

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 12 : 5 May 2012

ISSN 1930-2940

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Theory and Practice of Beda Theatre in Uttarakhand, India

Hemant Kumar Shukla, Ph.D. and D. R. Purohit, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT



Radhkhandi Raas by Beda Women

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Theories and Practices of Beda Theatre in Uttarakhand, India

Traditional theatre from all regions of the world has drawn attention of theatre practitioners and critics over the last fifty years. The curiosity has been prompted by the search for ever new theatre idioms. But very little has so far been written on the folk theatre traditions of the Central Himalaya. The present paper attempts to draw attention of theatre scholars to Beda theatre tradition of Uttarakhand, one of India's hill states. Beda Theatre and its artists have into the process of extinction and negligence owing to changing socio-economic structures.. Laang and Bart are the two theatre rituals associated with Beda, the traditional performers. The origin myth of the 'Beda' tribe anticipates the sacrificial rituals Laang and Bart for the bards. Besides, farces, satires, psycho dramas, the most attractive genres of 'Beda Theatre' is 'Radhakhandi Raas' which depicts the episodes from the life of Krishna, Radha, Shiva, Parvati, Ganesh, the legendary heroes and the exceptional lovers.

KEY WORDS: *Laang, Bart, Beda, Lilas, Brahmins, Swang, Radhakhandi Raas, Dholak, Ghoongharu, Ghaghra, and Cholis.*

Laang and Bart: The origin myth of the '**Beda**' tribe enunciates the profession they would do.

The creator of the universe when distributing fortune to all the living organisms sent for '**Beda**' tribes too. But accustomed as they were to music, dance, and drama, they remained lost in their performance and failed to turn up on time to take delivery of their lot from the creator. They reported when everything available had been distributed. The creator said to them, "Now, nothing is left, your lot is to live by the performance of dance, drama, and music and such performance too will be the part of two sacrificial rituals in which you will act as sacrificial goats. You will slide down a long rope; you will dance atop a hundred feet tall Bamboo Log. Thus, falling down off a cliff or sliding down a rope will be your destiny. (Personal communication with Village: Dangchaura, Uttarakhand's Late Purushu Beda¹)

On the two occasions called '**Laang**' and '**Bart**', the two sacrificial rituals, the 'Bedas' presented their full repertory lasting for fifteen to twenty days. The members of the community

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living in the entire cultural district would come together for the occasion. They were given food and shelter by the hosting village or group of villages. The Bedas created new songs and dramas for the occasion and rehearsed the old ones. The prime theme of their songs and dances was ‘Shiva’ (Indian God) and his *Lilas* because he was the patron deity of the ‘Bedas’. The male Bedas grew long beards and hairs as a mark of being Shiva’s devotees. They never applied seizers or blades to their hairs. The hairs were adjusted inside the turban.



Swaamg Performance in Hanol Temple, Tons Valley

Laang, was held for removing the curse of rodents, wild animals and other pests damaging the standing crops in the field. It was held for fifteen days in an open field where a 30 to 40 tall bamboo pole was hoisted with the help of ropes. The soil from all the cultivated fields was collected through a collective ritual and deposited at the root of the pole. On the fifteenth day the chief beda climbed up the pole and pirouetted on his belly stuck to spinning block of wood fixed to the top of the pole. The drama would start. A man standing at an elevated ground in front of the arena would shout: *Gram ke gram devata , Bhumyaaal ko khnd baaje*(let the

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drums be sounded for the god of land). The drums would play and the beda would take three pirouettes on the top. Then would follow the drums for other deities, then for the village heads and then for anyone who paid for it. At the end of the ritual the hairs of the beda and the soil earlier collected from the fields and sanctified by the ritual were distributed to the audience as the divine grace of the gods.

Bart, the rope sliding ritual was a dangerous ritual as it involved the risk of the life of the beda player who slid down a long rope tied across a valley or river. There are points at the higher and lower elevations which are still known as *bartkhunts*, the poles of the rope. For months together rope made of cotton grass was woven by the beda community and kept under strict security. It was seasoned with water and buttermilk in order to remove the risk of breaking. For fifteen days song dance, drama and ritual took place in the temple arena and on the last day one of the bedas elected for the sacrificial ritual rode on a sliding wooden block. His legs were given an extra support of clay bags to maintain the balance between the upper and lower parts of the body. He had to slide down the rope simply sitting on the wooden block. Half of such players fell down the rope and died. Their hairs, pieces of clothes were taken away as *prasaad*. Therefore the beda playing this role was treated as ritually dead and all the funerary rites were performed for him by his family members before he rode the rope. His wife was given the cost of his life in the form of golden ornaments and some cash. In case the performer survived the event he was given rich rewards by the public. Around 1925, as late Purushu beda reported, in one such rope sliding event the king of Tehri princely state was also present. The rope was fixed at two points across Bhilangana river at Gadoliya in Tehri District. When the first performed fell off the rope, his younger brother took up the challenge, who also fell off and died. Thus the next brothers also tried and died. The last of surviving brothers succeeded in safely arriving at the ground. The king was so shocked by the gory event that he put a ban on the practice since. One such freak event still takes place in Serkuriya temples situated in Masari, Bhitari, Doni, Khanyasingi and Khaana villages on the occasion of Jaagara held in Bhadrabad (Mid Aug through Mid Sept) of Parvat region in Uttarkashi District but the length of the rope is so short that no risk is involved.

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They were the prime entertainers of their times; albeit they were at the margin of the ritual domain, predominantly occupied by the *Brahmins (the people of upper castes)* and the drummers. They were instant poets: would compose songs on every glaring event or burning issue. They maintained their ballads, their history of feudal lords, village chieftains and the families which were allotted to them as patrons. They were musicians par excellence. They composed thousands of tunes for their songs. Their choreography, interestingly enough, does not compare with any other dance patterns of the region, suggesting that they migrated from a place other than Garhwal.

Their drama repertory was equally rich to which additions were made on every occasion. Bhishm Kukreti² enumerates thirteen Swangs which he had seen in his childhood. Beda tradition is dead now and eventually their performances. The following are the titles of the ‘Swangs’, he quotes:

1. Ploughing the fields.
2. The family of thieves.
3. The Woman suffering from night-blindness.
4. A graduate returns home.
5. Three wives of Dasharath.
6. Young bride of an old man.
7. A widower’s advice to his daughters-in-law.
8. Big brahmin and small brahmin.
9. Purchasing a bride.
10. A Go-between for brides.
11. The Pleasures of shitting.
12. Hunting in the forest.
13. Parodying a village headman.

Purohit in his report submitted to Sangeet Natak Akademi mentions three more plays which were frequently enacted in the public. The most popular of them was *Albeli* ,

unique woman. She was depicted as a promiscuous woman falling in love with any one who came across her. She was often asked a question:

Narrator: Albeli , what do you hide under your belly

Albeli: A baby

Narrator: Who is the father of the baby?

Albeli: (Pointing to one of the gentlemen sitting in the audience) This gentleman's

Narrator: Who will be your next pray?

Albeli: any one younger than the previous one

Shiv Charan Beda of Doni village relates how once when the play was being shown in the royal court , the woman acting as Albeli boldly attributed her pregnancy to one of the king himself. The king took it in good humour and appreciated the boldness of the actor.

Other plays listed by Purohit are *Bandokya*, as hunter and *Jangli Mahar*, a cowherd living in forest. *Bandokya* enacted the moves of a hunter with a gun and humored the audience by presenting the caricature of the hunter. But the sub text was always sexuality and the gun was used as a hand prop suggesting phallus. *Jangli Mahar* was a scything satire on the practice of untouchability which the artists could not speak out openly. The Milkman when approached by a poor low caste for milk and buttermilk makes so many excuses not to give the milk products to the low caste. One of the excuses is hilarious. He cannot give away milk because that act may affect the growth of the horn of his buffalo.

The beda repertory also used wooden masks for impersonating the divine and human characters. The masks were openly used for presenting the play of *Baagh*, lion. A man wearing the masks of a lion would wear a long tail made up of stinging nettles. He would run through the crowd of the audience and create a stampede , every one running away from the fear of stinging nettles. The masks of gods like Shiva and Ganesha were used when the character were offered *aarti*, prayer. For a long time the masks were stored in

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Pab village of Bhilangana valley in Tehri District but are now reported to be termite eaten.

One more genre of Beda theatre has been documented and experimented upon by Purohit³. The genre is known as '**Radhakhandi Raas**'. The form was first spotted by late Brajendra Lal Shah who could not document it himself but advised Purohit to do the same. Sri Kaviraj, Shiv Charan, Bihari Lal, Bachan dei, and Vimla Devi of Doni village in Tehri district are the only living exponents of the genre. They say that sixteen dramas of 'Radhakhandi' form were performed once upon a time. The 'Raasas' were based on the life of Krishna, Radha, Shiva, Parvati, Ganesh, the legendaray heroes and the exceptional lovers. One of the 'Radhakhandi Raasas'--"**Sadhunaam Kshetrapal Kunwar**" was produced by Vidyadhars' SRICALA theatre group of Srinagar (Garhwal). The play was directed by Shirish Dobhal and presented in 'Bharat Rang Mahotsava-2000'.

Radhakhandi may be put under the category of a ballet. It is rendered through an elaborate choreography designed for each scene. The dance itself is made up of extricate foot-work and body gestures varying for each kind of emotion. More interesting is the music and the song. The music accompaniment is that of *Dholak*, cymbals, *Ghoongharu* (ankle bells), twin flutes and a typical *Pahari* (Hilly) *Sarangi* (no more extant). A number of melodious tunes are applied to produce variety in the dialogues. No dialogue is in a spoken prose; all of them are songs rendered in the meters of varying length.

The narrators introduce the theme of "**Sadhunaam Kshetrapal Kunwar**" in the following lines:

Sadhunaam was the king of Sankla Dweep
Of Kedara dynasty was the stock
Once in the dream appeared to him
Vijatri princes, the divine beauty
Counted he not the movements of the night

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He dwelt more on the visions of the princess.⁴

Until now, the narration is paralleled by the female choreography. At this point, ‘Sadhunaam’, the hero appears and curses the column of the house into which the dream has vanished. After this scene, an intermission takes place. Beda artists relax for smoking and tea. This way the choreography and the action continue in succession.

Minimum requirement of costumes are fulfilled. But only the upper cloak is available for Sadhunaam. The lower garments like white trousers or military jeans or pants are allowed. But the women are dressed in perfect attires which may not necessarily be the attire of Indian princess but beautiful traditional *Ghaghra* and *Cholis* (Long and wide frock and bodices) worn by hill women for rich ceremonies. The rustic characters are not expected to wear a dress which creates verisimilitude.

However, the exquisite music creates many moments of ‘**empathy**’ which are suddenly broken by the informal halt announced by the narrator.

Lata Tiwari and Shshil Kumar⁵ in their dissertation on Radhakhandi have given a detailed background of ‘Radhakhandi Raas’. They have also reproduced in their dissertation a text documented by Purohit, and have given useful notations of the songs used in the drama.

Acknowledgement

H.K.S. is thankful to University Grants Commission, New-Delhi for providing financial assistance in the form of minor research Project (F.8-1(101)/2010 (MRP/NRCB) Dated 19-03-2010). He is also thankful to Dr. M.C. Nainwal, Principal, Govt. Degree College Talwari for providing necessary research facilities and encouragements.

Notes and References

¹ Based on personal communication with Village: Dangchaura, Uttarakhand's Late Purushu Beda.

²Bhishma Kukreti, "Badyun Swang, Jananyun Swan gar Bharat ku Natyashastra" (The comic plays of Bards and women and Bharata's Natyashastra), *Hamari Chitthi* (theatre special), Jan.-March, 2009, pp. 5-16.

³Personal Communications with Purohit.

⁴From Purohit's 'manuscript'.

⁵Lata Tiwari and Sushil Kumar, "Beda Sangeet and Radhakhandi Raas", H.N.B.Garhwal University Shrinagar (Garhwal), Dissertation of Diploma in folk music, 2009.

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