

## BHAND PATHER: KASHMIR'S THEATRE OF THE MASSES

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### ABSTRACT

*Bhand Pather* is one of the most significant traditional folk theatre forms of Kashmir. Rooted in centuries-old cultural practices, it combines drama, music, dance, satire, and social commentary. This paper examines the historical origins, ritualistic dimensions, musical structure, thematic diversity, and socio-political role of Bhand Pather. Drawing upon ancient texts such as the Nilmatpurana, Rajatarangini, and modern scholarly documentation, the study explores how Bhand Pather has functioned as a medium of cultural expression, resistance, and collective memory. The paper also traces its evolution from the Hindu period through Mughal patronage to its decline during terrorism and revival in the contemporary era. The study highlights Bhand Pather as a living cultural heritage that reflects Kashmir's pluralistic society and emphasizes the need for its preservation.

**Keywords:** Bhand Pather, Kashmiri folk theatre, Cultural heritage, Folk performance, Kashmir

### INTRODUCTION

Folk theatre has always played an important role in preserving culture and conveying social messages within communities. It is not only a source of entertainment but also a powerful medium through which traditions, beliefs, and social values are passed from one generation to another. In the context of Kashmir, Bhand Pather holds a distinctive place as a traditional folk theatre form that combines humor, satire, music, dance, and ritualistic elements. Through lively performances, it reflects the everyday life, struggles, and emotions of the people of Kashmir.

The term Bhand Pather is derived from two Sanskrit-rooted words: Bhand, which refers to a folk actor, entertainer, or mimic, and Pather, which means a dramatic performance marked by imitation, exaggeration, and expressive dialogue. Together, these terms describe a vibrant theatrical tradition that relies heavily on improvisation, satire, and audience interaction. The performers, known as Bhands, use wit, mimicry, and exaggerated actions to entertain the audience while simultaneously commenting on social, political, and moral issues.

Although recorded documentation on Bhand Pather is limited, its historical importance is evident through references found in ancient manuscripts, folklore, and oral traditions. These sources suggest that Bhand Pather has existed for centuries and has been closely connected with the cultural and social life of Kashmir. Traditionally performed in open spaces during festivals, ceremonies, and community gatherings, this folk theatre form has served as a mirror of society, highlighting social injustices, cultural practices, and human behavior.

This research paper seeks to examine the historical origins, performance structure, thematic richness, and contemporary relevance of Bhand Pather. By exploring its evolution over time and its role in shaping cultural identity, the study aims to highlight the significance of Bhand Pather as a living folk tradition and emphasize the need for its preservation in the modern era.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a descriptive and analytical approach to examine Bhand Pather as a traditional folk theatre of Kashmir. The research is based on the study of historical texts, cultural records, and existing literature related to Kashmiri theatre and folk traditions. An interpretative method has been used to understand the socio-cultural themes, performance structure, and ritualistic elements of Bhand Pather. The study also analyzes the evolution and contemporary relevance of the art form within the cultural framework of Kashmir.

### THE BHAND TRADITION

The term *Bhand* carries layered meanings across Indian linguistic and cultural traditions. In Hindi and Urdu, *bhand* commonly refers to a mimic or impersonator—someone highly skilled in imitation. In Sanskrit literature, however, the word denotes a jester or clown, specifically an entertainer who amuses audiences through

exaggerated facial expressions, bodily gestures, and comic behavior. Across regions, the *bhand* has historically functioned as a popular performer whose primary role is to evoke laughter while subtly reflecting social realities.

In Rajasthan, elements of the traditional *bhand* style can still be observed today, particularly in rural performance contexts. Here, *bhands* are known for their comic imitation and physical humor, often drawing from everyday life and familiar social characters. A similar understanding of the *bhand* exists in Punjab, where the term refers to comic entertainers or jesters who usually perform in pairs. The structure of the performance is dialogic: one performer initiates the interaction by asking questions, while the other responds with clever, exaggerated, or deliberately absurd answers designed to provoke laughter.

In response, the first *bhand* theatrically strikes the second with a leather whip-like prop. Although the act causes no physical injury, the loud sound produced by the prop amplifies the comic effect and heightens audience amusement. These performances are generally presented while the performers move repeatedly within a confined space, creating a dynamic yet contained visual rhythm.

The *bhand* tradition in Rajasthan largely mirrors this form, retaining its emphasis on imitation, humor, and physical comedy. In contrast, the *bhand* tradition of Kashmir displays a markedly different structure and aesthetic. Kashmiri *bhands* follow a distinct performance style, suggesting regional adaptations that have shaped the tradition according to local cultural, social, and artistic influences. This regional variation highlights the adaptability of the *bhand* tradition and its enduring relevance within diverse cultural landscapes.

## HISTORICAL ROOTS OF BHAND PATHER IN KASHMIR

The historical origins of Bhand Pather are deeply intertwined with the cultural and social life of Kashmir. While theatrical practices existed in various forms, Bhand Pather emerged as a uniquely participatory folk tradition accessible to common people. References in ancient texts like the Nilmatpurana and Rajatarangini indicate the presence of dramatic performances during religious festivals, social ceremonies, agricultural celebrations, and seasonal events such as the first snowfall. These performances were not merely entertainment; they were an integral aspect of communal life, blending cultural education, moral instruction, and social cohesion.

Bhand Pather, in particular, evolved as a medium through which performers could use humor, satire, and dramatization to reflect societal norms, challenge injustice, and preserve oral histories. Its open-air performances allowed direct interaction with audiences, encouraging collective participation and improvisation. Royal patronage during the Hindu period and later recognition during the Mughal era helped sustain this folk form. Kings and nobles provided support through performance spaces, rewards, and encouragement, ensuring that Bhand Pather remained a respected and influential component of Kashmiri culture.

Over centuries, Bhand Pather evolved from simple enactments of daily life to complex performances with structured narratives, musical accompaniment, and ritualistic elements, demonstrating its adaptability and resilience. Its historical significance lies not only in entertainment but also in its role as a repository of social memory, preserving folklore, customs, and moral teachings through generations.

## THE KASHMIR'S BHAND TRADITION

In Kashmir, any performer who plays the role of a jester or participates in *pather* performances is referred to as a *bhand*. Performances enacted through multiple characters are known as *pātra* or *pather*. All participants involved in these performances—including actors, musicians, and dancers—are collectively identified as *bhands*. This performative practice is also described as *Bhand Nāṭyam*, as it represents a composite form that blends classical theatrical elements with the folk theatre tradition of *pather*. The tradition of *Bhand Pather* gained significant prominence in Kashmir around the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Over time, this art form achieved recognition both as *Bhand Dance* and *Bhand Theatre*, establishing itself as an important cultural expression of the region.

According to the Kashmiri scholar *Shri Prithvi Nath Pushp*, who was well-versed in Sanskrit and Persian, early references to *bhand* performances can be found in the writings of Abhinavagupta, who described how performers entertained people through humor. Shri Pushp further notes the long-standing Kashmiri custom of *Pariksha-dana*, a ritual of patronage practiced for centuries, in which *bhands* received donations in the form of clothing, money, or agricultural produce.

The term *pariksha* means “to watch,” while *dāna* signifies “to give,” collectively emphasizing the reciprocal relationship between performer and audience. Kashmir’s theatrical tradition also included singers, instrumentalists, and dancers, in addition to comic performers such as *rakkās* and *rakkāsā*. Male actors were called *natt*, and female actors *natti*. In the Kashmiri language, the words *natt*, *natti*, and *nath* are associated with trembling or vibration, referring to the rhythmic movement of the performer’s body in accordance with musical tempo.

Historical evidence of Bhand Pather is found in Kashmir’s ancient temples and inscriptions. The Martand Sun Temple—also known as Pandavlari—contains sculptural representations depicting bhands engaged in performance. Some inscriptions found during excavations also show different artworks related to bhands, further attesting to the antiquity and cultural importance of this tradition. Professor Pushp notes that *bhands* often copied the behavior of kings and royal family members in a humorous way and performed directly in front of them. Through these performances, they told stories about royal families and showed both the good and bad qualities of rulers using humor and light satire.

During the time of Sultan Budshah (1420–1470), *Bhand Pather* was commonly performed on special occasions, such as the birthdays of princes, showing its importance in royal ceremonies. The term *pather* also appears in the *vākh* (poetic aphorisms) of the mystic poet Nund Rishi. Similarly, the renowned Kashmiri poetess Lalleshwari (Lal Dyed) frequently employed the term *pather* in her *vākh*, indicating the deep cultural embedding of theatrical performance within Kashmiri literary and spiritual traditions.

During the Dogra rule, *bhands* and their art received substantial patronage. Kings granted several exemptions to *bhands*, freeing them from common taxes levied on the general population, such as transport and oil taxes. These official royal orders, still preserved in government records, provide clear and powerful evidence that the rulers actively supported and valued the Bhand tradition.

## RITUALISTIC AND RELIGIOUS DIMENSIONS

Bhand Pather has historically been closely connected to ritual and religious observances, reflecting Kashmir’s syncretic cultural ethos. Performances often begin with the ceremonial dance called Chhok, which sets the stage for the evening and integrates symbolic gestures, while concluding with the Mangun prayer, infusing the performance with spiritual and cultural significance. These ritualistic practices highlight the deep-rooted integration of folk theatre into social and religious life.

Certain performances were historically aligned with religious festivals or seasonal ceremonies, emphasizing communal participation and moral instruction. By combining ritual, music, dance, and dramatic storytelling, Bhand Pather transcended mere entertainment, becoming a vehicle for cultural continuity, moral reflection, and collective identity. Symbolic props, masks, and performative gestures reflect ritualistic elements that link contemporary performances to their historical and religious roots. Each Pather, while addressing local social realities, retains traces of these ceremonial influences, demonstrating the enduring significance of ritual within the art form.

## PATRONAGE AND POLITICAL INFLUENCE

Bhand Pather benefited significantly from historical patronage, which ensured its continuity and evolution. During the reign of Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin, performers received formal training and recognition, and Bhands were rewarded for their skill and social contributions. This royal support enhanced the artistic quality of performances and positioned Bhand Pather as a respected medium for social commentary and communal reflection.

Under the Mughal period, Bhand Pather also served political purposes. Rulers used performances to communicate messages, reinforce authority, and subtly shape public opinion, while performers retained their folk essence and

satirical voice. This interplay between political influence and cultural expression ensured the art form's survival and popularity among the masses. Even in times of socio-political unrest, Bhand Pather functioned as a resilient medium for dialogue, education, and social critique, illustrating its adaptability and centrality to Kashmiri cultural life.

## MUSICAL AND PERFORMATIVE ELEMENTS

Music and performance lie at the core of Bhand Pather, making it a distinctive and immersive form of Kashmiri folk theatre. The traditional songs that were once an integral part of Bhand Pather have largely disappeared today. Although performances are fundamentally based on musical elements, over time, other Kashmiri folk songs—such as *Shrukya*, *Lalvakh*, *Vaczhun*, *Huray*, and *Rouf*—have also been incorporated into the performances.

Traditional instruments such as the *Surnai*, *Dhoal*, *Nagara*, *Thalij*, and *Saaz-e-Kashmir* form the foundation of its musical structure, providing both rhythm and melody that guide the narrative and energize the performers. The Dhoal, in particular, occupies a central role, coordinating the orchestra, maintaining tempo, and fostering communal participation during open-ground performances. Traditional taals, including Chapandaz and Sool Taal, continue to survive, preserving the indigenous musical patterns that have been handed down through generations.

The performative elements of Bhand Pather extend beyond music to include expressive gestures, exaggerated imitation, ritualistic dances, and costume-based characterizations, which collectively enhance the visual and emotional impact of the performance. The ritualistic dance, *Chhok*, often inaugurates the evening's performance, with regional variations highlighting the nuanced diversity of Kashmiri folk dances. Plays unfold gradually over the night, culminating in the *Mangun*, a prayer that adds a ceremonial and climactic dimension. Performances integrate social commentary, humor, and moral narratives, often reflecting local customs, agrarian life, and historical events.

The use of masks, animal representations, and symbolic props, as seen in *Shikargah Pather* and other pathers, emphasizes theatrical creativity while communicating ecological, social, and religious themes.

Bhand Pather relies on a minimal yet symbolically rich use of props that enhance its dramatic impact. Two essential objects in every performance are the *koodar* (whip) and the *bans* (short bamboo sticks). The *koodar*, made from the dried stem of the bhang plant, produces a loud, gunshot-like sound without causing harm. It functions as a powerful theatrical symbol of authority and oppression rather than a weapon of physical violence. In contrast, the *bans*, used by the *maskhara* (jester), create sharp rhythmic sounds and represents resistance, mockery, and the subversion of power through humor and satire.



Masks used in Bhand Pather

A simple cloth known as the *kaper chadar* serves multiple performative functions, acting as a curtain, an entry point for actors, or a royal canopy during court scenes. This versatile use of cloth recalls the *Yavanika* described in classical Indian dramaturgy, emphasizing the continuity between folk performance and traditional theatrical conventions. The linguistic texture of Bhand Pather is predominantly Kashmiri, enriched by the use of Gojri, Punjabi, Dogri, Persian, and occasional English expressions. This multilingualism heightens comic effect, exaggeration, and dramatic irony. Acting styles shift fluidly between realism and overt exaggeration, while the narrative progresses episodically with little suspense. Although performances often draw upon historical or royal narratives, their meanings are firmly rooted in contemporary social and political realities.

Bhand Pather continues to be performed across various districts of Kashmir, forming an integral part of local cultural life. While some traditional Pathers have declined, the form survives through adaptation and improvisation. Musical elements have evolved over time, though the use of classical *ragas* and *mukams* has

diminished. The Bhand's worldview and performance ethos reflect a syncretic cultural foundation shaped by both Kashmiri Shaivism and Sufi traditions, reinforcing the spiritual and philosophical depth of Bhand Pather as a living folk theatre tradition.



Through this dynamic fusion of music, dance, drama, and ritual, Bhand Pather achieves a multi-sensory impact, simultaneously entertaining, educating, and reinforcing cultural identity. The synergy between musical accompaniment and performative expression underscores its enduring significance, preserving centuries-old traditions while engaging communities in a shared cultural experience. This integration of sound, movement, and narrative illustrates the sophistication of Kashmiri folk theatre and its ability to convey complex social, moral, and spiritual messages through performative artistry.

## COSTUMES AND PROPS IN BHAND PATHER

In Bhand Pather, performers wear a variety of costumes, carefully chosen to reflect the character and context of the performance. Costumes are essential for identifying the role of each actor, whether they portray a king, priest, scholar, teacher, villain, commoner, Hindu, Muslim, or even a madman. The visual identity of a character is primarily conveyed through their attire.

Common costumes used in Bhand Pather include Peshwaz, Choga, Angarkha, Saaf, Féran, Shalwar, Vodvani, Khes, Hol, hats, and Khorbana.

- **Peshwaz:** A long, fitted garment similar to a skirt, often tight at the waist and flowing below, flaring out during dance. It is usually decorated with embroidery and made of bright, shiny fabric. Modern equivalents are known as ghaghra or choli.
- **Choga:** A gown-like robe often made of fine wool or zarbap fabric.
- **Angrakh:** Also called “Antariya”, sometimes padded with cotton for warmth. It resembles the pheran worn by Kashmiri Pandits but is slightly tighter.
- **Saafa:** A headwrap or turban also referred to as dastar.

- **Pheran:** A traditional coat or overgarment, usually worn in winter, with different styles for men and women.
- **Shalwar:** Loose-fitting trousers similar to those worn in daily life.
- **Vodvani:** A cloth used like a scarf to cover the head.
- **Khes:** A sheet of fabric used to wrap around or change costumes during the performance.
- **Hol:** A waist belt tied over the pheran or choga.
- **Hats/Turbans:** Worn according to the character. Common types include:
  - **Chri Toopy:** Traditional headwear.
  - **Karakuli:** Made from lambskin.
  - **Greezy Toopy:** Worn by farmers.
  - **Kasab/Kurrah:** Worn by Muslim women to cover the head.
  - **Taraga:** Worn by elderly Hindu women.
  - **Khorbana:** Footwear, originally made from grass but now replaced by leather or wooden shoes.
  - **Kurra:** A whip made from the stem of the bhang plant, thick on one side and thin on the other, used as a prop in performances.
  - **Beards and Wigs:** Occasionally used to suit characters, such as sages or elderly men.
  - **Bandi:** A net-like ornament worn over the turban of kings or princess.
  - **Tabarzin:** A small axe carried by performers to add a comic or dramatic effect.
  - **Gaandh:** A decoration made of bird feathers, placed on turbans or hats to resemble a crown.

These costumes and accessories play a crucial role in defining the character and enhancing the visual appeal of the performance, making Bhand Pather a highly expressive and colorful folk theatre tradition.

## LIVING PATHERS: THEMES AND VARIATIONS

**Bhand Pather**, as a traditional Kashmiri folk theatre form, functions as a powerful mirror of society, offering a vivid reflection of its social, cultural, political, and historical realities. Each living *Pather* focuses on distinct themes, portraying the complexities of Kashmiri life while simultaneously providing entertainment, moral instruction, and social critique.

- **Bata/Buhir Pather:** Satirizes social norms and moral failings within the Pandit community, highlighting injustice and societal inequalities.
- **Bakerwal Pather:** Depicts the life and struggles of nomadic shepherd communities, providing insight into their customs and relationship with nature.
- **Aarmen Pather:** Focuses on vegetable farmers, their unique marital practices, and local social dynamics.
- **Angrez Pather:** Critiques colonial oppression and linguistic domination during British rule.
- **Watal Pather:** Exposes social issues such as polygamy, child marriage, and betrayal within communities.
- **Raaze and Dard Pather:** Narrate historical oppression during Afghan rule, highlighting social trauma.
- **Shikargah Pather:** Uses animal masks to address environmental concerns like deforestation and wildlife conservation.
- **Gosain Pather:** Critiques religious exploitation and moral corruption, urging ethical reflection.

The multilingual nature of these performances, incorporating Kashmiri, Hindi, Pahari, Persian, and English, reflects the cultural and linguistic plurality of Kashmir, enabling Bhand Pather to reach and resonate with diverse communities. The performances often combine music, dance, ritualistic elements, and audience interaction, creating a multi-sensory experience that reinforces social values and preserves historical and cultural narratives. Collectively, the thematic diversity of living Pathers underscores their role as not merely a form of entertainment, but as a significant cultural institution—documenting social history, provoking reflection on moral and ethical issues, addressing contemporary social concerns, and sustaining the rich heritage of Kashmiri folk theatre for future generations.

## REVIVAL AND EVOLUTION OF BHAND PATHER

Despite historical challenges, including the decline during terrorism (1991–2001), Bhand Pather has demonstrated remarkable resilience. The 2002 revival, led by the Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture, and Languages, re-energized folk performances through festivals, community engagement, and institutional support. Contemporary troupes such as Kashmir Bagat Theatre (Akthingam), Anantnag National Bhand Theatre (Chadura Budgam), and Dilkash Folk Theatre (Hatmulla, Kupwara) continue to preserve and adapt traditional performances.

The revival emphasizes Bhand Pather's dual role as both cultural preservation and social education. Modern performances maintain traditional music, satire, and ritual elements while addressing contemporary social issues, ensuring its relevance to younger generations. By combining historical authenticity with modern concerns, Bhand Pather continues to serve as a living repository of Kashmiri identity, morality, and communal values.

## PRESERVING AND PROMOTING BHAND PATHER: ENSURING ITS SURVIVAL

To ensure that Bhand Pather, the vibrant traditional folk theatre of Kashmir, continues to thrive and does not diminish, a multi-faceted and sustained approach is essential. Sustaining Bhand Pather requires a multi-pronged approach:

- **Financial Support:** Grants, subsidies, fellowships, and touring opportunities for troupes.
- **Documentation:** Archiving scripts, music, costumes, and oral narratives.
- **Education:** Integrating Bhand Pather into school and university curricula, along with workshops and apprenticeships.
- **Media and Tourism:** Leveraging social media, cultural tourism, and digital platforms to increase visibility.
- **Community Engagement:** Encouraging schools, colleges, and local councils to host performances and involve youth.
- **Artist Recognition:** Honoring senior Bhands as cultural custodians and mentors.

Through collective institutional support, community engagement, and thoughtful modernization, Bhand Pather can remain a living, dynamic art form—one that continues to reflect the cultural identity, social consciousness, and artistic legacy of Kashmir.

## CONCLUSION

Bhand Pather stands as a remarkable testament to the cultural richness, resilience, and socio-political consciousness of Kashmir. Rooted in centuries-old traditions, it has evolved from ritualistic and religious performances to a sophisticated form of folk theatre that blends music, dance, satire, and social commentary. Its historical journey—from early royal patronage during the Hindu period, strategic use under Mughal rulers, to modern institutional revival—reflects both its adaptability and enduring relevance. Despite periods of decline, particularly during militancy, Bhand Pather has survived due to the dedication of performers, community engagement, and renewed cultural initiatives, demonstrating the art form's resilience as a living repository of Kashmiri identity. Today, with over fifty active theatre groups and continued audience participation, Bhand Pather not only entertains but educates, critiques social injustices, preserves oral histories, and strengthens communal bonds. Its preservation and

promotion are imperative, as it embodies the collective memory, pluralistic values, and artistic ingenuity of Kashmir. The survival of Bhand Pather is not merely about safeguarding a folk theatre—it is about sustaining a vibrant cultural legacy that continues to inspire, inform, and unify generations.

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