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Ramman: Folk Theatre of Uttarakhand and its Social Relevance

Abstract : The post-independence rediscovery and re-evaluation of indigenous forms of literature and performing arts have revived the attention and support of the government and state Sangeet Natak Academies. Though India is famously the country of Natyashastra, the art of theatre and performance has been the main component of its social structure, whether performed on stage or between the boundaries of four walls by women. It has been the source of both education and entertainment altogether. It is a holistic and composite art form containing dance, music, performances, recitations, and peasantry festivals. Ramman is a North Indian theatrical performance, which has its roots in the native culture of Uttarakhand. It is colourful, spirited, splendid, and mystic and tries to relive the themes of Ramayana and the region's heroic battles. It is a social tool for the pahadi region to come together and celebrate their regional, religious, social, and racial identity. The paper will attempt to discuss the origin and development of Ramman and its various existing forms in the region.

Keywords: Folk, multiplicity, Ramayan's version, theatre, spirited.

For the longest time, 'Folk' and 'Literature' have been separate entities. As literature was considered an elite, powerful, and privileged space. It is the advent of the 19th and 20th centuries that people started to recognise Indigenous and vernacular knowledge as a legitimate contributor to the social and cultural development of the people and society in academic spheres. A society is an amalgamation of geographical social space, folk drama, literature, and folk theatre and performances. One cannot separate regional and indigenous tales, beliefs, and practices. A Glossary of Literary Terms defines folklore as "the collective name applied to sayings, verbal compositions, and social rituals that have been handed down solely, or at least primarily by word of mouth and example rather than in written form." (Abrams 138). There are different forms of folklore like folk ballads, folk songs, folk tales, folk drama, and even folk sayings. Every culture and every geographical region has its way of presenting its mythology, folk beliefs, according to its myths, legends, and titular deities. In the form of ballads, songs, and performances from them, rather, they make them unique and diverse. Folklore and folk practices are inseparable parts of a culture, as they not only reflect the culture of the people but also act as a tool to reinforce their existing power equation, and their diversity, and also question the dominant social ideologies. When theatre is talked about, one gets

to know that by the 12th century AD, theatre was restricted by the advent of the Islamic establishment. This was the period when folk theatre came into the mainstream in rural areas, replacing the classical Sanskrit drama. The content of the enactment of the folk theatre was derived from the epics, Puranas, local legends, mythology, religious stories, etc. Thus, the second phase of Indian theatre evolved from the oral and folk traditions. While the classical theatre was largely inspired by Natyashastra, it was urban-oriented with great attention to its form and nature, and was catering to a particular class only. On the other hand, folk theatre, known as traditional theatre, is based on rural roots, beliefs, and is quite simple, unsophisticated, informal, and rural-oriented. The peak period of folk theatre's emergence in different regions of the country ranged from the fifteenth to the sixteenth centuries. Aparna Bhargava Dharwadkar says rightly in this context, "The folk theatre always belongs to a specific region, language, ecological cycle, and the participating community." (Dharwadkar 322)

Every region of the nation saw the emergence of folk theatre, which was mainly based on religious and local legends and mythological tales. Later, with time and evolution, they included the heroic local deities and local war heroes of the region as well. It can be seen in the North-Indian theatrical performances of Uttarakhand. Along with

Ramman, there are several forms of folk theatre existing in different regions of India with a slight or huge difference from one another, sometimes sharing the same feature or having an interconnection. The Urdu playwright Habib Tanvir believes that it is the rural areas and villages where the essence of India is contained and preserved. he says, "It is in its villages that the dramatic tradition of India in all its pristine glory and vitality remains preserved even to this day. It is these rural drama groups that require real encouragement... it is not until the city youth is fully exposed to the influence of folk traditions in theatre that a truly Indian theatre, modern and universal in appeal and indigenous in form, can really be evolved." (Tanvir 1977: 6).

Ramman is a theatrical play of Ramayan's version of the North Indian state of Uttarakhand. Uttarakhand is a relatively newer state, carved out of Uttar Pradesh. Uttarakhand became the 27th state of the Republic of India, which was formerly known as Uttaranchal. Though the demand of making Uttarakhand a state was first raised in pre-independent times, at a special session of the Indian National Congress held in Srinagar in May 1938, which materialised on 9th November 2000. So, the festival of Ramman is celebrated and is prevalent in many villages in the Garhwal region. This paper will discuss about the Ramman of Saloor-Dungra, twin villages in Chamoli district. It refers to both the festival and

the tradition of singing Ramkatha, the story of Lord Rama in the native dialect of Garhwali.

The Ramman festival is a significant cultural and religious festival celebration in the North-Indian state of Uttarakhand. It is a ritualistic festival where there are certain sets of strict rituals to be followed to worship and please the deity. Contrary to the pan-Indian belief of enacting Ramayan in the Sharad Navratri, Ramman in the Garhwal region is celebrated and enacted in April month according to the Gregorian calendar. It is celebrated in honour of the tutelary God, Bhumiyaal Devta, a local deity who is considered the protector of the region. It is slightly different from Ramlila, the folk staging of Tulsidas's Ramcharitamanas, which is a translation of Valmiki's Sanskrit epic Ramayana in the Hindi dialect Awadhi Boli. Rather, Ramman is a regional evolution of the Ramkatha, and it mainly concentrates on the local deities of the mountain region. Thus, the diversity of Bhumiyaal's rendition of Ramayana indicates at the ability of survival and reinvention of the folk against time, colonisation, and pan-Indian versions of the Brahminical texts. In this regard, Linguistics and literature scholar Kapil Kapoor says that dynamic cultures like India employ "seven text maintenance/renewal mechanisms to keep the thought alive and re-contextualized," one of which is adaptation. Ramman qualifies this understanding by showcasing how the

renewal process of adaptation is not limited to crossing different languages or cultures but also can be found within a given language/culture, leading to more than one variant of the same narrative.

Deity Worship: The festival is generally an 11 to 13-day-long celebration. It begins with the worship of local deities, Bhumiya Devta, and in another region, Jak Devta (patron deity) is worshipped, who are considered as the protectors of the community. People carry a procession, and villagers dressed in traditional attire carry the idols of the Gods to a sacred temple, which is a designated area in the village. A ritualistic dance performance is also enacted by the villagers, which is a mixture of musical ballads and dialogues. It focuses on the mask dance of Bhumiya and 17 other deities. The ritual process involves a sacred walk to the people's houses to bless them. The performance usually brings to the heroic acts of Lord Hanuman from the episodes of Ramayana, when in search of Maa Sita, he reaches Lanka. The festival and the performances also involve sacrifices to appease the deities. Harela (Sprouted greens) are offered to the Devta, these offerings have been done for centuries and have been passed down by the ancestors to ensure the cultural heritage and traditions. Women are generally the spectators, and they are not involved in the performance parts. All the rituals are performed by the upper-cast males. The possession of Devta is also carried by the

male members of the society, it is intertwined with the singing. The tradition of Ramman singing dates back to the "Reign of Vaishnavite Katyuri dynasty". The region has Bardic tradition, epiphanic songs are sung in the praise of the deity, and the songs sung are known as Jagar. The choral awakening Jagars are sung by Jagariya (one who performs Jagar) and are accompanied by musical instruments and near a sacred fire, known as Dhuni. Jagar can vary immensely in its aesthetic and meaning from one variant of Ramman to another. The Ramman festival plays an important role in reinforcing the uniqueness and cultural fabric of Uttarakhand. They reflect the deep connection with their deities, people, and the environment, thus expressing their local identity through the performative festival. The way Ramman gives privilege to the Local deities of Uttarakhand over Lord Rama creates a structure that celebrates 'multiplicity', which was called 'Rhizomatic structure' by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. The ritual dances, dramatic performances, and folk music traditions are all essential components that contribute to the region's cultural diversity. They keep the society in a tightly knit structure. As Bansi Kaul says about folk wisdom, "Most of the folk forms are not cheap entertainment. They provide us with social wisdom. This wisdom does not work on obvious levels. We have to search for it with continuous concentration and ultimately find our

own expression, so that we do not imitate by imbibing. My grandmother has a very interesting story to tell me about imbibing. She used to say that humans are like small pebbles rolling down a hill, collecting dust, mud and snow on the way. When these pebbles reach the foot of the hill, they come in contact with the wind of the plains, the snow melts, the mud dries, and the dust blows off. The pebbles come to rest. I am still rolling in search of an answer." Along with that, the Ramman festival has a significant socio-economic impact on the region.

It attracts tourists and cultural enthusiasts from around the world, providing a boost to the local economy through tourism. Anthropologist William R. Bascom developed a model based on his research on the functions of folklore creations. According to this model, folklore creations have four main functions, which are: a) entertainment, diversion, and amusement, b) supporting social institutions and rituals, c) transmission of education and culture to younger generations d) escape from social and personal pressures (Ekici 2010: 124-125). However, it is also seen from the studies conducted today that the functions of folklore, folk theatre, and folk belief creation are not limited to these. The festival not only adapts to the needs of time and reinvents the folk renditions, but also opens the door for the promotion of local crafts, such as the creation of masks and costumes used

during the performances. It functions as the uniting factor of the society, it reconciles the old and new beliefs, establishes a connection with the sacred beliefs of the region, acts as the most important factor in transferring the cultural heritage to the upcoming generation, and finally invokes a belief of good luck and blessing the hard and tough terrain and geographical region like Himalayas, ensuring the abundance and prosperity in the hearts of the people and devotees.

Conclusion : Folk theatre has the ability to sustain itself with the onset of time and invasion from another tribe. As Ramman has various renditions, some portions of which are entirely different from the Tulsidas' Ramacharitmanas, while other portions celebrate and are enacted in honour of the titular deities of the region. Thus, Folk theatre has the ability to reinvent itself with time. Folk forms of drama and theatres can be anti-hierarchical, and local-centric, and can put forward myths, and local communities that they grow up with and revolve around. The annual practices renew the belief every year in the festival with the manifestation of the local spirit deity in the human form, which further serves as a uniting, blessing, and transferring the cultural heritage to the newer ones. And, their sense of keeping power to themselves and not submitting to the dominant narratives of the pan-Indian Brahminical Hindu pantheon makes them stand tall.

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