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## **Interconnected Folk Traditions of India: A Study of Sindhi and Punjabi Folk Drama**

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### **Abstract:**

*Folk traditions of India display signs of continuity and interconnections despite their regional and linguistic uniqueness. This paper puts together selected variants of Sindhi and Punjabi folk drama to identify such signs of continuity between the two folk cultures that thrived next to each other for a long period of time. This approach takes from AK Ramanujan's framework of studying Indian folk traditions as interconnected systems that invert-convert-subvert their neighbours. It helps us look at Indian folk cultures not as isolated entities but as interacting, exchanging, live systems that share material, yet at the same time, use such material differently. The paper points to both shared content, styles and elements in Sindhi and Punjabi folk drama while also looking at the unique elements of each tradition. The paper discusses selected Sindhi and Punjabi folk drama forms separately and goes on to make observations about interconnections. On the Sindhi side, the folk drama forms discussed are Bhagat, Saang and Chaunki; and on the Punjabi side Leela, Saang and Nakal forms have been discussed.*

**Key Words: Folk Drama, Punjab, Sindh, Saang, Bhagat, Nakal.**

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**Introduction:** Folk drama has been an inalienable part of Indian folklife and culture. It is a performing folk art done by members of a folk group to the accompaniment of folk instruments, and rudimentary props. While performing folk arts can be subdivided into categories like folk dance, folk drama and folk music, the actual performances often comprise a mix of these with the presenters freely borrowing elements from any of the genres without being troubled by questions of purity of presentation.

Balwant Gargi looked at folk drama as opposed to the classical, and as a rural performance art opposed to urban drama. (Gargi 3). Since then, Folk drama has subsumed the divisions of rural and urban with techniques, tools and expressions of folk drama being used by several playwrights leading to greater appreciation and understanding of folk drama. Old legends, Puranic tales, mythological narratives have found their way into folk drama creating a flow of tradition between classical and folk. In this light, folk drama

becomes a repository of mythological heroes, popular romances, tales of bravery, social customs, beliefs and legends. Jagdish Chandra Mathur also attempted to survey traditional drama from a pan-India perspective. He talked about the similarities that emerge from a variety of dramatic forms across India and argued that the relationship between traditional and classical folk drama has been one of continuous and widespread exchange. He attributed the all-India character of folk drama to this process of exchange. (Mathur 4).

This paper attempts to study the exchange of folk drama practices between adjoining folk cultures of India. Towards this end, selected variants of Sindhi and Punjab folk drama have been discussed. The objective of the paper is not only to locate shared material and practices in both the traditions but also to find how similar materials get treated differently in each, thereby establishing both interconnectedness and uniqueness at the same time.

**Sindhi Folk Drama:** Folk drama is an important element of Sindhi folk art. The remains of ancient Sindhu civilization found in Mohan Jo-daro indicate that the region has been home to music, dance and drama since ancient times. Over centuries different styles of Sindhi folk drama have evolved catering to different occasions and audiences. After Partition, many Sindhis were forced to migrate to India. Deprived of their homeland, they found place in resettlement colonies across the country and carried their folk beliefs and practices with them. Sindhi folk drama too began to appear in resettlement colonies. Over the following decades, the community has struggled with passing of language and culture to the generations that had been uprooted. However, artistes, proponents and community leaders like Ram Panjwani worked to preserve folk drama forms and pass on their knowledge to the next generations. As a result of their efforts, folk drama forms continue to be practiced in various Sindhi panchayats and social groups as part of social-cultural activities both in rural as well as urban areas. A study of these folk drama forms, their content and presentation reveals signs of shared folk material between Sindhi and Punjabi folk cultures that once thrived next to each other in a borderless geography. Keeping the scope of this paper in mind, only some of the Sindhi folk drama forms have been discussed here:

**Bhagat:** The name Bhagat may suggest connection to the ancient Bhakti tradition but this is an independent Sindhi art form. Performance of bhagat is considered a pious activity and the bhagat begins with an *ardas* (a prayer in Sikhism). Sindhi Bhagat is an amalgamation of music, drama and songs. Lalvani uses the term 'ballad' to describe the subject matter, and says that much like ballads, the bhagat tradition involves presentation of a song that tells a story. (Lalvani 224-225).

Sindhi academics trace the growth of bhagat from ancient times when hermits, saints, and mystics would compose and perform musical pieces among people. (Ramani 178). Janmasakhis of Uderolal were among the popular subjects of such performances. According to Lalvani, the mingling of *katha* and *kafi* forms in Sindh led to the creation of a unique style where *katha* narrative would be interspersed with *kafi* verses. Over a period of time, performers freely imbued *kafi* with elements of *saang*. The amalgamation of all these took the shape of bhagat, the evidence of which can be traced as far back as the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

Bhagat performance begins at night. The Sindhi bhagat includes an invocation of lord Jhulelal that sets the auspicious mood. Bhagat presents a mix of folk tales with religious themes as well as themes dealing with everyday life. Some of the popular tales presented include popular figures like Raja Bharthari, Gopichand, Gorakhnath, Krishna-Sudama, Raja Harishchandra, as well as legends like Dodo-Chanesar, Sorath-Raidiyach, Laila-Majnu, Dhola-Maru, Umar-Marui, Moomal-Rano, Heer-Ranjha, Suhini-Mehar, Sasui-Punhhu, among others.

While musical instruments are used to create both the environment of tender love and stormy river, narrative is used to highlight the tragedy of doomed love. “*Paka rach kumbhar ja, paki nihai/ mukhe tiyai, bhelo bhad aiyo.*” (Devnani 62). Here, a bhagat voicing Suhini’s tragic fate, says that the pots are firm as is the furnace in which they have been baked, but Suhini is destined to pick the one weak pot. In their recorded performances, Bhagat Arjan, Bhagat Sunder, and Bhagat Manghan, can be seen using the dramatic setting of Sasui-Punhun and Umar-Maruee to invoke these themes. (Arjan 3:15, 7:03).

These narratives are interspersed with mentions from lives of Bhakti saints like Guru Nanak, Kabir, Soordas, Meera, Namdev, Bulleh Shah, and others. Couplets, quatrains, refrains, poems, *kafi*, song, and *ghazals*, are used depending on the context.

Social messages are also packed between the bhagat recitals. “*Hari hin desh Bharat mein, uhe insaaan paida karin / Uthain je kare Hindu khe, uhe gunwan paida kari.*” (Devnani 48). Here, the bhagat is urging god to give Bharat citizens who work for the welfare of the community. He goes on to say, “*Dharm ain desh je khatir, sahni saktiyun sada jeke / Hakeekat jian katain siru, uha santan paida kari.*” Here the reference is to Sikh warrior Banda Bahadur. The Bhagat is asking god for children who are as brave as Banda Bahadur and will sacrifice life for their country and duty. Bhagats also advise the audience on leading happy married lives by devoting themselves to their partner and to god. Contemporary performances by Prakash and Thanwar Bhagat can be cited as example of this. Recorded performances show them using both poetic lines and dialogue as devices to convey their message. (DD Girmar 2:40).

Bhagat is performed by troupes that rally around the lead or main performer who is also referred to as ‘bhagat’. Other are called *boliyado* or supporting players who repeat the *boli* or words. Though bhagat has a serious tone, humorous elements can be brought in by a comic troupe member identified as ‘*maskhara*’. Some popular bhagat performers before Independence were Bhagat Leelaram, Bhagat Naru, Bhagat Motand, and Bhagat Jodaram. After Independence, the form lost its popularity in the wake of large-scale migration and demographic change. Bhagat Kanwar Ram (1885-1939), also addressed as Sant Kanwar Ram, is among the most popular Sindhi bhagats and is venerated even today.

**Saang:** The word ‘saang’ comes from the root Sanskrit word *swang* which means farce. The folk form saang implies *nakal* or imitation. The form is popular in parts of north India including Haryana, Punjab, Rajasthan, Gujarat and parts of Western Uttar Pradesh. In pre-partition India Sindh was also home to saang. After Partition, saang performance was

commonly seen in Sindhi resettlement colonies in India. Around the festival of Holi, people would be seen performing saang near power poles and these performances were in keeping with the spirit of fun that Holi evokes. (Devnani 14). Similar performances were common in Cheti Chand processions and Ramlila enactments during Dussehra. While such performances still exist, over the years they have become fewer.

Sindhi saang can be divided into three types – those related to weddings, those related to festivals and important days, and those related to joyous occasions. Saang related to weddings involve farcical imitating by women of everyday family life situations such as marriage of an old man to a young woman, a woman waiting to get married, father-in-law demanding to be served food, woman engaged in household chores, etc. Some of the popular sang are around subjects like *aarsi* (mirror), *pallo* (fish popular among Sindhi community), *ghee* (clarified butter), gold coin and arguments between mother and daughter-in-law.

These saang become an opportunity for women to indulge in fun and frolic. In this type of saang, the female perspective gets primacy as the situations are viewed from her point of view, presenting a funny take on the responsibilities, hopes and aspirations of a woman. The festive saang is seen, particularly during the festival of Holi. With more forms of entertainment now available, this performance of saang has seen a decline. In the past, men and women would dress in different attires and perform saang. For example, *Holi holi sangdo/ Gud mithai khao / Pode ke putt jao* (Saang of Holi have come/ Eat jaggery sweets/ Son born to an old man) and *Achdi Juvar/ Gadhi kunwar / Putt jadindi chaar / Kuch moonkhe bi diyar* (Jowar (Sorgum) is white / Newly-wed is red / she'll give four sons / get me also some). (Lalvani 222).

Sindhi saang are also around themes related to tales of Laila-Majnu, Dhola-Maru, and Bhakt Prahlad etc. Often saang highlight injustice, family feuds and quarrels, and banter between people. Saang also go hand in hand with folk dance games like *tadiyuni* that involves *tadi* or clap, and *jhumar* dance.

**Chaunki:** Chaunki is another form of bhagat where religious aspects of folk narratives form the primary subject matter. In contemporary times, the *bhagat* and *chaunki* forms have mingled to a large extent. *Chaunki* now includes most elements of *bhagat*, except dance. The word *chaunki* literally means stool. The performers sit on an elevated stage of stool while performing and it can be argued that the form got its name from this practice. Artistes of this format are also referred to as 'ragi'. The term *ragi* literally translates into 'one who plays ragas'. Ragi was generally used to refer to anyone who performed a kirtan and came to be more specifically used to indicate Sikh artistes who sang hymns from Guru Granth Sahib in the prescribed ragas and formats. Since chaunki is also partially a kirtan format, the term came to be loosely used for chaunki-kars also.

*Katha* is the primary subject matter of *chaunki* with some intermittent discourse or hymns called *shabad*. *Shabad* is a Punjabi variant of *shabd* which means 'word'. Both the Hindi and Punjabi versions carries a cosmic and philosophical meaning, referring either to

the words of saints or scriptures. *Shabad* primarily refers to sections of Sikh scriptures that are sung as hymns or as the name for god himself. Similarly, *shabd* is also used to indicate words of knowledge or truth from Vedas.

Earthen pot is one of the key instruments used in *chaunki* which is usually performed within religious premises. However, people now also organise *chaunki* in their homes to mark religious occasions. Prof Ram Panjwani and Deepak Asha and Master Chander are some of the names associated with this form. Audio recordings of Prof Panjwani's *chaunki* is still used by people to mark important religious events. (Panjwani).

**Punjabi Folk Drama:** Punjabi folk drama is a mix of both religious and secular themes. It borrows dramatic elements from religious rituals, which can be seen in performances like Ram Leela, Raas Leela and Krishna Leela. At the same time, it also deals with non-religious themes that explore family dynamics, incidents from lives of popular personalities, love legends, etc. In pre-Partition era folk drama was performed in Punjabi, Saraiki and Jhangvi languages. Brij Bhasha was also popular in Punjab which accounts for prevalence of Krishna Leela performances.

After Partition, many folk artistes moved to west Punjab in Pakistan which led to Punjabi folk culture getting scattered and uprooted. Dr Harcharan Singh classifies Punjabi folk drama into *Dharmik* or religious folk drama tradition (Ram Leela, Ras Leela, etc.) and *Laukik* or worldly tradition (Nakal, Naat, Bawal, Madari, etc.). However, this categorisation ignores historical drama. Similarly, Dr Sohinder Singh, Dr Ajit Singh Aulakh and Sukhwinder Singh Virk have also attempted to categorise Punjabi folk drama but given its long history and overlapping forms, each categorisation come with its flaws. For the purpose of this discussion, only three major folk drama styles have been taken into consideration.

**Leela Natak:** This is a form of religious plays closely linked to the psyche of the masses. The life and character of popular religious icons, heroes, avatars, saints, rishi-munis, and bhagats, are presented in a dramatic form. Raas Leela and Ram Leela are two variants of this. By its very name, *raas* or *ras* implies taste, nectar, and enjoyment, though the primary meaning is dance. Raas Leela is a religious musical drama based on the life of Lord Krishna and his love exploits. It combines the elements of dance and drama. Gargi says that this tradition goes back to the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century when the Bhakti wave carried love of Krishna across the sub-continent while Aulakh believes that Raas Leela predates the guru period and was a very popular art form in Punjab that was used by Jains and Buddhists.

Mandir Shaili and Raasdhari Shaili are some variants of Raas Leela. (Virk 61). Mandir Shaili finds place in temples where usually Bal Leela is performed. In this form, children and people living around the temple perform the act instead of trained troupes. More emphasis is on costumes so that children look like divine incarnations.

On the other hand, traditionally Raasdharis go from village to village performing raas. This format still exists with roving Raasdhari's moving from one place to another and performing their art. The performance takes place at night so that people free from their

daily chores can attend. In modern times, movie songs and humour have found their way into these performances. Donations from the audience are also intermittently announced from stage to encourage others to contribute. The troupe consists of 12-15 members who use Saang raas style in their performance.

Ram Leela is another important form that is played around Dussehra and uses techniques like *sangeet vidhi* and *jhanki*. *Sangeet Vidhi* implies extensive use of music and *jhanki* refers to stageview. *Jhanki* or tableau has an important role to play in this form of drama. Between scenes when *jhanki* is being changed, artistes keep the audience entertained. Earlier songs used in such performances used to be religious but now songs from popular cinema have also made their way in. Most cities and townships have one or more Ram-Leela clubs who organise the show. A designated Ram Leela ground is also present in most places.

**Saang:** Saang is essentially a traditional method to musically express stories of historical or mythical king-queens, saints, spiritual leaders, or any other extraordinary characters. Explaining the origin of this form, Sukhwinder Singh Virk writes that during the Muslim rule drama troupes from Iran settled in Multan region and started staging music-dramas based on *laukik* or worldly tales in competition to the Hindu Leela plays that were popular at the time. The new form also became popular and gave birth to the characters of Ranga and Bigla. Virk refers to Sangi Hussain Baksh, a famous Punjabi elder, who used to participate in Hasmat Shah Chisty's saang and told the story of how Ranga and Bigla came into being. According to this account, Ranga was a Mirasi who was very good at telling tales and people would gather around him by hordes to listen. He had a cheerful weaver friend who would try to copy him each time he would sing. The weaver was not good at singing and came to be called 'bigadia' or spoiler. The word distorted over time and the team of two came to be called Ranga and Bigla. (Virk 70).

Saang has both Raas and Nautanki traditions. Raasdhari Saang only plays religious material such as Raas Leela, Ram Leela or events from lives of religious characters. Nautanki Saang tradition came with the Muslims who brought worldly subject matter into saang. Here tales were presented through use of humour and dance and was greatly liked by common people. Muslim Mirasis, Dom, Bhandis took this form to villages where it came to be called Nautanki.

Popular Saang dramas can be historical, legend based, indigenous legends, foreign legends, or fantasy legends. Historical Saang use material from historical kings, queens, warriors, heroes, brave hearts, et al. Legend based Saangs use legendary tales like Heer-Ranjha, Keema-Malki, Dharu Bhagat, Prahlad Bhagat, et al. Legends can be of indigenous origin like Sohini-Mahiwal, Mrza-Sahiban, Sahiti-Marad, Roop-Basant, et al. or they can be Muslim cultural tales of foreign origin such as Yusuf-Juekha, Saifai-Maluk, Sheeri-Farhad, Laila-Majnu, Dhal Badshah, Daud Badshah, et al. Over the years, the difference between foreign and indigenous legends has narrowed down. Imaginary or fantasy tales were written keeping in mind the psyche of audience. These include tales of Bego Naar, Rani Champa,

Shamo Naar, Julahe da Vyah, etc. In this type of Saang, artistes adapt according to need and introduce common characters like gossipy women, handsome man, etc.

Saal is another form for Saang which is popular in Doaba region. This is a religious Saang-Naat that is played to appease a deity known as Sidhbali. It is believed that when the deity is angry, villagers suffer and animals die. The ritual performed to placate Sidhbali is known as Saal. The people who perform this drama as known as Bhagats who are usually busy in the months of July to September performing this ritual. Other Saang-Naat include Kheode and Jalsa.

**Nakal:** This is a satirical and humorous performance traditionally performed by professional Mirasis like Dom, Behrupia and Bhand, who are experts at word play, dialogue delivery, and timing. Nakal is performed without much ornamentation or stage setting by two characters with musical support on a simple platform. During the performance the two artistes interact with each other. One assumes a superior role as *ustad* or teacher and the other as *chela* or student. Variations of this such as Ranga-Bigla, Madari-Jamoor are also found. Ranga and Bigla hold a sharp and interesting conversation and unveil the plot. Ranga uses 'chamota' to hit Bigla – an action that elicits laughter from the audience.

Nakal became an established and popular drama form during the Mughal rule. Virk says that from 11<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century, nakal performers took stage with *kanjari* or dance girls who were called on celebratory occasions. When the dance girls were tired and had to take a break Nakal artistes would keep people entertained. (Virk 101).

Eventually men also took up dancing and started performing independently. Nakal artistes had the responsibility to keep '*baraat*' (groom's procession) entertained. Over the years *tichchar* – a quick exchange and repartee between Ranga and Bigla - became a popular tool to hold the attention of the audience. This is cracking play of words where the end of every exchange trumps expectations of the audience.

Art and knowledge of nakal is passed down generations, with each performer modifying the material to suit his audience. In contemporary Punjab, nakal is performed during fairs, festivals and marriages. Humour is the primary theme of these performances that may also provide a social commentary. While earlier these performances were considered too crude for women now women routinely participate in such performances. Take the example of nakal performance at Muzaffarpur Mela inn 2018 where two nakkals one older and the other younger engaged in banter. (Aman). The older actor, a father figure, held a folded paper that he used to hit the younger one on the palm to evoke humour. The younger character expressed desire to get married which formed the subject of comedy between the two. After some exchanges, the older nakkal is replaced by women actors who act out various wedding ceremonies in a humorous way. Here, one of the women actors carries the folded paper and hits the younger actor each time he comes up with a rude retort.

Contemporary nakal performances also use song and music extensively. The village fairs at which they are performed have makeshift stage along with amplifiers and a basic

orchestra. Nakkal performers also satirise scenarios involving modern lifestyle problems like over eating and medical care (Live Show Naklan), alcoholism and domestic quarrels (Jonny Rattu Nakal Party 1:24), among others.

**Observations:** In the above discussion, it is observed that both Sindhi and Punjabi folk drama share similar forms such as *swang* or *saang* (*Saang* in Sindh and *Swang* in Punjab, though both the terms are used). It can be argued that the Saang tradition is popular in entire north India and not necessarily a sign of Sindhi-Punjabi folk continuity. However, a deeper look at themes, subject matter and presentations indicates threads of continuity. In both cases, the drama form involves an imitation. On the Sindhi side, it can showcase a domestic scene involving humorous arguments or banter, providing an opportunity to laugh. On the Punjab side, Swang has both elements of religious Raas and comic Nautanki. The Punjabi tradition borrows Ranga and Bigla characters from its popular Nakal style of folk drama to create a mix of slapstick and situational comedy in Swang too.

In the Sindhi folk drama the forms for humour and religious subject matter are separate. While Saang employs comic imitation, Bhagat uses pious elements in the ballad tradition. In Bhagat the presenter uses dramatic tools to present the ballad in an animated form. The evolution of bhagat form is also believed to share common threads with Punjab and Gulabdasi sect. Some believe that Gulab Das, disciple of Pritam Das, toured Sindh and met Shah Abdul Latif and other prominent figures of the time. During the course of the tour, he and his troupe presented the famous composition like “Gulab Chaman”. The manner of presentation and discourse used by him became famous as an artistic form of bhagat. (Devnani 52). The presentation itself takes subject matter from popular love legends highlighting the role of fate and divine intervention. These include Punjabi doyens like Bulleh Shah and Banda Bahadur. Social messages are also packed into this form.

Both the Punjabi and Sindhi traditions share the character indentified as *maskhara* who brings in the element of comedy and humour. The supporting players in a Sindhi Bhagat are called *boliyado* who deliver the *boli* or words. The use of *boli* is also common in the Punjabi tradition where *bolian*, plural of *boli*, refers to couplets that accompany folk dances.

*Tamasha*, *putli* and *chaunki* are other forms of Sindhi folk drama all of which exist in the Punjabi folk tradition as well. The *chaunki* format of devotional music continues to be popular in Punjab as well where popular *chaunki* are organised annually for popular deities, saints and gurus like Baba Balak Nath, Mata ki Chaunki, etc. Leela form of drama is also common to both traditions that draw independently from the common Indian tradition in this regard.

**Conclusion:** A study of Sindhi and Punjabi folk drama reveals several shared elements in terms of dramatic styles, tools, evolution of styles, as well as subject matter and themes. At the same time, the two traditions differ in elements like costumes and use of humour. Both traditions have evolved their own specialised characters or narrators to meet the requirements of their audiences. Therefore, the hypothesis that Sindhi and Punjabi folk



narratives display a cultural continuum and interconnectedness is verified when analysed on the parameter of folk drama. The unique elements in folk drama in each go on to prove that the cultural continuity has continued to evolve with the two traditions often using similar folk narratives to produce dissimilar results.

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