

Indigenous Folk Theatre of Kashmir and its Relevance in Contemporary Society

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ABSTRACT

Bhand Pather is a legacy of Kashmiri culture. Theatre activity in Kashmir reached its heights during the ancient period of Kashmir history. Before the establishment of the Muslim Sultanate in Kashmir, theatre activity was largely associated with the socio-religious ceremonies. Performing in open-air theatre constituted one of the important royal entertainment activities. Bhand Pather as a semi-scripted performance by men dealt with variegated issues ranging from social, political to religious. This open-theatre art is replete with satire, dance, and music. There is tremendous possibility of integrating it with our cultural tourism. This can help in rescuing this art form from extinction. The paper provides history of this little known art form of Kashmir.

1. Introduction

Kashmir's distinct geo-cultural climate has endowed it with matchless artistic merit and skill among its inhabitants. Influenced by the countless treasures of its natural beauty in the form of lofty mountains, lakes, waterfalls and charming flowers of multitudinous colours and its unique religious plurality offered enough chances for its people to demonstrate immense degree of tolerance and sense of accommodation. This has resulted in the production of fables, fairy tales, epics, dramas and poetry. Receiving stimulus from natural beauty and its religious colorfulness, theatre activity in Kashmir reached its heights during the ancient period of Kashmir history. Before the establishment of the Muslim Sultanate in Kashmir, theatre activity of Kashmir was largely associated with the socio-religious ceremonies. Both archeological and literary evidences suggest that the theatre performance used to be organized on the eve of festivals and on the birthday of Buddha, Lord Krishna & other deities. In the backdrop of pre-Muslim religious fervor of Kashmir; fine arts, like singing, sculpture, music, dance, and theatre performances were closely associated with different social and religious ritual activities. These arts, as such, were not looked from merely aesthetic and creative point of view, but taken as sacerdotal appendixes to fundamental devotional exercises. During the reign of Lalitaditya (reg.724-760 A.D.), alongside other fine arts, drama also received royal patronage and artists were given every incentive to promote their talent. It is learnt that Lalitaditya in spite of his busy war schedule, would spare some time to watch theatrical performances performed by professional actors.

With the establishment of Muslim Sultanate in Kashmir, the theatre, in tune with the earliest Hindu traditions, continued to attain legitimacy from the spiritual centers. The only difference was that the place of math and monasteries, and temples was taken by shrines, khanqahas and ṛṣi abodes. So deep was peoples attachment to these actors of Bhand Panther that during the days of acute crises, heightened by natural calamities like floods, famines, epidemics, fires and recurring

earthquakes, common masses sought their help by organizing special prayers, performances at the Shrines of Sufi and Ṛṣi Saints. During their prayer performances, the Bhandas were seen engrossed, with utmost degree of surrender and self denial, bandi duaayi khair as it is called in the vernacular, forms the crux of every Bhand Pather. It is generally carried out by the Maghun (Head Bhand) at the shrine where all Bhandas in traditional costumes used to play for divine aid and mercy.

The folk theatre, called Bhand Pather, is probably the earliest theatre specimen in the subcontinent. Though no serious attempt has been made to document this old extant art form, yet the traces of this kind of traditional theatre one can come across in some of the extant manuscripts. The word bhand with its origin in the Sanskrit bhaand meaning comical behaviour or imitation, is found in most of the north Indian languages.

The expression Bhand Pather is combination of two Sanskrit words bhand and pather. The word Bhand stands for a jester and pather means patra, a dramatic performer. But in Kashmiri parlance, bhand refers to folk actor and pather points to dramatic performance with greater tinge of imitation and exaggeration. Though we hardly get any direct reference in Nilmatapurana and Rajatarangani about Bhand Pather, the art of drama had reached its perfection under the ancient Hindu Rule in Kashmir. Performing in open-air theatre constituted one of the important royal entertainment activity. It was not a theatre in the folk form, but it contained all the elements of elite and devotional theatre. Therefore, it is wrong to dub Bhand Pather as Bhande Natyam as no attempt has been made to draw a line of demarcation between the great and the little tradition. In every learned human society, elite and folk-art compositions go side by side with a distinct purpose to delight two distinct opposite shades of people: elite and commoners.

Popular approach to Kashmiri folk theatre in collecting as well as understanding it, so far has been preservative rather

than appreciative and as such prescriptive rather than descriptive. In taking it as a repertoire of the relics of the past, the approach is a continuation of the earliest enthusiasm of the colonial times when the Orientalists of the West engaged themselves in collecting this forgotten treasure for its antiquarian value. However the folklorists who collected it and preserved it as a rich legacy merit commendation for saving its linguistic expression, craft and paraphernalia from vanishing into oblivion. It was Mohammad Subhan Bhagat (1927-1993), the eminent folk artist of Jammu and Kashmir who not only revived Kashmiri folk theatre, but also innovated in all its aspects. He wrote:

"So far as the question of survival of this folk art is concerned, I can say with confidence that the art has the potential to change and continue by accepting ever-new modes and hues of the ever changing times and assimilating them into its texture, nevertheless the survival of this folk art depends on the cooperation of the common folks whose representative it stands. In the past it thrived only because of the patronage of the Rajas, Maharajas and landlords. It is encouraging to note that in modern times too many people are showing their whole hearted love for it." (Kaashur Luki Theatre (1976), pp. 19-20).

The old oral form of the theatre, reminiscent of the medieval times is nowadays being forgotten, but it still has a tremendous scope because in modern times there is again a shift towards the native and the local. All the post-modernist theaters seek more and more inspiration from the native form, and, as such, bhaand pather, has the scope of getting resuscitated and turned into a viable tool of both entertainment and instruction. *Gwaseen pather* and *Shikaargah* to name only few are not dramatic representation of men and women of any historical past, but every one of every age. "The Maagum, the impresario", "Maskhar the buffoon", "Raazi, the king", "Gwar, the priest" and "Ashaaq, the frivolous lover", "Gupeely, the coquette" and other characters in the known folk repertoires are not fixtures of past theatre, but represent everybody of all times. They effectively and pleasantly represent men and women with all their charms and incongruities, noble and ignoble manners and conduct. They are not characters determined by any set values, but by time. They change according to the social, economic and cultural context as such it is not ideal to foresee a *Bhand Pather* that shall represent men and women of the contemporary reality marked for its western manner of living. Craze for the hi-fi culture and IT corruption, disintegration of families, diaspora and loneliness. We can have a new type of pantomime like *angrez pather*, Computer Pather, Mobile Pather and what not. The fact is that the Bhand is not legacy of the medieval time. The Bhand is our instinct present in every one of us in all ages. The professional entertainers bring the Bhand talent in us to the fore and the resulting humor in the words of Schopenhauer detaches us, "from our world of good and evil" of loss and gain and enables us to see it in proper perspective. This fundamental purpose of the burlesque and laughter is best understood by the clowns of the a Bhand Pather. Here for instance is an expert from *Darzi Paathir (Drama Based on Women folk)*.

Rest of the clowns : Tell us something delectable.

Clown-II: But say something so spicy (pointing towards the ladies) that they too get thrilled. Do not tell us anything that will cause us hang our heads in shame.

Elder Clown: (Singing Rof in cahoots with ladies) Hai ransi Tomul Manah (O Dear! Prepare rice for us.).

The choristers play at wasool and the clown and the ladies dance in a ring and sing doggerel about rice.

Dard: (Coming behind amidst the din and holding Clown -II by the ear, tearing him away from the ladies) What are you doing?

(Tr. M.S Beg 1999-855-6)

By combining comedy and satire, a typical Bhand Pather returns to modern man the euphoria of childhood. In all modern societies mankind is facing a terrible anxiety, fear and depression. The folk theatre can work as an antidote against this poison of modern living and give us, though momentarily the natural joy of the by gone times.

Being essentially a polyphonic theatre *Bhand Pather* is aimed at playfulness in mixing pantomime masquerade, drum beating, *shahanai* chants, dance and weird costume. The audience enjoys it spontaneously as they are free from the constraint of identification. The spectator in spite of the distance between the real and the theatricality is one with the players. In some performances of *Bhand Pather*, there is scope for the audience to become performers. The fundamental method of *Bhand Pather* is parody and juvenile instinct that for the adults get expressed in many art forms but in its complete form in the shape of folk drama. Since every folk performance deals with the present, it burlesques the men and women engaged in actual life situations. A *Bhand Pather* despite its set costumes and accoutrement explores the triviality and incongruities of human behaviour that is apparently very serious. By striking a balance between assumed seriousness and implicit triviality, frivolity and absurdity *Bhand Pather* makes his audiences conscious of his flaws and has been powerful medium of social transformation and has the potential of being a medium of mass education in times to come. In the past it has been the most popular and affective strategy of revolt against various social evils and exploitations and in the contemporary complex world when mankind is beset by numerous hazardous like over population, AIDS, pollution, noise, joblessness and terror, one hopes that the *Bhand Pather* becomes a popular street theatre to bring out attitudinal education among the masses.

Like any another form of folk art, *Bhand Pather* is a congregational performing arts in which there is hardly any difference between the performers of the proscenium and the audience. Being inalienably linked with festivals and rituals, the art though purely secular is sacred. It is participatory in nature rather than objectively distanced. Nevertheless the producer and the artists have to bear in mind that they are not to present a facsimile of the existing social reality and thus involves artifice and skill as much as possible. The maestros

in the genre knew it well. Now it is the turn of the inheritors of the tradition that they make it a complete art work which involves other art forms like music dance, song, martial arts, acrobatics, trickery, ploys and if necessary and possible even modern techniques like animation, laser beam effects and mirror props. In order to be aesthetically more presentable *Bhand Pather* has to come out of its narrow thematic and technical boundaries and be open to borrowing from the performing arts of other communities. No art form can survive in isolation. It could easily imbibe good constituents of folk forms of art like Manipuri dance, Naga Mask Dance, Assam drum dance, Ghatak Dance of North India, Dhamaal of Punjab and also from the South Indian arts. It can also revive all the extinct performing arts of Kashmir like *Gatki Beezy*, *Damaalee Swarnay Wadan*, *Kanil Waan*, *Tamburi Nagma*, *Vigne Nachun*, *Garaayey* and *Lady Shah*. There have been many experiments to integrate all these types of entertainment into one unified form of art, a whole theatre, called *Bandhi Pather*.

For re-integrating *Bhand Pather* with the changing culture patterns, Kashmiri people, various institutions like Sangeet Natak Academy, State Cultural Academy, Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage have to do whatever they can in making this legacy popular among the new generation. Contemporary generation in their inexorable stimulus hunt are getting dejected with stereotyped films and cheap television serials. *Bhand Pather* as an aesthetically presentable in terms of artists accoutrement, costume and technique is sure to fill the gap and become an integral part of Kashmiri society.

An art can have a secure future only when its pursuers find it as a visible profession. Every art is essentially a profession, various theories of art notwithstanding. The practicing Bhand inspite of their significant role are still marginalized under privileged community. A *Bhand* of young generations is generally shy of showing allegiance to the class. What Sir Walter Lawrence wrote about the Bhand over one hundred and ten years ago is still relevant for the community. He wrote;

The story of the Akungam Bhaggats is peculiar. Brahamns considered acting to be degrading and even now the Brahamans of Kashmir regarded the Akingam players with contempt. But the Brahaman players say that they took to the stage by the express order of the goddess Devi. The legend relates that many years ago Devi appeared to the ancestor of the Akungam and placing fiddle in his hands said play upon this fiddle. He protested his inability but on the goddess persisting he took up the bow and played unearthly music. (Lawrence 1895-313).

It is opportune time that we recognize the glory of Bhand Pather as a legacy of Kashmiri culture. There is tremendous possibility of integrating it with our cultural tourism. The tourists coming from other climes and lands are fed up with the artificial life and are always looking for something natural, indigenous, and the native. Let us hope that the roaming entertainers and educators associated with Bhand Pather once again throng into our village, modern urban halls, annual festivals and all tourist spots.

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