

'REVISITING BHAND PATHER: folk theatre of Kashmir'

A report of the festival of Bhand Pather at the IGNC A from 5th to 7th, April, 2013

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A three-day festival on the folk theatre of Kashmir **Bhand Pather** was organized at the Amphitheatre of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), New Delhi from 5th to 7th of April, 2013. The festival titled '**REVISITING BHAND PATHER**' was held under the ongoing Silver Jubilee celebrations of the establishment of the Centre and was organized in collaboration with Sh. M. K. Raina, eminent theatre and cinema personality, who directed these Pathers (performances), enacted by the Bhand troupe from Kashmir comprising 23 artistes.

The festival was inaugurated by Mr. V. B. Pyarelal (I.A.S.), Joint-Secretary, IGNC A on the evening of 5th of April, 2013 in the august presence of Prof. K. D. Tripathi from Varanasi, Prof. T. N. Ganjoo from Delhi, Prof. Farooq Fayyaz from Kashmir, and Sh. M. K. Raina at the Amphitheatre, IGNC A. The first Pather chosen for performance was **Gosain Pather**, which is an important ingredient of the repertoire of the Bhands and has been in public spheres for many centuries; being enacted by generations of Bhands. Soon after the lighting of the inaugural lamp, the stage of IGNC A Amphitheatre came to life by the magical sounds of Surnaai, Dhol and Nagara and colourfully dressed troupe of Bhands robed as Sadhus entering the arena. These exhausted and tired Sadhus are returning from a long and gruelling pilgrimage to Amaranath. A local Kashmiri Brahmin along with his three sons receives these Sadhus and takes care of them and their Guru, hoping to get some gifts, in lieu of the services they render, in cash or kine. Although dealing with a rather serious concept of realizing God's ultimate truth, the play operates at many levels of consciousness from physical to abstract. A

dialogue sequence takes place between a Rishi and a seeker on the lines of the teachings of Kashmiri Shaiva and Sufi philosophies, which concludes by the disappearance of the Rishi into void; symbolizing the merger of the Jivatma (being) into Paramatma (the Supreme being). Now, the Brahmin ponders over the depth of this dialogue while his sons want him to leave this world like the Rishi, so that they can inherit his worldly possessions. This insistence on his death turns into an absurd humour when the father keeps on pretending to die and then rising again. While dying and coming alive, he enacts the dying of numerous corrupt and dishonest characters within the society. The sons getting fed up of his act threaten to kill him if he does not leave his body quickly. Finally, they take their father to be dead and take him for cremation, but under the shroud he reveals to the audience that he was still alive.

In the evening of the second day, the historical background of this particular theatre art-form of Kashmir was discussed at the Auditorium of the IGNCA, by a panel of scholars comprising Prof. Farooq Fayyaz from Kashmir, Prof. K. D. Tripathi from Varanasi and Prof. T. N. Ganjoo from Delhi; while Sh. M. K. Raina moderated the session. During the course of discussion, the evolution, journey and contemporary scenario of this rare and endangered art-form of Kashmir were reflected upon by the scholars in great details. Dr. (Smt.) Kapila Vatsyayan, founder-member of the IGNCA also joined the deliberations and addressed the gathering. The discussions highlighted the need for the revival and survival of this art-form for posterity.

After the successful conclusion of the panel-discussion at the Auditorium, the focus shifted to the IGNCA Amphitheatre once again, as the Bhands wearing animal masks and colourful costumes of forest-dwellers overtook the stage to perform the **Shikargah Pather**. This Pather is also a traditional Bhand Pather, which has been revived after 30 years. It deals with the kingdom of Pashupati, the Shiva and his forest beings – the trees, humans, animals and the birds. The Pather showcases the conflict

between the forest dwellers and the people who claim to be the masters of the forest. It shows the story of a man who looks after his cattle in the forest and lives in a peaceful co-existence with the animals and birds of the forest. In this world of harmony between man and nature, arrives a hunter along with his team in search of his lost prey of a pair of Hangul. On meeting the forest dweller, the hunter asks him, "Who are you?" The forest dweller responds, "who are you?" This exchange builds itself up to an abstract sequence about the ownership of the forest and nature. The forest dweller becomes a hostage in his own area. In this humorous argument, the forest dweller shows them a lion, the real king of the forest, who might have taken away their pair of deer. The hunters in their anger and fear go for the hunting of the lion and finally kill it, despite the protests of the dweller. Happy at this killing, the hunters argue over the credit of killing of the lion. The upset forest dweller asks the dead lion to reveal himself, and narrate the story of his death. The lion with other animals sings songs of Nature and its preservation.

On the evening of the third and concluding day, the **Badshah Pather** was performed at the amphitheatre. The Pather is a part of experimentation of Sh. M. K. Raina, wherein he incorporates different stories and plots etc., into the traditional Bhand repertoire. This particular Pather was an adaptation of King Lear of William Shakespeare, which the Bhands performed under the theme of **Badshah Pather**. Through this Pather the story of two fathers namely, Badshah and Bedar and the relationship with their sons was put in perspective along with the duties and responsibilities, they have towards each other. In the Pather, Badshah chose to divide his kingdom amongst his three sons. His elder sons Shamim and Karim express their love for him choosing the most effective praises and were rewarded with a large part of the kingdom; while the youngest son Rafiq gave Badshah a very honest reply stating that he loved him as 'a son would love his father'. Hearing Rafiq's reply, Badshah

expels him out of his kingdom. As days pass by, Shamim and Karim decide not to put up with Badshah's instructions any more and force him to leave the kingdom. Bedar on the other hand makes a similar mistake and faces a similar fate when he misjudges his son Sikander and believes the lies of Kahram, his illegitimate son. When exposed to the forces of nature, Badshah realizes the meaning of Rafiq's reply and his love. He regrets his decision but is unable to change the course of events. Hearing his father's plight, Rafiq runs to comfort him and tries to bring his honour back, but instead, gets killed by his own brothers. Finally, Badshah aggrieved by the gruesome murder of his faithful son, also passes away. With this spectacular performance, the festival concluded successfully.

On all the three evenings, large number of people turned in to watch the festival at the IGNCA, most of them being Kashmiris, who not only appreciated, but also, got nostalgic after watching the performances. Some of them were enthusiastically happy to interact with the artistes and congratulated the IGNCA for organizing this event. Ms. Dipali Khanna, Member-Secretary, IGNCA also interacted with the artistes and the audiences and expressed her happiness at the overwhelming response of the festival and felicitated Sh. M. K. Raina and the artistes. Dr. Sushma Jatoo, coordinator of the event, thanked the audiences and the IGNCA officials for their presence, support and whole-hearted involvement.
