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OTT AND INDIAN THEATRE: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract:

The research article strives to explain how digital streaming platforms have started showing their impact on Indian theatre more particularly since Covid-19 pandemic situation. How young minds have started preferring this mode for entertainment. The gradual shift of presentation from stage to digital platform and its growing impact on theatre industry is the central argument of this paper. The research argues further challenges before conventional Indian theatre and also the opportunities emerged.

Keywords: Audience, Folk, OTT, Performance, Theatre, etc.

Indian theatre has been a most revered entity since ancient times. It has been instrumental in shaping the artistic minds and also illuminating culture throughout the centuries. The present article is an attempt to unearth gradual shift of audience in approaching to the theatrical performance more particularly after Covid-19 pandemic. The challenges before Indian theatrical art and also the opportunities with changing time have also been pointed out here. R. G. Collingwood in his *magnum opus The Principles of Art* illustrates that art is the "...power to create the preconceived result by means of consciously controlled and directed action." (Collingwood, 15). He adds further changing aspect of art with change in the interest of the people. In short, art changes with the demands or needs of its concerned group of people. The drama / theatre changes according to time. Theatre means, all-encompassing forms of performance. Theatre or performance doesn't require anything in concrete form. While stating the actual nature of creativity Peter Brook comments that "...it cannot be brought by explanation." (Collingwood, 77). The basic requirement for any performance is actual presence of performer and audience. The other dimensions or dynamics of performance such as lighting and other types of props are important but performance can happen without inclusion or presence of them. On the other hand, Indian folk performances have been significant in many ways. In the earlier times there was no physical space existed or differentiated between performers and audience.

The performances used to happen on equal ground without maintaining any distance as such. Concrete theatre stands to be later development. There is a possibility of having more concrete, well-equipped theatre houses be constructed in coming years. There is also a possibility of multiple performances taking place in course of time. The historical development of performance culture not only in India but in different parts of the world mainly emphasizes on physical distancing between performance and audience. The research endeavour has put forth following Objectives:

- To analyse what influence OTT has created on theatre dynamics.
- To analyse whether theatre is really benefited or turned into decrement.
- To elaborate the challenges before conventional Indian theatre.
- To emphasize the opportunities emerged.



Methodology:

The research carried out to prepare the present research article is based on analysis of ideas accumulated on the subject chosen for the study through critical and evaluative method.

Indian theatre has been poignant for its bond between performer and audience. Theatre is possible only through this bond. Performance has been a matter of profound pleasure and it is being equally shared by both performer and audience. One finds a respectful consideration of this relational bond in Bharatmuni's *Natyashastra* also. This association carries history of two thousand years. The contemporary time or generation demands entertainment in different or various ways. Cinema and theatre houses remained close for a particular period of time. Even though people have been experiencing an intense digitalization yet very few individuals have opted this mode for experiencing the plays. Covid-19 brought some changes in this scenario. To some extent, the pandemic helped conversion of theatre performances. The discernment of Indian audience regarding media and entertainment has started shifting its position. Indian audience claims that the recently emerged platforms of representation are transforming Indian media culture and theatre industry also. No one had believed a year ago that OTT platform will enhance immensely and will start grabbing the market of entertainment in a noticeable way. The factors such as media convenience, economic affordability, content diversity, innovative experiment, efficiency and feasibility of time have made digital platforms the most preferable. Undoubtedly, the present scenario provides synthetic overview that OTT platforms have a good future in our country as it is utilised by number of people and its subscription is escalating day by day. The reasons to enhance OTT in India are mobility, easy availability of smart phones, choice of content, effective cost and sensational presentation which have been limited by theatre performance at the same time certain factors such as aliveness, expressions ambience, and eye catching moments cannot be enjoyed on OTT. It would be an exaggeration if one would say that people will not reach theatre to watch live performance. Definitely people will once again reach theatre as they will realise the limitations of technological equipment but the platform will not be eclipsed entirely. It will remain a challenge and also opportunity to theatre industry but in brief, OTT has definitely created description to theatre industry because once the situation will get normal it will be a challenging factor to attract audience towards theatre overcoming the OTT platform. In recent times *Netak* - an innovative Marathi language play experience could register its presence due to unexpected change in external conditions. It was initiated on 12th June 2020. The artists who took part in actual performance were in different cities and created a virtual stage. The experience as such is innovative in itself. Nobody knows whether it will survive for longer period of time but it has certainly filled the gap, pandemic created.

On the other hand, *Mogra* (Through Performance) - This innovative experiment has indicated at few more possibilities whereas *Nine Rasa* of Shreyas Talpade has opened an avenue for enrichment of performance culture in our country. It may take a considerable period of time to show its actual implication but one should appreciate the innovation. National Centre for Performing Arts has been striving for conversion of folk performances on OTT. Though it is a difficult task but it has become essential.

In a concise, the challenges and opportunities, in terms of growing association of young generation particularly with OTT platforms can be discussed as below:

Challenges:

- Live experience is very difficult. Actual relation between performances and audience will be missing: The performance more particularly theatrical has a lot to do with live or actual experience. But it may be much difficult to have such an experience if we switch over to virtual mode.



- No audience-no performance: We have been habitual of audience based performances. OTT based performance demands audience but not in conventional form. It takes us away from the age-old no audience –no performance formula.
- Feeling the performance: It is going to change in various ways as the parameters of feeling the performance are on the mode of drastic transformation.
- Willing suspension of disbelief: The possibility of neglecting certain unbelievable facts will arise in due course of time.
- Symbolic presence: There would be certain performance related aspects that would remain symbolic. The director wouldn't be in position of showing anything or everything on this virtual stage.
- Fourth Wall: It is a matter of fact that a play or performance remains incomplete without fourth wall i.e. audience. In this format the audience would remain in virtual presence. Camera would become the fourth wall or audience. Hence there is a possibility of decreasing effectiveness.
- Folk performances: It is not a cup of tea to convert the Indian folk performances on OTT. These performances have a strong basis of masses. Connecting with the new type of audience seems somehow difficult. There may be a possibility of language barrier.

Irrespective of these challenges there seems to have a few opportunities waiting. These opportunities can be summarised as below:

- Controversial subjects: The conventional or well-rooted form of theatre has difficulty with taking controversial subjects for actual presentation. The social –political constrains are there. But to some extent the virtual platform may go for such types of subjects.
- Suicides of theatre artists: The pandemic caused heavy economic losses. Most of the workers related with theatre industry lost their jobs or means of living. Some of them committed suicides. With this new form of performance these suicides can be ceased to some extent. Even though pandemic intensity has decreased but future crises cannot be denied.
- Documentation is possible: We Indians are not much comfortable with documentation of practices like this. The new emerged platform gives us an opportunity of documenting the performances.
- Research and Development Wing: The possibility of such kind of wing is found round the corner. It may help for the development of theatre through this innovative form in many ways.

To conclude, the conversion of platform for theatrical performances opens up possibilities either it is worked or not that is an issue but a possibility was opened to stream theatrical works. Again, it is a technology, lot of difficulties as far as using the technology. It may be easier in bigger cities where people are technically sound and able to record and operate everything well. People who are not technically sound in rural areas meet with lot of difficulties in addition to that network connectivity and it is also a major problem in functioning. Some problems may be confronted as actual use of it increases. Altogether, the presence of obligation of this platform is beyond our denial as it has become an integral part of digitalized minds.

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