

## Exploring the Folk Theatrical Space in North India: Performance Dynamics and Cultural Significance

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### Abstract

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Existing performance postulations and the dramatic conventions of North Indian folk theatres share an undeniable affinity. An analysis of the dramatic principles underlying North Indian folk theatres reveals that the premises of these folk theatrical performances are founded on the very hypotheses that form the core of contemporary performance theory. While it is true that in modern times there has been a concerted effort to return to the simplicity and purity of things that were a part of the human ambience prior to the industrial age, the rise of performance theories and their affinity with folk theatrical practices warrant greater scrutiny. A shift towards performance is concurrent with a shift towards decentralization in nearly every aspect of human existence, including the social, cultural, and economic spheres. Recognizing the diversity and multiplicity of life as a result of this transition is part of a drive towards hybridity and heterogeneity. Thus, a transition towards performance is not merely a return-to-nature gesture; rather, it is an acknowledgement of previously neglected theatrical principles. The present study seeks to differentiate itself from the existing body of research on North Indian folk performance studies through its dedicated attention to the sociocultural and communicative dimensions inherent in North Indian folk theatres. In so doing, it endeavours to present an exclusive vantage point that both augments and extends the prevailing body of scholarship within this domain. Furthermore, the paper aspires to conduct a comparative scrutiny by juxtaposing these North Indian folk theatrical traditions against their Western counterparts, shedding light on the singular characteristics that define North Indian folk theatrical praxes.

**Keywords:** North Indian folk theatres, performance theory, hybridity and heterogeneity, sociocultural

North Indian folk theatres exhibit a notable alignment with contemporary performance theories, rooted in shared fundamental dramatic principles. This

connection extends beyond the confines of the “return to folk” movement and aligns with a broader societal shift towards decentralization, spanning social, cultural, and economic domains. This shift signifies a deliberate embrace of diversity and hybridity, rather than a mere romanticized return to a simpler past. It aims to unearth theatrical principles marginalized by the dominance of Greco-Roman dramatic traditions within Western culture. As a consequence, the evolution towards performance art incorporates elements that resonate not only with North Indian folk theatres but also with analogous practices worldwide. It is imperative to distinguish between realistic, naturalistic, and Sanskrit theatres, which emphasize codification and structure, and folk performance, and experimental theatres, which celebrate contradictions, diversity, and hybridity. This duality in theatrical paradigms reflects the intricate interplay between tradition and innovation within the world of performance. The present study seeks to differentiate itself from the existing body of research on North Indian folk performance studies through its dedicated attention to the sociocultural and communicative dimensions inherent in North Indian folk theatres. In so doing, it endeavours to present an exclusive vantage point that both augments and extends the prevailing body of scholarship within this domain. Furthermore, the paper aspires to conduct a comparative scrutiny by juxtaposing these North Indian folk theatrical traditions against their Western counterparts, shedding light on the singular characteristics that define North Indian folk theatrical praxes.

North Indian folk theatres prioritize the primacy of actors over their stage personas, a departure from conventional theatrical norms (Gilman xi). This emphasis disrupts the traditional theatrical illusion through exaggerated movements, frequent role changes sans costumes or makeup, and the use of upper garments for character transitions during performances. Such departures challenge the passive voyeuristic role of spectators, underscoring their awareness of the actor's presence on stage. Moreover, the incorporation of extra-theatrical activities, such as acknowledging donors, serves to further deconstruct the conventional dramatic illusion. In contrast to the Greco-Roman proscenium theatres, North Indian folk plays rely on the utilization of stock characters and improvisation, both of which are mutually reinforcing aspects deeply entrenched in the region's rich cultural traditions (Mathura 87).

North Indian folk theatre employs vibrant makeup and colourful costumes for increased ‘visibility’ on dimly lit stages, capturing the attention of “impatient crowds” (Mathura 37). Additionally, these striking visuals symbolize the transformation of actors from ordinary individuals to their respective characters. While these elements are sometimes seen as remnants of classical theatre and dance forms, it is worth noting that they may have influenced Sanskrit theatre as well, where they were extensively utilized to represent specific qualities of a character's inner self. These North Indian folk performances actively foster a participatory milieu where the audience and actors collaborate to shape a shared vision. This involves recognizing the coexistence of the real and the imaginary,

complementing each other. Actors' worth lies in their histrionic skills, with stagecraft taking centre stage. North Indian folk theatres address the challenge of understanding actors' social and individual selves by accepting their reality as individuals capable of transformation while retaining their unique value.

The challenge in understanding the emotional complexity of North Indian folk theatres arises from the linear and grid-like worldview in Anglo-American culture, where "repetition, redundancy, and clichés" are deemed artistic weaknesses (Toelken 275). In the twentieth century, Western cultural perspectives shifted to non-linear and dynamic views, influenced by modern physics and Eastern mysticism's dynamic and vibrating universe (Capra 205). This transformation extended to Western theatre, embracing movement and energy in performances, driven by changes in related fields. North Indian folk theatrical performances, known for their fluidity and departure from scripted texts, offered a flexible avenue for exploring actors' abilities, aligning with the adaptable paradigm.

Performance theatre and folk theatre use comparable methods to actualize human potentials and possibilities. Like North Indian folk theatres, performance theatre, too, emphasizes the physical and visual aspects, often veering towards dance, fashion, and circus (Gilman xii). Holistic performances encompass cognitive, emotional, and imaginative faculties, transcending traditional theatre models. In North Indian folk theatres, the blending of comedy, tragedy, songs, and dances offers a comprehensive portrayal of human capabilities. This transcending of classifications and rigid boundaries of genres into seamless representations has been one of the greatest strengths of North Indian folk theatres. Contemporary performance theories recognize the significance of North Indian folk theatres such as *svang*, *nautanki*, *bhavai*, and *mach*, with their distinctive song and dance sequences.

North Indian folk theatre incorporates songs as a fundamental element to facilitate character development, narrative enrichment, and the intensification of dramatic aspects. These songs, easily memorable and resonating with the audience, seamlessly integrate into performances, reflecting the unhurried pace of rural life during night-long folk shows. The fusion of traditional rural songs and dances with folk theatres results in a nuanced representation of human emotions through dance, drama, and vernacular language, underscoring the impact of external stimuli on human nature. These theatres transcend conventional genre boundaries, amalgamating diverse art forms such as theatre, dance, and painting. By incorporating dances, songs, and vernacular language prose, these theatres achieve a sense of realism while maintaining a degree of detachment within a mythical framework and verse, as exemplified and explored by Bertolt Brecht.

In colonial contexts, dance embodies the exotic 'otherness' in stark contrast to the 'cultured' colonizers, driven by power dynamics and unfamiliarity. Conversely, within North Indian folk theatres, dance delves into the depths of human nature.

Functioning as a transformative tool for identity recuperation, it challenges the primacy of language-based self-identity, emphasizing corporeal performance. In these theatrical spaces, dance strategically fulfils diverse objectives, employing techniques reminiscent of cinematic or theatrical aesthetics. Additionally, these theatres both subvert and reinforce gender norms, notably through male actors often assuming female roles, inciting scholarly inquiries into the gendered dimensions of dance within the colonial paradigm. The rhetorical questions posed by Pandit Lakhmi Chand, a doyen of Haryanvi *svang*—Nachan me ke dos dhara se, bhar ke bhes jnana, “What fault lies in dancing on the stage in the garb of a woman?”—undermines the conventional use of dancing as a gender specific activity which has been interrogated through the custom of male dancing on the folk stage (Śarmā x).

North Indian folk theatres, emanating from the Sanskrit theatrical tradition, have historically encountered an underestimation of their ritual significance, often attributed to their perceived adaptability to local customs. Nevertheless, these theatrical forms do encompass notable ritual components, mirroring structural parallels with Sanskrit theatre, such as the deployment of Nandi, symbolic flags, musical instrument incantations, and the presence of a chorus, collectively emblematic of a profound reverence for the natural world. Furthermore, North Indian folk plays exhibit a distinctive approach to the selection and invocation of deities, transcending religious boundaries and amalgamating secular and spiritual facets. The veneration of deities like Ganesha and Amba, which synthesizes diverse traditions, serves to underscore this inherent hybridity. This adaptability to local concerns, coupled with an emphasis on primitive instincts through a minimalist stage apparatus and human performativity, collectively underscores the multifaceted ritual and cultural significance embedded within North Indian folk theatres.

It is worthwhile to note here that these convergences between Sanskrit theatre and North Indian folk theatrical performances point towards the permeability of Sanskrit theatre and folk performances where Sanskrit theatre is only a single branch of largely amorphous performance possibilities. Performance traditions from different regions influence each other, facilitating the exchange of forms and ideas. According to Richard Schechner, every performing art is a hybrid, blending various elements (6). This blending uncovers historical layers and resists ideological homogenization. Folk plays, characterized by liminality, plurality, and physicality, differ from Western and Sanskrit theatres. They exist in the realm between reality and theatricality, rich in symbolic and non-realistic signs. These plays often occur during festivals or in village centres, blurring the boundaries between everyday life and performance.

An exploration of interactive events such as festivals reveals significant parallels between the ambiance of North Indian folk theatrical performances and the process of signification in social interactions within folk life. The festival turns everyday behaviour into a formalized stage performance. It elevates meals into

feasts and greetings into ceremonial rituals. It represents the culmination of community life and replaces ordinary everyday reality with “a more intense, symbolic, and expressive level of reality” (El-Nour 57).

North Indian folk theatres have historically functioned as vibrant platforms for fostering social cohesion, conveying codes of conduct, and imparting moral values. These theatres play a significant role in disseminating social awareness, bridging generational divides, and offering contemporary perspectives on historical events. They are communal performances that unite people within a shared physical space, both onstage and offstage. For example, the *kariyala* performances in Himachal Pradesh shed light on corrupt practices among village authorities and challenge superstitious beliefs, enlightening rural communities in the region. Audience involvement in folk theatres, marked by encouraging sounds, contributions, and requests, underscores the strong connection between performers and society. This engagement underscores the audience's identification with the characters onstage, rooted in a shared physicality that responds to oral and physical expressions. In line with Bertolt Brecht's concept of alienation<sup>1</sup>, folk theatres maintain a sense of immediacy in the present, both in terms of time and space. For instance, when an audience member interjects a remark towards a character, the actor incorporates it into their dialogue, and such interactions are embraced by the audience while preserving their sense of kinship with the characters onstage.

North Indian folk theatres serve as vital communication systems and cultural markers, facilitating the transmission of beliefs, values, and characteristics among various social groups while nurturing community values across generations and instilling traditional ethics in younger generations. These performances enhance social awareness by conveying customs and beliefs across diverse groups, expanding the horizons of rural societies. However, they must withstand a social validity test to become enduring sources of life wisdom, ensuring longevity and stability. In these theatres, a distinctive freedom in behavioural patterns resembles the essence of unrestricted performance, shifting the focus from thematic content to the creation of a transformative event. This approach transcends plot boundaries, typical character development, and didactic purposes, prioritizing the enactment of events over narrative intricacies.

North Indian folk plays use mythological stories as a conceptual framework, providing characters and basic plot elements, but not the underlying ideology. The plays prioritize temporal localization while utilizing myths as static elements and improvisation for dynamic effects, which are well-received by the audience. *Tamasha* plays combine mythology with satire, farce, and ribaldry, with the mythological plot serving as a mere pretext for a mixture of irreverent humour (Sharma, 28).

North Indian folk performances exhibit an implicit moral framework that frequently eludes the conscious awareness of the audience, despite its ubiquity

within the narratives. These moral underpinnings are regarded as sacrosanct and intrinsic to the storytelling, constituting a fundamental prerequisite for a holistic and authentic engagement. Any transgression of these moral norms is met with a sense of impropriety, not necessarily stemming from religious dogma but rather as a contravention of an ingrained, collective sensibility. The audience actively participates in these cultural expressions through a multifaceted engagement that encompasses dance, music, satire, and humour, thereby fostering an immersive and sensorial experience. Both rural and urban audiences typically do not compartmentalize the solemn and ephemeral aspects of these performances, instead perceiving them as an interconnected whole.

North Indian folk theatres utilize open-air performances due to their connection to ritualistic and social needs, taking advantage of the climate and avoiding the need for enclosed venues. This approach emphasizes the interplay between the performance and surroundings. Unlike modern theatres, North Indian folk theatres do not use curtains due to aesthetic and practical reasons. The absence of curtains allows for a three-sided audience and maintains familiarity between the audience and the stage. Instead of curtains, the area behind the stage serves as a space for costume changes, conversation, and rest for actors, maximizing space and emphasizing the centrality of human persona in the performance.

North Indian folk theatre aims to establish a connection between the audience and the play by avoiding excessive spectacle or naturalism, as explained by Tagore who asserted, “no one comes to see a play after locking his sensibility and imagination at home. Some things are to be suggested by the actor and some things the audience has to receive with his imagination” (Machwe 2). In rural folk performance spaces, actors ingeniously use their bodies to craft objects like chairs and curtains, adding to the suggestive nature of their performances. This style, known for its evocative language on stage, creates vivid poetic imagery, a hallmark of North Indian folk theatre. Due to limited resources and lack of formal venues, producers rely on vibrant colours, shimmering costumes, and audio-visual effects in songs and dances to enrich the visual appeal. This inherent suggestiveness fosters smooth transitions between scenes and actors, enabling a unique storytelling style different from Sanskrit theatre.

North Indian folk theatres demonstrate a remarkable fusion of theme and performance, a departure from Western theatres where the relationship between written text and performance remains notably variable, as Stephen Regan aptly observes (51). Folk theatres intricately intertwine narrative and performance, yielding a cohesive and vivid representation. Attempts at disentangling these elements result in an artificial portrayal of human existence. Within Indian folk theatres, audiences encounter recognizable settings, plots, and characters, underscoring the cyclic and repetitive nature of both life and performance. These performances not only challenge conventional Western theatrical discourse but also elicit intricate and interwoven emotional responses while defying rigid artistic boundaries.

Humour in North Indian folk theatres, as an essential part of their performance narrative, acts as a facet of its anti-structural functionality through which the whole edifice of the conservative and formal value system is deconstructed. North Indian folk theatres utilize humour to challenge the conservative and formal value system portrayed in their performance narratives. These folk theatres, like *svangs*, examine social issues by recognizing both societal and individual peculiarities. The cleverly hidden intelligence behind the theatres' witty remarks offers a perceptive analysis of contemporary events through pungent humour. When laughter is integrated into a society's psychological and social needs, it serves as a cathartic release and a "means to freedom from imprisonment in single role and egoist self" (Yarrow 66). The presence of a clown is indispensable in North Indian folk theatre, as they serve a purpose beyond providing comic relief. Tevia Abrams observes:

The comic jester role, with its special relationship to both audience and other performers, is thus a critical one for any troupe, as an audience will judge a troupe by the excellence of its jester. (294)

The jester in North Indian folk theatres serves as both a prominent figure and a reliever of actors during performances. Similar to the fool in Elizabethan theatre, the jester in North Indian folk performances represents a subversive quality that resonates with "the licensed transgression of the carnival tradition in Europe" (Yarrow 84). However, there are important distinctions between North Indian folk 'jesters' and Elizabethan 'fools'. In Elizabethan theatre, the fool was integrated into the plot and characterized by individual eccentricities. In contrast, the clown in North Indian folk theatres represents their social class or caste and often stands outside the narrative structure. Unlike the *Vidusak* in Sanskrit theatre, who was confined to ritual functions, the secular clowns in North Indian folk theatres introduce contemporary concerns and move against prevailing mythological and ethical structures (Varadpande 10; Jacob Srampickel 54).

North Indian folk theatres, with their performative nature, embrace spontaneity, further reshaping an already diverse compositional structure. Speech acts, performed within specific contexts, are constantly influenced by the politics of relationships, the situation of the speaker, and the listeners' responses. Speech becomes a controlled performative response, adaptable to spatial, temporal, and locational variables. Roger M. Keesing notes that women's speech is situated within "a specific micro political context" involving male-female relations and the ethnographic encounter itself (27). Understanding the historical circumstances and micro politics, including the ethnographer's role, is crucial for interpreting such speech. In the context of North Indian folk theatres, when the ethnographer is replaced by an exclusive male audience, representations of male-female relationships undergo noticeable changes.

Repetition as an essential aspect of folk theatres is employed very effectively by the performers on the stage. Ruth Finnegan's assessment highlights the performative nature of the use of repetition in oral poetry:

Repetition in some form is a characteristic of oral poetic style: repetition of phrases, lines or verses; the use of parallelism; recurrent formulae. Oral poetry is necessarily ephemeral. Repetition has a real point in such circumstances. It makes it easier for the audience to grasp what has been said and gives the speaker/singer confidence that it has understood the message he is trying to communicate. In antiphonal forms, refrains, choruses or the direct repetition of a leader's lines, repetition offers an opportunity for an audience to take part with ease in the act of performance, to a degree not possible without some measure of repetition. (129)

Deborah Tannen identifies four functions of repetition in conversations: production, comprehension, connection, and interaction (47). Repetition facilitates language production, comprehension, and forges connections with earlier utterances, ultimately serving the basic aim of speech: interaction. In North Indian folk theatres, the performative text modifies word meanings through contextual dialogue. The dramatic verbal exchanges involve multiple speakers, audience awareness, and various narrative elements like verse, prose, songs, and declamatory speeches. Dialogues between characters, actors, and the audience drive the story, resulting in dialogism from conflicting voices that shape meaning through commentary, examples, and extensions.

The interaction between actors and the audience in theatrical performances creates an active relationship between the speaker and the listener. The listener sometimes becomes a speaker, requesting repetitions, while the designated speaker adapts their communication accordingly. This dialogic nature of folk theatres emphasizes immediacy and experiential knowledge. Commenting on the emotional impact of dialogue compared to third person reporting, Tannen opines, "I believe it is because the creation of voices occasions the imagination of a scene in which characters speak in those voices, and that these scenes occasion the imagination of alternative, distant, or familiar worlds, much as does artistic creation. Finally, the casting of ideas as the speech of others is an important source of emotion in discourse" (25). Folk theatrical performances utilize speech to create understanding in line with their context and frame of reference.

In conclusion, it should be noted that North Indian folk theatres have certain major markers with performance theory. Through a protracted historical process of contestation, assimilation, and transference, these traits came to be a part of the structure, drive, and presentation of North Indian folk theatrical productions. What was realized in the West through discontent with realistic models of theatre, leading to postmodernist drives of intercultural, experimental, and performance theatre, was always part of North Indian folk theatre. Western experimentation by



way of monoculture, cerebral hegemony of the Enlightenment, exposed the vulnerabilities of these models at individual, societal, and aesthetic levels. The answer to this lacuna was provided by the Indian response to the conundrum that there are multiple routes to a single truth, thus offering a workable alternative to the monotony and bias of cultural paradigms of interpreting life and art.

The present inquiry aspires to represent a substantial departure from conventional North Indian folk performance studies, as it introduces a comprehensive framework comprising a number of innovative propositions. The study advances the argument that North Indian folk theatres exhibit a profound theoretical affinity with contemporary performance theories, transcending mere nostalgia and calling for meticulous scholarly analysis. It is posited that the foundational principles underpinning these theatres share an intriguing affinity with contemporary performance theories, thereby necessitating a comprehensive and rigorous analysis. This alignment is not confined to historical or cultural retrospection but, rather, represents a critical theoretical intersection, necessitating a profound examination of the profound influence these theatres have exerted on the broader spectrum of performance studies.

A seminal aspect elucidated in this study pertains to the deliberate challenge posed by North Indian folk theatres to conventional theatrical illusion, thus marking a significant divergence from established dramatic norms. These theatres privilege the corporeal presence of actors over the personas of characters, employing exaggerated bodily movements and frequent role transitions, all the while eschewing the customary use of costumes and makeup. This creative choice disrupts the audience's preconceived notions of reality and underscores the profound significance of hybridity and heterogeneity within the realm of performances. As such, this research prompts a critical re-evaluation of traditional paradigms within the field and underscores the multifaceted, dynamic nature of North Indian folk theatres.

Moreover, the present paper extends its purview to challenge the prevailing Greco-Roman hegemony in Western cultural contexts. It offers a nuanced critique of Western aesthetic perspectives, arguing that North Indian folk theatres, with their strategic use of typecast characters and improvisational practices, embody a vibrant alternative that the West has at times struggled to fully appreciate. The research also delves into the complex relationship between these theatres and their audiences. Their proclivity to breach the conventional 'fourth wall'<sup>2</sup> and the unique visual dynamics they employ serve as testaments to their dynamic audience engagement strategy. This immersive approach not only celebrates but also disrupts the conventional theatrical illusion, ushering in a nuanced discourse that emphasizes the cultural and sociological implications of North Indian folk theatres. In addition, the present discourse meticulously examines the transformative agency of dance within these theatres, challenging conventional language-based self-identities and fostering an examination of societal preconceptions. Furthermore, it dispels the misconception that North Indian folk

theatres lack ritualistic import by highlighting structural affinities with Sanskrit theatre and their engagement with primal instincts. The paper also draws parallels between the immersive ambiance of these theatrical performances and the semiotic processes operative in social interactions within the context of folk life during festivals, underscoring the profound cultural and sociological implications of North Indian folk theatres. Additionally, it argues that these theatres function as vibrant carnivals that foster social cohesion and disseminate moral codes and ethical principles, making a unique contribution to both the artistic and social dimensions of culture. Finally, it introduces the innovative concept that North Indian folk theatres prioritize the creation of an event over the linear progression of a narrative, thus challenging established understandings of storytelling within the theatrical milieu. This multifaceted research also seeks to underscore the utilization of mythological narratives and the role of humour as potent tools for subverting conservative value systems, shedding light on their subversive qualities and potential for social commentary. Moreover, it delves into the performative nature of speech acts within North Indian folk theatres, emphasizing dialogic exchanges between actors and the audience, and advocates for an interdisciplinary framework to comprehensively appreciate the complexity of these theatrical traditions.

The researched exposition in the present paper urges us to delve into the intricate interconnections between North Indian folk theatre and contemporary performance theory. The study elucidates not merely their nuanced performative attributes and profound cultural resonance, but also their potential to subvert and transcend conventional theatrical paradigms. By juxtaposing these indigenous theatres against the backdrop of contemporary theoretical constructs and deftly contrasting their unique dynamism vis-à-vis both the occidental and the classical Sanskrit theatrical traditions, this treatise aspires to elevate them from mere vestiges of bygone eras to pivotal epistemic reflectors of modern performance axioms. Such a nuanced positioning proffers a profound interstice between time-honoured practices and contemporary interpretative matrices, accentuating their oft-underappreciated significance and multi-layered implications. Moreover, by elucidating the adaptability of these theatres to distinct local sociocultural milieus and their pivotal role in shaping our broader epistemological comprehension of performative arts, the present endeavour underscores the intricate tapestry of folk traditions and their indomitable vitality within India's ever-evolving cultural topography.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Bertolt Brecht's concept of alienation, or *Verfremdungseffekt*, aims to distance the audience from the characters and emotions in theater to encourage critical thinking and social awareness. It disrupts traditional emotional identification with characters, fostering a more analytical engagement.

<sup>2</sup>The 'fourth wall' in theatre is an imaginary barrier between actors and the audience, maintaining the illusion that characters are unaware of being watched. Breaking the fourth wall involves actors directly acknowledging or interacting with the audience, blurring the boundary between fiction and reality.

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