



Nautanki An Operatic Theatre

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The National School of Drama, New Delhi, presented in September 1976, a Nautanki play, *Laila Majnu*, based on the popular romantic tale. The students staged the play under the guidance of the veteran Nautanki actor-singer Giriraj, who was assisted by a past student of the School, Anil Chaudhry of Mathura, one of the major centres of Nautanki theatre. This important event was an effort to relate our contemporary theatre work to the traditional theatre and was also part of the process of revival and revitalisation of the traditional theatre.

▲ *Laila Majnu*, a National School of Drama production.

This production gave the students a unique experience in operatic singing, and a feeling for the dramatic use of music in theatre. It is in the music of Nautanki that lies its unusual theatrical vitality. The play was presented in the traditional style on an open-air stage, though certain modern elements of theatrical production, such as blocking and grouping of characters, use of levels, and multiplicity of locales, were introduced. They added a new dimension to this traditional form, and made it more acceptable to urban audiences.

There have been several attempts in the last two decades directed towards re-forging creative links with the Nautanki form. In the mid-fifties Habib Tanvir mounted his controversial production of the Sanskrit classic *Mrichchhakatika* in Hindi translation entitled *Mitti ki Gadi* and called it 'Nai' (new) Nautanki. He did not convert the classic into an opera of the Nautanki style but used certain of the musical elements of Nautanki, and also its free and flexible structure. This production shocked the purists; but it did provide the possibility of treating the classics in a contemporary theatre idiom.

In 1960-61, when the present author was Honorary General Secretary of the Bharatiya Natya Sangh, the first Folk Drama Festival was held in Delhi and sponsored by the Sangh. The Jatra of West Bengal, the Maach of Madhya Pradesh were presented along with two Nautanki plays by a group of traditional Nautanki players. An attempt was made to restore the traditional mode, its values of production and the authentic music of Nautanki, all of which were, because of various influences, becoming hybrid; the form was seen to be disintegrating and losing its character. Mohan Upreti, folk-artist and expert in traditional music, and Inder Razdan, an expert of folk theatre designs and crafts, were associated with me in this experimental production.

Later, in 1970, Shanta Gandhi, then a teacher at the National School of Drama, worked with a Nautanki group on *Amar Singh Rathor*, the popular Nautanki play. She introduced certain elements of the modern theatre, such as mime, movements and choreography, to add a dynamic quality to the otherwise static performance-structure of Nautanki, without in any way disturbing its basic design. There have also been other efforts in recent years in the same direction: Dr. Laxmi Narain Lal's *Ek Satya Harisha Chandra* and Poet Sarveshwar's *Bakari*, both political satires. Currently Bansi Kaul is rehearsing the Gogol classic, *The Inspector General*, as adapted by Mudrarakshasa.

The Hindi-speaking region has a rich tradition of folk and popular theatre. The two great epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, and the *Bhagavad Purana* have been a source of rich thematic material, while the lyrics of the medieval poets of Brajbhasha, like Suradasa and Nandadasa, and Tulsidasa's epic poem *Ramacharitamanas* have furnished textual material of poetic excellence.

From the highly developed and processional Leela Plays—the Rama-leela and Rasaleela—to plays in a lighter vein such as Naqal and Bhandaiti,

there is an amazing variety of forms and presentational styles. Between these two categories lie operatic forms like the Nautanki, along with other forms of the same genre, such as the Swang and Bhagat (also of Uttar Pradesh), the Maach of Madhya Pradesh, the Khyal of Rajasthan and the Sang of Haryana.

These operatic forms evolved in the early eighteenth century, from the Akharha or Dangal tradition of singing and recitation of ballads and narratives like the Lawani, Khyal, Lahachari, Kajari, Rasia and Turra-Kalangi. But they are also related to similar minor dramatic forms with predominant elements of music and dance going back to the classical theatrical tradition. They seem to carry forward the medieval theatre conventions of dramatic recitation of epics and ballads. The *Natyashastra* and other later treatises on dramatic art mention minor forms or the *Uparupaka*-s, such as the *Natya Rasak*, *Sattak* and *Sangitaka* with similar elements as in the Nautanki and other variants of the Saangita tradition.

A proper study of Nautanki as an operatic form prevalent in Uttar Pradesh can be made only by placing it in the larger context of earlier as well as contemporary theatrical forms in the same operatic tradition. This vast popular operatic theatrical tradition of the Hindi region has been rightly categorised as Saangita by Ram Narain Agrawal, a scholar of this theatrical tradition. The earliest dramatic form in this tradition has been referred to as Swang in many poetic works of the early medieval period. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Amaroha (in the Moradabad District of Uttar Pradesh) developed as the main centre of these operatic plays; they were classed as Sang, Swang or Saangita. This Saangita theatrical tradition gradually migrated to other neighbouring regions. It is also related to the Leela plays, the Khyal, Bhagat and Swang, Amanat's *Inder-Sabha* of 1853 and the whole tradition of Sabha-plays, the tradition of the Rahas-plays at the court of Wajid Ali Shah, and finally to the medieval tradition of the dramatic recitation of epics and ballads.

While Nautanki, as part of the Saangita tradition, is related, both artistically and historically, to other forms such as the Sang or Swang, Bhagat, Khyal and Maach, it evolved certain distinctive features, especially in its own musical style. During its unbroken history of nearly a century it flourished in centres like Saharanpur, Muzaffarnagar, Moradabad, Meerut, Hathras, Etawa, Etah, Kanpur, Lucknow, Kannauj, Manipuri, Agra and Mathura. The most active centres at the beginning of this century were Amaroha, Kannauj, Kanpur and Hathras. These centres evolved their own special styles of singing.

There are several theories about the origin of the name Nautanki. But the most convincing is the theory that when the earlier Swang form of the Hathras region reached Kanpur in the Swang called *Shahzadi Nautanki*, it became so popular with the audiences that they started referring to the theatrical form itself as Nautanki. There are similar instances of a theatrical form being named after the first or most popular play in that form. *Bidesia* of Bihar, *Parijat-Haran*, the operatic play of the Bijapur region, and *Inder-Sabha* of Amanat are examples illustrating this pattern of nomenclature.

Dramatic Structure

Nautanki, as a dramatic form, stands midway between dramatic poetry and a fully developed literary drama. It also represents in many ways the conventions of the medieval theatre. The dramatic structure is rather simple; it is an episodic dramatisation of a narrative. The story line is straight, and the narrative unfolds with great fluidity, through small episodic units (like in the Rasaleela plays). These units are linked by the narrator known as Ranga, who is like the Sutradhara of the classical tradition. He introduces the episodes, helps to link them and provides essential information to the audience about those incidents which are not shown on the stage; he also summarises past events. Sometimes he describes the locale and, in some of his comments, he assumes the role of the playwright himself. Thus he plays a vital role in organising the narrative. But in recent years, the tendency has been to do away with the Ranga and organise the thematic material into a more formal dramatic mould. Some of his common utterances in the plays indicate his role as narrator:

दौहा : शीरोगुल को बंद कर, इधर लगा के ध्यान ।
हाज़रीन जलसा सुनौ, मज़मू आलीशान ॥

चौबोला : मज़मू आलीशान महोबा सुन्दर स्क नगर था ।
जहाँ मूप परिमाल का हँका बजता आठ पहर था ॥

From *Malkhan-Samar*

The Ranga also often concludes the play with a verse like the *Bharata-vakya* of classical Sanskrit drama.

स्वमस्तु कह नृपति को, दे अभीष्ट वरदान ।
जन पालन तारन प्रभू, हो गर अन्तरध्यान ॥

From *Harishchandra*

The Ranga, announcing action in prose, says:

जितेन्द्र को लेकर मृगेन्द्र इन्द्र का जाना । प्रमिला का हाथ
मलकर रह जाना, जंगल में जाकर जितेन्द्र का मृगेन्द्र से कहना ।

The Ranga frequently says:

अब आगे की दास्ताँ सुनिए खासो आम ।

or

यहीं पर छोड़ यह किस्सा सुनो अब हाल आगे का ।

or

सुन कर हाल इधर का सुनो माजरा उधर का ।

This simple dramatic structure is strengthened and sustained by a simple stage and economical staging methods. It is performed on a bare open platform-stage and, therefore, the writers have full freedom to orga-

nise the narrative material. They are not restricted in any way by considerations of the dramatic unities. The unlocalised, neutral acting area is non-representational; it is merely an arena for actors to demonstrate their art. It is given the specification of a locale through descriptions incorporated in the dialogue itself, or sometimes in the utterances of the Ranga. The actors' entries and exits are very informal; sometimes they remain present on the platform-stage all the time; by sitting near the musicians they suggest that they are no more engaged in the action. At an appropriate time they get up to recite and sing their lines and again get involved in the action.

Stage and Stage Conventions

The platform-stage of Nautanki is a point of departure in the development of the acting area, and in the relationship of the performer to the audiences. In most of the folk forms of a lighter variety, the performance is held on the ground-level, with the audiences sitting on all sides. In forms like Naqal and Bhandaiti, the performance takes place in the midst of the audience, in the open air or under a shamiana, and the seating is so arranged that passages and corridors are created right among the audience for the presentation of dramatic action. Besides, in the course of the performance, the spectators keep moving and shifting to accommodate the movement of the performers.

The platform-stage vitally changes the relationship of the performer to the audience, and also affects the gestures and movements of the actor. The actor suddenly becomes more imposing and his gestures and movements broader. The absence of scenery further helps the actor to heighten his gestures and movements. Any scenic design or an effort at a realistic presentation of locale works against the spirit of this kind of informal open air platform-stage. The spectators partially lose the sense of proximity to the actor, but they have the advantage of watching the performance from various points, changing positions as it proceeds. This audience response is quite different from that in the proscenium theatre, which is tethered to a frontal view of the performance. Often the performances are held in mofussil towns in bazar streets, chaurahas, city chauk areas, and sarais; the audience sit at ground level, on specially erected galleries, roof tops, balconies and trees, with residential houses and shops all round. A theatrical performance in such an environmental setting is constantly affected by elements and factors outside the domain of the theatre proper. The performance overflows into the outside area, with social activity influencing the performance.

Like all folk and traditional theatre, Nautanki is also an audience-conscious theatre. The actor is fully aware of the presence of his audience and is primarily a performer who wants to demonstrate his skills in recitation, singing, mime, and to entertain a responsive audience. The myths, legends and tales of romance and valour that he presents to his audience are part of their tradition and, therefore, there is a greater possibility of a shared dramatic experience. The audiences, in any case, are also fully familiar with the text since the Nautanki plays are read and recited a great deal, especially during the rainy season when performances are not held.

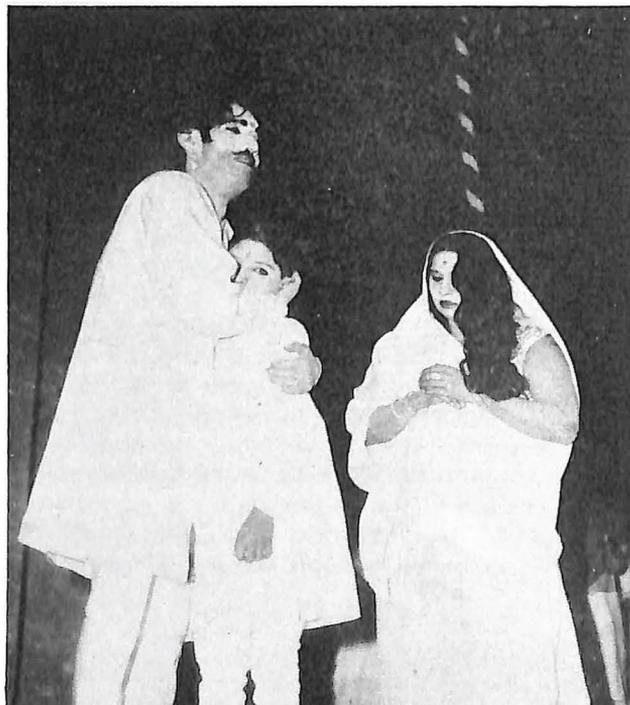
The audiences are also sensitive to the music of the Nautanki to which they respond enthusiastically.

One of the other interesting conventions of this theatre is the delivery of the dialogue. Each line of the verse dialogue is recited and sung by the actor-singer three times for the benefit of the audiences sitting on the three sides of the stage in three blocks. This most interesting convention has unfortunately been given up now because of the use of curtains, or because the audiences sit only in front of the stage facing the actors. Formerly the repetition of the dialogues helped to familiarize the audiences with the story and quite often with the entire text so that the music could be enjoyed at a deeper level. This convention of dialogue delivery also influenced the actor's movements; he moved from one side of the large platform-stage to the other in dance-like movements. When the Nakkara repeated a musical phrase, the actors used to present a brief sequence of dance. The actors' dance movements followed the beat of the Nakkara and were accentuated by it.

Themes

There is range and variety in the themes of Nautanki plays. They are drawn from all possible sources: epics, myths, folklore, legends, historical episodes, social events, and topical, even local stories of romance, of bravery and sacrifice. The tradition has always been alive to socio-political questions such as child marriage, dowry, untouchability, and has also depicted episodes from the freedom movement. This theatre has freely used tales of romance and bravery from Islamic tradition and thus contributed towards a cultural synthesis with the Hindu heritage.

From Satya Harishchandra.





From Amar Singh Rathor

Plays like *Rama Vanavasa*, *Sita Harana*, *Parashurama*, *Virata Parva*, *Karna*, *Draupadi Chira Harana*, *Shishupala-Vadha* and *Abhimanyu* are based on the epics; *Raja Bhartrahari*, *Raja Bhoja*, *Guru Gorakhanatha*, *Raja Gopichandra*, *Nala-Damyanti*, *Savitri-Satyawan*, *Harishchandra*, *Shravana Kumara*, *Bhakta Puranmala*, *Prahlada*, *Manjha Rani* treat popular legends, some of which have served as dramatic source material for many folk and traditional forms all over the country. *Heer-Ranjha*, *Roop-Vasanta*, *Nihala Dey*, *Sohni-Mahiwal*, and *Dhola-Maru* deal with folk romances. There are several plays based on the ballad *Alha-Khand*. *Samrata Ashoka*, *Sikandara*, *Amar Singh Rathor*, *Maharana Pratap*, *Anarkali* are based on historical episodes; and *Jhansi ki Rani*, *Khune-Nahaq* (on Jalliaanwala Bagh), *Bhagat Singh*, *Subhash Chandra* deal with heroes and episodes of the freedom movement. *Laila Majnu* and *Shirin-Farhad* are based on Muslim romantic tales. *Raksha-Bandhan*, *Beti ka Sauda*, *Anmol Grihasthi* handle social themes; and *Sultana Daku*, *Amar Sati* treat topical events. *Ankha ka Nasha*, *Aurat ka Pyar* and *Shahzadi Nautanki* have a touch of eroticism. Sometimes the Nautanki players also produce scripts based on popular Hindi films such as *Anarkali*, *Mother India* and *Dil ki Pyas*.

Verse Dialogue

The most interesting element in the Nautanki form is the verse dialogue, which has a variety of metres, enriching both the poetic and musical content of the play. The writers use metres from Sanskrit, Hindi and Urdu, and also create new metrical forms through various combinations and permutations. Dialogues are often based on popular and folk melodies and on tunes from the nineteenth century Parsi theatre. They also lean heavily on well-known film tunes. Some of the forms in vogue in Nautanki plays are: *Bahertabil*, *Chaubola*, *Doha*, *Lawani*, *Thumri*, *Dadra*, *Sher*, *Ghazal* and *Qawwali*. Among these, *Chaubola* and *Bahertabil* are the most popular.



From *Laila Majnu*

Chaubola is an old metrical form and basic to the Nautanki, and the entire Saangita tradition. In its musical rendering, it is eminently suited to the accompaniment of the Nakkara. It is capable of expressing various moods through appropriate *raga*-s. It can also serve to describe scenes and locales, and can be used for dramatic dialogues. It is capable of amazing musical variations and regional styles. *Bahertabil* is an equally popular metrical form, well-suited to Nakkara music, with a recitative quality that makes for strong dramatic effect.

Till the 1930's Nautanki actor-singers used to present a brief dance pattern after singing the *Chaubola* as is the practice in many other traditional theatre forms. This practice has been an integral part of the Saangita tradition. Amanat's *Inder-Sabha*, written in 1853, has stage-directions suggesting the presentation of dance sequences. Now these have been given up and the Nautanki performance has become flat, static, and lost much of its lustre.

The following examples of *Chaubola* and *Bahertabil* indicate the musical and theatrical potential of these song-forms:

दोहा : दिल उलफा सुलफै नहीं, बुरा हश्क का फंद ।
सनम शिताबी सेज चल, न जन मेरा फरजंद ॥

चौबोला : न जन मेरा फरजंद चन्द्रमुख, हँ हँ गले लगा लो ।
कहो न मौसी, माशुका अपनी सरकार बना लो ॥

हा-हा सारूँ पकेँ पैयाँ, सैयाँ अरमान भिटा लौ ।
जंग मचा लौ जीवन से , दिलजानी मजा उड़ा लौ ॥

दोहा : जान तुम पर निसार थी । वरुल की तलबगार थी ।
बड़ी उम्मीदवार थी ।
आए बड़ी मेहरबानी की, बंदी बेकरार थी ॥

बहरेतवील : न गृहस्थी का सुख कुछ हर्म है भिला,
न तो परमात्मा के ही घर के रहे ।
पाप का बोफ सर पर लदा है सड़ा,
न हघर के रहे ना उघर के रहे ॥

There are many dialogues in the Lawani form. Lawani, as a song-form, is prevalent over the whole of the Hindi-speaking region, and also in several other regions such as Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. It has greatly contributed to the origin and development of the operatic theatre not only of the Saangita tradition, but that of other regions. One such dialogue in Lawani in *Malkhan Samar* indicates its theatrical quality:

सजी हुईं दोनों और सेना, लड़न के खातिर निकल रही है ।
हघर है फलसे, उघर है ताहर, समर में शम्शीर चम्क रही है ॥

The following dialogue has an element of dramatic recitation, and its rhythmic structure is very similar to that of the verse dialogue of the plays of the Parsi theatre:

आ गया, आ गया, आ गया, आ गया ।
आ गया बस मैं कौशिक मुनी आ गया ॥
कुल फिकर हट गयी, ह्रा गया, ह्रा गया,
मेरी तबियत पर चैनो-अमन ह्रा गया ॥

Several of the dialogues in the Nautanki plays are written in the 'tarze theatre' tune following the pattern of the Parsi theatre. In *Shakuntala*, a dialogue between Dushyanta, Shakuntala and the *sakhi*-s runs thus:

हस चमन में आने वाले, अजी वाह, वाह, वाह, कहां कौन हो तुम?
भँवरे की उड़ान वाला, अजी वाह, वाह, वाह, दुष्यंत हूँ मैं ।

भँवरा उड़ाया आपने, मतलब था क्या पढ़ा ।
अफसोस है बड़ा, अफसोस है बड़ा ॥

डर ज़रा न खाने वाले, अजी वाह, वाह, वाह, कहां कौन हो तुम ।

A dialogue in *Veermati* runs thus:

Veermati: सुनियो बात मेरी चितघार । आवे जब तक नहिं भरतार ।
जाऊँ मैं न किसी के द्वार । लीजै मान, मान, मान ॥

Jamvati: बेटी क्यों ठाने है ठान, मेरा कहना लीजै मान ।
कल दो अब मेरे स्थान, कही मान, मान, मान ॥

It is not only in the Nautanki plays but also in the plays of the literary tradition, especially the stage-plays written for Ramaleela performances, that dialogues came to be written in tunes inspired by the Parsi theatre. The rhythm of these dialogues is very close to the spoken language, and is synchronised with the movements of the actors. The short phrase units permit a great deal of rhythmic variety. The repetition of the verbal units imparts a dramatic quality both to the delivery and physical action.

From the point of view of dramatic quality, the dialogues in the *Derha tuki* metre are very effective, as in the popular play *Siahposh*:

क्यों दाग लगाता है भियाँ सानदान में,
और अपनी शान में ।
मतलब के दोस्त, यार हैं सब इस जहान में,
हो किस गुमान में ॥

Sometimes prose dialogues are also used, and these are called 'drama', because the impetus for their introduction came from the Parsi plays. Prose dialogues are used in comical interludes or by the Ranga to describe a scene or narrate an episode. Some of the prose dialogues are also in the nature of stage directions. Following the practice of the Parsi plays, these prose dialogues are rhymed, as in the comical interlude *Ankha ka Tara*:

जब मादर की शिकम से बाहर आया, तब मादर ने यमपुर का
टिकट कटाया । जिस दाईं ने दूध फिलाया, उसको काल ने
खाया । वालिद ने पाला तो उनके जिस्म का निकल गया
दिवाला ।

Tapasi in *Shakuntala* says:

अरे राजन् तू क्या कहता है ? ऐसा करेगा तो घोर नर्क में
परेगा । याद रख पक़्ताएगा । अँसों से अँसू बहाएगा ।

It is because of this great variety of metrical and song forms that there is a tradition of reciting Nautanki plays in small groups, specially during the rainy season when this open air theatre remains inactive. Nautanki plays run into many editions. Semi-literate industrial workers and peasants buy and read Nautanki plays. The colloquial idiom, the popular poetic and musical content, and the absorbing narrative hold a strong appeal for this class. The Nautanki plays are also sold to immigrant Indians all over South-East Asia, Africa and other parts of the world. These printed plays are sold in many towns all over the Hindi-speaking regions in book-shops in old localities and in temple alleys along with other popular and religious literature. The Nautanki writer, Krishan Pahlwan of Kanpur, and the adopted son of the famous Nautanki writer and actor, Nattha Ram of Hatharas, turned publishers of Nautanki plays and prospered.

Music

Nautanki music has a wide range and variety; it draws from multiple sources—classical, regional folk and popular, and the urban theatre. It synthesises all these elements into an integrated whole, which acquires the distinctiveness of Nautanki theatrical music. It is further enriched by musical dialogue in a variety of metrical forms. Classical *raga*-s like Bhairavi, Saranga, Asavari, Shyamkalyana, Kalangara, Bageshwari and Yamana are frequently used. The *raga*-s are, however, used in their popular mode, without any strict adherence to pure norms. Actor-singers are not formally trained in classical music. They have a feel for the *raga* and its mood. If you ask an actor about the *raga* that he is using in a dialogue, he will say that the piece has the *chhaya* or *chhata* (a shadow or glimpse) of such and such a *raga*. Bhairavi is most commonly used for *Chaubola*. Songs in certain metrical forms are rendered in different *raga*-s to suit different situations and moods. While Bhairavi is used to express pathos and separation, Yamana is used to express the sentiment of love.

The opening prayer song (*Mangalacharan*, *Sumirini* or *Vandana*) is sung in the Dhrupad style similar to that of the music of the Rasaleela of Vrindavan. The music of the Rasa tradition has a strong influence on Nautanki music. The popular song-form of the Rasia of Braj is also used in Nautanki, and often given a classical flavour. Lawani is also rendered in many *rangat*-s or musical styles. Nautanki music also has regional stylistic variations, with two main styles, namely Hathrasi and Kanpuri. While the Hathrasi style is musically more developed and permits embellishment, the Kanpuri is predominantly recitative.

Music is the very soul of Nautanki and determines its pace and tempo. The musical structure builds the performance pattern; it leads and follows the actors' movements and physical action. The Nakkara, a kettledrum played with sticks, is the main percussion instrument, along with the dholak. They build the rhythmic structure. The Nakkara both follows and repeats the lines and phrases sung and recited by the actors.

Nautanki and the Parsi Theatre

A study of the popular Nautanki theatre will be incomplete unless we trace its relationship with the commercial Parsi theatre movement of the nineteenth century. This process of inter-action between the popular and folk theatre and the commercial and urban theatre is a common phenomenon, and forms an essential aspect of the study of traditional theatre.

It is interesting to note that the Parsi theatre drew inspiration at the time of its origins and development from the tradition of the Saangita theatre in respect of themes, dramatic elements, verse dialogue and music. But in the 1920's and 1930's, the Nautanki theatre itself came under the direct and powerful influence of the Parsi theatre. Nautanki companies take pride in using the terms 'theatrical' and 'dramatic' with their names in order to identify themselves with the urban theatre. Painted curtains began to be used in the 1940's; comical interludes running parallel to the main story were included; dialogues in 'tarze-theatre', (based on the tunes of the Parsi theatre), were inserted. In addition to these elements, the use of prose dialogues called 'drama' and of *Mangalacharan*, *Vandana* or *Sumirini* on the pattern of the chorus in the Parsi theatre are some of the obvious influences of the Parsi theatre on the Nautanki form. Some of the popular song-forms (Thumri, Dadra and Lawani) of the Nautanki tradition were also popular in the Parsi theatre. There has been a constant give-and-take between the two theatrical traditions. For several years there was a spirit of competition between the two, especially in the large industrial cities. Artistes would leave one to join the other; and there was a large common audience, with shared tastes and values.

Inter-action between these two theatrical traditions added to the richness and vitality of both these streams—but only insofar as it remained a healthy creative process, and the borrowed elements did not disturb the basic structure and the primary conventions of the form. Unfortunately at a later stage the Nautanki theatre came to be so powerfully influenced by the Parsi theatre (mainly because the latter was so popular and had greater financial and artistic resources) that it started losing its distinctive character. Soon its basic structure itself was seriously damaged.

One has only to watch a Nautanki performance to understand the nature and extent of this damage. One can observe it in any of the many fairs in Uttar Pradesh presented in a huge circus-type pandal with glittering tube-lights, painted curtains, (converting the traditional simple platform-stage into a kind of proscenium stage), the audiences sitting on one side in front of the stage, the sarangi replaced by the foot-harmonium called organ or just peti or baja in the manner typical of the Parsi theatre. This Nautanki theatre is the Parsi theatre, but in its decadent form; the only element which has saved it from total decay is its music, which still has great theatrical variety, vitality and dynamism.

The Sociological Aspect

Apart from the purely theatrical aspect, a study of Nautanki is equally fascinating from the socio-cultural point of view. Its themes and

their treatment, its poetic and musical content, its actors and their social background, and finally its audiences—all these facets are integral to its theatrical character. It is interesting to note that Nautanki originated and grew in Kanpur, a big industrial centre with several textile mills, an Ordnance Factory and the Hindustan Aircraft Factory employing a large contingent of skilled workers. Even today Kanpur remains the main centre of the Nautanki theatre, and one can see the sign-boards of scores of Nautanki companies in the Rail Bazar Mohalla, adjoining the Kanpur Railway Station.

The Nautanki theatre primarily entertains industrial labour and peasants. Nautanki audiences form a distinctive social group, with their roots in a rural culture though they live in an urban setting. The performances are mostly held during fairs, festivals and exhibitions and are part of a larger social event, which vitally influences their character. The main patrons of this theatre have, by tradition, been princely rulers, landlords, taluqadars, and big businessmen. They sponsored Nautanki shows during marriages and other family celebrations along with the *naach* by singing girls. In the social scale Nautanki shows have always been equated with the *naach* of the *baie*-s. Thus this theatre has been nurtured in a feudal set-up by feudal values.

The actors and musicians for the Nautanki theatre come from various social classes and groups; they do odd jobs, with occasional assignments in Nautanki shows. They are mechanics, tailors, factory workers, vendors, hawkers, peasants, and clerks. They are often social rejects and drop-outs. Most of the companies maintain a skeleton team: the leader, the main actors and the musicians; as and when they get assignments, they book the required artists for various roles in the play that they decide to do.

From a sociological point of view, the most interesting factor is the inclusion of actresses for doing female roles. As in other folk drama, male actors used to play female roles. In the mid-30's Trimohan's company used actresses for the first time for female roles. Gulabjan and Krishnabai belong to this generation of actresses. Gulabjan has now her own company and is the greatest exponent of the Nautanki theatre. She has been honoured by the State Akademi. Krishnabai's company is also very popular. In 1954, with the passing of the law called the Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act, prostitution was banned. This displaced prostitutes and singing girls from their profession, particularly those in the industrial centre, Kanpur. Deprived of their source of livelihood, most of them joined the local Nautanki companies. Some, like Gulabjan, organised their own companies with a large number of female artistes, and at times female artistes played male roles, reversing the age-old theatrical tradition. This class of actresses brought a new gaiety and verve to the Nautanki performances because they were skilled in the arts of music and dance. They made the performance entertaining and also injected into it a good deal of sex appeal.

The practice of presenting five or ten rupee notes to the actress-singer during the course of a performance often gives rise to fierce competition amongst the members of the audience, leading to fist fights and stabbing

incidents. The presentation of money is almost a ritual. The spectator is provoked at a climactic moment in the rendering of a song, or during a dance sequence. A suggestive gesture, or merely an inviting wink suffice. He gets up and presents a five rupee note to the actress; she often displays the note, kisses it, announces the name of the donor and puts it away in her blouse. Another spectator may then get up and present a note of a higher denomination, cast a meaningful look in the direction of the actress, and press her hands softly while presenting the note. Sometimes the note is also given to the Ranga who passes it on to the actress on the stage.

Nautanki performances often create a law and order situation, and were, therefore, banned for many years within the municipal limits of Kanpur city. To discourage this so-called anti-social theatre, a very high entertainment tax (30 to 40 per cent) was imposed. It has now been reduced to 20 per cent. The police keep a constant watch on the companies, and on their offices because the actors, singers and dancers mix freely with those listed as 'bad' characters in the police records. Thus a world of lusty entertainment, reminiscent of the world of the Kothewalis and with a similar social etiquette and atmosphere, is now regarded with suspicion. This theatre upsets the social norms of the middle class for whom it is a theatre of profanity.
