

Struggling to Survive: A Critical Response to the Folk-theatrical Scenario of Himachal Pradesh

Roshan Lal Sharma & Manoj Thakur

Abstract

This paper seeks to take a critical look at folk theatrical scenario of Himachal Pradesh (H.P.) with special emphasis on demonstrating how folk theatrical forms such as *askarayala*, *banthra*, *horingfo*, *bhagat*, *hiranyatar*, *harn*, *dhaja*, *barlaajandswang* gradually seem to be waning due to advancement in digital technology, DTH and Digital TV Networks, exponential increase in urbanization and crass commercialism. Moreover, due to rural-folk access to mobile phones and social media, there seems scant regard for endangered folk-art forms in general and folk theatrical forms in particular. Even local languages (such as Baghati, Kului, Kinnauri, etc.) which sustain/nurture these art forms have become endangered – a fact acknowledged by the UNESCO, which hints at the possibility of obliteration of complete ways of life that these languages represent. Thus, besides offering a brief overview of folk theatrical scenario of Himachal Pradesh, an attempt will be made to ascertain the reasons behind growing decline in their popularity along with shedding some light on their technical aspects and their deeper connection with the folk psyche despite the onslaught of digital TV networks and diverse forms of new media that seem bent on eradicating various folk-art forms.

Keywords: Crass commercialism; Endangered languages; Folk-art forms; Folk theatre; Media multiplicity.

Himachal Pradesh (also known as 'Himachal' in regional parlance) is a land of gods, goddesses, and deities. Their influence can be seen in folk-cultural arenas, rituals and also in the way 'Himachalis' (people living in Himachal Pradesh) conduct the business of their day-to-day lives. To say that Himachali folk consciousness is majorly influenced and regulated by local deities known as *gram devata* (governing deity of a village),

kulishta(the deity of the clan) and *kulja*(the female deity of the clan), it will not be an overstatement. Despite being a relatively smaller state, Himachal Pradesh has a rich and varied culture and so is its folklore and folk consciousness, and therefore, sheer range of folk songs, dances, and folk theatre is not only vast but diverse and distinctly unique as well.

Folk theatre not only in Himachal but elsewhere as well in India has been facing crisis of existence because of numerous factors affecting folk-theatrical space. Primarily, there is no state policy to protect folk art forms and particularly folk theatre. Kailash Ahluwalia and M. R. Thakur share this worry concerning gradual decline in the popularity of folk theatre owing to the intervention of Hindi idiom, which is mixed with the local dialect, eventually resulting in a sort compromise at the level of dialogues that are delivered in an impromptu manner. Folk theatre, in fact, has been surviving just because of selfless efforts of amateurs and professional artists. They have to struggle for their livelihood, yet they do not give up. Neelam Mansingh Chaudhury appreciates their passion thus: "The endeavors of regional groups, individually and collectively, need to be celebrated. They continue to work, struggle, create and dream despite the pathetic working conditions that they have to contend with. They . . . have budgetary constraints, and fewer shows. Despite this, they continue with their efforts to keep theatre alive(8).

We need to understand that the life force behind folk theatre is its socio-cultural embeddedness. However, it has been observed that playwrights keep trying to infuse folk elements into regular theatre without caring if these elements synchronize with each other or not. Devendra Raj Ankur criticizes Badal Sircar by saying that he (including others as well) has been following a reverse process in theatre: "[W]e look for the form, for the first and then try to infuse theatre into it" (23). In India, people have been interrogating the western hegemony even in the field of art for long. Efforts are still under way to establish the roots and identity of the Indian theatre but, as A. Mangai observes, "[i]ronically, these very forms became the basis of experimentation globally under the influence of Grotowski, Barba, Artaud and Peter Brook. . . While critique of multiculturalism and cultural piracy are levied against foreign artists, little thought is given to how the Indian artists deal with the same arts and artists" (85). Mangai's concern seems valid as we need to objectively introspect about Indian artists as well.

India is a monolith politically but culturally, it is diverse. In this respect U.R. Anantha Murthy rightly observes: "We are more a civilization than a

nation in the European sense" (14). He further says: "'Unity in diversity' is not an empty cliché; it has to be interpreted carefully. If you overdo 'unity' in the service of the monolithic state, then the diversities will assert. The reverse is also true" (17). This applies to the theatrical arenas well. So, instead of one national theatre we have numerous theatrical forms predominant in different parts of India. Shyam Parmar in his book *Traditional Folk Media in India* lists eighteen provincial states having folk theatrical forms while many of them have as many as seven or eight distinct folk theatrical forms (35-37).

However, folk theatre in India is mired in its ritualistic cocoon as a result of which there is hardly any cross-cultural sharing. Moreover, it has been bearing the brunt of indifference on the part of the government also. The achievements of the centrally funded National School of Drama in Delhi are many but its activities are restricted mostly to the national capital. Indira Parthasarathy vehemently criticizes the NSD by calling it Delhi School of Drama which, according to her, is "catering to those hailing from a privileged region of this vast country with a privileged language as their mother tongue" (43). In the present Indian context, we cannot ignore the fact that there are different forms of regional drama such as *kuchipudi*, *ram leela*, *bhavai*, *naqqal*, *karayala*, *bhagat*, *yakshagan*, *prasang*, *tamasha*, *koodiyattam*, *kathakali*, *nacha*, *gondhal*, *dashavatar*, *sowang*, *nautanki*, *jhamatra*, *therukoothu*, *rasleela*, *jhanki*, *jatra*, and *tiyatra*. Keeping in mind this diversity, Anantha Murthy aptly states: "I do not think that there is anything 'national' apart from the 'regional' in India and there is hardly anything like the one and only way of doing theatre. The way for us to be truly Indian is by belonging to various regions of India" (14).

Himachal Pradesh, as be the case with India, has rich cultural diversity. There are around nine folk theatrical forms practiced and they are: *karayala*, *dhaja*, *banthara*, *haranyatar*, *bhagat*, *raas*, *horingfo*, *sehn* and *budha*, and *barlaj*. Despite such plenty, it is sad that these folk theatrical forms are not thriving as they should have been or as they used to in the past. There are numerous reasons which account for the dismal folk-theatrical scenario in Himachal. Firstly, patronage for drama in India is too arbitrary. For example, in 2004, National School of Drama got twelve and half crore Indian rupees as its annual expenditure while expenditure for the rest of India was only ten crore rupees (Subbanna 47). As far as Himachal is concerned, there is no patronage for folk theatre either from the state or the union government. Secondly, 'inferiorization' (the process of making someone inferior), contributed to the massive jolt to folk theatre. Colonization played significant role in this process. Frantz Fanon rightly observes, "Every ef-

fort is made to bring the colonized person to admit the inferiority of his culture. . ." (1587). People belonging to lower castes were, and they still are, the major custodians of folk theatre in Himachal. These people faced inferiorization first at the hands of the colonizers and then people from the privileged class. Their existence has been demonized to an extent that their present generation does not want to reveal their identity based on lower caste or underprivileged class.

Moreover, being cleverly manipulated customers/consumers, people in today's world remain stuck in the vicious cycle of earning money and spending it mindlessly. They lack both time and interest in matters pertaining to art or aesthetics leave aside folk-theatrical forms. The artists too earn meagre sum of money, and hence, it is not at all a lucrative business for the youth. Furthermore, folk theatre's inability to counter modern means of media technology is another important factor. The sophistication of DTH TV network, Digital TV channels, cinema, OTT platforms alongside mobile phones is difficult to match. Vis-à-vis cinema, M.R. Thakur once succinctly remarked that "our cultural heritage has been badly affected by the achievements in the fields of technology and industry. He further observes that cinema has beaten our folk theatre strongly (21)."

Life in folk cultural spaces is abundantly fulfilling even though it is not that well-satisfying materially. These arenas are home to numerous folk-art forms but the most powerful among them is folk theatre as it has both audio as well as visual appeal. Folk theatre is usually characterized by light comedy, satire, irony, wit, pun, paradox, and wordplay. Before the advent of the television and cinema, folk theatre used to be the only form of entertainment among rural masses. The moment one would come to know about its staging, people would flock to that place, even persuade others to join them; such was the craze for folk theatre. Other folk-art forms such as folk song and folk dance were occasional. Even though the folk theatre was also occasional, its blending of action, singing, and dancing lent it an edge.

Peter France described the soul of the Enlightenment as "a progressive movement, devoted to the values of modern commercial society" (64). In fact, the Enlightenment blinded people with its dazzle. Revolution in the field of science and technology made its impact many folds and irreversible. Enlightenment made people hanker after material goods, luxurious lifestyle, and money. There was rapid industrialization which required cheap labor. This necessitated the migration of rural folk to the industrial centers. This marked the shift from a rural/ primitive economy to an in-

dustrial or market economy. Earlier people earned from agriculture but now they earn from laboring in factories, shops, and offices, etc.

Such a scenario caused change the world over as these laborers carried glowing accounts of city life, which they shared with the rural folk. As a result, a fascination for city life started developing among villagers. They started comparing city life with theirs, which Peter France observed to be “doomed to rapid extinction” (71). Slowly migration towards cities became and still is a continuous phenomenon. S. Imtiaz Hasnain and R.S. Gupta rightly quote E. Zwingle saying, “Goods move. People move. Ideas move. And cultures change” (4). City life took over rural life in almost all the aspects, be it culture, language, or lifestyle. When different cultures reached cities, it became a mix of numerous diluted cultures. The first and the foremost degeneration, Peter France said, was to be “visible in language” (71). The language of cities had the power to fascinate and took the souls of people prisoner, and that is why they started looking down upon their culture. People lost sense of pride for their own culture, and soon became oblivious to it. In this process, they lost the very sap of their life.

Issues concerning Sustenance of Folk-Art Forms

We are living in the age of globalization where the market economy has taken over every other kind of economy. Marx and Engels attest to it in *The Communist Manifesto* and say that “modern industry has established the world market.... All old-established national industries...are dislodged by new industries whose...products are consumed, not only at home but in every quarter of the globe”(32-35). Arguably, in view of this observation, everything has been converted into business including art and culture that have failed to escape its embrace. Concomitantly, any activity that does not yield monetary benefit is first pushed to margins, and later doomed to perish. Folk art forms and their diminishing relevance thus cannot be an exception.

The pursuit of material wealth has overpowered humanactivities which do not sustain people anymore; and likewise, people do not sustain them in return. Other contributing factors are the disintegration of families engaged in modern occupations. Earlier people used to live in joint families; household chores were shared and each family member would get at least some time to take interest in art and artistic pursuits. Moreover, this folk art/craft was consumed at home. People were not rich in terms of their material possessions, but they were self-sufficient.In this way, employ-

ment nowadays, promises us money and to buy goods from the market. The grind of day-to-day job-routine would cause physical as well as mental fatigue which would render the pursuit of art/ folk art/craft impossible. Also, nurturing taste for art also requires tremendous hard work as it is time as well as capital-consuming. For instance, if we compare making a broom at home and buy a readymade to use from the market, we will see that it just takes ten minutes to buy a fifty/sixty rupee worth broom from the market, but to prepare one at home will take week-long labor and if we sell the same in the market, none will buy it for more than ten/twenty rupees. Similarly, if we consider the case of folk art (music, dance, and drama), its performance, time of performance, and duration of performance are out of sync with modern occupations and way of life post-Enlightenment and after industrialization. Earlier people used to sing folk songs while working in fields, and at times they used to compose them as well collectively. Folk dance similarly was a common spectacle during festivals, fairs and family functions. Folk drama would be performed at night when the entire household work would be finished so that each village folk could enjoy it.

None of these activities based on folk art forms would fetch money simply because people wanted only entertainment and through the performance of folk theatre, they also used to worship local deities to propitiate them, and thus seek their blessings. As a consequence, folk art forms also strengthened their communitarian ties. If at all money would be involved in organizing such performances, the amount would be incredibly small, which underscores the fact that materiality in any form would be rendered insignificant—a fact that is hard to believe in an age of crass commercialism. Interestingly, in the contemporary scenario, jobs certainly allow us freedom to buy and consume goods endlessly but scarcely allow us to spend time on such communitarian activities. We have plenty of capsule/pocket entertainment available through mobile phones but no one has time to waste on lengthy, ritualistic activities concerning folk-art forms. Thus, the present generation has nearly severed its ties with the real-time folk theatrical activities as it becomes evident from the dwindling number of the viewers when folk theatre such as *karyalais* performed today.

Folk Theatrical Scenario in H.P.

As be the case in other parts of India, in Himachal too, people have been migrating to cities in search of better job prospects/opportunities and life. Himachali folk culture thus has been adversely hit by the tsunami of the modern ways of living and thinking despite having rich folklore and cul-

tural diversity in terms of folk art and folk theatre. Sadly thought, they are facing serious erasure due to the onslaught of digital technology, Dish TV networks, and media multiplicity. Nevertheless, despite the overwhelming presence of digital and technological tools, social media, popular reality and laughter shows, our folk-art forms have not yet become extinct. These have rather been diluted, modified and appropriated in such a way that their actual folk character is being compromised/ diluted in a serious way. These still comprise the core of the socio-cultural milieu of the state. Hence there are broadly three categories of folk drama – the first comprises ‘most popular folk theatrical forms’ namely *karayala*, *bhagat*, and *banthada*; the second consists of ‘less popular forms’ that have lost their relevance over a period of time such as *asharanand* and *barlaj*; and the third include ‘those forms that are on the verge of extinction’ viz. *raas* of kangra, *mandayala* of district mandi, *nirshu*, *gehna*, *jheru*, *bahandu*, and *shraani* of Kullu districts.

Most Popular Theatrical Forms in H.P.

Karayala: Popular in Solan, Shimla, and Sirmour districts of Himachal, *karayala* is an “impromptu” (Ahluwalia 1995) theatrical form. Which neither has a script nor any director. *Karayala* presents a fusion of dance, drama, and singing. The artists and the crew members are all males, even women roles are played by males disguised as women. The performances are enjoyed by all the age groups of society. A single *karayala* consists of around three to four different episodes (“spectacles” according to Ahluwalia) and each one is followed by a musical interlude. Comical skits and musical dance breaks are there which audiences like. This performance is organized in the name of the local deity, Vijeshwar Dev. *Karayala* can be organized on any festive and happy occasion. Usually it is its performances start after Diwali and go on throughout the winters. Even though it is a very popular folk theatrical form, the languages of its performance such as Baghati, Kului and Kinnaur figure in the UN’s list of endangered languages in Himachal Pradesh.

As stated earlier, *karyala* is an “impromptu” theatre of Himachal Pradesh in the sense that unlike the traditional and mainstream theatre, there is no written script and the actors (known as *karyalchis*) speak their dialogues in an extemporaneous manner. *Karyalchis* master dialogues through repeated performances. Improvisation vis-à-vis dialogues alongside acting, is the hallmark of *karyala*. Observance of rituals and ceremonies is a must even today. Invocation of the folk deity at the beginning of the performance through *dioan/ gur* (human representative of the deity who is a male and brahmin by caste) who in a state of divine frenzy (known as *khel*) accepts

karyalaas an offering and gives a formal nod to its performance.

Another aspect of *karyalais* is its subversive character. It subverts mainstream theatrical conventions related to stage, dialogue and written script. The stage is a make-shift arrangement and is called *akhada/khada* (in fact, it is alike in most of the folk theatrical forms in H.P.). The dialogue is steeped in the socio-cultural milieu and employs folk-idiom which is exaggerated, twisted as the moment demands, improvised and used to satirize, mock and lampoon people and the powers that be. It is at its creative best as the spectators partake of the fun by passing witty remarks, or make funny interventions. The actors too converse frequently with the audience in the course of the performance. The language is further subverted by deliberately mispronouncing words, twisting their usage, scoffing at the pedantic use of language by some sections of the society, upturning the conventional articulation of mainstream languages, and by misquoting from scriptures/other sources and twisting popular vocabulary in a way that provokes laughter. *Karyala* also enlightens people about contemporary political, social and economic issues. The motifs such as death, sex, love, deity (*deva*), clan names/ surnames are mostly alluded to quite frequently alongside sexual innuendoes that are used volitionally in a disguised and ambiguous idiom with the sole purpose of laughter.

Banthara: District Mandi of Himachal Pradesh has been nestling this folk theatrical form since the times of King Veer Sen (1268-1303AD). The name comes from the term *bhand* which means a jester. Feudal lords would employ jesters to alleviate the tense atmosphere of their court. It is similar to *karayala* in terms of its mix of dance, drama, and songs. Lord Shiva is invoked at the beginning and then the other forest gods. It is also performed near Diwali like *karayala*. The actors are great innovators as there is no script or rehearsals before the performances. They use wit, irony, and satire to ridicule peoples' follies. They do not even spare the court and courtiers in their satiric attack. There was a time when it reached the queens' palaces. Recently numerous NGOs are using this powerful folk theatre to spread awareness regarding HIV and malpractices like corruption, female feticide, drug addiction, etc.

Bhagat: The form has its origin in Raas Leela of Lord Krishna, popularly performed in Mathura and Vrindavan. In Himachal, it is performed in Kangra and Chamba districts but it is also practiced by the Dogra tribe of Jammu state. The essence of *bhagat* is humor and performers also extract it by wearing funny costumes like tattered or shredded cloths and patched pajamas. *Bhagat* is performed by the people of lower castes, and at one

point in time, upper caste people could not see it. Surprisingly, “women did not even name it” (Vayathit 36). The performers are usually called *bhagtias*. Initially, it was staged in two parts namely *raas* and *swang* but over a period of time drama started to take place in the third part. Mansukha is the pivot of the whole performance and the success of an act would largely depend on him. Like *karayala*, there is no script to the performance and artists perform extemporaneously. Amar Singh Ranpatia observes: “Tradition of Bhagat is prevalent in Bhatiaat tehsil and around Chamba city though it is almost extinct” (24).

Dhaja: Harijans or the people of the lower caste are the caretakers of this very popular folk form of Himachal Pradesh. It is also popular in adjacent states like Jammu, Punjab, and Haryana. It is not only a source of entertainment but also plays a vital role in the fulfillment of the wishes of people. Five main actors play Lord Krishna, Chanur, Mansukha, and female friends of Krishna. There could be other characters as well like SidhChano, Rohlu, Baura, Juggler, Hanuman, etc. The performance is organized near Gadha (a sacred place of worship). The stage is an open-air space usually but because the performance is specifically related to certain castes, special care is taken so that only the invitees can see it. There is mimicry of Chanur, Naarad, Kali, and the dance of Baura on fire. The pre-eminence of poetry is another striking aspect of *dhaja*. The performances voiced the life of lower caste people. *Dhaja* as a whole is music and dance-oriented performance wherein acting is not lent too much credence.

Less Popular Folk Theatrical Forms in H.P.

As evident, Himachal Pradesh has been an abode of many folk theatrical forms, but with time their popularity has receded significantly. Ironically, if these are alive today, it is just because of people’s fear of the deity’s wrath, which may cause havoc in the form of suffering, disease, or even death as per popular belief. A brief overview of these forms is given below:

Haran: Performed in the holy temples of District Chamba, mainly in the upper valley of Ravi river and Saal valley. Actors dress in different guises according to the characters they play, and move around. It is called *swaang* (loosely an episode/ spectacle). These young performers ambulate from one house to another with a target to visit each household of the village. The main characters in the group are Haran or Hiran, Khapper, Chandravali, Gaddi-Gadan, Sahab, Narad, and Sadhu.

Barlaj: According to M.R. Thakur, *barlaj* exists in two forms in folk literature. Firstly, the term *barlaj* is associated with king Bali. As the myth around him goes, he aspired to attain the throne of heaven by his donations, but Lord Vishnu deceived him and banished him to the underworld. It is presented on the day of *budidiwali* (literally *budi* implies old) that is fifteen days after Diwali. It is performed in Rampur Bushehar, Nirmand, Sarhan, Duttnagar, Nirth, and few villages of outer Siraj.

The second manifestation of *barlaaj* does not concern king Bali as episodes herein are enacted from the *Ramayana*. This form of *barlaaj* is prevalent in lower Shimla, upper reaches of Sirmour, few areas of Kullu, and district Solan. As M.R. Thakur observes, "In its first manifestation Barlaaj corresponds English Ballad and in the second it resembles opera" (63).

Seehmand Budha: These forms of folk theatre are popular in Jubbal (a tehsil of Shimla district) and its surrounding areas. It is also prevalent in district Sirmour around Renuka ji and trans-giriregion. The terms *seehmand budha* refer to music-drama (*geeti-natya*) and dance-drama (*nritya-natya*) respectively. These forms are performed by *harijans*. The story is told in the form of a song sung by members of the troop. The rest of the troopers put different masks (colorful and crafted in wood), and enact the whole story silently. *Seehn* differs a bit in the sense that the mask used therein appear like that of a lion, and the performers at times produce *hu-hu* sound.

Folk Theatrical Forms on the Verge of Extinction in H.P.

In the quest for modern living, a lot has been forgotten and left behind. Many folk theatrical forms fall in that category. These forms are either extinct or about to become history. *raas* of Kangra, *mandayala* of district Mandi, *nirshu*, *gehna*, *jheru*, *bahandu*, and *shraani* of district Kullu and *tupu* of district Solan are the forms least known to the people in the contemporary scenario.

Decline of Popularity of Folk Theatre in H.P.

Geopolitical Dimension: We live in an era where everything is controlled globally, and folk culture is no exception. The language which controls the global market is not a local dialect but a mainstream, hegemonic language. Hasnain and Gupta while highlighting the significance of language observe thus: "Languages are not only sources; they have to be viewed as resources, as reservoirs of cultures, customs, usages and worldviews" (10). They further rupture the very notion of mainstream versus indigenous

beautifully in the following words:

We are conscious of genocide and it is being universally condemned, but linguicide or even ethnocide, i.e. the destruction of peoples' way of life, is not only advocated as an appropriate policy aimed at eventually bringing people into the mainstream. It may be mentioned here that the notion of *mainstream* is an attractive one. It conjures up a nice picture of small streams and rivulets flowing into and merging with large rivers, which, in turn, flow into and merge with the seas. But in this case, the sources of the springs and rivulets do not dry up or cease to be. When the same kind of process is visualized in terms of languages, however, the source—the minor and tribal languages—are left to dry up. (10)

Thus, when we talk of the geopolitical area, folk theatre in Himachal Pradesh occupies hardly any significant geopolitical space. Because the state in itself is very small and it was replete with many thriving cultures. It is difficult to point out anyone as the representative of all others. Hence, the folk cultures, specifically folk theatrical forms, have been left to sustain on their own. The state has, in a sense, subscribed "to the homogeneity of languages and feels uncomfortable with linguistic plurality and even finds it inefficient" (Hasnain and Gupta 10). Hindi and English are the official languages of the state, but sadly, seven regional languages from Himachal figure in the UNESCO's list of endangered languages viz. Baghati, Handuri, Kului, Kinnauri, Pangvalli, Sirmauri, and Spiti, which became newspaper headline in April 2017.

Historical Dimension: Folk theatre has been in vogue since ages. It has been very popular until India got independence, but to everyone's dismay, the situation thereafter deteriorated at such a pace that today half a dozen folk-theatrical forms have become extinct, quite a few have nearly reached the point of extinction. If we consider the case of Himachal in particular, it was a union territory of India at one point. The states in India were formed on the basis of language but in Himachal, there were small principalities and most of them spoke different languages. Before these were reorganized into one state, they gave it in writing that their mother tongue would be "Hindi" (Parmar, Y. S.). This was the first and the strongest nail in the coffin of local/ regional languages in the state which substantially affected the growth of folk theatre as well.

Socio-cultural Sanction of Folk Theatre: Folk theatrical forms in Himachal is closely linked with rituals. Mostly humorous in content, folk theatre in Himachal deal with the lives of common folk. Be that *karayalaor*

bantharaor Bhagat, every form, jeers at follies and foibles of individuals as well as society. These are at times replete with sexual innuendoes without any malicious intent as the sole purpose remains laughter and humour. A member of a folk theatre troupe, upon enquiring, revealed that they had themselves dropped such lewd acts/ idiom which could somehow hurt the emotions of the audience. These performances have been very popular once. With the passage of time, the sources of information and entertainment changed; however, recent trends show that folk rituals behind folk theatre actually enjoyed social sanction rather than a theatrical performance. Interestingly, the rituals have acted as the adhesive force to keep folk theatre alive, despite its waning glory with each passing day.

Dwindling Relevance of Folk Theatre in Folk Psyche/ Consciousness:

Folk psyche of Himachal in the present context has so many diversions that the space occupied by the folk art / theatrical forms stands totally swapped by the latest modes of entertainment. Technology has become so advanced and handy that we have entertainment at a mere click anytime, anywhere. Thus, folk theatre nowadays occupies space, but only down the memory lane of aged people, and hence, it failed to persist as a regular mass entertaining event/performance. The whole structure of folk theatre corresponds to the time before modernity set in. Market has now become the major driving force to endorse or reject, accept or spurn any culture; however, it is the number of viewers that matters eventually, and that seems to be a major limitation. The reason is simple that folk theatre is enacted/ performed in the folk languages of the particular areas/regions. If we consider the case of Himachal in particular, the dialect of one region is considerably different from the other. Therefore, folk art, and especially folk theatre lost its space to drama performed in mainstream language like Hindi, which has a hegemony of the kind that can be inundating for folk theatrical forms so unique and exclusive to different regions/ areas of a state like Himachal Pradesh.

Firstly, it serves religious purposes as mentioned above. Folk theatre is directly associated with religious rituals. The members of a folk theatre troupe are scared of the supernatural wrath of the governing deities, and quite often, refuse blatantly to perform them without observing the rituals. New theatrical troupes are seldom formed because of the dread of devastating consequences in case anything goes wrong ritualistically. Even parents and elders in the family would discourage a youngster to pursue this field, both because firstly it is not a viable option financially, and secondly, they cannot invite a problem home in case by any chance divine rules are violated. Secondly, it has an ethico-moral purpose as well.

Folk theatrical performances today have to abide by ethico-moral values in terms of the language which is used. It cannot be sexist, nor can it have sexual innuendoes which may hurt or offend the public sentiment.

Folk theatre has also contributed immensely in educating the masses. During the freedom struggle, these performances would help in inculcating patriotic spirit among people. After independence, folk theatre contributed substantially in spreading awareness regarding government programmes such as family planning, woman education, drug addiction, child marriage, child labor, ills of dowry and female feticide. Folk theatre thus has ever remained close to people's heart. They, in fact, have a deeper connect with these forms, which have gradually become part of their collective consciousness. Despite onslaught of multi-media, pulls and pressures of market economy, and callousness of crass consumerism, a part of the collective folk psyche has remained intact, which strives hard to protect and preserve this rare folk theatrical heritage of Himachal.

The media as an effective tool of mass communication is regulated by market forces, and that is why it cherry-picks ideas and concepts to meet the popular demand and earn huge monetary benefits. Thus, very subtly, majority culture is being presented as universal and acceptable to all. No thought is being given to promote/ represent folk culture. The result has been homogenization of diverse range of cultures and erasure of indigenous and folk art and theatrical forms.

Today, the social media has emerged as a powerful tool to connect with the masses/public. It has contributed meaningfully in spreading awareness among the masses regarding issues of social and national importance. But the same space of social media is extremely volatile as well in the sense that a thing trending on social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter and Facebook might be replaced instantaneously by altogether different content next hour. This causes attention deficit syndrome of a sort on the part of social media users who are substantial in number. Their flippant behavior impedes any possibility of their becoming interesting in folk art forms. We have been seeing for quite some time that folk theatrical performances are being shared on the social media in a big way. People watch them too, however, the charm of a *live* folk-theatrical performance remains unmatched as it is part of the communitarian culture of togetherness, cooperation, mutuality and socio-cultural and interpersonal bonding. Folk theatre in its very inception is participative, wherein the distinction between the performers and the audience dissolves and the whole act enters a different space where communication of a different sort

takes place.

We are living in a world which is governed by speed, and therefore people keep moving on. If one enquires genuinely, as to where they want to go and why à la Neil Postman, they either wobble, or come up with silly responses, simply because they are being pushed in the direction where one loses the capacity to think consciously, independently and meaningfully. In today's world, there are very few people left, who have genuine concern about the present folk-theatrical scenario in H.P., while others just discuss it, express their concern, and then forget it, because they say that they have paucity of time. The older generation is passionately reminiscent of folk theatre and whenever they go to watch folk theatrical performance, they immediately resort to comparing the present with the past. They recall the heyday of folk theatre and the enthusiasm of people to watch it. On the other hand, the present generation seems least curious to know about this artform simply because there is no dearth of entertainment, and hence, rather than watching full-length, loosely-knit folk theatrical performances, they prefer short, interesting clips. Moreover, because of OTT platforms, Amazon Prime, and the trend of watching online series and finishing it before others, have totally engrossed and engaged viewers, and therefore, the space occupied by folk theatre/art forms earlier has been compressed considerably.

Summative Remarks

In view of the above, it can be averred that folk theatre needs to be protected and preserved in the crisis of the present as there are challenges and threats to its existence simply because its space has been invaded by media multiplicity (Sharma) and advancements in the realms of mobile and digital technology. Numerous things need to be done collectively. Whereas, popular art forms belonging to the mainstream have adapted themselves to cater to the needs of the changing times, the practitioners in the field of folk theatre need to be innovation-driven so that they can adapt in accordance with the changing times. Understandably, since folk theatre is ritualistic, it becomes all the more critical to develop a multipronged approach taking on board stakeholders such as the government of the day, actors, language and culture departments, and the rural population who need to understand the relevance of the folk theatrical heritage despite being modernist/forward-looking in their approach. In fact, Himachalis need to be more sensitive towards the restoration of folk theatrical culture alongside paying serious heed to the endangered languages.

It may be observed quite often that the use of local dialects/languages in public is viewed as an embarrassment or a mark of being lesscultured owing to our slavish mentality vis-à-vis Englishand hegemonic one in relation to Hindi. We must free ourselves from such prejudices. The media too can stop pandering to the powers that be and lend some quality coverage and time to folk art forms including theatre as a part of their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). It should also abstain from telecasting such programs where indigenous art, culture, and ways of living find ultimate respect only in being modernist. The government can contribute a lot by increasing spending on folk art forms including folk theatre. It can also contribute by improving the functioning and restructuring of Art, Culture and Language Academy via enabling it to reach out to rural masses and folk theatre artists, and alsolaunch programmes/ schemes to benefit the artists financially.

Moreover, migration of people to the cities in search of better job opportunities and life again pose a threat to the existence of folk-art forms. In fact, therural youth carry folk values alongas they imbibe the cosmopolitan culture. Nevertheless, the deeper connection with the folk cultural roots stays alive in their hearts and it comes to the fore when they watch video clips on social media. They become nostalgic undoubtedly, but fail to do anything substantial to save these art forms from their impending extinction. The already accelerated pace of development is being further enhanced with each passing day owing to advancement in mobile and digital technologies. In such a scenario, carving out a niche for folk theatrical forms seems an uphill task; nevertheless, we cannot give up. We must contribute our bit to restore the waning folk art forms with the help from the governments of the day, NGOs, big business houses who could be sensitized about their CSR, and creating awareness in whichever arena we work, so that genuine promotion of folk theatrical forms may be done and endangered languages can be saved.

Works Cited:

Ahluwalia, Kailash. *Karayala: An Impromptu Theatre of Himachal Pradesh*. Reliance Publishing House, 1995.

Ankur, Devendra Raj. "How 'National' Is Our National Theatre?" *Theatre India Journal*, no. 11, 2005, pp. 18-24.

Chaudhury, Neelam Mansingh. "How 'National' Is Our National Theatre?" *Theatre India Journal*, no. 11, 2005, pp. 7-12.

Fanon, Frantz. Gerould, Daniel, editor. *Theatre / Theory / Theatre: The Major Critical*

- Texts from Aristotle and Zeami to Soyinka and Havel*. Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 1999.
- France, Peter. "Primitive and Enlightenment: Rousseau and the Scots." *The Yearbook of English Studies*, vol. 15, 1985, pp.64-79. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3508548. Accessed 27 July 2020.
- Hasnain, S. Imtiaz and R.S. Gupta. "Globalization Language, Culture and Media: Some Reflections". *Globalization Language, Culture and Media*. Editors, S. Imtiaz Hasnain and B.N. Patnaik. IIAS, Shimla. 2006.
- Mangai, A. "How 'National' Is Our National Theatre?" *Theatre India Journal*, no. 11, 2005, pp. 84-91.
- Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels. *Communist Manifesto*. pp 32-35. Accessed 21 Aug.2020.
- Murthy, U. R. Anantha. "How 'National' Is Our National Theatre?" *Theatre India Journal*, no. 11, 2005, pp. 13-17.
- Parmar, Shyam. *Traditional Folk Media in India*. Geka Books, 1976.
- Parmar, Y. S. *Himachal Pradesh: Case for Statehood*. Directorate of Public relations, Shimla. 1968.
- Parthasarathy, Indira. "How 'National' Is Our National Theatre?" *Theatre India Journal*, no. 11, 2005, pp. 42-44
- Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. NY: Penguin Books, 2006.
- . *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1992.
- Ranpatia, Amar Singh. "Chambake Lok Natya". *Himachal Ke Lok Natya*. Editors, Tulsi Raman and Girija Sharma. Himachal Kala, Sanskriti, Bhasha Academy, Shimla.
- Sharma, Roshan Lal. "Media Invasion of Folk Consciousness: Rethinking Folk Theatre in Himachal Pradesh with Special Reference to Karyala in the Context of New Media Ecology". *Indraprastha – An International Journal of Culture and Communication Studies*, vol. I, no.1,2012: 61-70.
- Subbanna, K. V. "How 'National' Is Our National Theatre?" *Theatre India Journal*, no. 11, 2005, pp. 45-61
- Thakur, M.R. *Himachal ke Loknatya aur Lokanuranjan*, Himachal Pustak Bhandar, 1972.
- Vyathit, Gautam. 'Kangra Kshetr ke Loknatya evam Lokanuranjan'. *Himachal Ke Lok Natya*. Editors, Tulsi Raman and Girija Sharma. Himachal Kala, Sanskriti, Bhasha Academy, Shimla.