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**The folk theatre of the Rongdani Rabha of the Rabhas in North Garo Hills of Meghalaya and Goalpara district, Assam, holds significant potential as a tool for development communication.**

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**Abstract**

The folk theatre of the Rabhas in Goalpara district, Assam holds a significant potential for development communication in the rural areas. The Rongdani Rabhas reside in the southern bank of the Goalpara district. It is a sub-tribe of the Rabha that has been practicing a rich folk theatre since the 1940s as seen by Lt. Prasanna Pam. Rongdani Rabha Folk Theatre also called Jatra/Pala is a unique blend of Music, dance, acting, storytelling, and singing. It serves as a medium of communication in generating developmental work/messages related to social, cultural, and environmental issues, health, education, agriculture, and rights. The Rabhas are rooted in their cultural heritage and their traditional lives offer them to connect to their ancestral social, economic, survival, and political life. These folk theatres offer a powerful and accessible medium to address social issues, promote awareness, and empower communities. The shift in the dynamism of theatrical performances is on the decline due to the modern means of communication. This paper explores on the characteristics, significance, and potential of the Rongdani Rabha folk theatre in the context of development communication.

**Keywords:** Rabha, Rongdani Rabha, Golk Theatre, development communication, cultural and traditional elements

## **Introduction**

### **Folk Theatre definition:**

Folk media, also known as traditional media or Indigenous media, refers to the various forms of communication and expression passed down through generations within a particular cultural or ethnic group. Ranganath (1980) expressed Folk Media as a form of media that has ways of expression related to lifestyle and the cultural form evolved through the years. Wang and Dissanayake (1984) called the form of communication that was in the culture itself before the arrival of the modern form of communication with its continuity and change. Folklorist Richard Dorson (1976) divided Folk culture into four categories 1) Oral literature 2) Material Culture 3) Social Folk Customs and 4) Folk Performing Arts. These forms of communication often serve as a means of preserving and transmitting cultural knowledge, values, and traditions (Lent, 1982; Daudu, 2009). Folk Theatre is a traditional interpersonal, inter-group, and inter-community communication tool. It is a form of communication with social, political, and cultural issues which also help create public awareness on important causes as it directly appeals to the people. The characteristics of folk media include their reliance on oral tradition, the use of local languages, and their connection to the cultural identity of a community (Fairuz & Ng, 2018). The First Five Year Plan in India recommended the use of folk media to promote agricultural development and extension services, and subsequent plans have continued to recognize their potential for social and economic development.

### **Purpose and Objectives:**

The present study is based on the Rongdani Folk Theatre in North Garo Hills and in the Goalpara district of Assam practiced by the dramatists Lt Prassana Pam, Ganapati Pam, and the later followers. The study tried to analyze the past and the existing practices of the folk theatre are effective tool for development communication reviewed through existing literature, observing the performances, interviews, discussions, and participation in the community festivals and workshops.

The objectives of the study are:

1. To analyse the Rongdani Folk theatre as a medium of communication.
2. To study the impact and the changes brought as a result of modern communications.

## **Review of Literature**

The Rabha tribe is one of the indigenous tribes of the Indo-Mongoloid race to the Tibeto-Burman family, predominantly inhabiting the Goalpara district of Assam, a linguistic family, predominantly inhabiting the Goalpara and Kamrup (rural) district of Assam (Rabha, 2020). The Rabhas belong to the language group of the Bodo family. The generic name Rabha comprises the designated subtribes such as Pati, Rangdani, Maitori, Koch, Totla, Dahori, Bitlia, and the Shonga (Hana). The Rabhas are the fourth largest tribe inhabiting Assam of the 31 scheduled tribes. They are also found in small numbers in Kokarjhar, Darrang, Bongaigaon, dhubri, Nalbari, Nagaon, North and West Garo Hills of Meghalaya and Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal (Das, 2021).

The Rabhas have a rich cultural heritage, manifested through their unique folklore, music, dance, and folk theatre. Their ritual hymns, folk songs, and folk dramas are deeply rooted in their worldview, beliefs, and customs. These forms of folk media serve as a means of preserving and transmitting their cultural identity, values, and traditions across generations. Their agricultural practices, food habits, and traditional belief systems have made them distinct and unique amongst the various tribes of the said region (Bhattacharjee & Boro, 2017). Their traditions, myths, and numerous folklore are intimately associated with different ritualistic practices and performances which are transmitted orally throughout the generations.

The folk theatre tradition of the Rabhas in Goalpara district, Assam, has long been recognized for its ability to communicate complex ideas and narratives to local audiences (Joseph, 2016).

### **The gist history of Rabha Folk Theatre:**

The Rongdani Folk Theatre evolved as an oral tradition with narratives revolving around social issues while referring the historical figures and stories. The Rabha Folk Theatre as reviewed is believed to have first begun by Lt Prasanna Pam of Maniganj of Mendipathar in North Garo Hills presently and spread to Goalpara district of Assam. The various records of the origin of the theatre can be dated from 1940 to the present. The various sources of themes revolved around agricultural festivals, social customs, rituals, and trends of the time.

The Rabha Folk Theatre can be classified into Four Phases since its inception in the 1940s.

1. The Beginning/ First phase (1940-1950) by Lt. Prasanna Pam.
2. The Second Phase (1950-1969) by Rahen Pam, Ganapati Pam, Bhoben Daynang, and Congress Rabha.
3. The Third Phase (1970-1990) by Sushil Rabha, Manik Pam, Deepak Pam, Prakash Rabha, and Lasuri Rabha.
4. The Fourth Phase (1991-present) by Prakash Rabha, Rutikanto Rabha, Sukracharya Rabha, Pabitra Rabha.

The Pala is the leader and trainer of the group. The Ostads of the earlier phases are Prasanna Pam, Rajen Pam, Ganapati Pam, Bineswar Sontok, Pharsing Bantho, Arjun Pam, Ganapati Pam, Subin Rabha (Komakusi), Kirtan Rabha, Prakash Rabha, Bhoben Rabha, Rutikanto Rabha, Sushil Rabha, Ananda Rabha and many others.

### **The Rongdani Rabha Folk Theatre groups:**

The Folk theatre groups down the times are Maniganj Rabha Kristi Group (Prassano Pam), Upper Maniganj Theatre group (Congress Pam), Aua Baikho Natak Theatre (Bhoben Rabha and Rutikanto), Sonajuli Theatre Amguri Maladhora (Prakash Rabha), Manchalengka Amguri Maladhora (Prakash Rabha), Badungduppa Rampur (Sukracharya Rabha), Sirgiris Kristi Songo Dairong Madapara (Sushil Rabha), Yuba Naito Songo Dairong Kathalguri, Khardang Theatre Group, Bamunghopa Theatre Group, Bhalukdubi Theatre group, Hadlapar Theatre Group, Dhoroni Ujanpara and Namapara, Chohori group, Chutkigoraimari Group, Tilapara Group, Ronggiri Naito Parishad Dwarka Duapara, Hatisila Group, Chatabari Group, Kantapara Group, Baida Group, Jurigaon Group, Krishnapur Group, Batapara Group, Naguapara Group, Khokapara Group, Panchali Group, Dokapara Group, Paham Group, Chamaguri Group, Kainbatapara Group, Holaidanga Group, and Babarishi Kuruabhasa Group. The present surviving ones are Manchalengka of Prakash Rabha, Badungduppa of Lt. Sukracharya Rabha, and Baba Rishi Naito Dol by Pabitra Raba.

The relevance of Rabha folk theatre in development communication as observed and discussed with the experts from the field visits has potential functions and significance. The Folk Theatre incorporates the elements related to its unique cultural expressions. The Theme and Content are drawn from historical perspectives and contemporary issues while focusing on moral lessons, good over evil, the story of the Dodan King, Marukhetri (Rabha General of Dodan), etc as found in the plays Dodan by Prassan Kumar Pam, Rishi Srijan by Farsing Bantho. The Performance Structure usually consists of 25-40 members with singers, actors and actresses, musicians, prompters, and helpers. The performers put on traditional attire with the use of heavy makeup, colors, ornaments, masks, etc as costumes. Musical accompaniment is an integral part of Traditional theatre such as khams, khol, chengchop, flute, harmonium, etc linked to the narrative and cultural context of the Rabha community. Hence, the cultural significance of entertainment and a means of cultural preservation and community engagement, addressing social issues and reinforcing communal ties within the Rabha community.

### **Rabha Folk Theatre for Development Communication:**

While observing the various Rabha Folk Media such as Theatric performances like jatra gaan, nitto natika (Assamese term) locally, interviews with the experts, dramatists, performers, and local people the dynamism of the Folk Theatre has brought many changes with regard to cultural relevance and acceptance, entertainment purpose, oral communications, community participation, and transmissions to the new generations. Folk theatre is deeply ingrained in the Rabha community's cultural fabric. The use of familiar art forms like manchalengka, tondalengka, badadika (crafted wood kingfisher related to the ancestors), etc, enhance message acceptance and resonates with the target audience in efforts to the preservation of Rabha identity amidst the challenges posed by globalization and modernity. The use of music, dance, humor, and storytelling in Rabha folk theatre makes it highly engaging and entertaining. This can capture attention, make learning enjoyable, and increase message retention.

The Rabha community relies heavily on oral traditions still today. Hence, Folk Theatre as a live medium of communication and interactive medium, effectively reaches audiences with varying literacy levels. The communities performed in the open-raided spaces are integral to the locals and their needs. The participatory approach in the form of festivities during seasons fosters

the relationship between the cultural performing arts and the communal experiences. The use of folk songs, proverbs, and tales of the past plays a crucial role in preserving the oral traditions of the newer generation of knowledge with community engagement.

The Rabha Folk theatre encourages active participation from community members, fostering a sense of ownership and empowerment in addressing development challenges. The collective engagement of the entire community staged in the festivals and worship involves reclaiming their cultural narratives through folk theatre. For instance, the Manchalengka group of Ms Rayanti Rabha, Hadlapara encourages women and girls to participate in theatrics learning traditional instruments with a sense of pride and ownership as community members.

The Rabha Folk Theatre as a medium of cultural narratives and social changes incorporates contemporary themes with new audiences new ideas, and shifts in roles. The Jatra gaan of the Rabhas as called locally adopted religious themes earlier later adapted to address contemporary issues, making it a versatile tool for communicating about health, education, agriculture, gender equality, and other development priorities.

In Dance and Songs, the Farkanti and Hamjar are integral parts of the agricultural activities and social rituals addressing the themes of love, affection, prayers, agriculture, and spirituality. The performers entertain as vital tools of communication making them essential for community development.

### **Implementing Development Communication through Rabha Folk Theatre:**

The issue of interest and preservation of the Rabha Folk Theatre is challenging amidst the influence of modern media and entertainment. The younger generations are less interested in traditional art forms. The traditional folk forms are not originally oriented towards developmental messages however integrating development themes and messages is important for community ownership and participation. Another challenge as seen in the adoption of modern stages like village squares and temple courtyards in the adaptation to modern wider stage is a challenge.

The local playwrights, artists, and community members narrate stories related to the cultural history and figures in connection to local issues and challenges while minding the culturally

sensitive and engaging scripts that incorporate development messages. This is seen in the context of Badungduppa of Rampur in the play 'Modachi' with local narratives, contemporary issues, and interactive elements. The folk theatre resonates with the local audiences reflecting the community's aspirations and social issues; hence the initiative of involving the local people through free mentorship, and performances initiative is seen in Rabha folk theatre groups. The case of Badungduppa's summer mentorship camp, Manchalengka's winter camp, etc. for budding artists. This helped the groups to improvise the techniques and scripts with the integration of contemporary themes and traditional narratives.

The significant role in the development of communication as a medium to convey social, economic, and cultural messages includes the integration of music, dance, and drama. The ability to blend traditional narratives with the community's values and traditions, for better engagement of audiences engaging the youth can resonate effectively with the rural populations.

### **Challenges and Considerations:**

Due to the impact of modernization, westernization, declining interest, and lower economic earnings, the practice is less in number today than found prior to 2000. The festivals are celebrated in a modern concept, and the younger generation is less interested in traditional folklore over performing arts. Another cause is the economic factors with regard to fewer shares and earnings by the members of the group. (Field Visit Genderapara 2023 Kali puja). The traditional folk elements are found in the language uses, costumes, and performance styles that helped in integrating the art form to its roots and people's tastes. Hence, it is crucial to strike a balance between adapting folk theatre for development communication and preserving its cultural integrity and artistic value. The plays adapted the indigenous means of availability of resources, balancing the tradition and innovations, and engaging the community with sustainable practices. With the involvement of the local artists and craftsmen, the creation and performance of the theatre pieces with the storytelling practices sharing their experiences and perspectives from the local participants have brought the promotion of cultural festivals showcasing the community's talents and wider audiences. Today folk theatre has visual sets to help the traditional sets with sound designs for sound, audio, and background, reaching the broader

audience strategies. By embracing modern technologies, the folk theatre of the Rongdani Rabhas maintains its cultural significance, engaging the local communities.

The various groups since the familiarity of the theatre in small ways have emphasized the involvement of the local community. The locals and the dramatists have contributed to the development of the script with the stories and cultural practices. The effectiveness of the communication includes the younger generations involving the local narrative themes on societal issues and values fostering cross-cultural communications. The themes are community-centric with social and environmental awareness. Hence, developing robust methods to measure the impact of folk theatre on knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors related to development issues is essential. With the power of Rabha folk theatre and collaborating closely with the community, development practitioners can leverage this vibrant art form to create engaging, culturally relevant, and impactful communication strategies.

### **Conclusion:**

The folk theatre of the Rongdani Rabhas serves as a vital tool for the development of communication preserving the rich cultural heritage of the Rabha community fostering community engagement and social awareness. The themes are drawn from the historical, epical, social, and daily life of the people communicating important social messages, bringing and encouraging cultural pride among the younger generations. The earlier theatrical performances were historical in nature however the fourth phase of folk theatre such as Badungduppa, Babarishi Naitto dol, and Manchalengka highlight the local identity and addressing the contemporary issues. The permanent stages through preservation of cultural preservation, reinforcing the cultural connection between artistic expression and community development. The folk theatre of the Rabhas entertains, educates, and empowers the people with the development communications strategies with social cohesion and sustainability. Hence, reviving this form of art brings a potential to enhance community resilience and identity in the face of modern challenges.



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