

Bhand Pather (The folk theatre of Kashmir)

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Abstract

The popular folk theatre of Kashmir called Bhand Pather is a combination of two words Bhand & Pather. Bhand means “actor” or “artist” Pather in Kashmiri language means “to act” or “to imitate” or “to pretend”.

Keywords: band pather, folk theatre, Kashmir, musical instruments

Introduction

Bhand refers to dramatic performance with a great tinge of imitation and exaggeration. There are three main elements of Bhand Pather: -

- i) Playing Musical Instruments
- ii) Dance (with comical gestures)
- iii) Acting.

In all three forms music is an essential element of Bhand Pather, because Bhand has to cater to the tastes of audience, men, women and children, besides to provide background music for the pather performances. The instruments used by the Bhand musicians are Surnai, Dhol, and Nagara. Some Bhand Parties play the musical instrument called Saaz-e-Kashmir. In fact every pather begins with drum beating (beating of Nagara). Pather needs no stage for performance, it is mostly staged in an open ground. The man who plays the dhol is the central figure of the orchestra. Many taals in various combination are played on this drum in the past. Unfortunately at present only few of them survived e.g. Chapandaz, Sool taal etc. The Nagara is an accompaniment to the dhol by which the rhythm doubles to intensify as the play proceeds. More than one Nagara is used in the performance to emphasize the sound of the instrument. The “Thalij” is a metal symbol a little larger than those used in other musical forms. To this music are added Kashmiri folk songs, sung throughout the play.

Bhand has many Pather plays to perform. Among the present living forms of Pather that have come to us Wattal pather is the oldest one and the Angrez pather as the latest but generally Darz pather, Raz pather, Shikargah, Bakerwal pather, Angrez pather, Wattal pather, Armen pather etc are played. The above said plays focus on different strata of society and wants to highlight the various social evils prevalent in the society. Every play begins with music like drum beating, Swarnai vad, Nagara, Thailej etc.

Historical / Background

The history of Music, dance and drama in Kashmir goes thousands years back, had an old age tradition of theatre which happened to be most rich in content and art. The history

of Kashmir has been divided into four periods.

1. The early period of Hindu Kings.
2. The period of Kashmiri Musalmans known as Salat-i-ni Kashmir.
3. The period of Mughals known as Padshahi-Chagatai or Shaahi Mughlai.
4. The period of Pathans known as Shahan-i-Durrani ^[1].

But the history of Kashmiri Folk Drama viz-a-viz the Kashmiri Folk theatre falls into three periods: -

- Buddhist and Hindu Period which lasted till early fourteenth century.
- The Muslims (Sultanate and Mughlia) Period which lasted for another five hundred years.
- The period of 20th century.

The Theatre activities in Kashmir organized with socio-religious ceremonies during Hindu Period and the theatre performances used to be organized on the eve of festivals and on the birthdays of Lord Budhha, Lord Krishna and other deities ^[2]. During this long period, music, dance and theatrical performances were closely related to different socio-religious rituals. According to the details, documented in earliest text of Neelmath Purana, dramatic performances in Kashmir were held especially on the four important occasions ^[3] in the year i.e., some religious festivals, on social occasions, on agricultural festivals and in winter on first snowfall. On the above said occasions theatrical performances like drama of Kashmir took perfect shape and form.

The art of music dance and drama had reached to such an artistic culmination which carved a special place for Kashmir in the world ^[4]. According to Kalhana dancing, music & art was common in the respectable families and he further states that the Kashmiri kings had their own group of theatrical performers and had their own theatres known as “Nalyamandapa” ^[5] Kashmiri Drama (Pathar) had well developed and nurtured during the reign of Raja Harsh Dev

¹ The Valley of Kashmir by Walter R. Lawrence P-179.

² Kemmu, Sheerazah (English) Bhand Pather Folk Theatre of Kashmir PP. 44-54.

³ Neelmath Purana Ved Kumari Ghai P. 109.

⁴ History of Kashmir by P.N.K. Bamza. P. 256.

⁵ Stein, Rajtarangni Vol. IInd PP. 435-437.

“1100 - 1108” During his period he maintained a magnificent court at least in early period of his reign. He patronized music, dance and drama. He himself taught Shishyas (students) how to act and dance ^[6]. It is said that training centre regarding the “Pather” had been established there to train the artists. The people from outside the state also used to receive training there.

During the reign of Lalitaditya Kashmiri Drama received a royal patronage. He had given artists every facility to promote their talent and he himself watched theatrical performances performed by professional actors ^[7]. Kashmir has seen many hard turbulent times after 11th century ^[8]. The invasions, external incursions and internal turmoil from time to time resulted in the loss of books, manuscripts and play scripts, music and fine arts also suffered badly.

With the advent of foreign rule and invasions, decline in all forms of Kashmiri art and Literature was quite an expected misfortune of the time, the Kashmiri drama was banished from the Royal Court consequently the folk taste survived in all its manifestations through bhand of Kashmir in the shape of Bhand Pather.

With the inception of Muslim Sultanate in Kashmir (14th Century). The Kashmiri Theatre received comparatively a great setback in urban communities for lack of state patronage and public support for obvious reasons. However, it did not disappear completely in Kashmir as the Folk theatre form continued to receive applause (Commendation) in the remote and rural areas when folk artists performed in the folk theatre festival called Bhand Jeshin. Their role was encourageous on one side they entertained the public and on other side they played the role of good ambassadors of public before the royal court. Zain-ul-Abidin (A.D. 1420 - 70) “Zainab Villas” and “Zaina Charitha” ^[9] the earliest plays which were written and staged during this period. “Vikrama Charitha” ^[10] by Bilhana which was most probably modelled on Ban’s Harsha Charitha. These dramas were staged by professional artists in ancient and medieval times in Kashmir. According to the certain historians and the old tradition which passed from generations of Bhand, a great campaign had been organized during the reign of Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin to develop the Kashmiri Theatre. During the campaign, training was imparted to the actors. The traditional dramas that are played nowadays were played at that time too. On the best occasions the strolling bhand received gifts from the king and nobles. These bonuses being over and above their earnings from public performances ^[11]. The Kashmiri Folk Theatre progressed tremendously during Mughal Period which was made possible only because they used the Kashmiri Folk theatre for their own political purposes and they did little towards the promotion of this folk art. Deprived of official patronage these bhand develop close connectivity with the commoners, particularly with rural peasantry ^[12].

During the modern era with the spread of education and awareness Kashmiri art and theatre experienced revival and this revival could be seen from the early part of the 20th century. Various types of theatre companies were established like Maharaja Dharma Company, Kashmir Theatre Ltd. Etc. After the establishment of such drama companies Kashmiri Theatre experienced a steady process of development encompassing various phases along its way. The First Kashmiri Play “Sach Kahwat” ^[13] written by Nand Lal Koul (The Touch Stone of Truth) was staged in 1928 dealing with the theme of Harsh Chandra’s self-sacrifice for truth.

In 1938, the first full-fledged Kashmiri play “Grees-sundghar” (farmer’s home) written by M. Hajini about the grievances of Kashmiri farmers ^[14] was staged.

In 1953 Kashmiri theatre was for the first time introduced to modern techniques like proscenium, lightening system etc. The new experiments were being made in style and form of play writing and presentation.

In 1960 Radio Kashmir started a successful step to improve and expand local art. The authorities of Radio Kashmir reached to every nook and corner of the state were the folk artists lived and recorded their statements on the spot and encouraged the bhand artists and bhand started to improve their acting and the standard of their art.

In 1961 “Greesi Pather” was broadcasted through Radio Kashmir directed by M.S. Baghat. This drama was admired and appreciated by the listeners throughout the valley very much.

In 1965 “Sezr-Te-Pazar” was scripted by Gh. Mohi-ud-Din Aajiz¹⁵. This drama was related to the adult education ^[16].

In 1972 many drama clubs were established in Kashmir like Budshah Theatre and Bhand Theatre in Chadura ^[17].

In 1979 “National Bhand Theatre” was established in Wathura and Shah Qalander Youth Club in Wathura also ^[18]. After that the decade 1980 – 1990 could be considered the golden period of Kashmiri theatre.

In 1980 Jammu & Kashmir Academy of Art Culture and Languages started drama festivals in all districts of Jammu and Kashmir. Apart from that other institutes like National School of Drama, Sangeet Natak Academy and other institutes played a significant role in promoting and strengthening the Kashmiri Theatre.

The period of 1991 – 2001 saw down turn in theatrical works as the Kashmir was affected by militancy. After a long gap of one decade Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art Culture and Languages organized a theatre of different plays in 2002 at Tagore Hall Srinagar Kashmir which again encouraged theatre activists to give new lease of life to the theatre movement of Kashmir. It is very essential to mention here that after 1965 many folk theatres and drama clubs were established in Kashmir and at present there are almost over 50 registered folk theatre groups and among them the most popular and professional groups are Kashmiri bagat theatre – Akhingam, Anantnag National Bhand Theatre – Wathura, Chadura

⁶ India, J&K, the Land & the People by Somnath Dhar P. 133.

⁷ Kashmir Folklore Dr. Farooq Fayaz. “A Study of Historical Perspective” P 144.

⁸ “The Valley of Kashmir” by Walter R. Lawrence PP. 189-191.

⁹ India Jammu & Kashmir the Land and the People by Somnath Dhar P. 134.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ India Jammu & Kashmir the Land and the People by Somnath Dhar P. 134.

¹² Hassan, Kashmir under the Sultans P. 289.

¹³ India Jammu & Kashmir the Land and the People by Somnath Dhar P. 137.

¹⁴ India Jammu & Kashmir the Land and the People by Somnath Dhar P. 137.

¹⁵ President of National Bhand Theatre Wathura.

¹⁶ “Bhand Pather” by Gh. Mohi-ud-Din Aajiz P. 12.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ “Bhand Pather” by Gh. Mohi-ud-Din Aajiz P. 12.

Budgam, Alamdar Baghat Theatre, Muhipora Anantnag, Wular Folk Theatre, Zainageer Baramulla, Gulmarg Luk Theatre, Palhalan Pattan, Baramulla and Dilkash Folk theatre, Hatmulla – Kupwara.

NOTE: All above mentioned theatres are registered with cultural academy of Kashmir.

The Bhand Pather as an art has survived through the ages and forms an important part of folk tradition. This art which once was an important tool on information, awareness and amusement is losing its importance in the modern times. People take more interest in modern means of entertainment. Although various steps were taken to revive this form of art during the 19th century, various organizations have been formed to give an upliftment to this art but the efforts have proved to be insufficient. There is need to take immediate and effective steps in order to preserve this dying art because bhand pather is not only past of our tradition but is also one of facets of our identity.

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