

**Siliconeer, May 22, 2009**  
**The Demise of Saang: Folk Theater**

*A recent 'nautanki' or folk theater performance reminded poet folklorist Ved Prakash Vatuk of the sad demise of 'saang,' the truly rural theater of north India.*



(Above): Rajiv Nema and Devendra Sharma in a scene from "Sultana Daku."

Recently the Center for South Asian Studies at the University of California at Berkeley organized a wonderful event. It revived a folk opera or nautanki. A group of professional engineers and doctors performed an enchanting folk drama, Sultana Daakoo.

It was written by a famous nautanki writer Nathuram Gaur and it was directed by Devendra Sharma, an assistant professor at Cal State Fresno University.

Sharma is a son of a famous nautanki troupe leader and in his childhood he acted in the nautanki performances directed by his father. So his heart and soul are very much in this genre of folk drama which was as popular in its heydays as today's Bollywood movies. People reveled in it the same way. It brought back to me nostalgic memories of my childhood when I was growing up in a village in Meerut district in western Uttar Pradesh. This area had no nautanki, but the folk drama (or what I called folk opera in an article published in 1960s) was known as *saang*.

Even though Sharma and Cal Prof. Vasudha Dalmia, who welcomed the troupe, lumped them together, I must say, as I argued in that article, that they are not the same.

Nautanki is written in a standard Hindustani, with so many Persian-Arabic words and in a style which is so sophisticated that it appeals more to the semi-educated urban audience living in small towns. Saang is composed by mostly illiterate or semi-literate folks from the villages of Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh in their village dialects. Their raginis are very different in structure and their similes and metaphors so different (perhaps a bit crude to the ears of nautanki buffs). And saang, until its demise in the last decades of the 20th century, never ever had a woman actor in it. It is hundred percent rural, while nautanki is half way between the elite theater and folk performances.

Another point: the terms saangeet and saang differ in the sense that saang is what is performed and saangeet is a written version of any saang. When saang is performed it contains many extra features depending on the occasion such as fillers by the jester and many dance/ song items, while saangeet gives only the skeleton of the stories in songs/ raginis.



(Above): Devendra Sharma and Seema Gupta in a scene in "Sultana Daku."

When I was a child or even after I had reached adulthood, saang was a part and parcel of rural life. People lived it, quoted it to prove their points just as the pundits quoted from the Ramayana or the urban youth quoted from film dialogues or songs. The performers/composers of saangs were held in the same esteem as the heroes and heroines of films today. They were more known to some folks than the leaders of the day. I remember an incident in the 1940s Maharaja of Kashmir banned Jawaharlal Nehru from entering Kashmir. When he defied the ban, he was arrested and slightly injured in the skirmish. My brother and I were discussing the front-page headline when a boy from the neighborhood asked, "Is he a great saangi?"

The troupe which performed saangs was called khaaRaa. Its head was called khaaReband. A khaaReband was the composer, director, manager, employer and he was called guru by troupe members. Caste did not matter in the troupe and many people worked under the guru who belonged to a lower caste than the actors. The guru also played the leading role. A troupe generally had ten to a dozen members — five of them were instrumentalists and they played the nakkaaraa (or nagaaRa), sarangi, dholak, harmonium and cymbals. The cook was a Brahmin. The money raised was divided among all of them. The guru did get more than one share and so did the lead actor, who played the part of the heroine.

It is said that saangs were performed either in the afternoon until the sunset or late at night until the sunrise. However, I have never seen a night saang performance. It was said that once when a saang performance was taking place at night, a big robbery was committed in another village whose people had come to see the performance. So the government banned the night shows.

The troupes performed at the invitation of some prominent person, who booked them. They were given some advance money and the rest was paid later. Money was also given during the performance itself when someone in the audience, who liked any item or somebody's acting, gave some money in appreciation. The performance would stop at that point and the guru would sing in praise of the donor. That encouraged someone else to give money, even more than the previous donor. And this could go for a long time.

Before a performance could begin the kettle drum – the nagaaRaa – was played. Its loud noise would resound in several surrounding villages and the people would come with their friends. They would bring their chaddars– cotton shawls- which they would lay out as seats. The stage was made by putting several wooden cots together. They would be covered with sheets. The stage was set in the middle and people sat all around, some on the cots but mostly on floors. Women would sit on one side and they would watch the performance while still covering their faces.

In the olden days the troupe members did not carry many clothes. Village folks provided them with the best clothes- new ones from the rich families and ornaments which would decorate them from head to toe. The heroine had to look rich, after all, and it was some rich zamindar family who would loan these clothes and ornaments.

A performance of the saang always began with a bhenT or the hymn sung in the praise of the Lord or Goddess Durga and the guru. The youngest or the lowest in rank sang first and then others in ascending order until the guru himself sang his hymn and declared the performance open. All the dialogues were sung and they were called jawabs. The story was tied together by the prose narrative by the guru, which was called varta. Any sensitive scene could be carried on in many songs and the long periods of the events could be narrated in brief by the guru in varta.



(Above): Dhira Khosla at the mike with associates during a performance of "Sultana Daku."

The subject of the performance was chosen according to the occasion. If the saang troupe was invited as part of a wedding, the subject was mostly a love story. Most of these love stories were known to the people in the area. If however, a saang troupe came to raise some fund for a school or a temple, which was happening during the 1960s, then they chose some religious or social theme. Those stories would also be known to people. The most popular saangs in the category were Satya Harishchandra, Raja Mordhajj, Bhirtrihari, Narsee Kaa Bhaat, etc. in which the heroes were tested for their truthfulness or devotion to the Lord

It was not necessary to finish the story if it was getting late. Or the story would continue the next day if the troupe was invited for more than a day, or if the troupe was making its own plans. Since every one knew the story, it would not matter if they saw the end or not. If the day was ending and the sun was going to set, the guru would announce the end of the performance for the day with the words, "Bol Siyavar Ramchandra ki jai!" or Victory to Lord Rama, the husband of Sita. The end of the saang was called jai bolna — to pronounce the victory.

If there was a rivalry between the two families or factions in the village, sometimes two troupes would be invited at the same times. This would test the loyalty of people toward the person who invited the troupe or the popularity of one troupe or the other.

Not all people, however, liked saangs. The reformers in society were of the opinion that saang and saangees were a bad influence on the youth, specially on the womenfolk. Since my family was an Arya Samaji family, we were told not to go and see any saangs. We were told that they taught you nothing good, no character building, no patriotism, no social duty, and since their language was so foul, no good sanskar could come out of watching saangs. Since we were growing up at a time when the struggle for India's freedom was its peak, and my family was also involved in that movement, we were supposed to be more responsible. We were told to dedicate our life to the national cause instead of learning foul language. We were attending more and more so-called uplifting Arya Samaj events, where sacrifice for society and nation was preached. An Arya Samaji bhajanopadeshak — the singer who sings songs for change — gave this message, for example,

*Bharat maaM ne aaj tumhaaree veero maaMg kee.  
tumheM bimaaree lagee sinemaa , theTar , saang kee*

(The Mother is calling you, oh the brave ones  
But you are inflicted with the disease of cinema, theater and saang.)

They accused saang performers of corrupting young men and women who under the influence of saangis might even run away.

In my sister's wedding in the 1930s her would be in-laws brought a saang troupe, thinking that would enhance the prestige of the two families. Of course it made our family very angry and no performance was allowed. The saangis had to be paid nonetheless, but that was not our problem.

Once either my sister or sister-in-law succumbed to the request from a saang leader to loan some ghagree — the long, heavy 12-yard skirt — and other clothes for the heroine. It so happened that my brother came from the city and passed through the place where the saang was being performed and he recognized the clothes worn by the person playing the role of the heroine. That indeed created a big row in our family.

Thus the saangis were under attack for a long time and it had some impact. In additions to the bhent — prayers to the God or Goddess Durga, they began to compose songs in praise of our martyrs and heroes of the freedom movement — Netaji Subhash Bose, Bhagat Singh, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru became the subjects of new hymns.

When the film industry began to have impact on young minds, it influenced the saang too. The young members of saang troupes would go to movies on their vacation and come and insist that their guru compose new raginis in the tune of this or that film song. Gurus begin to comply. Sometime they even sang film songs and danced copying a scene from a film. They did so by including that item as if it was requested by the king in his court. "O young lady singer, sing that song for me." Even Arya Samaji preachers began to compose their reform bhajans in film songs style.. One of them justified this trend in the following way:

*Premi shobharam kaa gaan  
Badal gayaa apni pahlee taan  
kyoMki shrotaaoM ke kaan  
hee beemaaree ho gaye*

(The song of Shobha Ram  
Has changed its old tune  
Because the ears of listeners themselves  
Have become sick)

So if you want your message be reach your audience, you have to adapt it to conform to the medium they have become accustomed to.

But while these preacher singers survived, saang could not, because they could not keep up with films and TV. And thus unfortunately they would be performed from now on in the theaters in big Indian metropolitan areas and abroad as relics of our folk culture (with government or university grants).

The elites would watch them and professionals would get a boost in their career.. Even so, I and many people like me are grateful for that.

.....

Poet folklorist Ved Prakash Vatuk's many awards include the U.P. government's Pravasi Bharatiya Hindi Sahitya Bhushan. "Essays in Indian Folk Traditions," his collected writings, has just been published by the Folklore Institute, Berkeley, Calif.