



Harmonizing the Purusharthas: Baaje Bhagat's Saangs and the Four Pillars of Life

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ABSTRACT

The foundation of Indian theatre is rooted in the ancient folk theatre. The paper aims to explore the Indian ethics and values depicted in the selected saangs, a form of Haryanvi folklore, of Baaje Bhagat which consciously or unconsciously guides the spectators to follow the ethical and moral code of conduct. Since their inception, saangs have emerged as a strong and powerful medium of communal expression. Their narratives encapsulate the fundamentals of human – love, morality, courage and the persistent struggle between the good and the evil. Despite the various modern adaptations to saangs and Folk theatre, the underpinnings of expressionist reality remain unchanged. Humans are characterized by their capacity of thought and reasoning. Through the application of the Indian doctrine of purusharthas on the selected Saangs, one learns how these great people have understood, connected and navigated themselves in the times of crisis, challenges and complexities of life within a community, thus, directing people to the path of ethical conduct. Ergo, saangs play an intriguing role in shaping our identity as a human being, individually and collectively, since antiquity to the contemporary times.

Keywords: Saangs, Folk Theatre, Purusharthas, Identity, Expressionist Reality.

Introduction

Saangs are a form of Haryanvi folklore which has existed since antiquity. Since the days of yore, humans have used performing arts as a medium of representation for their struggles, challenges and complexities of life. Folk literature of any place can be thought of as living portraits of the place, people and culture since they carry the very essence of the soil that they emerge from. According to Dr. Nagendra, Folk theatre is so vast and important that it remarkably depicts the tradition and culture of India. (Bhartiya Natya Sahitya, 410) It encapsulates our way of life not only in the form of the dominant culture of the region but also reflects upon the residual and emergent culture, thereby highlighting the fundamentals of humanity as how one should be.

The four purusharthas in Indian tradition i.e. *dharma* (righteousness), *artha* (wealth and prosperity), *kama* (desire and pleasure) and *moksha* (liberation and enlightenment) guide us to follow the moral way of living and folk theatre has proved to be a classical manifestation of this tradition. Shalini Attri emphasises that the four purusharthas manifest themselves in the folk literature of their region (141). Every now and then, the Indian folklore has come up with narratives that teach us how to navigate through the times of crisis in order to attain the ultimate goal of life, moksha. Through the study of these folklores, one can get insights into one's conduct and behavior, dreams and aspirations, courage and struggle, victory and failure and so on. (Anuraddha Sharma and Neeru Batra, 2020).

Different regions have different names and traditions for folk dance theatre e.g. it is called Nautanki in UP, Tura Kalgi in Rajasthan, Nakaal in Punjab, Maanch in Malwa and Saang/Swaang in Haryana and Merrut. Though Saangs are harmonious representation of a blend of acting, music, dance, costumes, diction, mythos yet music (Raagnis) and dance have been considered as the soul of saangs. Many scholars including Dr. Suresh Avasthi and Dr. Jagdeshchandra Mathura believe that all these names have similar connotations and they take their origin from 'sangeet' i.e. music. (Jagdish Chander Mathur Rachnawali) The mention of saangs

in the works of Gorakhnath, Sant Kabir, Jaaysi, Rakshan and others indicate the prevalence of saangs since long back as an important form of performing arts.

Baaje Bhagat's Legacy

Dr. Nagendra believes that saangs originated primarily in Haryana by folk artists such as Saadulah in middle ages. (Bhartiya Natya Sahitya, 84) Kisan Lal Bhatt and Pandit Deep Chand (also known as the 'Shakespeare' or 'Kalidas' of Haryana) have been considered as one of the pioneers who established the foundation of saangs (Punita). Baaje Bhagat, a disciple of Hardeva, was another famous saangi who wrote before Pt. Lakhmichand. According to Dr. Ramphal Chahal, Baaje Bhagat enthralled the common people by his understanding of mental, social and religious beliefs and rituals of the mankind. Baaje Bhagat received such a trinity of music, intelligence and knowledge that even today, the common people haven't been able to forget him (8).

Thus, with a compassionate and empathetic attitude, Baaje Bhagat's saangs magnificently exhibit the complications of life and how the protagonists pursue the four purusharthas. Purushartha is a Sanskrit word composed of 'purush' i.e. soul/ immaterial essence and 'artha' meaning purpose or object of desire. Hence, etymologically, the word 'purushartha' means the 'object of human pursuit'. (Prasad, 2008)

The doctrine of purusharthas influence, guide and determine the entirety of one's life. Santanu Sarkar claims that the modern society is progressing rapidly using technology and somehow in this progress, the significance of purusharthas has been undermined and their meaning diluted. Hence, there is a dire need for the modern civilisation to understand and value and sanctity that the four purusharthas hold in one's life. (47) Baaje Bhagat's saangs present certain yardsticks according to which one should indulge or abstain oneself from certain actions. Of the four purusharthas, Baaje Bhagat considered *dharma* to be the most important goal of human life (Chahal, 9). Manusmriti also extensively accentuates upon the importance of *dharma*, often considered as the foremost purushartha. *Dharma* provides us guidance on personal conduct, adherence to respective duties and societal values by emphasizing on the essential human values such as compassion, sincerity, honesty and empathy. *Dharma* is called so because it protects all.

“धर्म एव हतो हन्ति धर्मो रक्षति रक्षितः

तस्माद्धर्मो न हन्तव्यो मा नो धर्मो हतोऽवधीत्” (Manusmriti 8.15)

Ganganath Jha roughly translates it as: “Justice, blighted, blights; and justice, preserved, preserves; hence justice should not be blighted, lest blighted justice blights us” (Manusmriti with the Commentary of Medhatithi).

The Supreme Path of Dharma

In Baaje Bhagat's saangs such as 'Satyavadi Harishchandra', 'Nal Damyanti' and 'Sarvar Neer' the characters are presented as quintessential representations of *dharma*. In order to stand firm to his obligations and commitment, King Harishchandra offered his kingdom, sold his queen, son Rohtas and himself to pay *daksina* to the Brahmin Vishwamitra. While Vishwamitra, unconvinced by King Harishchandra's adherence to his *dharma*, tested him consistently, he failed every time to disprove King Harishchandra's faith and devotion to his duties. After losing his kingdom, King Harishchandra is not only humiliated by others such as Bhangi Kaala but also by his wife who refuses to touch the pitcher that King Harishchandra carried since he chose to be a servant of an untouchable, Bhangi Kaala. She argues that it is against the *dharma* of a *brahman* to touch anything owned by the untouchables. Both of them feel vulnerable against their terrible situation. When King Harishchandra's wife refused to help him, she did it to stay true to her *dharma* of being a Brahman. Though her emotions overpowered her several times throughout her life, she never deviated from the path of righteousness, but questioned the decision of following the four purusharthas. On one hand, purusharthas are supposed to guide mankind towards a happier and healthier life leading to *moksh* but at the same time, following these purusharthas have caused much trouble to the king and queen which otherwise might have been avoided entirely. Overwhelmed by her emotions at the death of her son, the queen says,

“म्हारे की तरीयां कोए मतना धर्म पै अड़ियो।

जिसा म्हारा झड़ रहया मान किसे का मत झड़ियो।

म्हारे की तराह कोई मत बण कै बिगड़ियो।”

It roughly translates to: Nobody should obstinate about *dharma* as much as we did. Nobody should be disrespected like we have been disrespected. Nobody should lose their way after achieving success as we did.

Losing her rationale, the queen questions the relevance of *dharma* itself. However, in their marriage whenever the queen seemed to stumble on her path of *dharma*, King Harishchandra has emerged as stronger than ever. He stayed determined throughout his life to follow the path of truth and *dharma* even when his wife came to cremate their son and couldn't pay the cremation fees, notwithstanding he asked her to offer her dupatta instead of the money. Furthermore, when the villagers accused her to be a witch and demanded Harishchandra to burn her alive. He agreed to it and said,

“मैं राजा हू दानी, तनै इब तक ना जानी, तेरी मानु तै मेरे सत की हानि।

मैं धर्म बिच न्यु बंद रह्या सु रानी, जैसे मुश्किल पिंजरे में शेर घिरे नै।।1।।” (Chahal, 32)

It roughly translates to: I am a dutiful king, haven't you realized it yet, obeying you would question my character, my queen. I am bound to my *dharma* like a lion trapped in a cage in difficult times.

King Harishchandra feels helpless, yet resolute to be righteous in the face of adversity. Though, he wishes to be with his family and live prosperously, the unforeseen circumstances trap him into terrible dilemmas where he chooses his *dharma* above everything else, including the familial love.

Similar to King Harishchandra's plight at the hands of his owner, Bhangi Kaala and Brahman, Vishwamitra; when the innocent King Nal lost his kingdom to his deceitful brother, Pushkar, he was humiliated and separated from his son. Yet, it is Damyanti's *dharma* through which she acts as a resilient force under the scorching heat of adversity in their shared journey. King Nal feels terrible to see his wife suffering from starvation and poverty. Therefore, he decides to kill a partridge in order to satiate Damyanti's hunger however, the queen warns King Nal that it is against the *dharma* of a *kshatriya* to harm living beings in desperate times.

“छतरापण की आण-काण, बेशक जाओ प्राण,
पिया धर्म छोड़ना चाइए ना ॥ टेक ॥” (Chahal, 59)

It roughly translates to: The dignity of martiality must be maintained even though one has to sacrifice their life. One must not leave the path of *dharma*, my dear husband.

In order to follow her duties as a *pativrata* wife, Damyanti acts as a testament of unwavering pillar of support and an enduring power of commitment. In the symphony of their marriage, she acts as the instrument of harmony and wisdom, reminding King Nal to pursue the path of righteousness.

Dharma has been considered as the prime and most important of the first three purusharthas to attain moksha, the ultimate aim of life. Therefore, characters such as King Harishchandra, King Nal, Queen Damyanti, King Amba and others have followed *dharma* while somehow sacrificing the other two purusharthas, *artha* and *kama*. King Harishchandra had to give up his kingdom to follow his *dharma*. But according to Kautilaya's Arthashastra, a person must strive hard to achieve greater heights and accumulate wealth while at the same time protecting whatever he already possesses. King Harishchandra could neither protect his wealth nor his people. He even failed to keep his family safe and had to forsake his desire to be with his wife and son. Thus, failed to follow *kama* which implies the shortened form of *kamana* (desire, appetite). Brihadaranyaka Upanishad uses the term *kama* in a broader sense for any desire. (Hymn 129)

King Nal, on the other hand, is tempted by the passion for his wife and wishes for her safety and comfort. He repeatedly asks Damyanti to go to her parents after they are banished from their kingdom and when she denies, he makes every possible effort to make her living smooth in the woods. When nothing seemed to work in his favour, King Nal leaves her alone in the woods in a hope that after being separated from her husband, Damyanti might return to her parents and live happily. These incidents suggest the impatient nature of King Nal who gets anxious at little things which do not fall under his expectations. His hyper-activeness and uncontrolled responsiveness to circumstances led to the loss of his kingdom and his separation from Damyanti. However, many a times, when the King is overwhelmed by his desires, his queen directs him to the path of righteousness which would ultimately result into their attainment of moksh. Perhaps, this is how the institution of marriage works. Damyanti's adherence to *dharma* protects and decides king Nal's fate.

King Amba also epitomizes *dharma*, following the footsteps of King Harishchandra, he says to his queen,

“न्यून धर्म नहीं छोड़ूँ चाहे वोहे हो हाल मेरा राणी।
जिन्हें धर्म करया उन्हनैँ स्वर्ग मिल्या या झूठी नहीं मिसाल ॥ 2॥” (Chahal, 279)

It roughly translates to: My queen, I won't abandon my duty even if I meet the same fate (as King Harishchandra). Those who have practiced duty, received heaven, this dictum is not false.

After donating his kingdom to a *saadhu* (hindu holy man/ monk), he takes his family to the woods where the couple works as servants to an innkeeper who selfishly sells queen Ambali to a merchant in an attempt to satiate her bottomless greed. Later, King Amba is also separated from his sons, Sarvar and Neer in the search of Queen Ambali. The whole family wrestles against their harsh circumstances, separated from one another for almost 12 years. However, none leaves the virtuous path of righteousness despite myriad distractions and unsteady circumstances of life. Queen Ambali remained resolute and didn't yield to the merchant instead she took a vow to be the merchant's sister for 12 years. Sarvar and Neer struggled throughout their adolescent years, looked out for each other in the absence of their parents, educated themselves and joined the force as army officers. King Amba wandered here and there in search of his family like a beggar, but he was crowned as the king of Kannauj city, as per the dying wishes of kannauj's last king, and he solely devoted himself to the people of Kannauj as their chief.

Cultural Identity and Belongingness

In all these selected saangs, there is a common thread that involves loss of wealth and kingdom, separation and struggle towards reunion of the characters, often bound by familial love. Yet, it is noteworthy how different characters navigate and deal with such challenging situations. On the surface level, their problems seem to follow a pattern but on a deeper level, there are several dimensions to it which make every character different and unique. While analysing how folklores have helped us in shaping our identity, it raises the

question whether saangs challenge the concept of cosmic justice or reinforce deterministic fatality. Cosmic justice is a philosophical concept which explains the fairness of the universe. It questions the idea of good and evil by suggesting that there is a natural order in the cosmos – a higher power that guides us to follow the path of higher moral purpose. Deterministic fatality, on the other hand comprises of determinism and fatalism. Deterministic worldview explains that one's future is predetermined and entirely based upon his previous actions. Fatalism suggests the inevitability of events. Thus, deterministic fatalism implies that certain outcomes are not only predetermined by our earlier acts but are also inexorable. While this question depends upon the philosophical and moral groundings of the narrative, Saangs being rooted in the ancient tradition of Indian literature are more inclined towards the notion of cosmic justice. The four purusharthas guide us to the path of higher moral purpose and attainment of *moksha* maintaining the notion that there is a supreme power that rules over the entire universe.

Conclusion

Baaje Bhagat has sumptuously reflected upon the human values and moral conduct, also present in the Hindu classical texts such as Vedas, Puranas, Shruti, Smriti, Upnishads, Geeta, and the great Indian epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata. He was a staunch follower of *dharma* and his saangs present a magnificent amalgamation of the classical knowledge and local dialect, Haryanvi, thereby paving a way for mankind to explore the various ways for traversing through the difficult circumstances which come along with the uncertainties of life. His saangs suggest that it is only our *dharma* which can help us to overcome such obstacles. These narratives encapsulate the life journeys of great people in Indian history. Their actions and decisions may not be practically plausible to follow in the contemporary times, but they do establish the fundamental principles and examples of Indian ethics and morality. These characters exemplify the role of a hero, acting like a beacon of inspiration, to which we should aspire to emulate. The reason why these narratives have survived for centuries is that they have had the power of resonance in them. They possess the ability to make their readers realise the ultimate truth of life, that is, the beauty of life exists not in the on-going socio-political and cultural discourses but in our mere existence. The American poet, Walt Whitman ruminates about the very essence of life in his poem "O Me! O Life!". He questions whether there is any good in the midst of the usual happenings of life. The answer to this question is, "That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse".

Whitman suggests the importance of acknowledging the present as the most important of all. Man usually gets swamped in accumulating things, becomes greedy, unable to enjoy life as it is. However in this greed, he gets involved in a lot of tactics to retain his power over the others, in whatever way he can. Yet, the fundamental truth is that there could be no qualitative change in experiential reality. What's important is that we're there to feel and experience those similar emotions that people have felt throughout ages, but every time and to every person it is a unique and new experience. The socio-political and cultural discourses keep on evolving with respect to the contemporary times but their basic nature remains the same. These saangs tend to provide us insights into the basic nature of humans and how accordingly they should conduct themselves.

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