



## Bacha Nagma and Band Pather: A study on Kashmiri Singing

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### Abstract

Bacha Nagma was introduced by Afghans from Kabul, in which a teenaged boy dressed as a girl dancer, is trained in the Hafiza style of dancing. Bacha Nagma is popular in the villages, particularly at harvest time. Bacha Nagma is common in Kashmir during wedding celebrations at the homes or when the wedding processions would be taken out on boats on the Jhelum river. 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 "Bhand" meaning comical behavior or initiation is found in most of the north Indian languages.

**Keywords:** bacha nagma, band pather, Kashmiri singing

### Introduction

#### Acha Nagma

Bacha Nagma, is an offshoot of Hafiza dance form<sup>[1]</sup>. It has been very popular as an item of sheen entertainment. It is very popular and draws large crowd and much applause. Accompanied by rabab, sarangi and drums. It involves quick spinning movements and pirouettes resembling those with khatak. There is much expressional dancing as dell, and the dancer has to interpret the song related to love and romance. Hafizas remind us of the Devdasis, and Bacha Nagma remind the memory of the Gotiphas of Orissa.

This is a mixture of dance and song. Song is sung by Chorus and dance performed by the soloist. It is preferred by both Hindus and Muslims<sup>[2]</sup>.

Bacha Nagma (male young dancer performing to entertain admirers of this art) is also an inseparable part of Kashmir culture and cannot be ignored Bacha, a cherub in biblical terms is again a centre of attraction dressed in long lehnga type dress or ladies "Kameez Shalwar" with Dupatta, busy in dancing surrounded by this male partners playing different musical instruments.

Kashmiris have tremendously suffered at the hands of foreign invading rulers and all of them made women a special target. That is why people developed a habit of hiding their women and this gave rise to males or enriches dressed in women's clothing to entertain people. And this became part of culture. Now these troupes are nowhere to be seen and this art is a thing of past.

The dancer is known as Bacha, the kid- usually a boy/man who dances, sometimes comically, always attired like a woman in multi coloured dresses. The song-dance proceeding is known as "Bacha Nagma".

Nowadays in Kashmir, marriages and other occasions are

incomplete without Bacha Nagma. The group is booked before a couple of months before the events. Every body in Kashmir valley likes Bacha Nagma. I interviewed around 100 people in the valley and according to them Bacha Nagma is the most popular folk music in Kashmir. Kashmiri love Bacha Nagma.

On marriages the main thing the "Bacha" does he manages to get more people on the dance floor, he is showered with money. He pinpoints each and every member of the family and relation. Singing takes place all night. Gungroo on Baccha's feet gives a different aesthetic sense. The Bacha sings all types of songs, happy, sad, taunting etc. each and every type of emotions (rasas) are present in their songs. He behaves differently on each song. His facial expression are same as of lyrics.

The songs which are sung in Baccha Nagma are of many types. The Baccha depicts his emotions according to the songs. The songs are of different patterns, like Erotic, Humorous, Pathetic, Heroic, Spiritual, Peaceful and Wondrous. All types of emotions are seen in Baccha Nagma are can say all types of Rasas and Bhavas are present in Baccha Nagma which are expressed by the Baccha (young male dancer) through his dance.

Some of Bacha Nagma are as under:-

1. Haariye thawak na kan ti lo lo  
Zaar maen totas wan ti lo lo

#### Meaning

O, myna give ear to me,  
Tell pigeon of my suffering.

2. Laali lalay beha lalinawatho  
Shahzaado waadi kya aos

#### Meaning

O, love i love to fondle you.  
O, my prince you forgot your word.

<sup>1</sup> History, Religion and culture of india by S. Gajran Page No. 197.

<sup>2</sup> Hamari Mousique by Syed Qaiser Kalender P-211.

The compositions of Baccha Nagma is very much soothing, melodious and full of aesthetics. E.g. I will quote one song to show how the composition and the talas used with this singing gives an aesthetic sense. For every singing the lyrics play an important role which adds the aesthetic sense while composing the same.

**Sathayi** : Aare Wachkhie Nare Wizimalye Lo

**Meaning** : From founts you come, “O” lightening of fire.

Aare Wachkhie Nare Wizimalye Lo

**Swar** : Pa Pa Dha Ni Dha Ni Dha Pa Pa Dha Ni Dha Ni Dha

In the Sathayi, Komal swars are used on the word like Wachkhie, which beautifies the singing of the song. Here the singer takes a long pause and completes this word into six beats which is the main aesthetic sense in this stanza and a great melody to hear.

The singer or composer imagines as if his beloved, who is like a lightening of fire, walks down a stream which will take some time, so a pause in singing, is the aesthetic sense in this stanza of lyrics.

**Antra** : Nabi Saeb (Saw) Nis Bagas

**Meaning** : To the garden of Prophet Muhammad (Saw)

Soni Seri Lagas

**Meaning** : I will raise the wall with golden bricks

Aab Drawai Soni Seirev Taliye Lo

**Meaning** : Water flowed beneath the golden bricks

Nabi Saeb (Saw) Nis Bagas Soni Seri Lagas

**Swar** : Pa Pa Dha Ni Dha Pa Pa Pa Dha Ni Dha Pa

Aab Drawai Soni Seirev Taliye Lo

**Swar** : Pa Dha Ni Dha Pa Pa Pa Pa Dha Ni Dha Ni Dha Pa

When the singer sings the Antra, the rhythm get slow on first two lines of the lyrics, and after that the rest of the lyrics is again faster. The transition from slow to fast rhythm is the real beauty of this style of singing and the main aesthetic sense of the said song.

In this folk song, a folk Goda taal, having 8 matras as Dhin Dhin Na Na Dhin Dhin Na Na, is played on noet and tumbaknari, the traditional percussion instruments in Kashmir, when other musical instruments played also follow the same folk Goda taal, to create and enhance an aesthetic sense to the said style of singing. The traditional musical instruments plays an important role in Baccha Nagma among them Ghungroos (which the baccha, male dancer wears on ankle, enhances the aesthetics in Baccha Nagma. When the dancer dances on musical notes, accompanied with musical instruments, his Ghungroos and their jingling beats or rhythmic pattern automatically creates a soothing atmosphere for the listeners. When the beats of traditional percussion instruments like tumbaknari and noet mingles with the beats of Ghungroos, creates an aesthetical atmosphere. The dance in Baccha Nagma is very energetic and rhythmic in an artful fusion of music and Choreography, the dancer dances and spins around playing vibrant yet graceful rhythms.

### Bhand Pather

Kashmir distinct Geo-cultural clime has endowed it with matchless artistic merit and still. Influenced by the countless treasures of its natural beauty in the farm lofty mountain, lakes, waterfalls and charming flowers of multitudinous

colours, and its unique religion plurality offered enough chances for its people to demonstrate immense degree of toleration and sense of accommodation. This resulted in the production of false, fairy tales, epics, dramas and poetry<sup>[3]</sup>. Receiving ignition and inspiration from natural beauty and its religious colour fullness, theatre activity in Kashmir reached to its heights during the ancient period of Kashmir history<sup>[4]</sup>.

The expression Bhand Pather is the combination of two Sanskrit words –Bhand and Pather. The word Bhand stands for a Jester and Pather means dramatic personnel. But in kashmiri parlance Bhand refers to folk actor and Pather points to Dramatic performance with a greater tinge of imitation and exaggeration<sup>[5]</sup>.

Though we hardly get any direct reference in Nilmatpurana and Rajtarangni about Bhand Pather, but the art of drama had reached to 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 the folk form but it contained all the elements of elite and devotional theatre.

The village of Akingan in the Anantnag district of kmr, 45 kms from Srinagar is the home of a community of Bhands, the traditional performers of the valley. Spread over a number of villages at the foot hills of an endless mountain ranges, these people move from place to place with their extensive repertoire. A short distance up one of the smaller hills in this area sits a famous temple dedicated to the Goddess Shiva Bhagvati. Once a year, in honour of this Goddess, the Bhands who are muslims, perform a special ritualistic dance known as the “CHHOK” done with great devotion and faith. During this time the temple is enveloped in an atmosphere charged with a sense of timelessness, a cosmic reality. An extremely superstitious people, the Bhands perform this particular CHHOK at this temple and nowhere else. However, other shows are presented elsewhere, at muslim shrines as well as at Sufi centre’s.

The secular outlook of Bhands is reflected in their dynamic folk form that has incorporated many elements from the classical Sanskrit theatre as well as from other traditional forms of India but over the years many aspects have been lost and others have undergone dramatic changes.

The plays of the Bhands are called “Pathar” a word that seems to have derived from Paatr, dramatic character. Bhand comes from the bhaana, satirical and realistic drama, generally a monologue that is mentioned in Bharath’s ’Natya Shastra. The Bhand Pather though is not a monologue but a social drama incorporating mythological legends and contemporary social satire. Born as Hindus, the Bhands converted to Islam but remained very secular in their outlook. An extremely simple, witty and practical people. The Bhand Pather unfortunately does not sustain them economically and they have been driven to other professions primarily weaving the basket work of the kangris, woolen blankets and carpets etc.

Post tenth century onwards has been a time when there were foreign invasions in the valley. The social fiber was disturbed

<sup>3</sup> Kashmir folklore by Farooq Fayaz Page No. 113.

<sup>4</sup> Stein, Rajtarangni, vol – 11 PP. 313, 376.

<sup>5</sup> Kashmir Folklore by Farooq Fayaz Page no. 115.

and the kashmiri became a slave in his own land where he had to face and live with alien cultures, religious and socio political system. The cross exchange also came through in the folk tradition of the state. The injustice that the people suffered was expressed in the plays albeit as absurd or humorous be it. The king in Darza Pather or the royal soldiers in Shikargah, who speak in Persian to the poor and illiterate kashmiri and expect him to understand a foreign tongue and whip him for not replying.

Or the English couple in Angrez Pather who speak a hilarious version of the language to a rest house guard while out on a hunt.

In the Gosain Pather which is about shiva and saivites of Kashmir, large puppets with masks are used to project the sense of oppression through the character of the king or the witch. In all the plays, the local character is the protagonist, victorious in the end.

The tradition and form is handed down through the generations from father to son. The bhand has to train himself to be a skillful actor, dancer, acrobat and musician. The leader of the troupe is called the magun, a word taken from mahaguin, a man of varied talent. He teaches his people the art and expertise of their inheritance. Today the training is virtually non-existent, a danger signal of the un-pending doom on his form of entertainment. The finest performers all belong to the older generations.

Acting, dance and music are an integral part of this form, as a whole. In-pure tradition, the performances begin in the evening with a ritualistic dance, also called a CHHOK but different from the one done at the Shiva Bhagvati temple. With the onset of night the play unfolds gradually and ends in the early hours of the morning with the magun doing a duaykher, (a prayer or blessing).

The Bhands dance to the tune of a specified muqams and the orchestra includes the swarnai dhol, nagara and the thalij. The swarnai is larger in size then the shehnai with a strong and metallic sound that has arresting impact in the open air arena. This instrument attracts audiences from the vicinity. A very special wind instrument, it is made in three parts: the nai or wooden pipe made by special carpenters, the barg, a reed of a particular grass found locally and a copper disc of the diameter of the pipe into which the large barg is fitted. Before the swarnai player adopts his newly made instrument, a ritual offering is made in dargah (A shrine). The composition played is called a muqam and each Bhand Pather has its own muqam. The music follows a set pattern, the salaam, thurau, dubitch, nan patti and the salgah. There is a highly developed system of music based on the classical mould of the sufiyana kalam with intricate and codified patterns. The music adds more aesthetic sense to this form of folk theater in Kashmir.

The man who plays the dhol is the central figure in the orchestra. Many taals in various combination are played on this drum. The nagara is an accompaniment to the dhol and the rhythm doubles in the intensity 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 cymbal a little large than those used in other musical forms. To this music are added, kashmiri folk songs, sung throughout the play.

The two properties that are must for every pather are a whip and a short bamboo stick. The Koodar, or long whip is crafted

from the dry stem of the bhang plant and looks like a thick rope which is forked at its tip. When used it emanates a sound similar to a gun shot. During the performance a character can be whipped a hundred times without being hurt because this property does not have the impact associated with a whip, it just looks deadly. It is used to transform all the elements that represent oppression in to strong dramatic images. In sharp contrast the bans are used by the gesture or maskhara. These are split bamboo sticks, that make a sharp sound. In his pantomime the maskhara uses the bans, emerges as the total opposite of the oppressors whip.

The Kapar Chader or sheet of cloth is used as a curtain. Some of the actors make their entrance from behind this chader. The same cloth is often used as a canopy for the king when he holds court in some other scene.

The maskharas are one of the most important characters in this Bhand Pater <sup>[6]</sup>. They lampoon the king and the upper classes by exposing their corruption. The jester is the constant factor in the performance, the link of the various episodes.

The element of honour be it hazal (mockery), mazak (jokes), tasan (sarcasm) or even finding fault with the other character is the forte of the maskhara. They do very accurate caricatures of society using a great deal of pantomime. Finally, the maskhara emerges as the rebel, the character who does not low down to the oppression. The message that comes across through the performances, of the political or social scene, makes the Bhand Pather a very relevant and contemporary traditional folk form-a political and social review.

Performances take place in the open air and there are no clearly defined acting areas. The actor can move about climb the roof of a house or even a tree if they so choose. In the Watel Pather a satirical play about the profession of sweepers who in Kashmir are not considered untouchables, a wedding procession that is part of the action comes through the village drawing crowds along with and ends up at the point where another episode of the performance has already begun. This simultaneous action is an interesting aspect and is done in other pather as well. Another example is a king may be seen holding court at one point and farmers are ploughing the field at another. These instant juxta-positions give another very subtle and sensitive dimension to this form.

The predominant language used is kashmiri but there is also a use of Gujjari, Punjabi, Dogri, Persian and sometimes even English, Non-Kashmiri words are used to accentuate the humorous and abused situations to create dramatic effects and totally incongruous expressions.

The style of acting swings from the purely realistic to the highly exaggerated. The pantomime achieves an abstract, graphic quality making it a strong element in the fabric of the Bhand Pather. A good example is from the Arim Pather or the vegetables gardeners” Pather rarely done today, where the maskhara as the Gardner carries a tee shaped wooden contraption on which is tied a rope and an earthen pot. He mimes putting the pot into an imaginary well and draws the water to water his vegetables. Later the same pot becomes the well and he talks to a ghost the lives within it. Eventually frustrated that the owner of the garden will not permit him to marry his daughter he breaks the pot and runs away.

<sup>6</sup> Sanskrit Bharat Sarkar Hindi Journal June 1985.

The narrative of this form moves fairly rapidly from episode to episode with no elements of suspense. It is epic in its quality and the audience knows the action well. They know what is to come but do not know how the event will happen. Though the story line revolves around old stories of kings and their times the message projected is loaded with contemporary statements. All the performances end with the recitation of the duaykher, praying for the betterment of the land and people protecting them from disease and death very auspicious, the duaykher is spoken by the magun and repeated by the audience.

The Bhands are found in almost all of the districts of Kashmir and performances are a regular feature of life there. Some of the pathers have died, other are becoming rare, the form takes on new elements and continues to survive but alas precariously. The music has changed and unfortunately the traditional makaams, ragas are not played as much.

The Bhands in their day to day living reflect their firm belief, in the faith of a unique fusion of Kashmir shaivism and sufi traditions of the valley.

Bhand Pather has a unique place in the evolvement of aesthetics in Kashmir. The performing art, Bhand Pather is based on the concept of Rasa, or nine sentiments; Literally, rasa means juice or extract but here in this context, we take it to mean "emotion" or "sentiments" in terms of "aesthetics" Bhand Pather is the projection of the artists inner spirit, a manifestation of his most profound sentiments and sensibilities brought forth through tunes and melodies.

In Bhand Pather the Bhands (artists) touches each and every aspects of life, each and every evil, which is in the society, is highlighted in humorous ways.

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