

## **BHAND PATHER: ARCHIVING THE INDIGENOUS FOLK THEATRE FORM OF KASHMIR**

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**Abstract:** *Bhand Pather* is one of the oldest folk theatres in Kashmir that has a lasting influence in the public life and popular discourse in the valley. In an interview to one of the largest database called pad.ma, famous *Bhand Pather* artists Subhan Bhagat and Mahjoor Bhagat describes this theatrical form as a social drama that incorporates myths and legends with contemporary social satire. The recurrent theme of the interview is the immediate need to preserve this dying art form. In the essay, "Loss of Syncretic Theatrical Form" Javaid Iqbal Bhat notes that a comprehensive historical account of *Bhand Pather*—perhaps the oldest theatre in the subcontinent according to him—is yet to be written. In terms of its value as a cultural artifact, Bhat argues that it may act as a site to understand the complex discourse of *Kashmiriyat*. It is this confluence of Hindu Shaivism and Sufi mysticism that is symptomatic of the tapestry of life that is Kashmir, ably captured in Sushma Jatoo and Sudhir Lall edited *Bhand Pather: the Folk Theatre of Kashmir*.

At present, the age old tradition of *Bhand Pather* is confined to some theatrical groups or audio visual libraries of All India Radio and Doordarshan. The old theatres of Kashmir are in shambles and there is no initiative from government to construct the new theatres. The old *Bhand Pather* artists appreciated and nurtured by the ruling classes are a thing of the past. Now bhaands (artists) move from village to village as struggling artists in dire economic impoverishment with no audience to listen to them. There is an immediate need for preservation of *Bhand Pather* to prevent its untimely death. Apart from archiving and documentation changes have to be made in the old script of *Bhand Pather* so that it caters to the taste of new generation. There is also need for imparting training to the artists to rejuvenate it to fit in the contemporary times. Apart from one or two theatre groups there is nothing done to keep this folk theatre alive. This paper attempts to present a historical context of this traditional folk theatre of Kashmir valley in order to suggest ways of preserving and archiving *Bhand Pather* that has been one of the most effective means of communication for centuries. The paper primarily explores the problematic of the routine, often reluctant programming of *Bhand Pather* in Doordarshan and All India Radio.

**Keywords:** Bhand Pather, Folk form, Folk theatre of Kashmir.

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**Introduction:** *Bhand Pather* is the earliest theatre of the subcontinent though there are not much archival evidences of this folk form. But its traces can be found in 6<sup>th</sup> century. Before the Muslim Rule in Kashmir the theatre was performed on the days of religious importance, but with the Muslim Sultunate in Kashmir the *Bhand Pather* continued but the place of performance shifted from Temples to shrines and *khankas*. The *Bhand Pather* demonstrates *Kashmiriyat* by showing similar cultural aspects between Hinduism and Islam and elaborates differences as well. And in spite of all the differences it's not difficult to live together. The *Bhands* have enjoyed a very respectful status in the society. At the time of any natural calamity *Bhands* were requested to pray for the people of the land at the shrines of sufi saints (*Bhand Doikhar* as it is said in Kashmiri language). Even at the time of harvest people used to keep a share for *Bhands* not as a matter of favor but considering it as their right. *Bhand Pather* is the combination of two Sanskrit words *Bhand* and *Pather*, *Bhand* means –Jester and *Pather* means –dramatic personnel. It is a loosely scripted performance about the social, cultural, political and religious scenario of Kashmir. The *Bhands* receive training from their family heads and the traits of art are transmitted from generations. There are about ten types of *Pathers* the basic structure is somehow similar but the themes dealt with are different for different *Pathers*. *Wattal Pather* is considered to be oldest and *Angrez Pather* to be the latest. Each *Pather* deals with a theme from pollution, contemporary social

issues, political loopholes to lifestyles of different sections of society. *Bhand Pather* is a versatile folk form incorporating every issue in the society thus making it fit even for the contemporary times. Some of the *Pathers* are as:-

**Dard Pather:** The play depicts the tyrant Dards -Afghan rulers and portrays their atrocities on Kashmiris. It also depicts the lavish life style, epicurean philosophy of the rulers and effects of alcohol on humans. The languages used are Persian, Kashmiri, Urdu, and Hindi.

**Gosaine Pather:** The *Pather* focuses on the religious faith of Kashmiris and ridicules the people who use religion as a tool to befool people. The *Pather* mostly uses Kashmiri language apart from some expression from Hindi and Sanskrit language.

**Buhir/Bata Pather:** This *Pather* portrays the characteristics of Pandit community. It uses an element of humor to communicate how the common man is punished for no crime and the administration applauds the convict. There is a use of Kashmiri and Sanskrit Language.

**Shikargah Pather:** This is the only *Pather* where animal masks are used and *Bhands* talk about ecological balance, messages like deforestation, soil erosion, environmental pollution and wild life conservation are dealt with. The languages used are Kashmiri, Urdu and Persian.

**Raaze Pather:** *Raaze*- meaning King talks about the bad memories of Afghan rule and its oppression on people of Kashmir and portrays the ill effect of other cultures on Kashmiri society. The languages used are Kashmiri, Persian and bit of Punjabi.

**Aarem Pather:** The *Pather* talks about the life style of the Farmer section of the Kashmiri Society. Their marriages used to be different from the conventional one where the bride goes to groom's house here the situation was vice versa. It also deals with the issue of child marriage and forced labor. The languages used are Kashmiri, Dogri, and Hindi.

**Waatal Pather:** Depicting the lifestyle of the *Waatal* tribe and the issues like polygamy, child marriage, breach of trust, abusive language and promise breaking are the themes this *Pather* works on. The language used is Kashmiri.

**Bakarwal Pather:** Depicts the life of backward class *Bakarwals* and their exploitation from the merchants. The languages used are Kashmiri, Pahari and Urdu.

**Angrez Pather:** The *Pather* talks about the oppression of English and the resentment of Kashmiris to talk in English and showing their love for the native language. The languages used are English and Kashmiri. (Fayaz, 2008)

In an interview with Talha Jehangir Rehmani (Programme Executive, Radio Kashmir) revealed the plight of these *Bhands* as they have lost their status in the society as being an important medium of communication for centuries. Radio Kashmir is broadcasting *Bhand Pather* fortnightly but that is not enough to preserve this dying Art. There is no archiving done to preserve it and the Radio Library in Kashmir has just bits and pieces of this folk form. There are theatre groups who want to perform and keep this art living but due to lack of funds the art is vanishing with each passing day. DD Kashir being an audio visual channel of communication and a Government media unit has a responsibility to promote, preserve and archive *Bhand Pather*. But unfortunately they have a slot of two Saturdays a month and that too 3:00 PM which is not even a prime time for telecasting this folk form and the library is in shambles with a very less amount of archival material of *Bhand Pather* thus bringing this folk theatre more closer to the brim of its death. This art needs to be preserved, documented and archived in audio visual format. There are attempts made by The Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art Culture and Languages to promote this indigenous theatre. The academy is associated with more than hundred *Bhand* groups and is trying to give a chance to every theatre group at least once in a year to keep

boosting up their morale so that they don't leave this folk form. But this will not help the *Bhands* to keep them tied to the *Pather*, they need recognition and funds both to keep it alive and prevent its untimely death. In an interview with Prof. Farooq Fayaz, the author of *Kashmir Folklore A study in Historical Perspective*, expressed concern over the preservation of *Bhand Pather* by imparting it as an integral part of school curriculum. So, that young generation is not uprooted from their rich cultural history and the theatre remains alive. Once applauded in the royal courts with expensive presents now there is no money in *Bhand Pather* that is why youth are not being part of it anymore. The *Bhands* are being looked down in society now and this is reason for the younger generation to look for better options than being *Bhand* artists. There are attempts from some theatre groups also to promote this dying folk form but the political scenario in Kashmir hinders its impact and the theatre is dying. Kashmiris have never found themselves in favorable political climate and their expression of this suppression is monitored by government and if anything is found against the system, the punishment awaits for them. This leads the *Bhands* to enact the public suppression in a dramatic way so, *Bhand Pather* is not just a medium of communication to entertain the people but is a repertoire of the strong political history of Kashmir. So, its documentation and archival is very important so that the training to the future generation can be imparted. There is a need to change the script so as to fit this art in the contemporary times. The government has a major role to play in bringing back the theatre culture in Kashmir by construction and promotion of new theatres where the *Bhands* can portray their *Pathers* and providing schemes for *Bhands* so that new generation artist feels that the art is still applauded which will in turn bring more artists to come back to their roots of being *Bhands* from generations.

**Conclusion:** There are still groups who want to revive the *Pather* but lack support from the system. Radio and Television being an important channel of communication has a major role to play to prevent the untimely death of *Bhand Pather* but Radio Kashmir and DD Kashmir has lost the audience and so has the *Pather*. To revive *Bhand Pather* changes in the script to fit the contemporary times, imparting it at the school level curriculum and the intervention of New media is the need of the hour or else Kashmir will lose this folk form and it will vanish forever.

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