

The Creative Launcher

URL: <https://www.thecreativelauncher.com>

ISSN: 2455-6580

Vol. 6 & Issue 4, (October-2021)

Publisher: Perception Publishing

Published on 30th October 2021

©The Creative Launcher 2021. This Open Access article is published under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0 International License <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>, which permits non commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. For citation use the DOI. For commercial re-use, please contact editor on: thecreativelauncher@gmail.com

License Type:  <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Rejuvenating *Karayala*: An Endangered Folk Theatrical Form of Himachal Pradesh

Manoj Thakur

Doctoral Candidate in English Literature,
The Central University of Himachal Pradesh
Dharamshala, Kangra, India

Email Id: pkmanuthakur@gmail.com

ORCID id: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8574-9541>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2021.6.4.05>

Pages: 27-35

Abstract

This paper deals with *karayala*, a folk theatrical form of Himachal Pradesh. This form is basically a ritual, performed in the name of a local deity called Biju/Bijeshwar. It is a night long ritual consisting of minimum three and maximum four episodes (*swaangs*) and each one is followed by a musical interlude comprising singing and dancing. *Karyala* is an impromptu theatrical form. There are no women actors and only men play female roles. Surprisingly, till date women are not allowed to play female roles. It deals with range of themes and most of them aim at reforming society by employing techniques like mimicry, caricature, satire, paradox, pun and word play. The paper seeks to introduce *karayala* to larger audience. In the crisis of the present context and particularly owing to onslaught of media multiplicity, we have lost *karayala*'s past as none for a long while cared to document it due to urbanization, people's indifference and media charged environment that has threatened its existence. At present it is alive in people's memory and is necessitated by rituals to avert divine wrath;

nevertheless, its space stands largely invaded by media today. The future of this folk theatrical form seems bleak unless we take effective measures to revive/ retrieve it.

Keywords: Inferiorization, Cultural diversity, Colonization, Globalization, Endangered, Folk culture

Folk art and culture are indispensable unit of a society. There is hardly any society across the world without folk art forms such as dance, drama, and songs. India too had “God’s plenty” in terms of folk art forms. Our diversity has kept numerous folk traditions intact. But it has been observed that their existence has largely been endangered due to the onslaught of media multiplicity and many other factors contributing to it.

Folk Theatre in India

Folk theatre in India is heaving hard to survive. At present, it requires urgent patronage from the state, as folk culture preservation hardly finds any place in the state policy. Rajoo Baroot laments, “While doing (Gujrati) theatre I had to face many problems, obstacles, financial constraints and competition. . . I do feel that had there been a national level forum, I could have survived in spite of all those forces” (26).

Amateurs and professionals in the field of folk theatre are grappling with numerous problems. They lack both space for rehearsal and space among audience. They have to struggle for their livelihood. Yet, they are not giving up. Neelam Mansingh Chaudhury appreciates their passion in the following lines:

The endeavors of regional groups, individually and collectively, need to be celebrated. They continue to work, struggle, create and dream despite the pathetic working conditions that they have to contend with. They lack rehearsal space, have budgetary constraints, and fewer shows. Despite this they continue with their efforts to keep theatre alive. (8)

We have to understand that the life force behind folk theatre is its socio-cultural ties. However, it has been observed that playwrights are trying to infuse folk elements into regular theatre without caring if these elements are assimilating with each other or not. Devendra Raj Ankur criticizes Badal Sircar by saying that he felt that Sircar and likes of him were following a reverse process in theatre: “[W]e look for the form, for the first and then try to infuse theatre into it” (23). In India, people have started interrogating the western superiority since the nineteen sixties and seventies. Efforts are still under way to establish the roots and identity of the Indian theatre but, as A. Mangai observes, “[i]ronically, these very forms became the basis of experimentation globally under the influence of Grotowski, Barba, Artaud and Peter Brook . . . While critique of multiculturalism and cultural piracy are levied against foreign artists, little thought is given to how the Indian artists deal with the same arts and artists” (85).

More, Folk theatre is bearing the brunt of indifference on the part of the government also. The achievements of the federally funded National School of Drama in Delhi are many but its activities are restricted mostly to the national capital. Indira Prathasarthi vehemently

criticizes the NSD by calling it Delhi School of Drama which, according to her, is “catering to those hailing from a privileged region of this vast country with a privileged language as their mother tongue” (43).

In present Indian context, we have to recognize that there are different forms of regional drama such as *Kuchipudi*, *Ram Leela*, *Bhavai*, *Naqqal*, *Karayala*, *Bhagat*, *Yakshagan*, *Prasang*, *Tamasha*, *Koodiyattam*, *Kathakali*, *Nacha*, *Gondhal*, *Dashavatar*, *Sowang*, *Nautanki*, *Jhamatra*, *Therukoothu*, *Ras Leela*, *Jhanki*, *Jatra*, and *Tiyatra*. Keeping in mind this diversity, Anantha Murthy states: “I do not think that there is anything ‘national’ apart from the ‘regional’ in India and there is hardly anything like the one and only way of doing theatre. The way for us to be truly Indian is by belonging to various regions of India” (14).

Folk Theatre in Himachal

Himachal Pradesh, as is the case with India, has rich cultural diversity. There are around nine folk theatrical forms practiced. They are *Karayala*, *Dhaja*, *Banthara*, *Haranyatatr*, *Bhagat*, *Ras*, *Horing-fo*, *Singh*, *Budha*, and *Barlaj*. Despite such plenty, it is sad that these forms are not thriving as they should have been or as they used to thrive in the past. There are numerous reasons which account for the dismal scenario of the folk theatre. Firstly, patronage for drama in India is too arbitrary. For example, in 2004, National School of Drama got twelve and half crore Indian rupees as its annual expenditure while expenditure for the rest of India was only ten crore rupees (Subbanna 47). As far as Himachal is concerned, there is no patronage for folk theatre either from the provincial government or from the federal government. Secondly, inferiorization, the process of making someone inferior, contributed as a massive jolt to the folk theatre. Colonization played significant role in this process. Frantz Fanon rightly observes, “Every effort is made to bring the colonized person to admit the inferiority of his culture” (157). People belonging to lower castes were, and they still are, the major custodians of folk theatre in Himachal. These people faced inferiorization first at the hands of our colonizers and then so-called high caste Hindus. Their existence has been demonized to an extent that their current generations are not willing to do anything which reveal their identity based on caste.

More, today people are busy in the vicious cycle of earning and spending. They lack both time and interest. Further, artists earn meager sum of money and hence it is not a lucrative business for the youth. Furthermore, folk theatre’s inability to counter modern means of media technology is another important factor. The sophistication of TV, cinema, and now mobile phones is difficult to match. M.R. Thakur in his book *Himachal ke Loknatya aur Lokanuranjan* succinctly remarks that our cultural heritage has been badly affected by the achievements in the field of industry and instruments. Cinema has beaten our folk theatre strongly (21).

Karayala: Origin and Evolution

Karayala has its origin in the myth pertaining to King Junag of Junga, a former princely state. At that time his kingdom was tormented by the repeated attacks of Dev Shirgul. Despite his earnest efforts, he was unable to check Shirgul’s menace. At the end, he sent for King

Bijeshwar, ruler of Bajwara principality in Kashmir. In the battle field, iron-hails of Shirgul were greeted with lightning and thunder bolt of Bijeshwar which Shirgul could not stand and fled.

Karayala began during the reign of Dev Junag in Garh, i.e., present day Subathu. Junag was the reigning monarch of the area. The bonded laborers called as *bethoo* used to relax themselves in the evening by “singing and whatever they could coin and compose” (Hans 16). They also used to perform *swaang* (mimicry/act) keeping in mind their subjective experiences in everyday life. Dev Junag encouraged them to continue with some improvements. This form came to be known as present day *karayala*.

What is *Karayala*?

Karayala is a folk theatre of Himachal. It is ritualistic in nature. It is a night long ritual which includes acting, dancing, and singing. Acting includes *swaangs* i.e. mimicking and caricaturing vices and follies of individual and society. In one *karayala* performance minimum three and maximum four acts are played. Artists in *karayala* are proficient in dancing and singing. In between the acts, they present musical interludes and sing variety of songs: Pahari, Hindi, and Punjabi. At present, it has lost its glory but prior to the advent of TV, and cinema, it was the sole mode of the people’s entertainment in the four districts of hilly state of Himachal namely, Solan, Sirmour, Shimla and Bilaspur. Till date, only men participate in acting.

Hallmark of *Karayala*

The dialogue is steeped in the socio-cultural milieu and employs folk-idiom which is exaggerated, twisted as the moment demands, improvised and used to satirize, mock and lampoon people and the powers that be. It is at its creative best as the spectators involve in the fun by passing witty remarks, or make funny interventions. The actors too converse frequently with the audience in the course of the play. The language is further subverted by mispronouncing/ misusing words, scoffing at pedantic use of language by some sections of society, upturning the conventional articulation of mainstream languages, and by misquoting from scriptures and twisting popular vocabulary in a way that provokes laughter. Since *karayala* was meant for the lowest wrung of the society, it enlightened people about contemporary political, social and economic issues. The motifs such as death, sex, love, deity (*deva*) or god (*bhagwan*), clan names were mostly alluded to quite frequently alongside sexual innuendoes that are used volitionally in a disguised and ambiguous idiom.

Why is *Karayala* Performed?

Karayala is deeply embedded in folk culture. It can be organized throughout the year on any occasion except death. In all the texts explored so far, hosting *karayala* is usually associated with the fulfillment of any wish. But it is not the only condition; there are others as well. Village people host a *karayala* collectively as a token of gratitude for their deity’s grace on the village as well as a way of fulfilling the *bol* (promise) or the *kar* (debt) owed to their deity by them or their ancestors.

Karayala can be organized to express gratefulness to the deity for his kindness over one’s family also, or when a person achieves something in his life. This kind of *karayala* is

called as *khushi ra karayala* (*karayala* as an offering out of happiness). Nowadays people host *karayala* even on occasions like job retirement and anniversaries.

Another form of *karayala* is prevalent around the areas of the national highway no. 22 up to Solan hosted on the eve of the marriage of the family's eldest son (*jhete bête ki jabari*). This is considered to be a compulsory *kar* or debt which if not paid may bring some curse on the family. So, in every wedding season, there are *karayalas* hosted by the grooms' families.

The aforementioned are a few reasons as to why *karayala* is hosted. This gives us a fair idea about *karayala*'s deep-seated connection with folk culture and thus consciousness.

How is *Karayala* Performed?

The *karayala* performing party includes a *deuan* or brahmin, (who under goes holy frenzy) artists called *karayalchi* (actors, singers, and instrument players), and musical instruments like *nagara*, *dhol*, *karnal*, and *nafeeri*. The arranger invites his relatives, friends, and other people of his / her village and the neighboring villages. The host arranges for the dinner of all the guests and the *karayala* party. Arrival of the *karayala* party is marked by "an instrumental music based on Jang Taal" (27) which is an indication that *karayalchis* have either reached or about to reach. Before the play starts, *karayalchis* are offered refreshments.

On the day of the play, the host fasts until *dyoots* (trashed pots) are lighted. Prior to performance, *ghiana* (bonfire) "conical wooden stack" (Hans 24) is fired. Great care is taken to ensure that it does not extinguish in any case. This *ghiana* is worshipped by the priest or *deuan* along with the hosting family. Then ambers from *ghiana* are picked and placed on *dyoots* which are kept on the "tripod of branches" (22) of a particular tree (either cactus or *baloje / chirne*). Now these *dyoots* are worshipped; "[r]ight *dyoot* is the first to be worshipped in the name of Dev Biju." (27). The whole family then sprinkle *homan*, i.e., the mixture of *ghee* (butter milk), rice, barley, sesame, *bael* (*Aegle marmelos*, L.), lotus seeds, *shakkar* (brown sugar), and many other auspicious things over *dyoot*.

After *dyoot* lightning ceremony, *karayalchis* take food. While *karayalchis* have refreshments, audience assemble for the show. Thus starts *karayala* with *karayala taal*. Chandravali (man in guise of mythological woman) enters along with other actors. They sing an *arti* "*jaya jaya he jagdamba mata, dwar thumare jo koi ata . . .*" In the end of the *arti*, other actors leave the stage and Chandravali and her escort remain on the stage. They perform a dance called *Chandravali nritya*. "The gestures and the postures along with bowing head of the dancers are in such a way that right hand is being placed a little forward from the right side of the chest facing its left and the left hand on the left side of the chest touching it. After taking one round on the circumference of *akhara* (acting arena) from left *dyoot* to right *dyoot* which is also called to draw *kaar* (circumambulation), the dance is performed in the middle of The *akhara* and on the axis of the body by revolving first to the left side, i.e., clock-wise direction and then to the right, i.e., anti clock-wise direction and then to the right, i.e., clock-wise direction" (31).

After this, the escort leaves the stage and Chandravali keeps dancing to the rhythm of *karayala taal*, till *sadhus*' (ascetics) words starts reverberating. *Karayala* has numerous *swaangs*, but it is mandatory to stage *Sadhu's Swaang*. Throughout the night, three to four

different *swaangs* are played, each is followed by a musical interlude. These interludes are presented by singers who dance as well. They also perform songs on the demand of the audience. People give money to *karayalchis* for fulfilling their demands. *Karayala* ends with an *arti*, followed by worshipping the *dyoots* with flour, jiggery, and *ghee* cooked together and then tumbling them down. Also, *ghiana* is worshipped and sprinkled with water which marks the end of *karayala*. *Karayala* parties can wind up their show any time after 4 am.

Challenge to the existence of *Karayala*

Globalization is a reality today affecting every person and thing on this globe. In numerous ways it has proved boon to our civilization but as far as folk art is concerned, it has paralyzing effect. Before the advent of technology folk art was at its peak, but as soon as media and technology occupied Indian market, it started erasing our folk art forms. As a result of which we are interrogating transformations in traditional folk performing arts and evolution of tradition.

Transformation from Past to the Present

When we say transformation, we have to consider the transition from past till present in *karayala*. It was and it is live impromptu theatrical action mastered by *karyalchis* (actors) through repeated performances. There was such a craze for the show that not only the invitees but if the person who was not even invited came to know about the performance by chance would come along with his relatives, but such enthusiasm is lacking at present. The performances were so captivating that none would leave or sleep during performances but at present audience starts depleting after a *swang* or so—once during my field work in the end there were no spectators, there were only *karayalchis* and me. The musical instruments were all folk instruments indigenously made, whereas at present instruments like keyboard player etc are also used. There was no loud speaker or electronic equipment involved in the performance, but they are part of it now and some time they are very annoying. As *karayala* was night performance; for lighting purpose lanterns were used however, electricity has made it handy now. The costumes and make up which they wore was entirely local, although they have started spending a bit more on it now. The actors of *karayala* were all males which has not changed yet. They even play women roles disguised as women. Initially, when *karayala* started it was played by the people of scheduled caste only, though picture has changed now, men from upper casts have entered the acting arena. *Karayalchis* were and they are proficient in acting, dancing, singing and even playing musical instruments. They never had any formal training in these disciplines, which is a reality at present as well. Playing musical instruments was legacy passed from generation to generation. Having said that, new generation is least interested to learn and play traditional folk instruments. The performance was entirely in *Bhaghati* (local dialect) and use of Hindi was scanty. As of now use of Hindi has become extensive otherwise also and *Bhaghati* has been shoved to the margins, so much so that it has been enlisted in the UNESCO's list of endangered languages. The performance included mimicking and caricaturing vices and follies prevalent in the society at that time, which is still the same. Couplets in *Bhaghati* were spiced with wit, satire, pun, humour and practical

wisdom which spell bound people. The characteristic is still there but aged spectators long for aged wine.

Future of Karayala

The future of *karayala* is very uncertain as there is no appreciation. Least monetary benefits. Modes and means of media today are so strong that *karayala* troupers cannot beat it alone. In order to protect *karayala* and the likes of it, our state and central government should formulate a policy. It needs platforms like IPL and Pro Kabaddi League to introduce competitiveness among the *karayala* troupes.

Famous Karayala Acts

There were numerous *swaangs* (acts) in *karayala*. They deal with range of issues mentioned in previous section. Titles of few known *swaangs* are: *Jhoolana*, *Sadhu ka swang*, *Mem-Saab ka swang*, *Julaha-Julahin ka swang*, *Jogi-Jogan ka swang*, *Bangale ka swang*, *Gaddi-Gaddan ka swang*, *Jangam ka swang*, *Gangi-Sundar ka swang*, *Barada-Baradi ka swang*, *Rajput ka swang*, *Chooranwale ka swang*, *Hathi ka swang*, *Daag-Daon ka swang*, *Nawab ka swang*, *Oonth ka swang*, *Tau-Tai ka swang*, *Sahukar ka swang*, *Chamar-Chamari ka Swang*, *Bachole ka swang*, *Tarde Naai ka swang*, *Coolee ka swang*, *Lamberdar ka swang*, *Brahmin ka swang*, *Badhal ka swang*, *Chacha-Bhateeje ka swang* etc. Highlighted above are the few *swaangs* still played during *karayala*.

Conclusion

The present paper is an attempt to portray a verbal image of an endangered folk theatrical form of Himachal Pradesh. This is also an endeavor to expose the attitude of state towards folk arts. A shift from past till present easily communicates that the form is losing its base very swiftly, media and technology have contributed helping hand in this. Saving *karayala* means making it more competitive and lucrative in terms of earning and career.

Bibliography

- Affiah, Uwem, and Ndubuisi Osuagwu. "Ethnodramatics: Towards a Theory for Indigenous African Drama." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, vol. 5, no. 2, Nov.-Dec. 2012, pp. 6-10, www.iosrjournals.org/iosr-jhss/papers/Vol5-issue2/B0520610.pdf.
- Ahluwalia, Kailash. *Karayala: An Impromptu Theatre Of Himachal Pradesh*. Reliance Publishing House, 1995.
- - -. "karayala kuch prashn." *Somsi*, vol. 4, 1989. pp. 61-64.
- Ankur, Devendra Raj. "How 'National' Is Our National Theatre?" *Theatre India Journal*, no. 11, 2005, pp. 18-24.
- Barot, Rajoo. "How 'National' Is Our National Theatre?" *Theatre India Journal*, no. 11, 2005, pp. 25-27.
- Brockett, Oscar G. *The Theatre: An Introduction*. 3rd ed., Hoolt, Renhart & Winston, 1974.
- "Caricature." *Encyclopedia.com*. www.encyclopedia.com/literature-and-arts/art-and-architecture/art-general/caricature. Accessed 6 May 2018.

- Casey, Maryrose. *Creating Frames: Contemporary Indigenous Theatre 1967- 1990*. U of Queensland P, 2004.
- Cash, Justin. "Caricature in Drama." *The Drama Teacher*, www.thedramateacher.com/caricature-in-drama/. Accessed 5 June 2018.
- Chaudhury, Neelam Mansingh. "How 'National' Is Our National Theatre?" *Theatre India Journal*, no. 11, 2005, pp. 7-12.
- Dawes, Birgit. *Performing Memory, Transforming Time: History of Indigenous North American Drama*. SUNY P, 2013, www.sunypress.edu/pdf/62749.pdf.
- Diakhate, Ousmane, and Hansel Ndumbe Eyoh. "The Roots of African Theatre Ritual and Orality in the Pre-Colonial Period." *The IATC Journal*, no.15, June 2017, www.critical-stages.org/15/the-roots-of-african-theatre-ritual-and-orality-in-the-pre-colonial-period/.
- Eckersley, Mark. "Origins of Modern Australian Indigenous Drama." *Australian Indigenous Drama*, 14 Mar. 2014, australianindigenoudrama.blogspot.com/2014/03/origins-of-modern-australian-indigenous.html.
- Everts-Boehm, Dana. "La Pastorela-Si Lucifer Fuera Mujer: Mexican Folk Drama in Tennessee." *Folklife*, 21 Jan. 2016, tnfolklife.org/folklife/la-pastorela-si-lucifer-fuera-mujer-mexican-folk-drama-in-tennessee/.
- Garg, Nand Lal. "karayala dhami ra." *Somsi*, vol. 79, 1996, pp. 55-58.
- - -. "himachali paramparik lok natya karayala." *Somsi*, vol. 4, no. 110, 2003. pp. 88-90.
- Gerould, Daniel, editor. *Theatre / Theory / Theatre: The Major Critical Texts from Aristotle and Zeami to Soyinka and Havel*. Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 1999.
- Handa, Om Chand. "Himachal ka loknatya- karayada." *Somsi*, vol. 1, no. 9, 1975. pp. 25-31.
- Hans, Ashok. *Karayala: A Folk Theatrical Form of Himachal Pradesh*. Sahitya Sarkar, 1986.
- Joshi, Shreenivas. "Himachal Pradesh mein lok natya lekhan parampara." *Somsi*, vol. 151, 2014. pp. 65-71.
- Kanwar, Narrinder Singh. *Lok rang manch par himachal pradesh ke lok-natya: vidhayan*. 2000. MHRD, SRF.
- Mangai, A. "How 'National' Is Our National Theatre?" *Theatre India Journal*, no. 11, 2005, pp. 84-91.
- Mukherjee, Arun. "How 'National' Is Our National Theatre?" *Theatre India Journal*, no. 11, 2005, pp. 7-12.
- Munday, Jeremy. *Introducing Translation Studies: Theories and Applications*. Routledge, 2001.
- Murthy, U. R. Anantha. "How 'National' Is Our National Theatre?" *Theatre India Journal*, no. 11, 2005, pp. 13-17.
- Parmar, Shyam. *Traditional Folk Media in India*. Geka Books, 1976.
- Prakash, Om. "jananuranjan ka sashakt madhyam hai- karayala." *Somsi*, vol. 4, no. 110, 2003. pp. 91-94.
- Prathasarthy, Indira. "How 'National' Is Our National Theatre?" *Theatre India Journal*, no. 11, 2005, pp. 42-44

- Quinn, Jim O'. "Theatre of the Americas, Both Ancient and New." *American Theatre*, 23 Apr. 2015, www.americantheatre.org/2015/04/23/theatre-of-the-americas-both-ancient-and-new/.
- Raman, Tulsi and Girija Sharma, editors. *Himachal ke loknatya*. Himachal Akademi for Art, Culture and Language.
- Saraswat, Om Prakash. "himachali lok natiyon ka shilp." *Somsi*, pp. 52-54.
- Sharma, Amit. "lok dharma natya parampara: mahatv v mulyankan." *Somsi*, vol. 1, no. 45, 1986. pp. 72-78.
- Sharma, Divya. *Folk Theatre of Himachal Pradesh- A Study of Select Popular Folk Performances*. 2016. Himachal Pradesh University, PhD dissertation.
- Shastri, Sashikant. "Himachal-loknatya swaroop aivm parampara." *Somsi*, vol. 3, no. 35, 1983. pp. 32-34.
- Somsi*, vol. 111, 2004.
- Somsi*, vol. 147-150, 2013. (varshik sayunktank)
- Styan, J. L. "Dramatic Literature." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2 Feb, 2017, www.britannica.com/art/dramatic-literature.
- Subbanna, K. V. "How 'National' Is Our National Theatre?" *Theatre India Journal*, no. 11, 2005, pp. 45-61
- Thakur, M. R. *Himachal ke Loknatya aur Lokanuranjan*. Himachal Pustak Bhandar, 1982.
- . "Karyala." *Somsi*, vol. 56, no. 4, 1988, pp. 85-97.
- Thakur, SSS.. Sangeet Natak Akademi, 1983. *Karayala: Folk Theatre of Himachal Pradesh*