

Indigenous Performance: So What is Ragini?

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Abstract

Ragini, known as a folk song, is an essential piece of Indian folk culture. India's folk and cultural spirit are full of various types of folk songs exist in different parts of the country. This particular form of the song (*ragini*) widely performed in the northern states of India, particularly in Haryana. The performativity of *ragini* is full of various colour, music, tone, rhythm and expression. It is performed in the local dialect of the state engaging Hindi language flavour. Traditionally, these songs have no written records rather these have an oral transformation through generation to generations. The source of growth of these songs includes mythology, socio-political issues, education, women empowerment, social awareness, nationalism etc.

The nature of these songs is very independent and performed by a group of indigenous people. This group consists of one leading singer accompanied by four to six proficient musicians. The musical elements are drums, harmoniums, mics, guitars etc. These songs have an effective impression on audiences when performed on a proscenium stage within a four-wall close roof theatre. In the beginning, these songs were frequently performed on the open stages and theatres. In the present time, these songs have less charisma due to rapid advancement in the productivity of digital entertainment and cinemas. Moreover, the interests of people have been shifted from traditional ways to the digitalness of life which seems a principal factor in the gradual decline of these traditional songs. Nowadays, the beauty of these songs has been performed on specific occasions or festive seasons with certain limitations.

Keywords: Culture, Indigenous, Modernity, Performance, Ragini

Introduction

Indian literary tradition is as rich as the main stream of English literature. Folk literature and culture is an undivided part of Indian folk writings. Various folk arts including theatre, songs, dance, and music are among the well-known practices. Their representation is brilliantly explored through colourful and bright performances. Traditionally, the orientation of Indian folk arts was depicted in rural entertainment to increase socio-political and educational awareness among countryside people. It has been argued that the development of these folk arts was transformed through generation to generations. During several debates and discussions it has been pointed out that none have valid proof to claim the source of origin of folk arts available today. It is a speculation that the seeds of these folk arts were planted after the composition of Bharata Muni's *Natyashastra* which contains thirty-six chapters. It was written around 500 BC and also called the fifth Veda. The era of *Natyashastra* is known as classical age. The text provides a comprehensive theoretical knowledge on dramatic art and performance theory. It brilliantly deals with all major aspects of traditional Sanskrit Theatre. The majority of the text offers thorough treatments of all the various arts rooted in the classical Indian concept of the drama. It includes music, dance, song, poetics, and aesthetics of theatre. The text is the finest example to understand a connection between a lead actor and audience, structure of plays, acting techniques, dress, costume, make-up, musical instruments, stage direction, lighting, decoration, space and seating arrangement for audiences. The core argument of the text attempts to clarify the vision of Indian drama as a prime source of religious illumination. In addition to this if we talk about the narrative nature of folklore, it has been argued that oral narrative is the main technique adopted in the performance of a particular form of folk art; as most of these folk arts are suffered with a lack of written sources and documentaries. The folk song which is being discussed here is not an exception to this.

Performance of Ragini

Ragini is a popular folk cultural-song of Haryana. It plays a vital role in a cultural performance. It is sung by the lead narrator of the event. It is a musical song where multiple performers are involved together to sing and dance to exhibit the emotion of characters. The

structure of *ragini* can be divided into three parts; (i) a slow verse, (ii) a hyped-up chorus and bridge, and a slow chorus to end the song. It may be pointed out that Greek chorus, used in tragedy and comedy, is different to a *ragini* performance. The culture of *ragini* is persistent in Haryana for over a century almost. Gradually, this folk song has become the great source of entertainment. It is performed on the open stage with the help of some musical instruments including harmonium, microphone, *dholak*, *matka* etc. The performers sing these songs in a local dialect which brings more naturality in rhythm and tone. Many Hindi words are also utilised to provide a fine combination between a particular language and dialect. Rural people were among the highest in numbers as the audience of a *ragini*. If the audience do not know the dialect it would be very difficult for them to understand what is being portrayed. In addition to this, it can be assumed that these folk songs have limited opportunities outside the state line. This is one of the fundamental limitations of such type of folk songs. The culture of *ragini* is very much different than the modern art of pop culture. One can say that *ragini* has an essential place in Haryanvi folk culture whereas pop culture has no scope in the regional culture. Karpal Sharma, Rajendra Kharkiya, and Rajkisan Agwanpuriya, among recent generations, are the famous *ragini* singers who contribute immensely in the development of this folk art. Maangeram, Lakhmichand, and Chanderlal Baadi were remained most renowned among the old generation of *ragini* as well as *saang*.

Ragini and Saang

Ragini and *Saang* are very much inter-connected to each other. Both can be used as a metaphor stands for Haryanvi folk culture. Although *ragini* can be performed without a *saang* but a *saang* performance cannot be possible without inclusion of a *ragini*. *Saang* can be defined as a folk theatre while *ragini* is a folk song. Both are playing major roles in producing not only entertainment but also socio-cultural awareness too. Due to a unique combination between *ragini* and *saang* many scholars and critics called *saang* a folk opera or musical theatre. These folk arts are frequently being performed on special occasions like national festivals, popular village fairs, national days etc. It is argued that digital media is also playing a positive role in promoting *Saang* and *ragini*. Many digital platforms have been created in Haryana intended to provide a strong campaign for the development of *Saang* and *ragini*. It is said that *ragini* has influenced the status of *Saang* in a great way. It is also affirmed that *Ragini* competitions came into existence after the year of 1975. This platform of

contest has affected the reputation of *saang* widely. The main reason is that in early stage *ragini* was just a part of *saang* performances; afterwards, these were performed constantly as a rival of *saang* stage. Accordingly, audiences were divided themselves as per their interest and choices. Thus, one audience has promoted himself into two; one who likes *ragini* and one who likes *saang*. Since then both these folk arts have prominent place in Haryanvi folk literature and culture.

Despite the cultural and literary importance, these folk arts suffered with lack of appropriate attention from state authorities. The government has been ignoring the value of these folk arts for the last few decades. Due to this, the documentation of these has never been done so far. Those who are active in this field are putting in their own efforts. An optimistic sign has been noticed during the last decade. Many socio-cultural groups have paid attention to this folk art. It has been included as a folk ability in the cultural events performed occasionally in universities and state-level functions. The ministry of culture is also encouraging this folk art. These folk plays are available on You Tube too. The young artists who are coming into this field are very talented, skilful, and innovative. Cultural encouragement, financial aids, and rewards can also be useful for the continuity of these folk arts. It is viewed that major Indian folk arts have vivid imagery of cultural myth. Many songs and raginis have been composed on this theme. In this reference, Durgadas Mukhopadhyay's edited book, *Lesser Known Forms of Performing Arts in India* (1978), provides necessary information about familiar folk theatrical performances. For a general understanding, the book introduces a brief sketch of some of the most notable Indian folk performances alphabetically.

Ankiya Naat

This folk form of theatre from Assam considered the initiation of drama in the field of spiritual performance. The invention of this folk form of theatre is commonly attributed to the medieval saint and social reformer Srimanta Shankaradeva. These plays' performances provided the purpose of religious instruction and the distribution of information beyond the entertainment they presented. These performances have remained very popular during medieval Assam. The song narrated the story is usually descriptive. This folk form is preserved in Assam for centuries. Its principal subject is to worship Lord Krishna.

Chhau

A well known folk art in the field of folk dance is frequently performed in Mayurbhanj of Orissa, Sareikela of Jharkhand and prevalently in the Purulia region of West Bengal. The chief characteristic of these dances is to use a complete mask on the characters' faces during their performances. The majority of the theme is religious. Most of the performances imitate Indian epics the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. It is conceived as a unique form of folk dance performed freely and dynamically during festivals in folk and classical styles.

Jatra

This is a famous folk theatre form of West Bengal. This form of theatre is also popular in many parts of Odisha and Bihar. The original performances of *Jatra* were based on Indian mythology. It is said, the nature of *Jatra* performance is secular nowadays. Most of the performances are staged on the open stage. In this sense, it has resemblances with other folk performances like *Tamasha*, *Nautanki*, *Saang*, and *Bhavai*.

Kutiyattam or Koodiyattom

A unique temple art of Kerala is known for Sanskrit's traditional representation. The performers of this art belong to temple communities known as *Chakkiars* and *Nambiar*. The elaboration of Sanskrit *slokas* or stanzas through hand gestures by the different characters and oral expression by the *vidushaka* is received as a prominent characteristic of this folk art.

Nacha

Nacha is an outstanding art of folk theatre performed in Chhattisgarh. It is widely performed in the whole state apart from Sarguja and Bastar regions. This folk theatre can be divided into four categories; *Khare Saaj Nacha*; *Gandawa Nacha*; *Dewar Nacha*, and *Baithe Saaj Nacha*. Among these *Baithe Saaj Nacha* is much popular. It has been noticed that women actors can only participate in *Dewar Nacha* performances. In rest of three dramatic arts only men actors perform the role of women. The majority of these performances held during the night time. In these folk plays comedy is the route of all entertainments. Social issues are portrayed thorough various humoured satires and practices. *Pari* and *Jokked* are the main characters in *Nacha* performances. These performances were considered as the prime source of entertainment for the Maratha soldiers. Its origin is considered from *Gammat*.

Nautanki

This form of folk theatre occupies an outstanding place mostly in Uttar Pradesh, India's northern state. Most of these performances take place in rural areas. Traditionally, the majority of the audiences were expected to be illiterate. Though historically the origin and development of *Nautanki* are debatable still, it remains a widely appreciated folk theatre of regional performances.

Pala

It is one of the living theatrical forms of India. The basic nature of this form is dance performance. It is widely acknowledgeable in Odisha. This folk art creatively combines theatrical elements like music, wit, humour etc. Varieties of *pala* form are also available in Assam and West Bengal. The narrating sources of *pala* are from mythology, legendary and historical tales.

Saang

This eminent form of Haryana's folk theatre has been widely performed across the region. The performing art of *Saang* is almost a century old. Lakhmi Chand, Mangeram, Dhanpat Singh, and Chanderlal Baadi are renowned *Saang* composers in this field. They contributed immensely to this folk theatre's development. The plays usually manifest live instruments and singers, songs and elaborate costumes in performances. These plays usually start with the preface narrated by the *sutradhār*. When it ends, the actual performance begins. It is notable to mention that this thesis's research work primarily revolves around the performance of folk plays.

Sahi Yatra

This folk theatre is from Orissa. The Puri district of this state is known to provide the stages for most of these performances. *Sahi* stands for 'back street' and *Yatra* for 'progress or movement'. Collectively, it refers to the progressive street life of ordinary people. Indeed, it deserves a particular place in the folk theatrical tradition of India.

Tamasha

Maharashtra's most famous folk theatre art functions vibrantly in the state. The performative history of this folk theatre is found in the distant past. Today it has a distinctive availability everywhere in the region. Two poets, Eknath and Namdev have contributed to the composition of performance of this folk theatre. The satirical nature of these plays keeps alive the Marathi tradition of social satire.

Yakshagana

This most distinguishing folk dance is from Karnataka mostly performed in the state's north and south part. It is said that Yakshagana is known with several other names in different parts of Karnataka such as Doddaata, and Moodalapaya. The majority of the performance theme is related to the Indian epic, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The audiences used to be expected from the elite class and rural folks. Though, there are enough arguments among various scholars and critics about the origin of this folk art; such performances deserve to be much appreciated.

Each folk art, mentioned above, requires almost a separate research paper to be discussed elaborately. The idea behind the brief highlight is to provide an outline understanding of the surface structure of these folk arts. One can easily notice mythical motivation in each art. The journey of these arts was accomplished through a wide variety of myth references. However, by taking one of these folk arts into consideration, the author attempts to explore the culture of *ragini* with the help of critical citations and analysis. Though it seems a tough choice to select one of these; but the author has chosen one to find his way of responding. After much thought, the appropriate choice went to the folk art of *Saang*. The reason behind choosing this art is that the highest percentage of performance narrated through *ragini*.

Saang is a theatre event. The performance of this art is a phenomenal endeavour. It is one of the accepted living theatrical traditions of India. It is widely performed in the northern state of Haryana. In *Saang*, various stories are performed significantly. Each story has a unique theatrical expression. The source of these stories is mostly Indian mythology and legendary. This social form of *Saang* in English can be called 'folk, musical and poetic play'. Now onwards, the term 'folk play' may be used interchangeably. A *Saang* is named folk play because ethnically it has cultural and traditional significance. This may be an essential parameter to identify an art whether it is folk or non-folk. The performance of this folk play

offers an impressive blend of acting, songs, music, narration, and recitation. *Saang* performers are usually a group of eight to fifteen characters including musicians and the main narrator (*sutradhar*). In a *Saang* performance, the narrator should be a well-known actor, skilful, energetic in delivering dialogues and non-verbal expressions. It is the narrator who always remains in a commanding position and guides the movements of actors and musicians. The narrator also plays a vital role to bring audiences' attention to the performance. *Saang* performance is commonly staged in the evening and runs from three to four hours up to midnight. Earlier a *Saang* used to perform during the entire night. *Saang* provides a noteworthy contribution to Haryanvi folk literature, culture, and tradition. This common form of theatre functions vibrantly throughout the decades.

Soul Features of Saang

This theatre form brings a host of unique and outstanding characteristics. These offer a sound manifestation to know this folk art in the most appropriate way. Acknowledgeable qualities are:

1. *Saang* is equally stand to a folk play. It can also be called folk and musical play.
2. Originally, *Saang* is performed on the open stage.
3. *Saang* performance begins in the evening and remains to continue up to late midnight.
4. A *Saang* consists of eight to fifteen performers. These include one main actor & narrator, four to six actors, four to five musicians, and one comedian (clown, fool).
5. *Saang* is much popular in villages. Who performs the saang is usually called 'saangi'.
6. In *Saang*, female participants are significantly fewer.
7. *Saang* always begins with a prayer and ends with slogans of victory.
8. Frequent appearance of *Rāgini*¹ in a *Saang* performance is one of the main features.
9. Each *Saang* consists of at least ten to fifteen *rāginis*. The duration of one *rāgini* is ten to twelve minutes.

¹ A five to ten minutes long folk song used to convey further storyline in a *Saang* performance.

10. Myth is the main source for *Saang* performances.

Role of Ragini in Saang and Solo Performances

Ragini is the soul of *saang*. This folk song is an essential component of *saang* performances. It is included in a *saang* in order to maintain the consistency of story staged in these performances. The lead actor of the play is the main singer of this song. He used *raginis* to control the entire situation of the play. It appears in a play when a certain episode of stories is meant to perform through *ragini* instead to perform by other actors. In other words, *ragini* is an art to narrate the majority of the story to the audiences. It is interviewed that in a *saang* performance eight to ten *raginis* should be there to elaborate the purpose of the *saang*. Hence, it is collectively responded that without *ragini*'s inclusion *saang* performance are not possible. This unique combination between *ragini* and *saang* is a charming feature of this folk theatre.

In an inquiry it is pointed out that *ragini* has influenced the status of *saang*. *Raagni* competitions came into existence after the year of 1975. Since then *raginis* are being performed independently. Contrasting *saang*, *ragini* performances do not depend on theatrical practices. These folk songs can be performed devoid of *saang*. Solo performances of *raginis* are much popular in the state. These are sung by the professional and skillful performers. The theme of these songs orients around love, socio-political issues, myth, culture, ceremonies etc. Harmonium, microphones, and dholak are the major musical instruments used during a *ragini* performance. Like *saang*, *ragini* can be performed on open and proscenium stages. Briefly, though *ragini* has a deep affair with *saang*; its solo identity is also acknowledgeable. Nowadays digital media is also playing a positive role in promoting *saang* and *raagni*. Many WhatsApp groups have been created in Haryana intend to provide a strong campaign for the development of *Saang* and *ragini*.

Primary Features of Ragini

1. *Ragini* is a folk song.
2. *Ragini* performances are must in *saang*.
3. Love, myth, and social issues are the main subject in *ragini*.

4. Solo performance of *ragini* is very fashionable in the region.
5. It is performed by professional and common artist.
6. *Ragini* competition is a great platform to promote its significance.
7. *Dholak*, harmonium, and microphones are musical instruments used in *ragini*.
8. This folk song is performed on open and proscenium stages.

Conclusion

With this brief and informative explanation, it may be point out that *ragini* as a folk song highlights cultural and social importance. This folk art has now autonomous identity and appeals for a great amusement to local folks. Like a *saang* performance, the performance of *ragini* has also attracted the attention of the audience effectively. The influence of recent advancement in internet technology has brought merits and demerits for these folk arts. In merit we can say social media platforms regenerates the connectivity to the local folks and the demerit is that because of many entertaining resources on internet folk arts are under the threat of web trap. Useful strategies, recognitions, inter-state contests, and creating more productive platforms are constructive steps to protect these folk and cultural heritages. Therefore, *ragini* and *saang* secure a prominent position in the museum of Haryanvi folk arts and culture.



Illustration: A Professional *Saang* Performance with *Ragini*

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