



Androgynous Pariahs

Gender Transformations and Politics of Culture in the North Indian Folk Theater *Svāṅg*

Theater in general and so-called “folk” theater forms in particular transpose derivative behavioral patterns onto performers by arranging them spatially within a circumscribed area. This power of theater to transform a person from his familiar, normative life to an altered “persona,” temporally and spatially, lingers on with the performer, individually as well as collectively, even when outside of the performance arena. At the same time, however, even while on the stage, a performer is never really an individual in the sense of having a distinct consciousness, for he carries with him a considerable amount of baggage based on gender, caste, and other cultural determinants prominent within the Indian social sphere. While utilizing his dramatic capacity to transform his individual self into another being on stage, performance confers on the actor an opportunity to transcend social and gender boundaries. The present article seeks to understand the role played by ontological transformations and disguises as factors responsible for cultural condemnation of a well-known form of folk theater called *svāṅg*, due to the challenge it poses to the structural view of life undertaken by cultural purists as stable and fixed, particularly in the case of gender and social identities. At the same time it traces the genesis of opprobrium on folk theater as low-caste or low-class activity, resulting in its relegation to the margins of human society.

KEYWORDS: performance—folk theater—*svāṅg*—gender—caste relations—social transgression

Androgynous pariah, twin terms suggesting ambiguous gender and caste constrictions, represent a typical assemblage of terms for censorship through which folk theaters have been censured and rejected by elements of highbrow orthodoxy within an Indian cultural landscape encoded by rules and strictures concerning social hierarchy and the role of genders within normative society. Though androgyny has existed in India within the interstices of folk tales and classical myths since the Vedas, the earliest written texts of Hinduism, it still carries a derogatory reference within performative and popular culture, denoting fears of instability and structureless anonymity. The idea of the “androgynous” individual in my view represents an inversion of stability and the severance of male and female principles as fixed entities. Androgyny thus denotes the possibility of transitioning between two states, an on-stage prospect feeding and nurturing into reality an off-stage condition. For my purposes here, androgyny becomes a borderless state between the two fixed sexes, wherein the rigidities of boundaries between male and female disappear.

Within the domain of popular culture, femininity in masculinity and masculinity in femininity both become transgressive states associated with stigmas of hybridity and chaos. Similarly “pariah,” because of the term’s association with an impure caste located on the fringes of mainstream Indian society, tends to signify an enigmatic position and location, a borderless state without proper names and social positions, both materially as well as spiritually. These spaces of transition are used by *svāngs*¹ and other allied folk theater forms to tap potential inherent in the essential convertibility of one sex or caste into another, to demonstrate the transgressive potential as well as the erotic possibilities opened up by performance traditions. I argue that dubbing folk theaters as unrefined, the rough product of the masses fit only for the tastes of the vulgar, crude, and unsophisticated populace, arose largely out of their ability to challenge and transgress gender and caste specifications.

Both the state of androgyny and the stigmatic label “pariah” represent a state of rejection by the dominant codes of Indian society, which are based largely on caste and rules of purity and impurity. Androgyny, which in mythical terms is identified as the fusion of opposite principles leading to the generation of the universe and life, when clothed in the figure of a transvestite gives way to emotions of horror and revulsion on the social plane within normative circles. This state of rejection adheres to an androgynous figure on the stage as he becomes a matter of con-

cern in his transgression of normative sexuality. On stage, he inhabits the boundaries of social acceptance, as does a pariah in his existence as a degraded product of humanity through his location on the margins of caste society. Both of them remain outsiders, violators of nature who embody dangers that have the potential to disrupt the established boundaries defining the sexes and castes. An androgynous pariah, a genderless and casteless person, thus reveals a conglomeration of two converging processes wherein social and sexual transgressions come together in the figure of an actor who represents the social abhorrence of an alien space outside the social formations recognized by upper-caste Hindus. This transgressive figure creates the possibility of the loss of power and prestige through the cultivation of an enigmatic persona, a hybrid figure who is constructed by the power of theater, which spectators witness in the form of performance. The traditionalists' rejection of androgyny and their almost compulsive insistence on the separation of males and females in binary opposition is not so much due to the fear of homosexuality as it is to the fear of losing the power to define categories such as gender and caste. What androgynous figures onstage remind people of is not so much the dangers of homosexuality but rather their fears of powerlessness. Powerlessness in this context refers to an inability to perform when the boundaries between the sexes are crossed over so often and so seamlessly. The criticism of folk theaters by social reformers in nineteenth- and twentieth-century India steered around this dissolution of boundaries between the two sexes, wherein the potency of the masculine gets threatened. For instance, the almost obsessive insistence in Swami Dayanand Saraswati's book *Light of Truth* (1882) on *brahmacārya* (celibacy) is located in his connection of *vīrya* (semen) with power and vigor, the losing of which makes people physically and intellectually weak, while the preservation of it is considered as the highest goal of life. Every action in life is oriented around personal cultivation and the spiritual strengthening of it, so that a noble race of Aryans may be produced.² Another parallel incident that reveals the widespread prevalence of this belief occurs in the performative tale of a North Indian folk hero named Rājā Rasalu, who is described as losing half of his power through his contact with his paramour, Kokilan, when she sits close to him on his horse during a hunting expedition.

Folk theaters historically challenged the presumptions of the immutability of the human persona through the actualization of androgynous figures on stage, while at the same time opening up an imaginative space for caste mobility through the presentation of low-caste actors donning costumes of higher-caste deities and kings on stage. Hence, on the one hand, the divinely ordained, systematized caste restrictions were traditionally challenged in folk performance right in front of a diverse audience composed of different caste groups. The use of actors from lower castes representing heroes and heroines from higher castes or classes on the stage in front of members of those very same castes being mimicked suggests not just irony but a strong sense of transgression by becoming that which is not socially sanctioned. On the other hand, the spectacle of substituting males for females and vice versa onstage poses a challenge to the traditional view of the classification of human beings in terms of rigid boundaries based on caste and gender. This

cross-fertilization of sex and social binaries into a polychromatic view by folk theaters like *svāṅg* was the major factor behind condemnation and rejection of them by cultural conformists. This conflict between a mental structure that advocates neat categories versus a fluid imagining of Indian society that rejects delimitations imposed by the mind as essentially unnecessary and man-made is at the heart of conflict between classical and folk theater, whose genesis can be traced to the *Nāṭyaśāstra* of Bharata Muni.³

A fable recounted in the Natyotpatti chapter of the text provides some valuable insights into the process through which Sanskrit theater envisioned itself as a guardian of traditional notions concerning caste and gender. Sanskrit theater separated itself from other extant theatrical forms by exclusively concentrating upon the ethical dimension of theater. Kathryn Hansen, in *Grounds for Play: The Nautanki Theatre of North India*, notices a linkage between caste and theater as manifested in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*:

Theatre is profane in relation to the scriptures' sacred authority, it is a mixture of forms aimed not at purifying but at entertaining, and it is associated with debased social groups. Indeed the maligning of theatre—and its adherents—has a lengthy history in India, predating Bharata in its origin and continuing to the most recent period. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* myth may be an early recorded apology for an art form that had long been considered lowly, corrupting, and impure. (1993, 34)

In a way the whole compendium is an attempt to reject the principles, practices, and prevalence of folk theater forms through the institution of the divine origin of Sanskrit theater, in its conceptualization of immutable *mudrās*, *sandhbīs*, and *bhāvas*.⁴ The scant attention paid to *uparūpakas*⁵ among different forms of theater by Bharata testifies to not only the existence of folk theater before the codification of classical theater but also its devaluation under this scheme of codification. The tone of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*'s compiler toward folk theaters is at its best censorious and condescending, a reminder of a similar strain found among Indian cultural apologists of the later colonial era. As Adya Rangacharya reminds us, “In most of these plays of the popular stage, the majority dealt with low (*hīna*) or *prākṛt* characters, the usual style of story was also either low humor or low erotic sentiment or sometime [sic] *abdhuta*, i.e. fantastic magic, black art etc. Another interesting feature of these *uparūpakas* as they were later called is plenty of dancing and music” (1966, 49).

The myth of the genesis of theater as related in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* hints at reasons behind the rejection of theater by the gods and sages and its eventual but grudging incorporation by class- and caste-conscious Brahmanism, which thrived on watertight, clean categories to perpetuate itself. In the same chapter of *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Indra, the chief god, requests Brahma to create a diversion for mankind, which has taken to evil ways and has become prone to *grāmya dharmā*, the rustic way of life:

*grāmyadharampravartē tu kamlobhvṃśa gatē
īṣakrodhisammūdhē lokē sukhita dukhitē.*

People became addicted to sensual pleasures, were under the sway of desire and greed, became infatuated with jealousy and anger and (thus) found their happiness mixed with sorrow. (Ghosh 1951, 1:7)

Grāmya dharma (literally “village duty”) is here equated with emotions of lust, anger, jealousy, and greed, which had become the characteristic trademarks of the common folk, the village people who didn’t have the cosmopolitan smarts of urban citizens. Hence an activity, a *kridaniyaka*, that could be seen as well as heard was considered a panacea against these ills. *Kridaniyaka*, literally, is a play, a pleasurable activity, which would divert common people from their pursuit of low desires, while at the same time enlighten them. This new form was considered to be open not only to the twice-born castes but also to the *śūdras*, who were not entitled to the reading of Vedas and hence were bereft of their redeeming power.⁶ With this aim, Brahma creates *Nāṭyaśāstra*. When the treatise is finally ready, Brahma offers it to the pantheon of deities, who find it impossible to put it into practice and offer excuses regarding their inability to practice dramatic activity:

*grahnē dharnē janē prayogē casya sattam
aśaktā bhagwan dēva arogyā nāṭyakarmani.*

Gods are neither able to receive it and maintain it, nor are they fit to understand it and make use of it; they are unfit to do anything with the drama.

(Ghosh 1951, 1:22)

This inability on the part of *devās*, who represent higher realms of perfection, cannot be satisfactorily explained with reference to their lazy, easy life, making them incapable of study or intellectual work, as Rangacharya puts it (1966, 5). The argument here is that in the very last verse Brahma, the creator himself, refers to *devās* as “skilful, learned, free from stage fright and inured to hard work” (Ghosh 1951, 4). Nor can their dilemma be part of the observation that as “gods represented the primitive Indo-Aryans who possibly had no drama” (Ghosh 1951, 5), they were incapable of any dramatic activity. This incapability of the gods to receive and practice dramaturgy, I suggest, can be explained with reference to the relation of theater with social reality and the dangers inherent in all performative arts.

Both Plato’s objection to drama in *The Republic* as well as the *devās*’ rejection of it in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* reveal the same fear of the contingent in the well-ordered universe of Greek and Vedic thought. Firstly, at one level, all drama is ultimately a creation of a make-believe world, essentially a lie, and gods, by their very nature of existence, cannot be a part of self-created illusion, since they represent a higher reality, an all-seeing eye. They are what they are and their existence in and of itself is a counterfoil to the human indulgence in illusion, living in a make-believe world. Secondly, theater represents, at the microscopic level, the creation of the universe itself. In so doing, it mimics divine agency in the act of creating life. That is why theater in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* is seen as a metaphor of sacrifice (*yajña*), wherein life and its emergence are copied. Thus, if theater is a representational sacrifice, it should faithfully adhere to the classifications and divisions that are the hallmarks of Vedic culture. Thirdly, all representational arts presented a dangerous potential and, as admitted by Plato, the only way to control the danger was to use it for educational or moral purposes. Since theater fundamentally represents creation in all its chaos and multiplicity, resisting all attempts to tame and classify it, the two-way solution of either submitting it to the same classifications and divisions that

are characteristics of the Indic caste system based on social order or banishing it to the margins of society were visualized by sages and philosophers in both ancient Greece and India, albeit within their own specific contexts.

Toward the end of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, there is another fable recounted in chapter thirty-six, wherein the delegation of the status of *śūdras* to the actors as well as the audience of the drama takes place. This downfall in the status of actors and audience occurs due to a curse from sages who are presented in an unfavorable light in the drama produced by Bharata's sons. Bharata recounts that his sons produced a play in which it "treated the indulgence in vulgar passions. And . . . was produced in the assembly of the people a drama (lit. poem) which was unacceptable, full of wicked deeds, inspirer of vulgar passions, cruel, unworthy of any praise and in which they caricatured the sages by means of buffoonery (*bhand*)" (Ghosh 1951, 36:27–29). The sages, thus angered, put a curse on the actors that they and their progenies would become *śūdras* and lose their higher-caste status: "You will become mere *Sudras* and attain their functions, and those to be born in your line will be *Sudras* (too). Those actors (*nartaka*) who are already born in your line will be *Sudras*, and so will be those together with their women, boys and young men, who associate with them" (Ghosh 1951, 36:34–35).

This parable explains the imposition of pariah status on the practitioners as well as audience of theater by self-righteous moralists when theater spread to the common masses. The narrative also symbolically attempts to explain a need for a systematized and structured theater far removed from the laity. Along with this move, gender and caste restrictions are used to wean away higher-caste women from the corrupting domain of theater when gods refuse to allow *apsarāses*⁷ to take part in theatrical activities in which human beings participated. The gods, along with their leader Brhaspati, refuse to allow the celestial maidens to take part in theater performances, saying, "The meeting of divine damsels and mortals has not been prescribed (anywhere)" (Ghosh 1951, 36:50).

During the performance of purportedly the first drama, called *Samudramanthan* (Churning of the ocean), demons, incensed by their unfavorable presentation, created a ruckus. This reference to obstruction by demons further reveals how drama was sought to be controlled strictly within the limits of virtue by sages. The excision of any disruptive tendency contained within the psyche, however, becomes impossible, for how is evil to be repelled when it is born along with virtue, even from the same father? That is how the play was obstructed by demons in the narrative upon which the play is based, who obviously "paralysed the speech, movement as well as memory of the actors" (Karnad 2005, 299). The emphasis on the ineffectiveness of performance as sought by demons and not on physical harm to actors, which, as Girish Karnad notices, shows that the myth may refer to the difficulty of this separation under a common, open viewership. That is why the preceptor Brahma advised Bharata to enclose the performance within an enclosure, with gods providing security for the theater house. The act of creating a divinely created enclosure suggests a separation of the whole gamut of experience as well as the audience from the theater proper, comprising not only the laity but also those who are not sophisticated enough to enjoy the *rasas* (emotional juices) of theatri-

cal performance. This parting of ways, I suggest, refers to the separation of the folk and the classical, wherein the classical straightjackets itself from everything that is hybrid and thus seeks to expel “demons” that are considered destabilizing from the vantage point of a highly structured view of life and society.

The continual degradation of folk theaters under classical injunctions as revealed in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, a key text on the performing arts, and other religious texts can thus be located in the ancient caste structure that was constantly manipulated by the upper castes for their own benefit. The fact that folk theater as well as the epic space in which both its actors and audience are located have been dominated by low-caste groups has been asserted by many commentators right from the colonial era down to the present day. John D. Smith, for example, notes in this connection that, “It is normal for epic singers all over India to be of relatively low caste and often, specifically, to be of lower caste than the bulk of their audiences. Audiences may contain members of high caste, even including Brahmins, but these are described as being skeptical or interested only in the entertainment. The typical audience seems to consist mainly of the range of low to middling castes, the typical performer to be low-caste or untouchable” (Smith 1989, 180).

The sharing of divine revelation and knowledge with the masses through folk theater was frowned upon by upper castes, who were considered guardians of sacred lore and prided themselves in the monopoly of values, customs, and sacred tales. Folk theatrical performances have always had their base among the popular masses. By making classical lore available to the laity in their own language and medium, folk theater dismantled Brahmanical exclusivity, leading to anger among cultural elites. The process of exclusive claims over sacred knowledge by upper castes was further augmented by British colonialism, which manifested itself in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century India (Dirks 2001). It is important to note here that colonialism, while appearing to denounce caste and gender discriminations, helped in sustaining and strengthening these very structures. Due to its fascination with the classical Aryan past; its discovery of the upper-caste intelligentsia as a willing partner in its search for justification of its colonial enterprise; and its inability to understand folk culture, except as a simplified version of life lived in nature, colonialism perpetuated those very biases that marked the classical abhorrence of multiplicity and the experiential life that was made manifest in the folk performative arts.

The criticism of folk theaters like *svāṅg* in both the classical and colonial mindset as vulgar, unsophisticated products created for rural entertainment without any literary merit stems from the obsession with caste and gender, which were both perceived to be essentially unstable and dangerous categories. Theatrical androgyny celebrated therein revealed the stage as a hybrid space where people could meet without caste and class distinctions, thus designating theatrical space as an ideological threat to the stability and comfort provided by the clearly demarcated social order in which people lived their daily lives. As a consequence, the rising Indian intelligentsia that inherited these value judgments from its forefathers detached itself from folk representations and added to the normative critique that depicted the folk as vulgar and harmful to social morality.

Svāṅg Traditions in North India

Svāṅgs in Haryana, Punjab, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh retain a convention of male actors playing female roles, though now many dramatic troupes use female actresses as well. While before the 1920s all these drama parties were exclusively male, the use of female actresses by Parsi theater acted as a catalyst for folk theaters to admit females into their ranks, though due to the seasonal nature of itinerant dramatic parties, social conventions, and the stigma associated with female performers, many of these troupes still prefer male actors to personify females during their presentations. Gender transformation in *svāṅgs* occurs at more than one level. First, it is reflected in a male actor's impersonation of female characters on the stage. While this on-stage transformation is a one-way transition, the other transformations that are part of plot transformations are two-way processes in which a male or female character assumes the garb of another gender as per demands of the plot. These transformations can be understood as follows:

1. Male (actor)—first transformation—female character—second transformation—male character
(M-F-M)
2. Male (actor)—no transformation—male character—first transformation—female character
(M-M-F)

In contemporary practice, wherein female actresses have been accepted as part of the troupe, there is only one possible transformation:

1. Female (actor)—no transformation—female character—first transformation—male character
(F-F-M)

The double transformations, wherein the M-F-M axis is undertaken by female protagonists of *svāṅgs*, occurs in such as Sarande in *Rājā Bhoj*, Bina in *Shahi Lakhadhara*, Nagde in *Chanderkiran*, and Dharammalki in *Seth Tara Chand*, while the single transformations of the M-M-F kind are used in the *svāṅgs* of *Nautanki* and *Jani Chor*.

For these transformations actors use heavy make-up and ornaments to imitate feminine gestures. Many of them have become so popular with the audience that they remain much in demand for their suggestive mimicry of females. This transmutation of males into female personas within the story is often described through a description of all the ornaments connected with ordinary women that are considered to be an essential part of their *siṅgār* (ornamentation). The androgynous image revealed in *svāṅgs* is that of a heavily decorated and ornamented woman who wears all these accouterments, which become a part of her persona. In the *svāṅg* known as *Nautanki*,⁸ within a passage of twenty-nine lines there is mention of forty-four ornaments used by women that help in the transformation of a male into a female who, with all her ornaments, is now ready to assail the heart of male viewers with all of her charm:

śīše main nihār gorī, lacak kē bijlī sī kharī
dēkhkaiṅ mard kā ho muškil jīna

See yourself in the mirror, O white one,
Your slanting gait is like lightning;
Seeing you so, men would find it hard to live without you.

(Sharma 2013, 129, translation mine)

This image of female attractiveness is not hampered by the male impersonator's gender. The actor's maleness is totally eclipsed by the feminine charms he wears over his persona. The transformation thus brings out the conception of a tradition of female beauty wherein the woman as an aesthetic object becomes apparent through images of dress, ornaments, rosy cheeks, perfume, and long tresses. Make-up, traditional ornaments, voice modulation, and stylized movements are used to project an image of the feminine that is supposed to provide an "authentic" imitation of the female, both physically as well as psychologically. Hansen agrees, writing, "The transaction between the actress or female impersonator (the gendered performer) and the male spectator play with the possibilities of exhibitionism and voyeurism" (1993, 7). The concretized images with which the beauty of the male hero in female garb is praised in *Nautanki svāṅg* demonstrates that female beauty in these plays is seen as an acquired one, not just congenital to women:

kyā tārīf karūn joban kī raṅg terī unihār khilā
gabnā vastra pahan rahī sakhī tera khūb sīngār khilā
mūnh kā sāj borlā chinkai pahlū tak choṭī āyī
itr phulel ramā sir andar julf nāg-sī lahrāī

How should I praise your youth; the color of your youth is scintillating.
Oh, friend, wearing ornaments and dresses, your beauty suits you.
Your face shines like an ornament, your braid is up to your waist.
Wearing perfumes on your hair, your tresses twist like a veritable snake.

(Sharma 2013, 130, translation mine)

Thus transformed, the female figure on the stage transgresses boundaries of gender-specific characteristics and reveals that femaleness can be acquired through the imitation of gestures and the judicious use of the accentuation of feminine beauty. The praise of Phool Singh by Nautankī, the heroine of the *svāṅg*, takes no notice of the hidden maleness of the hero but revels in his total identification with the female disguise. The identification between male and female is complete here, and the nets of fantasy create a make-believe world with no sexual distinctions:

mere badan ke ūpar partī tere rūp ki chāyā
kele kesī gobh larjatī patli-patli kāyā
bemātā nai alag baiṭh terā joban khūb banāyā

The shadow of your beauty casts over my body.
Your slim body flutters in air like the sprouts of banana.
The goddess of fate must have created your youth in isolation.

(Sharma 2013, 132–33, translation mine)

The conflict between traditional patriarchal injunctions that prohibited gender conversions and the necessity of these transformations on stage as well as within plots is resolved through an appeal to classical references. The dilemma faced by the

hero of the *svāṅg Nautanki* brings out a host of traditional notions about gender divisions in Indian culture. For Phool Singh, this transformation would be tantamount to a slur on his masculinity or a threat to cosmic order, like a state without a king or a garden without a gardener. The defense of androgynous transformations is provided by a counter voice, wherein the disguise employed by various mythological figures is used as an argument against accusations of the impropriety of such conversions. He cites examples of Vishnu killing the demon Bhasmasur in the form of a celestial nymph; Bhima in *Mahābhārata* killing Kichak in the disguise of his wife Draupadi; and the dance of Krishna and Dasaratha, all derived from codified Sanskrit literature. These classical references are used to bring together the folk and classical worlds, wherein the rigidity of gender separation in the folk world is challenged through its prevalence and acceptance in the classical world.

The folk view represented in these *svāṅgs* does not reject women, as has been often alleged. The abundance of gender transformations in *svāṅgs* and their defense by playwrights like Lakhmichand suggests that in this play-world male and female principles do not exist in binary opposition. The easy transferability of feminine attributes to the male actors demonstrates the sharing of sexlessness. The poet-dramatist Lakhmichand identifies different phases in the life of a male, wherein he depends upon the female for his survival, thus belying all claims of self-existence and the separateness of masculine autonomy. His dictum that “there lies no fault with man wearing feminine disguise” is justified through the ultimate dependence of the male on females in all episodes of his life. Lakhmichand elaborates that the male is born of the female body and so the male’s body is a gift from her. In his childhood, the male lives mostly in female attire, which signifies androgyny; and ultimately, through marriage in his adulthood, he becomes the female’s slave once again.

These transformations and subsequent dialogues between the female protagonist and the male in female disguise further assume an important dramatic function within the context of the conventional cultural world within which they operate. *Svāṅgs* and other similar dramatic forms had to operate within the matrix of the cultural values of rustic North Indian culture, which denies the outward expression of feelings of love by a woman. Playing with gender was an answer to such restrictions. Conventional Indian norms also place a high premium on the cherished values of reticence and modesty. The transformation of males into females provided the dramatist an opportunity to circumvent such injunctions. The male-turned-female became a vehicle for the expression of those sentiments that might have been construed as vulgar and unbecoming over the years within the conservative social context in which *svāṅgs* operated. The gender-bending transformations in *svāṅg* also provide titillating entertainment through suggestions of forbidden erotic possibilities. Such dramatic situations become a potent source of *svāṅg*’s appeal to the common masses, for they provide mirth as well as allow for collective participation in erotica. In *Nautanki*, the disguised hero is requested by the heroine to spend the night with her in her own palace and in her personal bed, leading to an arrangement that had been denied to the male hero in his natural gender, which suggests a sort of “double edged eroticism” (Hansen 1993, 27).

The request of Nautanki to Phool Singh and his search for excuses wherein he, as a wife and mother, refers to his urgency to go to her husband, condenses more than one erotic possibility for the audience. The repartee between two females, one disguised and one real, uses many interrelated devices and brings to the fore strategies used by the dramatist to connect with his exclusive male audience as well as to cross over to forbidden expressions and situations that are seen as taboo in North Indian conservative society. While the prime purpose of the *svāṅg* situation is to arouse a mood of eroticism and raucous mirth, it also hints at the suppression of females in a male-dominated society, while also making imaginatively possible a situation that is denied in real life. In the words of Hansen, “The crypto-lesbian seduction scene functions in the text to suggest the enormity of the female sexual appetite and simultaneously to titillate the audience with the projection of a male fantasy” (1993, 30).

Within plot transformations, male-to-female transitions evoke different kinds of emotions as compared to female-to-male transformations. In the case of males, the issues of masculinity become problematic, raising problems of power equations between the two sexes. In the case of females, however, the transformation is without such contentious issues and does not interfere with the character’s inner identity. Unlike in Shakespeare, where the female protagonists, sometimes in the garb of males, question and assert their assumed masculine garb, bringing their femininity to the forefront, in *svāṅgs* the transformation does not evoke such qualms. There is no physical discomfiture concerning the transformation at the level of physical stamina, unlike Rosalind who cries out, “I could find in my heart to disgrace my man’s apparel and to cry like a woman; but I must comfort the weaker vessel, as doublet and hose ought to show itself courageous to petticoat” (Shakespeare 1919, 2.4:4–8).

Though there is a lack of direct expression of such self-searching involving the ideological hegemony of male superiority, it does not mean that the nets of patriarchy are any less vigorous in North India than they were in sixteenth-century Britain. One of the crucial functions of these transformations is that they are instrumental in bringing out the pathos of the situation of a rural woman who leads a life of tiresome drudgery. For instance, in the *svāṅg* play *Nautanki* the hard life of a rustic woman who has to bear the brunt of the daily grind in all its humdrum manners is presented through the voice of an “assumed female.” That the situation reveals a universal fate across the gender spectrum becomes apparent in its being voiced by a male character in the disguise of a female representing a woman in the play before a predominantly male audience:

*bālak chore roṅvte, chākkī main chodiyā cūn
nigore ikhre tanai ghañī satāī re,
jaise jālā pūre mākrī, nyūn dukh nai kāyā jākrī
āle gose lākrī, main dayā dhūmme nai bhūn
nigore inkhre tanain ghañī satāī re
manain ranjogam ke pyāre piye, merī martī kī dayā līye
mere rām kise nai mat dīye, in bīrān kī jūn
nigore ikhre tanain ghañī satāī re*

pīs aur pīke khuvāṇṇā, din bhar īkh nulāvṇṇā
sāñjh parē ghar āṇṇa, gayā sūkh badan kā khūn
nigore īkhye tanain ghaṇī satāī re

Having left the children crying and flour in the hand mill,
 Oh wretched sugarcane you give me too much pain!
 Sorrows have gripped my body like a spider weaving its web,
 With damp dung cake and wood, the smoke roasts me.
 Oh wretched sugarcane you give me too much pain!
 I drink the cup of suffering, have mercy on my dying self.
 My Ram, do not ever give the life of woman to anyone,
 Oh wretched sugarcane you give me too much pain!
 First I grind and prepare food, then gaze at sugarcane for the whole day,
 When coming home in the evening, the blood of my body has dried up.
 Oh wretched sugarcane you give me too much pain!

(Sharma 2013, 135, translation mine)

If the transformation of males into females helps the hero to be close to his beloved and creates situations suggesting inherent eroticism, then the case of females transforming into males is mostly a woman using her resourcefulness to save her husband from calamities, not very unlike Portia saving Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice*, though the motives of husbands in *svāñgs* are often not so noble. In *Shahi Lakadhara svāñg*,⁹ Bina adopts the disguise of a male to save her husband from a greedy moneylender. In *Rājā Bhoj svāñg*,¹⁰ Sarande transforms herself into a flute player, so as to outwit her husband, who is separated from her. Before her marriage, Sarande boasts before her friends that she would not allow Rājā Bhoj even to wash her feet, a boast that was overheard by the king's detectives and duly reported to him. Rājā Bhoj, to take revenge for this insult, marries Sarande and then quickly sends her into isolation. Sarande, escaping from her imprisonment, takes the form of a male flute player and entices the whole court with her music. She feigns illness. To revive her, the king agrees to wash her feet, an act that contravenes the social code that states a king is never supposed to wash the feet of a woman, though it is possible for a common male to do so. The last lines of the *svāñg* play upon the *pativratā* and *triyā* characteristics of female nature, which is considered a bag full of tricks: “A virtuous woman never goes back on her word; I completed my task, female wiles are indeed matchless! See I have thrown away my disguises and I am your beloved Sarande” (Sharma 2013, 284, translation mine).

AMBIGUOUS GENDERS IN THE EXPRESSIVE CULTURE OF THE FOLK

Gender transformations and disguises in *svāñg* plays, as can be deduced from the previous discussion, play a key thematic role that occurs at multiple levels. The first level traces the reconstruction of an ordinary “self” into an “other self” that involves existential issues, such as the possibility and desirability of this conversion, the fluidity of self, and the boundaries between the self and the other. Another level that has been a major focus of this article thus far is androgynous conversion

from male to female on the folk stage, where female roles are performed predominantly by male performers.

The transfiguration occurs through the use of make-up and the imitation of feminine gestures by male actors. The male actors playing these roles are imaginatively construed by audience members as having bodily similarities with the female anatomy and are often much in demand for their realistic portrayal of females. Further, on yet another level, there are textual and performative incidents in folk theater when the heroes or heroines within the story transform themselves into another sex to achieve easy access to their counterparts or to save them from some sort of calamity. During these moments, the hero temporarily suspends his masculinity for the sake of his beloved, while bemoaning its compulsion. In contrast, when the heroine takes on the disguise of a man to enter into the masculine world, she does not grieve over her loss of feminine self but uses her wit and wisdom to her advantage.

All of these transformations offer visibility to a counter voice that speaks against the “natural” separation of sexes. The persona of the androgynous actors on stage made it possible in the past to conceptualize, however abstractedly, this possibility, wherein one can change his or her essence like a chameleon and assume the garb of the other, thus challenging the rigidity of sexual separation and the hegemony of masculinity. The function of sexual liberation on stage holds true even today in many of the extant folk theaters of South Asia, especially in the North Indian gambit under investigation here. The subversion of gender codification is also accompanied by the inversion of caste hierarchy, for the status of society’s pariahs was accorded to theater artists due to the subversive potential inherent in their performances. This subversion, as a possibility to derail and pose a challenge to age-old institutions based on the separation of caste and gender, was what prompted the sages to curse Bharata’s sons to become pariahs.

The attempt to disapprove of and delegitimize theatrical space from respectability—and thus keep it on the periphery of the public sphere among the marginalized classes—has remained the case for folk theaters down to the present in India and elsewhere in South Asia. In a way, all attempts to classify and codify classical theater were goaded by this desire to silence the warring voices of dissent. Classical theater, though, with all of its strategies to delimit gendered expressions and highly stylized representations, could not totally get rid of theater’s desire to present an alternative voice. One of the ways theater attempts a coup against established hierarchies is by opening up a space for histrionic talents without any regard to birth. The staging of folk theater made possible—through the agency of the actor, who in real life was stationed at the lowest position in the caste matrix—the prospect of imitating and donning the mantle of upper castes and classes, however fleeting it may have been or continues to be. An actor or actress who “became” a king or a sage in a folk performance presented the fragility and humanity of those very categories that were jealously promoted by caste- and class-conscious members of the conservative upper echelons of Indian society. As such, they were against the forms of folk theater that were promoted and appreciated by the masses, often the nonliterate rural populace.

Religious performances like *Rāmlīlā*¹¹ were more strictly confined within the caste hierarchy. William Ridgeway notes that in *Rāmlīlā*, players are often Brahmins. As he notes, “Brahmans along with others have to bow down to them, because for the time being they are taken to be equivalent to Gods. Of course if a *Sudra* were selected to represent Rama, nobody would bow down to him in spite of his representing a great being” (Ridgeway 1915, 205). The contravention to the traditional understanding of life as a passage through fixed gender roles to the final denouement stands violated when in folk theaters the performer moves from one fixed gender and social identity to another.

The superseding of gender and caste fixities by actors within folk theaters that I have been discussing is largely responsible for the creation of an image of an androgynous pariah ironically portrayed by the folk actor. Propagated zealously as part of the politics of culture, within which gender is fixed, it unfortunately resulted in the banishment of many forms of folk theaters from the corridors of respectability and genuine artifice.

As should be clear from the discussion in this article, a sense of suspicion regarding all theatrical activities, particularly theaters with inherent possibilities of cross-overs and subversion, has been markedly present in many ancient cultures and reveals itself strongly in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Folk theaters like *svāṅg*, due to their easy accessibility to fissures in human society and even in the human person, thus posed a danger to social and gender stabilities that were counteracted by the purveyors of drama in ancient India through their emphasis on straitjacketing all human experiences within fixed roles and responses. The power of transformation inherent in folk theaters made compilers of dramatic art wary of them and led to an emphasis in classical theaters on classification and quantification within set norms and rule-based art. That all purists and lawmakers were aware of the transgressive power of theater is no surprise. Thus, while Bharata chose to push it to lower margins of human society, making it fall to earth from heaven, Plato endeavored to throw it out of his Republic when he found it impossible to control dramatic poetry for purposes suited to his creation of an ideal state.

Plato’s bewildered fascination with the power of poetry, and his observation that theater “waters the growth of passions which should be allowed to wither away and sets them up in control, although the goodness and happiness of our lives depend on their being held in subjection” (Cornford 1941, 338–39), shows his awareness of dramatic poetry’s closeness with uncontrolled and chaotic forces that revolt against the structured existence of human beings. The ability to transgress the known and the measured was curtailed in Sanskrit theaters through the delimitation of human potentiality. Encasing folk theaters within a carefully constructed and divinely ordained classificatory scheme allowed for a division between the sanctioned and the unsanctioned. As folk theater forms could not be situated within the codifications of classical texts, they became a source of condemnation and thus were relegated to a peripheral existence.

The power of transformation inherent in folk theaters provides another linkage to the subversive potential found within liminal phases. The ability to exist at the margins and thresholds of society, which in the case of *svāṅg* implied a lower-caste

person playing the role of a higher-caste person or a male becoming a female, threatened the given, stable universe of the structured existence of the caste system, which also regulated gender relationships. This threshold phase is packed with the dissident potential of hybridity that undercuts the divinely sanctioned universe of classes and genders. Victor W. Turner finds liminal phases full of ambiguity that crosses over such classifications:

The attributes of liminality or liminal personae (threshold people) are necessarily ambiguous; since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classification that normally locates states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.

(Turner 1969, 95)

Following Turner, then, the context of folk theater performance such as *svāṅg*, which is often erroneously viewed as an inflexible mimicry of the traditional Indic world order, is a clashing ground of opposing ideologies, resulting in a fluidity of stances concerning gender and social structures. This power to simultaneously absorb as well as resist prevailing social and gender formations, while giving folk theaters their popular appeal, also imposes upon them the strictures of orthodoxy, which accuses them of betraying the conventional order dictated by classical *śāstra* texts. The use of transformational power by folk theaters is thus decried by purists, who find the chameleon-like character of folk drama opposed to their structural view of life. The legalistically determined understanding of life as a passage through fixed gender roles is, in the end, threatened by the sight of a performer undermining immutable identities based on biological categories, which is construed as an onslaught on customary morality and social mores.

Folk theaters attracted condemnation from cultural purists because of this very ability to suspend the governing structures of existence. It has been rightly stated that, “it is the same suspension of the governing structures of morality or rather to see morals and sacredness as an indivisible segment of profane that gives a complexity and comprehensibility to the moral vision of folk theatres” (Singh 2013, 3). This power, while providing a longevity and mass appeal to folk theaters like *svāṅg*, also resulted in their rejection by the ideologically powerful governing classes of Indian society, revealing a politics of culture that sustained and sanctified a socio-cultural division of human life and art. As a counter-narrative deeply embedded in traditional rural society, folk theaters like the one explored here celebrated the possibilities of subversion within an ambience of abandon and gaiety in their enthusiastic acceptance of the inherent fluidity of gender and social boundaries. They continue to do so in the present.

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NOTES

1. *Svāṅg* is a dance drama performed mostly in the North Indian states of Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Punjab, and Haryana. The performance takes place on a makeshift stage, watched avidly by an audience comprised mostly of the rural populace. Virtually all of the roles of females are played by male actors, while the audience is predominantly male. See Gargi (1966) and Hollander (2007) for an elaboration of these folk traditions. While I fully understand the problems associated with the term “folk” and its complexities of usage, I employ it nonetheless, since it is used in common parlance in Indian discourses concerning forms of theater, as well as culture in general. For more on the controversies surrounding the terms “folk” and even “folklore,” see Claus and Korom (1991, 17–45) and Korom (2006, 17–49).
2. Dayanand Saraswati was the founder of the Arya Samaj in the nineteenth century, a reformation sect within Hinduism that advocated a return to the Vedas. He also emphasized the purported pristine glory of the Aryan race. His book *Light of Truth: Satyarth Prakash* (1882) relied on reasoning to contest what he perceived to be the prevalent superstitions in colonial Indian society.
3. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* is a compendium of ancient Sanskrit rules on the art of dramaturgy. The book is attributed to the sage known as Bharata. It is considered to be a fifth Veda, since it is viewed to be “revealed knowledge” (*śruti*) by some. Its renowned author is supposed to have lived somewhere between 500 BCE and 500 CE. Manomohan Ghosh’s translation of the text under the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1951 is considered to be the authoritative translation.
4. *Mūdrās*, *sandhīs*, and *bhāvas* are various components of Sanskrit theater that can be literally translated as gestures, connections, and emotions or moods.
5. *Uparūpakas* are minor theatrical forms of Sanskrit theater that are considered to be precursors of folk theaters in their use of dance and songs.
6. *Śūdras* are the fourth and lowest spiritual class (*varna*) within the Hindu social hierarchy laid out in Rig Veda 10.90. They were prohibited from dining with or marrying the twice-born upper classes, namely *vaiśyas*, *ksatriyas*, and *brahmins*, in ascending order.
7. *Apsarās* are divine damsels dwelling in the heavens. They are part of Hindu and Buddhist mythology, in which they serve as celestial dancers. They represent carnal desires in the hearts of celibate ascetics. They often appear as dancers in Indra’s court to tempt ascetics away from the path of meditation and severe austerities. They are known as *vidyādharis* (wisdom holders) in Indonesia, Malaysia, Java, and Thailand, where they were later merged with *houris* in Islamic traditions.
8. Nautanki is the name of a folk theatrical style in Uttar Pradesh. It is also the name of the genre as well as its heroine. The story of Nautanki, which was performed in this folk theatrical style, became so famous that all the plays that were performed in this unique style were henceforth called *Nautanki*. Though there are different versions of the story available, I largely use the story of Nautanki as represented by Lakhmichand in his *svāṅgs*. Nautanki was a famous princess of Multan (in modern-day Pakistan), whom the hero Phool Singh, a rustic resident of Syalkot, decides to marry when he was taunted by his sister-in-law about his insolence. Phool Singh sends a female gardener as his emissary and later on disguises himself

as a female to get access to the heroine. After some time Nautanki gets suspicious and comes to know about the real identity of Phool Singh. Toward the end of the *svāṅg* Phool Singh is reported to defeat a giant to win Nautanki's hand in marriage, though this part of the play is not represented on the stage. The focal point of the drama is the courtship of Nautanki by Phool Singh in the disguise of a female.

9. The plot of *Shahi Lakadbara* veers around the fate of a prince who is born after the exile of his mother, Rupani, to the forest by his father, Jodhnath. The prince, unaware of his regal roots, is married due to a quirk of fate to Bina, the daughter of Ram Singh, king of Madhopur. Bina incensed her father by telling him that good actions allied with the *dharmā* of a loyal wife can change the fortune of a person who orders her to marry a penniless person. His choice for her falls on an unfortunate wood cutter. Bina disguises herself as a male to threaten an exploitative money lender and is thereby able to get a true price for the sandalwood sold by her husband to him over a period of six years. The play passes through various episodes, then ends with the revelation of the true lineage of the wood cutter.

10. The story of *Rājā Bhoj* revolves around a king named Bhoj, who is incensed by the boasts of Sarande, a maiden of the low barber caste, who claims that she can make even the king wash her feet. To teach her a lesson, the king decides first to marry her and then banish his new wife to a widow's home. Sarande escapes from her captivity through a tunnel, disguises herself as a male flute player, then reaches the palace of the king, who is unable to recognize her. While playing the flute, Sarande pretends to be ill, falls to the ground and tells the king that she can recover only when cold water is poured over her feet by the king himself. The horrified king does so and fulfils the vow of Sarande.

11. *Rāmīlā*, literally "the play of Ram," is an epic narrative that is performed annually before the Dussera festival on decorated stages or out on open plains. The play reenacts episodes from the epic *Rāmāyana*, depicting the life of the heroic king and his victory over Rāvana, the ten-headed demon who kidnaps Sita, the king's wife.

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