

## Will the Chinar Smile Again? The Lost Art of a Wounded Valley

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Kashmir the land of snow-capped mountains, peaceful rivers, green valleys, and deep spirituality could have been a home for flourishing art. It had beauty, culture, and soul. But instead of becoming a land of music and dance, it became a land of conflict. Violence stole the peace that art needs to grow.

Art needs space to speak, to breathe and to move freely. The colorful traditions that once made our land so special have faded over years. Since the late 1980s, violence has reshaped our land. It was not only about lives lost, it was about the loss of culture, the suppression of joy, and the silencing of the voices that once celebrated life through art.

One of the most heartbreaking losses has been that of *Bhand Pather*, a centuries-old art form that mixed music, dance, and acting. It was not just entertainment, it was a way of life, a language of the people.

My grandfather, Mum Kak (Ghulam Mohammad Bhat), was a legendary *Bhand* artist. He often told us about the days when village squares turned into open-air stages. “Each performance started with dance,” he would say. “Steps, rhythms, satire, mime, poetry it was all there, in one act of dance.

That art brought people together. It taught lessons, made people laugh, and reflected the soul of the community. But it faded with the arrival of the unknown gunmen. The dancers stopped dancing. The voices grew quiet.

Ama Kak, an elderly *Bhand* from Wathora, smiles gently as he remembers. “There was no TV or internet. We were the media. We shared news, morals, and laughter through performance.” People gathered around like it

was a festival. Now, open spaces are fenced, gatherings are rare, and joy is scarce.

Mum Bachi, once a lead dancer from Budgam, says, “I had long hair, and I led our *Bhand* Chowk. There were eight dancers lead by me. The footwork, emotion, energy—it was my job.” People waited for them for hours under the Chinar trees. “Today, those trees don’t shade performers. They shade silence.” The sound of Dhol and Nagara has been replaced by gunshots. “Back then, there was no fear,” he adds. “Now, a gathering could mean surveillance.”

Azi Begum old and frail now, speaks of her late husband, Ab Rehman, a dancer whose energy lit up crowds. “He made people laugh, dance and feel alive. His dance was pure joy”. I stood beside him like a queen,” she says. Today, she lives alone with her memories. “Those days are gone now the situation has changed,” she whispers.

Few know that *Bhand Jashn* was part of Kashmir’s Sufi culture. Performances were held during *Urs* (celebrations of saints), often in shrine courtyards and under the vast Chinar trees that stood like guardians of the gathering. These shows began at night, lit by oil lamps and the stars, and carried prayers in their rhythm and devotion in every step. People wrapped in shawls would gather under the open skies—men, women, children—waiting with joy and reverence. The Chinar trees not only gave shade but a sacred stage to these soulful expressions.

After the *Bhand Jashn* at night, a different magic would unfold the sound of the Sarangi would rise gently like a whisper to the heavens, followed by the Rabab, Matka, Tumbaknari and



**Figure 1:** A Bhand Pather troupe performing in an open-air



**Figure 2:** Bhand Jashn during night under the Chinar Tree at the Shrine of Rahim Sahib at Safapora (R.A). Artists performing Shikargah pather.



Harmonium. Then comes the Bacha a male dancer—dressed in feminine attire. The dancer would lead the troupe, performing throughout the night with graceful footwork, expressive gestures, and an unmatched devotion to the art. He would place a glass of water on his forehead, his eyes gazing towards the sky and still dance. He would move to different rhythms, climbing a tree even, never letting the glass fall. People would watch breathlessly, expecting the glass to topple but only the sweat of his effort would drip down. These moments were not just performances; they were sacred expressions of happiness, resilience, and human excellence. That dance was not just art it was a skill, grace, and devotion. But now, even this tradition is fading. *Bach Nagma* of that era is now rare. Its performers are often mocked or ignored.

Bashir Ahmad, a celebrated Bach Nagma dancer, shares his pain: “We have modern dances and DJ music. But where are we? It’s like we were never here.”

These artists dedicated their lives to this craft. They did not go to schools. They did not learn other trades. They were born into it. From childhood, they held instruments instead of books. Dance and music were their only skills.

No one told them that someday, they would have to leave the art and sweep streets, carry bricks, or sell vegetables or utensils. The same hands which played the *Surnai* or danced with elegance would be used to sort scrap. They never imagined such a life.

The tragedy of Kashmir is layered with countless events that have scarred its soul. Among them are the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits that left an irreparable scar on the Valley’s shared heritage the Pulwama attack, where many brave soldiers were martyred, and the recent attack in Pahalgam, where innocent tourists

were targeted and it was another cruel blow to a land already in pain. Each act of violence chips away at its spirit. Art cannot grow in fear. Joy cannot bloom in mourning.

Today, nearly eighty percent of Kashmir’s traditional artists are elderly. Most live in poverty, forgotten by the world, too tired to perform the art they once carried with pride. The intricate footwork, the powerful movements, the sacred rhythms are being buried with the old.

In many families, *Bhand* and *Bach Nagma* artists have asked their children to walk away from the art. Not because they do not value it, but because they want them to be treated with dignity, not laughed at or cast aside. And so now, the question stands still and heavy, who will perform when the elders are gone? Now, while things are improving and youngsters are no longer interested in it. There are small efforts happening, festivals, workshops, and cultural shows but too often, they feel like flowers placed gently on a battlefield. The wounds are still too fresh. The pain runs deep. It is hard to laugh when your soul is weighed down by grief.

Still, I try through my Tulkul Arts and Media Collective to support young artists and revive *Bhand Pather* and *Bach Nagma*. I have no donors or major support but I try, because this land remembers. The dust, the trees, the sky, they all remember the rhythm. The silence is deep, but memory is deeper.

Art does not die in a day. It fades. It waits. And maybe one day it will dance again, when the land is free from the shadow of violence. Will the Chinar smile again? In here, I pen a call to action.



**Figure 3:** An open-air Bach Nagma gathering beneath a Chinar tree at Manishah Badshah shrine. Community elders sit in attentive rows, recalling the collective spirit and shared memory of Kashmiri folk traditions.



**Figure 4:** Artists of Karam Buland Folk Theatre presented Derzeh Pather and people are enjoying the glimpse late night