
A Study of Social Critique in the *vesha* of *Kajodo* in *Bhavai*

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***Bhavai*: an Introduction**

Bhavai is a folk drama that originated in the state of Gujarat. At present, the tradition of *Bhavai* is on the verge of extinction. But seven hundred years ago, it was dominant, providing entertainment to the rural people with its *veshas* on various social, religious and historical subject matter and themes. Asait Thakar is said to be originator and the father of *Bhavai*. He had written a poem entitled as *Hansauli*. It is a medieval Gujarati love poem with a total of 438 verses written in 1371. The poem is the first available manuscript of verse in Gujarati language. It is written in form of *Duha* and *Chopai*. Taking inspiration from the poem, it is said that Asait had written about 360 *veshas* of *Bhavai*.

Regarding the origin of *Bhavai*, the *Bhavaiyas* (players) strongly believe that *Amba Bhavani* (Goddess Amba) taught the art form of *Bhavai* to them. *Bhavai* is performed as a form of worshipping Goddess Amba particularly during *Navratri*: a festival of nine days to worship the Nine Goddesses. The *veshas* of *Bhavai* are performed in the midst of an audience, without a stage, in a circular space, with music, dance and dialogue as homage to Goddess Amba. Despite having a religious origin, the *veshas* of *Bhavai* are not only religious. The *veshas* also deal with social as well as historical characters and subjects. As a result, the form has also served as an effective medium of public education.

This folk-drama of Gujarat was developed in the rural areas and therefore captured and incorporated characteristics of regional castes, their sensibilities, thoughts and dialects. Yet, it has adopted the changes with time. For instance, magic tricks, games, body-exercise have also entered into it and are becoming a part of *Bhavai* itself.

A group of *Bhavaiyas* are called *Mandali* or *Pedu* and it is formed of around nine or more people. A *Mandali* play *Bhavai* for seven to eight months in a year. Some *Mandalis* play *Bhavai* only on festive occasions like *Navratri* or *Janmashtami*. The leader of the group is called *Veshgor*.

Bhavai has a poetics and rules. *Bhavai's* protagonist speaks mostly in prose. Other characters also use prose in dialogue. However, in addition to prose, a large part of the story is told in verses like *Kundaliya*, *Dohra*, *Sakhi*, *Chhappa* etc., accompanied by *taal* (beats) such as *Dadro*, *Japatal*, *Deepchandi*, *Chotal*. "The pakhwaj or tabla played in *Bhavai* is so difficult even famous maestro cannot play it. *Bhavai's* ragas, music on the one hand includes classical ragas such as Madh, Parj, Sohni, Desh, Sorath, Prabhat, Ashavari, Kalingdo, Bilawal, Lalit etc. The folk style of *Bhavai's* songs is a prominent subject of study." (Nayak, 345)

The *veshas* of *Bhavai* is performed in front of the village square or *chora*, in front of the temple of Goddess Amba. If such a place is not available, it could be performed on the street or on the ground of the village. The audience is arranged in a circle around the *Chachar* and *Bhavai* is played in the middle. *Chachar* is a circular empty space. It is used as stage for the performance of *veshas*. Generally, the *Veshgor* sprinkles vermilion and oil in *Chachar* as an act of purification and worshipping the *Chachar*. Then, *Garbi* of Goddess Amba is played before the performance of *vesha* commence.

As the first *vesha* begins, Lord Ganesha comes in Chachar in *Purva-rang* followed by Goddess Kali in order to bless all and removes obstacles to come. Then the Brahmin comes and sees the *Muhurta* (good omen), blesses the all. As they leave, the next *vesha* starts. The characters pertaining to a particular *vesha* comes and converses with one another or if there is only one character then he or she converses with the Nayak. In some elaborate *veshas*, instead of the story, sequences of limb-exercise, games, dances etc. are inserted in between.

Generally, Poor and common people perform *Bhavai*. So costumes, ornaments and make ups are not expensive in *Bhavai*. Even a goddess wears a sari and the ornaments wore by a common woman of a village. Lord Ganapati is adorned with crown and ornaments of gold whereas in *Bhavai* he enters with a brass plate with a swastika on it only with a cloth over his head. *Bhungal, tabla, cymbals and ghughra* are the main instruments in *Bhavai*. *Bungal* is the main instrument. *Bhavai* cannot be played without it. Other instruments are also added as per the requirement of the *vesha*. For instance, Krishna would play flute in *vesha* of Kaap-Gopi. *Bhavai* has its own *Taal* (rhythms) like *Chalti, Hinch, Tragado*. Classical *taals* are incorporated in it but that are used in its own way and not according scriptural rule. The *veshas* of *Bhavai* are full of dance. Ganapati is seen dancing in its opening *vesha*. *Rasa, Rasada, Garba, Garbi* etc. has taken place in itself in one way or another in *Bhavai*.

***Bhavai* as a vehicle of Social Critique:**

Bhavai is a traditional folk theatre form that originated in the Indian state of Gujarat. Social criticism is often a key element in *Bhavai* performances. The art form has historically served as a platform for commentary on social issues and cultural norms. Here are some ways in which social criticism is expressed in *Bhavai*:

1. Satirical Storytelling: *Bhavai* performances often feature satirical storytelling that addresses social and political issues. Through humorous and exaggerated narratives, performers can critique societal norms, traditions, and the actions of those in power. Example: The *vesha* of *Bavo* and *Brahmin*.

2. Mocking Stereotypes: *Bhavai* plays may include characters that mock stereotypes and societal prejudices. By portraying these stereotypes in a humorous or exaggerated manner, the performers can draw attention to the absurdity or injustice of such attitudes. Example: the *Vesha* of *Panch Chor*.

3. Reflection of Current Events: *Bhavai* performances have been known to incorporate contemporary social and political issues into their narratives. This allows for timely commentary on events and trends affecting the community, making the art form relevant to the concerns of the audience. Ex: The *vesha* of *Kajodo*.

5. Empowerment of Marginalized Voices: *Bhavai* can provide a platform for marginalized voices to be heard. Through its performances, the art form can shed light on the experiences and challenges faced by marginalized communities, advocating for social change and justice. Ex: The *vesha* of *Dedh, Darji, and Kumbhar*

The *Vesha* of *Kajodo* (Misfit Couple):

Miritio Thakor and his companion *Ranglo* enter the Chachar chowk. *Ranglo*, who is a jester, makes fun a young and stupid *Miritio Thakor*. Through their talk, it is informed that *Thakor* is married to a woman. *Thakor* has been sent to bring raw materials for preparation of food as his in laws have come. *Thakor* narrates some humorous incidents that took place with him on the way.

As the narration of *Thakor* is over, his wife *Thakarana* enters on the stage. Their incompatibility is brought forth through their conversation which makes audience laugh and indirectly the social issue is brought forth too. The *vesha* ends with the *Bhavaiyas* singing a prayer named '*Mastakpuja*'. The prayer incorporates an emotional story of a woman who killed herself as she was married to a boy.

This prayer is again followed by humorous argument between *Thakor* and *Thakarana*. Finally, they call their respective mothers for a solution. The mothers enter and begin an argument that leads to a small fight. Finally, the mothers reconcile saying that the husband and wife would resolve their issue themselves as the *vesha* ends. All characters leave.

Social Critique in the *Vesha* of *Kajodo*:

The *vesha* of *Kajodo* (Misfit Couple) is a social *vesha* which aims to satirize the practice of marrying a girl and a boy with a big age gap between them. It criticizes the contemporary society in a lighter and comic way. The element of comedy is added with the character of Ranglo, the Jester. Ranglo makes fun of Miritio Thakor, who is a young boy, throughout the *vesha* as he is innocent of responsibilities of married life. Yet the *vesha* takes a serious tone by its end with singing of '*Mastak Puja*.' It is a story about a woman who took her life as she was married to a young boy.

The *vesha* shows the result of child marriage which was a contemporary practice. It is still prevalent in some part of India. This *vesha* is played in sarcastic way that to represent how a child marriage is sometimes followed by such a bad result as narrated in '*Mastak Puja*.' However, it is surprising that marriages of older brides to younger grooms are still common in Nagar community. *Kajodo* is one of the fruits of child marriage. As the marriage of a small child is considered as an achievement in some community, parents were very eager to get their child married quickly. It is hoped that the spread of education will stop this evil practice. Only then the meaning of performing the *Kajoda* will be fruitful.

Conclusion:

Overall, it can be said that social criticism in *Bhavai* is often woven into the fabric of its storytelling, using humor, satire, and dramatic representation to challenge societal norms and advocate for change. By addressing pressing social issues and engaging audiences through lively performances, *Bhavai* serves as a vehicle for social commentary and reflection within its cultural context.

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