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Brechtian Elements in the Theatre of Nanda Cycle

Hemant Kumar Shukla and D.R. Purohit

Abstract

The present paper explores the mask theatre of Nanda Cycle of Uttarakhand on the framework of Brechtian discourse. It tries to judge and establish theatrical paradigms and structures of Nanda Cycle which are similar to Brecht's theory or depart from it. In the same process, it attempts to highlight the profound aesthetic contents and value of the Uttarakhand's traditional theatre.

KeyWords: Epic Theatre, *Verfremdungseffekt*, Alienation Effect, *Mait*, *Dhiyan*, *Sasuralis*, *Dhol*, *Damaun*, *pattar*, *taal*, empathy.

Brecht and His Goals

As the title suggests, this article is a brief analysis of the mask theatre of Nanda Cycle in the light of Brechtian theories and practices. The term *Brechtian* is related to German Dramatist **Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956)**, playwright, poet, and director all in one, who became the towering German dramatist of the twentieth century. He advocated extremely progressive views apropos the turbulent socio-political conditions of his time. Brecht was in constant search of evolving a kind of theatre which would be capable of laying threadbare the causes of miseries and difficulties of the common man. Brecht expected from his audience a kind of liveliness, critical attention, and a desire for entertainment and education.

Epic Theatre

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To suit to his theatrical design that endeavored to confront the social and moral crisis of his people, Brecht developed a form which came to be known as ‘**Epic**’, or non-dramatic, theater.

The main objective of Epic Theatre is to keep the audience’s critical faculties awake. To suit his ends, Brecht innovated a theatrical device and baptized it *Verfremdungseffekt* for which an English term “Alienation Effect” came to be used long after the original term was coined.

Function of Alienation Effect

The device “Alienation Effect” “prevents the audience from losing themselves passively and completely in the character created by the actor, and consequently leads them to be a consciously critical observer.”¹ The term also codifies the aesthetics of his Epic Theatre. The German term *Verfremdungseffekt*, is roughly translated into English as “estrangement” or “disillusionment” or “alienation effect or A-effect”.

The concept postulates that the spectators adopt an attitude of enquiry and criticism in their approach to the incident shown on the stage.² Brecht also expected that the Director laboriously avoids all scopes to evoke any kind of empathy, hypnotic tension, and illusion of reality among the audience. For achieving “A Effect”, Brecht employed various techniques like music, different styles of acting, sets, designs, etc.

The Plays of the Nanda Cycle

The term Nanda cycle stands for a series of mask dance dramas performed during the annual rituals offered to goddess Nanda in different villages near Joshimath town (near Badrinath). It is also inclusive of the mask performances held in seasons other than Baisakhi (13-14th of April). The central deity of the performances of all such dance dramas is Nandadevi. Hence the cycle known as Nanda cycle. The main objective of organizing the enactment of the plays of Nanda cycle is to invoke the gods, the goddesses and the demi-gods for securing the prosperity and wellbeing for the community. It is supposed that the invoked super-natural powers, after coming down to the Earth, would keep away the society from the problems, difficulties, epidemics, natural calamities and the state of financial crunch. However the artistic dimensions of the performances are equally significant.

Purohit³ regards **Nanda** to be all in one -- a myth, a cult, a ritual, a part of history, and a cultural life-line of Garhwal. Of all other gods and goddesses worshiped today, Nanda seems to have the largest number of devotees in Garhwal and Kumaun,.

The Story of Nanda

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Nanda (Gaura is the name used in Garhwal, and Gamara in Kumaun) was born to Hemant Rishi and Rani Mainawati after the duo performed a grand *yajna*. Gaura grew to be a miraculous child. She achieved the growth of a 12-year old average child in terms of mind, body and cognition, etc. in 6 years of age. She achieved her maturity, etc., in 12 years what an average child would acquire and achieve in 24 years.

With the mediation of Narada, she was married to Ishwar Raja of Kailash, equated with Shiva by the folks. But Gaura remained unhappy in Kailash, as the region was barren, cold, dry and inhospitable, and because Ishwar Raja remained lost in his own world of cosmic meditation. Even her parents forgot either to send emissaries to her or to invite her to Rishasau(*rishi+ sau*, i.e., the land of *rishis*). To remind her parents of their filial duties, she caused a curse in the former's land: There was a general waste all around: no rains, no crops. Cows begot buffalo-calves and vice versa. Young boys and girls grew dumb and deaf and many of them developed ugly goiters on their necks.

Realizing their mistake, the parents organized a great celebration in Rishashau(the land of the *rishis*) and, after a long interval of twelve years, invited Gaura to her '**Mait**' (Natal home). For a few days she enjoyed the pleasures of her natal home: she ate plentiful food, visited the fields, gardens, pens, and wattle house and cow sheds of her father, danced in the circle of her childhood chums and sang the songs of happiness and miseries.

Returning to Kailash(legendary Kailash Mansarovar) with her consort, or with her god brothers, Latu and Batu, she encountered and slayed many demons on the way, the most dangerous and dreadful of them being Mahishasur (buffalo shaped demon), known in Lata village near Nandadevi mountain) as Madan Singh, and Hasti(elephant shaped demon) in Bargaun, Dhak-Tapoban, Subhain, Sukkhi, and Tolma villages in Dhauli Ganga valley which originates from Nanda Devi and Dronagiri mountains of the greater Himalayan range.

With these encounters are associated a dozen of myths of Nanda. Every village of Garhwal treats Gaura as her '**Dhiyan**' (married sister). There are some villages and castes which are considered as the in-laws of Gaura. However, it is so done only for enacting the ritual part as '**Sasuralis**' (in-laws). The same castes and villagers worship Gaura as their most loving 'Dhiyan'. Leaving out Rawain and Jaunsar-Babar (in the catchment of Yamuna river) regions, the entire mountain tract of Garhwal and Kumaun forms the kingdom of Gaura. Of course, the entire Kailash (Himalaya) belongs to her.

The rituals performed for Nanda fall into six-monthly, annual, six-yearly and twelve-yearly cycles. In the villages where the theatre rituals of Nanda are held, she is worshipped twice, on the Nandashtami of Bhadaun(between 25th Aug to 10th Sept)and on the Ashtami of Baishakh(around 14th April)

An Expression of the Miseries and Social Plight of Hill Women

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William S. Sax⁴ has interpreted Nanda myth and ritual as an expression of the miseries and social plight of hill women. Ramakant Beinjwal and Nand Kishore Hatwal⁵ have collaboratively edited a book on the festivals and processions of Nanda Devi. Bhuvan Nautiyal⁶ authored a small booklet on the Stations of Halt of Nanda Devi Raj Jat'(Nanda Devi Procession).

Various Plays on Nanda

Purohit and William S.Sax⁷ have also authored a play 'Sri Nanda Devi Raj Jat' (2000) which was produced by Gratas Rang Mandal, 'Shailnut', Srinagar and various other theatre groups . In the play, the authors have devised the use of the mask of Lata in a particular scene. The play was even directed by Purohit in Germany engaging as artistes the students of South Asian Institute, Heidelberg (Germany). **Ramesh Pokhariyal Nishank**⁸, the present Chief Minister of Uttarakhand, has authored a Rahul Sanskritayan Award-winning book on Nanda Raj Jat which contains not only information on the procession but also beautiful pictures of the procession.

Episodic Play and Performance

The theatrical performances attached with Nanda tradition are 'episodic' in nature. All of the episodes-'Mw:r-Morin', 'Narad', 'Ganeshuri Bal', 'Ishwar raja', 'Gaura Mai', 'Brahma-Vishnu', 'Kauriya Rishis', 'Suraj Pattar', 'Lata-Lati', 'Ganni-Ganna', 'Chor-Pattar', 'Bagh Pattar', Chakkar Ganna and Thakkar Ganna, Ruriya Rurkyan, Baar Pattar , 'Gopichand', and 'Phurcheli' are episodic in character.

Nanda and Epic Theatre

One thing which keeps them connected with each other is the myth of Nanda which is sung in a continuum by a narrative singer called '**Bhaan**' who, in fact, is a director and narrator of these theatrical enactments. Otherwise, each episode is capable of maintaining its distinctiveness and identity. They do not rely on any way on any other episode for completion as in Epic Theatre. Similarly these episodes do not have any direct relationship with each other. Even if the sequence of these episodes is changed, there would not be any big difference. The total presentation is in the form of narrating and reconstructing mythical and modern history.

The ritual elements inherent in these dramatic performances also play crucial role in distancing the audience from being completely engrossed. There come many moments when the audience bursts into laughter. This also prevents them being emotionally involved. So, the dramatic sequences performed in Nanda tradition abound in Brechtian elements. There is also a kind of psychological distance between the performed piece and the audiences.

Brechtian Communication of Nanda

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In a **Brechtian way** the exposition of the story of Nanda and its communication by suitable means of alienation constitute the main performance of the *pattar* (character in mask) dance at Lata village on the second of *Baisakhi*. The story is set out, brought forward through the Bhaan's central narration as a whole, and by "mask-makers, costume designers, composers and choreographers."⁹

Early in the morning the character of Narada wearing his mask and appropriate costume enters the arena. He is accompanied by a professional Jaagar singer and a senior singer of the village. The latter is supposed to sing to Narada the three ages of the origin and growth of the universe. They slowly move around the arena in a circular formation on the low-pitched beats of *dhol* and *damaun*. The *pattar* of Ishwar (Maheshwar) appears when his cue in the narrative appears. Thus appear all the characters.

The entire dramatic sequence is looked upon as a spectacle and a performance whose text is known beforehand by the audience. If so, the audience is aware of the fine and weak points of performance. They sit detached taking care of their comfort and suitable space in the crowd and socialize with one another.

Brecht consistently tried to find out such theatrical means and techniques which helped dispelling any kind of illusion of reality. He uses music for achieving his goal.

Brecht prescribes that music sets forth the text. It should be communicative. Brecht not only set the musicians along with their orchestra to the full view of audiences but also displayed the song numbers in the background for dispelling any illusion. The role of music is very crucial and significant in **the theatre of Nanda cycle** as well. The musicians in the Nanda cycle of plays along with their musical instruments like *Dhol*, *Damaun*, Cymbals, trumpets, and so on are not only fully visible but are a part of *dramatis personae*. Bhaan, the singer-cum-drum player, has to interact with every character. The music in the theatre under study prepares the audiences to face the problems and difficulties which are the integral part of life and cannot be averted. The Bhaan recites the story of Nanda and other mythical characters and tells how they struggled and in what way they overcame. In this way, the words of the songs are often didactic, full of messages. Getting refreshed by the music, the audience once again gets prepared for the struggle in life. The musical narratives are often enacted with the help of gestures and mimes. '**Gopichand**' episode is the perfect example of this. Gopichaand is a legend based on the life of a king who opted for asceticism and resultant immortality and deserted his sixteen thousand queens.

No Brechtian Titles

Of course, there are no titles of the various song numbers projected on the screens during the song sequence like **Brechtian Theater**. But the **Bhaan** introduces the characters one by one by singing on a particular rhythm and *taal*, attributive to the character. The music

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conveys and differentiates the distinctiveness of various characters. A long stretch of *Dhol* music is played to establish the identity of characters through a particular way of dancing. This stretch of time is much longer than the realistic theatre demands. Thus, in the very beginning any scope for illusion or reality is distanced.

Symbolic Costumes

Influenced by the traditional Chinese performances, **Brecht** advocated the use of ‘**Symbolic Costumes**’. In the theatre under study, the symbols are frequently used to single out particular characters. For signaling those out, suitable costumes are picked up for different characters.

In ‘**Gopichand**’ episode, the male dancers wear royal coats and crowns, while the female dancers put on elaborate costumes and jewelleries of *Bhotia* tradition. In the same episode, an interesting character **Khankar Buddya** who remains present all through the play wears the dress of a clown and a hide mask.

The costumes and properties are chosen with the view to make him as ugly as possible because his sole function is to regain the performance space occupied unnecessarily by the audiences during intervals. He wears the mask of a goat hide with horse bells around his waist. He has a piece of goat hide in one hand but more importantly in other hand he holds a stick extensively used for keeping away the audience from the performance place. In this way, detachment on the part of audience is also achieved. They remain conscious with this fact that they are watching the performance, not the real occurrence.

For **Laata** and **Laati**, a naïve and retarded couple, the costumes are prepared in such a way that they appear as grotesque and miserable as possible. ‘**Gaura Mai**’ (folk nae of Nanda Devi) appears wearing the folk costume of a woman to show that she is the part of the same culture.

Natural Setting – Open Space

Brecht held the opinion that the set should appear as natural as possible. He did not favor much-decorated and elaborated set designs. He simply used the tools which were very essential. The set-designers were instructed in advance that the designed sets should not give the illusion of real rooms or locality. Just is the case with **the theatre of Nanda cycle**. The plays are enacted in open space. The acting place is surrounded by the audience. The bone-fire and lamps have been the traditional sources of the lighting arrangement. Presently, some skeletal means of lighting arrangements are being used but not extensively. The village courtyard is treated as the meeting place of gods, and the surrounding houses as divine mansions or hermitages.

Assuming the Roles of Material Objects

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In ‘**Gopichand**’ play, actors are asked to act as certain material objects as the situation demands. Sometimes, they become the trees by raising both their hands and so on. They are often used as if they are equipments, natural objects, animals and so forth just by showing certain gestures suitable to reflect the image. When Gopichand flees through the seven gates of his palace to become a Sanyasi (an ascetic), the gates are shown by pairs of men holding high their joined hands. In a Brechtian way, they become human sets.

Plenty of Masks and the Function of Masks in Epic-like Theatre

Brecht writes that the first condition for achievement of the ‘**Alienation Effect**’ is that “the actor must invest what he has to show with a definite gest of showing.”¹⁰ In **the theatre of Nanda cycle**, most of the characters don masks. They are distinguished by wearing particular masks. They do not have the opportunity to show histrionics. There is no place for the use of eye movements and facial expressions while performing as the actors have to act with their faces utterly covered with the masks suitable for particular characters.

‘**Mwa:r-Morin**’ episode has many instances of the use of gestures and mimes. When the reader of a letter brought in by a postman informs Mwa:r that his wife’s leg has been fractured and rendered useless. Mwa:r speaks nothing, but only moves his head and looks obliquely at the reader. When ‘Bhaan’ asks him to describe the means and manners of his journey. He only makes mimetic actions of his travelling on a bus. Walking on foot is shown by trotting. Reaching to the high altitude is shown by climbing up.

‘**Laata-Laati**’ episode provides a huge amount of entertainment with the help of gestures shown by its protagonists. When asked by ‘Bhaan’, Laata starts showing the gesture of massaging Laati’s feet, upwards her legs and towards the thighs much to the amusement of the audience. He sometimes holds her feet in a painful grip. Infuriated by this gesture, Lati retaliates by kicking him back but Laata keeps pulling her leg and when she falls, he drags her around the arena.

The whole myth of ‘**Gopichand**’ is enacted through dance mimes. The two male and nine female characters enact their parts dancing and alternatively interacting in mimetic ways. The actors seem to be conveying the story by making use of gestures and mimes and, thus, averting any chance of any kind of illusion of reality.

Everything is Natural, No Imposition of Doctrines of Theatre

The actors of **the theatre of Nanda cycle** never had the privilege to have a director indoctrinated in **Brechtian** theatre philosophy who suggested them to make extra efforts to prevent the audiences from having hypnotic tension or **empathy**. They were never told how the alienation effect is achieved. This is rather an inherent quality of this theatre.

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The Bhaan is not only the director, narrator, musician, anchor, all in one, but also acts inadvertently as a reporter, describing what has gone before and what is going to happen. Narration in Brechtian theatre was used to jolt the audiences from immersion, and fascination.

The Bhaan, while narrating, never pretends to seek the concentration or attention of the audience. He directly addresses the audience and characters. Purohit writes on 'Narad' episode, "...Narad begins the ritual of the dance-drama performance of the day, singing the myth of origin. With the progression of the myth, the other masked characters appear, the 'Bhaan' addresses them straight, and they enact their parts"¹¹

No Illusion of Reality or Hypnotic Tension

There is no scope for the illusion of reality or hypnotic tension in this theatre. Even the characters are often found talking to the audiences. Even the audience is sometimes required to be the part of the enactment. Instances of the conversation between spectators and characters are abundant. Here is an example from '**Mwa:r:-Morin**' episode:

The Postman delivers a letter, supposed to have come from his wife, to Mwa:r. As **Mwa:r** is illiterate, **a man from the spectators** comes and reads the letter for him:

Mwa:r: Read my letter, please! (Looks askance)

Reader: A letter has come! From Morin, your wife (says loudly as if Mwa:r were hard of hearing).

Mwa:r: Read, then, what is written in it?

Reader: (In the same pitch reads) Her leg has been fractured. One of the legs has been rendered useless, says the letter!

Mw:r: (Only moves his head, looking obliquely at the reader, and speaks nothing.

Reader: (reading) Her nose has got twisted.¹²

Another example of the audience taking part in the enactment from '**Laata-Laati**' episode would prove the point:

Bhaan: Take out your 'Yagyopavit' (sacred thread).

Laata: (With great difficulty, pulls it out)
(Now another of **the senior members of the community** enters.)

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The member: O, Laata, burn incense to gods.¹³

To Conclude

It can thus be conclusively said that in as much as the Brechtian Theatre rigorously tries to encourage the audience to forget that they are watching the play so does the theatre of Nanda cycle. However in the latter the effect is not labored but is the natural outcome of the traditional structure. It is in fact also the character of the pan-Indian theatre tradition. The audience never forgets where they are and why they are present there. The theatre of Nanda cycle inherently has all those elements which Brecht, throughout his life, tried to employ in his theatre to achieve ‘A-effect’ or ‘alienation effect’.

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