Folk Theatre

**Bhavai: Gujarat’s Folk Drama of Nomads**

Nomadic tribes have always been a source of suspicion to sedentary people. In the colonial period the British normalised a set of notions about such groups that echoed European ideas about the gypsies. They listed such groups that posed a threat to settled society and introduced a legislative measure, the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) in 1871 and as a result of which nearly 200 such communities stood ‘notified’ as criminal.

The Targalas or Nayaks have been itinerant drama troupes in Gujarat who moved from village to village to perform ‘Bhavai’, a folk dance theatre form. These performers too carry the stigma of criminality. There are numerous folk tales of ‘the skillful thefts’ allegedly committed by Bhavai troupe members. And if a burglary had taken place in a village where Bhavai had been performed, members of the troupe would be arrested and interrogated. The itinerant Bhavai players have always been expected to report their entry, stay and exit to the village headman.

The folk dance drama of Bhavai probably originated in the then Anart Pradesh (now North Gujarat). It then spread over other parts of Gujarat, Saurashtra, Kutch and Marvad (now Rajasthan). It has been a popular form of entertainment among the rural and the townsfolk from the 14th century through to the 19th century in the North-west region of India. Although its origin are in the worship of the Mother Goddess, Bhavani, it has gathered secular elements with the passage of time and come to embrace the whole range of human emotions of the rural community. It is to Gujarat what Yashagana is to Andhra Pradesh, Nautanki to Uttar Pradesh, Tamasha and Lalit to Maharashtra - a veritable folk dance drama.

The performing Targalas are believed to be the descendents of the poet Asait Thakar of Unjha who lived in the 14th century. As the legend goes, Asait was a Audichhya Brahmin of Unjha in North Gujarat. His host Hemala Patel’s daughter Ganga was kidnapped by a Khiljl, Sardar Jahan Roz. Hemala Patel urged Asait Thakar to use his artistic skills to help liberate his daughter from the Sardar. Asait told the Sardar, after pleasing him with his performance and songs that he should liberate the girl, who he claimed was his daughter. The Sardar then asked him to dine with the girl in the same plate to prove this claim. Asait dined with her and had her freed but the Brahmans excommunicated him for his ‘unholy dinner’. Asait chose to stay out with his three sons and live by his art – the performance of Bhavai. He is said to have composed three hundred and sixty veshas (performances) of which about twenty veshas survive in the repertoire of the performers today.

Perhaps, there was a living tradition, which Asait picked up on and improved to survive after his excommunication. We know that the classical Sanskrit theatre was active till the 13th century. Perhaps, Bhavai had developed alongside. It may be the case that due to the decadence of the Sanskrit drama during the Mughal rule, the audiences for Bhavai performances had become wider. The typical mixture of Apabhransha, Hindi, Urdu, Marvadi is sufficient testimony of Bhavai being an entertainment of the desi tradition.

Bhavai is a performance that presents a series of events, that are autonomous from one another. Each of these playlets has its own plot. There are usually no structural connection between one playlet and the other, except that all of them are played, one after another, on the same playground during a night or for longer duration of time.

The first nine days of Ashwin (Navratri) are usually the days of the performances. Janmashtami, Shivratiri, Ekdashi of the Hindu month are appropriately sacred for a Bhavai performance. The Targalas perform it on an advance Invitation or without invitation in places and villages where their right of performance or vesha (‘morsel’), is traditionally fixed. On a particular date or a Tithi, sacred to Mother Goddess the Bhavaiyas rightfully come to propitiate Bhavani to a village on invitation.

The Bhavai players herald their entry into the village with the playing of a long Bhungal in the afternoon. Villagers gather as darkness descends. The Bhavai players place the picture of the Mother Goddess in the centre and the Bhavaiyas begin to sing Garbis of Mata Song. The place where Bhavai is performed should be delimited and sanctified by invocation as the establishment of the Mother Goddess, symbolised by a burning torch (Masal) kept ablaze throughout the performance. The space is called Chuchar or Phoda. The songs sung to settle the audience and are not just for entertainment but they are prayers in honour of the Mother Goddess.
Each of the playlet that comprises a night of performance is called a *vesha*. It refers to the costume and the makeup of a character. On a typical night six to ten Veshas may be enacted. A Vesh may take fifteen minutes to five hours to complete and it prescribes to a particular pattern. An introductory song called *Avanu* or “entry” is sung. It unfolds the general trend of the Vesh. The *Avanu* gives us the clue as to what might be the original plot. Life, with its lapses and heroism as actually lived is depicted in Bhavai. The Mother Goddess is to be pleased by presenting such events. The origin of Bhavai may be religious but the content is extraordinarily social.

The performers add and subtract, as per the need of audiences while performing a Vesh. Bhavai is full of literary, social and political references and engages with the compositions of Mira, Kabir, Tulsidas, Gang, Narsingh, Premanand, Dayaram, Shamal, Bhojo, Mandan and Asait. The Veshas depict a society that is feudal and the custom of *Sati*, beliefs about omens, hobbies, festivals, opium, liquor and wine rituals are portrayed. Many Veshas also depict the influence of Muslim cultural influence on the life of the people. Love affairs between Muslim men and Hindu women are represented. The overall message is of communal harmony.

Dance plays a very important part in Bhavai. Mostly the Veshas begin and end with a dance. Very often the dance is a connecting link between two Veshas. Romantic, tragic and humorous or heroic situations may lead to a dance. In some Veshas the typical Gujarati folk dance of Garba is employed.

Anglicisation of Gujarati drama and the urbanised *desi natak* dealt a severe blow to Bhavai. Television, too has taken away Bhavai’s place in rural society. Efforts to reenergize and revive this theatre form seem to be of little use as entertainment has become an industry in our times.

A new website has just been launched for the benefit of music lovers, students, musicians and teachers of South Indian classical music: www.carnaticstudent.org. Its foremost objective is to contribute to a meaningful exchange of ideas, expertise and resources in the field of South Indian classical music through e-learning. To achieve this objective, participants from different cultural backgrounds are being encouraged to explore various aspects of Carnatic music, its traditions and present role in world music with an open mind. No opinion or theory is taken for granted; instead, queries about specific aspects of this music will be presented to renowned musicians, scholars and educationists who graciously agree to share their expertise based on their own research, publications and experience as performers.

E-learning opens new avenues for interaction and collaboration across national borders. It is therefore highly suited to fostering involvement in Carnatic music irrespective of one’s own place of residence or institutional affiliation. There is a concessional fee which applies to seminar groups of 10 or more students enrolled in courses held at any recognized educational institution or cultural association.

Courses will start in October 2002 and are given independently in English and German in collaboration with the Chair of Indology of the University of Wuerzburg and the Distance Education Center of the University of Lueneburg in Germany.

The course author and tutor, Ludwig Pesch, is a practicing musician and educationist. His publications on Indian music include the “The Illustrated Companion to South Indian Classical Music” published by Oxford University Press in 1999 which has been re-printed four times since 1999. In India he is widely known for several cultural projects and symposia on Indian music. In 2000 he was decorated with the Cross of the Order of Merit on the Ribbon of the Federal Republic of Germany “in recognition of his outstanding contributions to Indo-German relations”.

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