, and community life.

The ritualistic nature of Dand Nata creates opportunities for emotional release, spiritual expression, and collective healing. Anthropologists have argued that ritual theatre traditions enable communities to process suffering, uncertainty, and social tension through symbolic performance and shared participation. The intense physical discipline undertaken by the Danduas, together with devotional music, dance, and dramatic enactments, generates a collective emotional experience that reinforces both individual faith and communal solidarity. Through its combination of ritual practice and theatrical expression, Dand Nata functions not only as a religious observance but also as a living repository of Odisha's intangible cultural heritage.

Dand Nata also reinforces social unity and collective identity. During performances, community members gather together irrespective of social hierarchy, caste, or economic status to participate in religious rituals and cultural celebrations. Shared participation creates emotional solidarity, encourages cooperation, and strengthens interpersonal relationships within the community. The inclusive nature of the festival demonstrates how traditional performance practices can transcend social divisions and promote collective cultural belonging.

In rapidly changing societies where traditional social structures are weakening, Dand Nata continues to function as a cultural anchor connecting individuals to shared traditions, indigenous knowledge, and spiritual values. Reviving and preserving Dand Nata can therefore contribute not only to cultural sustainability and the safeguarding of Odisha's rich intangible cultural heritage but also to community resilience, intergenerational transmission of traditional knowledge, and the promotion of social inclusion through collective participation in ritual and performance.

Sanchar and Folk Communication Traditions

Sanchar represents the rich folk communication traditions of Odisha that employ storytelling, dramatic narration, songs, music, and social messaging as effective means of public communication. Emerging from the oral traditions of rural society, Sanchar has long served as a culturally rooted medium for transmitting knowledge, values, and collective experiences. Although practiced in different forms throughout Odisha, it has been particularly prevalent in the villages of western Odisha, including Sambalpur, Bargarh, Balangir, Subarnapur, Jharsuguda, and Boudh, where community-based performances have historically played a vital role in educating and mobilising local populations. Before the spread of modern communication technologies, these folk communication systems constituted one of the most effective means of disseminating information, preserving cultural knowledge, and strengthening community relationships.

The effectiveness of Sanchar lies in its accessibility, flexibility, and strong local relevance. Unlike conventional theatre, Sanchar performances are generally short, theme-

oriented presentations that can be organised in village squares, marketplaces, schools, temple premises, community halls, or other public spaces according to local needs. Performers communicate directly with audiences using familiar language, regional dialects, humour, songs, storytelling, and dramatic narration rooted in everyday life. Traditional costumes are generally simple and appropriate to the characters being portrayed, while makeup is minimal and intended to support characterisation rather than theatrical spectacle. Portable properties such as banners, symbolic objects, placards, hand-held props, and simple stage materials are often employed to reinforce the central message of the performance. Musical accompaniment through instruments such as the dhol, mridanga, manjira, harmonium, and locally available percussion instruments further enhances audience participation and emotional involvement. The absence of elaborate stage settings enables performances to be organised with minimal resources while encouraging close interaction between performers and spectators.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of Sanchar is its highly participatory and interactive nature. Rather than maintaining a strict separation between performers and audiences, Sanchar encourages dialogue, spontaneous responses, and collective discussion, making communication more engaging and effective. The use of familiar cultural symbols, humour, songs, and dramatic improvisation enables complex social issues to be communicated in ways that are easily understood by people of different age groups and educational backgrounds. This participatory approach transforms audiences from passive spectators into active participants, thereby strengthening public awareness and community engagement.

Sanchar traditions can be effectively integrated into modern community development initiatives. Folk communication methods are particularly valuable for awareness campaigns related to public health, education, environmental conservation, disaster preparedness, sanitation, gender equality, women's empowerment, child welfare, and social inclusion because they communicate messages within culturally familiar contexts. Government agencies, non-governmental organisations, educational institutions, and community-based organisations can effectively utilise Sanchar as a participatory communication strategy to reach rural populations where conventional mass media may

have limited impact. Its adaptability enables contemporary social issues to be incorporated without diminishing its traditional cultural character.

Reviving Sanchar also contributes significantly to preserving oral traditions, regional linguistic diversity, indigenous knowledge systems, and Odisha's rich intangible cultural heritage. As globalisation and rapid technological change increasingly standardise culture and communication, folk communication traditions remain essential for maintaining local identity, cultural continuity, and community participation. Supporting Sanchar through documentation, cultural festivals, educational programmes, performer training, and institutional recognition will not only safeguard this valuable folk tradition but also strengthen social inclusion by encouraging collective dialogue, cultural participation, and intergenerational transmission of traditional knowledge. Through its unique combination of communication, performance, and community engagement, Sanchar continues to demonstrate the enduring relevance of indigenous folk traditions in addressing contemporary social challenges.

Folk Theatre and Social Inclusion

Social inclusion refers to ensuring equal participation and representation of all communities within social, cultural, and political life. Folk theatre traditions inherently support social inclusion because they depend on collective participation and shared cultural experiences.

In Western Odisha, folk theatre performances often involve individuals from diverse social backgrounds including tribal communities, marginalized castes, women, economically disadvantaged groups, and rural youth. Festivals and community performances create temporary spaces where social divisions become less rigid and collective identity becomes more important than hierarchy.

Folk theatre also provides marginalized communities opportunities for cultural visibility and expression. Through storytelling and performance, communities articulate their

experiences, preserve their traditions, and assert their cultural identity. This process strengthens self-confidence and community pride.

Participation in theatre activities further contributes to emotional well-being and social interaction. Performance encourages communication skills, empathy, creativity, and emotional expression. Such qualities are particularly valuable for youth and socially excluded populations.

Community based folk performances therefore function as democratic cultural spaces promoting dialogue, participation, and collective belonging. In an era of increasing social fragmentation and isolation, folk theatre revival can strengthen social cohesion and cultural solidarity.

Challenges Faced by Folk Theatre Traditions

Despite their immense cultural value, folk theatre traditions face serious challenges in contemporary society. One major challenge is declining audience interest caused by the popularity of digital media and commercial entertainment. Younger generations increasingly prefer cinema, television, and social media over traditional performances.

Economic insecurity among performers is another significant issue. Many folk artists struggle financially because of limited performance opportunities and inadequate institutional support. As a result, younger generations often hesitate to continue traditional artistic professions.

Urbanization and migration have further disrupted community structures that historically supported folk performance traditions. Traditional performance spaces are disappearing, and folk theatre is becoming disconnected from everyday social life.

Another critical problem is the lack of documentation and formal training institutions. Much of the knowledge associated with folk theatre exists in oral form and risks disappearing with older generations of performers. Without systematic preservation efforts, valuable cultural knowledge may be permanently lost.

Government cultural policies frequently prioritize classical arts over folk traditions, resulting in unequal distribution of resources and recognition. Folk performers often remain socially and economically marginalized despite their contributions to cultural heritage.

Revival Strategies and Recommendations

The revival of folk theatre traditions requires coordinated efforts involving communities, educational institutions, cultural organizations, artists, and policymakers.

One important strategy is integrating folk arts into school and university education. Educational exposure can increase awareness and appreciation among younger generations while encouraging cultural participation.

Digital documentation and archiving are essential for preserving oral narratives, musical compositions, performance techniques, and cultural histories. Recording performances and creating online archives can support both research and cultural transmission.

Government and non-government organizations should provide financial assistance, scholarships, performance opportunities, and training programs for traditional artists. Cultural festivals and community theatre workshops can further strengthen public engagement with folk traditions.

Folk theatre can also be integrated into awareness campaigns addressing literacy, health, environmental sustainability, gender equality, and social justice. Such applications would enhance the contemporary relevance of traditional performance traditions.

The use of digital platforms and social media can help traditional performers reach wider audiences while maintaining cultural authenticity. Revival efforts must balance innovation with preservation to ensure the sustainability of folk theatre traditions.

Conclusion

The folk theatre traditions of Western Odisha represent invaluable cultural resources preserving collective memory, artistic creativity, spiritual values, and social identity. Pala, Daskathia, Dand Nata, and Sanchar continue to possess immense relevance despite facing serious challenges in the modern era.

The revival of these traditions is essential not only for preserving cultural heritage but also for promoting social inclusion, emotional well-being, and community resilience. Folk theatre creates spaces for dialogue, empathy, participation, and collective identity in ways that modern entertainment often cannot achieve.

Sustainable revival requires institutional support, documentation, educational integration, financial assistance, and active community participation. By recognizing folk theatre as a living and dynamic social practice rather than a relic of the past, society can strengthen inclusive cultural development and preserve the rich artistic heritage of Western Odisha for future generations.

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