

## **Bhavai: The Gujarati Folk Drama**

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I am a practical participant in the creative field of dramatic activity, and hence I could hardly claim to be an expert theoretician of the problems that mould and develop the processes of this wonderful mysterious activity of human life. The theoretical pursuit will need as much labour and concentration as has been found necessary in wielding the human form, mind and heart, which actually is the material used for this particular creative process. Theory and practice both, of course, are equally important and closely related.

This creative activity has been, since ages, giving equal satisfaction to the one who creates and to those for whom and out of whose varied and complex existence this creation takes place. As an actress, I have always experienced an incessant and growing need for that clear as crystal mind, which is ever ready to transparently project every little tremor of emotion or a wave of intellect as the various dramatic roles demand. This need for thought, deeper, richer and cleaner thought, has always been felt acutely. Without this, one feels lost in the limelight of this world of magic, the theatre world.

The lifelong practical experience of an artist and the accumulated knowledge of life by him would all be lying idle if he has no capacity for this throbbing, pulsating thought-process, ever living and ever active, which can make him solve problems, paving his way to precision and clarity which is vital for this art of acting. Now, once he is equipped with this thread of thought, it has necessarily to be consistent. Here comes the essential need of having a link with the past.

It has been said by the great, so truly, that 'culture creates culture'; there has to be a foundation on which one can confidently construct. And for this, groping in the darkness will not help, one has to go by the torches lighted by the many who have gone before. Some may mislead, but even that is worth while as it would expose a wrong path to all.

There have been serious formulations about the origin and the importance of various folk forms of human recreation. How song, dance and drama have played a vital role in the life of our people, has been a most popular subject for many learned representatives of the several culturally-awakened regions. So it would be rather impudent on my humble part to think that I have anything new to add to the already trodden course.

I accepted the invitation to enter this arena of intellectual expression only because of one deep urge, an urge to share with you all, art lovers, a very strange sense of satisfaction I experienced at one of the most powerful performances of our Bhavai, the popular folk-drama of Gujarat. To this extent, I am afraid, I will be forced by my love for this form to be subjective, but I am sure you will be kind enough to tolerate.

My purpose today is to introduce and elaborate on this form to the best of my capacity, to try and give an idea of the vivid existence of this form in our province, and also to put forward the immediate problems involved, so that the discussion on them could create a closer understanding of this cultural form of Gujarat.

I must clearly state in the very beginning that the facts which I put forward cannot be said to be based on systematically worked out historical data. There could be many opinions in favour as well as against Bhavai. Its importance is nowadays questioned in literary and theatre circles. But I pin my faith on my own reaction after witnessing many performances in remote villages, and to the two available printed texts, *Bhavai Sangraha* and *Bhavaino Bhomio*, by Shri Ramnarayan Pathak, Shri Jayshanker Bhojak, Shri Rashiklal Parikh and Shri Ramanlal Desai, and also to the valuable work done by my friend, Smt Sudha Desai for her Thesis.

I was told that the vulgarity of this 'crude' and 'low' form was abominable and now all that was good was completely drowned in the mire of dirt; but even then the undying search for the roots was inspired in many of us by the Bhavai performance. It appears to be an old form, but permeated with the banyan-tree strength which we associate with ancient existence. At its ebbing period, it seems to be giving out a certain protective and inspiring glow which we associate with the Olympian Torch. The cosy warmth of life and its expression, which those village players exhibited, showed a confident and constant tradition behind the now apparently 'crude' state of affairs.

In Gujarat, as in other provinces too, I think, the folk drama is becoming extinct, but still the literary interest is not altogether lost. Litterateurs have talked at length about the value of poetry in the original texts of Bhavai. Many have admired the spirit of social satire and understanding of social conditions portrayed in the series of Bhavai playlets. Some see Bhavai as representing the new synthesis of social change and religious rapprochement after Kabir and Nanak. Many have recognized the interesting importance of the typical dance technique which accompanies the stylized acting used in Bhavai. The music, the make-up, the costume—all attract attention, and research on all these, I am sure, would prove interesting and useful if systematically taken up.

Today, it is undoubtedly in a deteriorated stage. There is a ridiculous mis-pronouncement of words which makes the texts meaningless in several places. One instance is often quoted. There is a character of a fakir who speaks a couplet in one of the famous playlets thus:

तेरे शैयु पेद, हेला बाबा,  
तेरे शैयु पेद, हेला मियाँ।

The original text is:

साईं का पंथ दोहेला रे बाबा,  
मेरे साईं का पंथ दोहेला रे मियाँ।

Along with this, the acting has also been tortured out of shape. This pious fakir these

days makes ridiculous gestures, wears senseless costumes and makes people laugh by hook or by crook.

This is the stage where this once rich form has been driven to, I think, because of negligence and poverty more than any other reasons. It is also said that the puritanic reformist movement at the end of the nineteenth century signed a death warrant for the arts in general. Any way, this deep-rooted popular form of human entertainment seems to have survived many a hard times. The bruises are bound to be obvious. The language is the worst hit. The mixture in the texts of words from Gujarati, Hindi, Brijbhasha and Marwari shows this.

The Bhavai was once capable of winning golden *janoi* (holy thread which the Brahmins wear on their bodies) as gift for each of the three troupes of performers who visited the Peshwas of Poona. For the rich poetry in the Bhavai, its organizers won ministerial posts in the State. For the dance in the Bhavai, performers are heard of winning whole villages as gifts. Several Bhavai troupes were maintained by the States in Gujarat. The Bhojak community has produced great singers of the difficult Dhrupad, Khayal and Thumri styles of music. The Bhavnagar State gave facilities to one exponent to write a volume of music called *Sangeet Kaladhara*. Only the essential artistic qualities could have given these results and shown it as a potential creative treasure.

The Bhavai is a series of playlets which presents separate themes conveyed through acting, dance and song (music and words). Its instrumental accompaniment and production needs are kept to the most necessary minimum. The Bhavai is an open-air form of dramatic performance, presented at the *chowk* (cross-roads) or the outskirts of a village near a river bank or a well or a temple. A small circular space of about ten feet radius is systematically drawn with pieces of brick by two of the actors after removing the dust. This area is called the *paudh*. This is their sacred stage where a chorus of musicians sings the devotional songs in praise of Goddess Amba to whom this art form is dedicated.

There are 360 Bhavai playlets (*vesh* as they are called) in our existing knowledge. Unfortunately, there are not enough published collections or productions. These literary pieces have been learnt by heart by expert actor communities called Naiks and Targalas. They seem to have valued their learning, and hence they have preserved thousands of poems, songs and couplets, stories and anecdotes, music and dances, all by their extraordinary capacity to memorise. Most of them hardly know how to read or write. The ragas and talas used in the Bhavai are typical and very intricate. Hence, the musicians have to be specialists and experts.

What impressed me most was the essential importance of the main drama which is most consciously maintained by these rhythm players. In Bhavai, one finds every thing subordinated to the main idea of acting a part. Every thing is used to help and project this predominant purpose, which is neglected even in some of the modern efforts. It appears as if they have truly and faithfully imbibed the most important directives of our ancient treatise, the *Natyashastra*, in which the predominance of the art of *abhinaya* and a deep and full under-

standing and knowledge of bhava and rasa is constantly stressed. This could prove to be the source of the original richness and strength behind this indigenous folk form.

The Bhavai actors, while creating their whole, rounded and robustly live characters, which are a vital need in a vesh, depend on their superb control of the *angik* and *vachik-abhinaya* and even the *aharya* is strictly used in its true sense of aiding the creation of these characters. Whether evil or good, the character pulsates with life, as its basic values are easily recognizable and made appealing by carrying efficiently the various bhavas and rasas to the *sahridaya prekshaka*. Even their originator, Asaita Thaker, in his definition refers to the Bhavai as Bhavanam, i.e., to play with bhava.

These characters are played by extraordinary performers. The famous parts of Zhanda and Batau are played by some families for generations. The father teaches the son and so on. The girls of these actor communities are prohibited from entering this profession, though they possess lovely singing voices and talent.

The tradition of theatre in Gujarat is stated to be nearly 600 years old. The stories about the origin of the castes, who are in existence and who do follow this profession of entertainment as their means of livelihood, are either legendary or a few with some historical data. They are interesting nevertheless.

The Targala caste is said to have originated from Audichya, Shrimali and Vyas Brahmins. They are well-known for their inherited artistic talent, specially mimicry, music, dancing, acting, art of learning to speak languages and dialects with correct accents. Their capacity to memorise and express in extempore repartee is amazing. They are also very good story-tellers and katha-singers.

The prevalent story about their origin is dramatic and is as follows: in the reign of Allauddin Khilji, a captain named Jahanroz attacked Delhi and Kanauj and came over to Gujarat. At a village named Unzha, near Sidhpur in north Gujarat, there lived a peasant named Hemala Patel whose daughter Ganga was very beautiful. Her fame attracted Jahanroz to camp at Unzha and get Ganga arrested. In Sidhpur lived a poet, singer and orator named Asaita Thaker. His father Rajaram was a popular katha-singer. Asaita also was a popular romantic figure. Hemala Patel being his student, Asaita came to know of Ganga's fate. So he went to Unzha and pleased the captain by his art and, stating that Ganga was his daughter, he asked for her release. The captain cunningly called for a test by asking Brahmin Asaita to eat in the same plate with Ganga who was a Patel (a peasant girl). This was unheard of in those days but Asaita, good and benevolent friend and a staunch fighter for justice that he was, bravely took a split-second decision. This made him an outcaste, banished from the Audichya caste, from his family and from his home town, Sidhpur. By eating with Ganga, he gave up everything only for freeing Ganga.

The immediate results were only as expected. Asaita had to face all the social slander. 'Roti-Beti' relations with him were prohibited. He was left a lone man. He came to Unzha with his three sons, Madan Tha, Naran Tha, Jay Tha. The rich peasant Hemala gave them three houses and some land, and wrote down for them the service and support of his own

caste of Kadwa Patidar peasants for some generations. Thus, the descendants of Asaita are still served and supported by this caste of peasants.

Asaita started a new profession. He wrote 360 playlets and got them performed with the help of his sons on important religious and social occasions. They became very popular as people loved their zest for life. Women sang their songs which are heard even today. Asaita thus started a new community which boldly followed Brahmin religion in a liberal sort of way.

The name Targala or Tran Gharwala meant those who had three homes, but professionally they are called Bhavaia Naiks, which means Sutradhara, the director or organiser of a drama troupe. Some say 'Targala' means three castes of Brahmins who were all out-castes, and hence got together for the marriages of their children. There was such a community of Bhojaks who came from Patan and were originally Shrimali Brahmins, but took to Jain religion. Bhojaks had marriages with Naiks but practiced Jainism and maintained separate cultural identity in dress and custom. The women accepted the religion of their husbands. A Bhojak child never acted in Bhavai, but they sang during Pujas and taught Jainism. Vyas Brahmins of Katiawad and Malwa also joined. Hence the Targala families are not more than six thousand in all of north Gujarat, and the Bhojak families are about 250 only.

The Naiks continued the profession of Bhavai. They have designated villages to different Bhavai troupes which are called *tolan* (flocks). According to custom, there should not be more than 20 and less than 9 persons in a group. There are usually 12 to 15 players in one group. They tour from village to village for eight months in a year. The villages levy a special charge for maintaining them, which is usually four to eight annas per house. Meals consisting of a quarter seer each of ghee and gur per head are given to the group by turns. The oil in the *kuppi* (a special vessel) for the torches at night show is to be provided by a village Ghanchi (oil dealer); the Kumbhar (potter) provides the pots for water. Their arrival is a festival for the village. A katha is narrated in the afternoon by the players and *kusamba-supari* (opium etc.) is exchanged and introductions take place here. The halarun (birth-song or lullaby) and the marriage-song at several houses bring gifts for players. For this period of eight months, the whole group is expected to observe celibacy and hence the activity gets a strong religious colour. On the second day of Jyeshtha, which is Asait's death anniversary, they close down and go to their villages, where for four months they till their land. The formation of the group is as follows:

1. Naik (the chief) is the licence holder for several villages. He forms the group by invitations. He takes  $2\frac{1}{2}$  share of the net income.
2. Veshgor or Veshacharya (three main male parts: hero, side-hero, sub-hero). They get respectively  $2\frac{1}{2}$ ,  $2\frac{1}{4}$  and 2 shares.
3. Kanchaliyo (three main female parts: heroine, side-heroine, sub-heroine). They also get as above.
4. Mashkaro, vidushak or rangalo. He gets  $2\frac{1}{2}$  shares.
5. Instrument players.

6. A cook and a kamgaro (labourers) and other associates who often serve as reserve substitutes.

Among the instrument players, the most important are the two Bhungal players, a wind instrument with the shape of a long-stemmed trumpet and a sound like a bugle. This instrument has got a peculiar sweetness and a haunting note of its own. Its peculiarity is that it clearly and constantly keeps on registering tala (a definite rhythm) along with the svara (the note). The player need a good deal of practice and strong lung-power and physical stamina. On the night of the Bhavai show, the village comes to know about it by the haunting call of this instrument. It inspires valour in the players and also instructs them about the start and the end of songs and acts as an on-the-spot editor of the script. It also serves as the *nepathya* calling bell for the artists who have gone to change for the next scene or character. These staccato notes are fixed and very familiar to every actor. Then there are the two Tabla players or Narghan players as they are called in Bhavai. They help the dancer with various dramatic rhythms with loud open-palm playing, inspiring valour and enthusiasm in the players. They generally use Ada and Dyodha talas, which make the Bhavai talas intricate and different. Formerly Pakhwaj was used. There are said to be seven *man* or special tala combinations as follows:

खोड त्राडी अथवा रूपक (तिन् तिन् ना, धिनै नाके),  
 उलालौ अथवा आडा दादरा,  
 जेत मान,  
 चलती अथवा कहरवा,  
 मान,  
 पाधरौ मान (धिनं नाक धिन् धा, धिनाक् तिन् ता),  
 दौदीयौ पिस्ती।

Out of these, *ulalo* is used in *zhanda* and *dodhiyo pisto* is very difficult to sing with. In these *mans*, there are accents on the first, the fourth and the sixth beats. Among other instrumentalists, there are two Kanshi Joda players (big brass Manjiras) which also needs experts in rhythm. Formerly in its best days, the Sarangi was another predominant instrument, but now harmonium has taken its place.

Usually, the singing voices of Bhavai are peculiarly high-pitched. Instruments and voices both are set at pancham and dhaivat. But the pronunciation and bhava conveyed by the words in songs are extraordinarily precise and full of artistic appeal. The ragas are chosen mostly according to the time as our classical music demands. The predominant ragas are: Mand, Paraj, Desh, Sorath, Sarang, Sameri, Sohni, Purvi, Prabhat, Ramkeli, Bilawal, Kalingda, Asavari, and Maru. Other forms used are Bhajan, Ghazal, Garba, Garbi, Ras, Duha, Dohra, Sakhi, Soratha, Chhappa, Chhand, Rekhta etc., all of which are forms used in popular music.

The dance also is an essential part of this performing style. There is more of song and dance than prose dialogue in most of the playlets. Even the dialogue sometimes follows a rhythm. The dance is strikingly used as a means of dramatic accentuation of the main characterization. Even though there is little variety in dance steps, the dance conveys



meaning by changing rhythmic speed, grace and turns to express valour, expectancy, intricacy etc. This is a novel use of dance for drama. The same step can show you a king, a fakir or a shepherd, just by little changes in steps and turns, speed and grace. Usually, there is intricate rhythmic footwork and circular spiral movements. There is a slight similarity with Kathak dance style, but this is more dynamic because of being closely connected with dramatic meaning. The typical Gujarati Garaba-garabi are used in two playlets *Patai Raval* and *Kan Gopi*. In one, the Goddess Amba dances in Navaratri festival. The use of flowing *ghaghras* and *angarkhas* make the show picturesque. There are also a few graceful hand gestures, mostly of the palm and fingers.

The costume aids in making the dancer look very pretty, especially the *odhani* covering the head. This is often used delightfully to give lovely, meaningful framing to the expressive faces of the artists. This *ghunghat-pat* (veil) is charmingly used. I still remember my embarrassment when one player enumerated the various styles and ways of *ghunghat* holding practised by women in Gujarat, by which they could coyly see their loved one, in spite of all social restrictions and barriers. He made every one laugh by reflecting different castes by exquisitely precise and imaginative performance. He walked round in circles and every circle showed a different caste. A woman could hardly do this herself. The resourcefulness of these actors is remarkable. These troupes are usually not too well off financially. Formerly, the costly offerings to the deity Amba by the princes used to go the Bhavai troupes, but now they have hardly any material to decorate themselves. Their 'king' now has only one flowing *peshwaj* or *angarkha* and a head-wear, and his dance shows his kingly bearing. But their true decoration is their internal art, their talent. So the external devices are minimum and symbolic, just enough to inspire the imagination of the artist as well as the naive spectator. A little twist of the pagadi or a tilt of the topi, and the peasant becomes a peddler, or a shepherd becomes a soldier with the turn of the stick; sometimes with a change in the placing of the *khes* (a shawl piece) a trader is turned into a goldsmith, a slight change in the wearing or even the holding of a dhoti makes a washerman, a tailor. It is sheer *abhinaya* (acting)—like standing, sitting, walking, talking etc.—which conveys cartloads of meaning and makes people double up with laughter of recognition and appreciation or open their mouths in awe, as the theme demands in suspense or satire. These salesman of showmanship are sharp and smart. They carry their own costumes in a bundle which is called *bachko*, and portrays the prevalent condition of the artist. The head-wear of the Naik is typical and is called *batti*, a sort of combination of Maratha and Gujarati pagadi.

The indigenous artists utilize every little aid to create an artistry which becomes memorable. They say that on their tongues sits Goddess Saraswati and on their faces, the Goddess Shakti.

Their make-up material consists of a little kumkum, kajal and khadi (red, black and white) and the oil from the sacred lamp lighted in the *parsala*, or their dressing room. This lamp is lighted before the show and is kept on till the next morning when, after the show, the main female character take off the *ghungru* (bells) from her feet after a *Mujra* to the Deity, whose

seat is established by symbolic signs of trishul and kumkum dots on the wall. Two devotional songs are sung here. The lamp is put on a stand made of two bricks. This oil is applied on the face to make it shine when it gets lighted up by little cloth torches called *kakda*, used beautifully along with the dance by the female characters. This lighting arrangement is also wonderful. The torches drenched in castor oil, one big and several small ones, are held in hand by the performers. With little dots and dashes they create unforgettable characters. The clown alone uses white make-up. Their observations of life being acute, they utilize the most obvious to a great advantage and their spectators are never left guessing for long. A memorable make-up creation of *wagharan* (Waghari woman) who sells *datavans* (tooth-brushes) still haunts my memory. He was famous for this and none could recognize him. His name was Ratilal Durlabhjee Naik. Alas, he is no more, as he fell victim to poverty and hence to that horrid disease of tuberculosis which takes such a heavy toll in our land of beauty!

The Bhavai performance is an all-night session and continues for three nights, or sometimes four. Usually, they start the show at nine o'clock at night, when the villagers can come conveniently after meals, ready to roll in laughter from this good-humoured entertainment which takes all the fatigue away from these working people and prepares them for their next day's work. Till ten or eleven next morning, i.e., till the sun does not interfere, their popular players religiously continue this non-stop show.

They sing a *garabi* or a devotional song at the place where they are stationed, which is usually very near the *paudh*, so that it is used as the dressing room as well. Usually, a temple or a *mukhi's* or a potter's house is selected. Sometimes, even a shed or a barn is good enough. Very often one sees a couple of cots laid down where the tired artists rest after their act, awaiting the next one which might come after hours. The artists take rest by turns. Most of them are all-rounders who can sing, dance, act and play instruments. So the strain is equally shared. The clown, especially, has to know everything to perfection.

After reaching the *paudh*, they sing seven more devotional songs to the deity before starting the actual performance. By this time the audience settles down. Then the Bhavai starts with the vesh of Ganapati. The presentation of this character is done very symbolically: a sort of a small curtain-piece is held up by two musicians, almost as in Kathakali, only the cloth piece is not decorative but merely a *pitamba*. The character of Ganapati hides his face behind a brass plate, and holding it thus by his own right hand he dances. When the face is disclosed, it is lighted by a small torch and thus the vesh ends. It appears to be merely a ritual though the songs are good.

In most of these plays, there are characters—the hero, the heroine and the clown; and unlike the stage, all the characters do not have to enter the *paudh*. The musicians get up to continue the dialogue with the three main characters.

I would not be doing this form justice if I left out the vesh of *Zhanda Zhulan*, which left a very deep impression on me. There in a remote village of Virata, under the starlit sky, burned a big torch quenching its thirst by the periodically poured castor oil on its flamboyant flame. The hand that held this torch belonged to one in front of whom, they said, even



the kings had to bend their heads. He is the barber of the village, who alone holds this holy and proud privilege to place himself inside the *paudh* during this truly popular performance. Near him is the *kuppi* (an artistically shaped vessel) which holds the collected castor oil to last through the night.

The torch is ready to light up the small magic world which will be created for the pleasure of the village folk gathered in the circular auditorium, who alone are the honoured guests. Little children have usurped the places near the circumference and the air is thick with excitement. On one side, usually a little away but choosing a higher place at the back, are women. The auditorium is soon full to capacity and the crowd ready for the long session.

The loud tones of the Bhungal pierce the darkness and more or less pave a passage through the crowd for the entrance of the characters. These entrances in the Bhavai are breath-takingly thrilling. The musicians create an atmosphere of ecstasy, and as the last alap trails its way through the passage, the staccato notes of the Bhungal jump along accompanying up to the end of passage, and there appears two tiny lights moving in graceful movement and dancing to the tense rhythm as if choreographed by an unknown unseen hand. The lights come closer and the unseen is seen slowly yet clearly. Those lights certainly have a purpose; they light up a face out of the darkness, a women's expressive face, full of coyness and coquetry. The woman dances her way to the *paudh* and then the big torch gracefully introduces her to the entranced spectators. Little lights keep on dancing sometimes showing her singing face and sometimes her dancing figure. That face has to be remembered; it belongs to the famous character of the Bhavai, Tej Sethani, the beautiful wife of a foolish, miserly and cowardly old Bania. She sings of her misery and her growing youthful love for the romantically handsome and dignified thanedar of Unzha who is a Muslim of pious disposition, Zhanda Zhulan.

His entrance into the *paudh* from the dressing room is another piece of masterly art. He appears on the scene in the distance accompanied by his two servants holding torches. The way Zhanda uses his costume to make a dancing regal appearance is most impressive. His costume is picturesque yet a strange combination of a fakir and a prince. His head-wear is very decorative and all this gives him a romantic appearance. Above all, the actor who plays Zhanda has to be extremely well-versed in song, dance and acting. He can use everything to perfection. His entrance dance is breath-taking. The loud music and quickly changing rhythm and tempo build up a fanfare announcement of his arrival.

Then the woman, Teja, with her little torches dancing a wild dance of joy, rushes up to him as if to receive him there in the passage. The choreography builds up the suspense, and their attraction for each other and a strange hesitation is wonderfully portrayed by mere entrances and exits, meeting and crossing, sometimes slow, sometimes wildly fast. And all this with a perfectly harmonious lighting arrangement, worked out through choreography by the four characters handling torches, while acting and singing. Even the word in this vesh are poetic and powerful, and create a vision of the vesh.

This is one of the best veshes and excellent performers have played these parts. The

love-affair later takes a social turn, and there is a very unexpected and interesting end. There are words full of subtle social satire which enlighten people. Of course, the vidushak or rangalo (the clown) plays to the gallery; he is a very popular character and helps in keeping the link by acting as a chronicler.

Most of such veshes of Bhavai depict social conditions in their bare form, and also have morals strewn all over them. The available major playlets could be divided into three categories:

- a) Social: *Juthan* (with a comic character of a subedar named Zuzar Khan who pretends to be foolish), *Chhel Batau* (based on another Hindu-Muslim love affair), *Mian Bibi*, *Mian Brahmani*, *Kansara*, *Zhanda Zhulan*, *Bhaktani* and *Sadhu Canzaro*, *Lalji Maniar*, *Bajanio*, *Saranio*, *Darzi*, *Kunjada*, *Kabo*, *Dhed*, *Bawa*, *Purabio*, *Wagharan*, *Lalwadi* and *Phoolwadi* (two magicians showing magic tricks in duet), *Kerbo* (a performance of acrobatic and jugglery), *Munda* (*Nanakshahi*), *Pawai*, *Kajodo* etc.
- b) Mythological: *Ganapati*, *Mahadev Parvati*, *Kan Gopi*, *Ram Lakshman*, *Tadaka*, *Vaman Bali*, *Kalika*, *Becharaji* etc. Strangely, though this is being accepted as a religious ritual, there are very few religious themes in the Bhavai repertoire.
- c) Historical: *Viko Sisodio*, *Sadhra Jesang*, *Jasma Odan*, *Shuro Rathod*, *Dodia* (Rajput), *Raja Degam*, *Sura Shamlano Vesh*, *Patai*, *Rawal*, *Ramdevno Swang*.

Among all these, *Ramdev* written by Asaita is the most ancient. It alone can last for three and a half days and only the experts know it all by heart. It is said that this vesh contains the story of the Earth from its birth to death. One interesting thing found in these texts is an entertaining and enlightening dialogue form called *samasya*, something similar to riddles. The village folk appreciate them very much. After Asaita, there are references to some more poets also, like Kavi Gata, Gang, Madan, Pingal etc.

Many of these roaming actors later joined the newly-started Parsi-Gujarati-Urdu professional drama companies and went to the cities. Bhojak and Naik kids took to proscenium theatre. They sang, danced and acted female parts there, and since then the Bhavai was considered below their dignity. Also it did not pay enough to meet the ever-increasing cost of living, and the people were more and more being attracted towards the cinema and the theatre. For nearly seventy-five years now, the Bhavai is in a broken state. No doubt, the Gujarati theatre got a fine contingent of trained and experienced exponents of the art of acting, easily mouldable material, which the commercial tycoons of the growing theatre, were prompt in exploiting. The young Naiks and Bhojaks of those days created history on the Gujarati stage, and the immortal names of Amrit Keshan Naik, Mohan Lalji, Bapulal Naik and Jayashankar Bhojak came to the forefront out of the ashes of this dying theatre of the village folk.

Another definition of the word Bhavai is *bhai* of *bhava*, an account book of this world, a sort of picture book of the good and the bad deeds of man. This could point a finger at the important role this potentially rich form could play in the cultural regeneration of our province.

For this reason, the need for collecting more veshes, the Bhavai playlets, compiling them

into volumes for further research, is extremely urgent for the theatre movement in Gujarat. I say urgent because alien influence could easily make the theatre unpopular or ruin the taste of the people. The Bhavai once held a popularly prominent position. The pulse of the people had been felt by this form, and it had developed and enriched itself from this valuable knowledge. The very fact of its broken existence through these hard years proves its possibilities as popular entertainment. In our land of villages, we could visualize this form as a practical play-form, which could lead to education through entertainment and which would be valuable as visual aid to education for our illiterate millions.

Many writers are inspired to add to this treasure store started by the revolutionary Asait Thaker. Our Kavi Dalpatram wrote his immortal play *Mithyabhiman* or *Jivram Bhatt* in the style of Bhavai, though he used it liberally with more prose than poetry by putting a linked theme in place of stray scenes. Writers of merit have experimented on this form, so have the younger enthusiasts. Though in a very limited way, the awakening is certainly there. Lok Bhavai, Mandini Bhavai, Bhukhni Bhavai are some of the attempts by a few of us who write and produce as well. In some of our well-known plays, we have attempted the use of the presentation techniques of Bhavai. The *Mena-Badshah* dialogue in our musical folk-play *Mena Gurjari*, our complete production of *Mithyabhimana* of Dalpatram are examples of such experiments in adapting the style of Bhavai to modern stage. Our popular playwright C.C. Mehta has also tried to adapt the best of this style in his plays.

In the sphere of production also, the new stage movement is quite alive to this dynamic form. The character of the clown in Bhavai has attracted young performers. This tough acting style makes one emerge out of the proscenium, and establish that robust live contact with the audience which is so vitally felt in the open-air performances. With our new innovations in acting styles comes the subdued, introvert, psychological style of complex characterization which is necessary in modern plays. Now our demands are different in a way, but I feel that the basic contact between the audience and the actor is a necessity in any case, especially in the form of theatre presentation. This contact may be apparently physical or spiritual, but the under-current of the harmonious throb of common experience of one rasa or a combination of several rasas and bhavas is felt to be vitally essential for this aesthetic experience, and our ancient forms show the same.

In this age of speed, many things pass by so fast; but in our villages these forms still hold a deep appeal. Our Bhavai is, I think, a sister institution of Maharashtra's Tamasha, Bengal's Jatra, Uttar Pradesh's Nautanki and Andhra's Burrakatha.

During the years of foreign rule, our culture lived on, even grew in revolt, but it appeared as if it was growing without any roots, getting affected by alien influences. Fortunately, its intrinsic value has stood the test of time and could not be shaken out of the roots. This miracle seems to have made us more conscious of the deep roots that exist.

Our artists are yearning for an appropriate national form, which can express and inspire the growing aspirations of our people. In every field, the search for the foundations has begun, so it has in the field of drama also. From a study of our ancient Sanskrit drama and

theatre, we are passing on to the popular folk-drama where perhaps the remnants and relics of the past may be discovered; and whatever their present condition, but there only, perhaps, lies that golden key to the treasure house of our immortal cultural heritage. Let us all hope we find it and use it well in the service of our great people, in making our life full of peace, happiness and hence, beauty.

Practically speaking, I would like to suggest a few measures for achieving this goal:

1. Research work on the Bhavai script should be planned and encouraged.
2. Survey of the Bhavai performers and performances should be seriously taken up and the Bhavai should be popularized.
3. A history of the Bhavai should be written by a properly appointed committee, which could plan out a permanent record of this form by means of filming and recording.
4. There should be special schools for the children of the Bhavai artists, which could give them general education and also training in arts, in order to discourage them from giving up this profession, and to provide an incentive to continue and develop their natural talent.
5. In order to evolve the dance form of Gujarat, the Bhavai dance teachers should teach young Gujarati dancers their dance technique, so that along with our other cultural forms like Garba Raas, folk songs, Bhajan, Mandals, Duha Ramzhat, Charan-geet Kathas, Man Bhatts, Bharatharis, etc., this form also can take its own just place in our cultural life.

## DISCUSSION

*Dina Pathak:* I suppose you have read my paper and now know what is *Bhavai*. I have told you that Bhavai is not the only folk play prevalent in Gujarat. There are several other excellent folk forms as well. But this particular form had been the most popular one since its inception during the Khilji regime. I have given you the story of its origin and have told you that it is actually a series of playlets presenting separate themes conveyed through acting, song and dance. There are, as we have been able to discover till now, 360 playlets which are called *veshes*. Acknowledged authorities have admitted that original texts of the Bhavai are literary compositions of a superior order, and are rich in poetry. Drama critics have noted that in the Bhavai one finds everything subordinate to the main idea of acting a part. The ragas and talas are typical and intricate. Hence no untrained musician, vocal or instrumental, is ever engaged either to represent singing roles or to work as an instrumental accompanist. It is unfortunate that Bhavai texts are not available in print. They have been preserved by memorizing the whole of them. One generation of actors gets the text by heart and passes them on to the next by inducing them to memorize. Therefore, the Bhavai actors belong to groups of families and communities, mainly Naiks. Because memory is the only vehicle to convey the texts of the Bhavai from generation to generation, they have certainly differed from the original, and must have deteriorated in quality on account of the missing

links composed by persons of inferior merit. There are indeed lines which are definitely ill-composed and positively vulgar. These are interpolations intended to cover the missing portions. Fathers knew that their sons would not starve if they could be induced to keep the Bhavai texts in memory and to carry on the tradition.

Girls are never allowed to take part in a Bhavai performance. The Bhavai troupes are peripatetic performers. They move from village to village for eight months in a year. A Bhavai troupe usually consists of not more than twenty and not less than nine persons. The villages they visit provide them food and shelter, and each family has to fulfil a quota in cash varying from four annas to eight annas per family per visit. This net income of a troupe has to be distributed among the artists in fixed proportions. I have given the details in my paper. Details of the performances are also thoroughly described there. I will not repeat them because a mere recital of them would not help you to get a full picture of the Bhavai. To get it you must read my paper carefully and engage your imagination and, certainly, you have to see it once. What I want to impress upon you is that this important form of Gujarati folk art is now being ignored, neglected and often declared too trifling to be paid any attention whatsoever. I feel this is absolutely wrong, and must be contradicted with all the emphasis we may command. Today our workers in the field of dance, drama and music yearn for an appropriate national expression. They delve deep to discover the roots from which these arts grew. Who knows what treasures has this Bhavai form kept stored for us? That they have an extraordinary life-force in them to keep them going cannot be denied. We must discover what gives them that vital force. And secondly, if by our researches and studies we discover that the Bhavai has a definite contribution to make to our culture and its encouragement would give good results, then we will have to take up, as a sacred duty, the task of emancipating those communities of hereditary artists, who are going to be wiped off due to neglect, unemployment and starvation.

*Nirmala Joshi:* Dina Pathak and other members of this Seminar will, I hope, be glad to hear that the question of rehabilitation of the Naiks, i.e. the Bhavai players, has already been taken up by the Akademi. It is on the anvil now?

*Mulk Raj Anand:* We are indeed very glad to hear from Miss Joshi that the starving Bhavai artists have already received attention. But would Smt Pathak please tell us the kind of help they do need just now?

*Dina Pathak:* Something must be done to assure them food and shelter which is their primary need. Then they will have to be so trained that they can earn their living not by working as millhands, but by working as Bhavai artists. To qualify them for this profession, there must be a training school for them. Their boys are potential artists. Thirdly, the Bhavai texts are to be carefully studied and spurious interpolations have to be eliminated. We were so inspired by some of the Bhavai performances that we ourselves produced one which was written by one of our leading poets. It was well-composed and not badly played. But the reaction of the audience was not what we had expected. It was called bhava without Bhavai in it, i.e., *Hamlet* without the Prince of Denmark in it. We felt very depressed but gradually we came to realize that it was almost foolish of us to give it a modern colour. Modernization of the Bhavai means its death. I had tried to imitate as closely as I could the

movements and expressions of the indigenous Bhavai male artists playing female roles, but I was dismayed to notice that I could not make my role half as attractive as a genuine Bhavai male actor was capable of. And I am pretty sure now that I shall never be able to give those exquisite touches and to execute those graceful movements which a male Bhavai actor gives to a female role. They are such great actors. A little general education and a good training would, I believe, make them very useful members of the profession.

*C.C. Mehta:* The Baroda University has a school of Dance, Drama and Music. I am connected with it as a teacher. We teach our students all that actors, singers and dancers should know. We confer degrees too. But I have no knowledge where they go and what they do after taking their degrees. I am almost certain that not a few of these graduates could be found working as clerks in government offices and mercantile firms. I do not believe that schools do serve the purpose for which they are started. Undoubtedly, they impart education that an artist badly needs. But what is the use of these schools if their graduates find no occupation in the field of arts, enabling them not only to improve the arts they have learnt, but also to gain a social footing by virtue of their arts. I have felt that schools, without a social planning to accommodate their trainees, are mere decorations. They should not be multiplied. Not schools, but working dramatic groups are what we need and should look for.

*E. Alkazi:* In discussing the Bhavai folk form, we have allowed ourselves to be swayed by modernism. I feel that is entirely wrong. We want to educate the Bhavai artists. We want to teach them how to read and write and how to behave like educated persons like us. But we do not for a moment consider that the nearer they reach us, the quicker would they discard the arts of their forefathers. While I say this, I do not mean that they should be kept illiterate and ill-placed to give us a taste of that art which we eulogize. What I intend to emphasize is that if we bring them out of their environments to give them what we know as school education, we will fail to improve their lot. The art schools we have been accustomed to accept as patent drugs meant for all diseases. We should think deeply before we prescribe them for our folk artists of every pattern. My another observation is in respect of the so-called crudities and vulgarities in the current Bhavai forms. We do not care to consider that what we take as crudities and vulgarities or obscenities may be, after all, essential elements of these plays. We find them in Tamashas too. Should we be so prude and puritanic as to evaluate every art in the light of our own moral code? When the Police say that the Dramatic Performances Act had to be promulgated to stop vulgar stage-shows, we demand to know who gave them the right to do so? May we not ask ourselves who gives us the right to purify the Bhavai forms? As an artist myself, I believe all the shades and lights in arts are used to fascinate spectators and auditors. We should not poke our noses into this affair, because we do not really know what would exactly be good for this form and for its exponents. The Government have a department to put the Bhavai artists on the right track. This problem should be tackled by anthropologists and not by dramatists and actors and producers. Again, I don't think anything in the world can preserve itself eternally.

*J.C. Mathur:* I heard only a part of the discussion. You will excuse me if I say that this idea of preservation is often resisted. We want the anthropologists to advise us but we do



not want them to take charge of such a dynamic thing as the theatre. I should suggest that folk drama should not be looked upon as something outside us. It is an expression of a larger community of which we are a very small part. It is not something apart. It is something to be preserved and to be encouraged. I am not pleading for only one type of drama or theatre. There will have to be different types. There will have to be very modern experiments, intellectual types of drama and theatre, there will have to be an urban spectacular theatre also, making full use of the modern attractions and light effects. But what would be the main stage of the drama? Personally, I think it will have to be that drama which the larger community understands.

*Mulk Raj Anand:* These Bhavai artists are not tribals. They are within the social set-up to which we ourselves belong. And we are not talking of racial or tribal decadence but the decadence of folk arts. I feel we have a responsibility which cannot be brushed aside. I do not think that the anthropologists have anything to do with the problem we are talking of.

*Balraj Sahni:* What Smt Pathak said was nothing more than that the Bhavai composition had lost much of their superb qualities due to some bad interpolations which should be eliminated after a careful research work on them. If the research workers find that they were inalienable parts of the texts, they would not recommend their expurgation. If they do arrive at the conclusion that the texts would improve by such an expurgation, the artists should be advised to do so. Smt Pathak wanted only a research institution. I do not think that instead of ourselves looking into the matter, we should ask the anthropologists to take it up. As far as I am aware, it is beyond the pale of their science. Secondly, Smt Pathak has never said that there must be material change of the form to make it acceptable to the villagers. The Bhavai performances are still popular, the only trouble is that the performers themselves have nothing to eat and no shelter to live in. Thirdly, she feels that the Bhavai has a life-force which may lend vitality to the form of arts we cultivate. It is for this reason that she herself produced a play which was acclaimed to be an excellent performance but was stigmatized as a bhava without a Bhavai. I do not think she should be ashamed of it on that account. I do not think that she had any intention to sophisticate the Bhavai form. What she really wanted was to revitalize her own art by borrowing from the Bhavai or to help the evolution of a form which would contain in it the vitality of a Bhavai and as much of its indigenous character as the sophisticated audiences would be able to appreciate. Here *Mena Gurjari* is a positive contribution to our ventures in the field of dramatic art, although she has herself informed us that it was not accepted as an indigenous Bhavai. Nevertheless, the art we do ourselves represent was definitely benefited by her experiment. This is exactly what we should do to revitalize our own art of drama.

*E. Elkazi:* I had never objected to the kind of experiment Smt Pathak has made to the benefit of our dramatic art. What I objected to is the theory we are weaving to establish that we can, if we will, put the Bhavai and its artists back to the place where they had a glorious existence. That is an illusion. The community of the Bhavai artists and their audiences themselves and the whole structure of the countryside have undergone such a transformation that most of the old tunes are very likely to be rejected by the people themselves as bad tunes giving out false notes. We have no right to interfere. But we can certainly take out our own arts to them, as we

may improve them by adopting what we may find good in folk forms. We must not confuse the two distinct issues which have emerged out of this rather lengthy discussion.

*J.C. Mathur:* I agree with those who say that communities have no such cultural background as to inspire them to keep intact the tradition. They had been exploiting the arts to make a living out of them. Smt Dina Pathak has herself given us a graphic description of the events which forced the Naiks to adopt the performance of the Bhavai as a profession, enabling them to win back, through this art, social position their forefathers had lost. Many of them must have attained poetic and histrionic virtues but most of them were mere professionals. There are reasons to believe that community culture and tradition are completely broken down and shattered in most of the regions of this sub-continent. I can tell you from my experience that in the villages you will hardly find ten women out of a thousand capable of singing Gajra and Sohn songs. This culture which was sustaining folk forms is disintegrated and shattered altogether. But surely, we should not take it for granted that no revival is possible. The people have to be aroused so that they may become good citizens. A condition must be created in the villages so that people may come to think of their traditional arts. That can be done in the way Smt Pathak has herself done, i.e., by producing a Bhavai play as she understood it. If she can go round the villages giving performances of this play, I am sure, the people will come to remember their old tradition, and may be, they will be enthused to produce one by themselves.

*Mulk Raj Anand:* I am sorry that I have to intervene once again. Smt Pathak never told us that the Bhavai was a lost tradition. But some of our friends have taken it to be broken and shattered. Whatever may be the case of some other folk forms in some other places, the Bhavai as Smt Pathak tells us, is yet a live art. It still retains the life-force, only its votaries face difficulties. We should not imagine that Bhavai is dead and then go on spinning theories. A research institution and material support to the Bhavai artists and a training school for the growing generation of the Naiks are all that she wants us to do. The Akademi has taken up the question of the rehabilitation of the Naiks, Miss Joshi has assured us. We have been further told that the Akademi will very soon fund a school of drama where provision of researches will be made. Research workers working there would, I hope, deal with all the problems faced by folk forms. I do not mean to say that points raised by the worthy delegates are inconsequential. They are very important. Let us, at present, leave them for the research workers to work upon.

*Note:* The late Dina Pathak used her maiden name, Gandhi, when this paper was presented in the Drama Seminar.