Schedule: 21st Bharat Rang Mahotsav Feb 2020

If you are at wits end on which play to see, just check out the preview in this E-Mag itself (www.stagebuzz.in), under the Category: Theatre

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Stake holders in Artistic Practices: An Economic Model

When we hear the word stake holders, it reminds us of a company, with a marketing head looking into profits for the company. Do we see a theatre company to be functional as a profit making company, most unfortunately no! In India, with a strong tradition of socialism and the IPTA and the ideas of being the catalyst for change and activism we often fail to see a theatre company to have an economic model behind it. With increasing globalisation and now India adapting itself into a more and more global economy, theatre should also not fail to look at the most important aspect of being an economically strong and viable model. This hence will create more and more stake holders in artistic practices.

In India, the practices are dependent highly on grant giving bodies and neglect to get into even selling tickets for their shows. The management practices are highly lacking and often times publicity is given the last minute emphasis and

impetus. Often one sees that it is the management students, despite their little formal training students doing a much better job at marketing and public relations. What we really lack today is an equally strong focus on theatre management. Theatre in India should go much beyond waiting for the god in form to a government grant to arrive or to wait for a private benefactor to knock the doorsteps of the company.

The stake holders of a theatre company is thus not the role of only the producer and the director but the entire team. Unless and until the theatre company does not make profits it will impossible to give any monetary renumeration to the actors. The actors hence will be forced to look for work beyond theatre and get more and more into films (if lucky) or be forced to act in sometimes absurd television serials in which they might go largely unnoticed.

We lack a strong focus and determination to get beyond the mechanics of staging a play and not looking at marketing in specific and general terms. This input will also be able to not keep a record of all the old audiences but also create new ones and go to places that were unexplored before. Theatre management will also make sure that designing of the publicity, posters, brochures and handouts are created in most effective manner. One can perhaps see the role of the theatre manager as the most important person as he is the chief operative officer of the theatre company. His role is that of an COO like any other important company. Its time now to hence consider this role as a pivotal one and make sure that each theatre company has the focus and determination to start raking profits. The time is now to act!

Significance of Props- Gouri Nilakantan



Loosely described as, “objects used by the actor and those that are placed on stage” props are considered important as long as they serve on the stage. After the show is over very little attention is given over them and they are loosely packed and kept until further usage. How many of us have wondered about its deeper significance? Do we even for one look closely at “ the skull held by Hamlet” or the “ crystal glass unicorn held by Laura” in Glass Menagerie? Even once does the director care to explain to the actor for him/her to closely touch and feel the object as not only a part of the text but also beyond the whole text. It should provide a moment of heightened emotion not only for the actor themselves but also for the audience. Every object is to be placed by the set designer and the director with great fortitude and understanding.

The Natyasastra states that natya was created to meet the demand of a plaything, it's a " Krida" (a source of pleasure and diversion to boredoms, wants the miseries of daily existence). Therefore an art form can induce a temporary state of diversion of one's immediate sorrow and an escape into a world of pleasure and happiness. Nataka or drama can do this more efficiently than other art form, because unlike other arts, it is both drisya and sravya, it has visual and aural appeal. It can satisfy us by graceful or spetacular senses presented on the stage, can gratify our ear or heart. This is efficient only through props that makes the experience of the audience go beyond his reality.

Andrew Sofer, in his book, " The Stage life of Props" says that, " the object must be seen as having a sign." The stage props hence has a strong presence, sometimes as strong as the actor themselves. As Felix Bossonnet sees the props they are much more than the physical presence they hold. Props have to be read between the complex relationship between the actor the text and the audience. It provides a complete whole experience of transmission of the audience into the world of the " play or krida". As Sofer sees the distinctions between the props and the characters should become more and more blurred, it should be amalgamated as one whole. The responsibility of this hence is not just within the text but by the directors as well as the actors.

Khamohsi

Aksar baat karne ki kosish main Zubaan Khamosh kyu nahi reh jaata

Kyu nahi gum main asoon nikalte nahi

Kya duniya ki aagosh main yese sawaar hui

ki angaar baraste hain asoon nahi

Kya aise haalaat sahi

kya sirf angaare hi ankhon ka ujala bankar rahe

Aur awaaz uski asoon

Ek baar sirf tum meri nami bhari ankhon ko hi meri pechaan banao aur usi main meri baaton ki nishaani rakhna

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To be eternally lived



Her crumpled clothes still lies on her beloved bed

Her uncombed stands of hair lying still

They are not strands of shredded shrouds

But create the wave of tumultuous lived lives

of moments …of minutes…the hands of the clock lying still

To be unwound by her alone to live…to be eternally lived

What is “folk” after all? – Gouri Nilakantan

“Folk”, the ordinary, the mundane, the one without any purpose, that’s the first thing that comes to ones mind when we think of the word. Is that true, can we negate the voice of the common man, the arts belonging to the masses as just meaningless, not to be cared for? The recognition for folk arts, theatre, music, oral ballads, tales, stories now is a recognized study on its own. It is being now seen as strong discipline to be studied and understood. To categorize and delineate any dramatic performance as being folk, traditional or modern would be simply dispensing them off that can endanger our readings and interpretations for it. Our tradition has to be also be seen in through the eyes of the masses, the simple potter, the folk stories and the music of our villages, or cooking recipes and our theatrical shows all need to be studied in much more depth. While talking about theatre, all dramatic performances display set codes and conventions such as costumes, makeup, text, and use of diction prose or poetry and evolved choreography, movement or premeditated action. It can be said as one having a “traditional process” as pointed out Brynjulf Alver.

By definition it is the process of tradition which creates,

alters and renews, chooses and works in new topics in an endless chain, by the interaction between the individual bearer and the community. (Alver, 47)

Folk drama is said to often belong to the common and non-literate people. It is time to go beyond the 'folk' or the common and rethink about this dramatic form as an ongoing concern of contemporary life. As in the words of Steve Tillis,

…folk drama might be present throughout a culture, employing of any social rank who use texts that might either be freshly composed or have a basis in literature, and whose performances are an ongoing concern of contemporary life. (35)

Indian theatrical tradition goes back to antiquity and is deeply rooted within local culture and consciousness. Therefore, it has its own uniqueness and structure that is truly eastern in its orientation. The theatrical traditions of India are divided into Loka dharmi (the popular), the folk, which includes Nautanki of Punjab and Swang of Himachal Pradesh and the Natyadharmi(the traditional), the classical, based on ancient texts on drama, like the Bharatanatyam. Several characteristics delineate the classical and the folk. The classical performances of India are based on a set of codified laws, such as those of the Natyashastra, but at the same time are "open" to interpretation. The Natyashastra (800 A.D.) is an ancient Indian treatise on drama, written in Sanskrit that is the foundation for not just the classical dances but also most of the theatrical dance forms prevalent in the country such as Kuttiyatam of Kerala, Ankiya Nat, Ramlila and Raslila of Uttar Pradesh and Terukootu, of Tamil Nadu and Chhau of Eastern India.

This demarcation unfortunately has given the classical arts an " high and elitist definition. It's time to rethink and

reconsider what is “high” and “low” after all? Its time for a change in thinking, for reconsideration and perhaps a redefinition to all arts in general. The future students and communities of practitioners now need to speak in favor of all arts, it’s time to think act now and implement the much needed change now!

Parable of the Ten Virgins: Play Scripted for Nilakantan Gauri by Prema Sastri

(For permission to perform this play read the note at the bottom)




(Left)Virgins in Waiting
(Right)The Wedding

CAST OF CHARACTERS.

VIRGINS.10.

TOWN CRIERS 2

CROWD.

FRUIT SELLER.1

BEGGARS 2.

SCHOOLCHILDREN.3

SHOEMAKER.1

POLICEMEN.3.

STREET SINGERS 5

OLD LADIES. 2

OLD MEN 2

THE KING. 1

The KING`S ATTENDANTS. SEVERAL.

FIRST ATTENDANT.1

THE QUEEN.1

THE QUEEN`S ATTENDANTS.

FIRST ATTENDANT.1

THE KING`S SON. 1

35 speaking roles.

SCENE ONE.

PLACE. THE MIDDLE EAST IN THE TIME OF JESUS.

TIME.LATE AFTERNOON.

SCENE. A BUSY STREET IN THE CAPITAL.

AT RISE. STREET SCENE. PEOPLE ON STAGE.

ENTER FRUIT SELLER.

FRUIT SELLER. Fresh fruit.Bananas, pomegranates, grapes. I also have olives, and dates.(Arranges his baskets, and goes around soliciting)

ENTER SHOEMAKER.(He is holding a string of shoes(.Addresses. Fruit seller) I hope you have some extra fruit for me.

FRUIT SELLER. I have fruit for anyone who will pay.

SHOEMAKER. You have not yet paid me for the repairs I did to your shoe.

FRUIT SELLER. You just put in a couple of stitches.

SHOEMAKER. Without that your shoe would have come apart.

FRUIT SELLER. Allright, here is a pomegranite for you

ENTER SCHOOLCHILDREN.3

(Children run around)

FIRST CHILD. It is good not to be in school.

SECOND CHILD. The classroom was stuffy.

THIRD CHILD. The thatch on the roof was coming apart.Let`s have fun. No one knows where we are

.ENTER. OLD MEN. (They stare at the children, and shake their heads)

ENTER TWO OLD LADIES.(They look around.)

FIRST OLD MAN;(To schoolchildren)

Why are you on the street?
SECOND OLD MAN> You should be in school.

FIRST CHILD. It is a holiday today.

FIRST OLD LADY. What nonsense. My grandchild went to school today

SECOND OLD LADY. So did mine.

THE OLD MEN AND THE LADIES SHAKE THEIR HEADS IN DISAPPROVAL.

ENTER STREET SINGERS.

FIRST SINGER. This looks a merry place.

SECOND SINGER SINGER. So it is.

THIRD SINGER.Let us look around.

FOURTH SINGER. I am sure the people will love our song

.FIFTH SINGER. . Don`t be so sure about it. In the last town they chased us out.

FIRST SINGER We will sing our latest song;the one we made up in the desert.

SECOND SINGER. First let s eat something.(They go to the fruit seller,and buy fruit)

ENTER THE TEN VIRGINS.

FIRST VIRGIN. This is where we were told to come by the temple priest

.SECOND VIRGIN. It is too crowded here.

THIRD VIRGIN. We will stand to one side, and see what happens.

(The virgins form a group)

ENTER BEGGARS.

FIRST BEGGAR. This is a good place for our trade.

SECOND BEGGAR. Ladies and gentlemen. We are hungry. Give us something.(People move away from them, as they go round.).

ENTER POLICEMEN.

FIRST POLICEMAN. Why are you people making such a noise.? You are crowding the street.

SECOND POLICEMAN. Get out of the way.(raises baton)

FRUIT SELLER. It is market day today.

THIRD POLICEMAN. .Sell your wares in the market, not here.

FRUIT VENDOR. This is my market.(Laughs)Come buy grapes, oranges bananas

SECOND POLICEMAN. I`ll give you oranges.(Snatches an orange from the basket)

FRUIT SELLER.Hey give it back.

SECOND POLICEMAN. I`ll give you this.(Raises baton, and gives a blow

The crowd disperses to a side.The two beggars are in front).

FIRST POLICEMAN. What are you doing.?

FIRST BEGGAR. Begging sir. Have you something to give me?.

FIRST POLICEMAN(Raises baton) Yes I have.

SECOND BEGGAR. Have pity on us.

FIRST POLICEMAN. Why should I/ The king will be furious to see the street so crowded. His carriage is due any moment.

SCHOOLCHILD 1 Do we really get to see the king?

POLICEMAN. What are you doing here. ?You should be in school.

SCHOOLCHILD 2. I have to get some things for my mother.(Joins his friend.)

SCHOOLCHILD 3. We will stand in the shade..(They move to a side, trying to look inconspicuous)

OLD LADY 1. What are children coming to these days.

OLD LADY 2 They don`t care about anything.

OLD MAN1.Very true.

OLD MAN2 Not like they were in our day.

STREET SINGERS. Did you say the king was coming this way.?

FIRST POLICEMAN. I did.

SHOEMAKER. Perhaps he may buy some shoes from me.

SECOND POLICEMAN. The king buy shoes from you. That is a joke.(Laughs)

STREET SINGERS. The king is coming. Let us dance and sing.

SINGERS SING. THE CROWD DANCES.

FIRST POLICEMAN. Enough(Turns to virgins)Who are you.? VIRGINS.(Together) We are the keepers of the flame.We bring light.

SECOND POLICEMAN. Stay together then. Let us see the light.(Laughs)

ENTER TOWN CRIERS with a roll of drums

TOWN CRIER.Listen to me all you people. (The mob is silent and looks at him)

I have great and important news for you..

CROWD. Tell us. Tell us.

TOWN CRIER. The king`s son Liam is going to get married.

THE CROWD CLAPS, WAVES ITS HANDS AND DANCES AROUND THE STAGE.

SECOND TOWN CRIER. Wait. There are some special invitees. (He goes to the virgins)You ladies. You have been invited to the wedding feast to light the courtyard. Be sure that your lamps are burning bright.

VIRGINS. We will.

FIRST TOWN CRIER . The prince is going to marry the fair Sara.There will be a great feast. Liam and Sara are a fairy tale couple.

FIRST VIRGIN. Will the queen be coming now.?

SECOND TOWN CRIER. Yes she will.

SECOND VIRGIN.Are we invited to the feast?

FIRST TOWN CRIER. You are.The king and his company will get down near the statue, and walk this way.

THIRD VIRGIN. Is the prince as handsome as they say.?

SECOND TOWN CRIER. He is.

FOURTH VIRGIN. Will the prince`s friends attend the wedding?.

FIRST TOWN CRIER. He has many friends. They will come.

FIFTH VIRGIN. Are they also princes?.

FIRST TOWN CRIER. A prince`s friends can only be of his rank. They are all princes from various countries.

SIXTH VIRGIN. Will there be music?

SECOND TOWN CRIER. The best in the land.

SEVENTH VIRGIN.Are there any dancers?

FIRST TOWN CRIER. There will be dancing till dawn.

EIGHTH VIRGIN. Oh how lovely.(Claps her hands.)

NINTH VIRGIN> We are so fortunate.

TENTH VIRGIN. We will have a wonderful time..

SECOND TOWN CRIER Be ready with your lamps. The prince comes to the palace hall at midnight.

EXIT TOWN CRIERS. WITH ROLL OF DRUMS

FIRST POLICEMAN. The king and his court are coming.Stand back. (The crowd moves back.)

THE KING, THE QUEEN,AND THEIR ATTENDANTS CROSS THE STAGE. THEY GREET THE CROWD. THE CROWD IS RAPTUROUS.EXIT KING AND ENTOURAGE

FIRST POLICEMAN. Now all you people clear the street.

FRUIT SELLER. But I haven`t sold any fruit.

SECOND POLICEMAN. That`s your bad luck.

BEGGARS. You did not let us go near the king.

THIRD POLICEMAN. It is our job to keep the likes of you away.

STREET SINGERS. We wanted to sing, but we gazed in wonder instead.

SCHOOLCHILDREN. We will say we were invited to the wedding, and could not attend school

.OLD GENTLEMAN. Oh what it was like to be young.The young prince will be getting a beautiful bride.(Starts singing. The

other old people join in.)

FIRST POLICEMAN. Off with you. All of you.

(They herd out all the people..The stage empties.)

FADE OUT

. FADE IN.

It is late at night in the outer chambers of the king`s palace. The ten virgins are on stage.,in two groups.They are carrying lighted lamps.

BRIDAL MUSIC. THE VIRGINS SING.AND DANCE

FIRST VIRGIN.I never dreamed I would be given such a great honour.

SECOND VIRGIN. To be invited to a prince`s wedding.

THIRD VIRGIN. We are truly chosen.

FOURTH VIRGIN.God has blessed us.

FIFTH VIRGIN. Let us be ready for the prince.We will trim our lamps.

THE FIVE VIRGINS TEND JARS OF OIL AND THEIR LAMPS.

SIXTH VIRGIN. I feel as if I could dance.(Dances a few steps)

SEVENTH VIRGIN. I long to sing.(Sings a few bars.)

EIGHT VIRGIN. The queen will be wearing a beautiful gown.(Walks a few steps as if trailing a gown.)

NINTH VIRGIN.There will be pearls and gems sewn on to it. (mimes studying the gems on her gown.)

TENTH VIRGIN. I bet the prince will look handsome, and have handsome friends.(Looks into space, dreamimg.)

(the wise virgins attend to their lamps:the foolish virgins laugh and chatter among themselves)

FIRST VIRGIN.It is past midnight. I can see the lights have gone out in the city’

SECOND VIRGIN. Look, the people In the courtyard are sleeping.(Light on stage shows slumbering people.

THIRD VIRGIN. We dare not sleep.

FOURTH VIRGIN. We will walk and keep awake.

FIFTH VIRGIN. We must be ready when the time comes

THE VIRGINS ON THE OTHER SIDE ARE LYING DOWN HALF ASLEEP. SUDDENLY ONE OF THEM WAKES UP.

VIRGIN SIX. Look, our lamps have gone out.

VIRGIN SEVEN. What shall we do?

VIRGIN EIGHT.Look inside the jars.There may be some oil in them.I forgot. We did not bring extra jars.

VIRGIN NINE. The other group seem to have their jars full.

VIRGIN TEN. Let us ask them to give us some oil.

THEY APPROACH THE OTHER VIRGINS

VIRGIN TEN. Dear sisters, our lamps have gone out. Can you give us some from your jars?

VIRGIN ONE. Sorry dear sisters. We do not know when the prince will come. We have hardly enough oil for our own jars.

VIRGIN NINE. Please do help us.

VIRGIN TWO. We would like to, but we are helpless.

VIRGIN.EIGHT. Don`t be so cruel.

VIRGIN THREE. We don`t mean to be, but we have to first do our own duties.

VIRGIN SEVEN. Give us just a little.

VIRGIN TWO. We cannot. The prince may come any time. Go quickly to the market place, and get more oil.

VIRGIN SEVEN. You are being mean. You can spare each of us a little oil, just a little.

THIRD VIRGIN. We cannot.

(The foolish virgins weep and wail, and get into a frenzy.They turn on the wise virgins)

NINTH VIRGIN. We will take it from you..

(There is a scuffle. The wise virgins hold on to their jars)

VIRGIN SIX. We will have to get some oil.How foolish we were not to bring extra jars of oil.

VIRGIN SEVEN Let. us go quickly, before the prince comes.

EXIT FOOLISH VIRGINS.THERE IS A SOUND OF REVELRY. ENTER THE KING, QUEEN, ATTENDANTS AND PRINCE

KING. It is dark, on one side of the courtyard. Luckily, There is light on the other. We will go that way.

VIRGINS TOGETHER. Welcome your majesties.

KING. Come with us.

THE VIRGINS FOLLOW THEM. THE PRINCE GOES OFFSTAGE. PREPARATIONS ARE MADE FOR THE WEDDING.GARLANDS ARRANGED, CHAIRS DRAPED WITH SILKS ETC.

ENTER FOOLISH VIRGINS, THEIR LAMPS BLAZING BRIGHTLY. THEY SEEK ADMITTANCE.THE KING SENDS AN ATTENDANT,

ATTENDANT. What do you want?. The King is busy.

SEVENTH VIRGIN. We were asked to attend him.(The attendant goes to the King,and whispers to him. The king comes to the door.)

KING. Who are you?

VIRGIN SIX. We are the virgins sent to light your way.

KING. I did not see any light. Did you O queen?

QUEEN. I did not. The ladies with the lamps are already with us. The rest of the hall was dark.(Turns to her attendant) Is that not so.

QUEEN`S ATTENDANT. Yes, your majesty. It was so dark on one side,we nearly tripped on our gowns.

KING. Where were you.?

VIRGIN TEN. We had gone to fill our laps with oil

.KING> You made your king wait, while you went to fill your lamps You should have brought oil with you.. You lazy, stupid creatures, I do not know you. I do not want you here. Go from hence,You should have been prepared for me like your sisters. They will be richly rewarded. (To Attendants) Send them out.

ATTENDANT. You heard what the king said. Go from here.

ATTENDANTS HUSTLE OUT THE FOOLISH VIRGINS.

The KING TURNS .THE PRINCE HAS ENTERED WITH HIS BRIDE.

MUSIC.KING GESTURES TO THE WISE VIRGINS.)

You waited for me, prepared your lamps for me, and lit my way. Come now and join in the ceremony..(MUSIC….FESTIVITY…..BLACK OUT) END OF PLAY

PARABLE OF THE TEN VIRGINS.

A note on production.

The script should run to ten to twelve minutes, or more.

There are song and dance sequences,a scuffle and other forms of action, which would altogether take about six minutes.Action has been mixed with dialogue to prevent a young audience from getting bored and restless..

This parable could easily be put in modern times. It depends on the production requirements, and the producer.

There are thirty five speaking parts, with a possibility of adding as many players as required on the stage in the crowd scene.

In the courtyard sequence,it is possible to use figures moving upstage, people waiting for the king, people in various stages of slumber. The prime action could be by the virgins own stage, possibly even using the apron.

The script leaves room for innovation. Finally, the presentation is up to the interpretation of the director.

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Nilakantan Gauri

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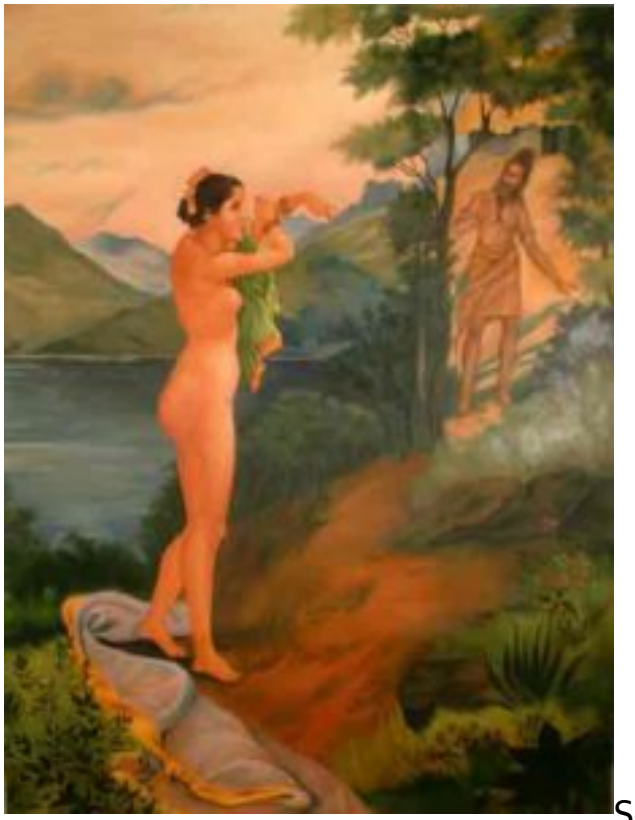
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Gender Contexts in Folk Performances: A Study of the Female Performers of Nautanki / Gauri Nilakantan Mehta



Sage Viswamitra succumbs to the charms of Menaka

Source: Exotic India Art

Any context that involves control and exclusion, of the master subject, or the dominant individual or group of the situation, manifests itself through its exclusive performance or by giving high status to them. This can be seen in artistic folk theatre genres. In most situations of aesthetic authority, we can see that the exclusion or low status of one gender, mostly of females, is to establish a total power of the males. My paper will attempt to illustrate this sometimes exclusion and low status of the female performers in folk theatre genres of North India and Pakistan. It proposes to study and analyze the gender contexts of female performers in *Nautanki* within Uttar Pradesh andPunjab with a special reference to her status in society. Women have been performers since antiquity and many gender stereotypes have been attributed to her. Before we analyze the gender contexts in *Nautanki* let us briefly elaborate on the historical and social conditions of female performers in folk theatrical forms in India & Pakistan.

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Historical and Social Conditions of Female Performers

Women have always been performers in India and Pakistan since the ancient times. The antecedents to dancing girls and courtesans go back to early ages. Statues of theIndus Valley civilization (3000-1500 B.C.) show strong associations with music and dance. A bronze figurine of a dancing girl was unearthed in the ruins of Mohenjadaro, inPakistan, that shows the popularity of performing arts in the Indus Valley amongst females. The figurine has been found in association with a large number of statues of goddesses that indicates that dancing and music must have had close associations with worship and therefore making it popular among women. Although, female worship was considered pure and divine during the Indus Valley Civilization, we have to keep in mind the paradoxical situation of female performers in

later ages from fifth or sixth century B.C. onwards.

Women became the sites of orthodoxy as they were seen to be the essential carriers of tradition. According to Mandakranta Bose,

The burden of maintaining order within a family and within society as a whole fell on women…But this was a responsibility within which women quickly became imprisoned by the needs of conserving tradition. Instead of embodying positions of decision -making power and defining order, women became vehicles of orthodoxy. (Bose 4)

By looking at archeological evidences as in sculptural depictions in temples, paintings and early dramatic literature like the *Kamasutra* (800 A.D.), a treatise on the art of love and lovemaking, many scholars tend to believe that the female performers had a high social standing in ancient Indian society (3000 B.C. to 1200 A.D.). Many literary texts make references to *Apasaras* or heavenly maidens, also accomplished performers and dancers. They lured heroes and sages from their path of duty, for eg. Sage Viswamitra succumbed to the charms of Menaka. Seduction and allurement hence is an essential characteristic of these courtesans. Dancing and performing hence had strong sensual connotations. Many of the courtesans such as Rambha, Tillotama and Manorama were widely respected and had a high social standing.

However, the relation between these respectable representations and its extension to "real" women can be argued. For e.g. the famous *Khajurao* caves of Orissa of Eastern India (800 A.D. to 1200 A. D.) depict females playing percussive instruments that later remained in the exclusive domains of the men. We can argue that perhaps these female performers (as shown in the statues) were courtesans, and it was their profession that allowed them to have access to display certain creative skills. The *Kamasutra*, written by Vatsayana, describes the skills of the courtesan, who was to

be well versed in the act of love making but also needed to be equally well versed in music, dance, drama, and painting besides giving them sexual pleasure, in order to please her patrons. Respect given to these courtesans hence had sexual connotations. The paradoxes that are created between real and representations of women has been understood and defined by Dhruvrajan. According to him,

The female principle is worshipped, yet in daily life flesh and blood females are secondary citizens, humiliated depersonalized. The more a woman lowers herself the more she is praised. (Dhruvrajan 100)

This paradox can be seen in other areas of worship as well, despite the fact that female worship is an essential part of the religion of India; females are still in some isolated cases "dedicated to temples" that are called the *devdasis*. These *devdasis*traditionally were the courtesans and the dancing girls. These women had a low social status and became victims of prostitution. *Devadasis*, or servant of god, are ceremoniously married to the gods by the symbolic tying of the necklace around their necks. As they are "married to the gods" they have a social sanction to keep sexual contact with men. The honor of helping with temple shrines such as cleaning devotional vessels and decorating shrines belonged to the *devdasis*. More significantly, following the heavenly nymph prototype, they worshiped, propitiated and entertained the deities (embodied in images) with dancing. Hueing Tsang, a Chinese visitor to India in the 8thcentury testifies to this well established institution of temple dancers, an Arabian traveler, Al Beruni remarked that about 500 dancers were dedicated in the Somanth temple.

Stigmas have been associated with female performers both historically and socially. For example, as discussed earlier female performers in the past belonged to a set class, the *devdasis* who were married to the gods. The *devdasis* who

often had to “entertain” men through music and dance and sex thus had some sort of socio- religious- legal sanction because of this “marriage” to the gods. The links between marriage and performance also takes on different levels of meanings as many women performers in India also discontinue their profession after their marriages to men. As tradition places high emphasis on modesty and virtue, many women do not continue with public performances after their marriages, since they would come under the public view and scrutiny. This shows the ambivalence that is maintained towards the female performers in society. Many female performers of N*autanki* are married but they belong to certain sects & caste that allows them to perform. They primarily belong to lower caste or lower strata of the society. Thus, there is direct connection between economic status, lower position, marriage & profession that women choose.

With the advent of the Mughals in India we can see the tradition of dancing girls in courts. Performance reached the courts from the sacred shrines of temples. Amir Khusrau, a famous writer in the 12th century A.D. recorded his praise for dancing girls. He also invited them to dance and sing in the marriage of his son. The professional performers were called nutwah, bhugleye, anjari, nat. The actors in *Nautanki* are also called the *nats* and the female performers are the *natis*. Traditionally the only women who acted and performed along with the male counterparts in *Nautanki* were these *devdasis*.

The connections between the royalty and performing arts are also a part ofIndia’s cultural history. Often in the past, the court dancers were considered the courtesans, or the *nautch* girls, and sometimes the performances were performed in the brothels, which were frequented by high-ranking officers of the court and warriors. Wade points to this and argues that the courtesan dancers were considered *nautch* girls when these performances were relegated to the brothels[1] (126).

A few more examples can make the connections between the royalty and the female performers clear. Grace Thompson Seton, a British woman, who traveled in Indiaduring the early 19th century remarks on the life of "*natuch*" girls,

I entered the dancing girl quarter, which looked like any other middle class street and good fortune! One of the dancing girls was standing in a doorway, arrayed in white trousers and long yellow diaphanous sari. Her middle and feet and arms were bare. She was not young, nor to my mind, good looking, but she had well developed muscles and supported the entire family on her earnings.

I was told that if I would stay a few days longer, H.H. would arrange a *Nautch*, but that his best dancer, Moti Jan, was away, having been loaned to a neighboring Raja for a wedding festivity. The maharaja subsides all the dancing girls and therefore controls their actions. (Seton 67)

Written in the early 19th century, this quote shows that dancing was relegated to low class women, wearing "diaphanous clothes", supporting their families through their incomes from prostitution or "entertaining" the high ranking officials of the court, their actions being controlled by the kings (Maharaja). The king clearly treated the women as possessions since these women were "loaned". The connection between royalty and dramatic forms therefore seems to have had a long historical connection.

Amorous songs and dances were rendered by these *nautch* girls. The Calcutta Gazette, a newspaper of 9th June1808 carries one version,

O says what present from your hand

Has reached me save caresses bland

And oh! Was present e'er so dear

As love soft whispers to my ear

Mar in affliction's sad decay

How this poor frame wastes fast away

I languish, faint from eve to morn

Nor taste of food one barley corn (Paul, 85).

However, some low class women traditionally performed classical theatrical forms, for example *Bhartanatyam* and *Kuchipudi*, two major southern Indian dance dramas. Their primary duty was to perform in the temples as dancing girls, but they could also supplement their family income by serving as prostitutes. Many folk dramatic forms have had the traditional exclusion of females, and only few forms like the *Lavan*i and *Tamasha* of Western India have included women. These dramatic forms often use camaraderie and sexual innuendoes; therefore, the female performers of such forms do not have high social standing. Therefore, these performances are often "popular entertainment" and quite often-religious themes are not depicted.

Thus, with very few exceptions women were effectively banned from theatrical stage, whether rural or urban, folk or classical. A striking instance of the extensiveness of this ban can be seen in *Kathakali*, an all male form folk dance drama of south India. Wade observes,

Kathakali was developed in Kerala, on the southwestern edges of the subcontinent, in a region that is traditionally matriarchal and in which women have influential in public affairs and have a reputation for considerable degrees of freedom in society in general. Yet even in this area, so deeply had the ban on women penetrated that *Kathakali* had been, and remains, an all male form.

(Wade 129)

But, historically & by large it is the female performers who have always dominated the performing art tradition in India and one such form is the *Nautanki*. Females play a very important role in the *Nautanki* performances. The next section will analyze the tradition of *Nautanki* in northern India & Pakistan with detailed references to its gender contexts.

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Gender Contexts in Nautanki

Nautanki, a secular semi operatic folk theatrical form of Northern India (Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Rajasthan) and Pakistan (Punjab region) developed from *swang*and *naqqal*. Performed in large open spaces and erected platforms, the performance starts with an invocation to the gods or the *mangalcharan*, accompanied by beating of the drums or the *nagaras*. The acts have strong and powerful story lines with tales are taken from epics, legends, and important events. The languages employed are common spoken language of the people and the texts are written in Urdu, Braj, Punjabi and Rajasthani. Dances, songs and comic acts make the routine. In the early ages most of the men acted as women in *Nautanki*, however from the 1930s we see that females performing.

Nau*tanki* is a folk form that has several hidden gender contexts within it. The role of the females, both as an actor and within in the script is intricately weaved in relations to the set historical and social conditions of women. According to Katherine Hansen,

Nautanki theatre as well as myth, epic and popular cinema do not reflect actual social relations, gender differences, and power alignments but rather produce and perpetuate them. They frame paradigms of gendered conduct that assist both women and men in defining their identities, inculcating values to the

young, and judging the action of others. (7)

Thus, N*autanki* is not only a result but a cause of a particular social gender formation and vice versa. *Nautanki* plays a very important role in understanding the cultural and social formations of India and helps us to establish the notions of womanhood, & further elaborate gender relations between men and women. Gender roles are also conditioned by the cultural, psychological and social correlates of a society and it clearly defines the rules and expectations to being male or female. Gender roles are thus environmentally conditioned and theatre can play an important part in creation and maintenance of such cultural stereotypes.

The very origin of *Nautanki* has strong gender connotations. *Nautanki*, originated in the theatrical play about *Shahzadi Nautanki*, depicting a woman who was flower light weighing only about 36 gms. Both fair and lovely she was the beloved of Phul Singh. The name of the play is associated with a desirable woman whose hands one could not win. Phul Singh is rebuked by his sister- in- law and he decides to win his pure love despite reproaches. Finally with the help of garderener or malin he gets disguised as his daughter- in- law and he meets his beloved Nautanki and unites with her. The princess here is desirable, bewitching, and a physical need and love for the man. Gender stereotypes can be clearly seen in this play as princess Nautanki is a light weighed virgin woman, untouched and a delicate beauty and Phul Singh`s manhood is rebuked. Heterosexual love between man and woman on both literal and metaphorical levels are emphasized and opposing characteristics between men and woman are thus exalted.

Sexuality is one of the dominant themes that occur in most Sangit texts or the dramatic texts. According to Hansen, incidents (ibid within the performance), images, and characters repeatedly focus awareness on the pleasures and

pitfalls of sexuality. (27) The recent sangit text *Udal ka Byah* (the marriage of Udal), the hero Udal meets his beloved Phulva and wants to marry her and his attempts are thwarted by Narpati Singh and his son, who are Phulva's father and brother. Phulva is described to be a lissome, beautiful princess.

The *Sangit* texts or the play scripts of *Nautanki* are replete with the female stereotypes. Women in the *Sangit* texts range from seductresses to honorable virtuous women upholding their womanhood and marriages. In the text *Lucknow Ka Lootera* (The Dacoits of Lucknow) the protagonist Hamid goes to plunder a rich merchant, whose wife falls at his feet and begs for his life to be spared and when Hamid makes overtures at her, she describes herself as a '*pativrata*' one who is vowed to her husband. She remarks at his attempts,

Door se baat kar paas mere na aa, yesi kalma mujhe mat sunao.
Shok se loot dhan mera le jaiye, ek pativrata ka sat digao nahi

(Talk to me from afar, and don't say such things to me. You are free to plunder but do not let me break my vow of marriage Akeel, 6)

The female character is rarely seen alone and she is always in connection with the man. The patriarchal society of northern India and Pakistan defines this position of the woman in the texts. At the same time we also see Hamid frequenting a prostitute's, Chameli Jaan's "*Kotha*" or house, who is clearly a seductress and vamp. According to Hansen,

Nautanki poets delight in describing women as murderers, lustful vamps, warring goddesses, and potent sorceresses. Yet they expound an ideology of female chastity and subservience

that belies the powerful posture of so many women in their stories. (171, Hansen)

Love, romance, wooing and winning are some of the common themes in the *Sangit* texts. In the play *Siyah Posh*, the daughter of the Wazir of Syria falls in love with Gabru. One day while trying to meet Jamal his lover he gets caught and his execution is ordered. The king in his daily rounds hears their love for each other and forgives Gabru who is united with Jamal.

The men in the *sangit* texts have an exalted position for example in *RajaHarischandra*, the king bequeaths everything and has to leave the kingdom. He has to earn his living by working in the crematoriums while his wife works as a servant. One day his son dies while playing and Harischandra refuses to cremate his own son as his wife cannot afford the fees. While his unrighteousness is upheld while his queen Taramati often breaks into seductive gestures like swaying her hips and kicking her heels. Hence there are different value additions for males and females.

Many of the acts of the female performers are seductive and amorous songs dances and comic routines make the story go further along. In the play, *Lucknow keLootera*, a song and dance sequence is enacted between the dacoit Hamid and the seductress and prostitute Chameli. Chameli Jaan sings out loud,

Kya haalat banayi mere gulhjaara

Kyu utra hai chera batao tumhara

Hamid

Na khuch haal pooch meri maahepaara

Is wakt aaya musibat ka maara

(Oh my beloved why do you look so unhappy, don't ask me why my sweet heart I am in trouble, 15)

Since the performance takes place at 11 pm and continues till the wee hours of the morning, sex and sexuality are recurrent themes. Women performers are often seen in their erotic persona, clearly to please the men and allure their audiences. They hence create as well as fulfill the need "to be looked at." Mulvey describes this "looked at ness" as seen in many traditional performances,

In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can connote to be looked at ness. (145)

It is this "looked at ness" of the female performers in *Nautanki* that delegates to her an inferior position as compared to men. Irigaray, the leading French feminist comments on this fact,

Investment in the look is not privileged in women as in men. More than the other senses, the eye objectifies and masters. It sets at a distance, maintains that distance. In our culture, the predominance of the look over smell, taste, touch and hearing has brought about an impoverishment of bodily relations. The moment the look dominates, the body looses its materiality.[2] (70)

In modern days, *Nautanki* is characterized by lusty singing, dancing and women often performing to the tunes of popular film songs and mimic erotic dances. The main objective of the performance is to entertain and delight their audiences. A kind of liaison is thus created and developed. There is hence an exchange of desire, a kind of courtship between the audiences and the performer that is born. The dancing and singing of submissive females appeal to the masculinity of the audiences. Therefore the performances of Nautanki, creates an

imbalance for the female performer, negating her position and demeaning her persona and establishing the total power nexus of the males.

To conclude, the *Nautanki* performance creates different values for men and women, and makes a comment on existing socio-economic & political situation of female performers. Nautanki thus creates many contradictions and conflicts for the female performer however one cannot negate or undermine its creative values and inputs into the rich cultural tradition of India and Pakistan. *Nautanki* despite its strong gender biases is one of the leading folk theatrical forms that have lent its hand into many other popular mediums of communication such as films and songs. This form thus needs to be studied and understood in all aspects of its rich diversity in terms of its acting style, rich *sangit* texts, music and costume.

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[1] The British described these courtesans or the dancing girls as natuch or dancing girls. Nautch is derived from the hindi word Natch.

[2] Irigaray cited from I C Owens Feminist and Postmodernism. Pluto press: London 1985

Let your child be what he wants to be this summer / Gouri Nilakantan



Platform for Action in Creative Theatre(PACT) and KINDERPLUME has initiated a new summer theatre workshop, Abhivyakti in the regions of Delhi and NCR. It is uniquely designed theatre workshop as it involves all the aspects of theatre namely creative writing, puppetry, face painting, theatre craft acting and improvisation and poetry reading and recitation. According to Neeraj Kumar Mehta, the business head of PACT, a child becomes truly empowered through theatre as Abhivyakti is not a forced activity by parents who just want to get rid of their children during summer. Abhivyakti truly believes in free expression and that is being done through the powerful medium of theatre.

Many theatre workshops are going on in the capital but Abhivyakti does not believe in flocking the children like sheep in a class so the class sizes are not more than 13 children in each batch. Many parents of the Abhivyakti children are well informed and wish to continue with these classes beyond the summer which is a heartening start. No activity is repeated more than thrice and the children's consent is taken by instructors from time to time. Sheel Kalia a regular instructor at Abhivyakti has himself undergone an intensive theatre workshop and certification program. Pact

believes that all instructors teaching the skill of theatre need to be not only well equipped but equipped way beyond ordinary expectations. As the children have a strong voice they should be heard by the teacher who should be capable of making quick changes in his approach if his activity is not liked for any reason.

The course has been designed in two folds, namely both the process and the product of theatre are given equal importance. Many theatre companies emphasize only on the product or the final performance is given upmost importance while others totally neglect the product and only pay attention to the process. Here at Abhivyakti both the process and the product are given significant amount of attention. Out of the 24 sessions 12 sessions involve the process while the rest of the 12 pay attention to the product.

By the end of the workshop a feeling of comradeship, confidence and enhancement of the communication skill is hoped to be achieved in the children. The program has been designed in such manner that the age difference between the children does not impede the classes in any manner. A child as small as 4 fit in well with a 12 year old! It is surprising to see how well a small kindergarten child enjoys himself along with a 12 year old. PACT and KINDERPLUME has truly designed an innovative and path changing program in the area of theatre workshops. One hopes to continue with such further activities in the times to come.

Theatre Review: Pagla Ghoda

by Gouri Nilakantan



A scene from the play

Pagla Ghoda of Badal Sircar was performed by a newly formed amateur group of Gurgaon AAKUTAM directed by Mahesh Prasad at Epicenter on the 17th of April 2011. Pagla Ghoda cleverly uses contemporary situations and social problems to life in death attitude of modern life. The play sees four drunk young men in the cremation grounds talking about the love in their lives. They keep themelves entertained through stories about these women that they have loved and lost in their own manner. The anguish in the characters has been beautifully crafted by Badal Sircar that has strong social moorings. While the play at one level speaks on psychological and social problems with the images of a badly bruised Malati or a crying Laxmi it also speaks of the four men and their deep relationship with the women.

While Mahesh Prasad has clearly made an honest interpretation

of the play the hidden problems lying within the play and subtext could not reach out to the audiences. The actors were too deeply involved in speaking their lines with clarity and focus loosing sight of their characterization. The female actors struggled to keep pace with the better counterparts, the men. The female actors often broke into hysteria, sobs and tears and thus giving a single dimension to their acting style. At one level the play is also about the residue of the middle class to have failed to adjust and align and ceases to aspire amongst the intellectually alive urban middle class. These social adjustments were lacking in the play as the acting appeared tired and fatigue seems to have hit both the audiences and the actors as the play over ran its time limit by a good half an hour.

The lighting of the play was extremely well designed and significantly added value to the mood of the play. The quiet introspection and the inner contemplation of the characters were used imaginatively by the choice of dim lights and blue overtones. The set design also needs special mention as was well crafted and the use of the space provided was covered excellently with good preferences of fabric material and wood.

Pagla Ghoda is about the guilt of men in personal and social relations with a continuation of the conventional mode of living. The acting of the character Laxmi must be mentioned as it was genuine and spoke well. Perhaps Sircar wants each of his characters to suffer from the awareness of their social responsibility. It is important for the director to read that sense of guilt, responsibility and social problems so that it can further enhance the acting style, convention and speech patterns used in the production.

As the body of the actor and its relation on stage is one of the immediate concerns of Badal Sircar the director has correctly used breakdown of the conventions of theatrical time and space. The production would have been even more interesting if the simultaneous action of the play had been

broken down by using the female actors as the focal points of entry an exit and also if non sequential modes of narration had been used more often. Overall the play could not speak well enough despite the technical excellence as it requires more dramaturgical analysis and theatrical inputs.