

# **Kuchamani Khyal: A Vibrant Folk Theatre of Rajasthan**

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**F**olk theatre has a unique position among the theatrical arts of India—it is an amalgam of different arts and is inseparable from the culture of the land. Though threatened today by electronic entertainment, many folk-theatre forms such as Tamasha, Jatra, Nautanki, Khyal, etc., continue to enthrall our rural audiences.

Khyal in general as a folk-theatre form assimilates vocal and instrumental music and dance besides histrionics and the art of costume design. A Khyal actor has to be a ‘total actor’—one who can act, sing, and dance with precision to the accompaniment of the Naqqara (kettledrum). Khyal is an all-male affair, with men playing female roles.

The Kuchamani Khyal is specific to western Rajasthan and is distinct from the other professional genre of Khyal prevalent in Rajasthan, the Shekhawati Khyal. It is a style that emerged out of the Khyal theatre performed by village folk around the Holi festival—a night-long theatre-in-the-round performance of mythological, historical, or social dramas already well-known to the audience. Rural playwriting talent would initiate this communal venture by composing a libretto which, committed to memory, preserved within its prosodical structure the musical rendering by the actor on the stage.

The Queen and the King are the leading duo in Khyal plays. In the professional Kuchamani version, the actor playing King or Queen either owns the theatre company or has formed a partnership with the other important member of the troupe, the Naqqara player. The degree of success of a performance is determined by the talent of this trio; the other actors, about ten in number, play minor male and female roles. The average strength of a company is fourteen, which includes a cook-*cum*-part-time actor. These actors are salaried, and the profit goes to the owner or is divided among the partners. The admission charge is deposited in a copper plate with an earthen lamp burning in it. One of the actors asks each entrant at the gate to drop the entry fee in it. The fee is not fixed; there is no ticket and no written accounts, and therefore no entertainment tax either. Earlier, the State’s Ministry of Finance had to be approached for tax exemption up to fifteen rupees, though in fact the entry to Khyal shows is much lower than the stipulated tax-exemption limit. Other sources of finance include contracts, made annually or for particular fairs or even for runs of a fixed number of days in suburban localities. Both company owners and contractors prospered from these arrangements in the past, when Khyal companies toured the countryside extensively. Monetary gifts or *inam* are accepted by the actors after a show, and the grateful recipients sing a couplet for each patron on the stage. This income



is part of the proceeds of the show and does not go specifically to the actor for whom it is meant. Sometimes, in the old days, the elite of a village patronized a visiting company by announcing sponsored meals for a day; the performances would then be free of charge for the audience. The acknowledgements which were publicly made by the company in such an event amply thanked the generosity of the patron, encouraging others to come forward the next day.

Until the late 1950s, the touring Khyal companies performed according to their respective annual calendars while amateur actors in the villages organized their own performances in the fortnight culminating in the Holi festival. These community shows had an elaborate cooperative character, with everyone in the village contributing some resources and labour. The stage and greenroom facilities, lights, and seating arrangements were all made by the villagers, who also provided refreshment for the actors and vocal support to the singers lent by impromptu choral groups. This tradition preceded the formation of the professional groups—Kuchamani and later Shekhawati—and was in turn preceded by a Brahminical tradition of Khyal, which has bequeathed to us the early Khyal manuscripts\*.



Pandit Lacchi Ram of Kuchaman (1847–1938), a poet, playwright, and performer, organized the first professional Kuchamani Khyal company in the 1870s. He was a ‘Garuda Brahmin’—a priest of the Meghwal community—originally living in Borsu. The feudal chieftain of Borsu would not permit a low-caste performer to sport jewellery even while playing the Queen in the play. So Pandit Lacchi Ram, who had earned the title of ‘Pandit’ (otherwise used only by Brahmins) for his knowledge as a religious preacher and his talent as a poet and performer, migrated to neighbouring Kuchaman where he was well received by the ruling Thakur of the principality after a test of his talents. Here, an allowance was also granted him to support his family. As a token of gratitude for the support extended by the principality, Pandit Lacchi Ram dedicated his Khyal art to Kuchaman, and thus his style came to be known as Kuchamani Khyal. In his old age, Lacchi Ram returned to Borsu as a preacher-sage and was worshipped as a demigod after his death. His memorial even today attracts people suffering from minor ailments who seek the intervention of his holy spirit; Lacchi Ram’s following is widely spread in the region, especially among the Meghwal community.

The professional companies introduced a new character in their performances, the clown. No published Khyal script includes the clown, yet there is no performance without one. This theatrical innovation has proved to be a boon to the Kuchamani Khyal as this character is at liberty to bring in contemporary references, communicate directly with the audience,

\*See cover—*Ed.*





Ugam Raj, doyen of Khyal.

and create humour where there is none in the action of the play. His pranks, especially on the female characters, delight the audience. He exposes the vainglorious and comes to the aid of the righteous, upholding morality. He also acts minor roles and exhibits a marvellous ability to be in and out of character. The clown is always a parallel character even if he is not a character in the play.

By contributing a comic aspect to the performance, the clown joins the King-Queen-Drummer trio as a character that has come to stay with this folk-theatre style. Ugam Raj as the Queen, Bansilal Khiladi as the King, and Pukhraj Gaud as the clown have made an indelible mark of artistic excellence in the practice of Kuchamani Khyal. Ram Kishan and Nathulal are accomplished Naqqara players. The six professional companies performing

Khyal at present all have actors playing these roles.

Ugam Raj (b. 1926), the octogenarian doyen of Kuchamani Khyal, is a nonpareil thespian and a marvellous minstrel of this 'total theatre'. A high-pitch singer of pre-microphone days, this adept dancer-actor has been the moving spirit of every performance he has led. His mentor Guru Bhanwarlal initiated him into Khyal-playing at the age of sixteen. Ugam Raj has left a gaping void since he bowed out of the stage a couple of years ago, but his phenomenal success has made him a living legend. The Sangeet Natak Akademi award (1975), the Rajasthan Sangeet Natak Akademi award (1971–72), the Tulsi Samman (1996), and recently the Marwar Ratna award (2006) have been conferred on him. He continues to work as an instructor, ensuring at least a quarter century of life for this endangered folk theatre.

Bansilal Khiladi, once a carefree lad tending goats and humming Maand compositions by his father Imambakhsh, had the early opportunity of apprenticeship as a junior artist with a Ramlila and later a Nautanki company. His occasional appearances as King against Ugam Raj as Queen have remained exquisite theatrical reminiscences for many of their admirers. He runs his own company today. Pukhraj Gaud, a noted jester and one of the most popular actors in Kuchamani Khyal, received the Sangeet Natak Akademi award in 1987 and the Rajasthan Sangeet Natak Akademi award in 1999–2000. Ram Kishan Solanki of Pushkar has dominated the folk theatre on the Naqqara for over four decades. His brother Nathulal and his son inherit the tradition and perform with a fair degree of competence. These artists have all contributed in keeping the Kuchamani Khyal alive and preserving

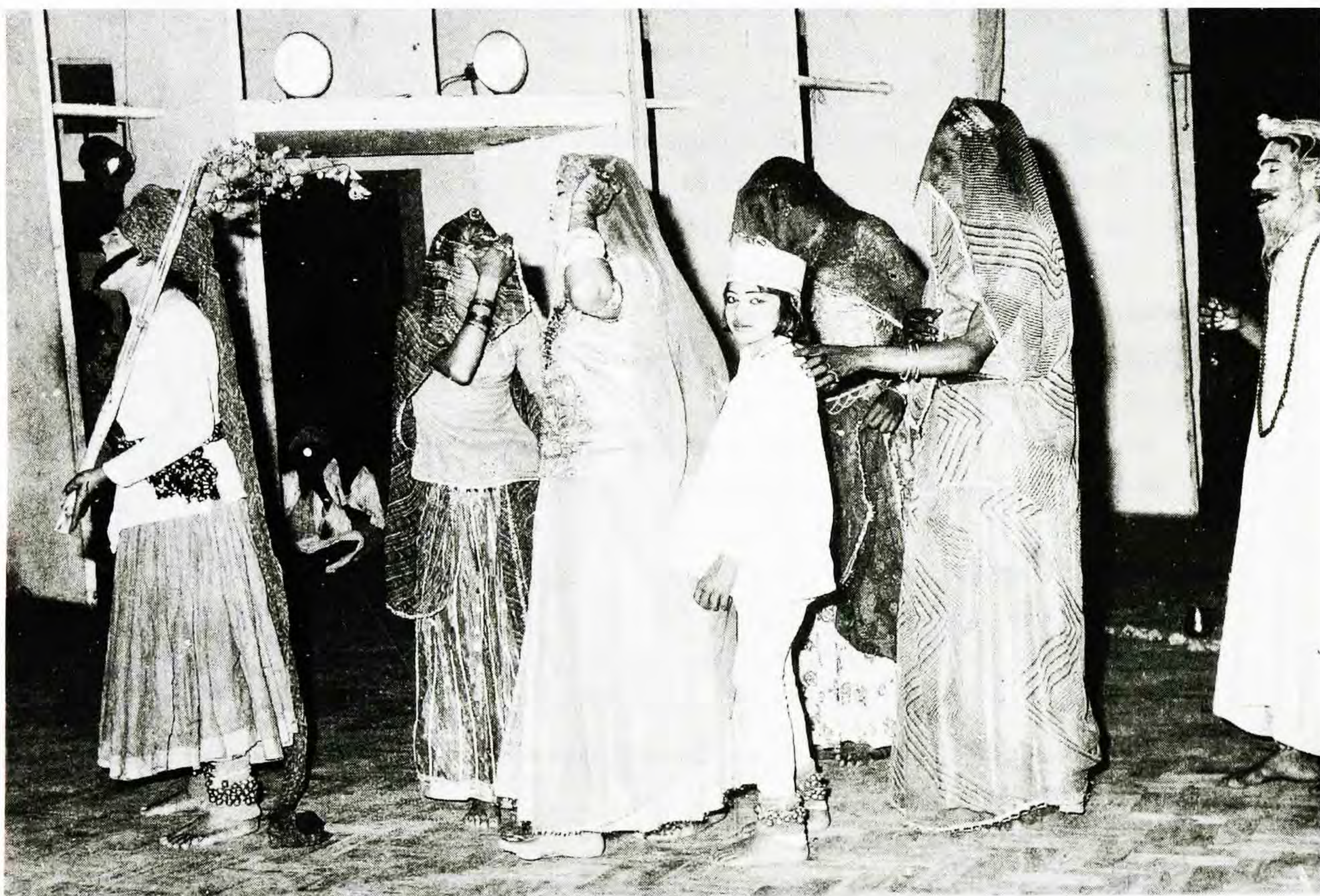




*Left: Pukhraj Gaud (right) as clown in a comic sequence from *Raja Harishchandra*.*

*Below: A wedding interlude from the same play, performed at the Pushkar fair in the 1970s.*

*Photographs: Courtesy Madan Mohan Mathur*





its popular appeal among the rural masses and non-resident Rajasthanis, who invite them to perform all over the country. About two hundred Khyal players wait to be hired for shows of the professional Khyal companies, which have lately also taken to publicizing governmental policies and programmes on behalf of the Song and Drama Division of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.

The music of the Kuchamani Khyal is mesmerising: the beat of the Naqqara and the voices of accomplished singers echo for long in the memory of most addicted auditors. The harmonium is generally used as accompaniment though there have been instances of the clarinet also being used. Separate choral groups of supporting singers for the hero and heroine of the play have sometimes been employed by companies. The musicians usually come from the Dholi caste and play also at Hindu weddings and other auspicious ceremonies.

The Khyal theatre is amazingly *sarva-varnik*, open to all *varnas* as drama is stated to be in the *Natyashastra*. The artists come from all classes and strata of society. Several Muslim artists under Hindu pseudonyms work in the professional troupes. Muslims were to be found even in community performances until the 1950s. Bansilal Khiladi is actually Basheer and Raju playing the clown is Ramzan. There are some other examples too.

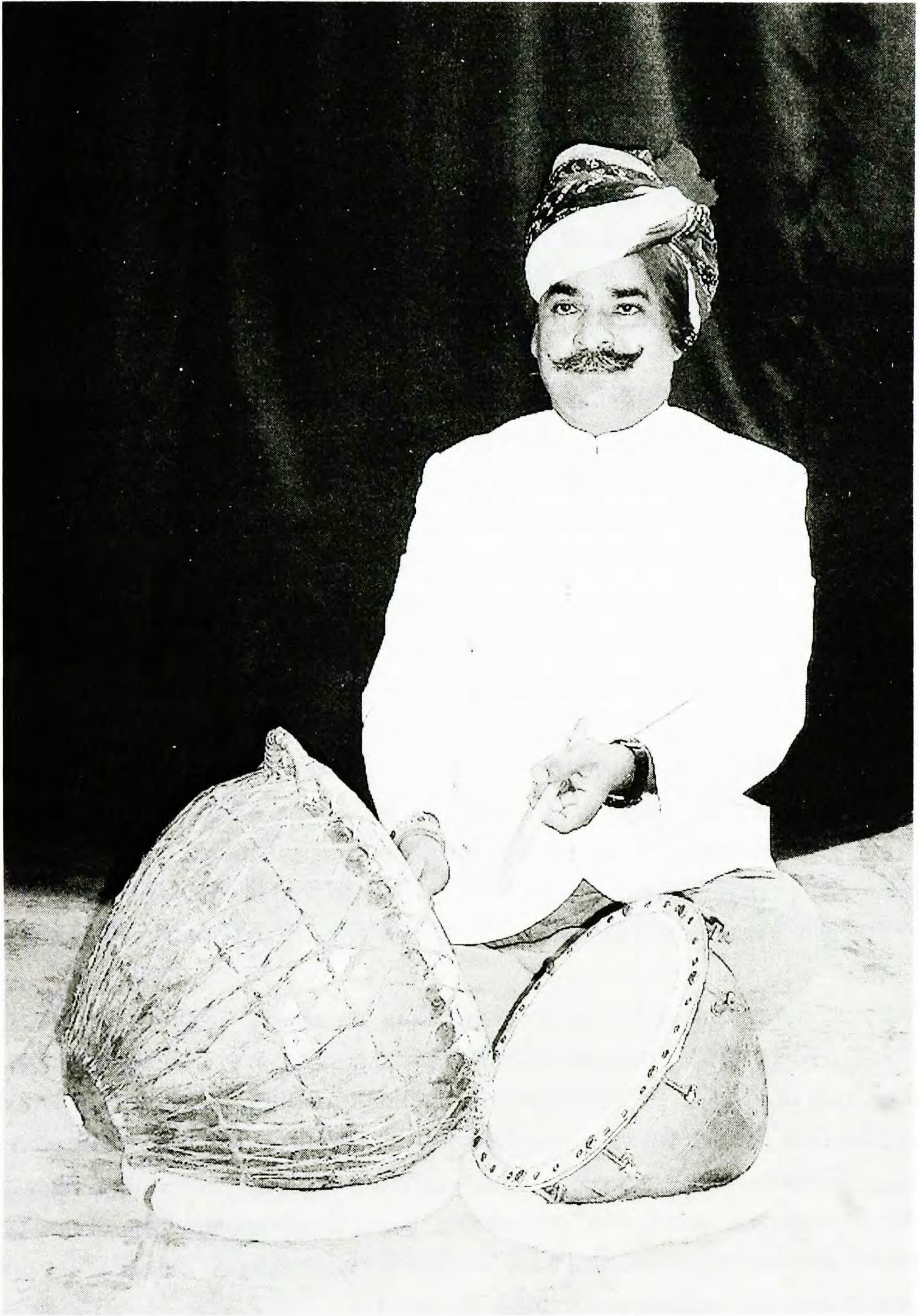
The process of recruitment to Khyal is uncertain; sometimes good singers are picked up from *jagarans*—nightlong religious assemblies centred around the performance of devotional music—or they are personally trained and recommended by senior artists. The stage itself is the training ground in many cases as child artists perform group dances, songs and interludes to entertain the audience.

Kuchamani Khyal is one of the best examples of an oral cultural tradition whose origins go back to about three hundred years. Most of the artists are illiterate and only the leading professionals have learnt to sign receipts, yet they know entire Khyals by heart. Although published scripts are available today and each group has a sizeable collection for ready reference, the artists' memory is chiefly relied upon in performance. An adequate knowledge of ragas such as Sorath, Malkauns, Maand and Jangali is basic to Kuchamani theatre singing.

Comic interludes form an essential part of the performance. They provide an opportunity to bring in the clown, the representative of the common man in the action of the play, to enhance the audience's participation and identification. The clown can give any story contemporary relevance and stretch any situation to its ludicrous extreme. Even sophisticated urban audiences at Jawahar Kala Kendra, Jaipur, comprising invited guests and university students, are seen to hugely enjoy the pranks of a player like Pukhraj Gaud. He is so brilliantly spontaneous at innovating and improvising his role that actors working with him on the stage have to be on their toes to respond in a like manner. Most of the time he steals the show.

The make-up in Khyal used to be simple and exclusively herbal. Mridsinghi, an indigenous preparation, was used as the base while vermilion and kohl with an admixture





A traditional Naqqara player.  
*Photograph: Courtesy author*



of water and oil respectively were used to accentuate facial details, paint moustaches and moles, and also to provide tonal colour for complexion. Sandal paste was used on foreheads. These days, the professional companies have adopted modern cosmetics for make-up as a result of their exposure to contemporary urban theatre. Stage props in Khyal are minimal; swords are used for the King, ministers and soldiers. Headgears tied in different styles distinguish royalty from the common folk.

Artists from all sections of society join the Khyal *akharas* and the professional companies too recruit artists of all castes and religions. However, crossing caste and communal boundaries carries its own disadvantages. While artists of specific castes fit into the prevailing structure of society and find appropriate caste patrons, the Khyal troupes have to depend upon the patronage of the general audience. Therefore earnings are limited, and the resultant financial insecurity dissuades the next generation from joining the profession.

Fortunately, a few avenues like contracts with local radio stations, State Akademis, etc., have opened up to provide at least some irregular income to Khyal artists. Registration with the Song and Drama Division has proved to be a shot in the arm. Yet old-age pensions are unheard of in this field. Agencies shooting Khyal for the purpose of documentation usually pay the leader, who never distributes the fee among the artists as they are his salaried employees. Artists' welfare schemes of the Culture Departments of State and Union Governments have not yet been able to ensure effective support for Khyal artists. Prospects are very bleak for artists languishing after retirement in far-flung places. Illiteracy mars all chances of awareness even of existing support schemes. The rainy season is a performance holiday and Khyal artists then attend to the little land that they have; most of them are small farmers with meagre holdings. Those who have no land at all remain unoccupied but still fight shy of working as agricultural labourers, though their salaries remain suspended for the period. This is the lot of Khyal artists who shoulder the responsibility for preserving this vivacious folk theatre in the twenty-first century. A gloomy picture indeed.

The strongest argument in favour of preserving an artistic tradition is that it has no substitute and is therefore irreplaceable. This argument applies indubitably to the Kuchamani Khyal of Rajasthan. At the present critical juncture, it needs to be listed among our endangered folk-theatre forms and efforts for its preservation need to be strengthened at all levels. Measures that need to be taken urgently include providing salary grants to professional companies, substantial retirement benefits to artists, production grants to those engaged in new experimental work in Kuchamani Khyal, and, most importantly, creating conditions for regular sponsored shows.