FOLK THEATRES OF NORTH INDIA

CONTESTATION, AMALGAMATION AND TRANSFERENCE

Karan Singh

ROUTLEDGE

FOLK THEATRES OF NORTH INDIA

This book examines folk theatres of North India as a unique performative structure, a counterstream to the postulations of Sanskrit and Western realistic theatre. In focusing on their historical, social and cultural imprints, it explores how these theatres challenge the linearity of cultural history and subvert cultural hegemony. The book looks at diverse forms of theatre such as *svangs*, *nautanki* and *tamasha*, all with conventions like open performative space, free mingling of spectators and actors, flexibility in roles and genres and so on. It discusses the genesis, history and independent trajectory of folk theatres; folk theatre and Sanskrit dramaturgy; cinematic legacy; and theatrical space as performance besides investigating causes, inter-relations within socio-cultural factors and the performance principles underlying them. It shows how these theatres effectively contest delimitation of human creative impulses (as revealed in classical Sanskrit theatre) from structuring as well as from normative impulses of religion and culture, while amalgamating influences from Western theatre, newly rising religious reform movements of nineteenth-century India, *tantra* and *Bhakti*. It further highlights their ability to adapt and reinvent themselves in accordance with spatial and temporal transformations to constitute an important anthropological layer of Indian society.

Comprehensive and empirically rich, this book will be an essential read for scholars and researchers of cultural studies, theatre, film and performance studies, sociology, political studies, popular culture and South Asian studies.

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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO MY WIFE, JYOTI,
AND MY DAUGHTERS, DIVYA AND BHUMIKA,
FOR THEIR PATIENCE AND CONSTANT SUPPORT

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FOREWORD

'Folk' has indeed become a difficult term to define these days. And, perhaps, more difficult to accept as a marker of identity by all those people(s) who are identified as 'folk' by individuals and institutions—social, academic, legal and political—because these individuals and institutions consider their own location as the centre of the contemporary discourse while consigning the location of the 'folk' naturally to the periphery/margin. Since ancient times the *margi* and the *desi* traditions have been in vogue representing the elite and the masses in Indian society. Strict scriptural codes were developed to keep these traditions demarcated through regal interventions which had kept small amount of traffic between them, usually to accommodate the changes effected by religious, technological and indigenous political situations rising on the cultural horizon. Situations arising from foreign invasions interacted with Indian culture—both the elite and the 'folk' traditions—the impact of which so far may not have been accounted for completely. The earliest *Vedic* and *Upanishidic* discourse kept changing and evolving in the successive periods, which is visibly manifested in the epics, *pauranas*, *smirits*, *shastras*, classical literature and treatises on arts, architecture, medicine, warfare, the reformist Jain, Buddhist and other schools of thought/philosophy and so on in the ancient and the early medieval period. This process can be most strongly perceived in the *Bhakti* movement in the late medieval period and, still later, in the impact of European, particularly English, colonization in modern times. These are only some of the important cultural situations that acted and reacted with the existing Indian traditions and brought in changes in the contours and trajectories of the elite and the folk traditions of India. The process of change continued after Independence through constitutional provisions and other means used by governments and social groups, political parties and other cultural outfits. Liberalization, privatization and globalization in tandem with late twentieth and early twenty-first century 'revolutions' are transforming the existing polymorphous and multivalent folk traditions of India.

Performing arts of the elite culture (*margi*), by and large, developed with reference to the prescriptions of *Natyashastra*, so a high amount of

homogeneity is noticeable in these arts across vast expanse of time and space in India. But the folk performing arts (*desi*), by and large, remained out of this loop and developed without interference of the hegemonic prescriptions of *Natyashastra*, at least in letter, if not in spirit, and, thus, are more heterogeneous, but it should be noted at the outset that both the traditions were aware of each other's practices. Language, worshipping practices of the local deities, agricultural patterns, legends, myths and heroic exploits and so on specific to a region were responsible for the growth of varied folk performing arts. More often than not they also liberated the performance from Brahmanical control and the caste hierarchy.

On account of the absence of scriptural reference and interference these performing arts remained largely absent in serious and extended discussions of arts and literature. Besides entertainment, these arts also served many other (both sacred and non-sacred) cultural functions of the community. If aspiration to come nearest to the ideal established in *Natyashastra* lent grandeur to the classical performing arts, the need to appropriately and creatively respond to the sacred and non-sacred in varied circumstances lent variety to the folk performing arts. In spite of local differences there was a lot of give and take between them because of cultural contiguity and cultural overlapping. So, it is quite possible to speak of folk performing arts of India or Indian folk performing tradition.

The mechanics and dynamics of the composite Indian tradition are generally restricted to its cultural, political, economic and religious dimensions. The mainstream thinkers of Indian tradition either do not consider the role of these arts or give them just a passing reference. And they conveniently forget that the composite Indian tradition cannot be restricted to the beliefs and practices of the elite sections of the society having exclusive access to the sources of tradition and exclusive control over corollary practices. Thus, the place and role of the masses in making Indian tradition, including the aesthetic tradition, a composite one must be recognized. During the colonial era the artistic practices of tribal societies were recorded and studied by anthropologists and ethnologists, but most regional artistic practices were given a miss from serious considerations both by social scientists and Indian thinkers as they had their hands full with establishing the unitary character of Indian tradition and the credentials of the Indian nation.

These problems have now settled down, which gives us an opportunity to study how these folk performing arts operate within the broad framework of the *margi* tradition on the one hand and act as the platform of communication between the masses and the source of elite tradition on the other hand. The sources of elite tradition are contained in numerous Sanskrit and Tamil texts, often written in obscure and metaphorical language, which require years of training accompanied by a wide range of study of commentaries on them. It would be simply beyond the comprehension of the illiterate masses. Performers of the *desi* tradition make the content of these treatises available

to the masses in their own language and thereby perform their role in making the Indian tradition a composite one and shared by the masses as well.

The 'frozen caste system' might not have started giving way to a class society, but enough social, economic, political and technological changes had come to play their role that chinks in its edifice have started appearing. Rituals rooted in the practices of a conventional agrarian society started becoming irrelevant in the face of mechanized agriculture, and new platforms of entertainment like radio, gramophone, cinema and television followed other information and communication technology (ICT)-driven means; they first brought radical transformation in folk performing arts and are further instrumental in pushing these arts to the margins. These arts were patronised by the 'upper' castes, and the bulk of performers came from the 'lower' castes. The changing social pattern brought the demise of the *jajmani* system which supported these folk arts.

Most social groups, the physical, cultural and artistic location of these arts, did not qualify as exotic in ethnological/anthropological terms and hence escaped the attention of social scientists or colonial officers to the extent that details of some of these arts practiced until a few decades ago are also not available. In many cases the authentic texts of very popular performances are not available because the illiterate artists or their patrons did not care to commit them to paper—a fate common to all oral traditions. Neither the government nor the public developed a dedicated system to collect information and create an archive of these arts.

Emergence of 'theory' and its popularity have opened new semantic possibilities of 'yet to be charted' dimensions of the aesthetic hinterland of Indian tradition. Dr. Karan Singh's effort is laudable as an academically remunerative effort for helping us have a better understanding of our own life. The luxury of writing a foreword provided to me by Dr. Singh allows me to be optimistic, and I can safely say that he has thrown a stone (a big one) in the hitherto still academic waters, which will have far-reaching, rich consequences.

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NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

Diacritics have been used sparingly and only in those cases where long vowels/diphthongs occur frequently in the text. The vowels with diacritic marks as used in the text are long vowels/diphthongs. A list of such sounds is given here:

ā as in car, arm
ē as in eight, wait
ū as in pool, ooze
ī as in eat, beat
ŏ as in ought, sought

The symbol ċ represents the initial consonant sound occurring in words 'chat' and 'charm.'

INTRODUCTION

Folk theatre: genesis, history and causes

Genesis of Indian theatre

The earliest inkling of Indian drama, whether folk or Sanskrit, is often traced to the hymns of the *Rig Veda* which are full of dramatic import, wherein the dialogue form used in these hymns bears out traces of rudimentary drama in the *Rig Vedic* society. Many hymns in the *Rig Veda* present a situation where dialogues between two characters are dramatized in a well-marked situation. Some of these dialogues possessing a dramatic import take place between Sarama and the Panis, Yama and Yami, Pururavas and Urvaci. Along with the presence of these dialogues bearing dramatic essence, the situations presented in these hymns are highly histrionic in their content. For instance, the hymns in the *Rig Veda* related to the croaking of frogs and the pressing of Soma by a Brahmin are picturesque in their presentation, containing seeds of theatrical performances in their visualization and suggestions of movement.[1]

This theory of the dialogues as drama in the *Rig Veda* was assiduously expounded by scholars such as Ernst Windisch, Hermann Oldenberg, Richard Pischel, Karl Friedrich Geldner, Max Mueller, Van Schroedar and Horrwitz. Sylvain Levi, for instance, claims that "in the dialogues of these hymns are to be seen the signs of an Indian drama. [. . .] These dialogue hymns are not a mere product of the poet's fancy, but that he reproduced in them scenes which he himself had actually beheld. [. . .] In this primitive drama he thinks he recognises the restriction of the actors to three, and also a chorus, human or divine" (Ridgeway 154). Although these verses seem to contain some sub-stratum for the genesis of drama in the climactic situation of events and the imagery laden language, the absence of any empirical evidence in the text of the *Rig Veda* seems to belie such claims. Further, as Keith points out, the ritual dialogues cited by these writers in favour of the origin of drama in the *Rig Veda* are basically liturgical and not dramatic since the mimesis as the essence of drama is missing here.[2] Another view regarding the origin of Indian drama is proposed by Ridgeway, according to whom the Indian drama originated not in the *Vedic* hymns but in the representations of Krishna's adventurous feats in the epic age. He cites evidence in this regard

from the *Mahabhasya* of Patanjali wherein the writer mentions staging of the *Kansavadha* and *Balibandha*.[3] Macdonnell, too, seems to agree with this view that the popular representations of these escapades might carry the beginning of dramatic activity in ancient India like those of mystery plays in the West: "It seems likely that the Indian drama was developed in connection with the cult of Vishnu Krishna, and that the earliest acted representations were therefore like the Mysteries of Christian middle ages, a kind of religious play in which scenes from the legend of the god were enacted mainly with the aid of song and dance supplemented with prose dialogues improvised by the performers" (Macdonnell 347). Additionally, a close connection between the terms such as *nat*, *nataka*, *nrit* and *nautch* led Macdonnell to trace the origin of Indian theatre in folk performances which were later metamorphosed into Sanskrit theatre. This theory is further evidenced by the semantic connection between the word *bharata* and actor and its derivative, *bharot*, which in Gujarati means a singer. The drama in India, as detailed by Macdonnell, progressed from the folk mimicry of episodes related to the life of Krishna to the progressive addition of dialogues to these performances and their final blossoming into Sanskrit theatre:

> It must at first have consisted only of rude pantomime, in which the dancing movements of the body were accompanied by mute mimicking gestures of hand and face. Songs, doubtless, also early formed an ingredient in such performances. The addition of dialogue was the last step in the development, which was thus much the same in India and in Greece. This primitive stage is represented by the Bengal yatras and the Gitagovinda. These form the transition to the fully developed Sanskrit play in which lyrics and dialogue are blended.
>
> (346–47)

This assertion is important here in the sense that this theory traces the development of Sanskrit theatre from folk theatres and not vice versa and thus contravenes the divine origin of Sanskrit dramatics as enumerated by Bharata in the *Natyasastra*.

Another important theory related to the origin of theatre in India is held by Pischel, who considers puppet shows as the precursors of Indian drama, which he discusses in his book *The Home of the Puppet Plays*. The argument he cites in favour of his thesis is that the words for puppet in Sanskrit are *putrika*, *duhitrka*, *puttali* and *puttalika*, which all mean 'little daughter,' thus evincing a close connection between the puppet plays and the domestic life of people. The adaptation of *puttali* and *puttalika* from vernaculars to Sanskrit further corroborates the mutual transference and adaptation between folk theatres and Sanskrit theatre in connection with these puppet shows. There are many references in ancient Indian literature regarding puppet shows, for

instance in the *Mahabharata*, princess Uttara requests Arjuna to bring garments for her dolls while in the *Kathasaritsagar* and the *Kama sutra* playing with dolls and holding of their shows are frequently mentioned. In the tenth century the *Balramayana* of Rajasekhara refers to the use of mechanical dolls in a play depicting the abduction of Sita. Rajasekhara therein calls the puppet players *sutradhara*, a word which became significant in its later connection with Sanskrit plays wherein the *sutradhara* is the director-introducer of a play. As per conclusions drawn by Pischel, the *sutradhara* in early Sanskrit plays, who initiated "a short introductory piece, consisting either of dancing, songs and instrumental music, or of songs and instrumental music or simply one of these three" (10), was followed by a *sthapaka* who was originally a setter up of the puppets. Hence these puppet shows were prototypes of Sanskrit plays wherein "the *sutradhara* was the actor, who moved the puppets and spoke for them; the *sthapaka* the man whose duties consisted first and foremost, in making, mending, and putting them on the stage" (12). This theory of puppet plays as the precursors of Indian drama is contested by critics like Ridgeway who point out that although there is a repeated mention of puppets in ancient Indian literature, there is no mention of a complete puppet play on or off the stage as a dramatic presentation. Most of the time, these puppets are only used as mechanical toys to play with or to deceive somebody in the form of a clever ploy. Further, it has been pointed out that the connection between the use of the term *sutradhara* in the drama and in the puppet plays can at best be accidental and might have begun to be used for stage managers fortuitously at a later date without any causal relation between the two art forms (Ridgeway 163).

The inception of drama in the rituals has also been a major contention of many theatre critics. A liturgical performance of rituals, which often uses highly performative gestures, seems to have led to this inference. Martin Esslin, in tracing this relationship, has noted: "In ritual we have the common root of music, dance, poetry and drama; in the subsequent process of further differentiation, drama developed into spoken drama, ballet, opera, musical comedy" (28). While there is some analogy between the performance of rituals and the theatres in their suggestive movements as well as imitation, a marked disjunction does exist between the two forms. The rituals, unlike theatre, are essentially monologues, their purpose is sacramental and there is a lack of plot and characterization. Additionally, while the rituals are inward looking and trace a connection between the microcosm and the macrocosm, the theatre is enmeshed within the world of action and events. Hence it seems unlikely that theatre might have its immediate ancestor in the rituals and their performances.

The origin of drama is also sometimes traced in the carnivals and fairs which celebrate freedom of human spirit from constricting social structures. These carnivals and fairs may have acted as precursors of folk drama in both their spirit and execution. Friedrich Nietzsche's use of the Apollonian

and Dionysian binaries as two contrasting impulses in Greek tragedy points to this connection. A disruption of their interdependence which began with Aeschylus and became prominent in the modern drama is seen as the cause of the breakdown of authenticity of drama. While the Dionysian urges are effectively subversive and anti-essentialists which release primordial instincts from the unconsciousness of the human mind, the Apollonian world is akin to a dream in which human beings create boundaries through *principium individuationis* and give shape to a shapeless reality. The dream world of Apollo, "the God of individuation and of just boundaries" (Nietzsche 51), has no place for monsters and is a creator of structural illusions which mankind attempts to envelop around itself so as to save itself from an awareness of the world as a site of acute suffering and chaos. Alongside this clash between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, it can also be argued that they cannot exist without each other as the Apollonian systematization is only an attempt to hide the real face of suffering which is revealed in the Dionysian Folk performances are spaces wherein this unification of the Apollonian and Dionysian currents is most explicitly visible:

> What is folk song as distinct from the utterly Apollonian epos? What is it but the *perpetuum vestigium* of a unification of the Apollonian and the Dionysiac? Its tremendously wide dissemination amongst all peoples, intensified in constantly new manifestations, tells us of the strength of nature's dual artistic impulse, which leaves its trace in the folk song just as the orgiastic movements of a people are immortalised in its music. [. . .] Any period richly productive of folk songs has also been most intensely stimulated by Dionysiac currents, which we must see as the substratum and precondition for the folk songs.
>
> (Nietzsche 32–33)

What Nietzsche saw as an encounter between the Dionysian and Apollonian universes was interpreted by Bakhtin as a conflict between the ecclesiastics and carnivals. For him, the carnival is tellingly revealed in folk performances which stand in opposition to the official world of seriousness and hierarchy. In the view of Bakhtin, the middle ages comprised two world views—one was strictly ecclesiastical and presented social structures as exemplifying customary beliefs and truths while the other one represented a universe laced with the subversion of these postulations. The carnivals are diffused pieces of performance where no single aspect of human life and society is accentuated at the cost of another. They revel in the roundedness of human reality, with a suspicion towards individualization and separation. Within the arena of carnivals, human beings exist as a common mass in relation to one another and not as individualized beings with an unconnected existence. The strength of carnivals lies in doing away with the centre as a

focal point as well as in its opposition to the homogenization. A carnival is also typified by change and transformations; it is never static, rigid or conventional. In the words of Morris: "Carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical ranks, privileges, norms and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed" (199). One of the potent ways in which this subversion is achieved in carnivals is through the use of humour. Folk humour, as realized in the carnivals, constitutes "a second reality outside the official realm; it is a complex system of meaning existing alongside and in opposition to the 'authoritarian word' of dominant orthodoxy" (Morris 194). It becomes rejuvenating and liberating because it frees mankind from fear and prohibitions. In its universality and ambivalence it is distinct from the present-day use of humour as a negative satire or a recreational horseplay. Here, the marketplace as a meeting place for all that is unofficial becomes a converging space for countering official seriousness with its use of billingsgate. The carnivals thus create free spaces where the hierarchy is questioned and reversed. In their mirroring of the flow of life and the vocalizing of essential truths about human life, they celebrate freedom from order, shape and authority and present a contrast to the structuring drives of life. Bakhtin rightly notes in this connection: "Carnival with all its images, indecencies, and curses affirms the people's immortal, indestructible character. In the world of carnival the awareness of the people's immortality is combined with the realization that established authority and truth are relative" (Morris 226). It can be seen here that the carnivals in their revolt against the established norms, their use of humour to undermine figures of authority and their creation of a dialogic space share much common ground with folk theatres. It seems quite plausible that the carnivals were major germination points for the subsequent development of theatre. A striking sharing of grounds between carnivals and theatres in their subversive drive can be seen as containing the seeds for the growth of drama through folk performances.

A brief sketch of the aforementioned theories makes it apparent that the origin of Indian drama must have been a result of multiple impulses which augmented each other through a synthesis impelled by the human urge to imitate nature as well as to give a semblance of permanency to it through representation. Schechner's understanding of Western theatre's obsession with presentable and socially useful attributes points to the significance of ritualistic aspects in Indian theatre: "Performance consists of four great realms: entertainment, ritual, healing and education. That modern Western orthodox theatre emphasises entertainment and education (political theatre) over ritual and healing" (*Environmental Theatre* xiv). Those drives which made a primitive man create rituals and religious pageantry must also have impelled him to produce theatre as homage to the ever changing reality

around him along with a desire to control and shape things through their performances. What is visible in this conflict between control and freedom on the level of ritual also becomes symptomatic of a clash between the mutuality and mutability of the folk and classical. These two instincts in human beings viz. the folk and classical derived their strength from the interrelated desires for control as well as freedom, a wish to create structures as well as an equally strong impulse to escape them. This interconnectedness of the folk and classical which has been a hallmark of Indian civilization, and is visible in the mythic journey of Indian civilization from the *Rig Veda* to the present, is thus part of theatre's origination in the oppositions and immersions of diverse catalysts.

Genesis of folk theatres

The origin of folk theatres lies in a human impulse for pleasurable imitations, which associates folk theatrical performances with contiguous folk expressive arts. Therein, the genesis of folk theatres lies in the day-to-day life of common people, particularly the low castes and their agricultural activities. A story related to the birth of *kariyala*, a folk theatrical art of Himachal Pradesh, is symptomatic of the nativity of all such folk theatrical performances and needs to be quoted at length:

> Outside the fort of Dev Junag and on the farms, a number of menials, called as Bethoo in the local dialect, were assigned with the work of collecting grain and depositing the same in Dev's i.e. King's treasure at the time of harvests. This was in the shape of Begar (bonded labour without any remuneration). The menials were required to work till the late at night at Dev's farm, thrashing and cleaning the crop. In order to break the monotony of their subjugatingly manual life, Toori(es), a local caste on the lower rung, relaxed themselves with singing and whatever they could coin or compose. [. . .] Along with Toori(es) the people of other castes also joined their hands to make jokes. While making jokes, they performed mimicry based on their deep observation in day-to-day life and subjective experiences obtained through contact with people around.
>
> (Hans 16–17)

The story traces connections between the lived life of common folk and theatrical performances. It also makes visible a subversion of hierarchical relations by folk theatres through humourous impersonations.

With the available wealth of scholarship on classical texts, our information on the structure, themes and actual performance of North Indian folk theatres before the arrival of Europeans in India is sketchy and insufficient. One of the important milestones in the development of these folk theatres

as we know them today is taken to be the eleventh century when Sanskrit theatrical traditions broke down into various folk traditions. This view is referred to by Jacob Srampickal: "With the decline of the Sanskrit tradition in the 11th century, its various elements splintered into regional vernacular forms. Folk theatre assimilated all these and survived, unopposed by the Muslim rulers, in the villages of India. [. . .] The wide kaleidoscopic variety of Indian culture may have given rise to multiple varieties of folk theatres rich in content, heritage and form" (59).

There is an acute absence of documentation on North Indian folk theatres from the eleventh to mid-eighteenth centuries, except some scattered references to them in the writings of *Bhakti* saints. Kabir's references to *tamasha*, *svang* and *khel* in his *banis*, his collection of songs, portray them as deceptive and illusory realities. Although he does not provide direct evidence on their performances in the fifteenth century, the repeated allusions to *svang* as delusive art gives the impression that the secular folk theatres were held in low esteem by social reformers very much like their counterparts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For example, Kabir in the following verse castigates false religiosity through its comparison with the illusory nature of *svang*:

मीठे बोल जु बोलिये,
तेते साधु ना जान
पहिले स्वांग दिखाय के, पिछे दीशै आन।

Whosoever speaks sweet words, is not a saint
First he uses illusion, later he dodges.
(translation mine)

Similar references to *bhagatiya* occur in the *Ain—e-Akbari* of Abul Fazel (1551–1602) and the *Naurang-e-ishq* (1685) of Maulana Ganimat. The following extract from the *Naurang-e-ishq* reveals the itinerary nature of folk theatres in the seventeenth century:

> Very interesting people have arrived in the city who in their peculiar style give various types of wonderful performances full of song and music. They are expert in imitation and dance and their voice is sweet. In our language they are known as Bhagatbaz. They sometimes perform the *nakal* of a man, sometimes of a woman and sometimes of a child. Sometimes they become child mendicants sometimes Muslims. [. . .] They can imitate people of all castes and communities.
>
> (Varadpande 140)

A reference to *svang* is also found in the *Hasyarnava* by Rasarup which was written in the latter half of the seventeenth century and the *Madhava*