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## Theories and Practices of Hurkiya Theatre in Uttarakhand, India

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

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### ABSTRACT

The present paper is an effort to analyze Uttarakhand's HURKIYA THEATRE in the light of traditional concepts, theories and practices, vis a vis the culture of hill state in which this

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theatrical form flourished. This theatre form contains ‘Hurkiya Bol’, Bhadauli or Talwaar performances. Hurkiya Bol is a ritual ballad singing done at the time of collective planting and weeding of paddy fields. A ‘Hurkiya’ plays the ‘Hurka’(hour glass drum) and sings devotional and heroic songs in praise of local gods and chieftains, and seeks blessings for a good harvest, while the women working in the fields join in the singing. One of the most famous ballads sung in ‘Hurkiya Bol’ is ‘Syunraji Bora’. Hurkiya Bol is a pure narrative theatre in which the singer informs the audience of story he is going to sing. Then, he sings and narrates the parts of the story. He mimes different characters through gestures and movements. Thus, he plays several roles while narrating the story.

**KEY WORDS:** *Ropai, Hurka, Hurkiya, Chakuhuli, Makhuli, mandua. Dalits, Damaru, Baira, and Bhagnolas.*

**1. Hurkiya Bol:** Hurkiya Bol is a singing entertainment while ‘**Ropai**’ (transplantation) is in progress. Transplantation anywhere is always a hard, exacting, and monotonous task, and full of hazards, like snake biting, influenza etc . *The Social Economy of the Himalayas*<sup>1</sup> has a chapter on ‘Hurkiya Bol’ which describes how ‘Hurkiya Bol’ plays a very vital role in motivating and entertaining the villagers, workers, and farmers at the time of transplantation which is very hard task. He describes by citing some ballads which **Hurkiya** (The singer) performs. To relieve the fatigue and monotony, a sort of variety and singing entertainment runs parallel to the community work of transplantation. This entertainment is locally known as the ‘**Hurkiya Bol**’.

The ‘**Hurkiya Bol**’ is associated with agriculture, mainly with the collective planting and weeding of paddy fields. The ‘**Hurkiya Bol**’ literally means the labor done by a ‘**Hurkiya**’. ‘Hurkiya’ is a sub-caste of the *Dalits* (depressed class) whose profession it is to play on a sort of drum ‘**Hurka**’, which resembles the ‘Damaru’ or drum of Mahadeva . It is also not necessary that the man playing on the ‘Hurka’, should always be a member of this sub-caste. Whosoever plays on the ‘Hurka’ while the transplanting is in progress is a ‘Hurkiya’, no matter whether he is a ‘Hurkiya Proper’ or not. Even Brahmin or a Rajput (people belonging to upper-castes) may

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perform this task. The two essential conditions are--first that the 'Hurkiya' must be a man--woman being debarred from the office-- and second that he must be a good singer and must be able to remember a great many ballads and songs.

Early in the morning, immediately after the work has begun, the 'Hurkiya' is seen playing on his 'Hurka' and singing the Morning Prayer. He faces the women-folk engaged in the work of transplantation, and moves gradually forward as the line of workers recedes, playing and singing continuously. When he has sung one line of the prayer, it is repeated in a chorus by the women workers, and so on until the entire hymn has been recited. It is exciting to hear the women singing as they dibble the seedlings into the mud. The most common form of hymn may be rendered into English as follows:

'O Gods, the Pearl like rice of these fields will be offered to you as a cooked offering. O, harvest God of this village, be favorable throughout, and grant a shady day without rain for the setting of the plants. Give the trans -planters and the leveler this shade in equal measure. Let the ploughman and the bullocks be endowed with equal speed. Give quickness to the hands, and let the seedlings suffice for all the fields, O, five-named God.'

The Morning Prayer is followed by the invitation to the Gods. The invitation song describes the scene of the operation. It relates how twenty-two pairs of bullocks are engaged in ploughing, six score of women in transplanting, and ten score of men in puddling. It prays to the presiding gods to ensure a magnificent crop by being present throughout the operations. 'May the stalks of the crop become costly as silver and the husked rice white as pearl and precious as gold', sings Hurkiya. If such results are to be granted, the cultivator promises to bring an offering of the golden grains to the royal court of the great mountain god, Mahadeva (Shiva).

But for the rest of the Hurkiya's time is given to singing such songs as have some historical bearing, or are of local interest, or relate an epic story from *The Ramayan* or *The*

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*Mahabharat*. Certain love-songs are popularly known as ‘Chakuhuli’, and ‘Makhuli’, ‘Baira’, and ‘Bhagnolas’. These are species of popular folk-songs. The historical songs deal with local history. Some describe the unjust character and tyranny of the Katyuri kings, and some the valour of other princes, like ‘Ratnichand’ and ‘Bikramchand’. ‘Hurkiya’ also prays for pardon pleading that he cannot remember all the ballads because this means remembering hundreds of verses, word for word and line for line.

The entertainment comes to a close in the evening with the recital of a benediction song. This prays for a long life and a merry one, for all (including their descendants) who share in the work, from the owner of the field down to the oxen. It certainly has a soothing effect on the hearer. ‘Hurkiya Bol’ accompanies the chorus of weeding rice and *mandua* (*finger millet*) also. In weeding, however, the ‘Hurkiya’ walks backwards while the women move forward.

While The ‘Hurkiya’ entertains the workers, he also acts as a taskmaster and overseer. He admonishes the women in verse for the slower hands, and holds them up to the ridicule of their fellow-workers.

On the day of ‘Ropai’ (transplantation), the owner of the fields or the head of the family observes a fast, worships the gods and remains pious throughout the day.

The most famous of the ballads sung in ‘Hurkiya Bol’ is ‘**Syunraji Bora**’ which has been recorded by Dev Singh Pokharia.<sup>2</sup> Two chivalrous brothers-‘Syunraji Bora’ and ‘Bhuranji Bora’, best known for their miraculous and daring feats in the court of king Bharati Chand, were the inhabitants of the village ‘Borkot’. They belonged to a very extensive lineage. ‘Jhup Singh Bora’, ‘Jhupuli Borani’ and ‘Ganga Borani’ were respectively their father, mother and sister-in-law. They would often carry, in the company of their father, the cattle to the forest in their childhood So courageous and powerful they were right from their childhood that they could pull the fighting buffaloes apart just by clutching and pulling their ears. They would often bring the cubs of lions and leopards straight from their dens. ‘Haru Singh Bora’ was their uncle posted as

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‘Diwan’ in the court of the King. He being jealous, created never ending hurdles and problems for them. He was deeply filled with the feeling of fear and jealousy seeing the prowess and gallantry of these brothers and painfully compared them with those of his own sons. To make the future of his sons secure and free from hassles which might come from the quarter of his cousins, he began to execute various plots to kill his nephews. He succeeded in his conspiracy when he secured the permission of the king to send ‘Syunraji Bora’ to the dangerous region ‘Tali Hati Maal’ (Bhabar) to collect tax. ‘Gujarhans Lool’ was very powerful feudal lord of the Maal region at that time. To ask for the taxes from him was like asking for one’s own death. ‘Syunraji Bora’ had no option except going there. He went, waged a violent war against ‘Gujarhans Lool’, vanquished him and returned back to Kumun-Champawat. This very popular ‘Syunraji ballad’ is extensively narrated in different performances of ‘Hurkiya Bol’.

‘**Hurkiya Bol**’ is a pure narrative theatre in which the singer informs the audience about the story he is going to sing. Then, he sings and narrates the parts of the story.<sup>3</sup> He mimes different characters through gestures and movements. Thus, he plays several roles while narrating the story. He would often address the audience, “Look! How does ‘Syunraji Bor’ reach the court of Bharti Chand!” Then he sings, “Six feet was his chest and nine feet his back. His eyes were shining and burning with fire. Mad with wrath was he.” Then again the singer addresses the audience, speaks prose dialogues with great rapidity. The prose dialogues are once again followed by poetry.

Different elements pertaining to gesture, narration, music, acting are well reflected when ‘Hurkiya’ recites and narrates the songs maintaining a good balance of plain and heightened speech, enacting various characters with showing off appropriate gestures and mimes. In between, Hurkiya’s interactions with the workers and farmers also break any illusion of reality and empathy.

Very little has so far been written on the genre. There are only some scattered collections of ‘Hurkiya Bol’ ballads. The most comprehensive of them is the book written by

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Madan Chandra Bhatt<sup>4</sup>. Girish Tiwari and Shekhar Pathak<sup>5</sup> have also incorporated some ballads of ‘Hurkiya Bol’ in their collaborative book. There are, of course, brief excerpts of ‘Hurkiya Bol’ published by Trilochan Pandey, B.C. Joshi and Sher Singh Pangati.



Late Giriraj, the Famous Hurkiya of Rudraprayag District, Uttarakhand, India

**2. Bhadauli:** The term Bhadauli stands for “the awali of the bhadas”. That is the series of stories on the chivalrous knights. “Talwaar” is another term used for the tradition in certain regions, because the heroes lived for fought with their swords. Bhadauli singing was a courtly tradition. The courts of the local princes and their chieftains had the ballad singers of their own. Thus each feudal lord and each community had a ballad singer of their own called Hurkiya. The Hurkiya would sing and dance the history of his patrons on important occasions and was in turn sustained economically and socially by his patrons. When E.S. Okley and Taradutt Gairola published The Himalayan Folklore there were thousands of practicing Hurkiyas in Garhwal and Kumaun princely states. D.R.Purohit, recalls that Purohit community had their own Hurkiyas Bhoongu and Ujalu who lived in Lodla village of Rudrapryag District. The Hurkiyas sang and enacted the heroic ballads of the local personages.

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They taught history to the local populace and to their patrons. However the ways of enacting history was theatrical and drew a large number of audience. The Hurkiya was assisted by a couple of Assistant Hurkiyas and an equal number of female singers and dancers. Sometimes with the ongoing narration roles were also distributed among the Hurkiyas. The females would sing the choric part of the song and render some portions of the story through their delicate dances . Late Jhusia Damain of Pithoragarh District continued rendering his performance even in his nineties at many public stages till 2006. He was documented by late Girish Tiwari "Girda" and Prof. Girija Pandey of Kumaun University. Another famous Hurkiya . Giriraj survived upto 2009 and rendered hundreds of performances of Paanch Bhai Kathait, Kaalu Bhandari, Rikhola Lodi, Sangram Singh Karki, Hansa Kunwar , Laksmi Chand Panwaar , Madho Singh Bhandari and Jagdeo Panwar. One of his ballads, Paanch Bhai Kathait was adapted with great success for stage by D.R. Purohit .



A Scene From Hurkiya Theatre (*Paanch Bhai Kaithait*)

The mono performance of the Hurkiyas deserves special attention. The narrative is interspersed with dialogues, songs and dances. In the rare emotional scenes, the choreography is designed to suit to the mood of the event. Such scenes were joined by all the performers present at the arena. Late Jhusia Damain attached bells to his music instrument Hurka and in such scenes the

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jingling of the bells created special ambiance for the play. The language of the narrative is highly ornamental and figurative. Use of folk motifs, proverbs and idioms makes the language commuicative and evocative. Such a poetic language transports the audience to the past where the events took place.

At the moment only Muli Dass of Chaka village in Rudraprayag District knows the genre of ballad singing. Kaviraaj, a ballad singer of Beda tradition also does narrative singing of ballads but does not enact the scenes. Late Bulli Dass of Deora , and Late Daulat Ram of Maidrath, villages in tons valley were great repositories of ballads.

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### Notes and References

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<sup>2</sup>Dev Singh Pokharia, *Kumaoni Lokgeet aur Lokgaghen* (Bareilly, Prakash Book Depot, 1996), p.9.

<sup>3</sup>Based on personal communications with Bhuvan Chandra Lohani of Dwarahat.

<sup>4</sup>Madan Chandra Bhatt, *Kumaon ki Jaagar Kathayen* (Haldwani, Shri Sain Printers Mukhani, 2002).

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**Hemant Kumar Shukla, Ph.D.**

Corresponding Author  
Assistant Professor in English  
Govt. Degree College  
Talwari-Tharali 246482  
District-Chamoli  
Uttarakhand  
India  
[hemantkumar.shukla1@gmail.com](mailto:hemantkumar.shukla1@gmail.com)

**D.R. Purohit, Ph.D.**

Professor in English  
Department of English  
H.N.B. Garhwal University Srinagar (Garhwal)  
Uttarakhand  
India  
[drpurohit2002@yahoo.com](mailto:drpurohit2002@yahoo.com), [drpurohit@yahoo.com](mailto:drpurohit@yahoo.com)

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