



BHAND PATHER: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

Shahi Shaika¹ & Sameer Ashraf²

1. Amity School of Communication, Amity University Noida, UP, India
2. Manav Rachna International Institute of Research and Studies, School of Media and Humanities, Department of Journalism & Mass Communication.

Abstract

Bhand Pather is one of the oldest folk theatre forms in Kashmir which has been practiced for over two centuries. It is a mix of dance, music and satire talking about the ruling class, religious issues and issues related to common masses. *Bhand Pather* is the combination of two Sanskrit words *Bhand* and *Pather*, *Bhand* means –jester and *Pather* means –dramatic personnel. It has been the major sources of entertainment and information for ages in Kashmir. The *Bhands* receive training from their family heads and the traits of art are transmitted from generation to generation. It has been intrinsic to the popular culture, public discourse, political debate and the social fabric of the people of Kashmir. Serving as the primary source of information about the state of affairs for the common people, it is perhaps one of the earliest forms of mass communication in Kashmir. At present, this form of traditional media is gradually losing its presence and influence in Kashmir after the government schemes for *Bhands* have sanitized their performances as relics relegated to government functions as empty cultural artifacts. The eroticization of this folk media has distanced it from its roots making people forget this indigenous art as an important part of Kashmiri culture. *Bhand Pather* is not only an important folk theatre form that needs preservation, but it is an extensive repertoire of the checkered history of Kashmir. The present state of *Bhand Pather* reveals that this folk form is dying an untimely death and there is an immediate need for its preservation and promotion. Apart from archiving there is a need to work on its script so that it fits the contemporary times. This paper attempts to give the historical perspective of *Bhand Pather*, its present status and future prospects for its preservation.

Key words: Communication, Bhand Pather, History, Kashmir, Folk theatre, Folklore.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:	RESEARCH ARTICLE
Shahi Shaika Amity School of Communication, Amity University Noida, UP, India E-mail: shahisam11@gmail.com	

Introduction

There are no civilizations which do not have any form of folklore to reflect their oral history and evolution. Kashmir has been refining folklore from the time for which there is no recorded evidence but its mention can be found in Kalhan's *Rajatarangani* (Zutshi, 2011). From 8thC to 15thC there has been a considerable development in the fine arts of Kashmir and every village had a stage of its own where dramatic performances were held (Lawrence, 1895). Even though Kashmir has been under the incursion of various foreign regimes but the folk legacy of Kashmir has its uniqueness which was patronized by all the rulers of their times and has made it an area of interest for the researchers and tourists for centuries. Mohammad Subhan Bhagat, the renowned *Bhand Pather* performer of Kashmir has contributed a lot in the preservation of this folk theatre and has compiled *Pathers* in the form of books and he writes as follows.

“So far as the question of survival of the folk art is concerned, I can say with confidence that the art has the potential to change and continue by accepting ever-new modes and hues of the ever changing times and assimilating them into the texture, nevertheless the survival of this folk art depends on the cooperation of the common folks whose representative it stands. In the past it thrived only because of the patronage of the Rajas, Maharajas, and the Landlords. It is encouraging to note that in modern times many people are showing their whole hearted love for it.” (Bhagat, 1979).

Folk has been a main source of entertainment for the people of Kashmir be it the folk songs with the Sufi lyrics, *Rouf* dance of women or the open air performances of *Ladi Shah* (a character moving from village to village and talking about all current issues in a rhythmic tone) and satirical folk theatre of *Bhand Pather* (Archana Kumari & S. B, 2014). *Bhand Pather* has been a source of not just entertainment but a strong voice of people about the issues that are prevalent in the society. It is satirical yet comic in nature making it the most loved folk form for all the age groups (Shaika, S., & Mishra, K. D, 2020). It is a loosely scripted open air theatre which starts with the loud beating of the *Dhol* to attract the audience and ends with *Duai Khair* (prayers for the people). *Bhand* artists are actors, singers, dancers and acrobats. Their body language, eye movement, spatial relationship and paralanguage are amazing as they have an art to involve every member in the audience. The costumes and the mask are very vibrant and the props used are very minimalistic ranging from a stick to a big sheet of cloth (Arif, 2018). Music is an important component of *Bhand Pather* and the instruments used are Swarnai, Dhol and Nagara. The composition played is based on Sufism and is known as *Mukam*, its different for all *Pathers* (Bhat, 2017). Mostly all the *Pathers* are in Kashmiri language but sometimes Persian, Punjabi, Urdu, Pahari, Dogri, languages are also used. Riddles, poetry, and metaphors are often used in the *Pathe*. The head of the group is known as *Magun* (a person of mixed talent) and apart from him the most significant character is the *Maskharas* (clown) who uses the elements of ridicule, comedy, and sarcasm in the performances. There are different types of *Pathers* talking about different issues in the society, the basic composition is same but the treatment given to the *Pathers* is different depending upon the themes dealt with.

- **Dard Pather**

The *Pather* talks about the opposition of people of Kashmir against the dictator Dards - Afghan rulers and about their injustice with the people. With Persian, Kashmiri, Urdu and Hindi languages the performance shows the love of Kashmiris for their land and indigenous language. It mocks the lifestyle of Dards and talks about the negative impact of alcohol and other intoxicants on society.

- **Gosaine Pather**

The *Pather* focuses on the history of Kashmir which has been a residence of saints, sufis, peers, sadhus and talks about the religious faith of Kashmiris and the misuse of religion to mislead the common people. The *Pather* mostly uses Kashmiri language apart from some expressions in Hindi and Sanskrit language.

- **Buhir/Bata Pather**

This *Pather* gives a picture about the uniqueness of Pandit population. It is full of humor and gives a clear message about the biased justice system where the common man is held responsible for no offense and the criminal is set free. The languages used are Kashmiri and Sanskrit.

- **Shikargah Pather**

This *Pather* deals with the topics of contamination of environment, conservation of habitat for wild animals, deforestation and biological balance. To shows the character of different animals masks are used in this *Pather*. Kashmiri, Persian and Urdu languages are used.

- **Raaze Pather**

Raaze (King) deliberates upon the atrocities of the Afghan rules and the imperialism of other cultures on Kashmir. It talks about the lavish life style of the kings, dishonesty and meanness of the people at the helm of affairs. The languages used are Kashmiri, Persian and some Punjabi

- **Aarem Pather**

This *Pather* depicts the way the *Aarems* (farmers) live in the society. Their marriages were different from the rest where the bride used to go to the grooms place but here it was the other way round- here the groom would come to the brides house and would live there. It asks the people to protest against the wrong social practices of forced marriage and child marriage.

- **Waatal Pather**

The *Waatal* (lower cast) section and their standard of living is talked upon in this *Pather*. This *Pather* is mostly in Kashmiri language and talks about various other issues like, polygamy, deceit, rude use of language and child rights.

- **Bakarwal Pather**

A shepherd tribe from hilly areas of Kashmir and their way of living is depicted in this *Pather*. Its talks about the mistreatment of the *Bakarwals* (shepherds) by the merchants. It also talks about cautiously talking in other language because of the different meanings of the

same words in different languages. There is a use of Urdu, Pahari and Kashmiri language in this *Pather*.

- **Angrez Pather**

The *Pather* gives an idea about the love of Kashmiris for their native language and their resentment to reply to the English people in English. It makes fun of English language and gives a strong message to the audience that Kashmiri is our mother tongue and no language can come in par with it.

Wattal Pather is the oldest *Pather* while *Angrez Pather* is the most modern one ^[6]. The basic purpose of *Bhand Pather* is to talk about the serious issues of the society but in a very subtle and humorous way so that the people are entertained and at the same time the message is conveyed. The jester with all his skills makes the audience laugh and gives them a clear perspective of the issue dealt with in a *Pather*. Here is an excerpt from *Angrez Pather* which ridicules the imperialism of English language on Kashmiri and the evil practice of child marriage:-

Clown-I (father) : *che anuthi ne maine kore kuth kahn rut bhog*

Clown-II (match maker): *hai! hai !sorry, sorry mai goe mashid*

Clown-I (father): *hai! yem angrez gai magar sorry thovuk yeti*

Clown-II (match maker): *bozum chein nich che wein truvah wershi*

Clown-I (father): *Waii me chui yeh naar bor kalas peth .*

[Kashmir has been under the reign of foreign rulers and people here believe that this has laid an impact on their language. Here the characters are ridiculing the sway of English language on Kashmir language and evil practice of child marriage.]

Review of Literature

Lawrence (1895) in his book 'The valley of Kashmir' which is a blueprint of the writers visit to Kashmir, has given a record of the destitution faced by the individuals of Kashmir during the residency of Dogra rulers. This book reveals how *Bhand Pather* has been a bridge between the people and the rulers and has been used as a medium to express the oppression of the people by the ruling majority. Apart from giving a detailed description about the *Bhands* and their performances the author has also focused on the information about the geology, culture, and life of the individuals. Bhagat (1979) a historical perspective and an account of a folk artist gives a nitty-gritty record of the historical backdrop of *Bhand Pather* in Kashmir. Subhan Bhagat has broadly given a thorough portrayal of the situation of the individuals under tyrant foreign rulers and how *Bhand Pather* has played a vital role to become a voice for the valley. The book uncovers the role of Folk media particularly *Bhand Pather* as one of the most exquisite means of entertainment and historical representation of Kashmir. It gives a comprehensive description of the *Bhand* performances and the status *Bhands* had enjoyed over the years among the people. Fayaz (2008) in the book 'Kashmir folklore: a study in historical perspective' has given a detailed description of the folk culture and different folk forms in Kashmir. Talking about the social fabric of Kashmiri society and the depiction of various social customs through folklore, the book envelops a comprehensive history of *Bhand Pather* and different parts of Kashmiri society depicted through folk theatre. A record of the

Bhand Pather: A Historical Perspective and Future Prospects

socio-political parody through different folk forms under various imperious regimes in Kashmir. The author has given an in depth detail of using folk theatre for protesting various socio-cultural issues in a dedicated chapter on *Bhand Pather*. Jatoo and Sudhir (2016) have given a detailed summary of *Bhand Pather* and its different types with a brief account of its history, cultural importance and the performative viewpoint. The authors have defined *Bhand Pather* as an undying art with a lot of scope for its preservation. *Bhand Pather* has been talked about as one of the most utilized mediums to satire the circumstance in Kashmir from the period of Mughals, Afghans, Sikhs, and other foreign reigns. Arif (2018) talks about the rich culture of Kashmiri folklore where *Bhand Pather* enjoyed a top position. According to the author even though this art has not been seriously documented but its traces can be found hundreds of years ago. Revealing the potential of *Bhand Pather* as one of the most important mediums of communication for centuries the author points out that this medium has not died yet and can be rejuvenated in many ways and one of the ways is to integrate *Bhand Pather* with tourism. Nisar (2018) deliberating upon the context of Kashmiri folklore has highlighted the importance of *Bhand Pather* as a representative of socio-political and cultural history of Kashmir. Dar (2016) has given an account of the 90s when Kashmir was going through militancy and how it affected the folk theatre. With the Pandit exodus *Bhand Pather* lost its charm and diversity. According to the author the concept of Kashmiriyat is missing from the *Pathers* now. The author reveals that the unrest in the valley have caused psychological imbalances in people and in this scenario it is very difficult to enjoy any theater performance. Shaika et al. (2021) have also given a detailed account in a case study research for using *Bhand Pather* as a potent tool towards achieving Sustainable Development Goal 3.

Objectives of the study

- To study the history and evolution of *Bhand Pather*.
- To find out the efforts by media, academicians and artists for the promotion and revival of this Folk Theatre.
- To understand the changes made in *Bhand Pather* to fit in the contemporary times.

Methodology

The approach used in this study is qualitative in nature and is based on the analysis of secondary data. The data has been gathered through research papers, journals, books, articles and websites. There is an in depth analysis on the secondary data which revealed the history of *Bhand Pather*. Through the review of literature the descriptive method has been adopted to explore the different aspects of the study. Apart from this primary data was collected by the researcher which includes personal interviews with the artists of the folk theatre, academicians, media persons and NGO's. Information collected through these interviews and personal meetings with the folk artist allowed the researched to observe their work meticulously apart from gathering the information.

Present status of Bhand Pather

Bhand Pather is a versatile folk form incorporating every issue in the society thus making it fit even for the contemporary times. The *Bhand Pather* demonstrates Kashmiriyat by showing similar cultural aspects between Hinduism and Islam and elaborates difference as well ably captured in Sushma Jatoo and Sudhir Lal's edited *Bhand Pather: the folk theatre of Kashmir*. *Bhand Pather* is

the oldest theatre of the subcontinent though there are not much archival evidences of this folk form (Jatoo & Lal, 2016). In an interview Dr. Farooq Fayaz revealed that the era from which *Bhand Pather* actually started cannot be said. But during the 1st-4th C (the era of Buddhist system in Kashmir) *Bhand Pather* became operational. Since Buddhists did not use the language of the elites but instead used *Pali* (local language) and this was the reason they developed close connection with the masses. Whether with the name *Bhand Pather* or some other name, *Pather* was used as a vehicle to promote Buddhist philosophy. With the establishment of the new democratic order after 1947 there were different institutions established to promote and preserve *Bhand Pather* and bring it to the level where it could compete with other traditional forms of media. But *Bhand Pather* has lost its connection with the masses which it enjoyed earlier. Ghulam Mohudin Aajiz the second generation *Bhand* artist believes that the psychological tension, tortures and pleasures of the spectators is confronted within the *Pather* representing the true frame of mind of the spectators making it a reason for its popularity among the people. In Kashmir it has been a source of mass communication for ages because it dealt with the issues of the people and hardly came anywhere near religion. Today this theatre is dying out. In other parts of the country folk theaters are emerging out and making a strong impact but in this part of the country there are hardly any theatrical activities. The state government has failed to rejuvenate the *Pather* and the present political scenario of Kashmir does not allow the artists to perform. *Bhand* artists cannot go to the villages, start beating the drums and entertain when the village is mourning the death of a militant. In the essay “Loss of Syncretic Theatrical Form” Javaid Iqbal Bhat notes the historical account of *Bhand Pather* as one of the oldest theatre of the subcontinent in terms of its importance in the history of Kashmir as the artifact of art and culture is yet to be written (Bhat, 2006). Before the Muslim rule in Kashmir the theatre was performed on the days of religious importance, but with the Muslim Sultanate in Kashmir the *Bhand Pather* continued but the place of performance shifted from temples to shrines and *khankas* (Muslim place of worship). *Bhands* enjoyed a special status in the society and at the time of any natural calamity they were requested to pray for the land (*Bhand Doukhar* as it is said in Kashmiri language) (Shaika, 2021). There is no training imparted to the artist other than what they receive from the heads of the family. Mudasir Ahmad Bhagat, a third generation *Bhand* artist, revealed the plight of artists where *Bhand Pather* has suffered at the hands of government and now it's a forgotten tale, and is replaced with the new media. Mudasir believes that *Bhand Pather* is the rich history of Kashmir and inseparable part of Kashmiri culture and the *Bhand* artist will do every possible effort to save and prevent its death. *Bhand Pather* has been documented from past 30 years only but the *Pather* is more than 200 years old and nothing can revive the lost history of more than two centuries. In an interview with Talha Jehangir Rehmani, (Programme Executive, Radio Kashmir) revealed the role of mass media in promoting *Bhand Pather*. In 80s Radio Kashmir started a service on *Bhand Pather* namely (*Luke Pather*). But radio and TV are not its places; *Pather* is an open air theatre and needs acceptance from the people. Earlier there was no script for *Bhand Pather* and the *Pather* would be extempore but one of the legendary artists of *Bhand Pather*, Mohammad Subhan Bhagat penned down and scripted *Bhand Pather* for the first time more than 30 years ago. In an interview with one of the largest database pad.ma, famous *Bhand* artists Subhan

Bhagat and his son Mahjoor Bhagat describes this theatrical form as a social drama with myths and contemporary social satire. The interview deliberates upon the immediate need to preserve this dying art. The musical instruments used in this folk form are quite novel as the materials used to make these instruments is purely local and there is an expertise required to play them. There have been attempts to preserve *Bhand Pather* and impart training to the young artists by two theatre groups FUNTOOSH and EKTA but due to the lack of financial funding and no support from the masses to encourage the folk theatre, the theatre groups stopped promoting *Bhand Pather*^[10]. To attract people towards the theatre there is still a long way to go for the revival of the age old glory.

Conclusion

Unless *Bhand Pather* is made part and parcel of academic curriculum right from the school to university level it cannot be preserved. This is the only way to send down the linkage to the present generation about the cultural history. For last 30 years the political scenario of Kashmir is responsible for the bad phase of *Bhand Pather*. Today there are more than 100 groups of *Bhands* but a good script and viewers are missing. Radio is doing its bit by fortnightly broadcasting a *Pather* but that is not enough to preserve it. There are some incentives from North Zone Cultural Centre Patiala in the name of *Nukkad Natak* given to artists for performance but that will dilute the name *Bhand Pather*. To revive *Bhand Pather* it is essential to get women on board as they are an important part of the social makeup. There are artists, stories, music, but lack of space among the audience and help from the authorities is a matter of concern. Some salary grant for the promotion of folk media is into play but that is not enough to bring it back from the gallows. Archival is important but what is more important is its presence among the masses. Radio and TV has lost its audience and so has the *Pather*, it is an open air theater and its place is among masses and not in the studios and auditoriums. New media can play an important role where websites, blogs, YouTube channels, personalized instagram accounts, Face book pages can be used to archive as well as to promote this dying folk form. Government can organize the Folk festivals on Tourist Destinations this integration of folk with the tourism will give an international audience to the *Pather*. Ads and information on the preservation of *Bhand Pather* and some write-ups to encourage the artists is a must to prevent its untimely death. *Bhand Pather* is a living art form and cannot be shelved.

References

1. Archana Kumari, S. B. (2014). Theatre: A mode of Communication in Kashmir, A case study of two theatre groups of Kashmir–Funtoosh and Ekta. *International Journal of Communication Development*.
2. Arif, A. (2018). INDIGENOUS FOLK THEATRE OF KASHMIR AND IT'S RELEVANCE IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY. *JOURNAL OF INDIAN RESEARCH*, 6(2), 33-37.
3. Bhagat, M. S. (1979). *Kashur Luke Theater*: University of Kashmir.
4. Bhat, J. I. (2006). Loss of a Syncretic Theatrical Form. *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore*. 34, 39–56

Bhand Pather: A Historical Perspective and Future Prospects

5. Bhat, W. (2017). Musical instruments used with Bhand Pather of Kashmir. *Sangeet galaxy*, 6, 26-32.
6. Dar. Sajad.Rasheed. (2016). Bhand Pather: A Traditional Folk Performance “Once The Representation of Secularism, Now Near To Extinction In Kashmir Valley”. *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Translation Studies*. Vol 3.
7. Fayaz, F. (2008). *Kashmir Folklore A Study in Historical Perspective*. Srinagar: Gulshan Books.
8. Jatoo, Sushma & Laal, Sudhir. (2016). *Bhand Pather: The Folk Theatre of Kashmir*: B.R. Publishing Corporation
9. Lawrence, W. R. (1895). *The valley of Kashmir*. Frowde.
10. NISAR, A. (2018). Koshur Pather: The Forgotten Folk Theatre. *The Fountain Pen*, 1(01), 56.
11. Shaika, S. (2021). Bhand Pather An Ethnographic Study of the Indigenous Folk Theatre Form of Kashmir.
12. Shaika, S., & Mishra, K. D. (2020). Folklore and mass media in Kashmir: A quantitative analysis. *International journal of scientific & technology research*, 9(2), 4447-4451.
13. Shaika, S., Lal, R., & Jonjua, M. (2021). Sustainable Development Goal 3: Case Study of using Folk media as a Potent tool in India. *The journal of contemporary issues in business and government*, 27(1), 4426-4443.
14. Zutshi, C. (2011). Translating the Past: Rethinking Rajatarangini Narratives in Colonial India. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 70(1), 5-27.

Personal Interviews

1. Jehangir, Talha. (2017, December 11). Personal Interview.
2. Fayaz, Farooq. (2017, December 10). Personal Interview.
3. Tak, Ashraf. (2017, November 8). Personal Interview.
4. Aajiz, G. M. (2018, August 20). Personal Interview.
5. Bhagat, Mudasir. Ahmed. (2018, August 22). Personal Interview.

Websites

“Kashmir: Bhand Pather Artists Subhan Bhagat and Mahjoor Bhagat I.” *Pad.ma*, pad.ma/HR/info.
Raina, M. K. Bhand Pather of Kashmir. Kashmir Overseas Association. Retrieved from <http://www.koausa.org/BhandPather/>

