Bāṇḍɨ Pəthɨr – The Traditional Folk Theatre of Kashmir
Past, Present and Future

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Bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr [bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr] 'a play of the Bāṇḍs' (pronounced as such in Kashmiri but often spelt as "Bhand Pather" in the literature, and sometimes also referred to as "Bhand Jashna"), is a centuries old, highly endangered, outdoor theater of Kashmir (see Lawrence 1895:312 and Gargi 1966: 55, 183). *Bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr*, described as a kind of epic drama where the themes and situations are already familiar to the audiences (Aajiz, 2022), traditionally features in annually held Kashmiri festivals called *bāṇḍɨ jeśin* (meaning 'the festival of the Bāṇḍs") and events for honoring Muslim Sufi saints referred to as "Bāṇḍɨ Cōk"; the latter are held at Muslim Sufi shrines such as Ashmuqām (see Raina 2015, Mathur 1964: 14). Typically held in open spaces with large number of audiences and performed by professional troupes belonging to a certain community of Kashmir referred to as "Bāṇḍ" [bāṇḍ] (Singular/Plural) in Kashmiri, a defining feature of the *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* is the art of improvisation.

With its characteristic use of body masks and powerful satire, the tradition resembles the comic improvisatory theatre of Iran (i.e., *ru-hauzi*) and Turkey (i.e., *orta-oyunu*) and the *commedia dell'arte* (meaning 'comedy of the profession') of Europe. The latter is an early form of professional theatre which bears some relation to the character types and plot devices of Hellenistic and Roman comedic theatre, and originated in something close to its present form on the Adriatic coast of present day Italy after the breakup of the multi-ethnic capital of Constantinople in 1453 CE with its bands of Christian and Muslim performers and was popular from the 16th to the 18th century (see Lea 1962). *Bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* is believed to be part of a larger unified tradition of comic theater which extended beyond borders with links to several other similar traditions of South and Central Asia as well as Europe (Beeman, ms.).

This survey paper provides an overview of the status of *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* as a genre of performing arts, the ongoing efforts towards documentation and revival, and the future prospects of this art form. The survey also includes an account of the history and evolution of *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* in Kashmir as well as its historical connections with the ancient Indian dramaturgy and its characteristic features.

Etymology of Important Terminology

The term *bāṇḍ* [bāṇḍ] in Kashmiri, often used pejoratively in colloquial language, refers to a distinct group of folk artists whose primary occupation is singing and acting. The word is comparable to the Sanskrit cognate *bhāṇḍa*, which means 'jester' (Russell and Lal 1975 [1915] 1: 349). The Sanskrit word *bhāṇḍa* is a derivative of *bhāṇa* -- one of the forms of satirical and realistic dramas, usually a monologue, mentioned in the ancient texts on dramaturgy, denoting "a comic monodrama in which the actor plays many parts" (see Raghavan 1981: 40-41; quoted from Emigh & Emigh 1996; cf. Skt. **bhāna* 'speech', Pa. *bhāṇa* 'recitation of scripture' (see Turner, 1962-1966: 537). The word *pəthɨr* meaning 'a spectacle, scene or drama' in Kashmiri is a cognate of Sanskrit *pātra* 'an actor, a dramatis persona' (see Gargi 1966: 55).[1] The Kashmiri word *cōk* in "Bāṇḍɨ Cōk" is a cognate of Sanskrit *ćauka* 'square'

1 Interestingly enough the English word "band" also refers to a 'group of musicians' (among other meanings). It finds its first use in 1660's, referring to 'a company of musicians (attached to a regiment of the army)' and playing instruments which were used while marching (see Oxford English Dictionary for more).

(cf. Hindi *ćauk* 'square'). The term used for the 'joker' in the *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* tradition is *maskharɨ* and *maskhari* means '(the act of) jesting.' Other common terms used in the repertoire are: *hazɨl* 'mockery', *mazāk* 'joke (n.); joking', *ṭasnɨ* 'sarcasm.' The origin of some of these terms can be traced back to Persian and/or Arabic (cf. Per. *masxara* 'buffoon, clown', *tamasxar* 'mockery, ridicule,' Urdu *mazāq* 'joke (n.),' and Arabic *mazāh* '(act of) joking'), and must have become part of the Kashmiri vocabulary, and especially of the repertoire of the Bāṇḍs, owing to the Persian linguistic and cultural influence on the Kashmiri language (see Zutshi 2004).[2]

Background

In his 1895 book *The Valley of Kashmir*, Walter Lawrence gives an account of the various races and tribes of Kashmir, describing the Bāṇḍs that he encountered in the Akingam (Akangám) village of Kashmir in the following excerpt:

"The minstrels of Kashmir (*Bhaggat* or *Bánd*) can be recognized by their long black hair and stroller mien……With the curious exception of the Akangám company, which is formed of Pandits, the Bhaggats are all Musalmáns. They are much in request at marriage feasts, and at harvest times they move about the country……Their orchestra usually consists of four fiddles with the drum in the centre, or of clarionets and drums, but the company often contains twenty members or more…...Their acting is excellent and their songs are often very pretty….They are clever at improvisations and are fearless as to its results. They have songs in Kashmiri, Persian and Panjabi, but the Kashmiri songs are the only ones I have heard. The story of Akangám Bhaggats is peculiar. Brahmans considered acting to be degrading, and even now the Brahmans of Kashmir regard the Akangám players with contempt. But the Brahman players say they took to the stage by the express order of the goddess Devi."

Lawrence (1895: 312-313)

In a 1946 account of a *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* (play) which took place in a village called Drugmulla located at about 50 miles drive from Srinagar on an unmetalled road, Mary Margaret Kak, an English lady married to a local Kashmiri, writes in a hand-written letter:

"In the evening after dark a party of mummers came…….. Here it all was – a large loose semi-circle of people all coming and going without any marshalling or art. On one side a huge fire of pine logs, leaping and blazing, and standing around, forest guards holding brands of blazing pine wood. Above, the dark sky and the stars. Behind an amphitheater of mountains. The players are all men, and boys who take the women's parts. Their stage properties look as though they have seen better days, but they serve their purpose, and you see the great king and the ladies of the harem and the sturdy beggars who do the horseplay. The incidents are traditional and often, I imagine very much debased. The band is drums and pipes very shrill and crude. When they drop into dialogue the fun begins. ……. There is the usual horseplay – the sturdy beggar soundly and very noisily thrashed with a tremendous, long whip that explodes like a pistol and yet leaves him quite unperturbed. The charm is that apparently anyone can do anything they like and everything is there – song, drama, farce, comedy, dancing, chaos – but chaos pregnant with every potentiality!"

Excerpt from the original letter by Mary Margaret Kak (Oct. 25, 1946)

The performance was a satirical piece called

2 Note also that the Kashmiri word *sāng* meaning '(a fake) spectacle' or 'drama', could be traced back to Sanskrit *samānga* (lit. 'a similar body' which also referred to 'mimicking' or 'drama'(cf. Hindi *swāng*).

angrez pəṯhɨr 'the play of the Englishman' which "makes fun of English couples staying in guest houses" with their local servants and illustrates the evolution of new themes and situations over time (see Kak 1980). From this account, one can discern that the performers were not an affluent community but one with little means. For many years, the art form continued to survive in various parts of rural Kashmir. However, as the Kashmiri society raced towards progress and prosperity, the Bāṇḍs of Kashmir slowly entered a life of oblivion in a race against the stigma presented by a robust social hierarchy that kept the community at the lower rungs of the Kashmiri society. From the early 1990's, when Kashmir entered an era of continuing unrest and a strong influence of fundamentalist Islam, the oral tradition, viz., *bāṇḍɨ pəṯhɨr,* which the Bāṇḍs had inherited from their ancestors as an art form and a means of their living, entered a phase of an abrupt decline. Amidst constant political disturbances and continuing militant threats against involvement in any "un-Islamic activities," public performances of this dying art form became no less than a life-threatening activity. Musical instruments had to be either destroyed or hidden as the struggle for alternatives continued.

After almost a decade of inactivity owing to political tension and threats, attempts towards the documentation, revival, and revitalization of the tradition of the *bāṇḍɨ pəṯhɨr* started in 1999-2000. Noteworthy among these was an intervention by M K Raina, a theater director and cultural activist. Raina's family had left Kashmir in the 1990s with many other Kashmiri Pandits owing to political tension. Raina's efforts have found their place within the tragically contested social parameters of Kashmiri life, navigating between fundamentalist Islam on the one hand and state repression on the other.

Recalling the journey of his documentation and revitalization efforts in his memoir "Before I Forget," Raina writes:

> "The last time I had met them in their villages their economic condition had not been good. They had not performed for years and had had to hide their instruments. It was as if the community had melted away into oblivion."
>
> Raina (2024: 316)

The Bāṇḍs of Kashmir: Past, Present and Future

The Bāṇḍs of Kashmir form a distinct and tightly knit social group traditionally devoted to the profession of singing and acting. The current total population is estimated to be about 53,000 with roughly around 6000 families in different villages across Kashmir valley (Manzoor Ahmad Mir, p.c.).[3] While there are references suggesting both Muslim and Hindu Bhands (see Lawrence 1895: 312-313), the professional entertainers of contemporary Kashmir are typically Muslims. Although their primary religion is Sunni Islam, they are heavily invested in the Sufi saints of Kashmir and believe in the tradition of *Rishut* (the Rishi tradition of Kashmir). Each group has their own (Sufi) *pīr* (saint) (see Raina, 2015). During special occasions, they sing and dance all night (*shab*) performing what is called the *sufi sama*. The Bāṇḍs live on the periphery of their villages and form a socially stereotyped community who have often had to rely on door-to-door solicitations for sustenance owing to the social stigma associated with the performance. Traveling from one end of the Kashmir valley to another, the Bāṇḍs depict, in their dramas, the

3 Manzoor Ahmad Mir is an active theater director and artist belonging to the Bhand community of Kashmir. Mir has collaborated with M K Raina over many years on different projects.

village life in its most intrinsic nature. The acts are interspersed with a composite of historical legends and contemporary social criticisms.

In the older times, *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* used to be a full-time occupation for the Bāṇḍs. During most of the summer, the Bāṇḍs would make performances in Kashmir, and during the winter times, they would carry their costumes, instruments, personal items and other paraphernalia on their backs and travel, mostly on foot, to the plains of Jammu, Punjab and other places of the undivided India (see Kak 1981). This tour would take about six months to complete before they returned to their families in Kashmir. This practice, however, stopped over time and the Bāṇḍs found themselves restricted to perform only locally.

About twenty troupes were active in Kashmir in the late 1970s or early 1980s. During Kak's visit in 1979-1980, there were about twenty key centers represented by some 75 villages across Kashmir. It was a robust, vital, and a very popular and entertaining form of outdoor drama which continued to survive despite all odds. One of the most outstanding groups during this time fighting a rearguard action to preserve the art in its authentic form was Mohammed Subhan Bhagat's *Kashmir Bhagat Theatre* at Akingam as featured in Kak's documentary film (1981). Attempts by local performing artists elsewhere such as Ghulam Mohi-ud-din Aajiz (a senior member of the Bāṇḍ community with expertise on classical *sufiyāna* music and president of the National Bhand Theatre Wathora) have also contributed to the revival of the art form (Shahejahat Bhagat, p.c.).

Over the course of the last few decades, however, the Bāṇḍs of Kashmir seemed to have largely vanished from the public eye and many of them have shifted to other types of occupation. The number of active performing groups drastically reduced primarily due to the stigma associated with this occupation and modernization and significantly quickly due to the impact of militancy and militant threats. The militants, whose political ideology was primarily based in the religion (Islam), saw this secular tradition as a threat, and consequently attempted to impose strict restrictions on many cultural activities in Kashmir, which included *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr*. Currently there are just about three key active centers in Kashmir where *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* is performed, viz., Wathora, Akingam and Bomai. Wathora is a village situated in the Chadoora Block of district Badgam; Akingam is a village situated in South Kashmir in the Anantnag district; and Bomai is one of the largest villages in the Sopore district.

The current state of affairs in relation to the Bāṇḍs is grim. In absence of active institutional support, the number of trained performers has significantly dwindled over many years. Owing to the stigma associated with the occupation and the community, many Bāṇḍs have opted to shift to other means of living. With little institutional support, few means of sustenance, and the continuing social stigma associated with the performance as well as with this underprivileged community, breaking the stereotypes is a major challenge. There is an imminent threat of the loss of this ages-old oral tradition which can only be addressed by intensive long-term efforts towards documentation, preservation, revival and revitalization. This can be achieved through a multi-prong approach which includes a long-term program aimed at and employing education, training and innovation to address both the theoretical as well as the applied aspects of *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* as an art form.

Contemporary Research

Contemporary research on the history and origin of *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* as a folk-art form is

scant. In the early 1980's, anthropologists and theatre specialists on folk theatrical traditions of South and Southwest Asia, began their studies on this topic. These researchers looked at evidence pointing to a unified comedic improvisatory tradition in the region. Some noteworthy publications include Awasthi (1974), Mathur (1964), Kak (1981), and Aajiz (2022). Most of these studies are far from being comprehensive and are inadequate in addressing the larger goals of a historical study. An unpublished manuscript by William Beeman (1980) attempts to draw similarities between the "semi-improvisatory" nature of *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* and the *bhavai* theater of Gujarat. Both, Beeman argues, bear a close relationship to the concerns of the patrons they serve. There are also structural similarities as far as the principal satirical devices used and the process of the performance in achieving a comic effect are concerned (*ibid*.).

A documentary film titled "The Bhands of Kashmir", directed by Siddharth Kak (1981), was the first media production on the tradition. The film is a 35-minute video recording which gives a concise overview of the performance with live demonstrations accompanied by a commentary in English. Scenes from a fairly peaceful period of Kashmir are seen, with large gatherings of people thronging amidst a festive mood to witness a performance in a village located only a few kilometers away from the bustling summer capital of Jammu & Kashmir – Srinagar. This was a time when folk theatre was flourishing and perhaps at its peak in Kashmir's rural areas albeit sort of concealed away from the busy urban life.

A proposal by Siddharth Kak in collaboration with William Beeman to provide the first comprehensive interpretation of "Bhand Pather '' was submitted to and approved (in principle though never implemented in action) by Earthwatch in 1988. The project had two major aims: 1) to study Bāṇḍ Pəthɨr as a performance form of India which tells us a great deal about the functioning of comedy and the role of performance in the everyday life of traditional society; and 2) to establish the (historical) connections which link *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* to other performance traditions in South and Southwest Asia, and perhaps even to the comic theatrical traditions of Europe. However, with the onset of the armed insurgency and continuing political turbulence in Kashmir from 1989 onwards, the project was stalled prior to its launch.

With continuing militant threats and warnings against artistic performances and cultural activities, for many years Bāṇḍs suffered enormously and lived a life of invisibility, holding a low profile as the oral tradition was close to its decline amidst constant political disturbances. It was a time when most cultural and artistic activities were either put to a halt or saw a significant decrease in frequency as well as participation, a time when curfews were common in Kashmir and the city of Srinagar would often shut down for activity by the afternoon. In these circumstances, the Bāṇḍs simply could not perform, and in fact, in many cases, they even had to hide their musical instruments.

Documentation and Revitalization Efforts

Although they had been barred from performing *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* for a long period, there has been an enormous degree of enthusiasm towards its revival in the community members who had greatly suffered over the years. In 1999-2000, Raina embarked upon an academic and aesthetic project with an objective to "investigate the many aspects of the form – the use of space, acting styles, musical elements, costumes and crafts," (see Raina 2024: 316). Several meetings with community members led to a new endeavor with an objective to help

re-build the *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* theater. A series of capacity building efforts and workshops were to follow which aimed at revisiting, reviving/ revitalizing and reproducing some of the old and forgotten plays. A six-week training workshop had initially been conducted by Raina in 1982 at Akingam.

Earlier, in 1992, during the height of militancy and political tension in Kashmir, Raina had invited a team of Bāṇḍs for a two-month visit to New Delhi which resulted in a performance at the National School of Drama (NSD). The play was written and directed by Motilal Kemmu. The interaction led to a series of additional visits to NSD and tours across the country where the team performed and collaborated with trained mainstream actors from more established theater companies, such as Repertory. In 1997, Raina conducted a festival, "Saffron Field Kings," in New Delhi with the help of the Bāṇḍs of Wathora village. In 2003-2005, Raina worked with the Bāṇḍs on a training program to revive old plays, which culminated into a powerful performance of "King Lear" (Raina, p.c.). This wasn't a cake walk. During the performance, Raina and his team encountered an embittered Islamic militant who threatened the artists and ordered the audiences to leave the scene. However, due to the ardent support of the community members and villagers, who stood guard, the performance continued and so did the revitalization efforts.

King Lear blends the experimental with the traditional performance finding a place within the tragically contested social parameters of Kashmiri life – navigating between fundamentalist Islam on the one hand and the state repression on the other. The adaptation of King Lear and other recent performances serve as a powerful means of cultural revival by creating a social discourse within a once relatively harmonious and now fractured society.

From 2005, Raina started an informal training school for the Bāṇḍ children and youth with the help of the community experts and masters of the tradition. In 2007, Raina held a workshop with the Bhands in Kashmir to assess their status and revive their performances. The workshop was held with grant assistance from the *India Foundation for the Arts* (IFA).[4] This was followed by a detailed proposal for a two-year revival project prepared by Raina for revitalizing the local content, with an adaptation and translation of Shakespeare's King Lear as a new play which was called "Badshah Lear" in the Bhand lexicon. The project was successfully conducted with a grant from IFA Bangalore and led to a renewal of enthusiasm in exploring the art and craft of the *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* theater in Kashmir.

In April 2013, a three-day Festival on Bhand Pather was held at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) in Delhi under the then ongoing Silver Jubilee Celebrations of the establishment of the IGNCA. Three plays, viz., *gosain pather*, *shikargah pather* and *badshah pather* were performed every evening in the amphitheater of the IGNCA. The plays were performed by the traditional artists of Kashmir. The festival provided an opportunity to scholars and performing artists to experience the academic, historical and cultural perspectives of this endangered art form and explore ways of rescuing and preserving it emphasizing an urgent need to document the dying cultural art forms of the state such as *sufiyāna kalām* and the *vākh* & *shrukh* genres of oral poetic forms.

Assisted by the Bāṇḍs, Raina's intervention received a very positive response from the community members, and more and more

4 See Raina 2024.

Bāṇḍs came forward to participate. The workshops and training sessions focused on both acting style as well as music. Two important documentary films, viz., *Mann Faqiri* (2015) and *Badshah Lear* (2019) resulted from Raina's many years of extensive documentation work. Funded by the Public Service Broadcasting Trust (PSBT), Mann Faqiri focuses on the *sufiyāna* musical traditions of the Bhands and their revival; the film was made possible with the encouraging participation of young women from conservative families participating in the classical training of *sufiyāna kalām*. Badshah Lear documents the progress of the folk theatre workshops, and the trials and tribulations of integrating and improvising the Shakespearean plays into the folk grammar of the *bāṇḍ* tradition.

Another noteworthy attempt on similar lines was made by Dr. Moti Lal Kemmu, an important figure in the contemporary Bhand Theatre movement. With the help of a grant from the Jammu & Kashmir Academy of Art Culture and Languages, a series of three workshops were held by Kemmu in collaboration with Natrang Theatre in 2011, 2012 and 2015 in which new themes were introduced for the folk plays (Kak, ms.).

Despite security concerns amidst intermittent disturbances and occasional threats by militants, several events were held over the years with increasing engagement and participation, primarily from the rural audiences -- the traditional base of the *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr*. Over the many years, the Bāṇḍs performed at various places and events, including some major Indian theater festivals at the national level (see Raina 2024). This is indeed promising. However, much more work is yet to be done in order to achieve the goal of documentation, revival, and revitalization.

A Look at the Performance

Bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr is a farcical or comic art form of improvised play or drama, often accompanied by musical performances employing various genres of poetry and poetic traditions including *ćhakɨr*, *rof*, *vanvun*, *laḍiśah*, and *sufiyāna* music.[5] These poetic traditions are a part and parcel of Kashmir's folklore and oral traditions (see Munshi 2012 and 2014). A form of traditional rural theatre, *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* is typically performed in the open, both in the daytime and at night often accompanied by a bonfire.[6] During a performance, the Bāṇḍs (plural of Bāṇḍ), including the lead performing artists accompanied by their entourage, gather in a wide-open space. Often emerging from a location behind the audiences, the team of characters advance into the arena, making way through the spirited audiences, often in rhythmic succession following musical beats.

Traditional musical instruments such as *surnai* and *ḍōl* are used to summon the audiences before a performance. Surnai, pronounced as [sornai] in Kashmiri (a compound word based on (Indo-Aryan) *sur* 'musical note' and (possibly Persian) *nai* '(reed) flute') is a wind instrument, akin to *śehnai*, consisting of a wooden pipe around 18 inches long with seven holes and a bell-shaped outlet at the bottom. *Ḍōl* (cf. Indo-Aryan *ḍhōl*) is a traditional double-sided barrel drum played with a pair of (often bow-shaped wooden) sticks. The two instruments, viz., *surnai* and *ḍōl*, are central to and accompany the performances which

5 Each of these songs or poetic compositions conform to a particular *maqām* or melodic mode. The term *maqām* is of Arabic origin (lit. 'place, location, or position'), but it is also used in Persian and various other languages. It is a system of melodic modes used in the music of the Middle East and parts of North Africa.
6 In this sense it is like the *Kariālā* of Himachal Pradesh (See Mathur 1964: 14).

have several musical interludes. Other musical instruments as accompaniments include *nagara* and *thalej*. Whirling *sufiāna* dances are frequently interpolated into the stories. Integral to a performance are two props – a long whip *kodar* which creates a pistol-like sound and is used to lightly whip a character, and a short, split bamboo stick called *baens* which creates a shrill sound evoking laughter (see Raina 2024: 329).

Figure 1 A look at some musical instruments used in the performance (Source: Shahejahan Bhagat)

An essential element of *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* is satire, concealing deep social and political truths. Traditionally, the performance starts with an invocation and ends with a *duayi khər* 'prayers of wellness' (cf. Per. *dua-e-ḵhair* 'prayers of wellness'). At the invocation, the players express a desire for the *dīdār* (divine revelation/ glimpse; cf. Ur./Per. *dīdār* 'glimpse') of the divine force (Allah). This may be followed by a mock *pūza-pāṭh* (cf. Hindi *pūja-pāṭh* 'worship-reading'), typically by two jesters, imitating a historical Sanskrit invocation (see Mathur 1964: 44 and Raina 2015: 41).

Figure 2 A *duayi khər* scene at a *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* performance in Kashmir (Source: Shahejahan Bhagat)

It is the broad farcical playing of the *maskharɨ* or the clown (cf. Per. *masxara* 'buffoon, clown, jester') which is at the heart of the form though. Each performing group is composed of about 5 to 10 jesters, sometimes dressed in rags or tattered clothing, signifying the common man, and at times in colorful costumes designated for specific roles during different performances on various themes. The most important characters are played by *Mahagun* (also *Magun*), a highly respected member of the troupe who is multitalented in acting, dance and more. Costumes are an essential component of the tradition, and include dresses of kings, ministers, village urchins and other characters. These are elaborate and rich costumes designed for the performances. Also, part of the wardrobe are masks and costumes depicting animals such as *hāngul* (deer), lion, and horse (see Raina 2024: 329). A traditional storage box is used by artists to carry their essential performance items such as makeup, costumes, masks and various props. This box is an important part of their journey when they travel from one region to another for performances.

Typical stage movements are quick, direct, circular, and curved, establishing a certain mood

Figure 3 Different types of masks used in the performance (Source: Shahejahan Bhagat)

Figure 4 Examples of masks used in a performance at IGNCA on 6/4/2013 (Source: Vinayak Razdan)

and rhythm in the performance, accompanied by a dialogue. The contents of a play can be a series of sessions – both narrative and poetic, the latter signifying various components and genres of Kashmiri folklore.

A characteristic feature of the performance is the breaking of the traditional division and the imagined wall between the actor and the spectators." A small earthen pot is often used by the performers as a "dark well" into which they talk as if "talking to a ghost in a well" giving the performance an abstract quality with diverse elements *(ibid*.).

Situations and Themes

A myriad of *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* situations and themes have been culled from various time periods over the history of Kashmir. Thus, the clowns may emerge as servants of an 11th century Dardic king or his wives, as wily peasants trying to survive the whims of the 13th century Persian overlords, as a haughty English family and their servants from the British colonial period, or as a contemporary town or city barber showcasing their skills. The dialogue spans a range of historical experiences and features multilingual puns using languages such as Kashmiri, Persian, Hindi/Urdu, Punjabi and Dogri. The broad farcical acting style serves as a vehicle for satirical comment as well as uproarious play and celebrates the endurance of the Kashmiri common man.

Figure 5 Visuals from a local performance in Chadora, Budgam, Kashmir (Source: Shahejahan Bhagat)

All roles have traditionally been played by male actors who also dress up as women to depict female characters. More recently, however, women actors have joined some performances, thus, leading to a possible shift and progress in the direction of a gender-inclusive art form.

Each traditional *pəthɨr* or play has a long history and is a combination of song, dance, mimicry, satire, and jest – not meaningless buffoonery but pointed satirical jesting with a social content and commentary. Each play falls under a category based on its theme and content with humor, often crude and coarse, as a central feature. Among the most vivid and compelling enactments of these ancient folk plays are the following plays: *śikārgah* or *śikārgah pəthɨr* is a play of the game preserves performed only at night (Per. *śikār* 'game of pray, a hunt', *śikārgah* 'the place of the game'); *rāzɨ pəthɨr* refers to the 'play of the king(s)' (K. *rāzɨ* 'king'); *bakɨrvāl pəthɨr* is the play of the shepherds (K. *bakɨrvāl* 'shepherd(s)'); *āram pəthɨr* refers to the 'play of the vegetable gardeners' (K. *āram* 'vegetable gardeners'), *darzɨ pəthɨr* is the 'play of the king's consort'; *baṭɨ pəthɨr* is about the Kashmiri Pandit community who are often referred to as *"Baṭɨ"* (<Sk. *bhaṭṭa*) in colloquial Kashmiri; *gosən' pəthɨr* is a 'play of the (Hindu) *sādhu* or ascetic' (*gosən'* refers to the 'ascetic' in Kashmiri); and *vātal pəthɨr* is the 'play of the *vātal* (cobbler) community' (vātul refers to the highly stigmatized cobbler community, historically treated as "untouchables"). In fact, *vātal pəthɨr* is one of the oldest folk plays of

Figure 6 Visuals from *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* performances on various themes (Source: Shahejahan Bhagat)

Kashmir. This play is over 300 years old and depicts the celebration of marriage between a grownup *vātal* girl and a child groom which ends in a fraud. The marriage procession arrives with the dowry – *a ćarkhɨ* or a spinning wheel. In this play, the groom's horse is substituted by a log of wood (see Raina 2015).

Tracing the Roots: History of Folk Theater in Kashmir

The literature originating from the Vedic period attests a continuous tradition of folk theater in India (see Vadarpande 1987: 8). The origins of the different regional forms of modern folk theatre in India could be traced back to an ancient Indian folk theater the influence of which is indicated in the Prakrit and Apabhramsa songs and passages in Sanskrit dramas. In fact, theatrical arts of antiquity are even attested from as early as the period of the Indus Valley Civilization (*ibid*.). It was during the 15th to 16th centuries, however, that folk theater saw a forceful impact in different regions of ancient India. These were primarily divided into two different but parallel categories – religious and secular. While the two forms functioned side-by-side and continually influenced each other, it was the secular folk theater which took upon itself the task of entertainment and emerged as the folk theater for entertainment in future (see Varadpande 1987: 4-8). Quoting Bharata, Varadpande mentions the "fun loving folk audiences and their crude humor" described by Bharata as "women and men of inferior type" who are "delighted by" these performances (see Varadpande 1987: 8), thus, indicating a class or caste-based hierarchy attached to occupations, including folk entertainment.

The earliest mention of open-air performances in and around the (present-day) Kashmir valley is found in an ancient Hindu (Indic) text, Nīlamata Purāṇa – one of the oldest sources of cultural history on Kashmir which covers history, geography, religion, and folklore of the region. The text mentions festivals, "crowded with ever sportive men," "gardens and pleasure groves….resounding with the sounds of drums and lutes" (see Kumari 1994: 6). The custom of *bhāṇḍ nāṭya* 'Bhāṇḍ play' or *bhāṇḍ nṛtya* 'Bhāṇḍ dance' also finds mention in the 10th century writings of Abhinavagupta. There are references to *nātak maṇḍapa* 'theatre enclosure' – a covered platform in the premises of a temple (but away from its sanctum sanctorum) during the 11th to the 14th centuries in Northern India (see Mathur 1964: 8). Some of the forms of drama (referred to as *rupakas*), such as, *dima*, *vyayoga*, *prahasana* and *bhana* (the latter possibly pronounced as [bhāṇa]), Bharata claims, were popular in ancient India. While "comic is the chief sentiment" in Prahasana, in the "mimic monologue of Bhana, oblique humor is inherent." (Varadpande 1987: 10).

Several attempts have been made in previous studies to define and analyze the etymology of the term "Bhāṇḍ" (Devanagari भांड; Urdu ڈنڈاهب; Gurmukhi ਭੰਡ) and trace the history of the various communities referred to by variants of this term. Varadpande (1987) describes "Bhānds" as the traditional folk entertainers of India, Bangladesh, and Nepal engaged in folk entertainment as their hereditary profession. Patronized by the royalty and by people, they are claimed to be the most popular of the medieval folk entertainers who continued to linger on the Indian scene till the modern day. They performed small skits, improvised jokes, and presented humor laced with social criticism.

In an account of the Bhāṇḍs of Awadh, Crooke (1896) remarks:

"The Bhānd is sometimes employed in the courts of Rājas and native gentlemen of rank, where he amuses the company at entertainments with buffoonery and a burlesque

Figure 7 Scenes from a *śikārgah pəthɨr* at IGNCA on 6/4/2013 (Source: Vinayak Razdan).

of European and native manners, much of which is of a very coarse nature. The Bhānd is quite separate from and of a lower professional rank than the Bahrūpia. The bulk of the caste are Muhammadans, but they have exogamous sections, some of which, as Kaithela (Kāyasth), Bamhaniya (Brāhman), Gujartha (Gūjar), Nonela (Lunia), and so on, are derived from those of Hindu castes, and indicate that the caste is a heterogeneous community recruited from different sources. There are two recognised endogamous subcastes -- the Chenr, which seems to mean little (Hindi, *Chenra*), and the Kashmīri. The former trace their origin to the time of Tamarlane, who, on the death of his son, gave himself over to mourning for twelve years. Then one Sayyid Hasan, a courtier of the emperor, composed a humorous poem in Arabic, which gained him the title of Bhānr. Sayyid Hasan is regarded as the founder of the caste. Though he was a Sayyid, the present Bhānrs are either Shaikhs or Mughals; and the difference of faith, Sunni and Shiah, is a bar to intermarriage. The Kashmīri Bhānrs are said to be of quite recent origin, having been invited from Kashmīr by Nasīr-ud-Dīn Haidar, king of Oudh."

(Crooke 1896; cited from Russell & Lal 1975 [1915])

As noted earlier, Lawrence (1895) mentions a group of Pandit Bhāṇḍs in Akingam (Akangám) which is regarded as a curious case, although these were perceived with contempt by the Brahmans of Kashmir.

Regarding the social norms and practices of the Bhāṇḍs, Russell & Lal (1975 [1915]) wrote:

"The Bhānds perform their marriages by the Nikāh form, in which a Kāzi officiates. In virtue of being Muhammadans they abstain from pork and liquor. Dr. Buchanan quaintly described them as "Impudent fellows, who make long faces, squeak like pigs, bark like dogs, and perform many other ludicrous feats. They also dance and sing, mimicking and turning into ridicule the dancing boys and girls, on whom they likewise pass many jokes, and are employed on great occasions." The Bhānd, in fact, seems to correspond very nearly to the court jester of the Middle Ages."

(Quoted from Russell & Lal 1975 [1915])

Notice a sense of disdain and stereotyping of the Bhanḍ community in Buchanan's statement quoted by Russel & Lal above. Russell & Lal (1975 [1915]) define "Bhāṇḍ" or "Bhāṇṛ" as a "small caste of storytellers and buffoons," tracing the origin of the word to Sanskrit Bhānda [bhāṇḍa], a jester. The caste is sometimes also referred to as "Naqqāl" in the literature. The latter is a term of Arabic origin often used for 'actor' in the Persian tradition (cf. Arabic *naql* 'copying, mimicry'). The term *naqqāl* is also used to refer to the Muslim (Bhand) community found in the state of Uttar Pradesh and Delhi in India. These were a community of mimics at the court of the Nawabs of Awadh (now the state of Uttar Pradesh in India) (see Singh 2001). Naqqāls, Bhands and Behrupis (a *behrupi* is a trickster who plays various different roles) were among the various types of entertainers in the court of Awadh's Wajid Ali Shah (Varadpande 1987: 137).

According to Emigh (1996), an inquiry into the art and function of the now vanishing *bahurupiyas* and Bhands of Rajasthan, "the ancestors of the present-day Bhands are said to have entered India from Persia with the Muslim courts and are especially associated with Timur-leng (Tamburlaine) who invaded India in 1398 (Russell and Lal 1975 [1915] 1: 349)". Emigh (1996) attributes the "substantial concentration of Bhands in Kashmir" to these historical movements – perhaps the reason

why many of the celebrations are held around the days of various Islamic saints. There are also claims that many of the Bhands presently in north India have "come down from Kashmir at a later date" after the initial migrations (Russel & Lal 1975 [1915] 1: 349, quoted from Emigh 1996). But Emigh further notes:

"The existence of Bhands in the region seems to be of considerable antiquity. G. N. Sharma (1968: 149) quotes the *amyaktva* of Taruna Prabha Suri, written in 1354, as already mentioning "bhands and troupes of professionals of both sexes performing buffoonery and farce, accompanied by music, dance, and dialogue." The *A'in-i Akbari* of Abu'l Fazl 'Allami makes note of Bhands playing percussion instruments, and "singing and mimicking men and animals" in sixteenth-century India (1978 [1894] 3: 272). In a 1983 conversation, Professor Sharma expressed his belief that Bhands played a vital role in developing the dramatic aspect of the *bhavai* theatre in Gujarat, as well as much of the popular theatre of Rajasthan."

(Quoted from Emigh 1996)

Most Bhands of northern India, Pakistan and Nepal are Muslims, primarily Sunni Muslims although there are exceptions. For example, Varadpande (1987) notes "an endogamous Hindu community of the Bhand in India and Nepal but these are no longer involved in their traditional occupation of folk entertainment, and include actors, dancers, minstrels, storytellers and impressionists. According to Crooke (1974 [1896] 1: 259; quoted from Emigh & Emigh 1996), "over 14,000 Muslim Bhands" as opposed to "only fourteen Hindu Bhands" lived in Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Haryana in the late 19th century. The trend was different in Rajasthan, however, where a separate Hindu caste (which included the ancestors of the then famous Hajari Bhand) emerged due to "a strong resistance to the spread of Islam."[7]

A number of different communities of Bhands are currently attested in India, Pakistan and Nepal. In India, besides Jammu & Kashmir, Bhands are primarily found in the states of Uttar Pradesh (total population: ~ 22,000), Bihar (~7000), Madhya Pradesh (~1300), Maharashtra (~1100) and Uttarakhand (~200). In Pakistan, Bhands are primarily located in Sindh (~2300) and Punjab (~1300) (see Pammant 2017).[8] And in Nepal, Bhands are found in several hitherto administrative zones, such as Kosi (~2800), Sagarmatha (~2000), Janakpur (~2000), Mechi (~200), Lumbini (~200) and Bheri (50).[9]

Note that many scholars have suggested a connection between the performance traditions of India and Iran, largely basing their claims on the historical accounts of migrations of "gypsy" musicians and dancers from India across Iran during the Sasanian period (see Beeman 2017). This includes a well-known excerpt from Ferdowsi's long epic poem *Shāh Nāmeh* ('book of kings') which was written between c. 977 and 1010 CE. In this book, often referred to as the national epic of Greater Iran, the Persian monarch, Bahrām Gur (AD 420-38), asks the king of India ("Shankal" or "Shangul") to send ten thousand gypsy (luri) men and women master lute players to Iran. Note that the gypsies, as the ancestors of

7 Hajari Bhand's ancestors served as jesters in the courts of Mewar (Emigh 1996).
8 Pamment (2017) explores the Bhānd performances in Pakistan, tracing their genealogy to Brahmin jesters such as Tenali Rama and Raja Birbal, and the Sufi wise fools like Bahlul and Mullah Nasruddin. She classifies the bhands of Pakistan into three categories: the wedding bhands, the stage show bhands and the television bhands.
9 The numbers cited here are based on a project called "Joshua Project" and are to be ascertained. The link to the project is: https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/16423 (date of access: September 23, 2021)

the (present-day) Roma, also found their way into Europe via the Byzantine territory and the Balkans as a consequence of the wars by the Seljuks, the Turkic tribes that invaded southwestern Asia in the 11th century (see Fraser 2006: 33, 45). While direct historical connections between the ancestors of the various "gypsy" populations around the world are well established, it is yet to be seen if these are also related to the Bhands (and the various itinerant populations) of South Asia, and, consequently, to determine any direct connections between the various performance traditions of India, Iran and Europe.

Concluding Remarks

Bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr as an oral tradition is a treasure which defines a certain cultural group of Kashmir and is a part and parcel of its folklore. As Kashmir's traditional school of drama, it has its own characteristics of stage, music, and the unfolding narrative, which are passed on from father to son (see Raina 2024: 328). It is, therefore, important to not only document, but also, for the community, to reclaim, restore, and revitalize this tradition. As a powerful means of social and political critique, *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* has prospects of revival and revitalization with a renewed interest among the educated younger generation. The art form could be a means towards promotion and revitalization of various dying verbal arts of Kashmir, such as *ćhakɨr, rof, vanvun, vacun, laḍiśah*, and *sufiyāna kalām,* which have continued to be a principal component of the performance. Despite the stereotyping of the community and the fact that *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* was more popular in the Kashmir of yore than it is today having undergone a period of great decline, efforts towards its revival have already started and are bound to bear fruit. Through revisiting what was done in the 1980's, early 2000s and onwards, researchers can work with the community and government institutions in an effort to build collaborations and pursue the work on *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* studies for a larger goal of research and training on the one hand, and documentation, preservation and revitalization on the other. Consequently, research, training and performance can go hand in hand with documentation and revitalization. Similarly, experimentation through engagement with the mainstream contemporary Indian theater can work well, and new themes and topics can be brought in and the old ones can be revived and recreated. A formal training program and institutional support can ensure community recognition and help break the stereotypes as well as counter the social stigma traditionally associated with the community.

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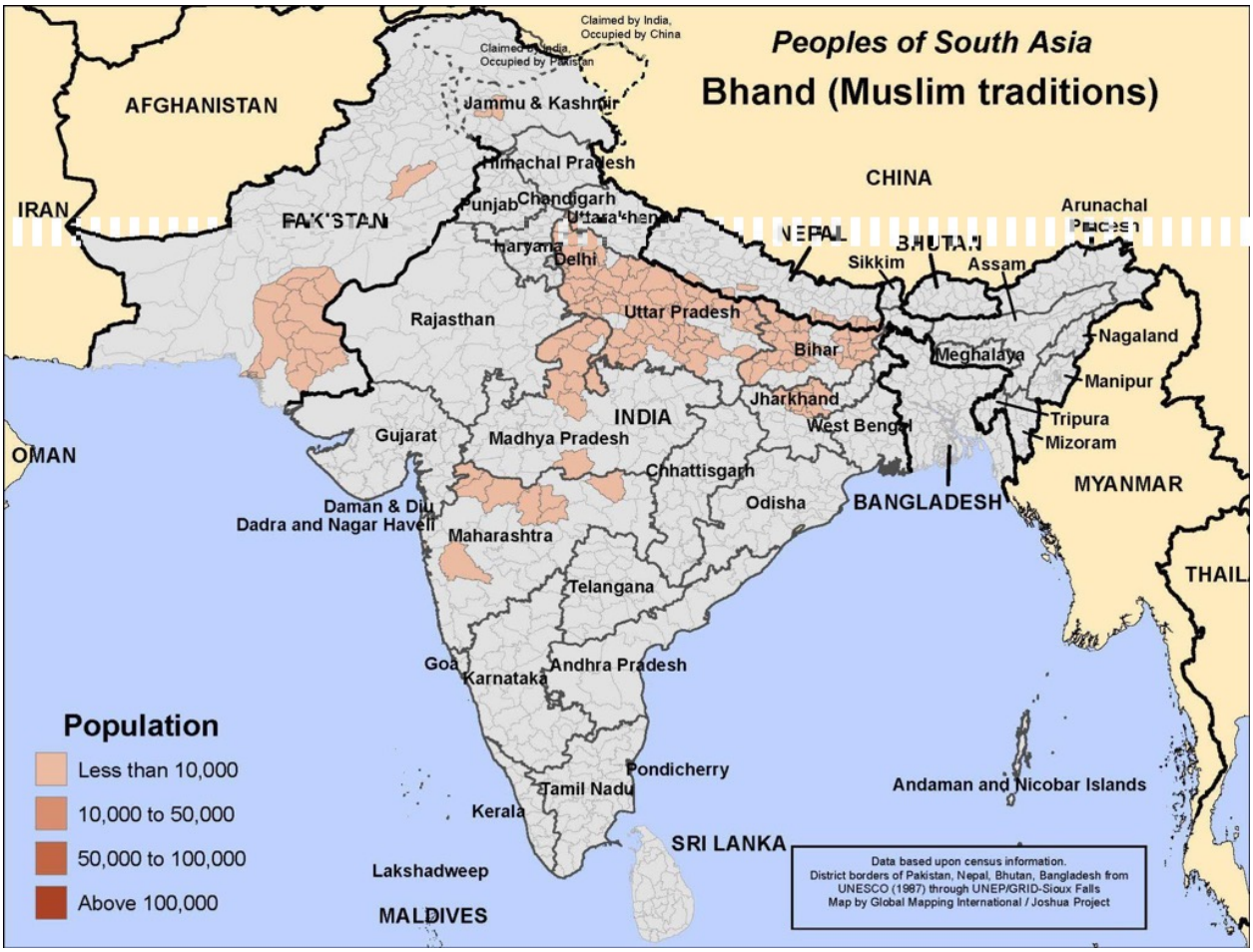
APPENDIX 1

(The following map gives an estimated number of different populations of Bhands in South Asia. Note that these figures may not correctly reflect the actual numbers)



(Source: https://joshuaproject.net/assets/media/profiles/maps/m16423.pdf (last accessed Oct. 21, 2021))