

# Semiotics of Traditional v/s Modern Space in Folk Theatre with Special Reference to the *Maand* System of Goan Folk Tradition

Tanvi S. K. Bambolkar

Research Scholar at English Department, Goa University

## Abstract

Folk theatre in Goa like any other region of India is ritualistic in nature. These performances to mention a few like *Zagor*, *Ranmaalem*, *Kaalo* are not performed anywhere and everywhere. There is a special space assigned for their performances traditionally. *Maand* is a space in most of the villages of Goa which is reserved for social, economic and cultural interactions. Most of the folk theatre performances are carried out in these open spaces. With the advent of technology and an exposure to concretization, the traditional *Maands* are losing their significance. In the modern times these spaces have been replaced by modern spaces. Another factor leading to the decline of significance of this traditional performance space is the commercialization of the folk theatre forms. This paper tries to trace the journey of traditional space to the modern space, its conflicts and probable solutions, if any, to tackle this hegemony.

**Keywords:** Folk Theatre, *Maand*, Space, Semiotics

## Introduction: Semiotics and Space in Folklore

While defining the concept of semiotics, Umberto Eco has said in *Theory of Semiotics* (1959), "Semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie. If something cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth: it cannot in fact be used "to tell" at all." (Alam) Keir Elam defines Semiotics as "science dedicated to the study of the production of meaning in society", (2002, p.1) Semiotics, technically speaking is a study of sign and symbols. Semiotics in a way is a way of trying to understand the roots of any material under study. Semiotics of folklore is a recent phenomenon that has led to the exploration of various elements related to folklore. Space and time are two elements of folk performances which define the context of the performance.

'Space' is a significant element in any folk form, especially folk performances like folk theatre and dance. They are performed in a specific defined space at a particular time. Folklorist Vladimir Propp argues, "Spaces in folklore has certain peculiarities that can probably be accounted for by early forms of human thought" (1984). Spaces define the overall movement of a particular folk performance. Thus, space is a feature that helps in analyzing the semiotics of folk theatre. Traditionally, various folk performances have been performed in defined spaces. This paper tries to analyze the semiotics of these traditional spaces as well as the absorption of modern space

within the traditional space. For this, an analysis of the *Maand* tradition from Goa has been carried out as case study.

### Goan Folk Theatre and its Spaces

Goa is a culturally rich land where various festivals are celebrated round the year. Agriculture being one of the major traditional occupations of the indigenous communities such as Gaudas and Kunbis, this state has various rituals and festivals related to the agrarian lifestyle. These festivals are the major reasons for the evolution of folk art forms including folk theatre forms which have survived over a period of time. Just like folk dances, folk theatre forms are also either part of some festival or are forms of festivals in themselves. Some of them are performed in some defined spaces like *Maand* or temple *mantap*. Some of them are a combination of static as well as mobile performance. Some of the major folk theatre forms of Goa are: *Zagor*, *Kaalo*, *Ranmaalem*, *Khell*. Even though these are the major categories of folk theatre forms, each of the forms has further variations and types. Each variant displays a unique regional nuance. The variants are found in various places of Goa.

Other than *Zagor*, *Ranmaalem* and *Kaalo* there are other folk theatre forms like *Lalit* and *Khell*. *Lalit* was a folk performance performed at the end of religious festivals in temples. *Khell* is found in southern parts of Canacona. Similar to *Yakshagana* of Karnataka and *Kaalo* of Goa, *Khell* presents itself as a region-specific folk theatre form. The Catholic community also performs a folk theatre named *Khell tiatr*. It was known as *Khell* before the arrival of Tiatr as a popular form of theatre amongst Catholics. *Khell* of Catholics is performed during the festival *Intruj*. Traditionally, most of the folk theatre forms are either a part of some festival or associated with a ritual specifically held in defined spaces in villages. For instance, *Kaalo* is performed mostly within the temple premises *Praakaar* or the temple *mantaps*, while *Zagor* is traditionally performed on a space called *Maand*.

At this juncture it would be apt to discuss the features of *Maand* and its contribution as a 'space' for the major folk theatre forms and festivities associated with them. It would be also apt to discuss the changes that have occurred in the significance of this space with the arrival of 'modern spaces' for the folk art and revisit its relevance in the Goan society over the years.

### ***Maand*: Cultural, Social and Economic 'Space' of Rural Life**

*Maand* is a platform-like structure found in most of the villages of Goa originally built out of clay and eventually coated with cow dung. At present most of the times, there is a sacred tree such as *Vad* (Banyan), *Peepal*, *Saavri*, *Rumod*, *Matt* etc near *Maand*. Also, there might be a small shrine called *Ghumti* or Tulsi Vrindavan near the *Maand*. It was meant as a space for religious and cultural activities. It also attained social significance over a period of time. All the traditional folk performances take place in this socio-ritualistic space. Either the *Maand* belongs to the village community or there is an individual who owns the space and is honored every year for permitting the community to use the space.

Vinayak Khedekar, folk enthusiast from Goa in his book *Loksarita* (1993) mentions that this tradition of *Maand* might have been brought by Kols and Gonds, the tribes from which the

earliest settlers of Goa Gauda and Kunbis have descended. According to him, words like *Maand* may have been derived from dialects spoken by the tribes which descended from Kols and Gond. The meaning of *Maand* denotes 'to set'. It can also mean 'tax'. However, it is also likely that the word has been derived from the Sanskrit term *Mandal* which means a systematic set up.

*Maand* is not just a venue where festivities of the villages take place; it is also a space where the village elders or the *Dha Jaan* (the symbolic ten) members of native class meet to discuss major decisions related to village festivities. While in some cases each village has one *Maand*, some villages might have more than one each meant for different purpose. Based on the functional focus and the gender of participants functions of *Maand* is divided. For example, there is a type of *Maand* called *Dhalaam Maand* (*Maand* for Dhalo) which is exclusively assigned for Dhaalo, performative festival of women, where the male participation is minimal.

### **Maand: A Ritualistic Space**

As a ritualistic space, three major deities are worshipped on *Maand*. They are *Van-devata* that is the forest goddess, *Dharitrimata* that is Mother Earth and *Maanda Guru* that is Teacher of the *Maand*. Interestingly, all these three deities are invoked in the *Naman* the initial prayer of the folk theatre form *Zagor*. Retaining the purity and sanctity of the village *Maand* is extremely important for the villagers. Thus, *Maand* symbolizes the values of a traditional village. For instance, the post birth and post death taboo periods for families and menstruating period for women are strictly followed and these individuals are not allowed on the *Maand*. It is also a space of social utility and interaction. It also serves as a place for social discourse, adjudication and used for financial transactions acknowledged within traditional norms. Thus, *Maand* symbolizes the meaning of how a society functions.

Traditionally this space is associated with the social, cultural and spiritual semiotics which is undergoing a drastic change with the arrival of modern spaces. At this juncture it would be suitable to discuss the current situation of these structures.

During the process of bridging the gaps between village and city, the rural setup of Goa has undergone many developments. These developments have inevitably influenced traditional lifestyle aspects thus, also influencing the topic under discussion: *Maand*. Many villages now have a cemented *Maand* instead of clayed and cow dung coated structure. Even the shrines in some places have attained a new shape and color according to the new architectural influences. This concretization of the structure has subsequently led to a decline in the use of natural products like clay, mud and cow dung which symbolizes the human relation with nature. The natural elements would keep the performing area cool. Nowadays, the closed performance areas create heat. Since *Zagor* is celebrated during summers, villagers now use fans and coolers for the convenience of artists and audience.



Figure 1: *Zagor* being performed on *Maand* at Veling

Although modernization has entered into the space dynamics of folk theatre, there is also a tendency to stay faithful to custom with regard to connect with tradition and adherence to its norms and values. For example, it was observed during the *Zagor* performance in Veling in May 2017 that the performance area was not at an elevated level, as is the case in modern theatre, where there is a proscenium stage entailing a gap between the audience and the artists. This phenomenon of a sort of elevated stage has arrived in folk theatre as well, but is not adopted in adherence to traditional practice in places like Veling where the audience and artists are at one

level. The performance takes place at the demarcated venue surrounded by audience on the right, left and in front of the performers. This proximity encourages an interactive, even participatory scenario. The audience tends to get more deeply involved in the performance. Thus, even in the adaptation of modern theatrical norms, there has been the element of intimate theatre which involves the audience in the performance. This can be seen as the sustained influence of folk theatre tradition and its norms on the contemporary *Maand*, notwithstanding other permitted changes in its venue and performances thereon.

Interestingly, the political intervention in the village system has also led to much change in these structures in the name of 'modernization'. For instance, Chetan Khedekar, folk performer from Priol, Ponda shared this piece of information that the *Maand* in their village went through more and more structural changes with each cycle of elections. The involvement of politicians in the field of art and culture has increased over the years. For them, promoting art and creating facilities for it, is an opportunity to safeguard and even enhance their electoral prospects with the voters.

### **Spaces away from the traditional spaces**

Despite these structural changes, there has been an arrival of modern spaces which have been an outcome of the need to expand the popularity of these folk forms. The folk theatre forms are now being performed in elite areas like starred hotels, corporate functions, academic conferences etc as a part of entertainment. Emergence of modern spaces has been the outcome of the need to expand the outreach and the accessibility of these popular folk theatre forms. At academic venues, the performances of folk theatre forms help augment the critical argument or serve as illustrative inputs to the discussion on the forms, nature, role, status of the form in question. It may be reiterated here, that while it would be most certainly desirable to have the traditional folk performances in their indigenous ritual mode and venue, with characteristic spontaneity of content and presentation, it would be extremely difficult for the traditional performing groups to match the present avenues of discourse and the time and venue of the annual ritual-linked folk theatre performance. This necessitates alternate performances at new venues. This change in space has also led to change in the duration and content condensation or variation in performance. For example, *Ranmaalem* usually goes on for around four hours when performed originally during the festival whereas; when it is performed in folk theatre festivals the time has to be decreased to meet the demands of the audience.



Figure 2: Traditional performance of *Ranmaalem* in Coparde, Sattari.



Figure 3: *Ranmaalem* performed at Zagorotsav organized by Directorate of Art and Culture.

Also, the folk artists make modifications in the lyrics, costumes (Ref. Fig. 2 and 3 to note the difference) to suit the 'other' space at times. This moving away from originality and a step towards hybridization questions the semiotics of traditional space giving rise to new semiotics in newer space.

The folk theatre troupés from various villages from Goa have organized themselves into professional groups over the years. They perform in various cultural festivals in the state as well as outside the state. Several groups have also performed internationally.

Directorate of Art and Culture, Goa has been an active institution in developing various schemes to promote and showcase the cultural heritage of Goa. Inter-state exchange of cultural troupés is one of the schemes of Directorate of Art and Culture of Goa. According to the official website of the Directorate, “The main objective is to opportunity by which people from different parts of the country will get to know about one another’s culture and promote National Integration. Under this scheme every year cultural troupés are sent to other states and in turn troupés from other states are received in Goa” (Directorate). It also mentions that only the recognized troupés will be sent in other states through this scheme through proper selection.

Directorate of Art and Culture of Goa in collaboration with West Zone Cultural Centre, Udaipur organizes several programmes for the benefit of cultural elements of various states. One of them is *Lokotsav* organized every year in Kala Academy, Panaji in the month of January or February. As mentioned on their official website, “These Folk Festivals are being organized to provide a platform and to preserve the traditional crafts and folk art of the artists from different parts of the country and the state. The artefacts are displayed and sold by the craftpersons. About 100 craft persons and 150 performing artists from different parts of the country and Goa are invited to participate in the festivals” (Directorate). The main objective of organizing this festival is to provide a shared platform to the artist and groups to showcase their folk art. It also gives boost to the local traditional professions by providing them a space at a subsidised rate to display and sell their products to the large crowd that visits this festival every year.

*Zagorotsav* is another festival which is solely dedicated to *Zagor* theatre form. It is organized by various local groups in collaboration with the Directorate of Art and Culture. It features various *Zagor* from various talukas of Goa. Since it is a two day festival every group has to modify and shorten their performances and present what is significant to the form, relevant to Event and appealing to the audience.

Other than these festivals, Tourism Department of Goa, Sports and Youth Affairs Department, Kala Academy, All India Konkani Association are the other institutions which organize folk based programmes.

The folk performing groups from Goa have been receiving exposure and motivation to continue the age old legacies due to such schemes of Government. However, as already discussed earlier they need to shorten the duration of the performances. These performances which are organized in auditoriums and/or on a stage cannot be as long as the ones performed in villages in their original space. This changes the core dynamics of folk performance which is otherwise intimate and interactive in nature. The audience remains at a distance during such sophisticated performances.

While performing in other states, the troupés from Goa are supposed to represent the state’s cultural heritage. Thus, it becomes a responsibility for these troupés to present the best of what they have. When asked how they choose which forms are to be performed, Chetan Khedekar of Shri Siddhivinayak Mhalsa group said that they choose the forms according to the demand of the organizers. He also said that if the performance is supposed to be presented outside Goa, then they choose the forms which will require less number of props and costumes. This is solely

because of the convenience during the travelling. The duration hardly crosses the two hours when performed professionally, so one needs to choose a few forms suited to the occasion/duration.

The groups try to bring the professional finesse in their performances while performing in festivals even in the state. For instance, the *Ranmaalem* performing group from Sattari modifies the costumes of the human curtain while performing for festivals. They bring more of uniformity in costumes.

There are many groups in Goa today which perform the folk theatre professionally as well as traditionally. There are some which have left performing in the traditional spaces and are solely professional. Reasons for these groups stopping the traditional performances are many. One of them is the internal tussle between the intra community members/groups due to difference in political affinities. Thus, it can be said that the contemporary politics has affected the cultural scenario in some way or the other. Folk theatre forms of Goa have also influenced the contemporary scene of art and theatre.

### **Folk theatre: placed in modern theatre space**

Folk theatre forms now are also a part of modern drama, either as an element to suit the plot and structure of the play or as a medium to spice up the performance. Thus, folk theatre is now not just a village affair but a part of a larger, non spontaneous, well designed form of art called modern drama. According to Amitava Roy, "During the 1950s and 1960s, an awareness began to grow among our emerging young urban theatre workers of the complex and rich forms, streams and traditions of Indian folk theatre" (Lal p.10). Not surprisingly, it was after independence that folk theatre in India began to be a part of mainstream culture. Institutions like Sangeet Natak Akademi set up by government for the growth of art and culture began the work of documentation. Probably, the need to search for native roots during the post-independence era and the sense of liberation from the colonial influence, was the motivation for this upsurge. But according to Roy, this led to, "[...] a blind mishmash of urban and folk theatre elements" (Lal, p.10). However, in some plays, the folk theatre was resourcefully used, such as in the works of Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar and Habib Tanvir, who, along with the forms also adapted the regional mythos in their plays to experiment with content and techniques. In Goa for instance, several playwrights and directors have made use of folk theatre elements in their plays. One example would be *Shabai Shabai Baujansamaj* by Pundalik Naik, a satiric play which uses folk songs and dances to comment on the contemporary political scenario. This has also led to a manifestation of lyrics of original folk form to suit the theme of the modern play. Another example would be *Premjagor* by Naik which uses the folk theatre form of Zagor to narrate a love story. Shakespeare's Hamlet has been adapted by Shridhar Bambolkar as *Soodzagor* in which again, the form of Zagor has been introduced in the rat trap scene.

This journey of folk theatre forms from the mud built *Maand* to the modern architecture such as proscenium is a signifier of the changing trends of 'space' of folk theatre.

### **Traditional Vs Modern: Pros and Cons**

It is true that the locally, regionally originated folk theatre forms have got a space in the modern spaces due to various initiatives, yet this phenomena has had several implications on how folk

theatre forms functioned. With the change in spaces, and with the change of spaces, folk theatre forms have also gone through major changes. On various occasions, these changes and modifications carried out for the sake of modern space have been also adapted in the traditional performances. Both the spaces, i.e traditional and modern offer their own pros and cons. Some of them can be discussed by making a comparison between the two:

- 1) While the traditional space like *Maand* encouraged the spontaneity and inclusivity during the performance, the proscenium demands the rehearsals and exclusivity. For instance, in a performance on *Maand*, the villagers react and respond spontaneously to the songs and dialogues of the characters. This may not be possible in a modern space where there is a formal environment and lack of intimacy between the performers and the audience.
- 2) One of the advantages of folk theatre reaching up to the level of proscenium is the larger audience and exposure in the outer world which the *Maand* system did not really allow to happen as it would be a simple village affair. Since the traditional folk theatre forms are being performed on national and international platforms, it receives wider audience with various tastes. It tests the ability of folk theatre performances to stand in par with the other forms of infotainment. The folk theatre forms do not remain as the heritage entity but becomes a live entertainment form.

Said and done, it is also a fact that folk theatre forms originated from the traditional spaces and still acquire a significant place in the lives of rural performers. These spaces, with required changes need to be retained as performing spaces. Both the spaces require a significant amount of attention. Yet, traditional spaces would require more of exposure to sustain and retain its authenticity. A few things could be done to bring not just the performances but the spaces as well into the mainstream.

### **Probable solutions for the sustenance of space**

Both traditional and modern spaces are equally significant in terms of survival of folk theatre. Thus it is necessary to think on the sustenance of these spaces. One of the probable solutions or suggestions to retain the traditional spaces like *Maand* and thus preserving semiotics associated with them is that the connoisseurs and the folk explorers can actually visit the real locations where these performances are being performed traditionally.

Folklore is now a part of industry such as tourism. This is one of the reasons why folk theatre performances are being performed in starred hotels and other touristic places. An attempt to take the tourists to the real locations of folklore is a probable solution for the declining significance of traditional spaces of folk theatre. By doing this, people can also witness the other rituals related to the folk performances. It will allow the urban audience to interact with the performers in their comfort zones. This does not happen in the modern spaces as there are time constraints and non-requirement of ritualistic endeavours.

### **Conclusion**

The space in which any performance is performed holds a great significance in the whole process of performance. It is not just a space to perform but also a space for socio-cultural interactions.

These spaces have helped the performing communities to sustain the traditional values. Spaces such as *Maand* have been significant in terms of retaining the values that is the essence of rural life.

With the process of commercialization, folk theatre forms are also being performed in modern spaces. This may lead to a slow decline of traditional spaces like *Maand*. It may also keep the audience away from the actual traditional spaces. Folk theatre forms have not been mere forms of entertainment, rather they carry socio-political and spiritual legacies with them. Every aspect, especially the spiritual one cannot be transferred to the modern spaces. Thus, the traditional spaces like *Maand* hold a greater significance in retaining and exploring these less explored areas. Loss of traditional performance space may further lead to loss of values that have been basis of these folk performances. Thus, everything that helps in sustaining values need to be preserved in its dynamic and flexible form.

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*Research Scholar at English Department, Goa University. Theater artist and amateur poet. Translator, anchor and film enthusiast.*

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