



## The Saangs as Cultural Heritage of Haryana

Dr. Shalini Attri

Associate Professor, Department of English, Bhagat Phool Singh Mahila Vishwavidyalaya, Sonipat, Haryana, India.

**Abstract:** Theater, a medium of representation is a phenomenon interconnected with the production and formulation of meaning using the spatial arts. Folk narratives defined as people's perception of their group identity, models of conduct and human endeavor, symbolic structures of

history and mythology exist as ‘memory text’ in the minds of performers who consciously/unconsciously resonate ethics, values, identity, and culture of the region. The accounts on ethics, *dharma*, *Karma* are grounded in “folk-knowledge” and are transferred through folk performers establishing theatrical space as knowledge systems. In Indian context, many folk performances map the dominant belief of *Dharma* (righteousness) and *Karma* (action). *Dharma* is a signpost and *Karma* is our actions. Haryanvi folk theater exhibits the interplay of ‘little traditions’ through *saang*- a form of folk theater. *Saang* is the identity marker of Haryana having its locus in the ethical codes centering around Indian philosophical discourse. The paper will focus on *saang* as repository of culture and identity. The transmission of the cultural narratives through retellings and folk performances is an identity construct. The research will discuss *saang* as cultural heritage with a special reference to Lakhmichand’s *saang of Raja Harishchander* and would elaborate on Haryanvi folk theater as promoter of the ethics and values.

**Keywords:** Saang, Ethics, Folk Theater, Identity.

## Introduction

Haryana, a northern state in India is culturally rich and is famous for *saang* and *raginis*. The *sang/swang/svang*, cultural heritage of Haryana is a vital and virile form of folk theater or folk opera. Haryana in Vedic Literature and ancient Indian history is known as *Bahudhanyak*, the land of rich harvest situated between Yamuna on the East and Saraswati and Markanda on its north western side. The banks of the Saraswati were the birth place for Indian culture, philosophy of life, fine arts, poetry, drama, and music (Sharma 39). The interplay of *great and little traditions* is visible in Haryanvi folk. *Saang* developed in the heartland of rural north Indian

through the nineteenth and twentieth century was of inordinate length, the performance lasting from ten to twelve hours or for several consecutive nights (Dalmia 238). *Saang* has a group of ten to twelve people and a stage similar to operatic performance which is elaborated on modern dramatic performances. The connecting thread in the *saang* is the narrator who is the representative of both the poet and the director. He is a storyteller who carries the action forward participating in the state of chief characters. It is a popular folk dance theater form found in Rajasthan, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh. It has songs and dialogues and is performed in open air theater with raised stage. In Haryana the *saang* was performed by cultural troupe of 20 to 30 artists. The origin can be traced back to Krishan Lal Bhat and Dip Chand Bhaman from Sonipat was known as Shakespeare of Haryana. The play opens with song in praise of Goddess Saraswati starting with the brief introduction of the play. *Sarangi, Tabla, Dholak, Nagara and Harmonium* are the musical instruments used in *sang* and the song reveals the story.

Pandit Lakhmichand (1901) from Jati Kalan, Sonipat was inspired by the *saangs* of Pandit Deepchand and Nihal Sangi. Lakhmichand's guru Shri Mansingh left an impact on his life. Lakhmichand was not only a *Lok Kavi* but a social reformer. Taking his themes from history, mythology, folk tales, and contemporary life, his *saangs* are categorized into two parts – *Shringara and Prem Pradhan* like *Heer Ranjha, Hoor Menka, ChandraKiran* and *dharam pradhan saang* like *Raja Harishchander* taken from *Shivpuran, Satyawan-Savitri, Nal Damyanti, Cheer Parv, Viraat Parv* that are taken from *Mahabharata*. He has mingled *Shastra Gyan* with *Lokbhasha*. *Loknatya sang Haryana ki Natya Parampara Ka Sirmour Hai, Jise Kaumi Natak Bhi Kaha Jata Hai* (qtd in Sharma 9). The *saangs* combines songs, dance and music and *ragini* is an important component of *saang*. The dance has various signs and symbols which makes *sang* more attractive. Lakhmichand's *saangs* elaborates on traditional values and

the implicit responsibilities of self and to society- values that are shattered by impact of modernization and urbanization. They are the manifestation of eternal values having aesthetics. His *saang* of *Raja Harishchander* is a narrative of Harishchander who was a wise judicious king devoted to truth. He was famous for his generosity and his virtues were tested by Vishwamitra. The sage stripped him to total destitution. He is sold to slavery, his son Rohtas dies and his wife is on the verge to commit suicide on the funeral pyre of her only son when the Gods intervene. The *saang* is an elaboration of this story which includes *ragini*, enactment and introduction of storyline in between to connect the dialogues.

## Ethics and Values

The *Saang* of *Raja Harishchander* starts with the description of Raja Harishchander whose wife and son being auctioned and Vishwamitra took them to Kashi city where people gather to buy all of them. *Ve Nar honge paar nidhi se, jo trishna ka jung jeetange* (429) [those men would be like treasure who would be able to control their pain/desire]. The quality of contentment in Indian culture is emphasized in many folk traditions. There is renewing of past traditional values, which becomes the guidelines for a region and nation. Harishchander lived for truth and renounced everything for the sake of truth which fills sage Vashishta too with admiration thus sending the message of 'truth triumphs' to the entire world. When the king wants Madnawat (Harishchandra's wife in Haryanvi folk Performance) to help him picking up the pitcher, she refuses because she is not ready to leave the path of Dharma. Raja: *Ek be Rani ghara Uthwa de Jata Konya Uthaya ... Rani: Tere ghare ke Hath Laga ke Dharam Bigardja mera.* (King: O Queen help me to pick up the Pitcher, Queen: I cannot help you as it would destroy my Dharma 434). There is another incident which is about his son Rohtas who followed the path of Dharma:

*Dharam jaan ke chal diya ladka chattri harichand ka jaya, pal bhar mein chahe jo karde he Ishwar teri aisi maya. (438).* [Rohtash, Harishchander's son left everything in the path of Dharma destined by God who happens to be almighty deciding everyone's future]. Dharma sustains, maintains the social, moral, political, and economic order that have qualities like justice, duty etc. It plays a significant role in Indian tradition linking it to historical and cultural continuity. In order to preserve himself man must conform to high order of dharma and it is one's moral and spiritual duty. This sense of dharma was acquired from *Upanishads*, *Smriti Literature* and *Purv Mimansa*. Again, Harishchander's wife, Madnawat follows the path of Dharma: *Dharam pe dat gi bahut si nar, ek tu datgi te ke hogya ...ye pativrata ki majbuti kade na soche bat kasuti (473).* [There were certain women who followed the path of Dharma as it was the strength of a dedicated wife who sustains and follows truthfulness and loyalty.] Another philosophy that is prominent in Indian tradition is philosophy of Karma: *Karm te neki karam te badi, karam te hathi ghoda gaddi (437).* [Everything runs according to duty whether it is good or evil or prosperity itself.] Wrong action results in bad consequence and performance of duty results in *punya*. There is no escape from the consequences of action. Thus, Lakhmichand is able to pass on the true value of wisdom of ancient Indian culture through folk theater to the audience. *Dharma* is a signpost and *Karma* is our actions. Both the philosophies are the basis of life that are prominent in the *saangs* of Lakhmichand.

Harishchander becomes the model of perfection, despite stripped of all the wealth and facing the death ordeal of his only son. The identity constructed by the *saang* of *Raja Harishchander* has a social dimension sketched in narrative that focuses on values like justice and sacrifice offering a model behaviour depicting values and ethics. *Saang of Harishchander* reaches one end of the identity register and constructs a new self-reliance. As a doctrine of culture and

symbolic language and consciousness nationalism's primary concern is to create a world of collective cultural identities or cultural nations (Smith 99). Ricouer argues that all historical writing depends not only on rhetorical tropes and narrative techniques but also on representational strategies that history shares with fiction writing (qtd in Postlewait 102). Similarly, representation in theatrical context illustrates the audience-spectator connect. *Saang* has narratives structured in prosodic plan with the actors specialized in performances. Performance, culture, and society constitute history of King Harishchander hence developing an identification, analysis and understanding of him becoming a symbol of truth. Folk theater is means of communication that transmits knowledge and beliefs, providing moral, philosophical, and historical information. They give information about the civilization as well as the social structure of past. By borrowing some traditions and imbibing them through the process of assimilation, they try to communicate the values to society. Loomis and Beegle defined communication as the process by which information, decision, direction pass through social system and the ways in which knowledge, opinions and attitudes are formed and modified (qtd in Dahama 347). Communication is a two-way process; therefore, transmission of facts should convey the intended meaning and usage of message. Folk theater is based on the Leagen's model: Communication-message-channel-treatment-audience – response of audience (qtd in Dahama 352). The audience responds by imbibing the goodness and virtues passed on through these performances in their behaviour. The idea of culture has both aesthetic and social meaning. It is evident to understand Indian Society as the narrative of *Harishchander* penetrates true and fictive modes of representation having some connections with historical writings and it again emphasizes and rebuilds the role of historical narrative. Looking into the symbolic forms, nation is most easily recognized in performance as it is an enactment of history.

Loren Kruger argues that drama of nation's past is the strongest form of expression and is called 'theatrical nationhood' i.e., the idea of representing nation in theater having a representative audience that will in turn recognize itself as a nation on stage (Dharwadker 221). What is the locus of traditional narratives in folk performances? They may be characterized as the narratives of identity and are able to convey extra-textual meanings to groups who identify with them. *Saangs* are the cultural heritage representing the ethics and values through theatrics.

## Conclusion

Folk narratives have values, cultural context, and function i.e., seen in relation to something beyond text, people's perception of their group identity, core values of the society in question, models of heroic conduct and human endeavor, symbolic structures of history and mythology. A repetitive narrative may attain greatness in the consciousness of the group that identifies itself with personages and events. They survive in the minds of singers and performers as 'oral text.' The story hence narrated illustrates the local ideals, domain values, socio-economic structures to the audience. The adaptation of narratives like *Raja Harishchander* into local traditions and geography gives expression to regional identities.

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## **Dr. Shalini Attri**

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Dr. Shalini is an Associate Professor in the Department of English at Bhagat Phool Singh Mahila Vishwavidhyalaya, Sonapat, Haryana, India. She has been teaching for last 19 years. Her doctorate is from Punjab University Chandigarh on "Politics of Representation: A Feminist Study of Vijay Tendulkar's Selected Plays". Her area of research includes Indian English Literature and Classics, Diasporic and Migration Studies, Women Studies, Theatre Studies, Folk literature.

She has co-authored and edited 4 books and has presented research papers in international conferences at Montreal, Uppsala, Moscow, USA, Estonia, Germany, London, India etc. She is currently member Academic Council, DRC, PGBOS and has been member Faculty arts and Languages at BPSMV. She holds the position of Associate director IQAC at BPSMV.

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