

Socio- Cultural Implications of Folk Theatre: A Study of Saang of Haryana

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Abstract:

Folk theatre is community theatre and evolves with the way of common man's life. There is not much of deliberation and conscious effort in it. It is spontaneous and is a part of the way of life of a community. It also gives expression to the achievements, satisfactions, pains, anxiety and concerns of the society. Inevitably, its popularity, sometimes even preservation becomes the apprehension of the society. Unsurprisingly, with changing dynamics of society, the folk theatre, alters in its content and form. But throughout the history, we find the communities in an endeavor to confine the spontaneous progression of expression withholding an idea of pure folk forms implying that it continues to be performed in same form, content and conventions without any effect of the societal changes on it.

This chapter investigates into the factors influencing the evolution and acceptance of the folk forms in the special context of Saang of Haryana. It would be worthwhile to see how a folk form outgrows its origin, is nurtured inside a community, becomes the expression of community and eventually fades into the same community often notwithstanding the pressures exerted by the same community. The chapter tries to find out that 'Does even the notion of purity or preserving exists in the context of folk theatre?'

Keywords: Folk Theatre, Saang, Culture, Sociology, Community,

Introduction:

The arena of Folk Theatre, its narratives and its conventions has always attracted the attention of researchers. But the issue of sociological influences and their impact of various folk forms is yet to be explored. We find a reluctant admission the advent of electronic media made the folk theatre lose their charm and popularity but an honest investigation into other reasons for diminishing audiences for these forms is needed. As far as the Saang the folk form of Haryana is concerned, it has been explored from the literary and creative angle but there is hardly any study so far which probes into the repercussions of posing confinements on a folk form which are potential reasons for the decreases mass interest in these forms as owing to such limitations, these forms cease to build connections with the younger generations.

Methodology:

The present research is a qualitative research based on the understanding of concept of folk forms as scholars have propounded and analyzing it in the light of views expressed by performers, organizers and audiences of folk theatre hence another major source employed for gathering data was ethnographic interviewing. Various research sources of secondary data like research papers in leading journals and books by eminent theatre scholars, articles and internet sources were referred to understand the Folk form in question, its origin and journey of development and also the concept of folk theatre in general. The researchers understanding of the socio-political scenario of Haryana comes from being a native of the state and hence, the participant-observation method has been employed to know about the nuances of the folk form.

Folk Theatre:

Theatre, being a composite art and a live medium of expression, has a certain visual quality that gets its projection in a three-dimensional space. It's an ancient art which first transformed into folk theatre, then to classical theatre and finally it has emerged into the modern theatre. Whatever kind of theatre we may examine, the element of folk theatre will be there because the emergence of classical theatre or modern theatre does not mark the end of folk theatre. In fact, all the theatrical traditions are constantly in dialogue with each other and the process of give and take is never-ending. Folk theatre is spontaneous and an inherent way of life of a community. Nobody had to learn it, so there is no question of unlearning also. It is an integral part of the blood that keeps any culture alive and vibrant. It also communicates and projects the value system of the community. It serves as the language of a particular culture.

The Saang of Haryana:

Saang is the folk form of Haryana, an offshoot of the *Swang* of *Jagadhari* region. An expression of total theatre, *Saang* emerged in the last decade of nineteenth century, gained enormous admiration from folks of Haryana, played a momentous role in the political upheavals of the state, influenced masses for over a century, but the post-independence era, posed a threat of life for *Saang*. Audiences were diminishing and the patronage was drying up. *Saang* was evidently losing its grip over multitudes. Ram Mehar Singh notes, "It would be worthwhile to call the modern era (1950 onwards) as an era of demise of *Saang*, as one can clearly notice the grand tradition of yesteryears fading away in this period" (242) Multiple reasons contributed to the gradual but irreversible demise of *Saang*. To trace the explanations for this demise, we need to appraise the socio-political scenario of Haryana which influenced *Saang* extensively.

Socio-political Scenario of Haryana:

As stated before, *Saang* emerged fully in around last years of nineteenth century precisely after the uprising of 1857. The people of Haryana played a major role in the uprising which received strong resentment from British government and hence as a penalty, Haryana was denied opportunities to basic things as health and education, leave aside the prospects for cultural expressions. Yadav asserts that Haryana has been the worst sufferer in the history because of the geographical, social and political upheavals with recurring shifts as it was made to change shape, size and position every now and then. He notes, “In 1803, they made it a part of Bengal Presidency, in 1843, it became a part of Delhi Division and in 1857, it became a part of Punjab though known as Haryana region.” (Yadav 204) Probably because of these tumultuous socio-political conditions, Haryana could not prove to be very productive culturally. As Yadav rightly notes, “Peace, tranquility and freedom are the basic requirements for the proper growth and development of arts” (283) but Haryana remained the worst victim in this respect and thus remained culturally under-developed. Unfortunately, things did not change even in independent India and Haryana continued to be a part of Punjab state, which according to people of Haryana, was the main reason behind why Yadav terms the period between 1947-1960, as ‘an era of passive development’ for Haryana. (205).

Realizing that the collaboration with Punjab is not contributing to the development of Haryana, the people of Haryana demanded a separate state for them as a protest against step-motherly treatment given to them by the leaders of Punjab. Lathor takes note of the situation, “From 1947 to 1966, the Punjab government gave no support or recognition to Haryanvi culture. No writings were done in Haryanvi by any writer either.” (57) This statement points out towards a kind of complex that seems to have developed in the people of Haryana due to which Lathor feels that the people of Haryana lost trust in their own culture and language.

Lathor further claims that there was not even a single competition in Haryanvi language in the only University of Haryana (at that time) i.e. Kurukshetra University. The youth of Haryana felt hesitant to speak in Haryanavi language and the Haryanavi culture clearly took a back seat. Lathor strongly notes that the Kings of Punjab, where, on one hand promoted their own art and culture, on the other hand, not only deprived Haryanvi of the chances to promote their culture but also conveniently associated many valuable arts like *Phulkari* with Punjab which originally belonged to Hindu Jats i.e. the natives of Haryana. Moreover, after independence, many Muslims artists went to Pakistan which was the greatest loss for the performing tradition like *Saang*. (57)

However, the demand for the separate state was fulfilled on 1st November, 1966 and Haryanvis finally got their own political identity. This was the time when probably the cultural reinforcement could have been targeted through state support; but unfortunately, for around twenty five more years, Haryana was struggling for political stability. Between 1966 and 1991, Haryana saw a repetitive shuffle in its governments. Ram Mehar Singh notes that in the following 25 years, the state of Haryana saw eleven changes in the political leadership, which signifies that it underwent tremendous political stress and that was definitely not a positive sign for the cultural upliftment of the state. While in other states, the folk forms got governmental support from state and national academies and other agencies, Haryana was struggling for political stability.

Performance Avenues for Saang:

By the time the political stability was achieved, the social scenario had altered considerably owing to multiple factors like decline of *zamindari* system and advent of cinema. The opportunities for *Saang* performances decreased considerably in the changing social situations. In the hay days of *Saang*, the troupes got a lot of opportunities to perform. A

Saang Troupe would be invited by prominent landlords or other wealthy persons to perform on their son's or daughter's marriage or to accompany the wedding party of their son. Seeing *Saang's* impact on its audiences, many social welfare groups and voluntary domestic organizations sponsored *Saang* performances for social welfare and developmental causes e.g. for building a temple, village rest-house or school or digging a well etc. For this purpose the *Saang* troupe would give a benefit performance for raising funds for social welfare. But gradually, the infrastructural developments begun to be taken care of by government and entertainment needs of people were fulfilled by more convenient and alluring medium of cinema. So, there are no reasons for wealthy people or groups to sponsor a *Saang* performance. Mehrotra takes note of this situation quite deeply, "The reasons for the wide spread decline of folk forms in many parts of India include changing popular tastes, competition from electronic mass media, disintegration of older sources of patronage and absence of critical state support. The contexts and environment in which these forms flourished changed dramatically and irreversibly." (289) With lesser contexts of *Saang* performances, the young generation got virtually no opportunity to witness *Saang*. How would the new generation admire or accept their folk form without watching it? So when they don't know it, they didn't want to watch it and so the demand for *Saang* shows further decreased. This became a vicious circle. Not many *Saang* troupes could survive. This was evidently the era of demise of this great performance tradition.

Sociological influences on Saang:

However, there is another way of looking at probable reasons of demise of *Saang*. Most of the above mentioned issues were common to almost all the secular folk forms in other parts of India but *Saang* also has certain uncommon issues. There are certain major issues that draw attention while we have a close look at the historical perspective of *Saang*.

First and foremost is that, despite of having existed for a considerable time now, we hardly see any major evolution in *Saang* since its emergence. Although India, during this period, as Hansen notes, has undergone 'complex transition from colonial rule to independence accompanied by realignment among social groups, changes in political and economic structures and technological developments.' (96) But a close look at the narrative structure as well as the theatrical conventions of *Saang* ascertains that *Saang* has remained in somewhat narrow precincts as compared to the neighboring forms like *Nautanki*. Moreover, there is hardly any reference of *Saang* performance outside the cultural boundaries of Haryana. Probably that's why there are hardly any considerable interactions of *Saang* with its fellow forms that existed in adjoining areas of Haryana like Parsi theatre in terms of visual symbolism, stagecraft, and *Nautanki* in terms of music. In addition to this, this is surprising to note that *Saang* is not listed in monumental writings by major theatre scholars like Kapila Vatsyayan and Varadpande and even Balwant Gargi as a form, independent of *Swang* tradition in which it is rooted. Although we find detailed study on its sister forms like *Nautanki* and *Khayal*. One of the factors limiting the scope of *Saang* appears to be, as observed by Hansen 'the relatively slow erosion of agrarian ways of life in this region.' (96) It seems that people of Haryana, who, as stated above, were always dominated by other communities like Punjabis, became defensive about their folk arts and adopted rigidity towards their culture. We find numerous accounts of the inflexibility of *Saang* practitioners as well as the people of Haryana.

At almost stage of the development of *Saang*, many *Saangis* tried innovating elements in *Saang* but they were not accepted by people of Haryana. (Singh 295).

Pandit Deep Chand and Pandit Lakhmi Chand were the two major exponents of *Saang*. Both of them tried to make some imaginative modifications in *Saang* in accordance

with the altering lifestyle of people in changing times. These measures did bring more popularity to Saang but were soon discouraged and criticized by their society. Deep Chand tried to include a more trendy blouse to the costumes of female characters to make it more sensual and appealing, it was completely rejected even by his own disciple Hardeva. He instead made the female characters wear a longer simpler shirt which would overlap on the waist with traditional 'ghaghra', a tradition which is followed till date. (Singh 97) Lakhmi Chand, the most famous of all the Saangis till date, got numerous titles as *Surya Kavi*, *Gandharva Purush* and even the Shakespeare of Haryanvi Saang. Lakhmi Chand was the first one to introduce the emotions like love and romance. He gave wider dimensions to the narratives of Saang by including *sringar rasa* in bolder and clearer tones.¹ This indeed added novelty to the genre and thus increased the popularity of Saang manifold. But this again wasn't acceptable to the so called elite of Haryana. They criticized Lakhmi Chand for polluting the culture of Haryana.² Even the man who has the greatest contribution to the genre was not accepted respectfully by the adult and reputable people of Haryana. Pooran Chand Sharma notes, "Many respectable people of Haryana strongly disliked Lakhmi Chand for being vulgar and obscene. They believed that his Saangs are nothing but cheap and vulgar narratives." (90) Sharma further claims that Lakhmi Chand remained extremely disturbed despite his unprecedented success because of the disrespect of the reputed people of Haryana.³ Hence, the performers on one hand were struggling financially and on the other were denied respectability and acceptance for their novelty and courage to bring about changes in the form.

This suggests that whenever Saang practitioners tried to bring novelty through modern advances, the genre gained impetus but some practitioners as well as some people

with orthodox thinking probably having their own idea of 'purity' of *Saang* which they want to preserve; strongly opposed them. The people of Haryana made conscious efforts to keep *Saang* away from modernity. They wanted the pure folk art form, unspoiled by any adulteration, to be used as an escape to a fantasy world away from their everyday realities. The eminent Indian actor and playwright Girish Kamad stated, "To have any value at all, drama must at some level engage honestly with the contradictions that lie at the heart of the society it talks to and about." (203) This statement clearly underlines the need of change in theatre with the change in the life of the people to which it belongs. In the light of these statements, it seems that due to the rigidity of the people of Haryana, and particularly because of their strong resistance towards any change in the basic patterns the *Saang* failed to flow freely with the times and gradually became stagnant and obsolete. Habib Tanveer, who has a wide experience of working with folk artists notes, "Folk artist normally does not believe in the purity of a form. Hence he does not follow a rigid code of discipline. The result is a happy abandon, an exhilarating freedom of expression, an extra ordinary aesthetic harmony, original and contagious in its appeal." (295) Then why one may wonder that Lakhmi Chand had a deep sadness in his heart and why he had to modify his creative instincts from the initial bolder depiction of love to the *Saangs* that upgraded moral values.⁴ The reason probably lies in Kambar's assertion who calls folk performances 'a community affair' and the community of Haryana seems to be somewhat parochial in its attitude. Therefore, in the entire history of development of *Saang*, we rarely see that the newer and bolder experiments get applauded by older generation and as far as the younger generation is concerned, they are not interested in a form that sticks to the age old conventions and has nothing which they could relate to hence, no contemporary significance. Another strong example of their rigidity came when Habib Tanveer, who is credited to have brought the Chhatisgarhi folk theatre on to the map of

International theatre, tried to stage *Saang* named “*Jyani Chor*” in Rohtak as well as in Chandigarh. Tanveer probably entered the genre to introduce it to fellow theatre people and the elite audiences with an intention to give it a wider exposure and scope for innovation and experimentations but the *Saang* practitioners and the audience of Haryana overruled the idea completely by strongly rejecting and critiquing the performances. Noted scholar of Haryanvi culture, Dr. Pooran Chand Sharma comments, “*Jyani Chor* (directed by) by Habib Tanveer was staged on a closed stage of an auditorium, which neither had a stage like that of *Saang*, nor the costumes or music; and above all the signature dance of *Saang* was completely absent. It further ridicules the performance by saying that the performance was shaking like a rural lady shakes when she wears modern high heels.” (212) Further by giving an example of Manipuri dance, Sharma asserts that the costumes in *Saang* should remain the traditional ‘*ghaghra*’ as is the case with Manipuri dance⁵ but Sharma probably ignores the fact that Manipuri dance is a classical as well as purely religious form while *Saang* is the secular folk theatrical form. Although in the preceding lines, he himself insists that a folk form must represent the lives of the people of the community, (212) then one may wonder that if such traditional dresses are no longer worn in common household in Haryana, how can the performers keep wearing same dresses on stage? Hence, it seems that the community to which *Saang* belongs wants it to remain unaffected by things that are otherwise happening in the society. Neither they allow innovation to the natives nor to the creative people outside the community, who seem to be fascinated with the form and want the people worldwide to know about it. Kamal Tiwari strongly condemns this inflexible attitude towards the experimentation in folk forms, “No folk art can survive in the museum conditions. Change is must for progress. Not doing anything in the name of purity will end up in the extinction of the form.” (Ahuja 293).

Even in the very beginning of this tradition, we see strong bias against the female performers which ended up in making this genre confined to one section of society only. As mentioned before, the *Saang* tradition is credited to Kishan Lal Bhatt while it already existed but was performed by women and that too of pale respectability. Hence it was not considered a respectable art. When Kishan Lal Bhat performed it with male caste, it suddenly became the folk art of Haryana and soon after, its so-called stigmatized past was laundered, the *Saang* became a reputable art. This establishes the preference of the society in favor of men that considers the form pure and unpolluted only when performed by males. Even in modern era, when females are competing everywhere with men, *Saang* continues to be an all-male genre. Till date, there is a self-imposed ban on women performing *Saang*. Although some gutsy women did try to make *Saang-beda* but they were so strongly disappointed and condemned that they backed out. It is, hence obvious, that remaining out of reach of almost half of the population, i.e. the female population, tremendously limited the scope of creative elevation of the genre.

Further, when the film industry began to have impact on young minds, it influenced the *Saang* too. The young members of *Saang* troupes would go to movies on their vacations and would insist their *gurus* to compose new *raginis* in the tune of some popular film song. Gurus begin to comply. Sometime they even sang film songs and danced copying a scene from a film. They did so by including that item as if it was requested by the king in his court. “O young lady singer, sing that song for me.” *Saangis* like Chander Bedi started composing *raginis* on popular film tunes which undoubtedly made him very popular amongst youth yet scholars like Ram Mehar insist, “The glorious tradition that begun 300 years ago is losing its charm today due to film tunes.” Although others like Prakash Bellavalli feel, “There cannot be a sillier insistence on doing folk forms as they were done 300 years ago or even 30 years

ago; this implies ignoring their evolution. It's like speaking a language in a way it was spoken centuries ago." (295) This shows that at every point of time, *Saang* and its practitioners were denied innovative freedom.

Ram Mehar Singh, in his book, '*Haryani Saangeet: Udbhav aur Vikas*, talks in detail about how the life of the common people of Haryana has changed tremendously. He takes note of the inclusion of words of English in day to day life, also of changing dress sense, he asserts that the orthodox and superstitious society has now become more rational and open, moreover, he explains how educational and technical development has reached every household in Haryana. He also explains the emergence of females in a more influential role in society. (206-207). Then why in this changing time, he says, "it is satisfying to see the older generation not accepting the changes in the *Saang*." (346) Noted theatre personality B.V. Karanth notes, "If a folk form doesn't reflect contemporary life, if it does not except the changes dictated by an age, it is destined to die." (295). Ram Mehar Singh also claims at one place that this tradition is continuously progressing because it has not allowed any alteration or foreign impact on it. But in the same book, he elsewhere says that this tradition is facing unfavorable conditions and he even calls the period after 1950 an era of demise of *Saang*. (345-346). The statements seem contradictory.

This dual attitude of masses for theatre is not a novel phenomenon. On one hand, people would relish the performances and also would bestow high honors on the performers, and on the other hand, they would not like their nears and dears to join these arts. According to Hansen, "The maligning of the theatre and its adherents has a lengthy history in India predating *Bharata*; from its origin to the most recent period." (34) This perceptibly applies to *Saang* practitioners as well. This prejudice seems to have strengthened under the influence of socio-religious reform movements like Arya Samaj, which entered in full bloom in Haryana

in around 1880 and by 1920s, they had (Arya Samajis) reached every village and town of Haryana. (Yadav 166). These reformers were of the opinion that *Saang* had a bad influence on the youth, especially on the womenfolk. Ved Vatak recalls, “Since my family was an Arya Samaji family, we were told not to go and see any *Saangs*. We were told that they taught you nothing good, no character building, no patriotism, no social duty, and since their language was so foul, no good ‘*sanskar*’ could come out of watching *Saangs*.” (Vatak Ved 4). He further explains, “Since we were growing up at a time when the struggle for India’s freedom was its peak, and my family was also involved in that movement, we were supposed to be more responsible. We were told to dedicate our life to the national cause instead of learning foul language. We were attending more and more so-called uplifting Arya Samaj events, where sacrifice for society and nation was preached.” (Vatak Ved 4). One of the *bhajans* sang by an Arya Samaji *bhajanopadeshak* (the singer who sings songs for change) calls *Saang* a disease:

“Bharat maa ne aaj tumhaaree veero maang kee.

Tum he bimaaree lagee Cinemaa , Theatar , Saang kee.”

(Meaning: Your Mother land needs you, oh the brave ones, but you are captivated by the mania of cinema, theater and *Saang*.) (Vatak Ved 4).

They accused *Saang* performers of corrupting young men and women.

But gradually, with the changing socio-cultural scenario, even the reformists like preachers of Arya Samaj understood the worth of the acceptance of newfangled ways to impact people and began to compose their reformist *bhajans* in film songs style. One of them justified this trend in the following way:

Premi shobharam kaa gaan ,Badal gayaa apni pahlee taan

kyonki shrotaon ke kaan hee beem aar ho gaye !!

(Meaning: The melodies of Shobha Ram have altered their original tune because the listeners' tastes have become sick.)" (Vatuk Ved 4). This couplet implies that if you want your message to sway your audience, you have to adapt it to conform to the medium they have become accustomed to. But *Saang* practitioners and so called saviors of culture kept *Saang* in a confined circle. Whosoever tried to innovate or to alter it was strongly condemned and suffered relegation. Ved Vatuk claims, "While these preacher singers survived, *Saang* could not, because they could not keep up with films and TV." This statement tries to establish that *Saang* demised because of the inflexible attitude of the people associated with the genre which didn't allow it to flow freely with the wings of innovation and experimentation.

Conclusion:

The above discussion underlines that there is a need to understand that folk or popular arts cannot be preserved; they cannot be treated as museum artifacts; they are ever-flowing, ever-changing expressions of people, reflecting their contemporary realities. To maintain their basic essence, these folk forms need independence to take their own course of growth. A so called pure folk form can only be performed in the theaters, in big Indian metropolitan areas and abroad as relics of our folk culture with government or university grants, but, in that case, it would definitely cease to be a popular form. It seems that the people of Haryana, to some extent, have, knowingly or unknowingly, tried to snub the 'sponge like quality' of folk theatre which according to Hansen' "allows it to soak up whatever is current, controversial or salable- whether it be new songs, dances, plots, topical references, jokes, or puns." (Kathryn 55)

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