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**BHAND PATHER: A TRADITIONAL FOLK PERFORMANCE
“ONCE THE REPRESENTATOR OF SECULARISM, NOW NEAR TO EXTINCTION IN KASHMIR VALLEY”**

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ABSTRACT

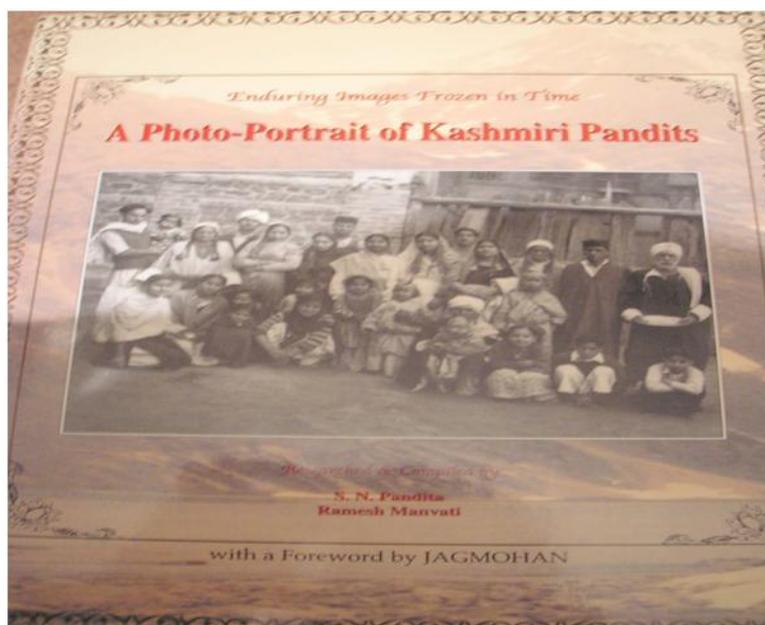
Bhand Pather, a traditional theatre form of Kashmir had shown a remarkable example of a Secular vision till 1990s when This form was performed by both the Pandits and Muslims of the Valley. Till 1990s when Kashmir was not hot and bothered by any external affair, strife or turmoil, when harmony reined the whole state, all the art forms in Kashmir were running smoothly and flourishing gradually. But all these forms received a huge set back in the last 22 years of violence, Which is still going on and during this upheaval Bhand pather underwent an unsuccessful phase thus. Since now it has lost its position, appeal ,charm and brilliance. More importantly It has lost its secular vision that it had created and presented before the world before 1990s. In broader terms that “Kashmiriyat” is missing now. These ancient theatrical forms are considered as the representation of one custom and culture as they perform without taking consideration of colour or creed, they set a secular belief and present themselves without showing any sort of antagonism. And once you lose this treasure , apparently you lose your identity and cause of existence too. There are many note of interrogations like (when, how, and why) this form lost its permanence. These inquiries are discussed and explored in this paper clearly.

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Bhand Pather is a traditional folk performance and a form of farcical theatre. Bhands are traditional folk entertainers of India, Pakistan , Bangladesh and Nepal. It is said that it entered Kashmir from Persia through the Muslim Courts in the 14th century and then spread through the rest of North India. Bhand Pather is derived from two Sanskrit words, “Bhana”-a satirical drama as mentioned in Bharata’s Natyashastra, and “Pather” or “Patraa”-a character in a play. This folk performance incorporates the performance of singing , acting, storytelling etc. There is a unique combination of the three. The storylines or Pathers are often humorous and satirical , and Farce is an essential component of these performances. Bhands of Kashmir hail mostly from Akingam, Muhripora, Shaangus and Gondpora in Anantng district. Apart from these places Bhands also belong to Achabal, Kokernag, Frisal, Qayamooh, Waathooru abd Dooru. It is mostly performed in the countryside. The performance of Bhand is called “Pather”.

There is a particular group of families who traditionally perform Bhand Pather. It is an ancestral endowment that has to be followed by the sons of Bhand performers. Kashmir had always been the heart of these performances. The lively interest and attachment of the spectators could be found all around. Originally these performances took place in open spaces, neighbourhood compounds, Isthapans, under the shade of Chinars or during wedding ceremonies, harvest seasons etc. And the predominant objective was to produce satire and evoke laughter. Tragedy was consciously kept away from the plot. This folk performance had completely a different way of expressing and intensions to deal with the subject matter in comparison to the present times. In fact this form has exhausted and come to an end at the end of the 20th century. If we cognise through its history, this form in real terms acted as 'the remover of sorrows' at the time when Muslim peasants were labouring under the hated institution of the Begar.

Till 1990s when Kashmir was not disturbed by any external affair, strife or turmoil, when harmony reined the whole state, all the cultural and social traditions and art forms in Kashmir were stable and flourishing. But all these forms received a huge set back in the last 22 years of conflict (whether it be the freedom struggle, uprising of militancy, or Pandit Exodus), and Bhand pather underwent an unsuccessful phase thus. Earlier before the Pandit Exodus (1990s) Bhand Pather was based on mythological stories and narratives most of which were of Hindu characters performed by both Muslim and Hindu actors. The subject of Bhand Pather was mainly to commemorate the lives of Rishis, enlighten their righteousness and reveal their firm faith in God. It also involved the enactment on the lives of Mythological Legends from Hindu Mythology. We could find the traces of Ramayana in it. The main aim was to correct people and made them morally strong. The best thing of this performance was the enactment of both Muslims and Pandits to demonstrate the secular belief. Even Bhand were patronised by many Hindu kings in 10th and 11th century. We could easily assume that till 1990s Bhand Pather was shown in a diversified form. Javid Iqbal in his Write up, "Loss of A Syncretic Theatrical Form" says that "this form was nourished by Hindu Shavism and Sofi Mysticism". Thus it glorified two different cultures with a message of oneness. And it is a well acknowledged reality that 'Theatre transcends barriers of boundaries'.



After the uprising of militancy and Pandit Exodus this form lost its spirit and diversity. Since then it is carried out only by a single sect to save its existence. In fact there is hardly any occasion when people find time to gather and conduct this performance. Now it is rarely performed and relished by the people of Kashmir. It has lost its fragrance and more importantly the secular vision that it had created and presented before the world before 1990s. Even though Kashmir has lost that cultural bonding and identity, in broader terms that "Kashmiriyat" is missing. These ancient theatrical forms are considered as the representation of one custom

and culture, their social departments and the witness of a secular identity. And when you lose this treasure, apparently you lose your identity and cause of existence too.

Javid Iqbal is of the view that , “ the presence of secular character is an eminent feature of this form. The character of Magun(leader of the troupe) is a reincarnation of Bharata’s Sutradar....Bhand Pather underlines not merely the shared cultural space and the interweaving of everyday Hinduism and Islam but demonstrates practically the sharp differences as well. And yet illustrates, how, despite such differences it is not impossible to live together”.

A village called Mahurpur , next to Akingam , on the way to Pehalgam, in District Anantnag , used to have Kashmiri Pandits Bhand performers. They were also joined by Muslim Bhand. In Akingam Hindu Bhand had made a company which was formed of Pandits (Bhagats), and Mohammad Subhan Bhagat (1927-1993) was their mentor . He was a man who sustained this folk theatre of Kashmir during his times .

Sir Walter Roper Lawrence in his book “The Valley Of Kashmir” says :

“Bhagat Sahib was one of the foundation pillars who revived the traditional Folk Theatre of Kashmir known as Bhand Paa’ther. His contribution in this field is immense”. (312-13)

Some paa’thars(Plays) written and directed by Mohd Subhan Bhagat that touched heights of popularity appeared in his collections that are titled, “ Taqdeer(Destiny)” , “Pouz Apuz (Truth and Falsehood)” , “ Yiti Chu Banan (This Also Happens)” etc. it is pertinent to mention that Kanwal Muhru , Sodha Muhru, Gulab Muhru and Madhav Muhru were also well known Hindu Bhand from Mohripura near Akingam. The Bhagat family faced the ire of militancy whereby their expensive sets, costumes and musical instruments were looted or burnt and their lives threatened, even some members of their troupe were kidnapped. Such was the condition of those times. A shocked Mohd Subhan Bhagat felt highly depressed with the sudden change in the cultural ethos due to onset of armed militancy in Kashmir. And soon he succumbed to his deep anguish.

In 1990s the whole panorama of this form turned upside down. It was the decade of disappearances. Even the transformation was so forceful that the subject matters of performances began to change from religious to social and political satires. Wherever this performance is held it presents the day-to-day conflicts (whether it be social or political). When M.K RAINA conducted a month long Theatre workshop with IFA support in Akingam village of Kashmir in 2009 where he came to know a lot about the extinction of this form. After this visit there came an interview of M K Raina Published in ‘the Indian Foundation for the Arts’ where he said that this form was highly suppressed by militants during 1990s as they considered it unIslamic. In his interview he also shared his views about Mohd Subhan Bhagat and says that on Jan 26 1990, Subhan Bhagat and his fellow artists were in New Delhi to perform at the Indian Republic Day ceremony. Eight days earlier, CRPF had massacred more than 50 demonstrators in Srinagar. When Bhagat returned home visitors with Kalashanikovs arrived . Bhagat promised not to perform again in New Delhi. Such was the condition in Kashmir during that era. From Pandit exodus till now this form seems handicapped.

“we lost the merriment of crowds who used to gather in villages to watch and celebrate the diabolic being vanquished”

Says Balwant Thakur

Thakur runs Natrang, a popular theatre group based in Jammu which has been going for 29 years. He decided to reopen the lost spaces and bring the crowds back to the village canvass and usher the resurgence of Bhand Pather , The Soul of Kashmir.

When we come to know the reasons behind the disappearance of Bhand apart from the uprising of militancy in the state , lots of causes can be brought forth. Before anything else Bhand’s survival was called into question. They could lead an advanced life on small earnings. Since Bhand Pather could not sustain them financially , so most of them worked as Artisans and Kangri weaving was their most preferred occupation . And most importantly this form has lost its appeal, importance and relevance to the modern times. As these type of activities are now seem to be a wastage of time. Earlier the audience was different and the situation was distinct too. There used to be a sense of belonging and connectivity between people. They were simple and faithful. Their nature was secular and fraternal, so both Hindus and Muslims could perform easily. People

loved to be united and associated with each other's doings. All festivals (Whether it be Eid or Diwali) were celebrated together without any compulsion. People also felt necessary to see religious characters being performed, their hearts were animated and swelled with inner delight to see such performances. There was also a communication gap between people, the whole multimedia system had not enriched the way it is now. The social network was not well flourished, therefore, people would love to engage and enjoy themselves in leisure times. Presently people have lost their time for ease and relaxation. The social network has veiled and absorbed the modern minds. There is hardly any time for a man to assemble and see these performances. It is now conceived an old and vague thing to be a part of this action. And perhaps with the help of material possessions and interests man has lost the ethical sense and that longing with his traditions and traditionality. Now a man loves to be all alone and independent, free from all the external affairs, crowd or revelry. So how could he enjoy and resist the unsophisticated gathering of Bhand Pather? How could he bear the clamour of multitudes sitting down barefooted on an impure turf? How could he!

And in addition to this there is also another well noticed reason behind Bhand disappearance and that is the current upheaval of Kashmir. Amidst the blood running out from every street, it is utterly impossible for a person to forget his piteous state and enjoy the theatre. All the pleasure seeking and comfort is detained in the dark and depressed environment of the Valley.

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