



Blue Ava Ford Publications

International Journal of Trends in English Language and Literature (IJTELL)

An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal; ISSN:2582-8487

Impact Factor: 8.02 (SJIF); www.ijtell.com Volume-6, Issue-1; Jan-Mar (2025)

Echoes of Tradition: A Study of Folk Theatre of Haryana and Uttarakhand

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Article Received: 03/01/2025

Published Online: 20/02/2025

Article Accepted: 01/02/2025

DOI:10.53413/IJTELL.2025.61016

Abstract:

India has a rich history of art and culture, and various means of art forms have always been a part of Indian society, be it in rural or urban settings. In the same tradition, Folk Theatre is one of a composite art form in India with a fusion of elements from music, dance, pantomime, versification, epic and ballad recitation, graphic and plastic arts, religion, and festival peasantry. As the very word 'Folk' describes that it has its roots embedded in native culture. In rural settings, it mainly provides entertainment. However, how the folk theatre is going to serve depends on the nature and orientation of the place, as well as where it is situated. In the state of Haryana, folk theatre's orientation is of entertainment, while on the other hand, in the north Indian state of Uttarakhand, it serves multiple purposes, as deity worship, entertainment, education, etc. As an indigenous form, it breaks all kinds of formal barriers of human communication and appeals directly to the people. The present paper will attempt to examine the state of folk theatres in both states and how they serve people as an art form, and what the prevalent themes of performing are in both states.

Keywords: Folk theatre, folklore, identity, religious representation, etc.

Introduction

India has one of the longest traditions in theatre, dating back to at least 5000 years. Bharat Muni codified the art of dramaturgy in his famous work Natyashastra, which is considered as



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a revered text to present times. Though there have been a few additions to his theory of Rasa, scholars have added a few more Rasas. One thing that cannot be avoided is that the tradition of Natyashastra belongs to the classical form of theatre, while, on the other hand, Folk Theatre is entirely of a different league. Folklore and folk practices are inseparable parts of a culture, as they not only reflect the culture of the people but also act as a tool to reinforce their existing power equation, and their diversity, and also question the dominant social ideologies. Folklore and Folk Life fall into four categories, as Dorson (1976:2-5) grouped them as: 1) Oral Literature, 2) Material Culture, 3) Social Folk Custom, and 4) Performing Folk Arts. Among them, Performing Folk Arts involve a tradition of artistic creation. When theatre is talked about, one gets to know that by the 12th century AD, theatre was restricted by the advent of the Islamic establishment. This was the period when folk theatre came into the mainstream in rural areas, replacing the classical Sanskrit drama. The content of the enactment of the folk theatre was derived from the epics, Puranas, local legends, mythology, religious stories, etc. Thus, the second phase of Indian theatre evolved from the oral and folk traditions. While the classical theatre was largely inspired by *Natyashastra*, it was urban-oriented with great attention to its form and nature, and catered to a particular class only. On the other hand, folk theatre, known as traditional theatre, is based on rural roots, beliefs, and is quite simple, unsophisticated, informal, and rural-oriented. In *Rethinking Folk Drama*, Tillis (1999) states that Folkloric drama or dramatic folklore is a theatrical act that occurs inside locally established nonexclusive frame works of action shared by actors and spectators; a dramatic performance, an enactment beyond time and space that uses performance practices of design, movement, speech and music (p. 139).

The peak period of folk theatre's emergence in different regions of the country ranged from the fifteenth to the sixteenth centuries. Aparna Bhargava Dharwadkar says rightly in this context, "The folk theatre always belongs to a specific region, language, ecological cycle, and the participating community." (Dharwadkar 322)

The classical and elite drama follows the rules set by Natyashastra or Greek dramaturgy. Contrary to that, the theatrical performances which are held in rural areas are done according to the seasons, according to the Hindu calendar months, and according to the needs of people. People and performers adhere either to the religious and mythological dates or to the needs



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of people; this way, folk theatre has autonomy of performances. The Urdu playwright Habib Tanvir believes that it is the rural areas and villages where the essence of India is contained and preserved. he says, “It is in its villages that the dramatic tradition of India in all its pristine glory and vitality remains preserved even to this day. It is these rural drama groups that require real encouragement... it is not until the city youth is fully exposed to the influence of folk traditions in theatre that a truly Indian theatre, modern and universal in appeal and indigenous in form, can really be evolved.” (Tanvir 1977: 6).

Theatre of Uttarakhand:

The state of Uttarakhand is known as ‘Devbhumi’, because of its geographical positioning and its association with the visits of Pandavas, the visits of Shankaracharya, and the establishment of ancient temples. Theatre forms of Uttarakhand are soaked in folk traditions, interwoven with religious, social, and seasonal rhythms of hilly life. The linkage of ancient epics is deeply ingrained in the most theatrical traditions of this region. The society-specific and culture-specific notions that are unified into the narrative flexibility, presenting a geo-cultural and ethno-linguistic society, make Indian folk theatre different from the West. Folk dramas have endured because they were vital; they were high points of tradition. Mohan Upreti remarked that:

“...The importance of folk theatre should become quite obvious to us because it embodies the creative work of countless generations who inherited and enriched it and passed it on to us ...without a concerted move on our part to understand the entire heritage, we can neither understand the heart nor the mind of our people” (as cited in Dalmia, 2006, p. 172).

Thus, the effects of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are quite evident on the arts and culture of the society. The folk performances in the region are equipped with episodes of either the *Mahabharata* or the *Ramayana*. The theatrical rendition of Ramayan in the region of Garhwal and Kumaon is known as Ramman. The festival and theatrical performance of Ramman is enacted in honour of *Bhumiya* Devta, which is a titular deity of that particular region. Masked performances are prevalent in Uttarakhand, 18 people with 18 masks perform the Ramman, and celebrate 18 Puranas. The dance performances of Ramman are also comprised of 18 different beats. The musical instrument that has religious values and is most widely used is the Dhol. The performance includes the dance of the Sun God, Ganesha, the Narad Minu dance, dance of the Buffalo herders. Meanwhile, certain episodes



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of the Mahabharata are enacted as a mythological skit, mainly of the Pandavas, and are known as *Pandavlila* or *Pandav Nritya*. These theatrical formulations, rooted in tradition and anchored in cultural heritage, established that folk theatre/drama plays an important and dynamic role in preserving and authenticating regional heritage, culture, and traditions. They worship the bows of Pandavas and do the *Pind-daan*. Rajputs worship them as their *Kul-Devta* in a theatrical performance.

Jagar Gathas is another form of performance in hilly regions, where people from a particular Shilpkar community recite the songs of invocation of deities. People gather in small congregations, and these performances become a medium to talk to the divinity, and people gathered here want to be blessed by the deity. As the deity speaks through a person and solves the people's problems and diseases.

Hurka Baul is an agricultural folk theatre, which coincides with the agricultural cycle of the state. This theatrical performance takes place when it is the timing to harvest the crops. Basically, it's a celebratory performance after the farmers see their sowing. Performances are done in open fields, villagers gather there to watch and participate in the performances.

Theatre of Haryana:

The state of Haryana has its unique folk theatre tradition named *Swaang*, which literally means imitation or disguise. It is the most popular form of theatrical performance in Haryana, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh. It is the amalgamation of music, dance, poetry, folk songs, and speeches. The setting of *Swaang* is essentially rural, and it is comprised of legendary and modern tales of valour, sacrifice, and humour from the region. The folk drama of Haryana is relatively new in origin, as it can be traced to Krishan Lala Bhat, who is considered as the founding father of contemporary Folk theatre. Unlike the classical settings of a stage, *Swaang* can be performed in any open space, a field, or a courtyard. Though many musical instruments are used in the performances, as dholak, harmonium, ektara, and khartal. The themes of the Haryanvi folk theatre range from mythological tales to the tales of morality, folk tales, and in present times, folk theatre is being used as a medium of communication to the people. Folk theatre highlights the theme of health and hygiene, literacy, and advocacy for diseases.



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The popular plays of Swaang theatre are Raja Vikramaditya, Pingla Bhartari, Jaani Chor, Kichak Vadh, Nal-Damyanti, Raja Rissalu, Heer-Ranjha, Harischander, and Prahlad Bhagat. Thus, Haryanvi theatre has varied themes from historical to semi-historical, borrowed themes and plays from neighbouring Punjabi literature, and mythological texts. Pt. Lakhmi Chand of Janti Kalan (Sonipat) is the most celebrated and towering figure in Haryana, in the field of Folk Theatre, folk songs, and their dissemination in the region. He improved the *Ragni* style of singing. He possessed a rich, melodious voice and was also a successful composer. Mulk Raj Anand gave homage to Lakhmi Chand in following words: “you have expressed in your passionate words the vital human truths by which our people often deadened by oppression, have left a heritage which shines like other fiery words of the Haryana tongue by unknown bards and still inspires the eyes of your men and women to awaken from their sleep”. The most popular Swaang staged by him includes Nal Damyanti, Meera Bai, Satyawan Savitri, Poorjan, Seth Chara Chand, Puran Bhagat, and Shahi Lakarhara. Lakhmi Chand presented the philosophy of life in his *Swaangs*; on the other hand, he polished and presented the musical, artistic, and philosophical heritage of the world in the folk language of Haryana. Through his art, he encapsulated the essence of the Geeta in his drama Padmawat. He says,

“Lakhmi Chand chhoday sab phnd,
Milega karam karey ka phal-dundh”.

(Lakhmi Chand says that leave all hypocrisy, all deeds will be justified)

Haryanvi theatre and drama were created not merely for the pleasure, but for conveying moral values and strengthening the cultural heritage. In earlier times, women were not a part of theatrical performances. With the advent of time and change, women have started to participate in the performances.

Conclusion:

A country as vast and diverse as India has been standing tall in the face of adversity because of its diversity and a connecting thread of folk drama, literature, songs, mythology, beliefs in local legends, and mutual respect. Uttarakhand and Haryana are neighbouring states, while



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Uttarakhand's geographical positioning is with the mighty Himalayas, Tibet, and Nepal, while Haryana is a plainer state in geographical positioning. Theatrical performances have been the main source of entertainment in both states. While the state of Uttarakhand's folk theatre keeps its folk deities in a position of privilege. Even when the theatrical performances of Ramayan or Mahabharata are enacted, they initiate the process with their local titular deities. On the other hand, the Folk drama of Haryana doesn't have such obligations of reverence towards the deities, it is freer and wider in themes. Haryanvi drama has borrowed themes from neighbouring states in the context of enactment, and does not have any rituals of masked dance performances. Contrary to that, Uttarakhand's folk theatre has been enacting mythological plays based on the rendition of the Ramayana and Mahabharata for centuries. For Uttarakhand, their folk drama has religious values attached to that, while Haryanvi drama has no such obligation, as its themes are varied and vast. Along with religious and mythological themes, they mainly provide entertainment, education, and awareness to the masses. Theatrical performances of Uttarakhand are as old as of 8th century, they began with the advent of Vaishnavism in the region. While the history of Haryanvi theatre is relatively new, dating back to the 16th century, as Lala Krishan Bhat is considered the founding father of Swaang in Haryana.

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