



The economic dimensions of folk theatre in India: A cultural and socioeconomic perspective

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Abstract

The paper explores the multifaceted economic and socio-cultural role of folk theatre in rural and semi-urban India. It highlights how this traditional art form, deeply embedded in local customs, acts as a vital economic driver by providing direct livelihoods to performers and artisans, while generating indirect benefits through tourism, local branding, and the growth of ancillary industries. Additionally, the study examines folk theatre's significant role as a platform for raising socio-economic awareness, addressing critical issues such as agrarian distress, labor rights, public health, and environmental conservation. Despite contemporary challenges posed by modernization and commercialization, the paper identifies viable pathways for revitalization, including government interventions, digital preservation, integration into cultural tourism strategies, and inclusion in educational curricula. Based on a synthesis of literature and case studies, the research concludes that folk theatre continues to serve as an essential mechanism for cultural preservation, community engagement, and sustainable economic development.

Keywords: Folk theatre, cultural economics, livelihood generation, cultural tourism, social communication

Introduction

Folk theatre in India is a multifaceted art form deeply rooted in local traditions and social values, serving as a powerful medium for communication and entertainment (Das, 2013)^[20]. It encompasses elements of music, dance and storytelling, reflecting the diverse cultural narratives of Indian communities (Deswal, 2018; Deleep, 2024)^[22, 24]. Originating from ancient rituals and oral traditions, folk theatre has played a significant role in India's socio-political setting, addressing social issues and raising awareness against British rule during the independence movement (Srampickal, 1994; Deleep, 2024)^[22, 69]. Notwithstanding facing challenges in the post-independence era, folk theatre remains a vital tool for conveying messages on social, economic, and cultural development (Das, 2013; Dutta, 2015; Deswal, 2018)^[20, 24, 25]. The economic dimensions of folk theatre in India are multifaceted, with both direct and indirect impacts on local economies. The Indian government has recognized its potential, using it for public education on various themes (Srampickal, 1994)^[69]. As a non-commercial, rural spectacle, folk theatre continues to be an integral part of India's rich cultural heritage (Deswal, 2018)^[24].

At its core, folk theatre in India is a celebration of community identity. It reflects the unique customs, beliefs, and local struggles of the communities in which it is practiced. Each performance is often a direct reflection of the socio-political landscape, blending epic narratives, religious themes, folk songs, and regional dialects (Das, 2014; Deswal, 2018)^[24]. As such, folk theatre serves a dual purpose: it is both a cultural preservation tool and a mode of social communication. Through its performances, rural and semi-urban communities preserve their distinct identities, passing on traditional knowledge and customs to younger generations. Folk theatre often addresses contemporary social issues, including caste, gender, and economic inequalities (Kamble and Ransure 2008, Das 2014; Keshava 2014; Dutta 2015)^[25, 37, 38]. Its origins are linked to ancient

rituals and religious texts, with the Natya Shastra attributing a divine genesis to Indian theatre (Deleep, 2024)^[22]. Despite challenges, folk theatre remains an important tool for conveying social, political, and cultural messages, contributing to overall national development (Das, 2014).

But folk theatre's importance extends beyond the cultural realm (Das, 2014). Since Baumol & Bowen's (1966) seminal work, *Performing Arts: The Economic Dilemma*, economists have increasingly focused on understanding the cultural and societal value of the performing arts. Their study laid the foundation for cultural economics, which examines the intersection of economics and the performing arts. The intersection of economics and folklore has gained increasing attention, with scholars exploring how cultural products and practices interact with markets (Shuman, 2019; Batra-Wells, 2019)^[67].

Folk Theatre plays a pivotal role in sustaining the economies of rural India, particularly by providing livelihoods to countless artists, performers, artisans, and support staff (Dutta 2015; Sreeanandan *et al.*, 2024)^[25, 70]. The relationship between folk theatre and local economies is intricate and multifaceted. Folk economies are intricately linked with the marketplace, influencing the production and consumption of cultural products (Shuman, 2019)^[67]. While urban areas benefit from superior infrastructure and investment in performing arts, rural regions face challenges but show potential through cultural tourism initiatives (Sreeanandan *et al.*, 2024)^[70]. The concept of cultural labor in folk performances highlights the complex relationship between artists, audiences, and the economic context in which they operate (Poduval, 2020). The preparation, performance, and dissemination of folk theatre are deeply interwoven with the economic activities of a community. The practitioners not only include the stage performers but also musicians, costume designers, carpenters, and local traders, who depend on these performances for their livelihoods. In many instances, these traditional performances serve as the primary or sole source of income for those involved.

Additionally, folk theatre has a ripple effect on the broader economy. Festivals attract visitors, stimulating demand for goods, services, and hospitality (Tohmo, 2005) ^[72]. These events create employment opportunities and increase regional incomes through direct and indirect consumption effects (Tohmo, 2005; Saayman & Saayman, 2006) ^[62, 72]. The location and size of the host town influence the economic impact, with urban areas generally benefiting more due to superior infrastructure and investment (Sreeanandan *et al.*, 2024) ^[70]. However, rural areas also gain from traditional performances and cultural tourism initiatives. Fairs and festivals help preserve traditions and folk culture while bringing together suppliers and vendors, contributing to the economic well-being of the community (Keshava 2014; Sharma & Sharma 2015) ^[38, 66]. The economic importance of these events extends beyond the immediate festival period, as they become focal points for broader economic activity and tourism (Tohmo, 2005; Saayman & Saayman, 2006) ^[62, 72].

Folk theatre in India is a powerful medium for socio-economic awareness and change. It addresses critical social, political, and cultural issues, breaking communication barriers and appealing directly to rural communities (Das, 2014). As an indigenous art form, folk theatre reflects local identity and social values, making it an effective tool for development communication (Das 2014; Keshav 2014, Prakash 2019; Onyenankeya & Salawu, 2018) ^[50]. It has been used to raise consciousness against oppression, dramatize exploitation, and educate the public on various topics, including water conservation and birth control (Srampickal, 1994; Onyenankeya & Salawu, 2018) ^[50, 69]. Folk theatre also provides a platform for marginalized groups to express resistance and advocate for social change, as exemplified by the Bhavai theatre of Gujarat (Parekh & Tiwari, 2022) ^[53]. However, recent commercialization has diluted the original essence of some folk theatre forms, necessitating efforts to revitalize and retain their authenticity (Parekh & Tiwari, 2022) ^[53]. Furthermore, inadequate funding, a lack of institutional support, and the marginalization of folk artists have exacerbated the vulnerability of this art form.

Folk theatre faces challenges in the modern era, but opportunities for revitalization exist. The COVID-19 pandemic forced folk artists to adapt by using social media platforms for performances, revealing new possibilities for content distribution and audience engagement (Rijitha & Gouda, 2022) ^[60]. While folk theatre has struggled to keep up with changing times post-independence (Deswal, 2018) ^[24], some forms like Nautanki in North India still maintain cultural significance despite pressure from modern entertainment (Singh 2020, Hansen 1992) ^[34, 68]. Key challenges include engaging younger generations and securing financial support. Additionally, integrating the folk theatre into the burgeoning cultural tourism sector and utilising digital platforms for wider reach can help revive interest in this traditional art form.

This paper explores the complex and multifaceted relationships between folk theatre and the economy of rural and semi-urban India, focusing on how folk theatre sustains livelihoods, promotes local economies, and contributes to socio-economic awareness. By examining the economic and cultural contributions of folk theatre, this study aims to shed light on its vital role in preserving local identity while addressing the challenges it faces in the contemporary socio-economic context. The objectives of the present research is (i) To examine the historical and cultural

significance of folk theatre in India (ii) To evaluate the economic impact of folk theatre on rural and semi-urban communities (iii) To explore the role of folk theatre in promoting tourism and cultural heritage (iv) To analyze the indirect economic benefits of folk theatre (v) To assess the challenges faced by folk theatre in the modern era (vi) To investigate the role of folk theatre in social communication and awareness-building (vii) To explore potential pathways for the revitalization and sustainability of folk theatre.

This study employs an exploratory research design to analyze the economic impact of folk theatre in India. The research integrates historical analysis, previous case studies, and economic assessments to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject. By systematically reviewing existing academic research, books, scholarly articles, and reports on folk theatre, cultural economics, and heritage tourism, this study synthesizes key findings in alignment with the research objectives. The study uses data from organizations such as the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Tourism, and UNESCO to assess the economic contribution of folk theatre. Through a comprehensive analysis of the direct and indirect economic contributions of folk theatre, as well as the potential pathways for its revitalization, the paper aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how this ancient art form continues to shape and sustain communities in a rapidly changing world. The interlinkages between culture, economy, and society are at the heart of this investigation, illustrating the ongoing relevance of folk theatre in both cultural preservation and socio-economic development by analyzing the extant literature on the topic.

Economic Impact of Folk Theatre in India

Folk theatre in India, as an enduring form of cultural expression, not only holds great artistic and social value but also plays a significant role in the economic ecosystem of rural and semi-urban communities. Its economic impact is multifaceted, reaching beyond the immediate scope of performance to influence various sectors of local and regional economies (Munjal & Jauhari, 2015) ^[49]. This section elaborates on how folk theatre contributes to the livelihoods of individuals, stimulates local economies, and enhances broader economic development, particularly in rural areas where economic opportunities may be limited.

1. Livelihood Generation for Artists and Artisans

The most direct economic impact of folk theatre is its role in providing livelihoods for a wide range of individuals involved in the production and performance process. It generates employment opportunities for performers (such as actors, musicians, and dancers), artisans (costume designers, set builders, prop makers), and support personnel (Priyadarshi, 2024) ^[58]. Folk theatre is an important source of income for many rural artists and artisans, especially those from marginalized communities. They earn a living by performing at festivals, fairs, and cultural events. Musicians who play traditional instruments, as well as artisans who create costumes and props, rely on the demand from folk theatre to sustain their work. This traditional art form not only preserves cultural heritage but also provides employment and economic support to local communities. Folk theatre serves as a vital medium for sustaining livelihoods and safeguarding cultural heritage in rural communities.

The Art for Life program ^[1] supported over 30,000 rural folk artist families, using cultural skills to create sustainable livelihoods (Bhattacharya, 2020). Folk performers in Bihar, often from marginalized communities, use their art to challenge societal norms and supplement their income

(Priyadarshi, 2024) ^[58]. Though no data is available for the analysis of livelihood, employment, and income generation are available, the paper uses the information on livelihood from the scattered sources, and the results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Employment Generation through Folk Theatres – Orissa & Maharashtra

Event	No. of Troupes	No. of Members per troupe	Employment*
Tamasha (Maharashtra)	30-40 Major Phads ^[2]	70-150	5075
	200 smaller phads	20-22	4200
Pala (Orissa)	500	5	2500
Das Kathia (Orissa)	100	2	200
Parhlad Natak (Orissa)	50	20-30	1250
Danta Nata (Orissa)	100	13	1300
Jatra (Orissa)	Major teams – 65	100-150	8125
	Smaller teams - 100	80-100	9000

Source: Patnaik (2020); Gawade & Kurtkoti (2017) ^[30]

Note: *The study takes the mid-point for computation of employment and income.

In Maharashtra, there are 30-40 major troupes with 70-150 members each. If these troupes operate at similar revenue levels, the total value from large troupes could range between Rs. 30-40

crore per year. Additionally, there are about 200 smaller phads with 20-22 members. While not all perform throughout the season, their collective contribution adds further economic value.

Table 2: Income Generation through Folk Theatres – Orissa

Event	No. of Troupes	No. of Shows in a Year	Income per Show (in Rs.)	Income Generated in a year (in Rs. crore)
Pala	500	35-50	5000-20000	10.62
Das Kathia	100	100	3000-15000	9.00
Parhlad Natak	50	50-100	25000-75000	18.75
Danta Nata	100	50-60	15000-50000	17.87
Jatra (Large troupes)	65	200	100000	130.00
Jatra (Smaller troupes)	100	200	30000-40000	70.00
Street Theatre	250	30	5000-15000	7.50
String Shadow/Rod/ Globe Puppet	50	50	5000-20000	3.12
Total				266.86

Source ^[3]: Patnaik (2020)

Note: *We measure mid-point for the computation of employment and income

Table 2 reveals that in a relatively poor state of Orissa folk theatre has a market size of around Rs. ₹267 crore. If we add income from modern theatre also, the figure would be around Rs. ₹275 crore. Bhavai performers in Gujarat make up to ₹20,000 per festival season. Additionally, Bhavai players play roles in various playlets and get corn and money in return in the rural parts of Gujarat.

2. Multiplier Effect on the Local Economy

Folk theatre’s economic influence extends beyond the performers and artists to create a ripple effect on the broader local economy. Cultural performances, especially those tied to festivals and fairs, attract large audiences from neighboring regions, generating an influx of visitors who contribute to increased economic activity in the area (Sharma & Sharma, 2015; Nyandoro, 2024) ^[66]. Local businesses—ranging from food vendors, transport providers, and accommodation services to small traders selling crafts and regional goods—benefit from the presence of tourists and visitors attending folk theatre events. For example, food vendors catering to large crowds during a folk theatre performance can experience a significant increase in sales (Tohmo, 2005) ^[72]. In rural and semi-urban areas with limited infrastructure, folk theatre events boost the local economy. Shops and markets benefit from increased sales of handicrafts, textiles, jewelry, and agricultural products as

tourists and locals gather for performances. In some cases, entire villages experience a short-term economic boom during these events. The economic benefits extend beyond the event duration, stimulating local economies and preserving cultural heritage (Nyandoro, 2024; Sharma & Sharma, 2015) ^[66]. Jatra theatre performances in West Bengal attract thousands of visitors, boosting local trade and services, with some events generating economic activity worth INR 5-10 crores annually. Yakshagan performances in Karnataka help sustain regional tourism, benefiting hotel owners, handicraft vendors, and transport services. The Surajkund International Crafts Mela in Haryana generates an estimated INR 100 crores annually, with folk performances as a major attraction. Kerala’s Theyyam performances bring in 1.2 million tourists annually, benefiting hotels, restaurants, and transport sectors. The Saraswati Pandal at Mahakumbh Varansi is showcasing the traditional art of Nautanki, with Padma Shri Ramdayal Sharma and his 30-member team presenting the story of Lord Krishna’s friendship with Sudama (Navbhart times, Jan 31, 2025).

3. Promotion of Local Handicrafts and Traditional Industries

Folk theatre plays a vital role in sustaining local handicrafts and traditional industries by providing a platform for their

display and sale. These performances often feature markets showcasing indigenous textiles, pottery, and crafts, attracting both local and international buyers. For instance, a folk theatre event in Rajasthan may highlight block-printed fabrics and handcrafted pottery, generating demand for these traditional products. This connection between folk theatre and local crafts helps preserve cultural heritage, supports artisans, and shields these industries from the pressures of industrialization and globalization. As folk theatre continues to draw tourists and urban visitors, it boosts the demand for indigenous crafts, elevating the profile of traditional craftsmanship. In rural and semi-urban areas, folk performances are frequently accompanied by craft exhibitions, offering a platform for regional artisans. This synergy not only strengthens the local economy but also ensures the survival of dying art forms by keeping them in public view. Thus, folk theatre serves as both an economic catalyst and a cultural preservation tool. Folk theatre relevance extends to cultural heritage promotion, as demonstrated by the value-added application of folklore artifacts in interior decoration and digital content creation (Wang *et al.*, 2012) ^[75].

4. Tourism and Cultural Heritage Economy

Folk theatre plays a significant role in promoting cultural tourism in India, offering authentic experiences that attract both domestic and international tourists seeking to explore the country's rich heritage (Hajra, 2015) ^[32]. Folk theatre, with its roots in tradition, provides an immersive and distinct cultural experience that attracts tourists interested in India's rich and diverse heritage. This tourism, which is often focused on heritage sites, religious events, or traditional festivals, creates a significant economic opportunity for rural areas. Local economies benefit not just from the direct revenues generated by ticket sales for performances but also from the broader tourism-related spending. The growth of cultural tourism centered around folk theatre creates economic opportunities for rural areas, benefiting local economies through direct revenues and broader tourism-related spending (Hajra, 2020) ^[33]. Cultural tourism initiatives, such as folk theatre performances and traditional crafts, can significantly contribute to sustainable community development and local economic growth. Integrating performing arts culture into the tourism economy promotes mutual development and enhances the overall tourism experience (Chen, 2022) ^[17]. Community-based cultural tourism initiatives, supported by outside actors, can ensure equitable distribution of benefits and maintain cultural integrity over time (Pradhan *et al.*, 2022) ^[54]. The Rajasthan International Folk Festival (RIFF) attracts over 50,000 visitors, generating millions in revenue for local artisans showcasing block-print textiles and handmade pottery. *Madhubani* theatre performances in Bihar create demand for *Madhubani* paintings, boosting the earnings of rural artisans by over 40% in some areas.

5. Economic Development and Sustainable Growth

Folk theatre also plays a role in fostering sustainable economic development by encouraging community-driven projects and promoting social entrepreneurship. Community organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) often use folk theatre as a tool to raise awareness about economic development issues, such as sustainable agriculture, environmental conservation, and micro-enterprise development (Meissner, 2021) ^[47].

For instance, in Nigeria, cultural and theatrical performances have been identified as avenues for revenue generation, thereby enhancing the economy (Agbasiere, 2020) ^[7]. Similarly, community theatre has been recognized as an effective tool for sensitization and mobilization, addressing environmental protection and economic development (Inyang, 2016) ^[35]. By integrating folk theatre into development strategies, communities can leverage cultural assets to foster sustainable growth and economic resilience.

Indirect Economic Benefits of Folk Theatre

While the direct economic contributions of folk theatre, such as providing livelihoods for performers, artisans, and supporting staff, are significant, the indirect economic benefits it generates are equally impactful. These benefits extend beyond the immediate scope of the performance itself and touch upon various sectors of the local economy.

1. Enhancing Regional Branding and Identity

Folk theatre, deeply rooted in India's theatrical tradition, reflects diverse cultural narratives and practices across regions (Deleep, 2024) ^[22]. Folk theatre often plays a key role in promoting the unique cultural identity of a region. As a form of local expression that showcases the customs, folklore, and traditions of a particular community, folk theatre contributes to building a strong regional brand. This cultural identity can be leveraged to attract tourists and turn other commodities and products directly or indirectly associated with theatrical productions into artifact brands. For example, Kathakali masks are also popular as home décor artifacts expanding businesses, and further boosting the economy.

By highlighting the local art forms and cultural narratives through performance, regions can position themselves as cultural tourism hotspots (e.g., performances of traditional forms like Kathakali in Kerala, Ramlila in Uttar Pradesh, or Tamasha in Maharashtra have contributed to the establishment of these states as vibrant cultural destinations). The ongoing association between folk theatre and regional branding helps create a distinct identity that can be marketed to both domestic and international audiences. Over time, this branding generates tourism revenue, attracts investment, and supports local businesses. The Mehrangarh Fort, where the Rajasthan International Folk Festival (RIFF) is held, becomes a hub of economic activity, with local artisans and performers earning substantial income. The Kisama Heritage Village, the main venue of the Hornbill festival, sees a surge in economic activity, with local artisans selling traditional Naga shawls, bamboo crafts, and jewelry. Local mask makers, who create elaborate Chau masks, see a significant increase in sales during the Chau festival. The Bharat Bhavan, the main venue of the folkrag festival, becomes a hub of economic activity, with local vendors selling traditional crafts and textiles.

2. Strengthening Community Engagement and Social Capital

Folk theatre fosters a sense of community cohesion, which has indirect economic benefits. As a collaborative art form, it requires the participation of the community not only as performers but also as volunteers, event organizers, and support staff. This can have long-term positive effects,

fostering a more resilient local economy as communities become better equipped to address economic challenges.

When communities come together to organize and participate in folk theatre events, they strengthen local networks and build relationships that can be leveraged for future economic opportunities (Ziakas & Costa, 2010) ^[76]. The network of volunteers, event planners, and performers can give impetus to other community-driven economic projects, such as cooperative businesses or local tourism ventures.

3. Creation of New Markets and Entrepreneurial Opportunities

Folk theatre and cultural tourism can stimulate entrepreneurship and economic development in rural areas. These activities create opportunities in traditional sectors like hospitality and transport, while also fostering new ventures in emerging fields (Rajendran & Indapurkar, 2020) ^[59]. As folk theatre becomes a focal point for tourism and local cultural activity, new businesses emerge to cater to the growing demand for services and products related to the performances. Entrepreneurs may seize opportunities to offer services such as guided tours of folk theatre festivals, digital streaming of performances for wider audiences, or the creation of folk theatre-related merchandise (e.g., souvenirs, printed materials, and digital content). Public-private partnerships can help stimulate entrepreneurial activity and overcome these obstacles (Marcouiller & Westeren, 2019) ^[46]. Additionally, local startups and micro-businesses can emerge around folk theatre events, offering unique goods or services tailored to tourists and visitors. These entrepreneurial endeavors contribute to the diversification of the local economy and help create sustainable, small-scale businesses that can support long-term economic growth. While not exclusively a folk theatre event, the Hornbill Festival in Nagaland showcases traditional Naga folk dances, music, and theatre. The festival has significantly boosted tourism in the region, with over 1.73 lakh visitors in 2024, generating ₹139 crore in revenue (Indianmasterminds.com). The Rajasthan International Folk Festival (RIFF), Jodhpur, generates significant revenue for local hotels, homestays, and restaurants. In 2019, it was estimated that RIFF contributed ₹50-60 crore to the local economy.

4. Cultural Diplomacy and International Relations

Cultural diplomacy and folk theatre play significant roles in India's international relations. India's approach to cultural diplomacy differs from Western concepts, preferring "international cultural relations" over terms like "soft power" (Isar, 2017) ^[36]. As folk theatre gains recognition on the global stage, it contributes to India's cultural diplomacy efforts. International cultural exchange programs often include folk theatre performances, which serve as a form of soft power, promoting India's cultural diversity and fostering diplomatic ties between countries. Theatre can serve as a connecting link between India and Pakistan, fostering mutual trust and peaceful coexistence (Akhter, 2016) ^[8]. The politics of cultural practice in Indian theatre intersects with issues of interculturalism, globalization, and activism (Bharucha 2003; Bharucha 2000) ^[12, 13]. These studies emphasize the importance of cultural exchanges and folk theatre in shaping India's international relations and internal cultural dynamics, offering alternative pathways for

diplomacy and social engagement. Indian folk theatre forms like Yakshagana and Ramlila have been featured in international cultural the Edinburgh Festival Fringe & Smithsonian Folklife Festival. UNESCO has recognized multiple Indian folk theatre forms as intangible cultural heritage, leading to increased funding and international exposure, such as UNESCO's recognition of Kutiyattam. Cultural exchange programs, where Indian folk theatre is performed abroad, strengthen diplomatic ties. The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) sponsors folk theatre groups to perform in countries like the U.S., UK, and Japan, fostering diplomatic goodwill. During 2013-14 to 2023-24, 62 Festivals of India (FoIs) were held in different countries. 2348 artists, including folk artists, participated in these FoIs (Ministry of Culture, Annual report 2023-24).

Folk Theatre as a Medium of Socio-Economic Awareness

Folk theatre in India is not merely an art form; it is a powerful tool for social communication, capable of addressing complex socio-economic issues in ways that resonate deeply with local audiences (Sharma & Kashyap, 2019) ^[65]. Folk theatre is a powerful medium for raising awareness about important societal issues, including agrarian distress, economic inequality, labor struggles, caste discrimination, and gender roles. One of its unique features is the ability to present these themes in an accessible and engaging manner, making them easily understandable to audiences who may not have access to formal education or mainstream media.

1. Representation of Agrarian Life and Economic Struggles

Traditional Indian folk theatre, such as *Ramlila*, *Tamasha*, *Jatra*, *Yakshagana*, and *Nautanki*, portrays the struggles of rural communities, focusing on farmers, laborers, and agrarian hardships. Themes include landowner conflicts, weather challenges, debt, and fluctuating crop prices. In states like Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar, folk theatre highlights economic distress, sparking discussions on agricultural policies and land reforms. By showcasing marginalized protagonists battling exploitation and injustice, folk theatre not only raises awareness of social inequalities but also empowers communities by giving voice to the oppressed. *Nautanki*, a musical folk theatre of North India, draws from various sources including contemporary issues, preserving written texts and emphasizing music (Singh, 2020) ^[68]. *Yakshagana*, a 500-year-old South Indian folk theatre, has been utilized for agricultural extension, disseminating development messages to rural audiences (Padmanabha & Kumar, 2020) ^[51]. These performances often address social issues like political authority, community identity, and gender differences. While traditional folk performances have faced challenges from modern entertainment forms, they continue to serve as important cultural conduits between urban centers and rural areas (Hansen, 1992) ^[34].

2. Awareness of Labor Rights and Worker Exploitation

Folk theatre has emerged as a powerful tool for labor activism and social development. It serves to raise political consciousness, build solidarity, and foster an activist culture among workers, particularly in precarious workplaces

(Srampickal, 1994) ^[69]. Performances such as *Bidesiyā* ^[4] in Bihar, reflect the struggles of marginalized communities, addressing themes of migration and labor (Prakash, 2016) ^[55]. Folk theatre also serves as a platform for raising awareness about labor rights and the exploitation of workers. Performances often depict the plight of workers, be they in agriculture, industry, or urban sectors, drawing attention to issues like low wages, long working hours, and poor working conditions. The theatrical approach has been used to educate workers about workplace rights, as demonstrated by a play about textile factory workers fighting for their rights in the early 20th century (Becker & Rabin, 2014) ^[11].

3. Addressing Caste and Social Hierarchies

India's complex caste system and social stratification are deeply embedded in its cultural fabric, and folk theatre has long been a medium for confronting and critiquing these social divisions. Historically, folk theatre has been used to raise consciousness against oppression, with the Indian People's Theatre Association and street theatre movements dramatizing capitalist and caste exploitation (Srampickal, 1994) ^[69]. The *Bhavai* folk theatre of Gujarat, originated by marginalized communities, uses satire to challenge the caste system and express resistance (Parekh & Tiwari, 2022) ^[53]. Folk performances by subaltern communities reflect their life-worlds and can challenge social hierarchies in caste-ridden societies. These performances, including land worship rituals, migrant laborer theatre, and Dalit ballads, offer insights into the relationship between culture and labor, providing a framework for understanding the politics and aesthetics of folk performance (Prakash, 2019). Through storytelling, folk theatre highlights the exploitation, marginalization, and dehumanization faced by individuals from the Dalit and backward castes. Characters in these plays often challenge the status quo, seeking to break free from the oppressive structures of caste.

In addition to challenging caste-based discrimination, Folk theatre in India has been a powerful tool for addressing social issues, particularly gender inequality and women's rights. It has evolved from traditional forms to more activist-oriented performances, challenging patriarchal structures and raising awareness about women's struggles (Dutta, 2015; Garlough, 2008; Vlassoff, 2013; Paik, 2007; Mahalingam, 2007) ^[25, 29, 43, 74]. Organizations like Jana Sanskriti have adapted techniques such as Forum Theatre to empower rural women and promote community-led social change (Dutta, 2015) ^[25]. Feminist groups have utilized street theater to discuss topics like rape, inheritance laws, and women's representation, often reinterpreting traditional folk forms to convey their message (Garlough, 2008) ^[29]. This approach builds on a long history of Indian theatre addressing social and political issues, including the independence movement and caste exploitation (Srampickal, 1994) ^[69]. Contemporary plays continue to explore themes of gender and caste politics, portraying women as resilient and central figures in the fight for social change (Bhatia, 2010) ^[14].

4. Raising Awareness about Health and Hygiene

In rural and semi-urban regions of India, health and sanitation issues remain major concerns. Folk theatre is being used to raise awareness about public health issues such as hygiene, vaccination, disease prevention, and

sanitation. Health-related themes are presented through folk plays that dramatize the impact of poor sanitation, the spread of infectious diseases, and the importance of public health interventions (Frank 1996; Shaika *et al.* 2021) ^[27, 64]. For example, Puppet Theatre and Street Theatre have been effectively used by NGOs and governmental bodies to educate rural populations about the importance of hygiene, safe drinking water, and sanitation practices (Kurscheid *et al.*, 2018) ^[41]. The combination of music, drama, and local languages makes these performances both entertaining and educational, ensuring that complex health messages are understood and acted upon by the audience (Séguin & Rancourt, 1996). In some cases, local governments and health organizations have employed folk theatre to deliver public service announcements, particularly in remote areas where traditional media such as television or radio may not be as effective. This use of folk theatre helps bridge the gap in health education and makes vital information more accessible (Prentki, 1998) ^[57].

Folk theatre has proven to be an effective medium for health education and behavior change in rural communities. Studies have demonstrated its success in promoting malaria control through bio-environmental measures in India (Ghosh *et al.*, 2006) ^[31], raising awareness about water conservation in South Africa (Onyenankeya & Salawu, 2018) ^[50], and improving knowledge and behaviors related to soil-transmitted helminths in Indonesia (Kurscheid *et al.*, 2018) ^[41]. These performances, which combine traditional art forms with health messages, have shown statistically significant improvements in audience knowledge and attitudes. For example, a shadow puppet shows in Indonesia increased knowledge scores from 48.6% to 62.8% ($p < 0.001$) and behavior scores from 77.4% to 80.6% ($p = 0.004$) (Kurscheid *et al.*, 2018) ^[41]. Similarly, a Yakshagana performance in South India effectively communicated information about COVID-19, with speech, music, and body language identified as significant elements in conveying health messages (Padmanabha & Kumar, 2020) ^[51].

5. Promoting Environmental Awareness

Folk theatre in India has also taken on the role of educating audiences about environmental issues, such as deforestation, pollution, climate change, and water conservation. By integrating environmental themes into the narratives, folk theatre encourages audiences to think about their relationship with nature and the sustainability of their resources (Kabbinahithilu & Kumar, 2022). Folk theatre has emerged as a powerful tool for promoting environmental awareness and rural development. Studies have shown its effectiveness in communicating water conservation issues in rural South Africa (Onyenankeya & Salawu, 2018) ^[50] and conveying environmental consciousness through traditional forms like Yakshagana in India (Kabbinahithilu & Kumar, 2022). The nature-sensitive approach of African folk theatre, as exemplified in Wole Soyinka's works, emphasizes the interconnectedness of humans and the environment, promoting ecosystem preservation (Fai, 2010) ^[26]. These performances often inspire collective action to address local environmental problems, empowering communities to take steps toward conservation and resource management.

Revitalizing folk theatre in India

Folk theatre in India is a vital component of cultural heritage, serving as a powerful medium for communication,

entertainment, and social change. It has deep roots in local traditions and values, making it an effective tool for addressing social, political, and cultural issues (Das, 2014). However, the onset of Western theatre during the colonial period led to the neglect of traditional performing arts (Burla & Yadav, 2022) ^[16]. In post-independence, folk theatre struggled to keep pace with modern entertainment forms (Deswal, 2018) ^[24]. These efforts include preservation, promotion, and digitalization of cultural heritage. Despite challenges like commercialization diluting its original essence, there is a growing recognition of folk theatre's importance in education, community development, and cultural tourism, necessitating sustainable preservation efforts and increased accessibility to ensure its relevance for future generations. To revitalize this art form, various initiatives have been undertaken by the government, non-governmental organizations, and cultural institutions. A snapshot of these efforts is presented in the preceding paragraphs.

1. Government Support and Funding: To ensure the sustainability of folk theatre, both state and central governments must allocate more funds and resources toward its promotion and preservation. In this direction, the Sangeet Natak Akademi (SNA) has been instrumental in this revival, organizing seminars and theatre festivals since 1956 (Burla & Yadav, 2022) ^[16]. The Ministry of Culture operates seven Zonal Cultural Centres (ZCCs) across India, which focus on reviving and promoting folk theatre through grants, training workshops, and performance opportunities. National School of Drama (NSD) conducts outreach programs, workshops, and training for folk theatre artists, ensuring skill development and transmission of traditional knowledge. Government initiatives can also help institutionalize folk theatre as an integral part of India's cultural heritage, encouraging its integration into national tourism and cultural policies. The government provides financial aid through various schemes:

- a. **Guru-Shishya Parampara Scheme** ^[5]: Aimed at the transmission of traditional knowledge, this scheme provides financial assistance to veteran folk theatre artists to mentor younger generations. Under this scheme, 204 Shishyas were trained by 34 Gurus in different art forms (including folk theatre) during 2023-24
- b. **Repertory Grant Scheme:** Under this scheme, financial assistance is provided to folk theatre groups for performances, training, and production expenses. From January 1 to December 31, 2023, a Grant-in-Aid of ₹78.70 crore was provided to 1,488 organizations under the Guru-Shishya Parampara (Repertory Grant Scheme), benefiting 1,482 Gurus and 9,200 artists (Annual Report 2023-24, Ministry of Culture).
- c. **Cultural Function & Production Grant Scheme (CFPG)** ^[6]: This scheme supports organizations engaged in folk theatre production and promotion. Under this scheme, about ₹24.84 crores were given to 1,879 beneficiaries from January 1, 2023, to December 31, 2023 (Annual Report 2023-24, Ministry of Culture).
- d. **Scholarships and Fellowships:** The Ministry of Culture offers junior and senior fellowships for research in folk theatre, along with scholarships for young

artists. Up to 200 Junior Fellowships and 200 Senior Fellowships are given every year to outstanding persons for undertaking research-oriented projects for advanced training or individual creative effort for the revival of some of our traditional forms of arts

2. Incorporating Folk Theatre into Cultural Tourism: Folk theatre should be included as a key component of India's cultural tourism initiatives. By promoting folk theatre performances during regional festivals and creating touristic routes around traditional art forms, local economies can experience a significant boost from the influx of national and international tourists. The combination of tourism with folk theatre can create a mutually beneficial cycle, where tourism drives demand for performances, and performances enhance the appeal of the destination. In rural regions, cultural tourism initiatives centered around traditional art forms and festivals have shown potential in boosting local economies (Sreeanandan *et al.*, 2024) ^[70]. This is exemplified in Meghalaya, where folklore-based tourism not only preserves cultural heritage but also provides economic opportunities for local communities through storytelling and cultural experiences (Lyngdoh & Gautam, 2024) ^[42]. Integrating folk theatre into cultural tourism initiatives can create a mutually beneficial cycle, enhancing both tourism appeal and local economic development.

3. Collaboration with NGOs and Cultural Organizations: Collaboration between educational institutions and cultural organizations is crucial for promoting local folklore and cultural heritage. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and cultural organizations can play a pivotal role in the revitalization of folk theatre. Theatre groups have demonstrated the power of collaboration in creating impactful productions and fostering cultural exchange, as exemplified by the partnership between *Jana Natya Manch* and The Freedom Theatre (Deshpande, 2017) ^[23]. The Third Theatre movement in West Bengal illustrates how theatre networks can function through intra- and inter-group collaboration, organizing festivals, workshops, and study circles (Debnath, 2021) ^[21]. These collaborative efforts strengthen the theatre movement and transform cultural activism. By leveraging folk theatre and fostering partnerships between NGOs, cultural organizations, and educational institutions, communities can effectively promote and preserve their cultural heritage while addressing contemporary social issues. Research suggests that forming regional networks and associations can significantly benefit folk theatre groups and cultural practitioners. Such networks facilitate resource sharing, knowledge exchange, and access to collective funding and performance platforms (Ashton *et al.*, 2013; Malisiova & Kostopoulou, 2023) ^[10, 45]. These collaborations can help rural cultural organizations navigate modern challenges like digital adaptation and marketing (Trang & Kollect, 2022) ^[73]. Networks also foster a sense of solidarity, mutual support, and expand social connections among cultural actors.

4. Digitalization and Global Outreach: The digitalization of folk theatre offers new opportunities for its preservation, promotion, and global accessibility

while posing challenges to traditional practices. Platforms like Senipedia.com serve as digital archives and marketing spaces, allowing folk performances, documentaries, and workshops to reach wider audiences. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this shift, as seen in the digital adaptation of *Chhau* dance of Purulia, sparking debates on authenticity and identity (Mahata & Doreswamy, 2024) ^[44]. Social media has become a crucial tool for folk artists, enabling content dissemination, audience engagement, and income generation. While digital platforms help folk theatre survive modern entertainment trends, careful integration of technology is needed to maintain cultural integrity and sustain economic opportunities for performers and artisans.

5. Training and Skill Development Programs:

Establishing dedicated training centers for aspiring performers, musicians, and artisans is essential for preserving and revitalizing folk theatre. These programs can equip artists with both traditional skills, such as performance techniques, prop-making, and costume design, and modern theatre production elements like sound engineering and lighting, making folk theatre more dynamic and appealing to the younger generation. Once a primary source of rural entertainment, folk theatre has struggled to adapt to contemporary cultural shifts (Deswal, 2018) ^[24]. Integrating folk literature into vocational education, as emphasized in the National Education Policy 2020, can enhance skill development and improve rural livelihoods (Gajjar, 2023) ^[28]. Additionally, Theatre for Development (TFD) has proven effective in marginalized communities, providing a platform for social awareness and developmental discourse (Prentki, 1998) ^[57]. These initiatives underscore the potential of folk theatre not only as a cultural asset but also as a tool for education, skill-building, and social transformation.

6. Promoting Folk Theatre as a Tool for Education:

In educational settings, folk theatre can be used to teach cultural heritage and local traditions, fostering a connection between students and their roots. Folk theatre should be integrated into educational curricula, especially in rural areas, as a tool for learning about local culture, social issues, and history. Folk theatre has also been employed to educate the younger generation about environmental protection, proper resource management, and social issues in rural communities (Chiangong, 2020) ^[18]. Additionally, puppet theatre, a form of folk theatre, has been successfully employed as an educational tool in pre-primary classes in Kerala, India, helping students grasp key concepts and visualize them uniquely (Aparna, 2024) ^[9]. Its effectiveness lies in its ability to communicate complex ideas in accessible language and formats, making it a sustainable alternative to conventional media for disseminating important information and promoting social change (Onyenakeya & Salawu, 2018) ^[50]. Schools and colleges could encourage students to participate in or organize folk theatre performances, fostering a sense of pride in their cultural heritage. Educational institutions can also collaborate with folk theatre groups to create performances that educate

students on contemporary socio-economic challenges, using the medium's power to engage and influence. Puppets are suitable for different educational contexts, from rehearsing performance and expression skills to being integrated into specific subjects (Kroger & Nupponen, 2019) ^[40]. Integrating folk arts into educational curricula significantly benefits folk artists, as it creates new opportunities for them to teach, perform, and showcase their skills. Folk artists can be engaged as instructors, guest lecturers, or workshop facilitators, providing them with stable income sources.

7. Empowering Local Communities through Ownership:

Folk theatre's economic and social impact is heightened when local communities take ownership of its preservation and promotion. Projects involving local communities in preserving their folklore through activities such as focus group discussions, research, and digital documentation have shown promise in promoting local knowledge preservation (Riyandari & Wohangara, 2022). Engaging local communities in planning and supporting folk theatre fosters cultural relevance, ownership, and sustainability. It preserves traditions, promotes intergenerational learning, and boosts local economies while keeping the art form dynamic and meaningful.

Conclusions

Folk theatre in India is a rich art form rooted in local traditions and social values, serving as a medium for communication and entertainment. It combines music, dance and storytelling, reflecting the diverse cultural narratives of Indian communities. Originating from ancient rituals and oral traditions, it has significantly influenced India's socio-political landscape, particularly during the independence movement by addressing social issues. Despite challenges post-independence, folk theatre continues to be an important tool for promoting social, economic, and cultural development. The Indian government acknowledges its potential to impact local economies both directly and indirectly. Folk theatre in India is both a cultural treasure and an economic driver in rural and semi-urban areas. It creates jobs, supports local businesses, and preserves traditional craftsmanship. However, the technology and globalization pose many challenges that must be addressed to sustain the relevance of folk theatre. Financial support, cultural tourism, digital integration, and community involvement can help preserve and promote this art form while expanding and enhancing its economic and cultural impact. Folk theatre, with its deep roots in Indian culture, heritage, and history, must adapt and evolve with the shifting social, economic, political, and technical paradigms. By doing so, it can retain its role as a preserver of heritage, as a medium of expression of contemporary social reality, and act as an active contributor to the economy by generating employment and supporting livelihoods.

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1. Banglanatak dot com, a national social enterprise, since its inception in 2000, the team has worked across 25000 villages in 22 states of India. It had started an experimental project called Art for Life (AFL) in 2005, in six districts of West Bengal focusing on using local

- cultural skills for generating sustainable livelihood for the rural communities practising such cultural forms.
2. In the context of tamasha, a phad refers to a traveling troupe of performers who present traditional folk theater in Maharashtra. These troupes include singers, dancers, musicians, and supporting crew members.
 3. The calculations presented in this table are different from the source because the author has taken minimum of the value whereas in this paper we have taken mid value of the group mentioned in the article.
 4. The characters in Bidesia plays are mostly common people like farmers, workers, wives, and village elders. The stories often focus on the difficulties of migration, the pain of separation, and the social issues affecting rural communities. Bhikhari Thakur's plays, such as Gabarghichor, Beti Bechwa, and Bidesia, addressed topics like dowry, gender discrimination, and the economic hardships of rural life.
 5. The Ministry of Culture launched the Guru Shishya Parampara Scheme through Zonal Cultural Centres to preserve and promote rare art forms by providing scholarships to young talents under expert guidance.
 6. This scheme supports non-profit organizations, including NGOs, societies, trusts, and universities, for activities such as seminars, conferences, research, workshops, festivals, exhibitions, symposia, and productions in dance, drama, theatre, and music, along with small research projects on Indian culture.
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