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Punjabi Folk Theatre in 19th Century

In 18th and 19th century, many Zoroastrian (Parsee) dramatic companies had been established in Mumbai, Madras and Kolkatta which first presented some plays for British entertainment but later they started writing and staging the plays in Urdu as well as in other languages. Those dramatic societies used to stage their dramas in many different cities. They also carried their journey on in Punjabi language. Influenced by them, some dramatic companies started emerging in Punjab too. Then Ras, Sawang and the other budding folk dramas gradually took the form of sequels.

Punjabi language emerged from ancient Prakrat, Drawari, Mandari and many other local languages which were used by laymen since ancient times. Folk theatres like Swang and Raas spring from ancient folk tales and the tales of sub continent gods and goddesses like Ram Lila, Dasara, Heer Ranjha, Kima Milki, Sohni Mahiwal, Sassi Puno etc. In Punjabi theater those stories and dialogues were staged which verbally came down from generation to generation and had never been written. But, later, with the establishment of dramatic companies, plot and the written form of the story was also given importance in Punjabi Folk Theater. By the end of 19th century, Urdu drama staged by Zoroastrian (Parsee) theatrical companies got immense popularity in Mumbai, Delhi and Lakhnow while in Punjab, they promoted and presented Punjabi folk drama. While talking about theatrical companies which were active in the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of 20th century, Syed Akhtar wrote thus:

"Alexander Theatre Company was established in Mumbai whose proprietors, two brothers named Habib Saith and Muhammad Saith, along with Urdu drama Heer Ranjha, staged a few Punjabi dramas too in Sialkot and Ferozpur which afterwards gained immense popularity." (1)

He also mentioned Babu Roshan Lal's Theatre, Krishna Theatre by Saith Jito Lal, Victoria Theatre by Saith Kaalay Khan and Al-Fareed Theatre. These theatrical companies also staged Punjabi Folk plays.

In Pakistan Talkies, Ameer Ali alias Master Baibu's Aziz theatre staged Heer Ranjha and Sohni Mahinwal featuring Master Ameer Ali as hero and Peer Bakhsh (who was Peero Pakhi in the play) as heroine while Master Rehmat and Laddu Ram too performed some important roles in the play. In that era, Abdussalam Sialkot's theatre, Miraj Din alias Bodi Shah's theatre and Sayen Ibrahim's theatre got immense popularity.

Kajan Ara Theatrical Company was established by film star Jahan Ara Kajan who played versatile roles in Delhi, Lakhnow and Lahore theatre. The drama Heer Ranjha prepared by this theatrical company got popular to the extent that the masses watched that repeatedly even by selling their household utensils. In this drama, Master Chinni played the role of hero. Miraj Din alias Majha Jee's theatre was established by some amateur artists. Miraj Din, the resident of Sandha Kalan, along with his group, used to present plays whenever he got a chance to. Syed Akhtar Hussain Akhtar writes about this group thus:

"The leader of this group, Majha Jee, was illiterate but the story and the dialogues for his dramas used to come out of him very spontaneously. Being illiterate, he hired Munshi Piara Lal Khitri as a writer. Majha, who basically was a director, used to play the roles of Guru, Qazi, shepherded, Kaidu, monkey and witch very beautifully." (2)

This drama company was established in 1934-35. It presented dramas like Heer Ranjha, Sohni Mahinwal, Sami Dhol and Dhol Badshah in Lahore, Amritsar, Jalandhar, Ferozpur, Shakkar Garh, Sheikhpura, Sargodha, Layel pur, Kasur, Laliyani, Pattuki, Sahiwal, Renala Khurd and Pakpatan Sharif till 1980.

Before partition, Bao Kala Khan's theatre also presented dramas derived from folk stories. In this theatre, an actress named Surraya, her father Bashir-ul-salam and her mother Khatoon Begum also worked. In ' Naya Zamana', we get the reference of another theatrical group i.e., Maula Pehlwan's theatre:

"Ruqayya Jabeen aka Miss Kataar started working as a dancer in Maula Pehlwan's theatre. Later on Miss Kataara who was only 13 years old at that time together with Miyan Fateh Muhammad started a new circus group with the name Nasar Theatre which is still working." (3)

At the time of independence, the artists of this folk theatre were scattered all over India but soon after 1947, these folk artists got established in different areas of Pakistan. Among them, Master Shadi Lal resided in Lyel Pur, Master Chunni in Chuna Mandi Lahore, Aziz Sialkoti in Sialkot, Fazal Shah aka Phajji Shah in Lahore, Miniby with her father Abdussalam in Lahore and Master Labbu started living in Chuna Mandi Lahore.

Except Abdussalam, all the artists were the immigrants and in that period a hotel named Karachi Hotel near Lahore Railway station was their meeting point.

The first theatre after the independence of Pakistan was established by Bao Abdussalam in which few artists like Tanveer Naqvi, Edan Bai, Master Fazal Jalandhri, Master Shadi, Master Channi, Master Ghulam Haidar Chaand Maula, Ismail Qamar, Iqbal Tara, Sultan Khosal, Munshi Dil Laknowi and Phajji Shah etc. started to work.

Aziz Sialkoti worked as hero and Mini Bai as heroine in Abdussalam's theatre. They bagged great fame by their roles of hero and heroine in Heer Ranjha.

Before the inception of Pakistan, Syed Fazal Shah earned great fame as a comedian in Kaalay Khan's theatrical company. Abdussalam lost his whole theatrical company to Syed Fazal Shah in gambling. Disappointed, Mini Bai, his daughter bade her fun adieu forever. Syed Fazal Shah changed the name of Abdussalam's theatre company to Pakistan Arts Society and featured Master Ashiq, the son of Master Ghulam Nabi as hero and his wife Iqbal Tara as heroin. On the other hand, Muhammad Shafi Butt aka Shafi Badam Rangia established Azad Kashmir Theatre in which master Siraj and Rukhsana Begum started working as hero and heroine. Those dramatic companies presented Urdu as well as Punjabi dramas in various cities of Pakistan including Naik Parveen, Khubsurat Balaa, Noor-e-Islam, Aalam Araa, Laila Majnoon and Punjabi drama Heer Ranjha, Sohni Mahinwal, Mirza Sahiban, Dulla Bhatti and Malki Keema. With the passage of time, many theatres were constructed and destructed. Bao Jan Muhammad, the gatekeeper of Pakistan Arts Society with a stroke of good fortune made Ittefaq Theatre and hired the famous hero of that time, Master Ashiq for the advance payment of ten thousand rupees. Shaista Raghini was hired as a heroine with him. After the exclusion of Master Ashiq from Phajji Shah's theatre, Phajji Shah hired a boy from Gujranwala named Ismail as hero for his dramas. In the same era, Wali Shah's theatre got immense popularity.

After the inception of Pakistan, Gaman Theatre became the most popular especially in the areas where Siraiki was spoken. In this theatre there were no women artists and their roles were played by men. This theatre group played dramas like Heer Ranjha, Sassi Puno, Sohni Mahinwal and Dhol Badshah in different areas of Multan and Bahawalpur. Moreover Allah Baksh Theater, Hamayon Theatre and Gulshan Theatre staged many traditional folk dramas in Multan, Muzafar Garh, Jhang, Sahiwal, Sargodha, Camblepur and Bhawalpur. In these dramas, mimicry was added as comic element. There used to be a competition between the songs and dramas of theatrical companies in Animal Show of Sargodha. Mian Anwar hired Master Ashiq of Ittefaq Theatrical Company for fifteen thousand rupees featuring Shah Jehan as heroine. Later on, the theatre too was named after

her name, Shah Jehan Theatre. Mian Anwar's wife, Kursheed Kukku played the role of heroine in this theatre for almost fifteen years. Baali Jaati also served Shah Jehan Theatre for a long time. Before this, she kept playing many side roles in Phajji Shah's Theatre as that theatre already had Phajji Shah as hero and his wife Iqbal Begum as heroine.

Balli Jatti, for her broad build, used to play roles of Ranjha, Mahinwal and Punnu in Shah Jehan's theatre while Mian Anwar's wife, Kukku played roles of Heer, Sohni and Sassi. From 1950 till 1970, the theatres which got popularity were Kisan Theatre, Shama Theatre, Watan Theatre, Tufail Theatre, Aftab Theatre, Punjab Theatre, Bhatti Art Society, Lucky Theatre and Aalam Lohar's Theatre.

The owner of Kisan theatre Sharif Chaina Wal also known as Chaina Pehalwan. "Chaina Pehalwan and his wife Gulzaar Jatti acted as hero and heroine in their dramas but the real reason for Chaina Pehalwan's popularity was his comic roles in different plays."⁽⁴⁾

The famous singer and film actor, Anayat Hussain Bhatti worked in this theatre (Kisan Theater) for several years for which this theatre was named as Bhatti Theatre. Balli Jatti got separated from Shah Jehan Theatre and made Shama Theatre. Aalam Lohar and Akhtari Party made Lucky Theatre. Hoor Banoo and Maula Baksh Pehlwan party made Aftab Theatre. Master Ismaiel made Watan Theater. ⁽⁵⁾

All three theatres were a great source of musical and dramatic entertainment for the people from the birth of Pakistan till 1975-80. Watan Theatre made by Muhammad Ismail got popularity only because Aalam Lohar worked in it as an artist. During the year of 1950 Lok Natak players (Rass Dharie) used to play Lok Natak in Tufail Theater. Later on Inayat Hussain Bhatti made Bhatti art society and Alam Lohar made Alam Lohar Theater. Bali Jatti made a separate theater.

Along with drama, singing became gradually popular in these theatres because dramas required enough time and hard work on the part of artists. Baali Jatti presented Sohni Mahinwal, Heer Ranjha, Mirza Sahiba and Dhool Badshah in her theatre. She, in one of her interviews, told:

"I have been a heroine in theatre as Sassi, Heer, Sohni, Tameezan and Laila. But if any other girl was found to act as Laila in Laila Majnoon, I would have become the mother of Laila after enrolling her as Laila. I had been playing the role of Ranjha too with mustache on my face"⁽⁶⁾

After 1960-65, Aalam Lohar, Tufail Niazi and Anayat Hussain Bhatti

made singing more popular in theatrical companies. Doctor Nasir Rana told, "With the arrival of Aalam Lohar Chimta entered theatre. People got an ear for folk music. The other people also had to turn themselves towards music, leaving drama far behind. Baali Jatti, at first, kept singing shoulder to shoulder with Aalam Lohar, uttering the lyrics by Sahiba. After this, she started singing alone."

Dr. Fauzia writes:

"Baali got immense popularity in the districts of Sargodha and Mianwali for her derived native accent".⁽⁷⁾

Ahsan Siddiqi writes:

"Master Siddique Hassan made a separate theatrical company with the name of Aashiq Theatre and selected Aalam Lohar for the theatre as a singer and brought Chimta in place of drama. Now the stage drama was completely replaced by Chimta, songs, prostitutes and Bhaand Mimicry".⁽⁸⁾

Till 1970-75, Aalam Lohar, Anayat Hussain Bhatti and Baali Jatti kept singing in competition with one another. Consequently, drama got completely extinct from folk theatre. Except singing, one more reason for the extinction of drama from folk theatre was the arrival of films and TV dramas. The real downfall of folk theatre started with the glamour of silver screen and provision of TV screen at every doorstep. But that downfall was limited only to the urban areas. In our rural areas, theatre is as popular even today as it was fifty years ago. Lucky Irani Theatre and Jubilee Circus are its well known examples. They include singing and different other stunts and is great source of entertainment to masses that come flooded to watch them.

On the contrary, Lok Boli Mela by Lok Rahts which was held in 2004 in Depalpur, in Haveli Lakha in 2005, in Gogiran in 2006 and in Jarranwala in 2008 provided free theatrical entertainment to the public by staging traditional folk stories as well as current issues in their plays, which once again brought theatrical entertainment to vogue. Lok Boli Maila is also a cultural event which provides free of cost entertainment of traditional and folk theater to the masses. They used the technique of mimes in their dramas.

One more reason for why theatres were wiped off was heavy taxes by government and ever rising expenses. Lucky and Jubilee Theatre also could not flourish on account of these two reasons and suffered from a sad demise.

Consequently, there were many such groups who could not continue the theatrical business which came down to them by their ancestors on account of heavy tax and growing expenses. And at present only a few theatrical companies can be seen who have hugged drama either as a part time business or a pastime.

In 1974 three Folk groups were called to present their traditional Lok Darams in Ghujjar Khan. In this cultural event Najeeb Mashooq along with his companions presented Drama Jogi Mutiar (Begger and Yound lady) Yousaf Ali and companions Mirza Sabah and Misri Khan and his companions presented drama Sahti Joggi. Yousaf Khan is son of Naik Muhammad who started his folk Drama in 1910.

Such examples are three left-over theatrical groups mentioned by Syed Akhtar Hussain in his essay Lok Natak, who have been carrying the tradition of their ancestors just amateurly. These groups kept presenting various dramas like Heer Ranjha, Sassi Punoun, Puran Bhagat, Sheerin Farhad and Laila Majnoon in Potohaari language in verse form.

Nawaz Mulhaar along with his companions too had been providing the people of Potohaar with such theatrical entertainment. ⁽⁹⁾

Vilayat Ali and Dolat Ali started staging dramas in Sahiwal, Multan, Cheecha Wattni in 1920 and died in 1992 at the age of 75, Issar Sabir son of Valiat Ali shouldered the responsibility of presenting drama in Cheecha Waatni and other areas of Punjab, presented various dramas like Goppi Chandh, Sakhi Sultan, Puran Bhagat, Aashiq-e-Rasool, Sona Zeeni, Sohni Mahinwal and Sassi etc in an interviews in 2008 in Jaranwala. He said

"I started my carrier along with my father with Touti Goup of drama and continued it till 2008".⁽¹⁰⁾

Lok Boli Maila Jaranwala this group presented Qissa Puran Bhagat in a very traditional dramatic way. In which the dialogues were sung and played on harmonium. In it, the roles of women were played by young boys who were very particular about their costumes which too were very traditional. Yet Sangh group presented dramas according to modern and old tradition in Mianwali.

In Punjab, folk drama, with a traditional tinge more than the color of modern street drama, is still alive and holds the fetters of drama staged before and after partition. Masood Nizami, in his essay Mailay writes thus:

"About forty years ago, on Saturday nights with lightening outside, there used to be an awful sight of hustle and bustle in Shalamar and the elite strata of Lahore used to have musical nights, with the whores singing and dancing all night long. There were Bhaand mimicries and dramas

too. And the whole night was spent in that dalliance.”⁽¹¹⁾

In spite of the fact that for the completion of their own purposes, NGOs (1990-2008) brought a novel wave in the world of traditional drama blending it with modern street drama, folk drama still does exist in its traditional form and style in our villages, becoming the greatest source of entertainment for our rural folk.

Fauzia Saeed writes:

"The lok theatre as a form of folk entertainment was aimed primarily at rural masses with the glamour of its loud music, bright lights, garish colors and heavily make up woman. All this went straight to the heart of peasantry who often followed their favourite theatre from village to village far beyond their homes." ⁽¹²⁾

In Bahawalpur, many folk theatre groups are still working very actively. Among them, Ishaq Fareedi Group of Folk Drama is very popular. Ishaq Fareedi is the representative of the race which used to present dramas in a very traditional style in rural areas before the inception of Pakistan.

Gamu, Ishaq's brother, with his dramatic society named Gamu Group, too continued his activities in Bahawalpur even after the birth of Pakistan. After his death, his son Ghulam Rasul (Grandfather Ishaq Fareedi) and his son Ibrahim (Father of Ishaq Fareedi) kept following the tradition of their forefathers, carrying the folk drama to its zenith.

In his interview Ishaq Fareedi reported that a few years before 1965 War, he joined in his ancestral profession and presented many dramas in various villages along with his father. He staged many traditional folk dramas along with his father in different cities including D.G.Khan, Ahmad Pur Sharqia, Bahawalpur, Rahim Yar Khan and Mubarak Pur till 1995 interview with Ishaq Fareedi.⁽¹³⁾

Ishaq Fareedi recruited many new actors and reorganized his group after the death of his father Ibrahim in 1995. But their traditional folk presentation suffered from no big change. The members of this dramatic group have beautiful faces and melodious voices. Their dialogues usually are accompanied with songs, duets, poems and Manqabat (Sufi traditional poem). Though Raza Yasin Group of Gujranwala too presents the stories of Sohni Mahinwal and Heer Ranjha but they take help of songs from different films and cinema movies for their dramas. But the Ishaq Group never does this, instead their actors themselves sing songs, poems and duets according to their dialogues.

'Masood Sodagar' and 'Arab ka Musafir' are such examples. These two

dramas were presented in drama festival organized by Punjab arts council in open air theater Jinnah Garden Lahore in 2008.

Traditional costumes are also considered much in this folk theatre group and the actors put those costumes on which suit best to their roles in the drama. As in 'Masood Sodagar', sodagar's wife wears gharara. The beggars are costumed in beggarly cloaks. The robbers come in black and Mundasay fully equipped with weapons make their appearance on stage with girdles and garters. In 'Arab ka Musafir', the actors come in special Arabic outfits. The role of woman is played by beautiful, young boys who in place of film dances, perform Masquerades which were there in olden times. Their songs too are accompanied by dholki, harmonium and tabla instead of new electronic tunes. Ishaq Fareedi group is representative of traditional folk theater in this modern era.

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