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Marginalization, Class Conflict and Identity Politics in Kashmiri Folk Theatre Bhand Pather

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Abstract:

Bhand Pather as an indigenous folk-art form as well as a ‘non-conventional’ source of history lends itself to the study of shifting patterns of Kashmiri society in both cultural and historical contexts. It is the manifestation of inner self of Kashmiri people who are witness to one or the other misery in various forms of invasions, foreign rules, epidemics and poor governance at different turns of history in which Bhand Pather as a theatrical expression helped them in articulating their grievances and anxieties and also in highlighting the socio-political setups affecting their daily lives. An offshoot of Classical and devotional theatre Bhand Pather adapted comedy in satirizing and criticizing and not only did it criticize but also helped in playing an identity politics in sensitizing the masses about their rights and identities. No matter how humorous and comic these performances might be but deep down they depict the harsh lives of Kashmiris lived under different rulers and aristocratic classes and it is these undercurrents which this paper attempts to analyze. This paper attempts to show how dramatic action of Bhand Pather helps in registering a protest against the oppression and marginalization of common lots. This paper also attempts to analyze how class consciousness and class conflict is aroused in Bhand Pather and how it is used as an important tool for the identity politics.

Keywords: Bhand Pather, Class, Conflict, Politics, Identity.

Performing arts like dance and drama hold a special place in the long cultural history of Kashmir. There are evidences from sources like *Nilmata Purana* (6th to 8th century AD), Bharat Muni’s *Natyashastra* (between 200 BCE and 200 CE), Kalhana’s *Rajatarangini* (1148 AD) and Srivara’s *Zaina-tarangini* that show the deep-rooted connection of performing arts with court life

and religious festivity in Kashmir. Many Buddhist and Hindu kings are said to have patronized the classical arts of dance, drama and singing until 14th century. With the onset of Muslim Sultanate, the classical arts got banished from Royal Courts as such activities were against the puritan thoughts of many Muslim rulers especially Sultan Sikandar Shah who heavily came upon the non-Muslims of the time. It is by this time that the performers came in contact with common people and “began to reflect in a symbolic manner the court intrigues, religious conservatism, social rigidity, feudal exploitation and bureaucratic vandalism of official cadres” (Fayaz, 66). With the effects and borrowings from earlier forms of Natya, Rang and Jashan, a whole new folk-art form came into being which used satire and criticism under the veil of comedy and humour and later came to be known as Bhand Pather. It is however interesting that the term ‘Bhand Pather’ itself is a Sanskrit derivation. The word ‘Bhand’ comes from ‘Bhana’ which means a satirical drama and ‘Pather’ is derived from ‘Patraa’ which means a character in the play.

During the course of time comedy became the main instrument of Bhand Pather performances and tragedy never found its way into it however the undercurrent of each performance depicting one or the other misery of the people right unto the modern period is not less tragic and less serious. Behind every comical figure, word or expression in Bhand Pather performances lie the tiresome social lives of Kashmiris lived under foreign rules, poor governance, epidemics and absolute poverty at different turns of the history and this “pain is articulated through a dramatic action in such a manner that an audience, instead of getting painfully involved in the scene, finds ample material of collective jubilation” (Fayaz, 130). Besides rejoicing and delighting, it became an important mode of expression for the subaltern in exposing the social and political rigidities while attacking a certain community, people and sometimes the system itself.

In its simplest terms, a ‘Pather’ could just be an amusing performance but when it is looked through the prism of performativity, it is an act of resistance which is also the motif of the character of maskhara or the jester in almost all the plays. By using wit and humour, Bhand performers actually deconstruct the social and political myths about people and communities. It is an identity politics whereby the masses are sensitized about their rights and instigated to fight for their true identities. Folk theatre or more generally the whole theatre works as an important medium in registering a protest against any social or political evil. In her paper “Protest through Theatre: The Indian Experience”, Pushpa Sundar (1989) writes:

Theatre can be a more potent form of protest than books or films because, though the latter may reach a larger audience, they lack the live contact of theatre which makes for more intimate and intense communication. Theatre not only makes an audience conscious of the wrongs being protested against, but arouses it to immediate action. (123)

Comparatively, theatrical expression is found more powerful and effective than other mediums like art, literature and films and Bhand Pather as an open-air theatre with more flexibility and free play involves its audiences more directly in doing so. However, the whole process is carried in a way so that the message is also conveyed to the masses and the chances of the ruling or aristocratic class getting offended also remain least. In order to avoid any expected punishment or chastisement, Bhands use a special refrain 'Phir Kath'. It is a technique whereby the characters use such expressions which only the natives or fellow class members can understand.

Bhand Pather finds its uniqueness in that it idolizes no legends, heroes or kings rather, it ridicules the socio-political setups affecting the lives of common people and thus pictures itself more as a theatre of protest. In many ways of its expression and involvement of the 'spectator', it resembles the Boalian 'Theatre of the Oppressed' which also began its journey by depicting "the real living conditions and struggles of the Brazilian working class" (Coudray).

By using the theatrical expression of Bhand Pather, Bhands also reflect upon the living conditions and struggles of common masses under the coercive feudal and aristocratic structures. Most of the performances of Bhand Pather highlight the social structures of Kashmir at different times and how the lower sections were exploited by the upper sections of the society and it is these differences which this paper attempts to analyze. This paper analyzes how class conflict, class consciousness and identity politics is highlighted through Bhand Pather.

The system of social class is an important and inseparable part of a society which defines and reflects upon economic, cultural and political lifestyles of its people. There could hardly be any society without the layers of social stratification considered on economic stability, social beliefs and caste analysis etc. as is the requirement of the time. In Kashmir social class dates back from the Hindu period itself which was predominantly based on the lines of race and caste. It comprised of various sections like "Brahmins, Vaisyas, Sudras, Nisadas, Kiratas, Tantrins, Ekangas and Lavanyas" holding different positions according to their castes (Bamzai, 191). During the intervening time, more and more sub sections were formed out of these groups. But during the 13th and 14th century when Muslim missionaries from Middle East and Central Asia

arrived in Kashmir, they were able to convert a great proportion of Hindu believers into Islam with the message that Islam stands for oneness and equality (the oneness of God and the equality in people) and race and class find no place in its teachings. For next three hundred years, there were mass conversions among the Hindus which left only the Brahmins (by now, sub sectioned as Karkuns and Bashya-bhats) to maintain their tradition.

During the course of time these Islamic missionaries; Sayyids, Qazis, Peers and Muftis, some of them claiming to be the descendants of the lineage of Mohammad ^(SAW), received the royal patronage of different Kings granting them Jagirs for cultivation with which they held the titles of nobility themselves. It is understandable from the fact given above that Kashmir, now a Muslim majority supervised by the new aristocratic Mullahs, was not still a classless or casteless society because “the social structure as prevalent during the time of the later Hindu kings continued to remain intact” as the people “continued to bear their old surnames” and “inter marriages between the different groups were exceptions rather than the rule” (Bamzai, 479).

The monopoly and exploitation by the Mullahs were worse than that of the other ruling elites as they (Mullahs) incited the religious sentiments in poor and illiterate peasants, it helped them in controlling their emotions and any protest against it would not have been less than any sort of blasphemy. The condition of the working class thus was still in the hands of the nobles (both new and old) and how they are exploited since then is evidenced both by the historical records as well as the folkloristic materials.

Bhand Pather is an anti-establishment theatre which imparts social and political education to the masses by first identifying a problem and then questioning it through the performance acts. The spectators (always being the subjects) identifying themselves in the performance makes them conscious about the problem as well as their social position in the context the play is set thus compelling them to look for their real identities and developing their psyche to questioning and establishing possibilities to get out of the hegemonic control, they are in. There are many instances in Bhand Pather where such consciousness is inducted into the play.

In Darze Pather, when the head Maskhara appears before the Darud Raja begging for a turnip, the Raja questions him in Persian. Since the Maskhar does not understand Persian, he replies with a “Wallaikum Assalam” (an Islamic greeting in return) to which the Darud gets

angry and infuriatingly tells him “Did I greet you?” (Baghat, 102). The Darud belongs to a noble class and the Maskhar to peasantry and as a social norm, a noble is not supposed or expected to greet a person below his rank so it is only the lower class who has to do it first, shamelessly. The Maskhar fully aware of the social norm still tries to make his audience conscious of their social status in which they are supposed to follow some established norms. At another instance in the same play when the head Maskhar touches the turnip and gets beaten by the Darud, he gives a loud shriek and says “Oh Lord this cruel man! It is for a piece of turnip that he did this, what if I ask for a meal?” (Baghat, 106). In this scene, the plight of peasantry (the actual source of production) is verbally depicted by the head Maskhar while facing his audiences directly.

In Raaze Pather, when the potter enters the court room, the Sagwaan welcomes him with the beating of whip without any reason and then asks if he has brought any honey. The potter not answering the actual question says “By profession I am a potter, all I know is clay and pots, I sleep late and wake early, move from village to village and earn my livelihood” (Baghat, 176). By not answering the question, he is actually trying to reveal his poor condition to the audience if not the court official.

At another instance in the same play, Shakar Ju, a noble on his way to the court is assisted by two servants Byor and Bala. By mistake while cleaning his hands, Bala drops some clay in his hands to which he gets very angry and getting up he gives a huge blow to Bala with his clay ridden hands and also taunts him by saying, “Don’t you know who Shakar Ju is, you fool?” making Bala conscious of the gap between the two (Baghat, 190). He reminds him of the social status both of them hold also giving impression to the audience about their own condition.

In Buhir Pather the conflict arises when the Daggas mistakenly fell upon the Batas and the Buhur, their master apologizes for the same. The Batas feeling too much offended do not accept the apology given that it hurts the sentiments of their Brahmanical stature where the people like the Daggas have no right to get into their ways. After the incident happens, they proudly talk about their noble lineage one by one stressing the point that class is what matters most for them. By employing such consciousness, the effects of marginalization on the internal psyche of lower classes are highlighted by the Bhands.

In *Angrez Pather*, it is the Maskhara who highlights this issue on behalf of all the characters. He stands representative of the masses in general when he says that everybody here is a coolie because each and every person is subjected to the mercy of state and whatever they want they have to follow the same even the village head, who works as a comprador for the ruling elite and stands on a higher position is not spared. The Quli (coolie) on the other hand stands a reflection to the oppression of state policies crushing voiceless working class without any means of protest.

The whole *Waatal Pather* depicts the condition and lifestyle of the cobbler community in Kashmir where they stand on the lowest rungs of social hierarchy. The play is considered to be one of the oldest Bhand Pather performances in which two cobbler families get into the conflict with each other. The arguments between Nabad Waatul and Daaji Hyond highlight the internal conflict of the cobbler community when the two try to show who is holding more denigrating position as one is a shoe maker and the other a hut maker. The idea it gives is that if both the cobblers exist nowhere on the social structure then what is the point of showing social positions to each other.

Unlike the other plays in Bhand Pather, *Waatal Pather* makes no criticism of the political system or ruling elite though at one instance there appear the village head and the Watchman to make reconciliations between the two families but their roles are very brief and nothing reflexive comes out from their characters. It is evident through the conversation of characters as well as the time it is being performed that the condition of cobbler community, being layered at the bottom of the social stratification, is as old as the play which according to the Nabad Waatul dates from King Harsh Dev's time period.

The condition of *Waatal* community in Kashmir has always been the same which even today is not getting better. The condition of *Waatals* is depicted by Mudassir Ali when he talks about his personal experiences with casteism in Kashmir. He States:

If you are in a mood for horrible stories, go to the *Waatal* community (Chamaar, also called Sheikh in Kashmir) and ask them how they have always been ostracized from society. They have been ostracized to such an extent that the word *Waatul/Sheikh* has

become a taunt and is used by people as an insult to refer to people from other communities. (np.)

It is however ironical that in Bhand Pather the cobblers are stereotyped rather than depicting their struggle in a social system. It is evident from the fact that the literal meaning of the word 'Pather' in Kashmiri is 'to make fun of' and applying it to this particular performance means that Bhands are making fun of Waatal community where they have been represented in a very derogatory way. Moreover the use of some infamous idioms and phrases about the Waatal community like the 'waatal batwaar' and 'hooiin maazass waatal waaze' also shows that Bhands consciously or unconsciously stereotyping the Waatal community although trying to draw comedy and humor out of it.

In most of the above-mentioned plays, the characters are divided into two groups or classes, to one belong the main characters after whom the plays are titled like the Dard, Raaze, Bata, Buhur and Angrez and to the other group belong the pack of Maskharas or jesters. The main characters belong to the ruling or aristocratic class while as the Maskharas who remain nameless in all the plays belong to the working class. The name and name-less-ness of the characters representing their class strongly depicts the condition of the society metaphorically defining the upper rung and the lower rung in which one exists while the other does not.

The action only takes place when there is an encounter between the two groups followed by long arguments of farce and pantomime with intermittent beating of the Maskharas by one of the main characters. Though inciting laughter, such acts through Maskharas and some other working-class characters highlight the plight of downtrodden sections of the Kashmiri society at various times.

A Kurreh or whip which remains in possession of a main character forms an important part of Bhand Pather. It is used on the Maskharas or any character belonging to the working class like the Kraal (potter), Navid (barber) and Gryoos (peasant) in Raaze Pather, the Quli (collie), Mokdam (village head) and Chowkidar (watchman) in Angrez Pather. Whip is the representation of brutality and high handedness and Kashmiris or more specifically the working class being the constant victims of brute and force elaborates the use of whip in Bhand Pather.

In Bhand Pather, the conflict of class struggle evolves in two ways, first it evolves through the characters of Maskharas from different pathers who stand representatives of the general masses and try to highlight their exploitations by the rulers or aristocrats. At times the Maskhar can tease and mock and also poke fun on the main characters and sometimes even “emerges as the rebel character that does not low down to oppressor” (Fayaz, 119-20). Though in reality, going against the official cadres was an impossible task but performing such acts would make people feel happy as it vented out their collective resentment against such cadres.

The second conflict evolves through the characters of the potter, the barber, the peasant, the coolie and the cobbler community as a whole from Waatal Pather who bear the brunt of the aristocratic classes on one side and considered as the ‘social others’ by general masses on other side. Ernest Neve in his book *Things seen in Kashmir*, gives glimpse of the social system prevailing in Kashmir during the early twentieth century, stating that;

So far as social distinctions exist, he (Zemindar) holds himself superior to what are called taifidars—those who are not pure farmers, for instance, the shepherds, galawans, gujars and market gardeners. They do not intermarry with these, nor with boatmen, leather workers, minstrels, pottery workers or village sweepers. (152)

The people in this category, which includes Bhands themselves, get into an internal class conflict with the already suppressed masses making their identities much fragmented, first within the periphery and then outside it which makes them the victims of double oppression. Their problems could not be compared with those of the larger group as their condition is much complicated and there is no way in putting them under the same banner of oppression.

Employing class consciousness in Bhand Pather not only depicts the sufferings of downtrodden and marginalized lots but it is also a shared platform of both performers and audiences where problems are highlighted, shared, questioned and politicized helping them in fighting and gaining their lost identities under any kind of oppression.

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