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Subject : From Legacy to Experiment : ' Bhavai' Folk Theatre of Gujarat

Starting from Natyashastra and the later text have extensively explored the Rupaka and Uparupaka Tradition. From then till now these forms have been taken different shapes in Indian Performing arts. The Uprupakas were predominantly had dance and musical forms along with the Natya. One such form is Bhavai, The Folk/ Traditional Theatre of Gujarat. Bhavai 's Origination can be easily trace from medieval , sanskrit text. The word Bhavai in the sense of show or spectacle occurs in the 13th century *Apabhramsa* Jain religious texts. The late Harilal A Dhruv has indicated the origin of the word 'Bhavai' from 'Bhav-Shiv' and 'Bhaav-Sutradhar'.

The Sanskrit drama tradition and especially the Uprupaka can be said to be an inspiration for the emergence of traditional folk drama. Drama is classified into two types, 1) Rupaka and 2) Uprupaka). Some of traditional folk theatre like *Natyarasak*, *Hallisak* are Parallel to the existing folk theatres like Rasalila Ramalila Bhagwat Mela Natakam . They have arisen due to devotional flow. While some other forms have emerged for the purpose of entertainment such as Tamasha, Nautanki .

The Uprupak are divided in two different categories based on its emotions (Rasa and Bhava), Story content , Dance and Music . *Natyarasak* is one Uprupaka which has Shringar and Comic elements along with extensive dancing . The folk theatre of Gujarat that is Bhavai has devotion as well as entertainment elements. It is dedicated to mother goddess (Mataji) . The dramatic form of Bhavai has extensive dance with Comic and Shringar Rasa as well. As in the Rupaka called "*Trotak*" which has Vidushaka / Comic Character, Uprupaka *Hallisak* has Hero who is crooked (Vakpattu) similar to Bhavai Comic Character Daglo / Rangalo . *Hallisak* is varieties of rhythms and dances and speeds . Some experts and scholar say Bhavai has influences of *Bhan* and *Prahasan*. According to Dr. Sudha ben Desai Uprupakas were the visual entertainment of people. They are also folk traditional theatre. According to her Bhavai is tradition of Drashya Kavya also Bhavai has not come from devotional rebellion but is the creation of a poet with his inspiration from an accidental occurrence.

The period of Asait is based on the Samvant mentioned in the manuscript of the poem 'Hansauli' written by him. Ke. Ka. Shastri puts the date from 1320 to 1390

AD. Asait was born Audhichya Brahman. In addition to being the Brahmin of Unjha and the surrounding Kunbi Patels . He was a story teller with a melodious voice. As per one legend Asait was thrown out from his own Brahmin Community as he had Food with the Daughter of Kunbi.

According to another folktale, Asait's host Hemala Patel's daughter Ganga was abducted and imprisoned in the camp. Asait went to the camp of Muslim Suba / King , There he sang songs in a melodious voice and pleased Suba and demanded the release of 'his' daughter as a reward. Suba (King) despite being luxurious loved art. He freed Ganga. It was not easy for a common man to go to the camp of the Muslim ruler / suba and get the abducted girl released when the Muslims were in power in Gujarat. The Staunch Brahmin Community did not accept this and Asait was out of the community . The relatives of Kunbi's of Unjha invited Asait from Siddhpur . They gave him land and Shelter in Unjha.

Muslim power, army camp, the contempt of the Brahmin community all these must have been stirred in mind of Asait. The visualization of the conflicting emotions and thoughts, started playing in the mind. He created stories with Play, Song, Dance with strong commentary and message of this complex situation. These were the beginnings of dramatic theatre Bhavai.

Dr. Sudhaben Desai has quoted in her dissertation on 'Bhavai', Plays performed before these times . Such as the eleventh century *Karnasundari* by the Kashmiri Poet Bilhan during the reign in Anhilpur. The play was performed at the Shantinath temple in Anhilpur. There is a reference of performance SatyaHarishchandra play by Ramchandra in 12th Century. The Sanskrit Poet Ramchandra was the main disciple of Acharya Hemchandra. The poet wrote 11 rupaka. They are *Raghuvilas*, *Nalvilas*, *Yavilas*, *Satya Harishchandra*, *Nirbhay Bhim Vyayog*, *Mallika Makrandprakaran*, *Raghavabhyudaya*, *Rohinimurnika*, *Vanidhanam*. *Ramachandra*.

Natyadarpan written by Ramchandra along with his Guru Brother Gunchandra occupies an important place in the Sanskrit Dramatic text. During the time of Bhimdev II, Shri Vijaypal's '*Draupadi Swayamvar*' was presented in the Shiva temple of Patan. At the end of the twelfth century, Prahladan dev's '*Parthaparakramavyayog*' was performed at Achaleshwar Mahadev-Achalgarh-Mount Abu. There are also examples of comedy plays performed in the time of Siddharaj Jayasingh.

Asait had extensive knowledge and was well versed in both literature and drama. There was a need for inspiration. Thrown away and despised by the Brahmins , instead of apologizing, Asait adopted a new path . It is estimated that Asait created more than 360 Bhavai "*Vesh*" that is Dramas. The Bhavai tradition started in the 14th century, served as entertainment and education in the villages of North Gujarat for about 600 years. During this time many changes took place in the stories and performances of Bhavai "*Vesh*"(Drama). The successors of Asait are known as Targala-Nayak. People of other

communities such as Nagar, Kachhiya, Kansara etc. also started Bhavai in the form of devotion to Mataji. Still they perform Bhavai in the temples of their family goddess on a certain day of the year. No one was allowed to enter the Taragala Mandali as the actor audience relationship was based on religious belief. Each group goes to its fixed host villages. At the end of the monsoon, on a certain day of Navratri, the first Bhavai is performed in a particular temple according to one's faith and then the group (Mandali) has to go on a pilgrimage to its host village for eight months.

The protagonist of Bhavai Mandal is *Veshgor*. The Bhavai Mandal consists of five strong male characters, five smart female characters (kanchaliya), five singers, musicians and Instrumentalists and five Young Men to do verities of Characters and helpers in other miscellaneous activities of the mandal. The masculine humorist is known as 'Bhathi'. The group goes to the host village get the permission of the village head and the leaders and camp there. During the nights the " Bhavaiya" play bhavai and day time strengthen social relations with the hosts. They bless the newlyweds, sing and welcome the birth of the child and if there is a death in the family they will also provide solace. They sing the praises of their host , the ancestors , and the villages. The group has written record of the ancestry of the host. Thus the heroes / actors and the host-spectators become intimately acquainted with each other going to their respective houses and villages. Bhavai was the livelihood of these groups.

The main parts of Bhavai include acting, dialogue-speech, song music, dance, nut and its acrobatics - acrobats and storytelling . The importance of storytelling becomes secondary in Bhavai. Bhavai is adorned with narrative utterances (narration), rhythmic dialogues, song , dance steps and verities of Acrobats(angachapalya) etc. The narrative in Bhavai is loose. After a small piece of Dialogs with description or statement is immediately followed by dance and Rhythmic dialogues sequence. These way slowly the play builds up. But the waiving is loose and that is the prominent feature of Bhavai. The *Vesh* are so simple that even the people of villages can understand. The development of the material is in the hands of the actors/ characters. After the opening song is sung the main Character enters, then other actors entertains the story of Bhavai in a timely manner. Sometimes a " *Vesh*" / Story is completed in just thirty minutes. But the same story lasts for three to four hours in a village with a knowledgeable audience. The actors dominate the timing of the story/ " *Vesh*". These shows the Bhavai is not a forte of a writer or storyteller but it is the prerogative of the actors. It is the art of the actors. In terms of storytelling, Bhavai's stories can generally be divided into three sections. Mythological, Historical and Social.

There are two meanings of the word '*Vesh*' in Bhavai.

(1) *Vesh* means 'Performance ' in Bhavai. *Vesh* means 'Bhavai Prayoga /Performance'. "Which *Vesh* are you performing today?" When such question is asked, the word '*Vesh* ' paired with the name of the main character is used to

describe the performance, such as - The *Vesh* of *Juthan*, the *Vesh* of *Jashma Odhan*, or the *Vesh* of *Zanda Zulan*, etc.

(2) Another meaning of the word *Vesh* is 'character'. In Bhavai, when a character is about to come, a song is sung indicating it and at the same time the character enters with a dance sequence. It is called '*Vesh*'. In Bhavai, the noun '*Vesh*' is used instead of the character. In other words, not the character in Bhavai, but the one who is dressed like that character, comes dressed in performance.

Characters appearing in Bhavai can generally be divided into two categories, (1) Characters representing a person (2) Characters representing a class

Ganapati's *Vesh* Kan-gopi's *Vesh*, Kali's *Vesh*, Kalaka's *Vesh* (Patai king's *Vesh*), Shankar Bhildi's *Vesh*, Ram Laxman's *Vesh*, etc. Thus this performance represents a certain person. Historical, popular as well as fictional characters like Siddharaj Jaysingh, Ratna Hamir, Shuro, Ramdev, Jashma, Rudio, Maniba Sati all these character have their own personal identity and their distinctive sign. So they are characters who represent that person. Along with this, The Ranglo, Rangali, Vidushak, Sutradhar, Juthan, Zanda Jhulan, Tej, Adavo, Mulchand, Thakor and Thakrana also have their own distinctive identity. The Bhavai is opened with the traditional playing of Bhungal (Long Pipe). Then Ganapati is invited and introduced with Aavnu. The *Vesh* for the evening is decided and then the actual Bhavi Performance begins.

From 14th century to 19th century, Performances of Bhavai Continued uninterrupted. By the end of the 19th century, the theater (Juni Rangbhumi) came into existence. Attempts were made in Gujarat to bring Bhavai's elements to the modern stage. '*Mena Gurjari*' was presented by Natmandal, Ahmedabad. In which shree Jayshankar Sundari, Dina Gandhi and Pransukh Naik acted. Shri C.C Mehta's '*Rangalika*' with creative parts of Bhavai was presented by Bharatiya Kala Kendra, Vadodara. Shanta Gandhi performed '*Jashma Odhan*' in Hindi and '*Ganpat Gurjari*' was presented by Shri Kailas Pandya.

In last few decades there have been some attempts to promote traditional Bhavai. Bhavai training is given along with primary education at Asait Bhavai Kendra at Visnagar. Stipend-incentive help is given to the trainee. Bhavai artists from Morbi have performed Bhavai *Vesh*-s abroad through Indian National Theatres, 'Lokkala Sanshodhan Kendra'. The last decades have seen the creation of Bhavai literature. Shri B.B. Mehta compiled the stories of Bhavai *Vesh*. Dr. Sudhaben Desai researched 'Bhavai' and discussed its form in detail. She found 60 *Vesh*-s and included them in her Doctoral Thesis. Three books of Prof. Janak Dave's were published of Bhavai *Vesh*. He created new *Vesh* / Stories focusing on issues such as environment, communal violence, linguistics, education and children. Prof. Janak Dave trained some of the students of Gujarat Collage in His Bhavai *Vesh* and presented. Shri

Krishnakant Kadkiya's books were published in which *Lok Natya Bhavai*, and '*Jashma Lok Natya-Prayog Shilpani Drishti*' are the main .

With the new globalized world easy asses to many channels of entertainment there are few hosts who invite Bhavai artists for the performances. The audiences for Bhavai are almost none. It is very tough situation and some strong and fast measures have to be taken at the earliest possible for the survival of these amazing 700 years old theatre art form of Gujarat.

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