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## **Bhand Pather : The Dramatic Presentation of Kashmir**

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### **Abstract**

The traditional theatrical art of Kashmir, known as Bhand Pather, derives its name from the amalgamation of two Kashmiri words: "Bhand" and "Pather." In Kashmiri, "Bhand" signifies an artist, while "Pather" translates to acting. The term "Bhand" traces its origin to the Sanskrit word "Bhand," signifying comical behavior or imitation, a trait prevalent in several North Indian languages. This inquiry into Bhand Pather leads us on a journey that not only unravels linguistic intricacies but also delves into the cultural and historical fabric that shapes this distinctive form of folk theatre in the captivating region of Kashmir. Nestled amidst the majestic mountains, Kashmir is a cultural haven, rich in folk traditions, literature, drama, and dance. This paper delves into the intricate world of Bhand Pather, exploring its cultural, historical, and dramatic dimensions. Situated amid the awe-inspiring mountains, Kashmir stands as a cultural sanctuary, endowed with a wealth of folk traditions, literature, drama, and dance. This scholarly endeavor meticulously examines the nuanced realm of Bhand Pather, scrutinizing its cultural, historical, and dramatic dimensions.

**Keywords:** Bhand Pather, Kashmiri singing, Folk art, Kashmiri language.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The passage highlights the nature of "Bhand," a traditional theatrical form, emphasizing its distinctive qualities. "Bhand" is defined by its inherent dramatic flair, showcasing performances that stand out for a specific combination of imitation and exaggeration. These elements contribute to the unique character of Bhand, making it a form of theatrical expression that is marked by vivid and expressive portrayals. The subsequent reference to "Bhand Pather" elaborates on the three key elements that constitute the essence of this theatrical tradition. First, there is an emphasis on playing musical instruments, suggesting that music plays a significant role in Bhand Pather performances. Second, dance with comical gestures is highlighted, indicating that physical expression and humour are integral components. Lastly, acting is identified as a fundamental element, underlining the importance of skilful portrayal and dramatic representation within the tradition.

Bhand Pather stands as an early theatrical tradition in the subcontinent, even though comprehensive archival evidence of this folk form is limited. Nevertheless, its historical roots can be traced back to as early as the 6th century. Prior to the advent of

Muslim rule in Kashmir, this theatrical art was predominantly staged on days of religious significance. Despite the cultural shifts accompanying Muslim rule, Bhand Pather endured as a form of expression. However, notable changes occurred in the performance venues, transitioning from temples to shrines and khankahas, reflecting the evolving cultural landscape under Muslim influence. This historical evolution underscores the resilience and adaptability of Bhand Pather across different periods and cultural contexts within Kashmir.

The village of Akingan, nestled in the Anantnag district of Kashmir, approximately 45 kilometres from Srinagar, serves as the ancestral home for a community of Bhands, the traditional performers of the valley. This community spans across several villages, strategically positioned at the foothills of the expansive mountain ranges, and demonstrates a unique migratory pattern, moving from one location to another while showcasing their extensive repertoire. Perched on one of the smaller hills within this region is a renowned temple dedicated to the Goddess Shiva Bhagvati. Significantly, once a year, in a gesture of reverence towards the Goddess, the Bhands, who predominantly follow the Muslim faith, engage in a special ritualistic dance known as the 'Chhok.' This dance, performed with profound devotion and unwavering faith, serves as a testament to the cultural amalgamation and shared traditions that transcend religious boundaries within this unique community.

The Bhands, as traditional performers, encompass a diverse repertoire of Pather plays. Within the current living forms of Pathers, those that have gained prominence in Wattal Pather include the oldest form and the more contemporary Angrez Pather. However, the prevalent ones are generally the Darz Pather and Wattal Pather, complemented by the Shikargah Pather, Bakerwal Pather, Angrez Pather, Armen Pather, and others. Each play commences with a ceremonial initiation marked by drum beating, Swarna vad, Nagara Thalijand other traditional musical elements. This methodical and rhythmic prelude sets the stage for the subsequent performance, contributing to the immersive and culturally rich experience that defines the Bhands' portrayal of various Pathers in the Wattal Pather tradition.

The Bhand Pather, as an art form, has endured the passage of time, remaining an integral component of the region's folk tradition. This artistic expression, once a vital conduit for information, awareness, and entertainment, has experienced a diminishing significance in contemporary times. The period between 1991 and 2001 witnessed a decline in theatrical works, largely attributed to the impact of militancy in Kashmir. However, in 2002, after a hiatus of a decade, the Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art and Culture and Languages orchestrated a theatre event featuring a variety of plays at Tagore Hall in Srinagar, Kashmir. This initiative served as a catalyst, reigniting the enthusiasm of theatre activists and breathing new life into the theatrical movement. Consequently, numerous folk theatre and drama clubs emerged across Kashmir, with nearly 50 registered groups such as Akhingan Anantnag National Bhand Theatre Wathura, Chadora, Budgam, Alamdar Bhagat theatre, Mahirpora Anantnag, Wular folk theatre, Zainageer Baramulla, Gulmarg luk theatre, Hatmulla upward. This resurgence

reflects a renewed commitment to preserving and revitalizing the rich cultural heritage embodied in Bhand Pather.

Bhand Pather does not grapple with the constraints or challenges associated with the treatment of women in society. The Bhands, through their performances, confront and satirize malevolent political agendas and various societal shortcomings, providing a unique and critical perspective that often goes unexplored in other art forms. The popularity of Bhand Pather heightened significantly, with performances becoming commonplace during agricultural festivals, religious celebrations, and the inaugural snowfall of the season. It found particular favour within royal circles, where members of the aristocracy would partake in dances and enactments accompanied by musical accompaniment, serving as a means to entertain and unify the entire empire.

## **CONCLUSION**

The diminishing significance of Bhand Pather, once a vital channel for information and entertainment, underscores the urgent need for concerted efforts to revitalize this invaluable folk tradition. Acknowledging the pivotal role of Pather artists, it is imperative to institute regular awards, thereby preserving their identity and cultivating renewed interest in Pather among the younger generation. Financial support is essential to enable these artists to fully dedicate themselves to their craft without having to seek alternative means of livelihood. The integration of Bhand Pather into the school curriculum becomes imperative, facilitating the impartation of knowledge about this traditional folk art to the younger populace for its continued transmission across generations. Immediate and effective measures are crucial not only to preserve Bhand Pather as cultural heritage but also to uphold it as an integral facet of our collective identity, ensuring its enduring presence in the rich cultural tapestry of the region.

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