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Bhand Pather–The folk theatre of Kashmir

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Abstract

Kashmir's distinct Geo-cultural clime has endowed it with matchless artistic merit and skill. 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 demonstration immense degree of toleration and sense of accommodation. This resulted in the production of fables, fairy tales, epics, dramas, and poetry. Receiving ignition and inspiration from natural beauty and its religious colorfulness, theatre activity of Kashmir reached to its height during the ancient period of Kashmir history. Gifted with creative imagination and innovation, Kashmiris developed rich folk traditions and music. Nilamat Purana, a century Mahatmya, fully records this. Based on the review of primary as well as secondary historical texts and discussions with leading Bhand Pather artists, the article attempts to explore the history, theory and playing musical instruments that are used with Bhand Pather-the folk theatre of Kashmir.

Keywords: Bhand Pather, Bhand Jashan, Bhand Chok, Musical Instruments

Research Paper

Introduction

The traditional theatre of Kashmir ejaculate Bhand Pather is presumably the earliest theatre of 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 Bhands are the professional jester of Kashmir, of the royal courts who entertained not only with witty repartee but also through song and dance. The performers improvise their dialogue and make sharp impromptu comments on social and political events of the day. The expression of Bhand Pather is the mixture of two Sanskrit words-Bhand and Pather. The term Bhand stands for a jester and Pather means dramatic personnel. The Kashmiri word Pathur too carries the equivalent meaning.

Historical Overview of Bhand Pather

Bhand Pather as an independent folk art form emerged late on the cultural horizon of Kashmir. According to the details, documented in earliest extant text Nilamat Purana, dramatic performances in Kashmir were held in especially on the three occasions. This is substantiated by Bilhana who opines that the art of music, drama and dance had reached to such an artistic culmination, which carved a special place for Kashmir in the world. During the period of Lalitadatya, alongside the other fine arts, drama also received royal patronage and artists were given every incentive to promote their talent. The art of dancing was common in the respectable families, and according to Kalhana, Princes and nobles were accepted connoisseurs of the noble art. Some of the dancing girls became consorts of Kings of Kashmir. Pt. Kalhana the author of Rajatarangini, further states that the Kashmiri King's had their own troupe of performers and a permanent theatre known as Nalyamandapa.[1] Alongside, the classical music and dance, there seems to have existed also folk dancing and music, performances of which were held in the open.

Before the establishment of Muslim Sultanate in Kashmir, theatre activity was associated with social-religious ceremonies. It is evident that archaeological and literary theatre performances used for festivals and on the birthday of Lord Buddha, Lord Krishna and other deities.[2] During the reign of great political crises which followed the fall of Karkota rule in Kashmir, Pathers began to reflect in a symbolic manner the court intrigues, religious conservatism, Social rigidity, feudal exploitation of Dammars and autocratic vandalism of official cadre

known as Kayasthas. By ridiculing, though in metaphoric expressions, different influential categories of Kashmiri society, these Pathers players had attained great popularity among the common masses. Such deep was their effect on folk psyche that Lal Ded and Sheikh Noor-ud-din Rishi, the two contemporary poets of 14th and 15th century Kashmir refer to the characters of Pather in creative poetic compositions to express their poetic experiments. The Mughal governors groomed in Central Asian aesthetic character did little towards the promotion of this folk art; they instead, offered every help to promote Persian oriented art forms like Calligraphy, Poetry and Garden traditions. Bereft of official patronage, these Bhands developed close connectivity with the commoners, particularly, with rural peasantry. During the Afghan rule there sneaked into the domain of Bhand Pather an additional character in the form of Bachakot. Dressed in feminine charm and costume, a beautiful teenage male was made to act in Pathers to amuse the cadres of Afghan nobility. (Fayaz, 2008)

Though we hardly get any direct reference in Nilamat Purana and Rajatarangini about Bhand Pather, the art of drama had reached its perfection under the ancient Hindu rule in Kashmir. The performing of open air theatre constituted as one of the important royal entertaining exercise. But it was not a theatre in a folk form but it contained all the elements of elite and devotional theatre. Therefore, it is wrong to dub Bhand Pather as Bhand 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 strikingly opposite shades of people elite and commoners. Sir Walter Lawrence in his book, The valley of Kashmir writes about the Bhands: - The Bhagats (Bhands) are very pleasant people and their mirth and good humor from a cheerful contrast to the gloom of Kashmiri peasant. They have a peculiar argot (Phir Kath) which they employ in stage directions. Seeing the suffering of the Muslim peasantry laboring under the infamous institution of the "Begar", Lawrence hails this popular art as the remover of sorrows. (Lawrence, 1895)

Bhand Pather, the folk theatre of Kashmir, has evolved over centuries as representative form of Kashmir's art-incorporating social, cultural, religious and economic perspective of the people. It has served as an important medium of communication, using the mode of satire between the ruler and the ruled. The Bhand receives necessary training in the art from the head of a family. Different elements of Pather are transmitted down to beginners in a very systematic manner. After getting good schooling in debate and action, the new comers are directed to demonstrate proficiency in dialogue delivery, rhythm of footsteps, and power of musical comprehensive. In short, the Bhand needs to be a skillful actor, good dancer, and an intelligent musician. The head Bhand is called Magun, a word taken from Mahaguni, which means a man of varied talent. Unlike Indian theatre there is no space for Sutradhar in Kashmir Bhand Pather, instead, almost all Pathers except few, are at the very outset, represented by two mashkars who by mettle of their wit and humor set a stage ready for the enactment of a thematic Pather (Kemmu, 2011). The distinctive quality of Bhand Pather is that it does not need any walled stage; instead, performances are made in fields, open meadows, terraced maize fields, and shrine courtyards and on the elevated shady spots amid villages. These open setting provide a lot of freedom to the action in the play. Frequent movement from one place to the other does not allow the artists to design sophisticated and permanent settings. For centuries the Bhands have been portraying contrasting shades of socio-political life of the people. Through these Pathers they have been ridiculing cast oriented social hierarchy; nobility intoxicated with the pride of the power; status conscious feudal elite; arrogant and corrupt revenue officialdom and ritual ridden religious leadership. It was through these Pathers, that Bhands communicated the pain and anxiety of sick and sullen Kashmiri peasantry to the general audience.

The decline of classical Sanskrit theatre in the early medieval period led to the emergence of regional folk theatre. This new theatre incorporated many elements of the old classical theatre, of course with its own ethnic flavor. The emergence of Bhand Jashan on the cultural scene of Kashmir to has been part of the same process.

Elements of Bhand Pather:

Bhand Pather has elements of dance and drama. There is a strong influence of folk and classical music on it. There is sufficient archaeological evidence which indicates that Kashmir has remained an important center of dance,

drama, and music. Temples at Zeithyar, Akingam, and Manzgam were not merely religious places but were important centers for the emergence of trends in dance, music and theatre. Bhand Pather is composed of typical dance movements and components of drama, which have been acquired from the ancient drama. Elements of dance in Bhand Pather include:

1. Bhand Jashan
2. Bhand Chok
3. Bhand Nagma

Bhand Jashan: Bhand Jashan is comprised of two parts. Bhand denotes of clown and Jashan means festival. Bhand Jashan precisely means the festival of folk performers. The latter in Kashmir is called by the nomenclature of Bhands. In Bhand Jashan, the Bhands stage plays/Pathers. Jashan is derived from 'Avesta' word 'Yasna' which means a festival. Bhand Jashan were organized on pilgrimages, seasonal festivals, etc. Presently, as part of the promotion of folk theatre, government organizes these Jashans. Since old times religious fairs or cultural festivals have witnessed active participation of Kashmiris in large numbers. On these occasions besides acrobatic shows and performances by wrestlers, jugglers, and tambourine players there was a regular participation of Bacha Nagma dancers, Hafiz Nagma performers and Bhand Jashan actors.[3] Common people had an opportunity to break the monotony of their dull life by witnessing performances of singing and folk plays in the precincts of temples, places of pilgrimage, or old mansions. Of all these, Bhand Jashan was most popular which big audiences. While inside the shrines there would be a somber display of religious faith, outside there would be joyful singing, music and theatrical performances by the Bhands. This is followed by a farcical imitation of the solemnities performed by the clowns (Maskhara). As most of the plays are semi historical in nature, costumes exhibit a blend of contemporary local and semi historical dress. Colorful headdresses and cloth pieces are used in Bhand Jashan a kind of lively plays Pather; improvised mostly in the Kashmiri language, borrowing immensely from Urdu, Persian, Hindi and Punjabi words and phrases to suit the plot concerning a particular socio-political situation. Actors get enough scope to ridicule and rebuke officials, money-lenders, and social evils like dowry system, making fun of everyone from the simplest peasant to the most powerful political leader.[4]

Bhand Chok: Chok means the village squares or crossroads where four ways meet. A religious fair in the precincts of shrines in four adjacent villages is also called Chok. For instance, the four day fair held at Badarwan, Vilgam, Gohan and Soph Shatipur villages near Kokernag, or the fair held on four consecutive days in Srinagar city at Batamaloo Sahib, Zaindar Sahib, Ropa Rishi Sahib, and the shrine near the Breyi Kujan locality. Chok, or Bhand Chok, is also the term for a kind of dance shown at these fairs. This is a very old tradition connected with the nine days of the Navratras, a festival celebrated twice a year where the dance was performed as an offering to the deity. It was performed on crossroads in four adjacent villages before the idol was installed on the occasion. In Gujarat, a dance called Chachar Chok is presented before the goddess as an offering to the deity.[5] Bhand Chok has taken a proverbial form in Kashmiri spoken language. This constitutes a customary opening exercise wherein Bhands seek an invisible aid either from the saintly soul or Almighty "Allah". (Fayaz, 2008)

Bhand Nagma: Bhand Nagma is also called Bacha Nagma; it provided rich entertainment to people. Here the role of Hafiza is taken over by a male boy called Bacha-Kot. Bach-Kot himself sings Vachans, Ruff, and Chakri, popular with the audience. The musical instruments are played with Bach Nagma are Bach-Kot dance is Rabab, Sarangi, Tumbakhnari, and Nout. During the Afghan rule there sneaked into the domain of Bhand Pather an additional character in the form of Bachakot. Dressed in feminine charm and costume, a handsome teenage male was made to act in Pathers to amuse the cadres of Afghan nobility.[6]

Types of Pather

Bhands of Kashmir have a repertoire of about ten plays. Among the present living forms, Wattal Pather is considered oldest and the Angrez Pather as the latest. The essence of all the Pathers is not their antiquity or modernity but flexibility. Although the theme is basic to each Pather yet the incorporation of contemporary social issues is done with relative's case. Such is the flexibility of the Pather that even present day problems like environmental pollution and unplanned urbanization are dealt with and accommodated into its format. Some of the present days living Pathers are as:-

According to Bhawani Bashir theatre artist, the folk plays

were performed without preparation. The names of Pathers are as follows. Grees-Pather" (Pathers about Farmers), Watal-Pathers (Pather about cobblers), Darzi-Pather (Pather – portraying the tyranny of the Dards), Bakerwal-Pather (Pather about Bakerwals – a nomad tribe of Kashmir), Buhri-Pather (Pather about Bohris – the traders), Raze-Pather (Pather about the Rajas), Shikar-Gah (Pather about the animal kingdom and the human behaviour with animals), Gosani-Pather (Pather about Hindu-hermits), Angreez-Pather (Pather about the English), Armeen-Pather (Pather about the vegetable-growers) Hanz-Pather (Pather about Fishermen), Chakwal-Pather (Pather about Chakdars) and many more. To say there was hardly any cult, tribe, trade or community of which these Bhands didn't make mimicry – thus is the Pather named about". (Bhawani, 2009)

Musical Instruments of Bhand Pather

The musical instrument is an integral part of Bhand Pather. Various instruments are used in it. The word 'Vadya' means Instrument in Indian terminology. The constituents of music i.e. vocal music, instrumental music, and dance are based on two most important constituents, which are Swar and Laya and the liberal and effective use both these constituents can be seen in instrumental music. Besides vocal music and dance, instrumental music also finds an important place in the theatre. It would take the life out of a theater if it is not accompanied by instrumental music.

According to Maharishi Bharat; instrumental music forms an integral part of the theater and should be judiciously used after considering the Rasa and Bhava aspects present in the theater. Bharat the author of Natyashastra has classified musical instruments into four classes:- Tat Vadya string instrument, Sushir Vadya wind instrument, Avanaddha Vadya Percussion instrument, Ghana Vadya Solid Instrument (Jaidev, 1995). In Bhand Pather, the Swarnai, the Dhol or drum, and the Nagara or kettledrum are more often used, as the performance is held in the open where the sound of these instruments carries a long way. They would be too loud in any enclosed space.

Swarnai: Swarnai is the mixture of two words Swar and Nai. Swar means musical note and Nai means flute. Swarnai (also called at times Tul-e-Saz) equivalent of Shehnai, is slightly bigger in size. Swarnai is completely a folk drama instrument. The tunes composed in Bhand Pather are played on Swarnai. The use of Dhol and Nagara is essential along with Swarnai because they help in making it prominent.[7]

Figure 1 Bhands displaying their musical instruments

Source:http://blogs.tribune.com.pk/story/25114/bhand-e-pather-a-fading-art-in-kashmir/

Nagara: Nagara is the instrument in the form of dhol. It is used for musical performances in Bhand Pather. According to Subhan Bhagat, veteran Bhand Theatre artist, the original name of nagara was naqara, which subsequently changed to Nagara. Nagara is an important musical instrument in Bhand Pather. Before the commencement of the play the nagara player comes in and goes around the performance arena in a circular movement, beating his drum. The audience then takes the seat around him. He is called Karydar and his action is termed Kor dyun. The drummer, who follows him, provides accompaniment to the Swarnai players. By now the space outside the Karydars circle gets packed with the people. The Vad or musical mode changes after the beat of the Kor and the players make their entry.[8]

Dhol: Dhol has its own history in the musical instruments of India. But in Kashmir, this instrument is used with Bhand Pather-the folk theatre of Kashmir and Bhand Jashan festival of folk plays to add a musical touch to the acts. [9]

Conclusion

Music has remained an important ingredient of Bhand Pather. Keeping in view the requirement of Pathers different musical forms and instruments has evolved for Bhand Pather. Elements of theatre and musical instruments play an important role in Bhand Pather and make it more effective and presentable to the audiences. Precisely we can say that the folk theatre of Kashmir without elements and musical instruments is a body without soul and spirit.

FOOTNOTES

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