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Brechtian Theories and Practices in the Theatre of Hill Jaatra

D. R. Purohit and Hemant Kumar Shukla

Abstract

The present investigation focuses on the theatre of Hill Jaatra of Kumaon region of Uttarakhand from the view point of Brechtian idiom. Hill Jaatra is the festival of pastoralists and agriculturists which provides ample opportunity of entertainment and enjoyment to the agriculturists, pastoralists, laborers, and workers.

The present paper tries to assess and establish theatrical paradigms and structures which are similar to Brecht's theory or depart from it. In the same process, it has attempted to highlight the profound aesthetic content and value of the Uttarakhand's theatre of Hill Jaatra.

Key Words: Hill Jaatra, epic actor, 'Indra Jaatra', Mahar, Athaun, episodic, empathy, complete transformation.

Hill Jaatra

Hill Jaatra is made of two words - 'Hill' and 'Jaatra'. In local dialect, 'Hill' means 'mud', 'wet' and 'Jaatra' means 'procession'. 'Hill Jaatra', some people think, is a distortion of

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‘*Hal* (plough) Jaatra’. According to them, it simply means the adoration of plough which is the fundamental agricultural instrument used to furrow the land. Dev Singh Pokharia¹ writes, “The word ‘Hill’ is related to Sanskrit word ‘Ilah’ which means the Earth. ‘Hill’ and ‘Jaatra’ denote ‘mud’ and ‘procession’ respectively in Kumaoni language. Thus, ‘Hill Jaatra’ stands for the procession held when the earth is mud-spattered and damp.”

The Ritual

‘Hill Jaatra’ is a unique processional theatre enacted at the time of rainy season when the Earth is mud-spattered and soggy. It acquires its name thus because this annual processional festival is celebrated with a pomp and show in the month of ‘*Bhadrapad*’ which is essentially a rainy season in Uttarakhand. This is basically a ritual exercise in the form of processional theatre.

This festival-ritual-theatrical exercise reflects the folk’s passionate urge to bring about immense prosperity in their agriculture centered economic activities. The folks of dozens of villages of the ‘*SoreValley*’ wait enthusiastically for this dearly loved festival to be held.

Even the wedded daughters of the region, presently residing in far-off places, report to their parental homes to take part in this much-awaited festival. The aforementioned ‘Sore Valley’ is a part of district-Pithoragarh of Uttarakhand, located in very panoramic ‘**Kumaon region**’ and adjoining Nepal-Tibbet border. This valley is one of the beautiful valleys, not only of Uttarakhand but of India as well. In this valley is located a small village ‘*Kumaur*’, known for being the original habitat of chivalrous, courageous, valorous and gracious feudal lords of the bygone days called ‘*Mahar*’. Their inherent chivalrous instinct fetched them the title-‘*Bharh*’.

Celebration of the Festival – the Story

The festival is celebrated in the memory of four ‘Mahar’ brothers-Kunwar Singh (Kumaur village), Chihaj Singh (Chauchal), Beda Singh and Jakh Singh. D.R.Purohit², Prabhat Kumar Upreti³, and Yogesh Khanna⁴ have carried pilot research to find out the details of ‘Hill Jaatra’. The legend has it that these four ‘*Mahar*’ brothers succeeded in killing a man-eater leopard. The Chand King of Nepal had already announced a fat reward on the head of this voracious man-eater. The mahar brothers killed the leopard cutting off one of its legs; they showed to the King as an evidence of their chivalrous feat. The King, being immensely delighted on the gallant feat, granted to them a vast area of land. Kunwar Singh got *Kumaur*, Chaihaj Singh-*Chaihaj*, Beda Singh-*Vin*, and Jakh Singh received *Jakhani*. These villages still exist in the ‘Sore Valley’ and are known after these heroes.

As the King was greatly impressed by the heroism of these courageous brothers, he invited them to take part in ‘**Indra Jaatra**’ festival which is celebrated during the

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Dushera festival in Nepal. The rituals of ‘Indra Jaatra’ festival were to begin with a sacrifice of a he-buffalo at the outset. But heching the he-buffalo became impossible owing to its long horns curled upon its neck and the beginning of the festival was held up until the He-buffalo was hacked in a single stroke. The situation grew critical with the passing of each second. The fleeting emotions of uncertainties and doubts crept up in the minds of the assembled people, making them absolutely restless.

It so happened that the ‘*Mahar*’ brothers were present there on the invitation of the King. Eventually, they took up the challenge. They made the use of an intelligent trick. One of the ‘Mahar’ brothers reached to the elevated place and tempted the He-buffalo towards soft green grass held by the former. As the he-buffalo raised his head to eat the green grass, his horns slanted below the neck. Instantly, another ‘*Mahar*’ brother grabbed the opportunity and in no time cut the neck in a single stroke, much to the relief of worried people including the King himself. Already overwhelmed, the King became ecstatic to watch valor coupled with intelligence of the ‘Mahar’ brothers and asked them for the reward.

The ‘Mahar’ brothers had become very impressed by the way the mask dance drama of Nepal ‘Indra Jaatra’ had brought the spirit of enthusiasm, cheerfulness and brotherhood among the people of Nepal. They wanted the same for their people as well. They requested the King to grant them certain masks, chiefly that of *Lakhe* (*Lakhiya*) to celebrate the same festival in their respective villages. The King was more than happy not only to grant them permission but also generously provided them masks essential for the festival like ‘*Hiran-Cheetal*’, ‘*Bear*’, ‘*Galya Bald*’ (Sleeping lazy ox), ‘*Badi Haul*’ (grown up pair of oxen), and the central mask ‘*Lakhiya Bhoot*’. ‘Lakhiya Bhoot’ is known as ‘Lakhe’ in the Indra Jaatra festival of Kathmandu, Nepal. Anne Vergati⁵ says that the word means ‘demon’. But in ‘Hill Jaatra’, ‘Lakhiya Bhoot’ is supposed to be twelfth incarnation of god ‘Shiva’, says Yogesh Khanna⁶.

The Starting Point

Consequently, Kunwar Singh’s village ‘Kumaur’ was the first to initiate the celebration under the changed name of ‘Hill Jaatra’ instead of ‘Indra Jaatra’ of Nepal. As it was wisely decided to celebrate it during the rainy season when the fields are muddy, wet symbolizing the agricultural activities necessary to the livelihood of the farmers. It so got its name. Apart from ‘Kumaur’, this festival is also celebrated in the adjoining villages like-‘Bajeti’, ‘Paun’, ‘Pagatra’, ‘Seri Chanali’, ‘Puran’, ‘Dewal Thal’, ‘Palkot’ etc.

Yogesh Khanna⁷ refers to some of the people who suppose that ‘*Mahar*’ brothers learnt ‘Hill Jaatra’ from ‘Baldia’ (One who makes the bull dance) to whom the credit goes to organize the ‘Hill Jaatra’ for the first time in ‘Sore Valley’. But all of them are agree on one point that it was ‘*Mahar*’ brothers who initiated and consolidated the celebration.

When It is Celebrated

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The festival is celebrated during '*Aathaun*' which continues incessantly for a period of eight days. During this period, women and men, irrespective of their financial condition, wear colorful traditional dresses and perform the ritual exercises. The '*Athaun*' ends with '**Hill Jaatra**', a mask-dance-processional play.

During '*Athaun*', the people worship '**Gora-Mahesh**' deities and present ritual enactment of sending *Gaura* to '*Kailash*' (a mountain) under the escort of her husband Maheshwar. For the purpose women hoist the image of *Gaura* made up of a pitcher and leaves of cons fixed inside it. They take out a procession around the village, a symbolic journey of *Gaura* Maheshwar, and end it by distributing the shoots of leaves as '*Prasad*' (divine blessings). Eventually, before sending off '*Mahesh*', an auspicious day is selected for the enactment of the play '*Hill Jaatra*'. On the day of the enactment of the play, the artists cleanse and paint their respective wooden masks right from the morning till noon as the masks are regarded to be very divine, sacred and sanctimonious.

Brecht's Episodic Way of Presentation

Brecht liked the idea of presenting the story in 'episodic' way. He was of the opinion that each episode should stand for itself.⁸ He centered his emphasis on making his plays to be episodic, each scene to be independent and complete in itself.

Hill Jaatra is basically a ritual exercise dramatized and enacted. It consists of many '**episodes**' which portray a variety of characters. It is 'episodic' in its character. Not a single episode relies on any other episode for its completion. Each scene is self-regulating and complete.

The episodes of '*The Horse-rider*', '*Burhiya*', '*Dahiwallah*', '*Hukkawallah*', '*Hiran-cheetal*', '*Lakhiya Bhoot*' etc come one after another and the characters enact their respective parts to the accompaniment of musical instruments.

The pamphlet⁹ of Navodaya Parvateeya Kala Kendra, Pithoragarh says that Lakhiya bhoot is also known as '*Jateshwar*' or '*Lateshwar*'. Each episode has its individuality without any dependence of preceding or succeeding events. The articles of D.R.Purohit¹⁰, Prabhat Kumar Upreti¹¹ and Yogesh Khanna¹² throw light on the sequence of these episodes in '*Hill Jaatra*'.

1. **First act of the event** is the procession of *sayana* heads and senior citizens of the village who go to *Kot* (the place where Lakhiya is housed) and move from *Kot* building to the arena of Hil Jaatra holding red flags and ensigns in their hands.

2. **The Jharuwallah:** ‘Jharuwallh’ makes the appearance in the arena, sweeps and cleanses the place displaying ‘gestures’ and ‘mime’. He also applies his *Jharu* (broom) on some of the spectators to produce spastic comedy.
3. **The Horse-rider:** When every one is silent in curiosity, suddenly there is in distance a sound of neighing of the horses, and sound of their neck bells. It sends a commotion in the crowd of the spectators. A character sitting on a horse made of twigs and grass runs around as a horse rider showing different kinds of acrobatics. Then follows the series of the ‘*Swaangs*’.
4. **The Burhiya (Old Woman):** An artist comes dressed as a village woman, with a wooden hammer (used for breaking clay blocks in the field) in one hand and a doll on the other, symbolizing her grand children. The woman plays as cutting the shrubs and bushes and breaking the clay blocks showing that hill women can never be relieved of their hard duties even in the old age. She is free to improvise her role.
5. **The Dahiwallah:** A boy actor enters with a wooden pot containing curd in his hand and shouting all around “*Dahi Le Lo!, Dahi Le Lo!*” (Buy Curd! Buy Curd!). In fact it is white lime paste in his container and not the curd. As a part of traditional fun making, he pastes the lime on the faces of his acquaintances or an innocuous stranger. The prank is taken as an act of giving *Prasaad* (divine blessings) of the festival. None takes offence to that. People rather incite him to paste lime on them. Some spectators even give a hot chase to Dahiwallah and running behind him slip into the mud of the field. The character also takes liberty with men and women for pasting the lime.
6. **The Bear:** Suddenly the mask of the bear enters and the horse rider, the old woman and the Dahiwallah run for their safety. The bear acts as giving a fright to children, women and old men, and thus present a comedy of farce.
7. **The Barber:** Then enters a barber with one foot long shaving- knife, forcibly attempting to shave any man standing there and improvising a rich comic script for him. He would poke fun at the audience whose beard is hypotrophic or hypertrophic in growth.
8. **The Hukkawallah:** Then enters the Hukka wallah with farcical devices to be followed by a fisherman who carries a jute bag as fishing net. He throws the net at his will upon any man or woman of his choice and thus produces rocking laughter.
9. **A Harnessed Oxen Pair’ and ‘The Ploughman’:** The next group of characters is a harnessed oxen pair being driven by a ploughman stamping the

ground with their hoops. The oxen pairs are of three varieties: *Nani Haul* (a pair of calves), *Thuli Haul* (a pair of mature oxen), and *Galiya Bald* (the lazy sleeping ox). This ox is also known as Aduwa ox. The ploughman tries to harness another oxen but the sleeping ox either refuses to move forward or just lies down on the ground. The ploughman is free to improvise a scintillating script on the ox. He may compare the ox with the District Magistrate, or with an MLA of the region or with a local boy. Galiya Bald is a very popular character next only to Lakhiya Bhoot. A hefty and energetic artiste is selected for the role because he has not only to create comedy but also to roar a lot terrifying the imps standing around. The ox wears sharp bells around his neck, roars and stamps his hoops on the ground. He tears through the crowd although tied to the tether by his master. He even drags his master behind him all the time he runs on the periphery of the arena.

10. **Hiran-Cheetal:** Then enters a colorful and beautiful figure. It is the two characters sometimes four wearing the hide colored dress of as deer and *cheetal*. The characters strut through the arena. The dance is looked upon with a sense of devotion. The Hiran carries the codified meaning of the divine origin of sexuality. The villagers therefore try to beautify the character as much as possible and give him the best kind of choreography.
11. They are followed by a group of '**Bhajan chorus**' singing to the accompaniment of *dholak*, cymbals, *hurka*, percussions etc. The chorus has in it female characters, young men brandishing swords and sticks. The scene glides into the play of women dances singing and planting seedlings in the fields. Their songs are very melancholy and nostalgic. This scene also gives space for singing '**Malushahi**' or '**Hurkiya Bol**'.
12. **The Lakhiya Bhoot:** Then suddenly a long tattoo of *Nagaras* (Drums) is heard in the distance which is a sure signal to other characters to vacate the space. All the characters except for the *Putari* women leave the arena. The women have to play their role of singing in the field. The rattle of drums reaches its crescendo, a huge bodied character waving yak whisks with both his hand, along a weird tuft of hair on his head, a black cloak on his body, a garland of *rudraksa* beads on his neck, red shot eyes and large canines –enters the arena. He is Lakhiya Bhoot. Lakhiya is controlled by two thick ropes held by two stout men called "Cheer Baitaal". The role of the terror striking form of the twelfth incarnation of Lord Shiva is brought alive. All the devotees stand bowed to their presiding deity, i.e., Lakhiya and pray for the safety and wellbeing of their homes, families, village and town. With the same *tandava* posture, Lakhiya moves through the arena and blesses each devotee.
13. The mela ends, people move to their houses, so does Lakhiya to the '*Kot*' where a goat sacrifice is made to propitiate him. '*Gaura*' and '*Maheshwar*' are

also given a send off to the tune of ‘Aathaun song’ and drums and trumpets. The effigies of ‘Gaura’ and ‘Maheshwar’ are immersed at a sight near the Gulu Devta temple of the village.

Music in Jaatra

Music plays predominant role in this enactment. Just like epic theatre, music in ‘Hill Jaatra’ moves the story forward. Musicians, to the accompaniment of local musical instruments like *Dhol-damaun*, trumpet, *Hurka* etc, sing the songs which are enacted by various actors in very impressive way. In this performance, music directly addresses the audiences and shares their concerns, aspirations, pressures and above all philosophy. The music is utilized effectively as the narrator/singer, on the basis of his memory, recites the story. Clear and direct message is imparted to the audience through equally direct, matter-of-fact music. The music is instructive and communicative. Just before the entrance of ‘Lakhiya Bhoot’, a long tattoo of Nagaras is a sure signal for the audiences to vacate the space. The music communicates the same thing before the entrances of ‘Horse-rider’ and ‘Hiran-Cheetal’.

Direct Speech Addressed to the Audience

While enacting their parts, the actors are often seen directly speaking to the audience. The actors’ indulgence in conversing with the audiences is very interesting characteristics of this enactment. The actors’ direct address and conversation with the audiences break any illusion of reality and unwanted hypnotic tension. Actors’ communication with the audience provides a great deal of opportunity to the actors to establish the lively relationship with the audience sharing their views with them.

Epic Actor Forbidden from Complete Transformation

Brecht tried various technical devices to discourage the actor’s natural tendency to create empathy. In case of ‘Hill Jaatra, the actors wearing various masks of different character except for Ladhiya Bhoot never actually have the illusion of becoming their respective characters. The movement and verbal patterns are developed to the highest levels of abstraction.

It is essential for **epic actor** to forbid himself to ‘complete transformation’ in the character he is showing. He should not become the character he is portraying but show that, by putting forward character’s way of behaviour to the best of his abilities. Once the idea of total transformation is abandoned, the actor speaks his part as if he is improvising a character like a story-teller.¹³

The actor playing ‘Dahiwallah’ has scope for improvising his acting. ‘Dahiwallah’ is often found indulging in exchanging comments with the audience. There are no ready-made dialogues to deliver. The people from the audience and the character playing

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‘Dahiwallah’ exchange their comments instinctively, much to the enjoyment of the rest of the audience. They have to respond quickly in the extempore way. In this way, ‘Dahiwallah’ has the prerogative to improvise himself. The actor just shows the character of ‘Dahiwallah’. His ‘complete transformation’ is impossible. Sometimes, some of the audiences unknowingly start to act while talking to the actor enacting his part. The spoken words without any preparation add a distinct flavor to the atmosphere. This spontaneity leaves no room for any kind of ‘empathy’.

Comic Elements in the Jaatra

The episodes in which ‘Dahiwallah’ and ‘Galya Bald’ are portrayed, offers huge amount of entertainment. The most hilarious character is ‘Galya Bald’. It is a sure symbol of laziness, inactiveness, giddiness and irresponsibility. The ploughman makes fun of it. The amount of the laughter keeps increasing with the Ploughman’s consistent comparison of ‘Galya Bald’ with famous political personalities, office-bearers, government officials, and even a local doctor.

Brecht deliberately preferred comedies over tragedies. The tragedies are prone to create ‘empathy’ among the audience. In these episodes, there is no place for ‘empathy’ at all. The audiences aren’t carried with the actors’ performance. Most of the characters are performed in a humorous way.

Prose and Poetry Mixed

Brecht mixed prose and poetry, regular rhythmic poetry with irregular rhythm, the regular prose with heightened prose and standard German with native dialects. The actors playing their respective characters are bound to deliver their dialogues with changing vocal pitch in this enactment. The mixture of poetical singing with entertaining prose dialogues is the characteristics of this enactment. Constant mingling of Kumaoni dialect with Hindi language makes the spoken words non-realistic. The dialogues often are abounding in pithy sayings, folk adages, and proverbs spoken in native dialect Kumaoni as well as Hindi language.

Ample Opportunity for Entertainment

So, this festival of pastoralists and agriculturists called ‘Hill Jaatra’ provides ample opportunity of entertainment and enjoyment to the agriculturists, pastoralists, laborers, and workers. It is associated with the painstaking exercise of paddy-plantation and other pastoral and agricultural labor of the rainy season. This festival is marked by enthusiastic procession of the villagers, enchanting folk dances, melodious singing, ardent worship of gods and goddesses, and dramatic performances.

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