



# Folk Literature and Social Space: Interdependences and Correlations

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**Abstract**— “Art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it.” this dictum attributed to famous playwright Bertolt Brecht as quoted by Bleeker et al., (2019) sums up the interdependence and correlation between art and literature and society. The world has never been a singular entity. There have always been groups that lived a powerful, privileged existence and it is their experience that has passed down the generations as literature, as the core narrative of human existence at a given time. For long ‘Literature’ did not include ‘Folk’ or their culture as was relegated to the peripheries of academic discourse as belonging to the savage, subaltern people. However, it is now increasingly being recognised as an archive of vernacular knowledge systems and a great contributor to the social and cultural development of the people. Both social space and folk literature affect and mould each other. What happens in social space gets reflected in folk literature and what folk literature depicts becomes part of social space. Saang as a form of folk performance tradition has been the source of or a defining influence on the various forms of Folk performance traditions of North India. It has been called “a north Indian Folk Opera” by Vatuk, V. P., & Vatuk, S. (1967) because the dialogues between characters are sung. Taking it as a representative form of North Indian folk performative tradition, my paper attempts to analyse issues of representation of culture, society and morality on the Saang stage. The paper, would focus on some selected Saangs of Lakhmi Chand (1905-1945), as compiled by Sharma, P. Chand. (2006) in *Lakhmi Chand Granthavali*. He is known as the greatest exponent of the Saang form and often referred to as the Shakespeare of North India. His Saangs invariably represent the values and experiences that formed the core of the society of his times. He has taken tales from history, myth and local legends as the basis for his performances. The present paper analyses the content of some Saangs composed and performed by Lakhmi Chand to analyse the knotty question of representation of culture and morality and how one can see reflected in the tales performed by the Saangi, the major social concerns of the times.

**Keywords**— Culture, Folk literature, Performance, Social space, Saangs

## INTRODUCTION

“Art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it.” this dictum attributed to famous playwright Bertolt Brecht as quoted by Bleeker et al., (2019) sums up the interdependence and correlation

between art and literature and society. The world has never been a singular entity. There have always been groups that lived a powerful, privileged existence and it is their experience that has passed down the generations as literature, as the core narrative of human existence at a given time. For long ‘Literature’ did not include ‘Folk’ or

their culture as was relegated to the peripheries of academic discourse as belonging to the savage, subaltern people. However, it is now increasingly being recognized as an archive of vernacular knowledge systems and a great contributor to the social and cultural development of the people. Both social space and folk literature affect and mould each other. What happens in social space gets reflected in folk literature and what folk literature depicts becomes part of social space.

### **Marginalisation of Folk literature**

The online dictionary defines folk as “The common people of a society or region considered as the representatives of a traditional way of life and especially as the originators or carriers of the customs, beliefs, and arts that make up a distinctive culture” and their culture may be referred to as folk culture. However, that is to simplify a very complex debate because folklorists as well as anthropologists have been divided over what constitutes folk culture. Norbert F. Riedal ‘Folklore and the Study of Material Aspects of Folk culture’ (Oct-Dec 1966) rightly points out, “so far no consensus seems to have been reached, and the various and often conflicting interpretations of “folklore” that have been brought forth by folklorists as well as anthropologists have caused much consternation, frustration and even alienation between the two disciplines” (1). Folklore is an inseparable part of culture but the relationship between folklore and dominant culture is not very simple because folklore or folk traditions not only reflect the culture of their folk and are also used as tools to emphasize and reinforce existing power equations but also question dominant social ideologies. The issue gets further complicated when we discuss issues of Indian folk tradition in relation to folkloristic as an academic enterprise, which started in the west.

As Lisa Gabart points out in her article Folk Drama

It easily imposes frameworks of interpretations that are not necessarily grounded in local understandings. When used in non-western contexts, for example, the term imposes western understandings of Drama on traditions that may be more profitably understood as something else, such as worship, sacred retellings, or a visitation by deity, thus drawing disparate performance traditions into the same interpretive sphere. (1)

Indian theorists and researchers too voice the same difficulties.

According to K N Panikkar

"We often come across Western scholars who approach Indian artistic traditions in a meticulously analytical way and create theories on our theatre concepts after their own fashion. I have all respect for their

analytical approach which helps them make their own deductions. But the question which baffles anyone in theatre is whether these deductions can be taken as guidelines for the practice of Indian theatre. A theory is generalised from our experience of doing a thing. Even when an artist practices an art after thoroughly learning its grammar, he cannot neglect the creative impulse which springs up from within, necessarily paving the way for further enlargement of theory."

In Western countries they consider folk forms as rudimentary, as fossils of some bygone age. Many theorists see folk as primarily low-class activity, belonging to illiterate people. It is hardly seen as literature.

As Lisa Gabert posits in her article Folk Drama,

"In the nineteenth century, scholars were interested in the origins of cultural forms they considered to be “folk Drama,” which largely was conceptualized as ancient but degenerated plays that continued to exist in the modern era primarily among the European peasant classes. The plays themselves were presumed to be “survivals,”—that is, leftovers from an earlier era in which fuller, more complete versions had flourished, and where the functions they fulfilled were supposedly more holistically incorporated into society”

But in India the scenario is different. The folk forms are not dead and gone. True that they have suffered setbacks with the coming in of satellite TV and internet but they are not history as yet. According to J C Mathur

"In these circumstances, the question arises how did the contemporary traditional and folk forms arise? In the West the folk form is considered only a community activity of an amateurish kind. This is not so in India because our traditional and folk Drama has very important and strict traditions in some cases and is far more sophisticated than the Western folk Drama. While editing jointly with my friend Dashrath Ojha some medieval plays on North India and Nepal (C 1 300 A D - C 1 625 AD) I (J C Mathur) came to realise that those plays along with similar contemporary traditional forms in other parts of India, actually belong to the corpus of a Dramatic genre which has received scant attention from historians of Drama, including Keith who has rejected them as merely "irregular plays." The same attitude is disclosed in a recent work called “Sanskrit Drama- Its Origin and Decline” by Shekar (published in the Netherlands) "

### **Saang -as a unique Performance Tradition of North India**

Swang or *Saang* developed in the north Indian state of Haryana. Haryana as a state may be of a recent creation (Haryana was constituted on **November 1, 1966**, as a

result of the partition of the former state of Punjab into two separate states—Punjabi-speaking Punjab and Hindi-speaking Haryana.) but the history of the people of Haryana goes back to time immemorial. In fact, the whole reason that the Govt of India found it necessary to create a separate state is reason enough to agree that the distinctiveness of the Haryanvi people was too much to ignore and could not be brushed aside under the carpet of a common state with the Punjabis. Haryana has existed as a separate unit with its own distinct identity and distinct folk culture. It has unique folk practices and performances which take place at villages, at temples, at road crossings, at fields and granaries, marriage ceremonies, festivals etc; and are an inseparable part of the lives of the people. It includes *Saangs* also which are performed on a particular kind of stage or platforms with usual themes of legendary story, historical event or love story at its centre and can keep the public or audience enraptured for the whole night. *Saang* is a balanced combination of acting, dialogues, music, dance, songs, plot, worship and spirituality.

Though the history of folk performance traditions in north India has much in common, the *Saang* from of Haryana (erstwhile Punjab) is unique and different from other performance traditions practiced in the area. *Saang* may be called folk theatre but its status as theatre remains disputed. First of all, as stage it uses a platform of about three and a half meters which is open on all four sides. As Balwant Gargi points out in *Folk Theatre of India*, “life in India is in the streets. Shops, stalls, rituals, bathrooms, all are exposed to the sun and to the glare of people, so is the folk theatre.” (6) There are no curtains or green room attached to the stage and *Saang* hardly uses any props during performance. It is the main narrator or the *sutradhar* who describes to the audience what the stage stands for e.g., a palace, forest, or riverside depending on the scene. Though the characters are well delineated, there are no dialogues; the exchanges between the characters are sung and these songs are called *Ragini*. The performers are all male and sometimes they wear costumes but that is a rarity and in fact a recent practice. Thus, for *Saang*, all the three important constituents of theatre—acting, dialogues and stage are markedly different from practices of the theatre. *Saangs* is also quite distinct from other performing arts in the region. While on the one hand we have narrative traditions like *Alha* which sing epic poetry and the *Nath jogis* who narrate folk stories to an audience, on the other hand we have the *Naqqals* and *Behrups*. While *Behrup* performers disguise and move from village to, the *Naqqal* performers usually perform little skits based on imitation. Therefore, if *Alha* is about musical rendering of poetry, *Behrup* is purely about costume and acting. As per this categorization, *Saang* would fall somewhere in between

because it incorporates elements of both. Like the *Alha*, the *Saangis* sing their *Raginis* and like *Behrup*, the staged performance tells a story using costumes and acting.

Usually, the man playing the lead female character is dressed up as a woman, but the onus of creating the scene and retaining the interest of the audience is primarily on the poet who composes the *Raginis* and who is also the lead actor who sings them. The one after whom the *Saang* troupe is known is more often than not the composer and the lead singer/actor. The *Raginis* are accompanied by *Sarangi* and *Nakkara*. The performances demand great skill and stamina from the artists who perform for as long as six hours and usually there are no loud speakers to amplify their sound. An hour or so before the performance, the musicians begin to create the atmosphere and the artistes sing some religious or other songs connected with the performance till such time when the ‘Guru’ appears and the artistes touch his feet to seek his blessings. The *Saang* begins with the recitation of a *bhet* as pointed out by Ved Prakash Vatuk and Sylvia Vatuk in their article the ‘Ethnography of *Saang*’,

Om(a) Nam(a) sab(a) tai Bada the name of aum is the greatest

Ustai bada na koy(a) no one is greater than he

Jo uska sumiran(a) karai one who remembers Om

Sudha at(a)ma hoy(a) his soul is purified

Ari bhavani bas(a) kar(a) oh bhavani, come and live in me,

Ghat(a) ke par(a)de khol(a) open the gates of my heart,

Ras(a)na par(a) basa karo stay on my tongue, oh mother

Mai suddha sabad(a) mukh(a) and speak the correct words

Bol(a) through my mouth.

Manai sumar(a) liye jag(a) dis(a) I remember the lord

Sat(a) guru mile is my guru

Kahu charan(a) vakai sis(a) I bow to his feet. (23)

With a brief introduction about the play, the performance starts.

### Lakhmi Chand's performances as Folk literature and Chronicles of Social Space

Of *Saang*'s exponents, Pt. Lakhmi Chand (1901-1945) is the most celebrated. Shashi Bhushan Singal as quoted by Puran Chand Sharma in his book *Lakhmi Chand Granthavali* describes his contribution to the form of *Saang* as, “Pandit Lakhmi Chand freed the themes of the ‘*Saang*’ from religious and puranic subjects to which they had become confined and included in them a blend of love

themes and of youth. Thus the 'Saang' was made more ornate (17). Lakhmi Chand has been called a 'luminous bard', 'Kalidas', and 'Shakespeare of India' by his numerous fans and followers. It is difficult to even imagine the kind of cult following he inspired in the people of his state. People walked for days or travelled in their bullock carts to see him perform and listen to him. It was no less than a pilgrimage for most people, with the only difference that while on pilgrimages women and whole family travelled, only men had the prerogative to attend performances like *Saang*.

Before Lakhmi Chand *Saangs* were looked down upon by the self-proclaimed custodians of society who declared such entertainment to be obscene and vulgar. All through history folk entertainments had to battle against discrimination as they were looked down upon by the so called literati and respectable high society people. Lakhmi Chand also brought *Saangs* to repute. Not to say that he didn't face any resistance. He did. But slowly he could lift the *Saang* form from the depths of neglect to the height of such popularity that no social occasion was considered complete without his performances. Though he was illiterate himself he didn't let that come in the way of his education. In fact, he kept Tika Ram with himself as his guru, for the purpose of instructing him and teaching him the scriptures. He was able to pour his experience and knowledge in his poetry that he is looked upon not just as a poet composer but as a wise man in the state of Haryana. Other than the *Saangs* he composed lots of Bhajans, and his bhajans have been compiled and recorded in many volumes as 'Lakhmi Chand ka Brahmgyan' or 'Lakhmi Chand's Divine Knowledge'.

One of his most famous *Saangs* Nala Damyanti has left an indelible imprint on the psyches of the local people. Nala-Damayanti is originally a story from Mahabharata.

It is a popular story in literature and there are hundreds or rather thousands of versions of this story. From Himachal Pradesh to Rajasthan to Gujarat to Tamil Nadu, the story can be found in different formats. In fact, the story of Nala Damayanti is a popular story in Persian literature also. As David Shulman points out in his article Damayanti and Nala: The Many lives of a Story

In The *Mahabharata* episode known as the *Nalaopakhyana* is an elegant, fast-paced narrative.... Moreover, the story it tells is one of the most popular in India, existing in all Indian languages, often in many versions in each language. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of Nala stories exist. Wherever one goes in the sub-continent, Nala was there first. (1)

The story is equally popular in folk literature, with every region having its own version. When we are talking about

different versions of the story. Sometimes it is told as a love story, sometimes as court drama, sometimes as a tale displaying fortitude in the face of adversity at other times it is a cautionary tale about going against the wishes of gods, sometimes it is about predestination. In the original story it was narrated by the rishis visiting Yudhishtir when he was living in the jungle. One day he was feeling particularly sorry for himself, wailing at his misfortune. He complained to the rishis about his misfortune and said that no one was probably more unfortunate than him. It was in response to Yudhishtira's wailing and complaining that the Rishis tell him the story of Raja Nala. They tell him that there was one more who suffered more than you and urge him to thank God that even in jungle he is surrounded by his brothers and his wife, while Raja Nala had to battle adversity and misfortune all alone, after losing all his wealth and kingdom. Thus, originally the story of Raja Nala is narrated to Yudhishtira to make him stronger, to have fortitude and to make him count his blessings. The story is narrated to give him hope for a better future and courage to face the difficult time that was coming ahead. However, every Nala story doesn't have the same motive.

In this context it becomes important to analyse how Lakhmi Chand tells his Story. The *Saang* begins by a *Ragini* where Lakhmi Chand talks about the loss of goodness and honesty in the people and how it has led to various misfortunes befalling the people of Haryana.

*Jab te gaarat mahabhart mein attharah akshohini dal hoya*

*yagya hawan tap daan chhoot gayenyun bharat pe jaal pade*

*indra bhi varsha kam karte jal bin soone taal pade*

*bawan janak huye brahma gyani ved dharam ke khyal pade*

It is after the end of the first *Ragini* that the sutra Dhār tells the context of the story. How the story was first narrated by rishi to Yudhishtira in Mahabharat. But the motives of Lakhmi chand's story is far different from the motive of the rishi as we get to know as the *Saang* progresses. Lakhmi chand's story is a love story. In the initial *Raginis* there is prevalence of the romantic element. The poet gives evocative descriptions of the beauty of both raja Nala and Damayanti as both were famous in all three realms for their beauty. Another thing that the poet stresses is Nala's honesty and piousness. In the Lakhmi chand Granthawali, Pt Poorna Chand Sharma has ended Lakhmi Chand's *Saang* at the point when Nala abandons Damayanti and grief-stricken Damayanti is roaming in the jungle searching for her husband. She tries to follow his footsteps and does so till the end of the day. Then the night

falls and she is forced to abandon her quest. The next morning when the sun comes up, she realises that she is lost. The heroine's pain and bafflement have been very poignantly expressed by the poet but after this the *Saang* ends abruptly.

Pooran Chand Sharma has given a note from Lakhmi Chand's son Pt Tuleram that Lakhmi Chand never performed the *Saang* after this. However, the researcher herself has heard some more *Ragini*'s while growing up ascribed to Pt. Lakhmi Chand and dealing with latter part of the story. One very popular one is

Ulta ganga pahad chadi aur ulta chalya paani  
Daasi banke rehna lag-gi khud damaynti raani

(The river Ganga is climbing up the mountain and the water is flowing in reverse direction as the queen Damayanti herself has started living like a maid.)

The *Ragini* starts by comparing the descent of queen Damayanti to the station of a common maid to the reversal of natural order. It is as unnatural as a river climbing up the mountain or water flowing from down to up. The *Ragini* further describes the problems that the queen faces, living a life of want and subservience. The queen Damayanti who was a princess before she was a queen and who has never seen hardship in her life and yet her love for her husband is such that she is ready to face any amount of adversity in order to continue her search for her husband. This *Ragini* deals with the part when Damayanti has been abandoned by Nala and reaches the kingdom of Cedi and starts living with the queen as a maid (daasi)

Ja kite toh le raja Nala ne, main kyun garib sataya gaya  
Nala te bhi suthra pati mile, tera swayamvar pher rachaya gaya

(Go and look for Raja Nala! Why are you tormenting me, a poor man? And now that your *swayamvar* has been organised again, you would probably find a man better looking than king Nala also.)

This *Ragini* belongs to the time in story when Nala has been living as an ugly deformed servant of the king of Ajodhya, Rituparna. He is tricked into coming to Vidarbha by Damayanti who sends an invitation to the king for her *Swayamvara*, letting it be known that she is planning to marry a second time, now that there is no hope of her husband Nala to be found. However, she sends the invite at such a short notice that she is sure that only Nala himself would be able to make it in time with the Ajodhya king as the distance is far and time very less. Nala with his expertise of horsemanship would be the only likely candidate. When Rituparna manages to reach Vidarbha on time Damayanti's suspicion is confirmed but the sight of

Nala as *Bahuka* makes it difficult to believe. She tries to talk to him to find out the truth but Nala chides her and tells her to leave him, a poor man alone. In the *Ragini* on one hand he urges her to go and look for Nala her husband instead of bothering him. On the other hand, he taunts her about her second *Swayamvar* and hopes that she finds and a husband better looking than Nala himself.

But even if one ignores these other *Raginis*, which the scholars doubt to have been composed by other composers but named after Lakhmi Chand, one thing becomes clear that Lakhmi Chand has appropriated these stories for the purpose of his own representations. In fact, there is significant evidence that every performance used to be unique and a change in emphasis probably changed the message of the story.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, one can see that *Saang* has been the theatre of the people of Haryana. Before television and print media invaded every aspect of our lives, the simple people of villages learned and communicated through the *Saangs*. As WhatsApp has become a university to millions of people of India, *Saang* was a university to the people of villages as it was not just a medium of entertainment but also a source of education to the common people who could neither read nor write. It was a showcase for the local as well as universal problems of life. In fact, the *Saang* were performed by people who shared similar social and cultural backgrounds and so the connect with the audiences was immediate and complete. Lakhmi Chand was one of the biggest exponents of *Saang* and his popularity lay in the fact that he not only depicted the men as well as the morals of the society but also challenged some age-old norms and reinforced the message of good life through his performances.

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