

SWAANG: AN INDIAN FOLK OPERA

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ABSTRACT: My present paper deals with folk theatre form Swaang. Swaang is one of the very famous forms of folk opera in North India. Swaang is known by various names in the different states of India. The beginning of 20th century proved to be the Shakespearean age of Haryanavi folk opera swaang. The folk cultural form, swaang, which is representative of Haryanavi folk culture, is in a deteriorating or decaying position. I have tried my best to bring to light the cultural value of this theatre form and all causes for this decaying condition of folk opera Swaang.

Key Words: Swaang, opera, culture, folk theatre, natya vida, heritage, tradition, Haryanavi, Shakespearean, consumerist, materialist.

Folk theatre begins with the origin of the universe and its cultural boundaries spread with the extension of the world. Folk theatre has played a vivid and lively role in Indian culture. Folk theatre includes all those forms of theatrical performances which entertain people with its miraculous performances. It includes even those forms which give performances at villages, at temples, at road crossings, at fields and granaries, marriage ceremonies, festivals etc. It includes *swaangs* also which are performed on a particular kind of stage or platforms with usual themes of legendary story, historical event or love story at its centre and can keep the public or audience enraptured for the whole night. The peoples of India are a unique combination of diverse races, tribes, castes and communities. As a nation India has unity in diversity. This diversity finds expression in various forms like religion, folk culture, folk theatre etc. In India, many forms of folk theatre and folk opera are in tradition. In North India, particularly in Haryana folk theatre is commonly known as Swaang or saang. Swaang is one of the very famous forms of folk opera in North India. Folk culture is a very decent form of human heritage. Hence, all corners of India are glittering with folk cultures and traditions. As soon as one hears the word 'folk', it seems that a common platform, for common man, of folk cultures and traditions.

Swaang is known by various names in the different states of India. In Kashmir, Swaang is known as *Bhand Pather*, in Panjab as *Nakkaal*, in Rajasthan as *khyaal*, in U.P. as *Nautanki or Raas* and in Haryana as *Swaang or saang*. In Hindu mythology, the Gods themselves figure as supreme dancers. Brahma created *natya vida* and Bharat Muni wrote a book by the name *Bharat Natya Shastra*. In an opera, various themes are mixed—mythological, love popular history and religious themes, all with overtones of secular values. Swaang is a balanced combination of acting, dialogues, music, dance, songs, plot, worship and spirituality.

Haryana swaang follows the old tradition, being the most popular variety of performance based on the 'open stage' technique. It is an all male culture troupe of twenty to thirty artistes, including the director, producer, musicians and actors. Swaangs are performed in the open at night on the stage made of wooden beds. The female roles are also played by males. But there were some female troupes too. The leaders of these troupes were Saradari of Kalyat (Jind), Natni of Gangaru and Bali of Indri (Karnal).

The origin of swaang is traced to Kisan Lal Bhatt, who laid the foundation of the present style of folk theatre. Another view gives credit for this to one Kavi Shankar Dass, a poet artist from Meerut. The stage was most elementary, the actors performed from a central place among the audience. The light was provided by *marshals*. A notable early pioneer was Ali Bux of Rewari, who successfully staged 'Fasanai', 'Azad' and 'Padmavat'.

The beginning of 20th century proved to be the Shakespearean age of Haryanavi folk opera swaang. The proponent of this era was Deep Chand. In Haryana the most celebrated name that of Deep Chand Brahman of village Sheri Khanda in Sonapat. He is still in public memory and his popularly styled as the 'Shakespeare' or 'Kalidas' of Haryana. Semi-literate, he had a spark, a touch of genius. He polished the style of Ali Bux and gave a new colour to this folk art. Dip Chand's style of performance incorporated elements from music, dance, pantomime, versification, and ballad-recitation. During the First World War, British government used his swaangs as a medium of recruitment in army and made him a 'Rai Sahib'. The haunting tune of one of his songs is:

Bharti holai ra, tara bahar khara rangrut.

Yahan milta ha phatta purana, vha milta hai phul boot".

(Come and join the army; the recruits are waiting outside your door; you have only old worn out clothes to wear here; but there—in the army—you will get full-boots)

Among Dip Chand's many contributions to the folk music of swaang, the outstanding one is that he opened the eyes of contemporary singers and music lovers to the prime importance of voice-culture and voice-modulation and the supreme value of emotion in music. It was his genius that chiselled off all the harsh crudities and angularities of the old style of the stage and lent it a new polish and glow. Among his talented disciples may be mentioned Hardeva Swami of Golar (Rohtak), Bhatru Brahman of Bhainsru (Rohtak), Qutbi Doom and Khema.

After Deep came the name of Hardeva in the field of swaang. He skilfully polished the 'chambola' style of Deep Chand and made some improvements in Haryanavi ragni. Heeramal-Jmaal, Dharmbir-Ragbhir, Heer-Ranjha, Bija-Sorath are well known swaangs of Hardeva. Baje Bhagat, a disciple of Hardeva, was a popular swaangi before Lakhmi Chand. He beautifully mixed both the styles of folk music, thus creating a greater mass appeal. He made many improvements in stage-music. He brought polished artists of saarangi, Dholak, Nagaras and Harmonium on stage.

Pt. Lakhmi Chand of Janti Kalan (Sonepat) is the next most celebrated name in Haryana after Deep Chand. He improved the ragni style of singing. He possessed a very rich, melodious voice and was also a successful composer. The important swaang staged by him included Nal Damyanti, Meera Bai, Satyawan Savitri, Poorjan, Seth Chara Chand, Puran Bhagat and Shahi Lakarhara. Lakhmi Chand presented the philosophy of life in his swaangs, on the other hand, he polished and presented the musical, artistic and philosophical heritage of the world in folk language. For example, he contained the whole gist of GEETA only in the two lines of a ragni in his swaang Padmavat:

*"Lakhmi Chand chhoday sab phnd,
Milega karam karey ka phal-dundh"*

(Lakhmi Chand says that leave all hypocrisy, deeds will be justified)

In the same way, he wrote in his swaang 'Harishchander' from the point of view of an ascetic:

*"Lakhmi Chand karam ki chhint,
Yaa jindagi roti par kaa tint"*

(Duty is good where life is volatile and transient)

In one of his ragni Lakhmi Chand sings:

*"lena ek na dene do dildar bane hande se...
Man me ghundi paap ki yaar bane hande se"*

(People who are absolutely unconcerned tend to behave kind-hearted and treacherous and sinners pretend to be friendly)

Lakhmi Chand's songs, ragnis and his swaangs were as solemn and vivid as the *gajals* of Mirza Ghalib. Mulk Raj Anand gave homage to Lakhmi Chand in following words: "you have expressed in your passionate words the vital human truths by which our people often deadened by oppression, have left a heritage which shines like other fiery words of the Haryana tongue by unknown bards and still inspires the eyes of your men and women to awaken from their sleep". A number of disciples he left behind included Pt. Mange Ram, Mai Chand, Sultan, Chandan and Rati Ram. Swaangs were used to educate people.

An hour or so before the show, the musicians of the orchestra began to create the proper atmosphere. The artists sing some religious or other songs connected with the play. Then the "guru" appears and the artists touch his feet to evoke his blessing. The play opens with a dedicatory song in praise of the goddess of knowledge (Bhawani).

*Ay re bhawani baas Kar maira ghat ka parda khol
Rasna par basa kru bhai shudh shabd much bol*

(Oh Goddess Bhawani give me enlightenment).

With a brief introduction about the play, the performance starts. The Haryana swaang has enriched itself by borrowing and adopting a variety of themes. It embraces romances like Sorath, Nihalade, Padmawat, Nautanki etc. There are historical and semi-historical themes based on epics, such as Raja Rissalu, Kichak Badh, Draupadi Chir Haran, Amar Singh, Rathor, Sarwar Neer, Jaswant Singh, etc. themes of old literature, such as Gopi Chand, Bhartari Hari, Harishander, Raja Bhoj, etc. are also adopted. Mythological themes like Prahlad Bhagat, and Punjabi romances like Puran Bhagat, Heer Ranjha, etc. have become part of the vest and varied themes on which the Haryanavi rural theatre operates.

Haryanavi land has cultivated a well known folk culture. Though today its folk culture and folk theatres lost all its charms and artistic talent, which were seen some 35-40 years ago. Some folk cultures have altered their shapes and forms and some are in a more critical situation.

Hence, the folk cultural form, swaang, which is representative of Haryanavi folk culture, is in a deteriorating or decaying position. In present era, swaang culture which entertained people at nights on open platforms with the mythological, historical or love themes and performed with dancing, singing, music and acting. And through this swaang culture, older generation passed its theatrical cultural heritage to the younger generation. But, now this folk system is gradually dying away. If we try to find out the causes behind it, we find following:

- Today's consumerist culture is shadowing down acting, drama and folk theatre. In this culture only materialistic and physical thirst is being satisfied on the name of identity. New facets of human busyness are growing in this materialistic culture. The treasure of folk culture of man and society is gradually deteriorating. In this materialistic era, luxury and affluence has definitely increased. If there is something that has decayed, is the condition of swaangs.
- The inflation and unemployment after World War 2 has badly affected the merry lives of public. This bitter and deceitful experience has diverted their attention from holy rituals and traditions, that is why, they are not interested in any kind of theatrical entertainment. Thus, we are required to sustain our happiness.
- Very charming plots on mythological, historical, religious and social themes have been presented in Indian cultures. Even after this, we require new plots and new experiments, so that, work can be done for the betterment and regeneration of our folk opera swaang.
- Cinema has also badly affected the folk opera swaang and traditional culture and it has become a serious problem today. A proper consideration must be given to it.
- Theatre should be organised by the government. Cultural institutions and theatre groups can do a very helpful work for swaang. Government must organise training camps for folk artists.
- In the past, folk opera swaang, which is the representative of our theatrical genre, its performances continued for whole nights, but this characteristic of swaang does not suit the present times, so, swaangs should be mould in such a way that their performances can be completed within three hours.
- Today's, consumerist and materialist approach has made us passive towards our folk opera swaang and traditional arts. But this attitude of ours is dangerous for us and our traditions. We will have to take interest in our culture and folk arts. We should feel proud our culture. Importance must be given to culture, traditions and folk arts. In this way, our culture will flourish and it will become a medium of our inner expression or emotions and then, will develop the cultural awakening of our society.

Prof. Satyawan Malik is right to opine "Unfortunately, the gamut of life-songs as ragnis, kissa and saangs by Pt. Lakhmi Chand, Baje Bhagat, Mange Ram, Dhanpat Saangi, Mehar Singh et al, are being fast replaced by seemingly vulgar pop songs that are far removed from the fundamental life's complexities about which Dada Lakhmi Chand always dispassionately sang".

Folk opera is an inseparable part of whole folk theatre. Swaang has a well known position among the whole theatrical genre and in all folk theatre forms. Hence, it is important to do experimental work on folk opera swaang, so that, it can regain its creative and imaginative power and this can be done by balancing its traditional forms and modernity. In this whirlpool of Western culture, it becomes important to introduce traditional culture to the younger generation by swaang performances. If we want to set older values in present society, we have to revive and reinvent our folk opera swaang. So, swaang must maintain its popularity among theatrical genre.

We have to acknowledge the cultural value of swaangs and swaang performances need new energy and new experiments. Artists should work on new plays like the plays of Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar, Dharmbir Bharti etc. If we want to give swaang, its earlier position and fame, we have to use new theatrical techniques like new stage settings, light and sound effects, acting, makeup, dialogues, dance, music etc. Along with these new techniques, we have to present a swaang in such a way that it can suit the demands of the present time, atmosphere, happenings and folk artists. We have still to do much more for swaangs using new techniques and experimental themes of theatre and drama.

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