

Censorship, Corruption and Surveillance in Art: A Case Study of Kashmiri Theatre

Khalid Amin

Research Scholar

Aligarh Muslim University

Abstract: Bhand Pather is the oldest traditional theatre of Kashmir, maintained by Shaivism and Sufism of Kashmir. It possessed a display of unity and coherence of differences in Kashmir. Although the main themes that it covered were secular in their nature, but one of the major themes in Bhand Pather was to highlight the atrocities of the government. The other themes that would be its part were feudalism, child marriage, religious hegemony and control and still there are many others like mythological legends and many other myths believed in Kashmiri culture. In this paper, the author highlights the causes that Bhand Pather faced and what lead to the extinction of this historical genre by comparing the political conditions and the challenges of Modernity to it. It would be necessary to highlight the political conditions of Kashmir, its culture, tradition, religious beliefs and impact of all other visible forces that influenced or dismantled the rich tradition of Kashmir theatre.

Key words: Kashmir, Bhand Pather, Resistance, Censorship, genre, and surveillance.

Introduction

Bhand Pather is Kashmir's oldest folk theatres performed primarily in Kashmir. Bhand means an actor or a performer while Pather is translated as drama. This traditional theatre of Kashmir is an amalgamation of acting, music, dance including satire, wit, sarcasm, and laughter. Music is usually provided by Surnai, Dhol and Nagaara. Bhand Pather used to be performed usually during the annual death anniversaries of Sufi saints in open air near the shrines. People gather around the shrines and watch Bhand performing. The performance is usually based on mythological stories, satire on political situations, including farcical elements often enacted in humorous way. Bhand Pather is nourished by both Shaivism and Sufism which highlight the

secular character of this theatrical form. Javid Iqbal writes in: “Loss of Syncretic Theatrical Form”, “Bhand Pather underlines not merely the shared cultural space and the interweaving of everyday Hinduism and Islam but demonstrates practically the sharp differences as well. And yet illustrates, how, despite such differences it is not impossible to live together” (42). The Election Commission of India report of 2014 on Jammu and Kashmir write in their *Comprehensive SVEEP Plan of J&K State 2014* about Bhand Pather:

Bhand Pather is a social drama incorporating mythological legends and contemporary social satire. It pertains to the injustice that the people in the Kashmir suffered in the hands of the Kings. The performance of the play begins in the evening with the ritual dance and unfolds with the onset of night. The play is performed by the community in Kashmir called Bhands. Acting, dance and music are integral part of the play. (6)

Akingam, a village in Anantnag district of Kashmir is famous for this theatre, where this community of Bhands or performers live. They travel from place to place with their stock and repertoire to perform at a temple or a Sufi shrine. M.K Raina while commenting on the secular aspects of Bhand Pather writes in his “The Bhand Pather of Kashmir”:

Once a year... 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 [Shiva Bhagvati] temple and nowhere else. However, other shows are presented elsewhere, at Muslim shrines as well as at Sufi centres.

Similarly, Jisha Menon writes in *The Performance of Nationalism: India, Pakistan, and the Memory of Partition*:

The cultural practices in Kashmir complicate and disorder the categorical production of Hindu and Muslim as separate, bounded, hermitically sealed religious traditions is made manifest in the *chok* dance which is performed by [Muslim] Bhand actors. (156)

Apart from being secular in its nature, the other theme that runs through a performance of Bhand Pather is oppression. The history of Kashmir is a history of oppression as Sanjay Kak writes in *Until My Freedom Has Come: The New Intifada in Kashmir*:

If violence breaks lives, Kashmir is quite broken. If oppression produces resistance, Kashmir is profusely resistant. From the writings of Michel Foucault to Achille Mbembe, and so much in-between, we [Kashmiri people] are reminded of the myriad techniques in governance that seek to subjugate, while naming subjugation as subject formation, as protection, ‘security’, law and order, and progress. (146)

After tenth century, Kashmir was invaded a number of times which created differences in the social fibre that made Kashmiri people slaves in their own land. They were made to adapt, live and to survive under alien socio-political and cultural systems as Walter Lawrence comments on the condition of the Kashmiri people that “the system of administration had degraded the people and taken all heart out of them” (qtd in. Bose 234). Bhand Pather reflects this cross exchange as it makes apparent the anguishes of the people of the state and through its form by being absurd and humorous; for example, a character of a king speaking in Persian with poor and illiterate Kashmiris and whipping them for not being able to understand the language. Similarly, many other similar performances which portray oppression of the local people ultimately end by making the local character as victorious. Patrick Colm Hogan writes in *Imagining Kashmir: Emplotment and Colonialism*:

More precisely, there is often the figure of a ruler from outside who is exploiting the natives. A key figure in overcoming this exploitation is “the jester or maskhara,” a “rebel who does not cow down to the oppressor... Moreover, the victory comes when “the jesters fool” the “ruler from outside” and “bring him to some kind of an understanding.” (NP)

Nandita Dinesh in her book *Theatre and War: Notes from the Field* comments on the characteristic feature of Bhand Pather. She writes, “In a region that has been invaded by different parties over the years, Bhand Pather might be said to reflect a performance tradition in which the lines between insiders and outsiders are clearly drawn” (NP). One of main components of Bhand Pather is its linguistic component known in Kashmiri language as *Phir Kath* which are coded narratives where meaning and message is propagated in such a way that only local people are able to understand it. The injustices that people of Kashmir had to endure made Bhand Pather a vehicle of communication to warn people about the plans and atrocities that were coming or planned by the tyrant regimes. R. K. Braroo in “Architecture and Drama in Kashmir and North-West” writes:

In the presence of a court officer they [Bhand Actors] would communicate with people in 'Phir' Language fore-warning them about action to be taken. The Court officer even though within listening range and conversant with local language failed to understand anything yet couldn't doubt the credibility of the performer. This speaks for the mastery of histrionic talent that bhand possess. (Braroo)

Javaid Iqbal in “Loss of a Syncretic Theatrical Form” comments on Phir Kath as:

The fact, however, remains that *phir kath* is/was a symptom of slavery. The necessity of this mode was felt under the consciousness of the colonial subjugation. It is interesting to learn about the survival tactics, however, it is not hard to imagine the repercussions which ensued upon exposure by the colonial officers. (47)

The other themes that form the part of Bhand Pather are environmental awareness, health related issues like polio vaccination campaigns or family planning and political matters. A report “National Award Winning Bhand Pather Artist Laments Dying Art Form” by DNA India interviews Manzoor-ul-Haq a seventh generation folk artist and he says, “In the ancient times, when there was no internet or newspapers, Bhand Pather would keep people updated about the governance issues. These plays were a source of information for the audience.”

Effects of Politics and Modernity on Bhand Pather

After the advent of radio, cinema, television, internet and other modern technological sources of entertainment the focus shifted from Bhand Pather and made it suffer to such an extent that neither public nor the children of the Bhand are interested to carry on with the tradition. Sheikh Qayoom writes in “Will Kashmir’s Street Theatre Die an Unsung Death?”, “Today, we have just a few old Bhand Pather artistes like Ghulam Ahmad Bhat and Abdul Salam Bhat of Wathoor village in Badgam district. But both are well past 70 years.” And after interviewing Ghulam Ahmad Bhat, he quotes him saying, “The result is that our children have taken to other professions. There is no doubt this theatre form is dying.” The condition of Bhand Pather is so lamentable in the contemporary times that they are no longer welcomed in cultural institutions except for political parties who call them to perform in their rallies and sometimes these artists are invited to perform in tribal marriages. Ifat Gazia quotes the National award winner Manzoor-ul-Haq saying, “We don’t have any place to perform. Very

rarely we are invited for a show on Doordarshan or Radio Kashmir. Moreover, we are paid too less.” Ifat Gazia further writes:

According to Manzoor, most men in his community have turned to daily wage labourers, farmers and sand dealers. Although Manzoor and many of his peers learnt this art from his parents, many in his generation are no longer passionate as far passing on this legacy to their children is concerned. (Gazia)

The issue of political effect on Bhand Pather is that of a gaze, to maintain power. How Michael Foucault meant it to be and how it affected Bhand Pather is quite closer than one could imagine about. The gaze watches, judges and explains to the outer world what truth is. Rom Harré and Fathali M. Moghaddam in *The Self and Others: Positioning Individuals and Groups in Personal, Political, and Cultural Contexts* elucidate the meaning of Foucault’s gaze as:

Foucault’s gaze has two implications... First, gaze describes the power to watch and judge or arrive at a prognosis. Second, it explains how members of the community that compromise the gaze are able to make statements that are taken as truth by those outside the community. (257)

Same is the case with Kashmir, the only information that is allowed to reach to the outer world is what is pro-government or what makes the occupation as a necessary requirement. Heiberg et al write in their world famous book *Terror, Insurgency, and the State: Ending Protracted Conflicts* about the gaze in Kashmir:

Most of the general public are dependent on Indian media for news. In India itself...media are largely self-censoring with regard to the Kashmir conflict. The main media outlets have made no serious attempt to present a balanced account of the issue. The coverage is very pro-government. The government is primarily concerned with regulating and limiting the flow of information to the Indian public on the conflict. (415)

The human rights abuses and the rejection of basic legal protections endured by the people of Kashmir has been summed up by the writers of *Encyclopaedia of Censorship*, written by Jonathon Green and Nicholas J. Karolides. They write, “Arrests by police, sometimes in conjunction with physical assaults, are also frequent response to editorial

positions and published articles” (276). The conditions depicted in above paragraphs highlight the role of government of India to keep Kashmir under surveillance and allow no one to propagate their voice. Comparing the conditions which are prevalent in Kashmir valley, it makes it easier to understand why Bhand Pather suffered and is about to die soon. The question remains that if government wants Bhand Pather to rise again then will it be the Bhand Pather as it used to be? Or will it be a cropped version where resistance is silenced and its inherent linguistic components edited as has been the case according to the National Award winner Manzoor-ul-Haq as he says “We don’t have any place to perform. Very rarely we are invited for a show on Doordarshan or Radio Kashmir” (Gazia).

Works Cited

- Bhat, Javaid Iqbal. “Loss of a Syncretic Theatrical Form.” *Folklore*. Folklore. 15 Jan 2017.
- Bose, Sumantra. *Transforming India: Challenges to the World’s Largest Democracy*. New York: Harvard University Press, 2013. Print.
- Braroo, R. K. “Architecture and Drama in Kashmir and North-West.” *Koshur Samachar*. 20 Jan. 2017. *Ikashmir.net*. Web. 20 Jan 2017.
- Gazia, Iffat. “National Award Winning Bhand Pather Artist Laments Dying Art Form.” *DnaIndia* 22 July. 2014. DNA India. Web. 15 Jan. 2017.
- Govt of India. Election Commission of India. *SVEEP Plan of J&K State 2014*. <www.eci.nic.in/eci_main1/SVEEP/Jammu%20&%20Kashmir19092014.pdf>
- Green, Jonathon, Nicholas J. Karolides. *Encyclopedia of Censorship*. New York: Infobase Publishing, 2014. Print.
- Heiberg, Marianne, Brendan O’Leary, John Tirman. *Terror, Insurgency, and the State: Ending Protracted Conflicts*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2007. Print.
- Hogan, Patrick Colm. *Imagining Kashmir: Emplotment and Colonialism*. Nebraska: Nebraska Press, 2016. Print.
- Harré, Rom, Fathali M. Moghaddam. *The Self and Others: Positioning Individuals and Groups in Personal, Political, and Cultural Contexts*. New York: Praeger, 2003. Print.

Kak, Sanjay. *Until My Freedom Has Come: The New Intifada in Kashmir*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2011. Print.

Menon, Jisha. *The Performance of Nationalism: India, Pakistan, and the Memory of Partition*. New York: Cambridge, 2013. Print.

Qayoom, Sheikh. "Will Kashmir's Street Theatre Die an Unsung Death?" *TwoCircles* 4 Sep 2014: Web. 16 Jan. 2017.

Raina, M. K. "The Bhand Pather of Kashmir." *Koausa*. Kashmiri Overseas Association, Web. 11 Jan 2016.