

Nautanki in Transition: From Traditional Folk Theatre to Contemporary Challenges in Cinema and Digital Media

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Abstract

This article delves into the evolution of Nautanki, a cherished folk performing art in Hindi-Urdu-speaking northern communities, amidst the emergence of cinema and digital media. It explores Nautanki's historical significance and cultural roots, highlighting its enduring popularity and distinctive characteristics. The interplay between Nautanki and Hindi cinema is examined, tracing the influence of traditional folk performances on early cinematic expressions and vice versa. Additionally, the article discusses contemporary challenges faced by Nautanki in the era of cinema and digital media, including shifts in audience preferences, competition for attention, globalization, and modernization. Through an analysis of Nautanki's themes, schools, and musical compositions, as well as its mutual influence with cinema, this article provides insights into the evolving landscape of Indian performing arts and the preservation of cultural heritage in the face of modernization.

Keywords: Nautanki, Cultural Evolution, Hindi Cinema, Digital Media, Contemporary Challenges.

Research Paper

Introduction

Nautanki, a cherished folk performing art in Hindi-Urdu-speaking northern communities, holds a prominent place in Indian cultural heritage. It was a popular form of entertainment in northern Indian villages and towns long before the inception of the Hindi film industry. Despite the advent of mass media, Nautanki concerts still draw sizable crowds, with audiences ranging from 1500 to 2000 people. Its secular appeal and emphasis on providing wholesome enjoyment have contributed to its enduring popularity. Nautanki's success lies in its ability to blend and transfer cultural elements seamlessly, captivating audiences with its captivating charisma. Scholars like Hansen have noted its role in aiding the development of Northern culture, offering insights into the societal experiences of its people. Nautanki performances typically take place on elevated platforms constructed from wooden cots, known as Takht, acquired from local sources. These performances occur in open-air venues near villages, accommodating hundreds or

thousands of spectators. Traditionally, Nautanki shows commence late in the evening, around 10 or 11 p.m., and continue until daybreak, without any intermission. In contemporary times, Nautanki has undergone significant transformations, yet it retains its distinctive feature of preserving complete written texts, akin to a libretto, for all characters, including the director-narrator known as Ranga (Singh, 2020).



Figure 1. This image captures the essence of Nautanki, as actors in colourful costumes bring ancient tales to

life under the open sky, embodying India's rich cultural heritage and the enduring power of storytelling.

Although the Nautanki performative tradition dates back several hundred years, there is no clear point of beginning. While direct references to Nautanki in ancient texts are scarce, parallels can be drawn between Nautanki and traditional theatrical forms mentioned in ancient Indian literature. For instance, the "Natyashastra," attributed to the sage Bharata Muni, discusses various aspects of performing arts, providing foundational principles that likely influenced the development of folk performance traditions like Nautanki. One the reference available is in Ain-E-Akbari, a book, composed in the 16th century by the scholar Abul Fazal in Emperor Akbar's court during the Mughal era. This shed light on the popularity of folk performances and theatrical spectacles during that period, indicating the existence of a vibrant tradition of storytelling and entertainment.

Hindi cinema has its beginnings in the early 20th century with the release of India's first silent feature film, "Raja Harishchandra," directed by Dadasaheb Phalke in 1913. With the introduction of sound in the late 1920s leading to the production of the first talkie film, "Alam Ara," directed by Ardeshir Irani in 1931. When Hindi cinema started that time Hindi cinema was heavily influenced by various forms of traditional theatre, including Nautanki. Many elements of Nautanki, such as exaggerated emotions, dramatic narratives, and lively musical numbers, have found their way into Hindi films, particularly in the early days of Bollywood. The theatricality and spectacle of Nautanki have played a significant role in shaping the larger-than-life nature of Hindi cinema.

Methodology

The methodology employed for this paper encompasses a literature survey, and interviews. The literature survey involved reviewing existing academic works on Nautanki, Hindi cinema, and digital media to understand their historical context and evolving dynamics. In-depth interviews with Nautanki artists were conducted to gather nuanced insights into three key areas: their artistic journey, interpretations of Nautanki's cultural significance, and responses to contemporary challenges. These interviews focused on the experiences, perceptions, and challenges faced by Nautanki artists, providing valuable first-hand perspectives. The data collected from these sources were analysed thematically to uncover patterns and trends, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of the transition of Nautanki and its interaction with cinema and digital media.

Exploring Nautanki: Themes, Schools, Musical Compositions

Themes and Stories: There are several Nautanki plays available but the two significant production hubs, Hathras-Mathura and Kanpur-Lucknow, account for most of them. Nautankis of the Braj or Hathras School or style are principally the work of Inderman and his student Nathram Gaud, whereas Srikrishna Pahalwan was the most significant author of the Kanpur style. Nautanki has borrowed concepts and narratives from a variety of sources. These stories, which draw inspiration from Arabic and Persian love stories as well as Indian oral and written narratives, are either dominated by Veer rasa or Sringeri rasa. Numerous myths and legends from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Puranas, Jatak tales of Buddhism, Panchatantra, and folklore are included in Nautanki. Notable love tales such as Laila-Majnu, Shirin-Farhad, and Heer-Ranjha, historical subjects like Jallianwala Bagh and Amar Singh Rathod, Satya-Harishchandra and Bhakt Moradhvaj, are rooted in mythology; folklore gave rise to Indal Haran and Puranmal, and valiant tales like Sultana Daku and Andhi Dulhan, among others. Some of the Nautankis, such as Bhikharin, Bahu Begum, Beti Ka Sauda, and Bharat Durdasha (all authored by Shrikrishna Pahalwan), among others, also touch on social issues. Agha Amanat, a well-known Urdu poet from Lucknow, wrote Indrasabha, a significant Nautanki from the nineteenth century. He combined folk songs, seasonal dances, and traditional melodies with the finesse and subtlety of Urdu Shayari and dramatic lyrics. This musical drama has been through several iterations with changes and improvisations to the melodies, events, and characters. As a result of its success, other Nautanki authors created tales about fairies, demons, gods, princes, magicians, and dancers in a similar vein. Patriotic tales with political overtones from the era of the liberation fight, as well as role models of moral rectitude and honesty such as Puran Mal, had also caught on. The strongest instances are found in Srikrishna Pahalwan's writings:

During the Gandhi-led non-cooperation movement of 1920-1921, one of his plays, Non-Cooperative Pickles (Asahyog Chatni), was widely distributed in North India at a low cost per copy (Singh, 2020). Additionally, he composed and performed a play in Kanpur on the British killing of Indian people at Jallianwala Bagh. He called this the Khune Nahak (Senseless Massacre). Because of his writing and performances, he became so influential that the British put him under close observation. Undaunted, he presented the play once more in Najivabad. Finally,

he was compelled to leave that location by the district official's order (Swann, 2007).

Nautanki Schools: Folk performance customs of Bhagat and Raas Leela from Mathura and Vrindavan in Uttar Pradesh are where Nautanki got its start. According to some academics, Nautanki is a subset of the Bhagat tradition (Gargi, 1966), as both traditions shared a similar performance aesthetic. However, Bhagat's ceremonial element, which gave it a religious dimension, set it apart from Nautanki. The history of Nautanki became clearer in the nineteenth century with the advent of the printing press to India and the chapbook publication of Nautanki operas. In the late nineteenth century, Hathras and Mathura in western Uttar Pradesh and Kanpur and Lucknow in central Uttar Pradesh served as the principal hubs for Nautanki performance and teaching. It is said that the Hathras style emerged first and the Kanpur style is second. Although both schools use the same theatrical format, their performances vary, particularly in terms of singing.

The Kanpur school substitutes delicate singing and conversations, for the Hathras School's full-throated, strong singing style. When India was ruled by the British in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, this style emerged. 'The fundamental styles of these two cities differ, just as much as their structures and lifestyles do. The Kanpuri School canters itself more on prose-filled discussions combined with singing, whereas the Hathrasi School stresses singing more and is operatic in nature' (Sharma, 2006). According to L. Darius Swann, the primary variations are: Both artistic and organizational distinctions separate the Nautanki styles of Hathras and Kanpur. Hathras songs are frequently higher pitched, and the singer embellishes and develops the notes while holding onto them. The play's theatrical needs take precedence over the music in the Kanpur style. Singing in this style is less difficult since the pitch is often lower and there is less embellishment. Much more true musical ability is needed for the Hathras style. 'Hathras Nautanki is difficult to comprehend due to the decorative vocal style, just as opera anyplace, However, because of Srikrishna Pahalwan's experience speaking poetry, Kanpur-style songs are simple to follow' (Swann, 2007). Kanpur school of Nautanki had adopted many stage conventions of Parsi theatre and experimented with them so much that it became totally removed from the other schools. Large painted curtains, rugs, and chandeliers were first used to decorate the stage, and the system of switching the scene in between acts was developed. Songs became less frequent and the

music group started to perform mostly through talk. But the introduction of Hindi cinema further endangered the future of Parsi theatre and Nautanki. Nautanki and Parsi theatre lost out to it in terms of popularity.

Musical Composition: Nautanki is a solely musical drama with a compelling narrative featuring dances and dialogue in both poetry and prose. The most significant nonverbal mode of communication is music with a strong meter. The vast range of tunes in the Nautanki singing repertory, which was mostly based on classical Ragas, but as it evolved, there was a noticeable shift away from the classical form of singing toward the folk form. A Nautanki expert can discern whether a piece of music is telling the tale of Ras Lila, Alha, or Laila-Majnu, without seeing the performance because of its cyclic meter and rhythmic cadences. The only unifying components for a diverse collection of stories with such disparate forms and structures are the musical and metrical structures. 'Strong rhythms, expressive singing, powerful vocalization of the highest notes, emotional outbursts, quick ornamental twists, melismatic ascents, and descents, and ornamented vocal lines are characteristics of Nautanki music' (Singh, 2020). Actually, as Hansen states in her interview, "Nautanki as a genre can be identified by its distinctive meters" (Hansen, 2013). The usage of musical instruments adds another distinguishing element. The primary instrument, the Nakkara or Nagara, is used to announce the performances of Nautanki as well as to keep the beat and fill the pauses between each verse throughout the performance (due to its powerful resonance, it can be heard for kilometers through the night air). A performance without the dominant Nakkara player would be inconceivable. Other complimentary instruments include the harmonium, Shahnai and flute for themes of romance and frolicking games, and dholak for sharp rhythm and booming voice.

The composition of the talks, which are mostly shown by singing metrical lines, varies somewhat. Doha is the dominant metre in both traditions, however, Nautanki uses a variety of other rhythmic poems, such as Behere-tavil (a long verse), Chaubola, Daur, and Behere-shikast (a short verse). Doha is the primary metre in both traditions. Several key meters are typically utilized in recitation: the first Chaubola (four-line stanza), which comprises the primary stanza; the second Chatti (sung at a considerable pace); and the Doha, which is sung freely. The singing is quite reminiscent of opera. It always expands on a vocal melody's embellishment. While Braj Bhasha and other Hindi languages are frequently utilized for song items, Nautanki dialogues typically use

a flowery form of Urdu. The only features of a Nautanki performance in the nineteenth century were songs and recitatives. Prose sections and humorous sketches began to be included in the early 20th century. Now, comedy and dancing acts typically open an evening's program.

The Mutual Influence of Nautanki and Cinema

The early decades of Indian cinema, marked by pioneering films such as "Alam Ara," "Indrasabha," "Bhakta Prahlad," "Raja Harishchandra," and "Sita Swayamvar," laid the foundation for the interplay between Nautanki and Hindi cinema. While these films may not directly feature Nautanki performances, their creative innovations and artistic expressions echoed the spirit of traditional folk performances. "Alam Ara," often hailed as the first Indian talkie film, set a precedent with its incorporation of musical and dramatic elements inspired by traditional forms like Nautanki, signaling a shift towards a more dynamic and immersive cinematic experience. Similarly, "Indrasabha" captivated audiences with its grandeur and extravagance, showcasing elaborate song and dance sequences reminiscent of Nautanki performances, complete with opulent sets and colourful costumes. Meanwhile, "Bhakta Prahlad" embraced the storytelling style of Nautanki, infusing its narrative rooted in Hindu mythology with dramatic dialogues and musical interludes. These films, alongside cinematic milestones like "Raja Harishchandra" and "Sita Swayamvar," not only showcased the richness of Indian cultural heritage but also paved the way for future filmmakers to explore and incorporate elements of traditional performing arts into their works, bridging the gap between Nautanki and the evolving landscape of Hindi cinema.

The popular theatre, especially Nautanki, is also heavily influenced by Hindi film, which explores the implications of this depiction for nationalism, gender, and modernity at different geopolitical moments. The difficulties in striking a balance between their personal and professional lives are shown in the lives of Nautanki dancer-actresses in Basu Bhattacharya's *Teesri Kasam* (1966) and Chandan Arora's *Main Madhuri Dixit Banna Chahti Hoon* (2003). According to Deepti Priya Mehrotra, 'movies provide valuable clues into the lives of Nautanki actresses like Gulab Bai, who started performing in the 1930s and passed away in 1996. *Teesri Kasam* is one movie that she feels has a strong emotional connection to' (Mehrotra 2006). As per Mehrotra, 'Films borrowed plots, styles of song, dance, and characterization from Nautanki, Parsi theatre, Tamasha, and other popular genres' (Mehrotra 2006). Since D.G. Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) was based on a Nautanki of the same name that had been performed several times prior to cinema being the dominant art form, even the first Hindi film owed its allegiance to Nautanki. The 1950s saw an increase in the popularity of movies, which in turn sparked the creation of new Nautankis. According to Mehrotra, some examples of these include Yasin Mian's *Jehangir ka Insaf*, which was based on the movie *Mughal-e-Azam*, and other Nautankis like *Pukar*, *Sholay*, and *Nagin*, which were directly inspired by the films bearing the same names (Mehrotra 2006). The movie, which centres on Nautanki dancer Hira Bai, is based on *The Third Vow*, an English version of Phanishwarnath Renu's short story "Mare Gaye Gulfam."

Table 1. Some of the Prominent Hindi Films Influenced by Nautanki Or Impacting Nautanki Performances

S.No.	Film	Year	Director	Reference
1.	Raja Harishchandra	1913	D. Phalke	Kapoor, K. (2017)
2.	Bhakt Prahlad	1946	Dhirubhai Desai	Kapoor, K. (2017)
3.	Diwanji	1950	G.K. Desai	Kamath,S. (2019)
4.	Laila Majnu	1953	K. Amarnath	Mehrotra (2021)
5.	Shirin Farhad	1956	Aspi Irani	Mehrotra (2021)
6.	Mujhe Jeene Do	1963	Mani Bhattacharya	Pothukuchi, M. (2019)
7.	Teesri kasam	1966	Basu Bhattacharya	Bhatia, N. (2009).
8.	Heer Ranjha	1970	Chetan Anand	Mehrotra (2021)
9.	Sultana Daku	1973	Mohammed Hussain	Mehrotra (2021)
10.	Main Madhuri Dixit Banna Chahti Hoon	2003	Chandan Arora	Bhatia, N. (2009).

Table 1: chronicles Hindi cinema films influenced by Nautanki or impacting Nautanki performances. It illustrates the dynamic interaction between Hindi cinema and Nautanki, showcasing instances where elements of Nautanki were integrated into Bollywood or where Bollywood influenced Nautanki themes, characters, or performances.

Nautanki in the Era of Cinema and Digital Media: Evolution and Challenges

Cinema and digital media have had a significant impact on traditional forms of entertainment like Nautanki. While Nautanki, a form of folk theatre, has its roots deeply embedded in Indian culture, the advent of cinema and digital media has influenced its popularity, content, and presentation.

Adapting to Changing Audience Tastes: Nautanki, once a popular form of entertainment in traditional Indian culture, now faces the challenge of keeping up with modern audience tastes. With the rise of cinema and digital media, people prefer more visually exciting and fast-paced entertainment. To stay relevant, Nautanki has had to change its performance style and content to match these new preferences (Singh, 2022 pp. 75–95; Findings from interviews and surveys of Nautanki artists).

Globalization, Modernization, and Adaptation: In response to the challenges brought about by globalization and modernization, Nautanki has undergone significant changes.

To appeal to contemporary audiences who prefer cinematic experiences, Nautanki performances have started including film songs and dance numbers. This fusion has changed the traditional format of Nautanki, blurring the boundaries between the two art forms (Singh, 2022 pp. 75–95; Findings from interviews and surveys of Nautanki artists).

The traditional style of Nautanki, characterized by its specific time duration, musical instruments, and scripts, has been modified to suit the preferences of modern audiences. Shorter durations, modern musical accompaniments, and scripts that are more relatable have become common to attract viewers who are more interested in cinematic narratives (Singh, 2022 pp. 75–95; Findings from interviews and surveys of Nautanki artists).

Recognizing the importance of digital media in reaching a broader audience, Nautanki troupes have started using digital platforms for promotion and distribution.

Social media, online streaming platforms, and digital marketing have become crucial in maintaining the visibility of Nautanki in the digital age (Singh, 2022 pp. 75–95; Findings from interviews and surveys of Nautanki artists).

Competition of Attention: Despite its attempts at adaptation, Nautanki faces formidable challenges in capturing and retaining audience attention. One of the major challenges is the dearth of fresh scripts that reflect contemporary societal issues. Nautanki, rooted in tradition, struggles to keep pace with the rapidly changing social landscape and often finds itself unable to resonate with modern audiences (Singh, 2022 pp. 75–95; Findings from interviews and surveys of Nautanki artists).

The rise of cinema and digital media has resulted in Nautanki competing with a plethora of entertainment options. Variety shows, item numbers, and orchestras featuring performances on Hindi cinema songs attract audiences away from traditional folk performances like Nautanki.

Financial Strain and Socio-Economic Status: The socio-economic status of Nautanki artistes reflects the financial strain the genre faces. With limited patronage and minimal remuneration, many artistes struggle to make ends meet, leading to a decline in the quality and frequency of Nautanki performances (Singh, 2022 pp. 75–95; Findings from interviews and surveys of Nautanki artists).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the journey of Nautanki from its origins as a cherished folk performing art to its contemporary challenges in the era of cinema and digital media reflects the evolving landscape of Indian performing arts. Despite its enduring popularity and cultural significance, Nautanki faces several hurdles in maintaining its relevance and sustainability.

The interplay between Nautanki and Hindi cinema highlights the mutual influence between traditional folk performances and modern cinematic expressions. Early Hindi films drew inspiration from Nautanki, incorporating its dramatic narratives, lively musical numbers, and larger-than-life spectacle. However, as cinema and digital media have gained prominence, Nautanki has had to adapt to shifting audience preferences, competition for attention, globalization, and modernization.

Contemporary challenges such as changing audience demographics, globalization, and urbanization pose



significant obstacles to the preservation of Nautanki as a cultural heritage. The younger generation's preference for modern entertainment forms, coupled with the impact of urban migration and globalization, threatens the traditional audience base and economic sustainability of Nautanki performances.

However, amidst these challenges, there are opportunities for Nautanki to reinvent itself and find new avenues for growth and preservation. Collaborations with filmmakers, digital platforms, and cultural institutions can help Nautanki reach wider audiences and adapt to changing times while still honouring its rich heritage and distinctive characteristics.

In essence, the evolution of Nautanki reflects the broader dynamics of cultural transformation in India, where traditional forms of expression must navigate the complexities of modernity and globalization to remain relevant and vibrant in the contemporary world. Through continued innovation, adaptation, and advocacy, Nautanki can continue to enchant audiences and preserve its cultural legacy for generations to come.

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