



Nautanki as a Performative Art Form of North India



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Abstract

In entire north India, Nautanki was the most popular entertainment art before arrival of Cinema. The most popular centres of this traditional theatre form are Kanpur, Lucknow and Haathras. Nautanki dramas were fine-tuned; its protagonists were highly skilled. Few props were used, yet actors created forests, rivers, battles and royal courts by the sorcery of their art. In contemporary times, the street plays resemble to Nautanki. Nautanki stories range from mythological and folk tales to stories of contemporary heroes. This popular art from has now dwindled and its existence is in threat, It was a part of education. Nobody read Raja Harishchandra but everybody knew it. Therefore, Nautanki is the most powerful medium in the world; hence, it should be provided means to keep the art alive.

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1. Introduction

Once in a land, far away, there lived a princess of peerless beauty. The radiant glow of her body made the moon's turn pale. Her eyes were like a doe's she had the voice of cuckoo. When she laughed, jasmine blossoms fell. In the prime of her youth, she maddened men with her lotus-like breasts and the three folds at her waist. She was so grateful that her weight could be measured only against a portion of flowers. This princess was known in many different regions of India under a series of names, each incorporating the word phul meaning "flower". In Rajasthan she was called Phulan Derani. In Sind and Gujarat she was known as Phulpancha (five flowers). In the Goanese account, her name was Panch-phula Rani, as it was one of the North Indian versions. The Punjabi tale styled her Badshahzadi Phuli or Phulazadi, "Princess Blossom" as translated by colonial collectors. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, when most of these tales were recorded, a drama called Princess Nautanki (Nautanki shahzadi) was also being performed. It employed a music-laden style popular in rural Punjab and Uttar Pradesh. Nautanki was Panchphula literally weighed in a different coin. Nau means "nine" and tank, a measure of silver currency equivalent to approximately four grams- Nautanki: A woman, whose weight was only

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36 grams, was the princess of Multan, flower- light, fairylike, whose fame had travelled far and wide and therefore her story is still being told- “What is it like, this roving theatre? What is its name, do you know? This is Nautanki. That’s right, Nautanki! The chief attraction of village fairs in Uttar Pradesh. Several days before the fair starts, the tents and trappings arrive on a truck and are set up at a fixed spot. A large tent is stretched out to form a hall. At its head, a good-sized stage is erected and adorned with curtains. All the arrangements are made for the lighting. In front of the stage, places are fixed for the audience to sit. A big gate is put up outside, and a signboard attached to it with the name of the Nautanki.” (Hansen 10).

Nautanki drama was larger than life. The predecessor to Bollywood extravaganzas, it was the world full of glamor, glitz, and pure fantasy. Song, dance, romance and melodrama wove many a magic spell. Popular dramas performed in this genre were peopled with historical figures like Raja Harishchandra, who gave up wealth, kingdom, wife and child for the sake of keeping his word; Majnu, who went crazy for love; Rani Taramati, who too became crazy, but for her child; Laila, who was torn between loyalty and love; and Sultana Daku who robbed the rich and gave to the poor. A folk form of entertainment among the Dalit classes, Nautanki rose to prominence during the latter half of the nineteenth century. When people were exhausted by their daily lives, such fantasy provided a means of escape for them. Ordinary people often got together and put up Nautanki troupes in their humble homes, providing simple food and warm hospitality in return for a night’s entertainment. Nautanki dramas were fine-tuned; its protagonists were highly skilled. Few props were used, yet actors created forests, rivers, battles and royal courts by the sorcery of their art. The same spot would be transformed into a different place by a word or a gesture. The Ranga or Sutradhar built up a montage of varied dramatic episodes and threaded them together like fine beads in a storyline. As the years went by, Nautanki became increasingly elaborate with ornate sets, sophisticated props and gaudy costumes. Drop curtains and painted sceneries were used. Nautanki worked at several levels. Some encouraged a sense of high moral duty, true love, and loyalty and at the same time tensions, conflicts and varied points of view were also communicated. Therefore Nautanki presented dilemma people could relate to. They found some of their own concerns mirrored on stage. These dramas were like a distorting mirror-stretching figure, exaggerating details, making everyday concerns look bizarre, funny, grand and interesting. Nautanki- earlier known as ‘Svang’- became easily the most popular form of entertainment. Entire villages- men, women and children- watched it hypnotized, eyes kept stuck to the temporary stage from late nights till early hours of next morning. Folk influences on Nautanki included the earlier ballads and recitals of board which include, stories unrolled. They use gestures to dramatize the emotions and actions of various characters. Such as stories of saints, robbers, kings, lovers and knights popular in folklore were carried over into early Nautanki. Verses from ballads were often used within the plays. Nautanki theater of North India employs the languages based on the Khari Boli dialect, a form of speech that was linguistically identified as Hindi and Urdu. As a regional form, it is comparable to theatres found in other linguistic territories which include Rajasthan Khayal, Uttar Pradesh Raas Lila and Ram Lila, Punjab’s Nakal, and Parsi theatre, Madhya Pradesh’s Maanch, Tamil Nadu’s Natakam, Maharashtra’s Tamasha (which employs Marathi) Bengal’s Jatra (which employs Bengali), and the Bhavai of Gujarat (which employs Gujrati). Therefore it would be wrong to say that localized form of speech never appears in Nautanki performances. Depending on the background of the performers and the audience, dialects may be used. However, the prime medium of Nautanki theater remains Khari Boli, Hindi or Urdu. All these regional theaters share elements of music, dance, drama, story, vocabularies, and gestures as a magical whole.

2. Research Methods

Research means to investigate more about particular content. For this paper I have referred several books and also made notes so that I can focus on my paper and tried my best to cover all the details required for the paper. As the paper entirely discusses about Nautanki as a Performative Art Form of North India, therefore, I had tried to focus mainly on historical background of Nautanki, its existence and its position in today scenario and also urge to keep the art alive and I hope and tried to do full justice by providing all the relevant details in my paper.

3. Results and Analysis

Nautanki as Intermediary Theatre

The traditional theaters may be subdivided into those dominant essences of religious (dharmic) or worldly (Lau kick). But secular character of Nautanki can readily be observed unlike the two religious theatres of the Hindi region, the Ram Lila and the Ras Lila, Nautanki is neither oriented towards the praise of particular deities (such as Ram or Krishna), nor are its performances connected to annual religious festivals (Example- Dussehra or

Krishna Janmashtami, common occasions for Ram Lila or Ras Lila performances, respectively). Nautanki is first and foremost an entertainment medium which is full of dancing; pulsating drumbeats and full-throated singing. Nor does the theater draw its characteristic subjects from the Pan-Indian religious epics; The Ramayana and the Mahabharata, neither the social organization of troupes has any connection with religious institutions or priestly groups, and therefore performances are not viewed as in any way suspicious or ritually effective. In the political sense, Nautanki's secularism is displayed by its almost equal attention to topics identified with Hindu and Muslim cultural traditions. Islamic romances such as Laila Majnun and Shirin Farhad are considered one of the favorite stories in Nautanki. The blend of Urdu and Hindi diction in the texts, together with the inclusion of metrical types from both Hindi and Urdu prosody, point to a mixed non-sectarian heritage. Muslims and Hindus participate together in the formation of troupes, and Nautanki audiences may be drawn from either or both communities.

Nautanki does address certain semi-religious topics drawn from the popular strands of devotion and morality common to Hindus and Muslims. Exemplary stories such as that of King Harishchandra, tales of self-sacrificing devotees (Prahlaad, Dhruvji) and accounts of miracles and magical feats are examples. In other instances, Nautanki plays communicate folk concepts of good and evil, the proper conduct of men and women, the nature of spiritual liberation, and similar topics. Specific tales were also included in the Nautanki corpus such as that of Guga, also called Zahar Pir, a saint-deity worshiped by the Chamars (untouchables) in Punjab are sometimes performed during rituals of possession. In these rites, the narration or enactment of the Guga story is controlled by specialist participants associated with the cult. The procedure in a Nautanki show is quite different. Performers are professionals from outside the community, their advertising techniques (placards, drumbeating, and public crying) signal a separate space designated for entertainment.

Nautanki has consistently appropriated the modern values and tastes of its consumers and has brought the clash of old and new onto its stage. Contemporary stories have joined the older repertoire, as witnessed in Dhul Ka Phul, a tale of two college students, whose bicycles collide, causing them to fall in love. Under the impact of the celluloid medium, tunes and dance items from cinema are now incorporated into performances, and Bombay films provide the plots for the latest Nautanki dramas. Within this rapidly growing market-based economy, Nautanki may even be viewed as a phenomenon of mass culture. Nautanki now reaches audiences more through the electronic media- records, cassettes, films, and television- than through the older model of face-to-face contact. Print reproduction of Nautanki plays scripts may have contributed to the standardization of the genre and facilitated its reception as a commodity. Therefore rather defining Nautanki as either a city or village form we might more appropriately view it as a link in the cultural flow that connects the urban centers and the hinterland in the ongoing process of exchange between them. For over a century Nautanki has carried the stories, poetic forms, music, beliefs, and attitudes of different groups of people back and forth, linking the village and the urban dweller, the educated and the illiterate, the Hindu and the Muslim. The traveling theatrical troupe brings rural ideology and reference to the migrant worker in the city; it takes back to the village the latest in urban social history. The same exchange occurs between different parts of geographical territory linked by Nautanki as regionally specific elements (song genres like the Rajasthani mind or Banarsi kajari, for example) are transported to other parts of the country. The audience too is mobile, including within it groups who move between village, town, and city: migrant industrial workers in the factories of Lucknow and Kanpur, artisans in craft centers like Banaras, agriculturalists visiting market towns like Hathras, and seasonal laborers such as the rickshaw pullers found in every Uttar Pradesh city. In this manner, Nautanki can be adjudged best as intermediary theater as it permits crossing barrier amongst urban and rural folkways.

In terms of content, Nautanki belongs to a large group of narratives that includes the various legends and tales known to the North Indian region. The reservoir of potential Nautanki narratives is fed by oral and written accounts from Arabic and Persian romances, Sanskrit epics and Puranas, folk epics of Rajasthan, Punjab, and Uttar Pradesh, legends of saints, kings, and local heroes, popular novels, historical events, newspaper accounts and popular films. Nautanki themes tend towards the martial and romantic, with social dramas based on contemporary life entering into the modern period. The sophisticated formal apparatus of Nautanki employs the verse patterns and conventions of Hindi poetry (seen in the doha and chaubola) as well as regional folk genres such as the lyric forms dadra, thumri, savaan, holi, mand, lavani, and so on. It also draws on the traditions of Urdu classical prosody, borrowing verse types such as ghazal, sher, qavvali, and others. Similarly, the musical materials show some features of classical Hindustani music, including a rudimentary raga structure, the use of metered cycles (tala) and rhythmic cadences of three repetitions (tihai). In these formal features of music and

meter, the intermediary character of the genre is visible again as the mediations occurring here between Hindu and Urdu poetics on the one hand and folk and classical music on the other.

In contemporary Indian culture, obsessive passion seems to run riot: songs, dramas, novels, films, and magazines loudly declare the inexhaustible craving for romance. Western media images may have given a new face to love – an English word now heard everywhere in India. Yet the tradition of romance predates European influence and has strong roots in the lore of village society. In North India long before British incursions, performances popularized a number of oral tales, each focusing on a pair of pining lovers. The concept of love in these folk traditions is distinct from the courtly notion of erotic sentiment (*sringara rasa*) of Sanskrit verse and the devotional love of religious poetry (*prema-bhakti*). Indigenous and secular, it manifests itself in the dramas of the Nautanki theater beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century and continuing to the present. What the Nautanki dramatic literature may offer is evidence of the complex ways in which society responds to the emotional lives of its members. The tension that arises between a pair of lovers and their families is one that is amply depicted in these plays, indicating a strong push and pull between individual interests and the group loyalties focused on units of caste, clan, and community. The love experience frequently seems to oppose and undermine the hierarchical order, yet in other situations the social body incorporates it into a more harmonious whole. Once more the Nautanki play, through its concrete embodiment of character and incident, explores the moral dilemmas around a difficult issue that touches each spectator. In this process, it ultimately affirms the capacity for loving as an indispensable part of being human. Nautanki text includes love stories like *Laila Majnun*, *Shirin Farhad*, *Hir Ranjha*... The Nautanki romances operate as an arena for sorting out the conflicting responses of society to the experience of love, an emotion that poses a profound moral dilemma for North Indian society. Antithetical for many of that society aims, it emerges over and over to arouse in men and women actions of nobility and self-sacrifice.

In Nautanki, music constitutes the most important nonverbal system of communication, ranking above dance, acting techniques, or visual symbolism as a signifier of meaning. Further, the musical system of Nautanki separates it from the performance that shares its narratives, serving as a determinant of the genre. A Nautanki play based on the *Alha* story can be identified by its own music, different from that of an *Alha* epic recitation; the music similarly gives away a Nautanki performance occurring at the edges of a *Ras lila* festival. Music in its alliance with the poetic meter is the principal source of Nautanki's aesthetic impact on its audience. The sound of Nautanki resides in the listener consciousness, giving melody and rhythm to remembered snatches of words, aiding in their acquisition and retention. Musical and metrical structures weave through Nautanki's treasury of hundreds of tales, conferring a unity on an outsized body of folklore. Furthermore, as Nautanki has formed and reformed in the last hundred or more years, it is the music that has most clearly registered the radical shift in the relations between folk theater and society. Over the last hundred years, the context for Nautanki music has altered from patron-supported open competition to production of a commercially-oriented commodity. Remnants of the historically discrete musical styles now coexist. The older Hathras style, to the extent that it survives, has maintained the improvised character and agonistic ethos of the traditional art, while in the Kanpur style and on recorded disks and cassettes, the music has become standardized, melodically and metrically simplified, and commodified to meet very different market conditions and listener expectations.

We approach the overall character of Nautanki music through consideration of the material culture of the folk stage and its requirements for communication. Until very recently, shows were performed outdoors mainly at night- on temporarily erected stages or platforms, on porches in market areas, in courtyards, or in tented arenas at fairs. Three sides of the stage were generally open to the public, and large crowds gathered, as many as ten thousand spectators by some accounts. In the absence of electricity and amplification, the foremost demand was that the music and voices of actor-singers be audible. The hearing was even more important than seeing because sightlines would have been obstructed for many in the throng. Probably for these reasons, Nautanki like other traditional theaters favored instruments with piercing timbers. The core of the Nautanki ensemble consisted of a high-pitched reed instrument, such as the indigenous *shehnai*, a relative of the oboe, or later the imported clarinet. The rhythm was maintained by the booming *nagara*, a kettledrum played with sticks, supported by a second higher-pitched *nagara* or a *dholak*, a popular double-faced hand-drum.

The *shahnai* and *nagara* were traditionally part of a professional ensemble known as the *naubat*, whose role was to lead military parades and announce the watches of the day in royal palaces. As used in Nautanki theater, the *naubat* served first in its original function as marching band. It announced the show, playing in procession in the town or village beforehand and at the commencement of the evening's entertainment while the audience was assembling. Second, it served as 'orchestra' accompanying the singers during the drama. Even today, the loud,

rapid-fire drumming of the nagara sums up the heroic and martial character of Nautanki and serves as its ubiquitous trademark. The thin piping tone of the shahnai, by contrast, alerts the listener to the romantic and feminine side of the theater, signaling, in particular, the flirtatious games (nakhre) of the dancer-actress.

As with the instruments, the singing of the actors had to be very loud to project to the crowds. To reach this goal they cultivated an open-throated, forceful vocal style, dwelling primarily in the upper register. The recitatives of Nautanki typically begin on the tonic in the upper octave and wind their way gradually downward to close on the lower tonic. The melodic 'shadow' provided by the accompanying instrument anticipates the beginning, leading up to the high tonic at the end of the preceding phrase. Holding the breath on high notes is considered a feat of virtuosity, earning outbursts of praise from the audience. At climactic moments, the singer conveys dramatic bursts of emotion by exploring the uppermost notes in his or her register; they are the ones most likely to cut through the ambient noise in the performance area and make an impact on the listeners. Male singers, especially female impersonators, may employ a falsetto voice quality. The most virtuosic Nautanki singing is characterized by stirring florid passages charged with an almost erotic excess, an operatic overflow of passion. Rapid ornamental turns, melismatic ascents, and descents, and other flourishes are used to adorn the vocal line and are much prized. The vibrato effects common to choral Sufi singing (qavvali) and the folk singing of Haryana, Rajasthan, or the Punjab are usually absent.

The particular musical interaction that occurs between the singer-actors and the instrumental ensemble in Nautanki reflects the demands of communication in an outdoor setting. Three types of poetic discourse characterize Nautanki's sung text; these are narrative, dialogue and lyric. Prose passages may also be introduced into the verbal texture but are never sung. Narrative and dialogue carry the forward movement of the story and must be clearly enunciated for audience comprehension. Perhaps for this reason, the overlap between singers and instrumentalists in these sections is reduced to a minimum. The poetic lines are delivered one by one in recitative style, with percussion and the less audible melodic instruments entering after each line is concluded. These passages produce an antiphonal structure between the singer and the instrumental ensemble, the two alternating and taking turns throughout. During the recitative, the singer's meter does not follow the framework of tala (rhythm cycle), as it would in Hindustani vocal music. He or she spontaneously matches the short and long weights of the metered line to the standard contours of the appropriate melody or freely improvises on an end rhyme using melismatic ornamentation. As soon as the singer finishes the line and usually beginning with its last note, the percussion enters and plays a pattern in a regular rhythm cycle, ordinarily eight or sixteen beats. Melodic instruments such as shahnai, flute, charinet, sarangi or harmonium may shadow the singer during the recitative, lagging behind slightly and imitating the sung line. Customarily they repeat a refrain melody (comparable to the lahara of classical music) during the percussion solos. This antiphonal style contrasts with the style of the lyric passages, which exhibits simultaneous accompaniment (sath- sangat). This style is found in the song forms of Nautanki such as dadra, thumri, and ghazal.

More recently, Nautanki listening (rather than viewing) has been turned into a leisure- time activity catering to the consumption habits of the semiurban populace. This trend has taken shape in the mass production of inexpensive audiocassettes and recorded LPs of Nautanki songs. In this new package, Nautanki offers to the consumer one more musical commodity available at push of a button. Gone is the lively atmosphere of the dangal with the free play of improvisation it inspired. Instead, the soundtrack is a series of abbreviations: allusions to films, to sounds, to sentiments associated with prestige and pleasure. The new cassettes seem to be organized so that when casually dropped into a tape recorder, they offer the listener the first impression of a Hindi film score. With the widespread availability of amplification, instrumentation has changed drastically, both in live performances and recordings. One effect adopted from studio stand technology in the violin tremolo, used as background to prose dialogue, as found in an example from Bhakt Puranmai, one of the most venerable Nautanki stories, in its latest incarnation on Brijwani Records. The worthy nagara, a difficult instrument to record because of its resonance and low boom, has been replaced by tabla, dholak, and even castanets. The use of harmony and chords to accompany familiar bahr-e-tavil tunes is another innovation. Other signs of the times are reverberation and special effects; the addition of ghoulish laughter (in an echo chamber) sets the scary mood for the opening of Daku dayaram gujar on a T-Label cassette. The hallmark of these performances is the vicious speed at which the story and music precede, imposed both by the limited availability and high cost of electromagnetic tape and by the listener's preference for 'modern', that is, fast-paced, music.

While the burgeoning audiocassette, film, and television industries have helped break up the old patron-performer-audience nexus that nurtured improvisatory folk music, they have attracted mass audiences seeking new symbols of social identity through hybridized forms of rural and regional music. Cassette technology, as

Peter Manuel notes, may facilitate the access of rural audiences to folk music and even offer the potential for democratic control of the means of production. In this sense, the mass media possess a regenerating force that may stop dying folk arts and stimulate their recirculation. Meanwhile, for the recently urbanized seeking a palpable sense of place, the Nautanki 'hit' synthesizes nostalgia and modernity, negotiating the divide between distinctive regional cultural symbols and the homogenizing impulses of a larger public culture. Vestiges of the genre's identity remain and the word Nautanki still carries meaning. But a new arena has been created, and music now provides a ground for playing out the conflicts accompanying development, social dislocation, and economic change.

Major Nautanki Artists

Nautanki employs professional actors usually residing outside the village, which appears almost urban. Therefore Nautanki seems to belong to the category of popular theater which can be more suitably defined as "often (arising) from folk theater but the players are professional and the audience comes from the place other than the community in which the players live" (Hansen 41).

Many Nautanki actors are from low castes which mainly include Dalits in a broad range. The participation of the artisan broadly appears to have been particularly significant. The legendary poets and singers of Hathras, include Ustad Indarman, Chinjilal, Ganeshilal and Govind Ram, were all Chhipis, a jati (caste) of cloth printers and dyers. Natharam Gaur, the most famous poet of their school, was, however, a Brahmin. Shrikrishna Khatri Pahalvan, the founder of the Kanpur branch, can be identified from the back covers of his early plays as a tailor (darzi). Nautanki troupe members in the Banaras region were drawn from Muslim entertainer castes such as Dafalis (who play the daf, a large drum), Bhats (musician-genealogists), and Chamars. Another artist from Lucknow was Pandit Kakkuji whose real name was Munindranath Gosawmi. He was influential in popularizing the Lucknow style of Nautanki. Together with Ashiq Hussain and his wife, Malika Begam he had formed the Ashiq Company that remains active for a while and after retiring from performing he made his living by stitching theatrical costumes. Another artist from Lucknow was ex-Nautanki singer Phakkar, "Phakkarji was a famous Nautanki artist of his time. He captivated audiences with his acting and singing in many parts of North India. Audiences in places close to Lucknow still can't forget him. The thunderous range of his voice is without equal. He is famous for his pure behaviour in Nautanki troupes." (Hansen 269).

In the initial years all the roles of heroines and side-heroines and other female characters were played by young boys. In those days Nautanki had a masculine ambience. Many boys ran away from home and village in order to join a Nautanki troupe. Grippled by wanderlust and the urge to perform, they left home for months, sometimes years. In all male-space, Gulab was the first woman to join Nautanki. A girl joining the Nautanki was a bit shocking and surprising as well. However, one of the artists had heard Gulabiya singing and was impressed by her talent.

"Gulab Bai sang so beautifully, one could not stop listening. Truly she was 'Kalyug Ki Saraswati' (Goddess of music and learning in the present dark era). She sang full-throated. Her voice was pure. Her enunciation was clear. Twenty to twenty-five thousand people would gather, but when Bai got up to sing there would be pin-drop silence." (Mehrotra 144)

Initially, Gulab was given small roles in plays- part of a crowd or chorus. The first distinct role she enacted was that of Rohit or Rohtas, Harishchandra, and Taramati's son. A large part of the time she had to act as a corpse, lying flat on her back or being lifted as a stiff body. But this hardly dampened her enthusiasm. It was a dramatic scene and clearly, she was the centerpiece! She routinely took part in chorus singing and dancing and scenes where a crowd was required, or a bunch of courtiers. From her early acting debut as Rohit, Gulab soon graduated to 'Rani' roles. She played Rani Taramati in Raja Harishchandra and Rani Haadi in Amar Singh Rathore. In Laila Majnu she would play Laila, in Shirin Farha, Shirin and in Heer Ranjha, Heer. Other popular Nautankis in which she played the heroine were Alam Ara, Pukar and Bahadur Ladki. Soon hunting for women players was started to enhance the popularity of Nautanki theater. Later, Krishna Bai and chahetan (Gulab's close relative and sister) also followed Gulab's footsteps. They had a powerful voice and flowered both as singer and actress. In subsequent years Krishna Bai's five sisters also joined Nautanki. Women joined the Hathras Nautanki too. Shyama Bai and Anwari Bai, or Anno-sisters hailing from Pinahat near Agra- became famous as the 'Shyama-Anno' duo. Radha rani of Pilibhit became exceedingly popular. These were talented khandani singers that are from 'Tawaiif' families where mujras and thumris were passed down the generations from mother to daughter. Most Hathras Nautankis remained exclusively male and are so to date. Compared to the Kanpur side, Hathras companies are purists about traditional music as well as the sex of their artists. Shrikrishna Pehelvan, a

giant in Kanpur's Nautanki world, also disapproved of the growing trend of nurturing Nautanki actresses. Women who came into Nautanki were either from Bedia or Tawaif deredar Muslim families. Both communities had a well-established tradition of women earning their livelihood by singing and dancing. In both these subcultures, women did not marry, led unconventional sexual lives and provided for their natal families. Although most Nautanki actors and musicians were from Dalit classes and castes, over the years several upper-caste men joined. For instance, Natharam Sharma Gaur was a Brahman. So was Lalman Numberdar. Shri Krishna Pehelvan was a Khattri and his full name was Shri Krishna Mehrotra. Trimohan Ustad was a Kurmi.

4. Conclusion

Nautanki Today

“Earlier there was izzat in Nautanki; now there is none” (Mehrotra 243)

Nautanki is the most powerful medium in the world... and it has all but vanished today. Amarnath, Nagra and Dholak player who have given music to several Nautanki acts notes that there was so much work at times that we barely have time to eat. We were booked from Janmashtmi up to Holi. Today, we are offered barely twenty to twenty-five programs a year. Another Nautanki artist Prabhu Dayal's son Robert played dholak with his father but for now, there is very less demand for this music. Therefore they play at some programs and rest of the time they run Paan shop. Nautanki is degenerating because it does not have due recognition or status. The Uttar Pradesh state government calls actors from Bombay to perform at functions, but not a Nautanki troupe. With globalization, we no longer care to know our own culture. Where do we begin putting things right? What is the right point to begin? The artists are poor Dalits, so they are treated as second-class citizens, put up in dormitories or green rooms rather than in hotels. They feel hesitant about entering the elite culture. “Nautanki is the most powerful medium in the world... and it has all but vanished today. If Uttar Pradesh doesn't have Nautanki, what will it have?” (Mehrotra 287) Like other genres, Nautanki has an origin, rise, decline and natural end. Yet if the end is inevitable, at least an ageing form can receive appropriate care and attention so that it lives out its last years with dignity. Born in a feudal ethos, nurtured in Akharas and performed in the open air, Nautanki is considered one of our most successful cultural forms. It moved to tents and then halls, tickets were sold and box-office earnings totted up. By the middle of the twentieth-century, Kanpur Nautanki adopted the picture-frame stage with painted scenery and elaborates costumes, and established itself as a commercially viable form. During the last quarter of the twentieth century, however, Nautanki began to lose its grip. Folk theater forms declined in other parts of India as well. The reasons for their widespread decline include changing the popular taste, competition from electronic mass media, the disintegration of older sources of patronage and absence of critical state support. The context and environment in which Nautanki and similar forms flourished changed dramatically.

“Art never dies. I have grown old, but art is still alive within me. It will be with me till my dying breath. I still have dreams. I feel suffocated, I want a chance to sing, act and show people what is possible. We are artists. We want an opportunity to display what we know, what we can do, what we are. But where can we do this? An entire world has disappeared into thin air. Our art is dying with us.” (Mehrotra 264)

Nautanki seems to have come around full circle- the genre and its protagonists are completely transformed a lot. Its humble origins in the Akharas of Hathras, with disciplined body culture and classical ragas, are lost in the mists of time. Nautanki companies no longer tour the urban centers to entertain the crowds and allure the young. Without the visiting troupe, the nostalgia, the runaway experience, are not available to today's children. Young people in the north do not know the meaning of the word Nautanki. Today, if a Nautanki troupe turns up people, would hardly prefer outdoor stage to the air-conditioned comfort of the cinema hall. Meanwhile, in the countryside “song and dance parties” continues tour under the banner of Nautanki, but hardly a doha or chaubola is sung. A nominal plot provides the pretext for the cabaret-style dancing imitated from Bombay films. The women who earn their livelihood supplying this entertainment may or may not be prostitutes, but their reputation is considered for granted and their art viewed as vulgar. Therefore these shows are often restricted, taxed, or canceled by government authorities. “Yet even as one Nautanki grows feeble and fades away, new uses of Nautanki and other forms of traditional theater emerge from the multilayered Indian cultural scene. Will Nautanki be reborn into a changed world? In what guise will her next entrance be performed? These questions hold us suspended, waiting for the future.” (Hansen 272)

Nautanki is the most powerful medium in the world, but it has all vanished today. It was a part of education. Nobody read Raja Harishchandra but everybody knew it. In every village at harvest time, a Nautanki was performed at the temple. Today Nautanki actors don't want to learn new roles. In Unnao there are still several Nautanki companies. In Bangarapur, Unnao, we have sixteen good Nautanki performances over three days. These

are by all-male troupes. Educated classes should take initiative to revive Nautanki, but it should remain in the hands of Dalit artistes. It should not slip out of their hands. They have carried on the art for centuries, yet they remain poor. They should be provided means to keep the art alive. Economic means and status are connected to the survival of Nautanki and its artists. People should start a movement to bring more and more Nautanki onto stage, TV and various functions. Training should be systematically taken up: in schools, colleges, gurukuls, workshops, etc... "Cooperation between Nautanki artists and new theatre-persons can be fruitful. Nautanki too will have to change, to draw more people towards it." (Mehrotra 263)

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With regards,
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