

In the Company of Naqals

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This paper examines the changing realities of folk theatre in Chandigarh through the interaction of the author with the Naqals (“imitators,” from Farsi *naqal*). As performers and folk artists the Naqals preserve a rich array of Punjabi cultural traditions. However, given the processes of modernization and the changing parameters of the patronage economy, the art of the Naqals is slowly losing its sway on rural and urban communities. This article describes the author’s attempt to preserve the rich traditions of the Naqals while simultaneously adapting them to modern circumstances.

The energy of folk theatre comes from the fact that although it upholds traditional values, it also has the capacity to question those values and spin them on their head. The various conventions of chorus, music, unrelated comic interludes, as well as the mixing of human and mythological characters, allows alternative views to be presented simultaneously. My relationship with this particular form, through my own personal experiences, has created inferences that have evolved mysteriously, organically and silently. It was my desire to learn about the ‘other’ in order to enrich my own work that led me to work with the Naqals.

While driving from Chandigarh to Amritsar with my family, in 1985, we stopped at a village from where I heard sounds of singing and shrieks of laughter. There seemed to be a show in the village square. Through a narrow mud tract in the dusty golden light I could see a scattering of mud and thatch huts with tin doors around. Intrigued by the sound we walked towards a large gathering of men and an equal amount of children sitting around a dimly lit stage. A naqal performance was in progress. An actor comes on the improvised stage and blows long and hard through the horn of an antelope. Immediately after that an old decrepit man comes blowing fire from his mouth, while a procession of actors follow him, moving with a shambolic monotony. After some exchange of risqué repartee, a group of garishly dressed female impersonators enter making the villagers alert with joy. There was laughter all around and the actors on the stage were encouraging the audience to dance with them. The stories that they were enacting were pan Indian myths conjoined with local myths, transformed and renewed for local meaning. The gods that they

evoked rode on bicycles, aspired for a Maruti car, and sweated profusely. The musical rhythms were inspired by the common stock of Hindi film songs and folk tunes.

The Naqal performance is designed for pleasure as well as profit. Allusion, parody, irreverence, subversiveness and comic interludes were the main ingredients of the performance. It is a form without any firm or continuous tradition and the Naqals are master adapters, changing their script, movements, songs, and innuendoes as they go along. They include in their repertoire urban issues, along with stories of Gods and Goddesses, legendary heroes, tales of devotion and miracles that were enacted with an idiomatic speech, in a patois that had its provenance in colloquial aspiration; their performances are rendered with a rhetorical flourish, that is interspersed with a comic vulgarity that stops short of crass.

The stage on which they performed was made of temporary planks of wood, laid on a trestle creating a platform stage, lit by oil lamps, creating giant shadows on a soiled white sheet strung haphazardly as a backdrop. The story had a simple narrative, which most of the audience knew by heart. The Naqals often poke fun at the high-minded ideals of the rich and powerful through their earthy humor and capacity to ad-lib. Through humor, they demystify those symbols sanctified by tradition, and in this way reduce the tensions and anxieties. The Naqal's satirical commentary on contemporary issues has a similar therapeutic impact. The Naqal tradition not only represents a people's rebellion against the establishment, but also shows the way to adjust and humanize to it.

While watching them perform, I understood the true meaning of the words 'spontaneity' and 'openness'. To see a large number of people sitting under a starlit night, responding to the mood of the performance was an enriching experience. To observe how the audience pumped energy and excitement into the performers was to recognize that something real and precious was being exchanged.

The Naqals, also known as the Bhands (clowns) are rural itinerant actors who perform in Punjabi. They originally came from among the bazighar (acrobats), patronized by local landlords, to whom they ritually apologize before they begin their performance. The Naqal is normally presented by two men who, through a series of jokes, improvisation and horseplay, make sharp and satirical comments on society and politics. One of the actors carries in his hand a leather strap the size of a folded newspaper, which he wields as a weapon to hit his partner to underscore a witty punch line. They wear a costume of wrap around lower part of the body (*tehmat*), a short shirt, and a dunce cap. As jesters, they are the symbol of the common-man who relates to issues of tradition, progress and modernity in a light-hearted but incisive manner. Naqals function as both social critics and popular psychiatrists through their verbal gymnastics, on varying subjects such as dowry, corruption and greed.

Their repertoire of stories, taken from the popular Punjabi folk tales: Hir-Ranjha, Sohini-Mahiwal, Puran Bhagat, Raja Bharthari. The leader is

actor/director/playwright/musician all rolled into one. The text that evolved is impervious to any rules of dramaturgy or syntax, with a freewheeling mix of tragedy and comedy that swings from the esoteric to the banal.

Their mesmerising performances include a range of songs and dances with musical patterns derived from classical dance (*kathak*) and popular Bollywood movements. Their form of presentation is completely non-realistic, as when the protagonist pats his horse while singing an adieu to his mother, the charger unsatisfied with the rendering starts singing by repeating the same lines in a more mellifluous voice. Characters burst into dance movements even when receiving bad news.

Men enact the role of women. In fact, a folk actor is taught how to change gender. This is a complex process because the actor not only has to become another character, but also has to change gender. With their over powdered faces, seductively drawn eyes, blood red lips and accentuated false breasts, performers with names like Miss Lily and Miss Rosy are the true stars of the show. The men in the audience let go of their repressed inhibitions and behave in a manner which would not have been acceptable if there was a 'real' woman on the stage. On the other hand, the female impersonators on stage can make provocative gestures and sexual overtures, which would not have been possible if they were 'real' women. In other words, they serve an important function in a feudal and conservative society by addressing through displacement and sublimation the sexual fantasies of a male audience.

Puran, Sohan and Bahadur are female impersonators. That night they were gyrating wildly to the song *Jhumka gira re, Ravan ke darbar men* (I have lost my earring in the court of the demon king, Ravan). Displaying a mock show of coyness, they laced their provocative gestures with a roll of their eyes, while consciously thrusting their fulsome 'falsies' at an all male audience. The audience participated with a roar of appreciation, threw coins and crumpled five rupee notes towards the performers.

Meher Chand, the main musician, was singing a *Sufiana kalam* (Sufi songs of devotion) with his grainy voice, layered with a patina of nicotine and lack of sleep. Mundri strummed his stringed musical instrument (*tumbi*) with wild abandon, becoming a dancing mystic (*mast kalandar*) in the process. The female impersonators puckered their red lips that were painted on to the chalky white canvas of their face. "Look at me, I am so beautiful and saucy," they stated with an insolent insouciance. The unassailable arrogance of the performer mocked the audience without modesty or artifice.

Before I knew what was happening they had crept into my heart and mind with their repertoire of stories, dancing skills, musical background and dramaturgical concepts. Most traditional forms use music, dance, mime, gesture and speech, and the performer always remains within the prescriptive framework of his character. He does not manifest any individual traits, but displays the skill required for the role he is enacting. However, this particular form of theatre enacts myths, legends, folklore and rituals, expressing shared beliefs and value systems. I recognized in their work a specificity that was both

authentic and rooted. I noticed that every action had a ring of truth. They had an incredible capacity to shed the superficial and hone onto essentials, with a minimum of artistic tools or dramatic grammar. Yet, they could not handle speech, in the realistic naturalistic style of theatre. They spoke as though they were singing, and sang as though they were speaking. They did not have the range or expertise found in the more codified traditions, but they had a corporality that provided me with creative material on which I could sculpt shadows.

It took a long time for me to understand their world and for them to figure out why I wanted to enter their world. Initially I felt like an intruder. It is not easy to traverse distances that have resulted from belonging to different social strata, educational and economic backgrounds. I decided that the only way to interact with them was to drop all pre-conceived notions and consider us as a group of people working together. However, as the Naqal tradition is also a commercial form of entertainment they understand money well. If you pay them regularly, they do not bother with unnecessary esoteric issues. At that time, I did not envisage the significance that this work would have on my creative journey. I was not only thinking of directing a play but also searching for a characterization that was to be realized, not through detail, but through attitudes and concepts.

Workshops were arranged where local urban actors had an encounter with the Naqals. Both, to some extent shed their skin of separateness, and found invisible but meaningful threads that would stitch them together. Even though each group remained confined to their social strata, they showed an incredible capacity to pool their world-view in the cauldron of shared history, memory and collective consciousness.

Chandigarh is a faux French city designed by La Corbusier. This city created in the middle of nowhere; made of concrete, with an artificial lake and a garden-park created out of waste building materials. This became its history and ritual. Most of the urban actors were like the city itself floating in a concrete soul, searching for inspiration in a city of stasis. The work I make exists neither in the village, from where the Naqals come, nor from the city, from which I try to escape and come back to everyday. The hybrid work that I create makes me weave my own mythological world from a series of images that come from my everyday world. Grain, fire, water, mud, blood, sand become the leitmotif for my displaced imagination. The city for me flows into the village and the village flows back. This concrete jungle is a space: the memory and history that the Naqals bring transforms it into a place. A place where we gather to transcend the logic of rural versus urban.

The Naqals have been nomads and like all nomads they are aloof and suspicious. How do I build bridges with them? Their background is mysterious. Even though they belong to the same family, they all claim separate genealogies. Prem Chand the self styled master (*ustad*) says his family comes from Rajasthan and came to Patiala on the invitation of the local chief, Maharaja Bhupinder Singh. Tall, fair, with orange henna on his hair and moustache, gold loops in his

ears, he looks more like a buccaneer than a musician. Mundri claims no such esoteric history for himself. Wrapped in a huge overcoat, even in mid summer, with thick military shoes bought from the flea market, his favorite activity is sleeping and a stubborn resistance to bathing. During travels, most actors refuse to share a room with him because of this habit. My actors tell me that Mundri falls asleep on the stage during a performance. However, all that is forgotten when he plucks the strings of his *tumbi* and ululates in a voice that speaks of a land that has not measured time.

Meher Chand, the most talented is also the most serious. The only time he lets his guard down is when he talks about that part of his family left in Pakistan. He always wondered why our group, which has performed in so many parts of the world, had not been to Pakistan. Especially since they shared the same language. Our recent performances in Lahore fulfilled this dream.

Most of the Naqals have no permanent address or home and move from village to village with their cattle and sheep in search of pastures and work. They sing at village fairs and weddings. With pseudonyms like Miss Rosy and Miss Hurricane, the female impersonators had no problem posing as hermaphrodites, dancing and singing with gusto at the birth of the village headman's son or at traffic crossings. The performance of their art is intimately tied to questions of survival and as a result no role is--big or small, good or bad--in their economic dictionary.

Their main source of income came when they assumed the role of apothecaries for buffalos and cows during the monsoons, when the animals were prone to disease. During this period, they would sit in cowsheds chanting incantations to dispel evil spirits. Before the ritual, the *ustad* would assume the role of a shaman and purify the musical instruments by lighting incense and sprinkling rice over them.

Directing them in the play *Raja Bharthari* and the subsequent opening performance at the Kamani theatre in Delhi was an unmitigated disaster. Transferring them from the open fields to a cramped stage confined them, which made for a self-conscious performance. Their spontaneous and free movements now looked awkward and clumsy. Nothing flowed, as nothing was natural. I recognized that the trappings of a proscenium theatre and the imitation of western models had estranged them from their essential impulses. The myth, ritual, magic and song now removed from their life cycle sounded wooden and stilted. However, through this monumental failure, I got a glimmer of my future work.

I understood that one could not separate performance from the social context that generates it. Folk forms were changing; some aspects were dying, and others were renewing themselves just as society was going through a transformation. Along with changes in the content, there was also a change in presentation. Melodies from Bollywood crept into their presentations, and the Naqal form was used for political and social propaganda.

I wanted to create a theatre that had an encounter with its tradition and its archetypes, and attempt to create a piece of theatre that could be energized by

the past, but would be modern in outlook and spirit. The Naqal tradition provided a fund of stage conventions, concepts and techniques, but more than that, were the attitudes and philosophies that they exemplified. The Naqals have never heard of Brechtians alienation effects, but they continuously urge the audience not to be passive spectators but to participate actively in the development of the narrative. Their ability to detach themselves from the action of the play and comment on the action creates an immediate rapport with the audience. After playing a part, an actor still in costume, could either join in as a singer or sit in a corner smoking a cigarette. He could become 'invisible' on stage by letting go, almost metaphysically.

Working with them for the past twenty years has not been easy. It could have been artificial, and caused strains in the creative relationship. The plays that I do with them relate to a contemporary reality, which they are a part of, yet the presentation mode is far from their tradition. Over the years, these chimerical lines have moved backward and forward, like waves erasing traces, inscribing new ones, and moving towards new horizons. Working with them has helped my theatre retrieve a shard of memory that lay buried in some forgotten corner of my mind.