PERFORMING *NAUTANKI*: POPULAR COMMUNITY FOLK PERFORMANCES AS SITES OF DIALOGUE AND SOCIAL CHANGE

A dissertation presented to

the faculty of

the College of Communication of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Devendra Sharma

August 2006

This dissertation entitled

PERFORMING *NAUTANKI*: POPULAR COMMUNITY FOLK PERFORMANCES AS SITES OF DIALOGUE AND SOCIAL CHANGE

by

DEVENDRA SHARMA

has been approved for

the School of Communication Studies

and the Scripps College of Communication by

Arvind Singhal

Professor, School of Communication Studies

Gregory J. Shepherd

Dean, Scripps College of Communication

Abstract

SHARMA, DEVENDRA, Ph.D., August 2006, Communication Studies

PERFORMING *NAUTANKI*: POPULAR COMMUNITY FOLK PERFORMANCES AS SITES OF DIALOGUE AND SOCIAL CHANGE (250 pp.)

Director of Dissertation: Arvind Singhal

This research analyzes the communicative dimensions of *Nautanki*, a highly popular folk performance tradition in rural north India. It explores how *Nautanki* creates participatory dialogue, builds community, and opens up possibilities for social change in rural India. It also tries to understand the position of *Nautanki* as a traditional folk form in a continuously changing global world.

This research uses Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of performance as *carnival* and Dwight Conquergood's notion of performance as an alternative to *textocentrism* to understand *Nautanki* as a community folk form and an expression of ordinary rural Indian culture. The research employed *reflexive* and *native* ethnographic methods. The author, himself a *Nautanki* artist, used his dual position as a performer-scholar to understand *Nautanki's* role in rural communities. Specifically, the method included observation of participation and in-depth interviews with *Nautanki* performers, writers, troupe managers, owners, their clients, and audience members in the field.

The present research suggests that *Nautanki* enhances the feeling of community in rural India and provides community members an opportunity to connect to their cultural heritage. The research also shows that *Nautanki* helps its audiences to challenge various oppressive social traditions such as dowry and adopt certain pro-social thoughts

and behaviors, including gender equality and better health practices. However, this research also shows that *Nautanki* faces numerous challenges, including competition from an expanding mass media, changing audience preferences, and non-professionalism among its ranks. However, it seems that community folk performance traditions will continue to hold their place in the changing media atmosphere as they are more immediate and connect to their audiences in an intimate manner. Unfortunately, ordinary folk forms have not been given their due respect by Indian elites. In this respect, *Nautanki* performances and this dissertation represent sites of struggle to reclaim dignity for "ordinary culture."

Approved:

Arvind Singhal

Professor, School of Communication Studies

Acknowledgements

I would like to record my deepest respect and gratitude to my father and renowned *Nautanki* artist Pundit Ram Dayal Sharma for inspiring me to conduct this research. This dissertation could only become possible due to the access he provided me to the world of *Nautanki*. His deep knowledge of *Nautanki* which he affectionately shared with me as a father and guru since my childhood propelled me on this journey. I thank him also for accompanying me in my dissertation research field trip to villages in north India in the hot summer of 2005.

I can not thank enough my committee chair Dr. Arvind Singhal for mentoring me carefully and working with me on my journey of researching and writing this dissertation, and for his oversight throughout my graduate studies at Ohio University. Without his guidance, a timely completion of this dissertation would have been impossible. I would also like to thank Drs. William Rawlins, Roger Aden, and Gini Gorlinski for agreeing to be part of my dissertation committee and giving me invaluable suggestions and advise from time to time.

My heartfelt thanks go to the numerous *Nautanki* performers, writers, gurus and *ustaads* (traditional teachers) troupe owners and managers, audience members and villagers without whose contributions I could not conduct this research.

I would like to convey my gratitude to the Department of Communication Studies, Ohio University, Friends of India Endowment, Athens Ohio, and Graduate Student Senate, Ohio University for providing me financial assistance to enable my field trip to north India. Also my special thanks go to my colleagues at the Department of

Communication, California State University, where I am a faculty member at present, for providing me with time, financial assistance and moral support to finish my dissertation fast.

I would specially like to thank my sister Indu Sharma for providing me valuable support in all ways throughout my stay in Athens, Ohio during the long process of this research. I will like to express my respectful regards and thanks to my mother Ms. Krishna Sharma for giving me affectionate support from India during my graduate studies, and my brothers Sangeet Sharma, Sahitya Sharma and Vishnu Sharma for sending me helpful information related to my research from India. Finally, I thank my wife Vandana Sharma for her patience and loving support in this journey.

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents whose affection and love has instilled confidence in me, inspiring me to move ahead in life.

Table of Contents

Page

List of Figures

Figures Page

Chapter 1

From Mudhera Village to Athens, Ohio

Figure 1: The author performing with his father, renowned Nautanki singer Pundit Ram Dayal Sharma

I remember that night in village *Mudhera* in India 25 years back as vividly as the evening yesterday at the Donkey's coffee shop in Athens, Ohio. The two seemingly different locations in two countries across the globe are not entirely disconnected. If it was not for that night 25 years back, I would not be here in Athens, Ohio, doing my doctoral studies in communication. It all started that night. I will return to it later.

I was born in a small village called Samai-Khera in Bharatpur district of India's Rajasthan state some 30 years ago. Samai had about 500 families and its population was about 2,500 people. There was no electricity in Samai, and one walked for five to six miles to the nearest bus station. Our house was made of mud and reed. I remember it as a beautiful house. My grandparents had never gone to school. They could not read or write; however they were wise. My grandmother was immensely talented. She had single-handedly carved solid mud pillars in front of our house, and painted the house with various folk motifs. She loved to draw and sing. When I was born, my family's financial situation was pretty bad. The financial pressures were such that my father abandoned his studies when he was in high school and took up work.

Rajasthan, the name of our State, literally means "the land of princes". Prior to gaining independence from British colonial rule in 1947, Rajasthan was composed of a number of principalities, each ruled by a prince. These principalities, although under British oversight, were fairly autonomous in their internal matters. I remember when I was trying to fall asleep on a *charpai* [1] under an open sky in front of our mud house, my grandfather used to narrate stories of kings and princes. Staring at the Milky Way, I was transported to a different world.

In his youth, my grandfather was a famous wrestler of Bharatpur principality. He was tall and fit. He had won many competitions and beaten many acclaimed wrestlers. He also told stories about his wrestling prowess. One of them is still etched in my mind. In his twenties, he went with a *Barat*[2] to another village. During the wedding festivities,

[1] A cot made of bamboo or other kinds of wood
[2] The groom's wedding party.

some people from the bride's village challenged my grandfather to fight a *kushti* (wrestling match) with a famous local wrestler. My grandfather agreed to fight but on one condition. There was a person from our village in the *Barat* who was not very good looking and thus no body was ready to marry him. My grandfather said that if he won the wrestling match, the local villagers would have to marry one of their daughters to this person. The villagers agreed. The wrestling match took place and my grandfather won. The wedding party returned with two brides. Even now, people in my village talk about this incident. Listening to this, I remember how proud I was of my grandfather. However, I was also curious about the fate of the girl who was married to the "not so good looking guy". My grandfather told me that the wedding worked out fine and the couple lived a happy married life!

My grandfather also told me stories about *Nautanki. Nautanki* is a folk musical theater form that, until a few decades back, was the most popular form of entertainment in rural north India; even more popular than cinema. I remember *Nautankis* as performances that lasted for a whole night, and every body, including us kids, just loved them. Apart from being a wrestler, my grandfather was a famous artist in a *Nautanki* troupe. His younger brother also worked with him. My grandfather told us stories of audiences treating him and his brother as "divine" beings because they used to sing so well. In particular, I loved his story about the incident when he confiscated the *harmonium* (a musical instrument used in *Nautanki*) of his troupe because the dishonest troupe owner did not pay a salary to his brother. Without the *harmonium*, no performances would be complete. My grandfather confiscated the *harmonium* because he

and his brother did not have money to even buy food. He returned the *harmonium* when they got their money. Of course, nobody dared challenge my grandfather. He was a wrestler!

My grandfather used to tell me that my father grew up to become one of the biggest stars of *Nautanki*. So big that everybody in neighboring districts knew him by his name. He told me how proud he was of my father, when he saw people in the thousands coming to see his performances. Slowly as my father became a nationally famous performer, our financial situation improved. My grandfather told me how for the first time in history, the name of our village was broadcast on British Broadcasting Corporation (B. B. C.) London when my father was visiting England for a performance and his interview was aired. Every person in our village felt so proud; their own boy was speaking from London, and *Angrez* (British) were giving him respect. Through these stories that were narrated by my grandfather, my father became my biggest hero. I dreamed of becoming a great singer like him, to be worshipped by audiences like he was, to be on the top of that stage called *Nautanki.*

Another related memory, although belonging to a much later time, comes from the days when I was an undergraduate student at the University of Delhi. My siblings and I were now living in Delhi, the capital of India, with our parents. My grandparents still lived in Samai with my uncle's family, and I was traveling to meet them during my summer vacation. When I reached the small town of Goverdhan by bus, six miles from our village, it was dark. There were no buses running to my village. The only difference from my childhood days was that instead of walking all six miles, one could take a *tonga*

(a horse carriage) for three miles and then walk the remaining three miles on foot. I inquired when the next *tonga* was going to my village. I was informed that the last *tonga* had already left. The only way to reach my village was to walk the six miles in pitch darkness through agricultural fields and a forest. People at the *tonga* stand told me that it was not safe to travel on foot after dark. I did not know what to do. There was no hotel in this small town and I did not know anyone there with whom I could stay for the night. Suddenly I heard a voice, "Which village do you want to go?" I turned around to find a person in his forties, sitting on the driving seat of a big farm tractor. Although small, Goverdhan is the only town in the vicinity of many villages, and therefore many farmers come to Goverdhan to sell their produce and buy supplies. There were many tractors parked near the *tonga* stand. There were also a few workshops where some tractors were being serviced. The person who asked me the question had already started his tractor and was ready to leave. He must have heard my conversation with the *tonga* people. My conversation with him continued in the following manner:

I: I have to go to *Samai-Khera.*

Person: Oh *Samai-Khera*. I am going to *Petha*, the opposite direction, or I could have dropped you. I am sorry.

I: That's all right.

Person (moves his tractor ahead, and then stops): Well you are from *Samai-Khera*. Do you know the famous *Nautanki* actor Master Ramdayal? He is very good-looking and very young. I saw him in a performance in my village long time back. I know that he is from *Samai-Khera*.

I: Yes I know him very well.

Person (gets down from his tractor): Oh, you know him! Please tell me more about him. How is he? Where is he? We have not seen his performance for a long time now. Our whole village wants him to perform again.

I: Well, he is my father.

Person: He is your father? You are kidding! He is so young. How can he have a son so old? Besides he is so good looking.

I (a bit annoyed): When did you see his performance last?

Person: Around 20 years ago.

I: So you think he would remain the same young boy even after so many years?

The person felt a little embarrassed. During this time, a small crowd gathered around us. Knowing that I was the son of the famous *Nautanki* star Master Ram Dayal Sharma, the tractor driver and many others began asking about my father. I was overwhelmed by the fandom for my father. The tractor driver requested me to accept his hospitality for the night. This, he said, would give him an opportunity to do some service to his favorite singer's son. I thanked him and informed him that I had to urgently reach my village that night. He revved up his tractor and dropped me to my village, driving on a dirt road through a forest. I was amazed by the popularity of a *Nautanki* star. The tractor driver informed me on the way that *Nautanki* has been the most popular source of entertainment not only for his village community, but for the people in the region. *Nautanki* stars are like "gods" for them. I wondered what was in this art form that makes people identify with it so much.

Let me now return to that night in Mudhera village some 25 years ago where seemingly I was transported, yesterday, while sitting at the Donkey's coffee shop in Athens, Ohio. That night, I was attending a family wedding in Mudhera, this small village in Bharatpur district. I was eight years old. I had come to attend the wedding with my grandmother and my paternal uncle. While playing with other children, I overheard that a *Nautanki* troupe was invited to perform that night, and that my father was going to make an appearance as the star performer. I was very excited and decided to keep awake until the *Nautanki* started. Although I had heard that my father was a big *Nautanki* performer, I had never seen him perform on a village *Nautanki* stage as we were living in Delhi at that time. So I kept myself awake that night with great difficulty. I saw that thousands of people were gathering in the vast open grounds in front of my grandmother's paternal home. Many of them, I learned, were coming from adjoining villages. They were coming on foot and in bullock carts with sturdy bamboo sticks in their hands. A platform made up of wooden cots was being assembled in middle of the ground. We used these cots to sleep on. When I asked my uncle why they were being assembled, he informed me that a stage for the *Nautanki* performance was being constructed. I saw that a tight rope was connected from one end of the platform to another and many gas-filled lanterns were hung on it to illuminate the stage. I remember the wonderment these bright lights held for us, as our village homes only had dim lanterns. There was much excitement in the air.

People were milling around. They were taking their seats on the bare ground, eagerly awaiting the performance. I was immensely curious. I remember seeing a huge

crowd behind the stage. I tried to make my way there but could not; it was crowded. I could see some performers putting on their glittering costumes. However, I could not find my father. It was very noisy. I heard many people in the crowd inquiring about my father. They were shouting that they would not let the performance happen until Master Ram Dayal arrived. I was praying that my father would be there. I could not wait to see him perform the main role in a *Nautanki*.

Suddenly there was a commotion in the audience. I heard people shouting that Master Ram Dayal had arrived. People were running back to take their seats. I was thrilled. I tried to make my way to the back stage to reach my father. However, there were so many people pushing and shoving to see my father that I could not reach him. Then, I heard some one calling my name from behind. It was my uncle. He made his way through the crowds and took me to my father, who, meanwhile, was changing into his costume backstage. There were hundreds of people watching him. Seeing me, my father hugged me as he always did. I was so happy. I could not believe that I was the son of this big star. Was I? I looked around and found people looking at me with admiration. I was proud. My father arranged for me and my uncle to sit on the stage itself. There was 10 years of difference between my uncle and me; we were more like friends. We implanted ourselves firmly near the accompanying instrumentalists on one side of the stage. The *harmonium* player had started to play *Nagma*[3] already and the *Nakkara*[4] player was providing accompaniment. The sharp and loud sound of *Nakkara* was reverberating in the

[3] The melodious compositions played on *harmonium* to set the audiences' mood for the *Nautanki* performance.

[4] A percussion instrument composed of two drums played by two wooden sticks. This instrument is unique to *Nautanki.* It is so loud that it can be heard over many miles. It serves to "advertise" *Nautanki.*

whole village. It could be heard for miles. Sitting on the stage I could see people still making their way to the performance grounds. Some came on foot, some by bullock carts, and some by tractors. People were sitting on ground, on their bullocks-carts, on tractors, on roofs of houses, on walls, on platforms in front of their houses, and some were even hanging from trees. They were talking to each other, laughing, sharing jokes, smoking, eating, drinking *chai* (tea), and doing other activities. I was really liking the warm-up tune that was being played on the *harmonium* and *Nakkara,* and eagerly awaited the performance. Hundreds of people would intermittently shout a *jaikara* (a slogan spoken in a chorus) of Giriraj ji (our local deity) --"*Bol Giriraj Maharaj ki Jai*" (Praise Giriraj!). The atmosphere was electrifying!

Finally, the *Nautanki* got underway around 11 p.m. I was mesmerized. It is hard to describe. I had not heard such melodious and powerful singing before (and actually never did after that). Over the years, I have heard thousands of film songs, classical and light compositions on radio, television, and live concerts but they pale in comparison to the wonderful opera that I heard that night in Mudhera. As the night passed, the performance got better. At one time, people were so absorbed in the performance that there was pin drop silence. Imagine that in a crowd of thousands of people! My father's performance, as I remember it, was ecstatic. Many times during the performance, I had goose bumps. The *Nautanki, Indal Haran* was performed that night. The audience participated in the performance in many ways. For instance, some audience members announced spontaneous cash awards to performers after they had sung their pieces. A person, on stage, was specially designated to make a list of rewards and collect money

from the reward givers. After he collected enough rewards, say 10 or 15, he would signal the performers to take a short break, and then announce the names of the reward givers, names of the performers to whom the rewards were given, and the amount of the reward. There were endless rewards given to my father. As his son, I, with my uncle, was given the responsibility of keeping the money that was awarded to my father. I remember feeling very important. Soon there was a mountain of currency bills in front of me. My uncle and I were both counting the bills and also watching the performance. I was excited and trying to guess how much more reward money would come in by the morning.

I remember at one point in the performance, two audience members competed (as happens in an auction) in announcing reward money for my father. One of them, my uncle told me, was the local superintendent of police; the other a local landlord. The competition started with cash rewards. One of them would announce a certain sum of money to be given to my father as a reward for a piece sung by him. Then the other person would increase the amount of money after my father's next piece. The audience was not only enjoying the performance but also this reward giving competition. After every announcement, thousands of people would cheer the person giving the reward. Soon the amount reached in thousands of *rupees*. They did not stop there. One of them announced that he was giving my father a few acres of his land as a reward for his wonderful singing. Finally, my father stopped singing. He requested the two audience members to not indulge in unhealthy competition and returned all the rewards, save a little to distribute to the troupe. Everyone in the audience was touched by his

magnanimous gesture. By now, I had forgotten about my sleep totally. I was enjoying the performance and counting the currency bills!

The performance lasted all night, finishing when the sun rose above the horizon. The story of *Indal Haran* had concluded. However, the people were not ready to budge. They requested one song after another from my father. My father obliged them as far as he could. Then he requested the audience to let the performers get some rest. They were tiring after singing the whole night. He also reminded audience members that they had to get back to their villages to get their chores underway. I noticed that my father exercised a tremendous clout over the audience. Whatever he said, they accepted. However, before the performance finally wound up, the audience demanded a final romantic number from my father and the heroine of the *Nautanki*, a famous female artist named Prem Lata. Then they went home.

Surprisingly, even after being awake the whole night, I did not feel tired. I wanted the performance to go on and on. After the performance ended, I ran to my father, and he hugged me. My uncle showed my father the large amount of money that had come as rewards. My father distributed that money on the spot to his junior artists and instrumentalists. Later he explained the reason for this. He told me that the big artists usually get all the rewards and money and small artists and instrumentalists get little. I felt so proud of my father that day-- not only because he was a great performer but because he was also a caring human being. Now more then ever, I wanted to be a big *Nautanki* star like him.

I have never quite been able to recover from that heady experience in Mudhera even though it was some 25 years ago. There was something in that *Nautanki* performance that I have never found in any other medium of entertainment. Since that performance in Mudhera, I have been privileged to perform live in hundreds of shows in all parts of India, Europe, and America, seen and heard the most acclaimed television and radio programs; however, I never was able to get the immensely satisfying and fulfilling experience that I got from watching *Nautanki*. Was it the presence of thousands of men and women, bullock carts, people on their roofs, melodious singing and acting, and reward giving that made it such a memorable experience? I don't know. What was it that hooked me to *Nautanki* forever after the Mudhera experience? I have not been able to put my finger on what exactly had grabbed me in Mudhera. And perhaps it is not only me. I have talked to hundreds of fans of *Nautanki* and they all talk about the mesmerizing appeal of *Nautanki.* As I grew up, I decided that I would find out why *Nautanki* is so appealing to its audiences. Why do they like it so much? I wanted to understand what made for that remarkably exciting community ambience during my Nautanki experience in Mudhera. The present dissertation project is the result of that longing.

This dissertation is also an exploration of another kind. It is an attempt to discover the importance of ordinary culture, of folk culture, in a world which generally favors cultural elitism. As it turned out, I did not become a big *Nautanki* star like my father (at least, not yet). My situation was different. I grew up in a city and earned a "modern" education. While I sang on television and radio and big auditoriums, I rarely performed on the rural *Nautanki* stage. I noticed that my classmates in school and city folks in

general did not know much about *Nautanki* or for that matter any popular folk form. I tried to explain to them what *Nautanki* was, but I doubt that they fully understood me. When I performed with my father in sophisticated urban settings, we never performed pure *Nautanki.* In cities, nobody has the time to watch an all-night *Nautanki*. Also the atmosphere is totally different. How could a full *Nautanki* be performed in air-conditioned city auditoriums? *Nautanki* needs informality, people sitting on their bullock carts, on their tractors, people talking to each other. No, *Nautanki* could not be performed in cities! At least not without losing its soul. Even though I have been in the center of folk performances in cities, I have felt culturally alienated. I have longed for that community atmosphere of *Nautanki*, where every body mingled, improvised, and had fun. In cities, people silently watch performances in air-conditioned auditoriums, clap, and return home after two hours.

Growing up in New Delhi, I also noticed that city folks usually look down upon rural and ordinary culture. The middle class folks in cities generally imitate the upper classes, who in turn imitate the West and their erstwhile English masters. Most of the well-to-do city folks have not seen an Indian village. They think about Indian villages in exotic terms and consider rural arts as a heritage that should be preserved. In their day-to-day lives they entertain themselves with Hollywood and Bollywood (referring to Bombay, India's Hollywood) movies, and with Monet and Picasso, Elvis Presley and the Beatles, and so on. Other city-based elites listen to Indian classical music. Growing up in a city, I felt culturally disoriented among these people. While it was hard to voice it, I felt they were hypocrites. I wanted somehow to show them the real power and genuineness of

indigenous entertainment forms. I wanted to show that ordinary rural art competes on an equal footing with "elite" art. But in order to make such claims, it was important to more fully understand the performative and consumption dimensions of a rural art tradition like *Nautanki*. This dissertation is an attempt towards that understanding.

When I earned a masters degree in communication in India, I felt an even stronger urge to study *Nautanki*-- not only as an art form but also as a community event where people collect, talk, and socialize in each other's company. Another reason for this desire was that my father in the 1990s had started writing new *Nautankis* on social issues like dowry, women's empowerment, environment protection, and family planning. He wanted to make *Nautanki* contemporary. I regularly performed in these *Nautankis* with him and found that audiences were taking a keen interest in these new *Nautankis* and were discussing these social issues during and after the performances. This, combined with my formal study of communication, ignited my interest in the possibility of using *Nautanki* as a communication strategy to foster community development. It was clear to me *Nautanki* had a very strong emotional impact on its audiences. I had never experienced such a strong emotional bond after watching a television program, or after listening to a radio program. I wanted to explore the reasons for this "pull" of *Nautanki*.

Meanwhile, my father and I established an organization called Brij Lok Madhuri to create and perform *Nautankis* and other folk performances on development issues. The Government of India and some international institutions such as Johns Hopkins University contracted us to create folk performances in India and serve as master trainers to other folk troupes. These field-based experiences showed that *Nautanki* and similar

folk forms were effective in communicating social messages, especially among rural audiences. As a communication student, I became very interested in exploring how these performances encouraged a community feeling, and how they affect their audiences. This dissertation is an attempt to explore these questions.

Finally, this dissertation is a celebration of the inspiration that my father provided for me to become a *Nautanki* artist, and to conduct research on this folk form. As *Nautanki* artists, we want to explore the potential of our art form. My father and I have had numerous discussions about the place of folk forms like *Nautanki* in a cosmopolitan, modern, global society. Although in all these discussions we are hopeful about folk art forms, we are quite clueless (like other folk artists) about the direction these art forms will take in the future. We do not know but we want to know. This research is an attempt to explore the future direction that *Nautanki* might take.

CHAPTER 2

Purpose and Rationale

In the present chapter, I provide a rationale for understanding popular folk performances such as *Nautanki* as sites of community dialogue, and as a communication strategy for fostering social change.

The chapter begins with a historical background on the pro-active use of communication strategies to foster social change in developing countries. First, I discuss the dominant paradigm of communication for social change, which arose in the mid 20th century, and continues to dominate despite a rise of other alternative discourses. In this paradigm of thinking, scholars believed that a top-down dissemination of knowledge through mass media would be sufficient to bring positive social change in the developing societies. In this outdated conception, the mass media were looked upon as magic multipliers and the audiences were construed as atomized passive recipients. There was hardly any attempt to involve local community and indigenous wisdom in the process of social change. In fact, local community traditions were considered more as a hurdle in way of progress rather than an aid.

Second, I discuss the participatory paradigm of communication for social change, which gathered steam in the 1970s, as disappointment with the dominant paradigm grew. Participatory scholars advocated more involvement of people in the process of social change. I illustrate this section with examples of activists and scholars around the world who used performance as a powerful participatory strategy for social change.

Finally, I argue that the pro-active use of performances for social change purposes has remained essentially an urban and elite phenomenon. Although well intended, these communication attempts have remained alien for ordinary people in developing countries, particularly for those living in rural areas. I argue that for fostering positive social change processes, there is a need to understand how dialogue is spurred in a community, particularly through indigenous entertainment traditions. I argue that understanding the value of indigenous folk performances can facilitate an empowering paradigm of communication, which bestows dignity to the ordinary culture of neglected, marginalized populations.

Background: Communication for Social Change

During the 1950s and 1960s, communication was primarily viewed as a *magic bullet* to foster social change in the underdeveloped societies of the world. Early research on mass media effects during the 1940s and 1950s suggested that the mass media had direct, powerful, and uniform effects on individuals living in modern industrial societies (Melkote & Steeves, 2001). Mass communication research in World War II by Harold Lasswell and others (like Carl Hovland) perceived mass media as powerful tools for propaganda and persuasion (Rogers, 1997). There was a lot of enthusiasm to use the mass media to modernize nations in the Third World, which had newly acquired their independence in the 1940s and 1950s.

Daniel Lerner (1958) in his *The Passing of the Traditional Society* argued that the traditional societies could modernize through exposure to the mass media. Mass media were considered as *magic multipliers* of development benefits in developing countries by

conveying critical information. It was assumed that the information in itself would foster bring change and that people were expectantly waiting for the vital information to reach them (Rogers, 1962, 1976, 1986; Schramm, 1964). Thus the early approach towards using communication for social change was more or less one way and oriented to *dissemination* (Peters, 1999) of information. Since this approach did not involve a two-way or a multi-way flow of communication between senders and receivers of communication it was referred to as a *dominant* or the *top-down* paradigm of communication (Melkote & Steeves, 2001). The dominant paradigm of communication visualizes communication as the vehicle of *exogenous* ideas entering *local* communities through mostly *alien* media. The local communities, on their own, were not considered capable enough to communicate among themselves through their own indigenous media.

The dominant paradigm of communication (Bordenave, 1976; Downs & Mohr, 1976; Havens, 1975) has been criticized as a linear model that frames the message perceives recipients as passive. This model also does not take into consideration the local socio-economic contexts in the development process, and is dominantly Western in nature, inconsistent with non-Western epistemologies and worldviews. This criticism emerged as a result of the failures of social change projects where the mass media were expected to perform as magic bullets and they did not. Analyzing these failures, communication scholars have argued that unless there is a *need-based* realization of social change from within communities, the attempts to bring social change from outside would remain ineffective and oppressive.

By the 1970s, disillusionment with the top-down, source-oriented paradigms of communication for social change started to set in the developing world (Bordenave, 1976; Rogers, 1976). This happened due to many reasons. After around two decades of using source-oriented communication, many scholars in the developing countries realized the pitfalls of this approach. As people began to come out of the colonial psyche, they gradually realized that an approach that does not account for indigenous communication wisdom was problematic. In academia, in the seventies, the modernist approach was questioned. The usefulness of modern science in social inquiry was challenged. According to Dwight Conquergood (1991), the undermining of objectivist science came roughly at the same time as the collapse of colonialism. Post-colonial critics began to analyze the deeper undercurrents in the dominant Western thought of modernization and West's stereotypical images of East or the *Orient*. Deconstructing the Western notion of orient as the "other", Edward Said (1978) noted:

> The scientist, the scholar, the missionary, the trader, or the soldier was in, or thought about the orient because he *could be there*. Under the general heading of the knowledge of orient there emerged a complex Orient suitable for study in the academy, for display in the museum for instances of economic and sociological theories of development. (p.90)

Thus the "modernist" or "enlightenment" theories guiding communication for social change projects were increasingly challenged in the seventies and eighties as they were perceived to consider local populations in developing countries as the "other". Communication scholars and practitioners searched for theories that would lead them

towards more holistic definition of social change, and participative ways to use communication for development (Freire, 1970).

Participatory Paradigm of Communication for Social Change

According to the noted Brazilian educator and liberation theology thinker Paulo Freire, the oppressed get so used to their oppressive conditions that they may even fear freedom from it (Freire 1970, 2005). Also, continued oppression leads to a psychological state in which the oppressed begin to imitate the oppressor. Thus, when a group of oppressed people gets power, they turn into oppressors themselves, oppressing their fellow people, and thus the system of oppression continues (Freire, 1970, 2004). The conditions in many developing countries such as India during colonial and post-colonial times can help us to understand Freire's point. In colonial times, many Indians, belonging to upper middle classes, who were in close touch with their British masters and were routinely oppressed by them, adopted the same oppressive attitude towards the illiterate, powerless, ordinary, and poor people of their own country (Premchand, 1932). This oppression continued even after India obtained its independence. However, after independence, the elites in India still looked up to the Western models of development for inspiration. The fruits of independence hardly reached the ordinary people. According to Freire, involving ordinary people in the development process is the only way genuine development can be achieved. Change, coming through a dominant or top-down way, does not help ordinary people to liberate themselves.

Like Freire, many communication scholars believe that communication for social change should be participatory (Frey, Pearce, Pollock, Artz, & Murphy, 1996; Frey,

1998; Gonzalez, 2003; Singhal, 2004). The desire for social change should come from within the oppressed people. The challenge is how to ignite that desire to produce the consciousness for change. How to end this vicious circle of oppression? According to Freire, the traditional system of education supporting a top-down paradigm of communication must be challenged if oppression of any kind is to end. He questioned the traditional system of education in which educators and communicators impose their knowledge on passive students or recipients. This "banking" of knowledge reinforces the oppressive power structures in the society as the communication targets do not *discover* or *invent* knowledge themselves; instead they *receive* it. For Freire, the goal of development was liberation or attaining full humanity (Freire, 1970, 2005). The liberation can happen only through, what he called, *conscientizacao*, i.e. oppressed people's critical awareness of oppression accompanied by active action to overcome it. This awareness comes through dialogue between the various agents, especially if it is grounded in equality, mutual trust, and affirmation (Buber, 1994; Laing, 1994; Merton, 1994; Rawlins, 1992; Singhal, 2004). Broadly this research will explore how, and to what degree, *conscientizacao* can be fostered through indigenous community performances.

Performance for Social Change

Some efforts, inspired by Freire's thinking, have been made in the direction of using performances for social change. Augusto Boal, also a Brazilian, inspired by Freire's thinking, and his own knowledge and experience as a theater director, worked out an approach called *Theater of Oppressed* (TO). TO became a worldwide movement to use theater as a medium of social change (Singhal, 2004). Boal disagreed with

Aristotle's separation of art from politics. According to him, Aristotle, through this definition, eliminates all the "bad" or illegal tendencies of the audiences, or in other words, makes them conform to the existing hegemonic system. For Boal, all theater is necessarily political as all human activities are inherently political (Boal, 1985). Boal agrees with Brecht (1964) that social beings or humans should be in-charge of their thoughts, not the other way round. Boal perceived theater as the destruction of all boundaries between ruling and the ruled class. Through TO, Boal wanted to break the boundaries between the actors and audiences (that is between the senders and receivers of messages). He wanted to make audiences (receivers) the protagonist of drama. Thus the spectator was turned into a "spect-actor", and took an active part in the dramatic action (Singhal, 2004). In this method, actors would address an intractable social problem in the performance but leave the resolution open. Spectators are then invited to think about possible solutions that may work in their socio-cultural context, and act it out on stage. In the process of this *conscientizacao* activity, the passive, oppressed audience members learn to rehearse actions to change the status quo.

Many other theater workers around the world were also influenced by Freire's thinking. Safdar Hashmi in India was one of them. He created a street theater group called *Janam*, which staged street plays based on political and social problems facing the ordinary people (Basu, 2000; Prashad, 1999). However, theater for social change is not purely a developing world phenomenon. There have been several attempts in the US and Europe by several performance scholars to use theater and music to foster pro-social change (Cohen-Cruz, 2001; Reinelt, 1996). Performance of Amiri Baraka's *Slave Ship*

during the height of civil rights movement, and Irish women's resistance to English domination through theater in the early part of the 20th century are some examples of theater playing an important role in social struggles. At one performance of *Slave Ship* in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, the audience members became so aroused by the "militant participatory action of the production" that at the end of the performance they were ready to take concrete action (Elam Jr., 1996). Similarly, the emergence of Irish Dramatic Movement in the early part of the 20th century not only turned a political crisis between England and Ireland into a cultural renaissance of Ireland, but also helped Irish women to come out of their homes and become an important part of the nationalist movement (Trotter, 1996). During these and other instances, theater within the nationalist movements became a site of collaboration across religion, class, and gender lines (Trotter, 1996).

However, one of the problematic aspects of performance for pro-social change is that it is limited to a relatively few educated scholars/practitioners/activists, and it is rare for such performance to engender a mainstream movement involving the larger community-- like in the Irish nationalist struggle. Usually, such performative actions to challenge the status quo are in danger of being crushed or suppressed by hegemonic forces. As Raymond Williams (1967, 2000) noted, such practices are often neglected in their beginning and allowed to develop until they are recognized as dangerous, and then repressed. We have seen this repression happening throughout the world. Freire and Boal were made to leave their home country (Brazil) because people in power thought that

revolutionary theater was dangerous. Safdar Hashmi lost his life during a performance routine in India in 1990, killed by a politically incited mob.

Until now, there have been few attempts to integrate social change efforts with already existing, highly popular, indigenous performance traditions of ordinary people. Folk performances represent such community performance traditions. Even though Baraka's, Boal's, or Safdar Hashmi's work has used traditional and indigenous forms of community performances, their performances do not really emerge *out* of the indigenous culture. They essentially remain *elitist,* a theater of the educated urban class. Common uneducated people, although in awe of these efforts, never consider themselves as a part of these attempts. For instance, Hashmi routinely *borrowed* the elements of Indian folk forms such as *Alha* (a folk singing form) to garnish his work but his work is not *Alha* itself. In other words, Boal's or Hashmi's works do not integrate and get integrated into the indigenous culture. While laudatory in their own right, they remain exogenous works trying to *use* indigenous cultural forms for their purpose. Well intended and effective, they still remain alien to indigenous culture. The possibility of using indigenous performance traditions for purposive pro-social change is yet to be fully and systematically explored. Using indigenous performances for social change might enhance the involvement of indigenous people in the process of determining and enacting their own change.

Popular theater that does not emerge out of people's own will but is initiated by those in authority can be oppressive. As Adam Versenyi's work on relationship between the Mexican Revolution, religion, and theater suggests, theater can be used as an

ideological tool both by oppressors as well as reformers. In Mexico, theater was used by both colonizers and the revolutionists as a propaganda tool. As Veseneyi (1996) noted:

> Where the [colonizing] mendicants insisted upon the salvific powers of Christianity, the revolutionary government preached a secular gospel that had to be followed to attain a state of grace. Both brands of millenarianism found it necessary to convert masses of people to avoid apocalypse, and in both cases those masses of people were of indigenous descent. (p. 56)

In Mexico, education and theater "became crucibles of crisis in both historic moments (Reinelt, 1996, p. 3). Versneyi's work suggests that performance is available not only for radical purposes but also for reactionary ones. Another alarming and concerning point here is the consideration of indigenous people as "masses ready to be converted". Both "enlightened performance workers" and "reactionary powers" are keen to grab the indigenous people as if they have nothing to say. Why can't there be purposive performances for social change that emerge from people's indigenous culture? Why can't one put faith in people's performing traditions that have functioned for thousands of years?

The present dissertation examines the role of indigenous forms of communication in community building and social change processes. Can performance for social change be a part of everyday life rather than an "alien" exogenous communication attempt to bring change? Previously, the work of activists such as Boal and Hashmi has been predominantly political, particularly favoring the politics of the Left. This has arguably

alienated many people who are interested in social change but do not want to perceive themselves as belonging to a particular brand of politics.

Of course, there can be no disagreement that performative efforts championed by Brecht, Freire, Boal, Grotowski, Baraka, Hashmi, and others have enriched the practice of communication for social change. The present research aims to *add* to their efforts by studying the efforts of bringing *conscientizacao* in everyday life through indigenous cultural performances. A study like this is required at this particular time as countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America which are in the process of their economic development, are keenly searching for indigenous communication methodologies to enhance social change processes. The majority of the population in these countries is rural or semi-rural. For instance, in India, 73% of the population lives in villages (Census of India, 2001). In rural India, political and social decisions are taken collectively in *Panchayats* (traditional rural administrative bodies), and interpersonal interaction is the primary mode of communication (Singhal, Sharma, Papa, & Witte, 2004). The dominant forms of entertainment are still folk festivals and performances. Thus, any communication strategy aiming to achieve the goals of effectively communicating positive developmental messages should emerge from the indigenous culture of these locations.

Rationale for the Present Research

This present research investigates the role *of Nautanki* in starting community dialogue, and bringing new critical social awareness and change. Collective events like village fairs, festivals, and folk community theater and music performances are examples of such indigenous performances. In India, these performances do not merely serve as

entertainment occasions but, more importantly, as events that function as sites of intense interpersonal and community discussion (Hansen, 1992). These communicative sites are particularly helpful for the illiterate and otherwise disempowered sections of Indian society to engage with their social and cultural environment.

The present research focuses on the role of *Nautanki* in initiating reflection and debate about social problems. This research study looks into the possibilities of fostering a *community performance paradigm* of communication, which can draw together the dominant and participative paradigms of communication discussed earlier, and support positive social change without looking down on indigenous cultures. In other words, this research examines how new developmental information coming to a community from the outside can be integrated with local communication forms such as folk performances. Specifically, this research attempts to examine the following communicative dimensions of community performances.

1. Community performances are expressions of local wisdom and culture. How can these performances lend their unique position to bring about social change? How can they help in developing critical awareness in a community?
2. Performance provides entertainment. It is an opportunity for people, even when they are oppressed, to experience moments of enjoyment and satisfaction. Performance is a safe place, sometimes a place for people to escape the realities of life, but also a potential space to make sense of

social realities. How can this entertainment-education dimension of performance be used for purposive social change?

In essence, indigenous performances can effectively communicate new information from the outside to a local audience while respecting indigenous culture. This research examines how a performance can involve local idiom not only in the *entertainment aesthetics* but also in the *cultural aesthetics.* In other words, indigenous performances are firmly grounded in local culture and they can also communicate social change messages in an entertaining way.

Studying community performances as a communication strategy for social change offers several benefits. As noted previously, such performances allow for sparking social change within a community through indigenous communication forms rather than through imposed from the outside. Further, such community performances can provide financial and moral support for the rural practitioners of these art forms to survive in the face of competition from expanding mass media choices.

Recently, there have been attempts to use community performances in social change efforts in many parts of the world. For instance, in 1999, the Indian government in collaboration with USAID and Johns Hopkins University's Center of Communication Programs (JHU/CCP) launched an ongoing massive folk media campaign in north India using indigenous forms of performances to communicate messages on women's empowerment and reproductive health. By 2006, some 10,000 performances had been done in as many villages (SIFPSA, 2003). This is a rare instance of using indigenous performance genres for communication for development and social change on such a

large scale. High school students in KwaZulu-Natal Province in South Africa use interactive community theater performances to break the silence on AIDS (Singhal & Howard, 2003). Similarly Nalamdana, a non- government organization in Chennai, India uses street theater to spread awareness about HIV-AIDS among urban slum-dwellers (Dagron, 2001; Singhal & Rogers, 2003). However, research available on these and other initiatives is mostly anecdotal. We do not know much about the actual communicative processes that take place during a community performance. In the absence of such research, the practice of communication for social change struggles to become truly participative.

The present dissertation analyzes the communicative dimensions of indigenous performances by studying an immensely popular Indian folk performing tradition, *Nautanki*. *Nautanki* is a popular folk musical theater tradition of north India. The research explores how performers and audiences use *Nautanki* to construct an understanding of the world around them, build community, connect to their cultural roots, and spur dialogue and actions. It also explores how the community dialogue generated by *Nautanki* can potentially inspire people toward progressive social change. Finally, this research examines the current status, challenges, and future of *Nautanki* as a representative form of ordinary culture in an increasingly global world.

A Brief History of the Nautanki Performance Tradition

Figure 2: Nautanki actress Sitara in Nautanki "Amar Singh Rathore"

The history of the *Swang- Nautanki*[5] performative tradition goes several hundred years (Agrawal, 1976). In recorded form, we find references of *Nautanki* in a 16th century book called *Ain-e-Akbari* written by Abul Fazal, a scholar at the court of Emperor Akbar in India (Agrawal, 1976). *Nautanki*'s origins lie in the folk performance traditions of *Bhagat* and *Raasleela* of Mathura and Vrindavan[6] in Uttar Pradesh,[7] and *Khayal* of Rajasthan[8] (Agrawal, 1976). *Nautanki*'s history becomes clearer in the

[5] I will refer to *Swang-Nautanki* as *Nautanki* from now onwards for the sake of convenience.
[6] Mathura, Vrindavan, Hathras, Kanpur, and Lucknow are all towns in Uttar Pradesh.
[7] Uttar Pradesh is a state in north India.
[8] Rajasthan is a state in north India.

nineteenth century with the coming of the printing press in India and publication of *Nautanki* operas in the form of chap-books (Hansen, 1992).

In the late nineteenth century, Hatharas, and Mathura in western Uttar Pradesh state, and Kanpur and Lucknow in central Uttar Pradesh, became the two biggest centers of Nautanki performance and teaching. The Hathras School developed first, and performances by its artists in central Uttar Pradesh state stimulated the development of Kanpur-Lucknow school of *Nautanki*. Both schools differ from each other with respect to their performative form and technique. While the *Hathrasi* (literally meaning "of Hathras") school emphasizes singing more, and is operatic in form, the Kanpuri School centers itself more on prose-filled dialogues mixed with singing. This style developed in the colonial times (19th and early 20th century), when India was under British rule. The Kanpuri style borrowed many elements of prose dialogue delivery from *Parsi Theater* (a theater genre inspired by European theater traditions), and mixed them with the Hathrasi singing to come up with its new style of performance. Also, the singing style in the Kanpuri School is somewhat fast-paced compared to the Hathrasi School.

Nautanki reached the pinnacle of its glory in the early 20th century when numerous *Nautanki* performing troupes, known as *mandalis* (literally meaning "groups") and *akharas* (literally meaning "wrestling arenas") came into existence. *Nautanki mandalis* were called *akharas* due to the prevalence of particular style of singing in *Nautanki* that required a lot of physical power. The *Nautankis* staged by these *mandalis* or *akharas* became the main source of entertainment in the small towns and villages of

Northern India, and remained as such until television and VCRs began to make inroads beginning in the early 1990s.

Figure 3: Pundit Ram Dayal Sharma and comedian Kishan Swaroop "Awara" in a Nautanki performance

Riding on its popularity, *Nautanki* progressed both in terms of form as well as content and its stage became bigger and more professional. *Nautanki* companies like *Natharam's mandali*, catching the cue from big Parsi theater (an urban Indian theater style) troupes such as *Alfred Theater Company,* started to present their performances outside the core region of its audience. Some performances occurred as far as in Myanmar. Storylines of *Nautanki* ranged from mythology and folklores to tales of contemporary heroes. Thus while *Nautanki* plays such as *Satya-Harishchandra* and

Bhakt Moradhwaj were based on the mythological themes, *Indal Haran* and *Puranmal* originated from folklores. In the first half of the 20th century, the contemporary sentiments against British rule and feudal landlords found expression in the *Nautankis* such as *Sultana Daku, Jalianwala Bagh*, and *Amar Singh Rathore*.

The *Nautanki* tradition still has a strong hold over the imagination of people in rural north India. Even after the rapid expansion of mass media like television and radio, a crowd of 10,000 to 15,000 people can easily gather at *Nautanki* performances. Like many other folk forms of India, *Nautanki's* status has been badly affected by the apathy of the political leadership, and the attitude of looking down upon the indigenous Indian artistic traditions by the powerful urban-based elites suffering from a *post-colonial hangover.*[9]

Nautanki: The Contemporary Scenario

At present, *Nautanki* is experiencing a dialectical tension. On the one hand, it still holds an important place in people's collective imagination, and on the other, it is struggling to deal with the changing audience aspirations, molded by cinema and television. On top of it, *Nautanki* has failed to contemporarize the subject matter of its script (Sharma, 2004). So one may ask the question: Why might a teenager in India watch a *Nautanki* depicting the 350 years old heroics of the famous historical warrior *Amar Singh Rathore*? Times have changed and the context of these old *Nautankis* is perhaps not as relevant for today's audiences. During colonial times, these narratives had a specific function. *Amar Singh Rathore*, for instance, provided a catharsis to the subdued sensibilities of a colonized nation by giving them hope. People identified themselves with

[9] Colonial after-effects on the psychology of Indian elites

such heroes, and imagined themselves fighting against the colonial authority and oppressive elements through them (Hansen, 1992). After gaining independence, this colonial context is no longer valid. Audiences today want to watch *Nautankis* that mirror and discuss their own realities, rather than those which depict narratives from a remote past. People prefer to listen to stories woven around current issues that affect them; for instance, the ill-effects of outdated social traditions like dowry, side effects of agricultural pesticides, unemployment and poverty, and women's empowerment. In essence, they want to make sense of the *world around them* (Burke, 1969). A community performing art can help in this endeavor (Bakhtin, 1984). When a folk popular form stops fulfilling its function, it ceases to be a *popular* form. This is a real danger that *Nautanki* is facing in present-day India. *So Nautanki* has to keep up with the times.

It would be incorrect to put the full blame for not moving with the times on *Nautanki*, or for that matter on any other indigenous performance tradition. The failure of many of these traditions to keep up with changing realities of society has been a result, in many ways, of developments in India's *high brow* (Bourdieu, 1984) culture, and attitudes of "the custodians of high art" towards the folk or *ordinary* culture (Williams, 1958). The development of arts and theater in the colonial, and particularly in post-colonial India, has taken a path full of contradictions (Jain, 1967). On one hand, most people working in the field of performance in the post- Indian independence years have looked up to the Western models of theater for inspiration; or they have at least sought the approval of the West for their efforts. Only a handful of folks chose indigenous performance forms to make contemporary statements. On the other hand, the upper and upper-middle classes

adopted a kind of superficial missionary zeal toward *saving* the indigenous folk forms. They used folk culture to increase their cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984), a way to distinguish themselves from the so-called "ordinary" or common people. They looked at folk forms as artifacts frozen in time, which they could use to decorate their houses, like old paintings. Thus many times, the Indian elite, through government or private grants, attempted to *preserve* folk forms. They wanted the *pure* folk art form, *unspoiled* by any adulteration, to be used as an escape to a fantasy world away from their everyday realities. Folk forms functioned as a toy, an amusement, a showpiece for the high-brow elite. This situation continues.

What people from the so-called *high-brow* culture fail to fully realize is that folk or popular arts cannot be *preserved*. They are ever flowing, ever changing expressions of people, reflecting their contemporary realities. What *can* be done is to provide these folk forms with equal opportunities and a level playing field in relation to their urban counterparts, giving them opportunities to express contemporary realities. Thus in post-colonial India, folk forms have either been seen as art forms incapable of intellectual expression, or they have been given a *rare species* status. In both scenarios, community folk forms like *Nautanki* have been neglected by those who control socio-economic and cultural capital. Unfortunately, *Nautanki* artists and others associated with these forms either do not have enough resources or educational capital to make a case for their art, or are so caught up in their struggle for survival that they have time for little else.

In sum, if *Nautanki* or other similar community folk art forms are to survive (if not thrive), they need opportunities to adapt in a changing context. They cannot survive

by continuing to portray outdated themes. If they are given this opportunity, it can be a win-win situation. For instance, development agencies interested in communicating social change messages would get a possibly effective medium to reach rural audiences with contemporary themes.

Already some efforts have been made in this direction. Recently some performing troupes have used *Nautanki* to grasp and incorporate Indian society's contemporary concerns for social change and development (Brij Lok Madhuri, 2003). Brij Lok Madhuri (BLM) is one such troupe. BLM was founded by renowned *Nautanki* singer Pundit Ram Dayal Sharma (my father) in the 1970s to promote the use of folk forms for purposive social change. Working with the Government of India and Johns Hopkins Center of Communication Programs (JHU/CCP) from 1999 to 2003, BLM created new *Nautanki* and other folk forms' scripts on pro-social messages such as small family size, women's empowerment, dowry eradication, and HIV-AIDS prevention. BLM trained over 100 folk troupes to perform these scripts in north Indian villages (SIFPSA, 2003). By 2003, over 10,000 performances had been done by these troupes in as many villages. This contemporary use is giving an edge to *Nautanki.* As a community art form, *Nautanki* is a more "real" and live art form than television and video can ever be, and also closer to the culture of rural and semi-rural people. However, sound research is needed to address these assumptions, which the present project intends to do.

Summary

During the 1950s and 1960s, scholars and practitioners primarily viewed communication as a *magic bullet* to bring change in developing countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. This early approach was top-down and did not involve much interaction between senders and receivers of messages. By the 1970s, disillusionment with the top-down, source-oriented paradigms of communication for social change set in the developing world as many social attempts based on this model failed. Communication scholars and practitioners searched for more holistic framings of social change phenomenon, including more participatory ways to foster development.

Performance, according to many scholars, can be one such participatory route. There have been important attempts to use performance for social change. However, these attempts have largely remained exogenous to indigenous cultures of developing countries. There is a need to explore how indigenous performance traditions can contribute to social change processes. Unfortunately, little research is available that explores the utility of such performance traditions.

The present research analyzes the communicative dimensions of *Nautanki*, an immensely popular folk performing tradition in rural north India. The research explores how performers and audiences use *Nautanki* to create participatory dialogue and build community.

Figure 4: Nautanki artists meet in a workshop to get training from BLM on how to incorporate contemporary social issues in their performances

CHAPTER 3

Review of Literature

Merilyn Friedman (1993) views public dialogue as important for creation of a caring society. According to her, individual perceptions, because of their limited capacity to take the perspective of others, cannot be trusted as means for building a fair and caring society. “As for the methods for eliminating recognizable biases from critical moral thinking, foremost emphasis must go to interpersonal, including public, dialogue. For good psychological reasons, each person’s unaided thinking cannot be trusted to discern its own biases” (p. 32). Public dialogue brings people together both emotionally and intellectually and helps them to form a shared sense of the world. Friedman argues that this dialogue must involve the marginalized sections of a particular society-- those who do not have enough resources and status to influence public dialogue. “Only in that way can they have any hope of challenging the biased direction of public debate and its ensuing impact on social policies and arrangements” (p. 33). Thus, dialogue, if it is to be meaningful, should involve all sections of society, especially the neglected ones.

But there are critical questions that we must answer before we can proceed any further in this direction. How can we actually involve the less privileged people in public dialogue? How can we create situations where people come together without being conscious of their place in the social hierarchy? What communication strategies speak to such aims?

Folk performances represent a possible communication channel to achieve these ends. Long standing traditions of community performances can facilitate the entry of new

information from the outside into a community while respecting and, more importantly, involving the local communication wisdom. Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of *performance as carnival* and Dwight Conquergood's notion of performance as *resistance to textocentrism* provides a theoretical base for a *performance paradigm* of communication.

In the present chapter, first, I review Bakhtin's thoughts on community folk forms as sites of social dialogue and resistance. Then, I discuss Dwight Conquergood's vision of performance as a legitimate form of knowing and expressing, serving as an alternative to the dominant literacy-based *texts.* Next, I draw upon communication scholarship in the U.S. dealing with the exclusion of marginalized populations from the mainstream rhetoric, drawing parallels in India with the exclusion of rural people's rhetoric from the mainstream urban rhetoric. In so doing, I argue that performances can be helpful to make mainstream rhetoric more understandable for the marginalized people, and bring concerns of the marginalized into the mainstream. Finally, I review the scant scholarly literature in India on folk performance traditions. The lack of recent Indian scholarship on folk forms is in itself telling, exemplifying the lack of attention ordinary culture has received in India.

Community Performance as "Carnival"

Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) argues that folk performances are like *carnivals*; they are participative in nature and may represent a voice against the oppression of people by socio-political authorities. Bakhtin assigns two major functions to community performances: (1) they help people in understanding oppressive practices; (2) they help

people to resist these practices by making a connection with other members of their community, and feel united through a realization of their common conditions.

In addition to Bakhtin, a number of scholars have thought about the capability of community performances to resist oppressive practices and foster social change (Becker, McCall & Morris, 1989; Boal, 1985; Conquergood, 1985; Denzin, 1997; Harter, Sharma, Pant, Singhal, & Sharma, in press; McCall, 1993; Mienczakowski & Morgan, 2001; Paget, 1990; Pollock, 1990; Richardson, 1997; Siegel & Conquergood, 1985, 1990; Singhal, 2004; Smith, 1993, 1994). Performance scholars have also tried to use formal stage theater performances to attract community attention towards social change (Brecht, 1964; Conner, 1996; Dion, 1996; Elam, Jr., 1996; Kruger, 1996; O'Brien, 1994; Schroeder, 1996; Sieg, 1955; Taylor, 1990; Trotter, 1996; Versenyi, 1996; Worthen, 1996). Most scholars have situated performances as a modern, urban phenomenon. They have not specifically focused on using indigenous performance traditions for social change. Bakhtin's work becomes especially important for the present research as it highlights the role of indigenous performance traditions in society. These traditions, according to Bakhtin, are products of people's ordinary lives, not consciously designed performance for social change. As such, it becomes important to discuss Bakhtin's work in detail here.

According to Bakhtin, community performances resist oppression by not being serious but rather being fun:

A boundless world of humorous forms and manifestations opposed the

> official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture….folk festivities of the carnival type, the comic rites and cults….the clown and fools….manifold literature of parody--all these forms….were sharply distinct from the serious official forms and ceremonials. (pp. 4-5)

Bakhtin's work establishes performance as a potential communication strategy for understanding the established and oppressive practices through social dialogue. His notion of carnival celebrates liberation, even if temporary, from the established order (Hansen, 1992). In carnival, a folk performative ritual in medieval Russian society, the King, a symbol of established oppressive order, becomes a target of people's ridicule (Bakhtin, 1984):

> King is the clown. He is elected by all the people and is mocked by all the people. He is abused and beaten when the time of his reign is over, just as the carnival dummy of winter or of the dying year is mocked, beaten, torn to pieces, burned or drowned in even our times. (p. 197)

Making the King a clown and taking digs at him in a controlled hegemonic system can be done through communicative actions like performances. Here resistance is conveyed through covert humor. A hegemonic establishment is helpless when faced with a resistance that is indirect, ridicule-oriented, and humorous. For instance, the Indian Folk tradition of *Naqal*, which literally means copycatting, is an example of this function of a community performance. Similar to mockery of those in power in carnivals, *Naqaals* (people doing *Naqal*) made fun of higher castes and rulers at festive occasions in India (Shashtri, 1987). These people usually belonged to "low" castes (Shashtri, 1987). Usually

Naqals happen in the presence of those very people who are mocked at through these performances. Thus, performances function as symbolic resistance. Bakhtin (1984) explains this symbolic nature of performance more clearly:

> Here is a dimension in which thrashing and abuse are not a personal chastisement but are symbolic actions directed at something on a higher level, at the king. This is the popular-festive system of images, which is most clearly expressed in a carnival. (p. 197)

Nautanki represents an interesting but a slightly different variation of Bakhtin's description of carnival in India. In *Nautanki* performances, while the main storyline usually supports the establishment, there is a specially created character of clown (called "joker" in *Nautanki*) whose job is to mock the system. He spontaneously comes in the middle of the performance, and talks directly to the audience, involving them in spontaneous jokes that fit well with the storyline, and make fun of people in power.

According to Bakhtin, although popular folk festive forms resist oppression, they are never serious. People, even if oppressed, have to cope with their circumstances. One of the essential conditions of folk-festive forms, whether carnival or *Nautanki*, is audience engaged entertainment. In folk performances, people come together and engage in role playing, make sense of their oppression, and resist it, but through the medium of entertainment. It is no wonder that we find no concept of *tragedy* in folk performances (as is present in classic Greek or modern theater). This is not to say that there are no serious incidents in folk scripts. They exist in plenty but they are never let to spoil the

over-all festive and humorous mood. Bakhtin (1984) explains this positive nature of folk forms:

> There is no pure negation in the popular-festive system of images; it tends to embrace both poles of becoming in their contradiction and unity. The one who is thrashed or slaughtered is decorated. The beating itself has a gay character; it is introduced and concluded with laughter. (p. 203)

Similar to the beating of the King in carnival, which is symbolic of destroying the old oppressive system, women in India often beat men in a socially sanctioned ritual during the festival of *Holi*. *Holi* is one of the prominent festivals of India with similarities to carnival. It is a lighthearted festival, full of fun. Women who hardly have a chance to resist male social hegemony in traditional Indian society get this one day to beat men, and they do a god job of it. Men getting the blows, similar to Bakhtin's carnival catchpoles at the occasion of weddings, cannot complain: "During the wedding feast the guests cuffed each other jokingly. The person who is subjected to these light blows could not complain; they were consecrated and legalized by custom" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 200).

A pertinent question that emerges out of this discussion of folk-festive, ritualistic, and performative forms is whether these folk forms have been actually designed to serve as *safety valves* in an oppressive society? Is it because oppressed people cannot do anything to change the oppressive social customs in real lives, they try to address them in entertainment forms? Another related question is whether folk-festive forms have become irrelevant in the modern society? Are they now vestigial organs of the society? Do they have any role to play in contemporary society? Bakhtin's (1984) thoughts on the question

of relevance of traditional folk-festive forms as communicative tools in the contemporary society are captured in his writing:

> But perhaps all these images are nothing but a dead and crippling tradition? Perhaps these little ribbons tied to the arms of the victimized Catchpole, these endless blows and abuses, these dismembered bodies and kitchen utensils, are nothing but the meaningless remnants of ancient philosophies, nothing but an empty form, a dead weight, which prevents the author from seeing and representing the true reality of modern times. This would be a most absurd supposition. True, the system of popular-festive images was developed and went on living over thousands of years. This development had its own scoria, its own dead deposits in manners, beliefs, prejudices. But in its basic line this system grew and was enriched; it acquired a new meaning, absorbed the new hopes and thoughts of the people. It was transformed in the crucible of the people's new experience. The language of images developed new and more refined nuances. Thanks to this process, popular-festive images became a powerful means of grasping reality; they served as a basis for an authentic and deep realism. Popular imagery did not reflect the naturalistic, fleeting, meaningless, and scattered aspect of reality but the very process of becoming, its meaning and direction. Hence the universality and sober optimism of this system. (p. 212)

The first question, i.e., whether folk-popular performances are just safety valves of the society or are they really capable of actual social change is more difficult to answer. There has not been a single study, particularly from a communication perspective,

analyzing the role of folk forms in social change. Also, no research, has attempted to test Bakhtin's claim of folk traditional forms' relevance in modern society. The present research project explores these difficult but important questions.

Several scholars have drawn upon Bakhtin's ideas, especially on the use of folk traditions such as *carnival* and the social dialogue they generate to shed light on 20th century social questions (Berrong, 1968; Bernstein, 1986; Danow, 1991; Haynes, 1995; Herschkop, 1999; Holoquist & Liapunov, 1990; Knowles, 1998; Macovski, 1997; Morson, 1986; Todorov, 1984; Wesling, 2003, Wills, 2001). For instance, Berrong (1968) draws upon Bakhtin's categorization of people into two distinct cultures based on their attitude toward laughter. He points out that laughter and comic forms were slowly excluded form the "official" culture (culture of the power establishment) over a period of time, and became an integral part of the "nonofficial culture" or the culture of "people":

> Those at this 'nonofficial level', the 'people', now had laughter as their exclusive property, and they developed their lives around it until it became the essence of their culture. With the 'people' these comic forms 'acquired a new meaning, were deepened and rendered more complex, until they became the expression folk consciousness, of folk culture'. (p. 10)

Bakhtinian thinking places laughter and fun forms as the basis of a community. When people have fun together, the feeling of community develops. Thus folk forms, which symbolize laughter, are important ingredients of a community where dialogue occurs among its members. As Berrong (1968) puts it: "Folk culture was essentially comic. Carnival, the single greatest expression of this culture, was 'organized on the basis of

laughter'. Popular culture was everything that official culture was not: changing, open, unstable, egalitarian" (p. 10). According to Wills (2001), Bakhtin argues that this egalitarianism of laughter represented by popular folk festive forms is important to start a change-oriented discourse in a society. As Bakhtin muses on carnival:

> Its wide popular character, its radicalism and freedom, soberness and materiality were transferred from an almost elemental condition to a state of artistic awareness and purposefulness. In other words, medieval laughter became at the Renaissance stage of its development the expression of a new free and critical historical consciousness. (p. 87)

According to Berrong (1968), Bakhtin's analysis of Rabelais'[10] work suggests that community-centered folk forms can potentially help the elites in power to step out of the "official" and serious culture (even if it is with one foot) and step into the world of ordinary people:

> If Rabelais became interested in popular culture to the point that he adopted its images and its very world view as the structuring principle of *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*, it was, Bakhtin argued, because Rabelais saw how thoroughly other it had become. So different and distinct was it from official culture that by using it images and its language, the language of the market- place, one could step outside the patterns of thought that official culture had imposed upon its members. In so doing, one could view the establishment, not as it wanted to be seen, as it made its members view it through the language and thus the thought patterns that it

[10] Rabelais was 16th century French writer whose work Bakhtin analyzed for his dissertation. He later modified it and published as *Rabelais and his world*.

> imposed upon them, but rather, as it really was. (pp. 10-11)

This analysis of Rabelais's scholarship of folk traditions by Bakhtin, as articulated by Berrong (1968) is especially helpful to the present study situated in the Indian context. The use of *Nautanki* for purposive social change by power elites in India is providing them an opportunity to come out of their secluded ivory towers and connect in some ways to ordinary people's culture. By stepping into a marginalized village culture through *Nautanki* can aid in recasting the dominant paradigm of communication of social change in a more participatory mould.

In *Mikhail Bakhtin: An Aesthetic for Democracy*, Ken Hirschkop (1999) argues that Bakhtin sees folk activities of the *public square* as an essential part of the *public sphere* that supports democracy. Oral culture of the public square, as opposed to written text-based culture, is concrete and ordinary, representing one of the primary requirements to spur an intersubjective and democratic discourse in the public sphere:

> The public square is an image of oral speech--everyday, informal language and conversation; the novel is, even in Bakhtin's philosophical account, written or printed, and thereby formalized communication. We may think that the first is concrete and ordinary, the latter abstract and secondary. (p. 253)

Indigenous folk forms in India such as *Nautanki* are central to the oral culture that builds and sustains the public square in rural north India. This, in turn, supports the formation of an intersubjective democratic public sphere.

It is important that the written word recognizes the importance of the oral word. For oral forms of communication to be effective tools of social discourse affecting public

policy, the elite/dominant paradigms of communication, symbolized by written word should understand and value the participatory paradigm of communication symbolized by oral culture. As Wills (2001) argued:

> Of central importance in any consideration of these questions is the status of popular festive forms within literature. For Bakhtin, in order for popular carnival to become politically effective it must enter the institute of literature. In *Rabalais and His World*, he argues that it is only in literature that popular festive forms can achieve the 'self-awareness' necessary for effective protest. (p. 86)

Although I strongly believe that folk forms should be given due recognition by the written literature to gain in political effectiveness, I disagree with Wills that folk forms such as *carnival* can only achieve their full public potential when they are adopted by the written word. To me, this can potentially symbolize a cooptation and appropriation of oral word by the written word making oral cultures even more disempowered. I argue that folk forms are essentially *performed* ways of knowledge and can exist on their own strength, regardless of help from the written word. What is required is the acceptance of performance as an alternative form of knowing and expressing. Dwight Conquergood (2002)'s scholarship (discussed later in this dissertation) speaks to this issue forcefully.

In reading scholarship inspired by Bakhtin, I was surprised and somewhat disappointed that although a lot has been written on how Bakhtin's scholarship has influenced text-based literature, barring few exceptions such as Hoy (1994) who studied football songs using Bakhtin's ideas, not many scholars have used his ideas to understand folk performances. Although scholars have talked a lot about the *carnival*, hardly any one

has engaged with the field to examine the attributive elements of this folk form. For Bakhtin, the critical discourse was not in the abstract forms of written language but in the multiple levels of real world speech. As Knowles (1998) argued:

> For Bakhtin, the reality of language lay not in the abstract norms of theoretical linguistics but out there, in the endless multiplicity and richness of actual speech, of dialect and idiolect, of slang and swearing, of trade and profession, of the street and dining room, of court and country, of past and present, of both literature and life, all subject to the everchanging contexts of society and history from the slogan of the day to the expression of an epoch. (p. 4)

The present dissertation tries to examine the elements of *carnival* at work in a real world performative tradition. I draw upon the elements of *carnival* to gain a richer understanding of *Nautanki* performances, especially how they spur social dialogue.

I also noted that most of the scholarship on Bakhtin is conducted by Western industrialized world scholars (including several from Russia). Few scholars from developing countries have incorporated Bakhtin's ideas in their understanding of indigenous performative forms. This point is noteworthy because the kind of folk traditions that Bakhtin comments upon are still amply prevalent in developing countries, particularly in rural areas. Thus the lack of the use of Bakhtin's ideas on folk culture by developing world scholars is a gap in social research in these countries that needs to be filled. The present dissertation is an attempt in this direction.

Performance as a Challenge to "Textocentrism"

An important voice that supports using performance as a communication strategy to involve under-privileged people in contemporary social change is that of Dwight Conquergood. Although his work uses both traditional as well as modern performative forms, and does not exclusively speak to the relevance of folk community folk forms in social change, Conquergood's work is very important to establish *performance* as a strategy for social change. Conquergood (2002) views performance as a communication strategy, which is a revolt against what he calls *textocentrism*. *Textocentrism,* according to him, is the undue privilege that is given to the written forms of knowledge. According to Conquergood, this text-centered privilege undermines the vast amount of non-written forms of knowledge in non-western cultures. He says: "The root metaphor of the text underpins the supremacy of Western knowledge systems by erasing the vast realm of human knowledge and meaningful action that is unlettered" (p. 312).

But Conquergood also warns that non-elites who use non-written forms of knowledge recognize the opacity of text and critique its implications in the historical processes of their oppression. Conquergood gives the example of the Garifuna people in Belize, an African-descended minority group that use the word *gapencillitin* (people with pencil) to refer to upper-class people. They use the word *mapencillitin* (people without pencil) to refer to rural and working class people. Thus "the pencil draws the line between haves and have-nots" (p. 314). So what are the modes of communication and knowledge transfer in non-textual cultures? According to Conquergood (2002), community performances, songs, spoken language are the main communication channels

in oral cultures. Thus, studying peoples' modes of performances becomes essential to know them and empathize with them. He claims that: "The consecutive liminality of performance studies lies in its capacity to bridge segregated and differently valued knowledges, drawing together legitimated as well as subjugated modes of inquiry" (p. 318).

As per Conquergood, if non-elite people in oral cultures are to be involved in the process of communication targeted towards their development, non-written forms such as performance should be privileged. Privileging performance should not be seen as undermining the text or the written knowledge. One is not against the other. In fact social change communicators can use multiple textual and non-textual channels for the best results. For Conquergood, *text* is just one of the many tools of performance.

Conquergood's scholarship is unique (and rare) in that he was both a theoretician as well as a practitioner of performance. Another important contribution of his work was that he used performance for communication in different cultures, from refugee camps in Thailand to the slums in Chicago, and found it effective in multiple locations (Conquergood, 1991). Conquergood's work in the refugee camp on the borders of Thailand and Laos is especially illuminative of performance's effectiveness in traditional non-western societies. In 1985, Conquergood was appointed at the Hmong refugee camp of Ban Vinai in Thailand as a consultant to the environmental health education program of the international rescue committee. When Conquergood arrived at the camp, refugees were not allowed to go out of the camp without the permission from the Thai military in-charge of the camp. There was a lot of mistrust and miscommunication between the

refugees and the officials of the camp (Conquergood, 1988). The health conditions were very bad in the camp, and worse, camp officials were not hopeful of any improvement in the conditions as they thought that people in the camp were beyond reform. In this scenario, Conquergood organized a series of participatory performances to improve health conditions in the camp. The performances involved both the refugee community and camp officials. As a result of performance, the tension between the camp officials and camp inhabitants eased, refugees' trust in outsiders increased, and health conditions relatively improved. One of the characters of Conquergood's performances, "Mother Clean" was particularly popular as a credible source of health information with audiences, and became a household name in the refugee camp. During his experience in camp Ban Vinai, Conquergood (1988) found that performance is particularly helpful in involving marginalized people in the discourse of social change:

> As a medium of exchange, performance draws us to the margins, the borders between Self and Other….Conceived as barter, a site of exchange, performance is a key to understanding 'how the deeply different can be deeply known without becoming any less different (Geertz 1983, p. 48).' The value of the exchange is in the encounter, the relations that are produced, not the objects. (p. 202)

Other scholars have drawn upon Conquergood's ideas to understand social change initiatives (Fine & Speer, 1992; Lamphere, 1992; Simons & Billig, 1994; Singhal & Rattine-Flaherty, 2006). Singhal and Rattine-Flaherty (2006) used Conquergood's ideas to analyze social change activities of Minga Perú, a non-governmental organization in the Peruvian Amazon. Instead of using "scientific" and text-based data-collection procedures

(survey questionnaires and the like), they elicited pencil sketches and photographs from respondents to gain an understanding of their worldviews. Their respondents, comprising children and women, used these simple pencils and disposable cameras to 'visually' articulate their perceptions of Minga Perú contributions to reproductive health, gender equality and social change in the Peruvian Amazon. Singhal and Rattine-Flaherty (2006) argue that "pencil sketches and photos represent important tools for communication research and praxis, providing an alternative to 'textocentrism' – the privileging of text, writing and the lettered word as a mode of comprehension and expression" (p. 313).

According to Fine and Speer (1992), one of the important points that Conquergood draws our attention to is the role that folk art plays for marginalized people to perform their identity, and in the process, strengthen it. Commenting on Conquergood's analysis of Hmong art form of *pa ndau* (embroidered flower cloths that depict Hmong migration stories), they note: "As, Conquergood concludes, cultural identity is not stable or given, but must be performed again and again, and more urgently in the situations of displacement, exile, and erasure" (Fine & Speer, 1992, p. 15). Conquergood argues that through *pa ndau, Hmong* stage "their identities as displaced persons, bear witness to their experience of exile, and tell their own history before Western historians create it from their own points of view" (Fine & Speer, 1992, p. 15). I think that *Nautanki* serves a similar function for rural Indian people as *pa ndau* serves for the Hmong. *Nautanki* gives villagers in north India an opportunity to perform their cultural identity. Villagers who have migrated to cities for employment return to their communities to participate in folk festive forms such as *Nautanki,* thus connecting to

their cultural roots. Also while folk or ordinary culture faces erasure by dominant urban culture, *Nautanki* serves as a means for rural people to resist this marginalization by celebrating their community-centered cultural identity.

Conquergood also draws our attention to the politics of branding an art form as "folk" by elite cultures. Fine and Speer (1992) point out: "Probing the politics of representing and displaying the story cloths [of Hmongs] in America, Conquergood shows how their classification as folk art renders them apolitical and non-threatening" (p. 15). Folk performing traditions in India such as *Nautanki* have often faced this situation. Historically, urban elites in India have offered to "conserve" rural art forms such as *Nautanki* as "folk heritage," suggesting their non-relevance in contemporary times as opposed to considering them as living forms of expressions of rural people's sensibilities. This is one of the reasons that in addition to the term *folk*, I consciously use Bakhtin's term, *popular-festive form* to refer to *Nautanki.*

I, as a folk performer-scholar, strongly identify with Conquergood because his research tries to understand performitivity of ordinary cultures reflexively and he is sympathetic to the ways of learning in marginalized cultures. Simons and Billig (1994) effectively highlight Conquergood's commitment to marginalized people in discussing his work with the streets gangs in Chicago:

> Conquergood is concerned with the voices of discontent, rather than contentment, and he recreates textually the lives of those living in the extremes of urban poverty. His prose expresses the hermeneutics of affirmation by way of a sympathetic 'counter-narrative' of the lives of Chicago gang members. Indeed he

> is savage in his response to sociologists who have textually assaulted the dignity of gang members. By writing in this way, Conquergood is doing more than offering ethnographic realism, or engaging in academic critique. He is also affirming rhetorically his community with the gang members themselves. His own textual practices attack and assault, just like the gang members, whose lives Conquergood celebrates. (p. 9)

The above analysis of Conquergood's scholarship resonates strongly with my own commitment to preserving and enhancing rural cultural traditions in India, and expresses my frustration with Indian elites. Indeed this dissertation is, in a way, a folk performer's response to the apathetic attitude of Indian elites toward the ordinary culture in their country. The present dissertation draws upon Conquergood's scholarship to understand the "counter-narratives" of ordinary culture in rural India in the face of its exclusion by urban elite culture. It also examines the ways people in Indian villages use their popular folk traditions like *Nautanki* to share their world with each other and experience a sense of community.

Again and again, Conquergood draws our attention to the necessity of understanding the language of the disempowered, which is culturally different from the language of those who are in power. Commenting upon Conquergood's research on the habitants of "Big Red", a dilapidated red-brick multi-apartment building known for its ethnic diversity and its gangs in Chicago's Albany Park, Lamphere (1992) notes:

> Conquergood's class analysis reminds us that power is constituted through a power/knowledge nexus (Foucault, 1972) and is embedded in language.

> Conquergood isolates what he calls the 'rhetoric of transgression' in the language used to describe Big Red. It was classified as dirty and dangerous; 'blight', 'cancer', and other terms evoking contagious disease were used. (p. 25)

Following Conquergood, it is important to deconstruct the language forms that are used to describe and understand a community not only by the outsiders but also by its own members. As Conquergood (2002) points out, these forms can be verbal as well as non-verbal, textual as well as non-textual. Performance traditions of a community are important cultural language forms that aid in understanding its inner workings. This dissertation is an attempt to examine these ideas of Conquergood in the light of *Nautanki* performances in rural India. *Nautanki* can potentially be deconstructed as a cultural language to understand the foundations of rural Indian community and consequently to frame purposive pro-social communication.

Performance as Post-Modern Public Rhetoric

Public rhetoric now is no longer considered as a practice that is concerned with producing objective theories or generating purely abstract theories, but is rather viewed as a "performance" that is interpreted and analyzed in "particular, interested, local contexts" (Lucaites, Condit, and Caudill, 1999, p. 12). Interestingly, now rhetoric is increasingly viewed as a performance of subjective perspectives of small groups rather than an expression of the whole community. For instance, Campbell (1973) thinks that classical male dominant rhetoric, which gives privilege to objective knowledge, fails to provide a useful guide for the rhetoric that can shape women's liberation. According to her, instead of a more traditional, mainstream platform for persuasion, rhetoric that uses

alternative strategies (such as raising the consciousness of small groups) is more suited to give voices to hitherto silenced groups. For Campbell (1973), classical rhetoric cannot give voice to marginalized groups (such as women) because it only appeals to audiences steeped in traditionally gendered norms.

This discussion of questioning the place of traditional rhetoric in contemporary society is as relevant in developing countries such as India as in the context of the U.S. For instance, for centuries, the dominant mode of social and political rhetoric in India was a discourse in Sanskrit, the language of the elites, particularly of elite men (Gangal & Hosterman, 1982). Women and low castes were not allowed to learn Sanskrit, and thus were excluded from the mainstream rhetoric. The results were disastrous for the Indian society in the form of oppression of "low" castes and marginalizing of women (Thapar, 1966). However, through folk and community performances these groups could express their voices. Community folk songs that are sung at the occasion of weddings in rural India are interesting examples of the use of performance by women to express themselves. These songs symbolize women's struggle to find their voice in a public sphere dominated by men. In these songs, women often make funny and sarcastic comments on men. They point out their weaknesses and assert women's power. The performance occasion (wedding) gives them a "right" or a "safe space", approved by tradition to make a mockery of men. They could not have done this normally using the dominant modes of discourse such as reading and writing.

In post-colonial times, the situation has become worse. English has replaced Sanskrit as the elite language of discourse. Majority of Indians (now even men) are

excluded from the dominant public sphere and decision making in India. English is spoken or understood by a tiny portion of Indians.[11] The upper and upper middle-classes that can communicate through English often look down upon ordinary people (the majority of population) who do not. It is ironical that these English-speaking Indians themselves feel marginalized when they come to the West and try to gain legitimacy in the mainstream rhetoric (Shome, 1996). Sadly, this class of Indians pays no attention to empower the marginalized sections in their own country. So what is the communication solution for ordinary non-elite people to participate in the social discourse and influence public policy in this hegemonic situation?

Performance as a pedagogy provides hope. As a potentially effective rhetorical strategy, community performance might be able to give expression to the voices of marginalized populations relying on oral means of communication (Conquergood, 2002). According to Wander (1984), the challenge for the rhetorical critic is to identify the "Third Persona" of texts. The "Third Persona" is the audience negated (ignored or excluded) by the dominant discourse. Participative community performances are clearly more inclusive as they do not require literacy. Excluded or ignored audiences such as "low" castes and women in India have more chances to participate in public rhetoric through indigenous community performances. Performance might give them an opportunity to modify or *sabotage* the dominant oppressive rhetoric in their society (as in the case of Indian women singing wedding songs). Also, as performance is less rigid compared to a literal text, and is inherently improvisational in nature, it provides more

[11] Around 15 to 20 percent of Indian population is estimated to speak or understand English. However, people who can also write in English is much lower than this figure (English in India, www.indianchild.com, 2000).

space for its participants to derive multiple expressions and interpretations (Barba, 2000). Using Foss and Griffin's (1995) terminology, performance can be viewed as an "invitational rhetoric" that encourages the exploration of other rhetorics that do not involve the singular interactional goal of persuasion. Thus performance can be viewed as a vehicle to a challenge to the "objective" notions of hegemonic modernity. It is an expression of post-modern, subjective, and multiple meanings. In other words, performance can be a potentially effective communication tool to give voice to subjugated knowledges within a culture.

Community Performance as a Tool to Make Rhetorical Discourse More Understandable

As indigenous performances are grounded in local culture, community members understand them easily. Here lies the usefulness of indigenous performances to make difficult and technical rhetorical discourse accessible for these audiences. According to Fisher (1984), since the idea of rationality has become a matter of argumentative competence in specialized fields, the public and its discourse are mostly deemed irrational. According to Fisher, this limits the possibilities of bridging the gaps between the experts and the public, and between various segments of the public. Thomas Goodnight (1982) expressed similar views. He noted that words and symbols in rhetoric are sometimes designed to keep audiences *watching* as opposed to inviting them to *participate* in the construction of a future. Edward Schiappa (1989) is also concerned with non-specialized audiences' difficulty in understanding a specialized rhetoric that has been consciously made too complicated to understand. For instance, "Nukespeak" or

nuclear rhetoric in the U.S. uses metaphor, euphemisms, and technical jargon to portray it in a positive and “neutral” way. Thus it is hard for public to be critical of this rhetoric. For him, the important task of the rhetorical criticism is to maintain and promote alternative discussion options for audiences that might otherwise disappear from the view (Schiappa, 1989).

Participative performances have the potential to serve as a rhetorical strategy to maintain discussion options for audiences by translating technical rhetoric in a vocabulary that people can understand. An example would be helpful to illustrate this point. The rhetoric of family planning and its methods such as condoms, intrauterine devices (IUDs), vasectomy, etc has been too technical and full of jargon for Indian rural and semi-rural people. Most of these people are scared of family planning because of their lack of understanding it properly. This fear was the main reason that the heavy-handed family planning campaign implemented by the Indian government in the 1970s failed (even backfired). In 1990s, when the government resumed the campaign it incorporated (at least in the state of Uttar Pradesh) community folk performances as the major rhetorical strategy. During performances, the concept of family planning was made simpler in colloquial terms and explained through interesting narratives. Anecdotal evidence indicates that results are heartening. People increasingly feel that they are a part of the family planning discourse, and acceptability of family planning methods is increasing (SIFPSA, 2003).

Discourse on Indigenous Performance Traditions of India

Only a handful of scholars have written about Indian folk performance traditions and most of the material is, unfortunately, dated. These facts signify a lack of enthusiasm among educated urban people in India toward rural folk performance traditions. The scarcity of literature also signifies that rural performers and audience members do not have the educational training that could enable them to write about their own art form. Even if they wrote something, it was perhaps in indigenous languages, which never saw the light of the day. During my field trip, I heard about many literary pieces on *Nautanki* and other folk forms written in Indian native languages, which no one seemed to know where one could find. Since only a few Indian scholars have written about Indian performance traditions, and even fewer on *Nautanki*, I review all the material here that I could find on north Indian folk forms in general. I have included the literature that is evenly remotely related to my dissertation. I have also included the major pieces written by non-Indian scholars on *Nautanki* or similar folk forms. As the numbers of pieces are few and themes discussed in them not much varied, I have chosen, after some deliberation, to review authors separately, rather than grouping their work together according to different themes.

What do we exactly mean by the term “community folk performance” or for that matter by the term “performance”? There can be many definitions of this word (Goffman, 1959). Richard Schechner (1983)’s definition of performance is helpful. In his book *Performative Circumstances: From the Avant Garde to Ramlila*, he defines “performance” in a much broader sense than “performing *arts*”:

> Performance is a wide range of activities-- from theater and dance to sports, from entertainment to ritual and healing, from children playing make-believe to the *swarupas* [divine characters] of Ramlila[12] incorporating in their very bodies the steadfast beliefs of millions who are both spectators and worshippers. (p. xi)

Many Indian theater scholars believe that folk or community[13] performances are still relevant in contemporary society. The literature on folk theater in India is mostly written by scholars living in cities. These scholars, except very few, are not clear about what role folk arts can play in a "modern" society in addition to the traditional role they have been playing in village societies. Any review of the folk performance literature of India cannot escape the analysis of the cultural politics that forms the basis of this literature. The following review of Indian literature on folk performance traditions is no exception.

According to Nemi Chandra Jain, folk theater is the basic component of Indian theatrical tradition (Jain, 1967). According to Jain, folk theater provided more variety to its audiences than the Sanskrit (classic) theater. Most importantly, folk theater is still *living* at various levels of Indian society unlike the Sanskrit theater, which died a thousand years ago. Jain believed that no urban theater worker can ignore folk theater for long. The need for this connection to folk theater is that a large part of Indian cultural tradition is associated with folk culture, which consists of people's day- to-day rituals, festivals, music, dance, and literature. Since Jain was one of the leading theater scholars

---

[12] Ramlila is a very popular annual performance ritual in India. It portrays the life and doings of Lord Rama (one of the incarnations of God in Hinduism). Ramlila is performed every evening for 2 to 3 hours continuously for 10 days in the month of October/ November.

[13] I use the terms "folk" and "community" theater interchangeably as in India, folk theater is invariably performed with the whole local community (say a village) involved as performers or audience members.

of India and was also the director of the National School of Drama of India, it would be important to discuss his thoughts in greater detail.

While sympathetic to folk theater, Jain (1967) noted that the art form had become stagnant in India in 1960s. As theater in India was mainly a domain of rural areas for about 1,200 years (before the 19th century), it became, and remained, isolated from the developments in art and literature in the country. Indian theater became "folk" and could not make substantial progress. The author does not explain clearly what he means by the term "progress", and why folk theater cannot be progressive. According to Jain, the renaissance of Indian theater happened 100 to 200 years back under the influence of foreign (British) power. One harmful consequence of this, for him, was that the development of the modern theater in India had been more "imposed" rather than a result of a natural internal force. Urban theater in India does not have enough audience to sustain it commercially and even after decades, the Western- influenced urban theater has not been able to establish itself in India. While it has become *fashionable* among Indian elites, again under Western influence, to discuss folk theater's revival, this interest is superficial, similar to these elites' interest in cosmetics or new fashion. Jain argued that if theater has to express the sentiments of the country, it needs to rediscover elements that can connect modern Indian theater to its past.

Is government's support the answer to the conservation of folk theater in India? Government officials, due to their lack of deep understanding of folk traditions, want to either *conserve everything*, or *reform everything*. Both of these approaches are

undesirable as the conservation of folk tradition is different from the preservation of ancient architectural monuments because folk forms are *living* (Jain, 1967).

Although supportive of the importance of folk theatrical forms, Jain did not seem to be very hopeful about their future. He did not offer any suggestions on how to make them contemporary, particularly, in "non-governmental" ways. On the one hand, he thought that the Indian folk forms are *living*, on the other, he opposed changes that were experienced by folk theater in the last 50 years. For instance, Jain opposed women actors playing women's parts in *Nautanki* (until 50 years ago, men used to play women's characters in *Nautanki*). According to Jain (1967), introduction of women had vulgarized *Nautanki*. It seems that Jain had his own ideal image of folk theater that he wanted to preserve.

I believe that the changes in any art form are demands placed on it by the changing times, and it is not possible to freeze a certain historical rendering of it. Thus conservation of any art form cannot be a selective process where a group of people decides what types of changes are desirable and what are not. In the natural course of history, the art form will accept those changes that are necessary for its survival and reject the rest. Thus, we can promote either "change", or "conservation". We cannot be half-hearted about any one, or both of these ways. In the past few decades, *Nautanki* is trying to change and make itself contemporary even if in limited ways, through such measures as the introduction of women actors, writing scripts on new themes, and experimenting as a channel of social change.

Joshi (1967) established the antiquity of Indian folk theater and its intimate relationship with country's traditions, festivals, and religion. Like Jain, he claimed that after the glory of ancient times, Indian theater was almost destroyed by foreign invasions. According to Joshi, theater in India was revived after the coming of British, and now has become an integral part of everyday life in India. It is difficult to agree with Joshi's claim that Indian theater was destroyed by foreign invasions as he does not take into account the continuance of many Indian folk theatrical performing traditions such as *Nautanki* and Alha (a ballad of valor of Indian Rajputs) since 12th century A.D to the present times (Hansen, 1992). Joshi himself contradicts his claim when he accepts that puppet plays (called *kathputli* in India) and *Bahrupiyas* (imitators) continued to be performed in the medieval times.

Agrawal (1976), in addition to being a folk theater scholar, was also an active audience member and an organizer/impresario of *Nautanki*. He organized numerous *Nautanki* shows in and around Mathura over the past four decades. He was an important member of *Brij Kala Kendra*, an organization founded in the early 1960s for supporting and revitalizing the *Nautanki* tradition. His book: *Saangit, Ek Lok Natya Parampara* (1976) is one of the very few works, which have tried to document the development of *Nautanki* comprehensively, discussing its history, theory, and practice. Agrawal regrets that because of "the crushing inflation of these days, *Brij* [region around Mathura] has become like a desert culturally" (p. 1). He laments: "Thirty-Thirty five years ago, when we were kids, people used to spend thousands of rupees to organize and enjoy *Bhagat* [Nautanki on religious themes] performances" (p. 1). Obviously this statement expresses

Agrawal's pain like many other folk theater enthusiasts, on the decline of the *Nautanki* folk theater traditions in the 1960s and 1970s. But writing in the 1970s, Agrawal was not totally pessimistic about the situation of folk theater in India. He was of the opinion that if culturally aware people get together, *Nautanki* could be saved. Agrawal worked for many years with All India Radio (the government-run national radio corporation of India) and produced many *Nautanki* performances to be broadcast on radio. Ironically, although Agrawal thought that *Nautanki* is declining due to the competition from emerging mass media, he also believed that mass media can be, and should be, used to preserve and support community folk traditions.

Rajaram Shastri (1987) in his book *Hariyana ka Lok Manch* writes in detail about *Saang* (a regional variation of *Nautanki).* Shashtri argues that although there are many different folk performance traditions in India, they show many similar features. One of these features is the "open stage". Almost all folk forms are performed on a makeshift stage made of wooden platforms (commonly used to sleep and sit in rural areas). Another common feature is the minimal use of sets and properties allowing for creativity on part of folk directors, actors, and audiences to establish the mood or context. Audiences and performers start conversing with each other in the middle of a performance. The audience becomes performers and performers become the audience. Audiences many times cheer actors informally during the performance if they are happy with their work. Sometimes when an actor has finished his part or is waiting for his cue, he casually smokes from a *Hukkah* (Indian smoking instrument), kept in a corner of the stage. No one is distracted by his behavior. The whole cast is usually sitting on the stage itself while a performance

is in progress, and freely converse with each other. Many times, the performance is stopped temporarily to announce the name of audience members, who pleased with the performance, hand out cash awards for the actors.

Balwant Gargi (1991), a modern Indian playwright of Northern India, discusses in his book, *Folk Theater of India,* most of the major Indian folk theatrical forms -- *Jatra, Nautanki, Bhavai, Tamasha, Ramlila, Raslila, Therukoothu, Yakshagana,* and *Chhau*. According to Gargi, the city theater in India, which is "modeled on the nineteenth–century picture frame stage, has little new to offer and ancient classical dance dramas are esoteric" (p. ix). Thus in Gargi's opinion, the folk forms of rural India are the only arts that have "exciting forms, evolved by actual battling with the needs of the audience and the actors" (p. ix).

Suresh Awasthi (1983) examines the intimate relationship between culture, performance, and communication in India in his work *Drama: The Gift of Gods. Culture, Performance and Communication in India*. He treats various aspects of traditional Indian theater (both classical and folk) in much detail, particularly its aesthetics and practice. According to Awasthi, before and immediately after India's independence, many "Western oriented" playwrights and directors in India believed that indigenous theater had become irrelevant, and could not express contemporary concerns. But "the great cultural upsurge of the post-independence has proved them wrong" (p. ii).

According to Awasthi (1983), Indian theater, both classical and folk, are based on the theory of *rasa* (translated variously as sentiment, aesthetic pleasure, or mood), which is created by performers and audience jointly. *Rasa* is created by performers through an

emphasis on imagination by using hand gestures, postures, music, etc., rather than depiction through sets and properties. Make-up is also not elaborate in most Indian folk forms. According Awasthi, the relationship between the *dramatic text* and the *performance text* is very complex in Indian performance traditions. While the *dramatic text* is the playwright's script ready to be performed, *performance text* is the *actual* performance created through the collaborative efforts of actors, musicians, director, and audiences. *Rasa* is created when the *dramatic text* is enacted as a *performance text*. Although, Awasthi believes that both classical and folk theater is guided by *rasa* theory, the transition of *dramatic text* into *performance text* follows a much more strictly defined code in the classical Indian theater than in folk theater. Awasthi emphasizes that both performers and audiences participate in creating a *performance text*. Community performances in India are highly participative, rendering them as useful spaces of community communication.

Like Awasthi, Kapila Vatsyayan (1971) has also examined the aesthetic theories underlying community performing arts of India. Kapila Vatsyayan is a well-known urban scholar of Indian traditional arts who was trained in the classical Indian dance. More importantly, she has been associated with the government efforts in the realm of "conservation" of arts as a bureaucrat-expert, being intimately involved with various government organizations such as Sangeet Natak Academy (The national academy for music and theater), and the Indira Gandhi National Center for the Arts. Due to her important position in the government, Kapila Vatsyayan has been one of the people who shaped the destiny of Indian arts in many ways in the post-Indian independence years.

In *The Performing Arts in Asia* published by UNESCO, Kapila Vatsyayan (1971) perceives the “magicality”, “spirituality” and “improvisational nature” as the important shared elements of the performing arts of Asia in general:

> …. These general impressions, of an art which is spiritual and magical in character, highly charged with literary myth and legend, presented through a seemingly improvised dance, drama, opera style to a highly percussion accompaniment, provide us with a clue to an understanding of the fundamental foundations of the performing arts in Asia. (p. 16)

Vatsyayan is concerned with two basic questions related with Indian performance: (1) How did traditional Indian theater and other performing arts of India survive and develop through successive historical periods? (2) How was the dramatic theory of Indian performing arts was formulated and practiced by creative artists?

According to Vatsyayan (1971), “these [folk] forms have continued through the transmitting power of the oral tradition" (p. 17). Dramatic theory in India was codified as early as the second century A.D. by performance theoreticians such as Bharata Muni. Muni’s treatise *Natya Shashtra* has, more or less, guided the practice of formal urban performances in India. Vatsyayan also conceptualizes Indian performance experience as *total theater*. One of the definitions of *total theater*, according to her, is “the total amalgam of various media in integrated manner which can satisfy at once both intellectual and popular desire” (p. 18). According Vatsyayan, Indian traditional theater comes close to this definition as “it achieves a totality of participative experience” (p.

19). But Vatsyayan does not explain how one reaches the *totality of the participative experience*. The concept needs to be explored further.

Sometimes Vatsyayan contradicts herself. On one hand, she says that the traditional performing arts of Asia have survived because they "have been an integral part of the process of living: their traditional content has been given contemporary validity through an ever-renewing and re-interpretative oral conditions" (p. 26). On the other hand, she is afraid that these forms are in danger of being wiped off as their frame of reference is "challenged and endangered through the impact not only of the West but of modern technology" (p. 27). Why can't Indian performing arts reinterpret themselves in these new circumstances? After all, they are *living* art forms not museum pieces. One of the interests of the present research is to explore the flexibility of Indian performing traditions that have enabled them to survive over a period of time.

Another interesting point from the perspective of this research project is Vatsyayan's (1971) discussion of the communication process during an Indian traditional performance:

> The process of communication was complete only when the spectator and reader, i.e. an initiated one, was put in a similar state of mind. The Sanskrit word for the reader or spectator is *rasika*: he is a potential artist (*sahrdaya*) himself. The bridge of communication was established when the familiar was revealed through a known language of symbols. (p. 28)

Vatsyayan's explanation of the communication process fits more closely the classical performing arts of India more where the symbols for particular expressions are rigidly

codified and audiences know and appreciate them. It is less suitable to understand folk forms, where spontaneous improvisations are the norm. There is a need to better understand the communication processes that form a "bridge" between the audiences and performers during community folk performances.

In a subsequent book, *Traditional Indian Theater: Multiple Streams*, Vatsyayan (1995) gives a general history and description of many Indian traditional performance forms: *Kudiyattam, Yakshgan, Bhagvatmela* and *Kuchipudi, Chau, Mayurbhanj chau, Puralia Chau, Ankia Nat* and *Bhaona, Ramayan* and *Ramlila, Raslila* and *Krishnalila, Yatra, Bhavai, Swang, Khyaal, Nautanki*, and *Tamasha*. She avoids the often-used word "folk" to describe these forms. According to her, these forms are neither *folk* nor *classical* in the traditional sense but are expressions of mixed elements. Although, these traditional forms are quite distinct from each other, they show a shared strength of structure. Vatsyayan's writings represent an effort of a *cultural outsider* (urban scholar) trying to view folk and traditional theater that is popular in the "countryside". Such efforts, as discussed earlier, have tended to treat the indigenous folk or "traditional" forms as museum artifacts.

Adi Rangacharya (1971) does not treat Indian traditional forms as museum artifacts. His chapter "The Folk Stage" in his own edited book *The Indian Theater* presents a thoughtful account of the development of folk theater in India. He claims that Indian performance traditions were revived during the late medieval period (15th century A.D. to 18th century A.D.) under the influence of *Bhakti*[14] and *Sufi* (Muslim counterpart

[14] *Bhakti* literally means devotion to a personal god. This notion developed in a religious and social movement in medieval India and produced many noted saint-poets.

of *Bhakti*) movements. This view differs from the writings of Jain (1967) and Joshi (1967), discussed previously who believe that Indian theater was revived during British colonial times.

Rangacharya also highlighted the common features in the folk theatrical forms from different parts of India. This commonality, according to Rangacharya (1971) is amazing, since these geographical parts were almost never politically united in India. Moreover, given the scarce modes of transportation to cover long distances in India, the people who practiced these different folk forms hardly, if ever, came in contact with each other until the 20th century. Then how come we find structural similarities in these forms? According to the Ragacharya, it was due to the wandering *Bhakti* saints that similar performance features were introduced in different folk forms in different locations in India. For instance, an interesting common feature is that many of the Indian folk forms are performed overnight. Rangacharya traces this feature back to the tradition of *Charana-Bhakti-Harikatha* in the *Bhakti* period. This tradition involved a community waking up whole night to sing the glories of Hindu gods like *Krishna* or *Rama.* Led by a narrator, these night sessions involved music, dance, and sometimes enactments of god's *leelas* (or actions). Later, folk theater in general adopted all-night performances. According to Rangacharya (1971), *Bhakti* saints also introduced some features of the classical ancient Sanskrit theater (prevalent before 8th century A.D.) in folk forms such as the practice of *Poorva Ranga* (an invocation to various gods before the beginning of actual performance), and the characters of *sutradhar* (the narrator, or the stage manager

acting as a link between the audiences and actors) and *court jester,* who apart from providing a humorous break, fulfills the function of voicing audiences' concerns on stage.

Rangacharya also highlighted some features of folk theater, which distinguishes it from the classical theater, which were generally looked down upon by society's elites but because of which, folk theater gained its popularity and character. For instance, *Natyashashtra* (the classical "elite" Indian theater text) complains that the folk theater was comprised of ordinary rural elements (*gramya-dharma),* "ignorance, and nothing of knowledge or instruction" (p. 69). Other supporters of classical drama complain of "vulgarity" in folk theater. But the bottom line for Rangacharya (1971) is that whatever the elements of folk theater, they make it immensely popular with its audiences:

> Folk-stage is there because people are there to enjoy it; people enjoy it because medium is the one known to them. What we call vulgarity is not an essential feature of the folk-stage, nor is it vulgarity in the experience of the audience. It was a stage created by them and for themselves. It must change with changes in their experiences, in their ways of life and in their living conditions. Perhaps they might not be enjoying the vulgarity as such but the art and cleverness behind it. (p. 70)

From a communication perspective, the Rangacharya claims that people enjoy their community folk performance because (1) it is a "medium known to them" and (2) "it is a stage created by them and for themselves" is extremely important. This familiarity of audience with folk theater as *their own* medium makes the folk performances an

important vehicle to carry messages with little “noise” (the loss of information due to the unfamiliarity of the medium).

Varadpande (1992), in his *History of Indian Theater*: *Lokranga, Panorama of Indian Theater,* defines folk theater as “theater which originated and evolved among, and has been transmitted through, the common people” (p. 3). A problem with this definition is that author does not define whom he considers as “common” people. I suppose he uses this word to distinguish between the cultural “elites” and “non-elites” of Indian society. One fall-out of such definitions is that over a period of time they create a group of *cultural have-nots* in a society. Cultural have-nots are the people who are “common”, whose culture is “ordinary”, and who are looked down upon by those who belong to the so-called “high culture”.

However, Vardpande (1992), explains the communicative nature of folk entertainment in a succinct and interesting way:

> It (folk) is a kind of entertainment, which is not entertainment alone. It carries within it the entire folk culture with all its social and religious institutions. We find reflected in folk theatre the cults, customs, rituals, and beliefs of common people. It assumes different forms and fulfills multiple functions. (p. 3)

Also, according to the Varadpande (1992), the craft and structure of the Indian folk theater differs from the classical and western influenced Indian urban theater at the very basic level:

> Folk theater encompasses the entire gamut of performing arts, including art forms like magic, acrobatics, martial arts or any other device it deems useful. Often theater vast

> in scope, does not remain confined to a small stage, but converts the entire locality into a theater. (p. 3)

It is possible that this inclusive characteristic of Indian folk theater that "converts the entire locality into a theater" makes it an effective communication channel in a community. A folk performance can possibly convert community audience members into "actors" participating actively in the performance. According to Varadpande (1992), folk theater does not have rigid boundaries; it gives villagers a platform where they can communicate with each other, the performers, and their environment.

Varadpande (1992) thinks that the Indian folk theater forms can be divided in two general categories: *religious* and *secular*. This clear-cut categorization is questionable. The line between so-called religious and secular elements is blurred in Indian folk theater. Many forms that are categorized by the author as religious (such as *Raasleela*, meaning "the acts of Krishna") often incorporate secular narratives and vice-versa. The basic characteristic of folk theater, whether it is religious or secular, which Varadpande (1992) highlights is that it is people's *own* communication medium.

The Proceedings of the Round Table on the Contemporary Relevance of Traditional Theatre in 1971 provided platform for an in-depth discussion of the contemporary relevance of Indian traditional performance traditions. The round table was organized by the *Sangeet Natak* (1971), the journal of the Sangeet Natak Akademi (the Indian government body overlooking performing arts in India) and its proceedings were published. This round table provides an excellent account of urban theater scholars/practioners' views on the relevance of traditional theater in their modern work.

Almost all the important urban theater workers of the post-independence India were invited to this round table.[15] The proceedings, while useful, do not contribute much in assessing the internal state of community performance traditions in India and their contemporary relevance. Why? Because not even one folk traditional performance practitioner was invited to this round table. However, the round table's proceedings reflect some interesting dimensions of urban theater's search for roots in the traditional community performances. How genuine this search has been is debatable.

Habib Tanvir, director and playwright, who has done noteworthy work in the use of folk theater for contemporary expression, noted in the round table proceedings:

> As we make progress and industries encroach upon our rural economy into these areas where these [folk] forms exist and flourish, these forms suddenly change and also die. They die same as human bodies do and are reformed . . . the reformation is not being helped through any vision on the part of these who really decide things in authority. (p. 31)

Suresh Awasthi, an influential theater scholar, discussed earlier, has a different view in this regard:

> It seems to me it is going to be an inter-action and in the very process of your absorption, creatively as playwright, as director, you are also going to revitalize these forms. This is what has happened during the last 5-10 years. (p. 33)

[15] Participants of the round table were- Utpal Dutt, Dina Gandhi, Shanta Gandhi, J. C. Mathur, E. Alkazi, S. Awasthi, P. L. Deshpande, Mohan Rakesh, Girish Karnad, Badal Sircar, Habib Tanvir, Sheila Bhatia, Vijay Tendulkar, Satyadev Dubey, G. S. Pillai, Romesh Chander, Kapila Vatsyayan, Balwant Gargi, N. C. Jain, B. V. Karanth, and Manoranjan Das.

Another point, important in relation to a new role for traditional folk theater in the contemporary scenario, was brought out by Habib Tanvir:

> This particular country with its social, economic and political needs requires middle-class people, the intelligentsia, to go out and be articulate and express the opinion about hygiene, about various things in terms of theater and be able to go and approach the people and guide them. . . . I today am firmly of the opinion that the traditional theater forms ought to be more effectively utilized in this particular manner in political plays and social plays and go out to the people. (p. 31)

Some folk artists are indeed working to take theater "to the people". The huge folk media campaign, to promote reproductive health, supported by Indian government, United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and JHU/CCP (mentioned earlier), in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh is one example. These kinds of projects provide valuable opportunities to understand the contemporary relevance of traditional folk theater. However, little systematic research was conducted on the effectiveness of folk forms in these efforts. An opportunity lost.

Although a few speakers in the round table touched on the relevance of traditional performance forms in contemporary[16] society, most of the speakers delved on how they can use folk and traditional theater in the modern urban theater. So the seminar proceedings are more suitable to understand the relevance of traditional theater in urban theater, rather than the larger contemporary relevance of the traditional theater itself.

Sangeet Natak again came out with a special issue on the *Traditional Idiom in Contemporary Theatre* in 1985. This special issue is kind of a continuation of the round

[16] However, it was "contemporary" as in 1971.

table organized by Sangeet Natak Akademi in 1971 about the contemporary relevance of traditional theater.[17] The title "contemporary relevance of traditional theater" makes a clear division between "contemporary theatre" and "traditional theatre". It signifies the assumption of the participants that "contemporary theatre" is essentially different from "traditional theatre". When traditional theater is performed in contemporary times, how can it not be contemporary? A related question is who defines *contemporariness*? Is the *contemporary* in villages not contemporary because it is not part of urban (center of power) contemporariness?

According to the editor of the issue, Nemichandra Jain, there was a marked difference in the situation of traditional idiom in contemporary theater in 1985 from 1971:

> One of the most significant developments in modern Indian theatre during the last one decade or more is its increasing interaction with the traditional theatre forms of different regions. This has affected all aspects of our theatre activity- including playwriting, staging methods, acting and scenic design- and has produced some outstanding plays and performances. (p. 7)

However, apart from a few performances, this interaction between the traditional and contemporary (urban) theater did not flourish as urban theater failed to attract large audiences. Jain ponders on the probable reasons for this situation:

---

[17] The participants of this special issue were- K.N. Panikkar, Vijaya Mehta, Bansi Kaul, Rajinder Nath, M.K. Raina, Manoj Mitra, Chandrasekhar kambar, G. Sankara pillai, G.P. Deshpande, Kironmoy Raha, Rudra Prasad Sengupta, Dnyaneshwar Nadkarni, Lokendra Arambam, Naa Muthuswami, Suresh Awasthi, and Shanta Serbjeet Singh.

> Traditional theatre survives only in the countryside from which most of our West-oriented urban theatre people have remained cut-off. There is a real danger, therefore, that like many Westerners they may also be attracted towards the 'exotic' in the traditional theatre forms, mostly for their novelty and appeal for the fashionable city crowds rather than the artistic relevance of these forms. (p. 12)

Shanta Gandhi, one of the authors in the volume, goes deeper in the problem related to the difficulties in using "traditional" idioms in the "contemporary" theater:

> On the whole, a saturation point has been reached in this line of experimentation and there is not much hope of raising the level of exploration unless we are able to build up a team of actors specially trained for the purpose. Even those producers who have more or less a clear idea about what needs to be done are not able to translate their conception in actual performance because the [urban] actors do not possess adequate skills of the type required for such an undertaking. (p. 16)

The above complaint of Shanta Gandhi raises the question that if urban actors do not have skills to express themselves in traditional idioms then why can't urban directors recruit folk actors for their work? Perhaps they distrust the intellectual capabilities of folk actors. Folk theater, and its artists have repeatedly shown that they are capable of creating plays about *their* contemporary circumstances (Hansen, 1992; Sharma, 2004). If urban theater directors argue that folk actors cannot express urban realities then they should not use traditional idiom in their work in the first place. Every artistic idiom is integrally related with its own social context and so is the case with the traditional folk idiom. Why do urban theater directors use traditional idiom to give expressions to their

urban ethos? Ultimately, the problem boils down to one of cultural snobbery. The urban "intellectually sophisticated" theater workers wish to reap the benefits of the traditional idiom but look down upon popular rustic folk theater.

Another seminar, specifically focused on the relationship between communication and traditional media (IIMC, 1981), was organized by the Indian Institute of Mass Communication (IIMC), and the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) in 1981. As the name suggests, IIMC is the national institute established by the government of India to train students and government employees in mass media practices. FTII is the leading cinema training institution in India. A monograph was published from this seminar titled: *Communication and the Traditional Media*: *Papers and Proceedings of Seminar Organized by I.I.M.C. and the Film and Television Institute of India, Pune.*

This monograph is a compilation of papers on how Indian traditional media forms can be used for communication. The description on the cover jacket says: "since the reach of the 'Modern Media' [television was in its formative stage in India when this seminar was held] is inadequate, the traditional and modern media might be regarded as playing complementary roles in communication". It was also felt that for developing rural areas of India, traditional forms could be used as communication support. The traditional media were assigned only the "supporting" role to mass media. The mass media were considered as the main vehicle for social change.

Theoretically, several papers in this seminar were interesting and pointed to useful directions about research on traditional media. For instance, Arun Shroff, the then director of Bombay Doordarshan (Television) station, notes that although traditional

media forms were said to be disappearing due to competition from the modern mass media, radio and television helped to revitalize traditional forms by encouraging folk artists to present programs on mass media and earn a livelihood. Other papers were on themes such as traditional forms and modern message, traditional change-agents among rural communities, traditional media and adult education, folk media for better communication, traditional media for social change, and the contemporary relevance of India's traditional media.

The basic problem that all the authors in this seminar struggled with was how to address and resolve the sweeping societal changes with traditional forms of community entertainment. Also, although the seminar was focused solely on the use of traditional media in communication for development, it is rather unfortunate that not a single paper in the seminar was data-based from a field-based folk media project. Thus, most of the papers in the monograph are "in the air" opinions of participants without research evidence. Authors appear to be articulating writing from their hunches, rather than supporting arguments with evidence. The monograph has no bibliography at the end. Moreover, most of the authors were government bureaucrats who were not directly connected with folk or traditional media. This situation reflects the larger tragedy of communication studies in India where government officials and elites still retain and perpetuate the colonial condescending attitude towards ordinary culture.

Some writings on Indian folk performance traditions focused more on their anthropological dimensions rather than the performative aspects. One of them is the book titled *Lok,* edited by Piyush Dahiya (2002) and published by one of the prominent

organizations involved in the folk arts of India-- Bhartiya Lok Kala Mandal. *Lok* includes anthropological works about Indian tribal and folklore. The essays in this volume show how everyday tribal and village life issues (such as men-women social relationships, romance, sex, marriage, rituals, etc.) are reflected in the songs and theater forms of various regions of India. In the introduction of the book, there is an analysis of the relationship between the "classical" and the "folk". Acharya, a theater scholar, defines folk culture in the book's introduction as "the specific expression of human creativity in a local context" and notes that:

> Classical art is nothing but the exploration and codification of the essence of creative folk experiences. Classical art, though absorbs from, and highlights the timelessness of folk forms, become stagnant and codified over a period of time. It has to take back freshness again from folk to revive itself (introduction, translated from Hindi).

G. S. Agrawal (2000)'s book *Gyarah Nukkad Natak* highlights a variation of community folk performances called *Nukkad Natak* (Hindi equivalent of *street theater*). Street theater, in comparison to folk performance traditions, is relatively a recent phenomenon all over the world. Street theater came into existence as a political propaganda tool, mainly after World War II. Specifically, communist or leftist movements have used it for political resistance around the world.

Agrawal (2000) covers the development of street theater in India. Street theater, according to Agrawal, came into prominence in India as a result of the communist intellectual movement in the 1940s. Agrawal collected eleven popular Indian street plays

in his volume. In the introduction of the book, he traces the origins of street theater to folk theater. According to Agrawal (2000), street theater has taken some features from folk theater such as- minimal use of costumes, sets, and properties; more emphasis on dialogues and acting rather than on scenic design; easy to understand language; and ample use of music and dance.

There are also important differences between folk theater and street theater, both on the structural as well as content level. It is important to highlight these differences because many people confuse folk or popular theater with street theater and think them to be the same. Street theater does not require any stage to be performed unlike the traditional folk theater. While folk theater requires at least a makeshift platform, street theater can be performed on streets, road crossings, market place-- almost anywhere-- where it can get an audience. Themes of street theater and folk theater also differ. While folk theater is popular theater, taking its themes unconsciously from anything that is popular with people (such as mythology, religion, contemporary heroes, socio-political conditions), street theater is consciously designed “propaganda” political theater, offering resistance to dominant mainstream market forces and promoting politico-economic change. Street theater has advocated more radical political themes than folk theater.

In any case, both “folk” and “street” theaters are community performance forms that involve audiences in the communication process and have a potential to address development and social issues. Some of street theater’s practitioners such as Augusto Boal (1985) in Brazil, and the late Safdar Hashmi in India have written about its use to spread political and social awareness among masses. Boal notes, “all theatre is

necessarily political, because all the activities of man are political and theater is one of them" (p. ix).

One of the important works on Indian folk performances that specifically focuses on *Nautanki* has been of Kathryn Hansen (1992). Hansen's book, *Grounds for Play: The Nautanki Theater of North India,* is one of the two most rigorously researched and well written works on *Nautanki*. The other work- *Saangit: Ek Lok Natya Parampara* authored by Ram Narayan Agrawal, has been discussed earlier. Incidentally, while doing her research on *Nautanki,* Hansen came to India during the 1980s for fieldwork. She met my father and had long discussions with him about *Nautanki.* My father was one of her key informants, particularly on the training and performative aspects of a *Nautanki* artist. I still remember being intrigued as a child when my father told me that a woman was coming from the U.S. to learn about our *Nautanki.* As I have reflected on Hansen's visit to India over the years, on one hand, I have felt proud that a person travels such long distance to write about us, and on the other hand, I could not understand why a foreigner was taking so much interest in *Nautanki,* when Indians around me in the city were apathetic (if not dismissive) of this "ordinary" folk form.

A unique quality of Hansen's book is that it does not treat *Nautanki* as an outdated folk form, cut off from the "contemporary" life, but as a communication channel associated with people's everyday life:

> Even as they entertain, the traditional Indian theatres such as *Nautanki* supply 'pictures of the world,' 'selection of things worth attending to, just as newspaper cinema and television do. Theatre shows together with epic recitations, ballads,

> folktales, and so on comprises the principal media of communication in societies characterized by limited literacy and technology. (p. 2)

Hansen (1992) also tells us why folk forms such as *Nautanki* are so popular with their audiences:

> *Nautanki* and other secular theaters are unabashedly concerned with entertainment. Performances of *Nautanki* provide pretexts for fun, grounds for play in the workaday lives of ordinary people…cultural forms of play possess the potential to change and regenerate the society. (p. 2)

Unfortunately, this potential of folk forms has not been fully understood and developed yet. I hope this dissertation would be a step in this direction.

It is important to review Raymond Williams' (1958) essay *Culture is Ordinary.* Although it has nothing to do with *Nautanki* or Indian folk forms directly, it is helpful in understanding the politics of *ordinary* versus *high cultures* in a society. Williams' analysis helps to understand the situation of Indian folk performance forms struggling with the condescending attitude of elites. After going through the multiple debates in the Indian performance literature on how urban theater is for *sophisticated* artists, and how folk theater might not be suitable for modern culture and communication, reading Raymond Williams' essay is reassuring. It reminds us that culture is always ordinary, a part of our ordinary life:

> Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, and its own meanings. Every human society expresses these, in institutions, and in arts and learning. The making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its

> growth is an active debate and amendment under the pressures of experience, contact and discovery, writing themselves into the land. (p. 11)

Folk forms in India express the common meanings found in rural societies. They are not only parts and parcels of these societies but are also their contemporary communication channels. Some scholars have written on how community folk performances have used modern technology to apt themselves in a changing world. Their work touches upon the critical question: Are traditional community performances incompatible with modern media? In other words, can traditional forms of communication co-exist with modern forms of communication or are they each other's enemies? Peter Manuel (1993) and Susan Wadley (2001) are two scholars who ask these important questions in their works.

Peter Manuel (1993)'s *Cassette Culture: Popular Music and Technology in North India* shows how folk and traditional folk performing arts are capable of modifying themselves with changing times. Folk forms, earlier performed on makes-shift stages in villages, are now available on audiocassettes to reach masses. The author uses the examples of *Rasiyas,* a genre of romantic community folk songs of north India. The dissemination of *Rasiyas* through audio cassettes has been highly successful. Recently, many folk artists have graduated to the use of video compact discs (VCDs), thus having advantages of visual presentation in addition to audio. It is interesting to see how folk forms are trying to reconcile with the changes in technology by modifying themselves, while trying to retain their essence. But audio-cassettes and VCDs not withstanding, folk forms still retain their community appeal. Further, cassettes are often played at community festivals and still attract community's participation and discussion.

Susan Wadley (2001), in her "Popular Culture and the North Indian Oral Epic Dhola", also highlights a similar point. According to Wadley, the *Dhola* (a folk form similar in some ways to *Nautanki*) folk ballad, popular in villages of north India, is not only adjusting itself to the changing times by incorporating new themes, but is also taking advantage of the new technology of audio cassettes to spread its popularity to mass audiences. Wadley notes:

> Increasingly found on tape cassettes, and hence moving from the arena of folklore to that of popular culture, Dhola remains popular because of its continuously changing content and its ability to adapt to ever-new performance styles. (p. 13)

This adaptation to new circumstances is not unique to *Dhola* but is also occurring among other folk performing traditions of India.

All of the works on Indian folk theater discussed above, except the one by Ram Narayan Agrawal, have been written by the urban theater scholars/workers. There are hardly any writings about folk theater by a scholar/worker who is himself/herself active in folk performances. Many folk theater artists in India are illiterate though they are very proficient in the oral traditions of knowledge creation and transfer. Given the predominance of written word as the carrier of knowledge these days, folk theater artists are unable to articulate their voices. Even if they were literate, most of the times, they can read or write only in their regional languages. However, as English is given preference and status by the elite guardians of culture, authentic works in regional languages never receive wide coverage. Moreover, English-proficient theater workers/scholars in India perceive it to be fashionable, and even a sign of belonging to high culture, to discuss and

write about ordinary folk theater. Such “elitist” scholars have almost monopolized the “legitimate” theater scene in India, throwing the folk theater artist on the margins, if not oblivion.

Research Questions

Based on the above literature review, which points to the dismal and elitist state of scholarship on Indian folk forms, and drawing upon Bakhtin’s notion of *carnival* and Conquergood’s voice against *textocentrism*, the present dissertation represents a personal, professional, and political journey for me. Although performance scholars agree that folk performances (such as *Nautanki*) are firmly grounded in their culture and engender strong connections with and between audiences, this view has remained predominantly on the level of assumption. No research study has been conducted to study the role of folk performances such as *Nautanki* in community life. Many questions remain unanswered. Specifically, the present research attempts to answer the following research questions:

Research Question 1: How does *Nautanki* reinforce the feeling of community in its audience members and help them to connect with their cultural roots?

Research Question 2: How does *Nautanki* communicate social change messages to its audiences effectively?

Research Question 3: What are the present challenges before *Nautanki* and what is its place as an indigenous folk form in a global world?

Summary

A number of scholars notably Bakhtin have thought about the capability of community performances to resist oppressive practices. Performance scholars have also advocated the use of theater to direct community's attention towards social change. However, most of these scholars have couched of performance in the context of modern, urban phenomenon. No study has specifically focused on using indigenous performance traditions as vehicles of community building and social change. The present research would use Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of performance as *carnival* and Dwight Conquergood's notion of performance as an alternative to *textocentrism* to analyze the role of *Nautanki,* an indigenous Indian performance tradition, in fostering discussion, dialogue, and opening possibilities of social change.

CHAPTER 4

Research Methodology

I used both reflexive as well as native ethnographic methods in my research. This chapter first describes the research pedagogy that was employed in the present study. Then it discusses the specific methods of data collection in the context of how the present research was operationalized in the field.

This research project, which primarily used qualitative methods of research, is based on the belief that understanding humans in a specific context involves a study of the meanings of their activities. One of the ways by which this meaning can be understood and explained during research is by constructing a narrative that connects human thoughts and activities to their context. This narrative construction is difficult to gauge when using methods that emphasize an objective, distanced inquiry of people. Narrative construction is only possible by going closer to people, hearing their stories, and understanding their circumstances. Ethnography is one of the research methodologies that can be used to construct narratives.

Ethnography has been widely adopted in humanities and social sciences as a useful research methodology. It has been used in folklore studies, cultural studies and performance studies research, among others (Tedlock, 2000). Ethnography allows a researcher to get an experiential interaction with people and their day-to-day life; it also provides a better understanding of their thoughts, actions, and cultural characteristics. This quality of ethnography was particularly important in the present research project because it was grounded firmly in the everyday life of rural people in India. As the

literature review in the previous chapter showed, communication processes in rural areas of north India are intimately connected with local traditions and culture. Only when a researcher immerses himself/herself in the local life and culture, can he/she reach an understanding of the underlying communication processes. Given that I grew up with the art form of *Nautanki*, ethnographic methods allowed me to understand deeper meanings of audiences and performers' actions during the *Nautanki* folk performances. Understanding people's views and listening to their stories in their cultural context means privileging subjective perspectives. I am comfortable with these choices I have made.

Reflexive Ethnography and Native Ethnography

In reflexive ethnography, researchers use their own experiences in the culture they are studying, reflexively, to understand their *self* and *self-other* interactions (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). In this type of research, the researcher's personal experience becomes important as it illuminates the nuances of the culture under study. Reflexive ethnographies range along a wide continuum-- from initiating research from the researcher's own experiences to an ethnography where the researcher's experience is studied along, and with, other participants (Chawla & Rawlins, 2004; Smith, 1993, 1994). It can also include confessional tales focusing on the researcher's experience in the field (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Thus reflexive ethnography is a method that uses both the researchers' as well as participants' standpoints, stories and experiences to construct knowledge (Jones, 2002). Some scholars use the term *radical empiricism* to refer to this process that includes interaction between the researcher and the participants, as well as values the researcher's experience (Jackson, 1993, 1998). In reflexive ethnography,

researchers use their whole being, i.e., their bodies, movement, feeling, and senses (their "self") to learn and know about "others" (Cohen, 1988; Jackson, 1993; Okeley & Callaway, 1992; Turner & Bruner, 1986).

Native ethnography refers to the construction of cultural stories by bicultural *insiders/outsiders* (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Many third and fourth world scholars, who share a common history of colonialism and subjugation, are engaged in this type of research (Rodriguez & Villaverde, 2000). Exploitation and subjugation need not always be colonial or foreign. It can very well be domestic and "indigenous". The rural-urban divide, and the historical cultural subjugation of ordinary people by the ruling indigenous elites in India is a case in point. The present research highlights this subjugation. *Native ethnography* scholars raise important and serious questions about the interpretations of others who write about them. As a researcher, I identify with this position.

My personal life experiences became particularly important for this research as I was in a position of an insider-outsider, looking at *Nautanki* through a personal lens of a *Nautanki* artist, as well as from the point of view of a scholar living and conducting research in the U.S. I used my dual positionality to problematize the distinction between insider and outsider, interviewer and interviewed, and observer and observed. However, this research goes beyond me. It privileges the voices of other participants and their experiences of *Nautanki*. These participants include *Nautanki* artists, troupe managers, and audiences. With participants I used the interactive interviewing technique (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), co-discovering probable "answers" to the research questions. Thus I incorporated both participants' personal experiences and my own standpoints in this

research. In the opening chapter, I explained my personal narrative explaining my personal connection to this project. Here I will primarily focus on privileging the participants' experiences and voices.

Here I would like to add that during the process of writing this dissertation, I have many times felt a dialectical tension, a push and pull, a dilemma. This dissertation has been a product of my longing to understand ordinary oral traditions and raise a voice against the undue privilege accorded to text-driven written traditions. However, ironically, I am still *writing* this dissertation and my audiences are probably going to be educated urban people who can read English, not the rural ordinary people whose story this dissertation narrates. Thus, not surprisingly, many times I have felt that I am doing what I am arguing against.

My purpose in writing this dissertation has been to use the language that my audiences can understand. To gain respect for oral traditions from the educated textocentric audience, I have employed the medium of text. Also, I would like to clarify here that I am not *against* text. As Conquergood says, *unwritten* and *written*, both kinds of knowledges should be given their due respect (Conquergood, 2002). One is not against the other. Only when the perspectives offered by various forms of knowledge are taken into consideration, a holistic understanding of a social community can emerge. Thus my hope in *writing* this dissertation is that it will be able to help create a bridge between literate urban educated audiences and the oral traditions of Indian villages. I sincerely hope that a mutually beneficial perspective on community dialogue that combines both oral and written knowledge emerges out of the present research.

My Position as Researcher

I am a *Nautanki* artist. As I mentioned previously in my personal narrative, I was born in the same rural area in India where the present research project was situated. I have performed in numerous *Nautanki* shows myself. However, I moved to Delhi from my family's rural home with my parents when I was 4 years old. Thus, in this research, as I have mentioned previously, I was both an insider and an outsider. I was an insider because I am a *Nautanki* artist and knew most of the *Nautanki* performers whom I interviewed; I was an outsider because I grew up in a city, earned a college education in New Delhi and am doing graduate study in the U.S.A. Most of my *Nautanki* colleagues did not move out of villages. However, I have regularly visited the rural area where my research is based (about once or twice a year). I thus identify both with *Nautanki's* folk artists and its audiences. I believe this familiarity is an asset to this research endeavor.

Observation of Participation

The development of reflexive writing and research is associated with a shift of emphasis from *participant observation* to the *observation of participation* (Tedlock, 1991). My ethnographic quest definitely falls more under *observation of participation* rather than *participant observation*. *Observation of participation* signifies a research process where the researcher is totally involved and identifies with the community, and everything he/she sees or experiences in the community is relevant. Thus, the researcher in this type of research is not just a mere observer of the activities of his/her research subjects but also observes his/her own participation in the community that he/she is researching (Wolff, 1964).

The main advantage of being an observer participant is that the researcher can make an epistemological shift from an objectifying methodology to an intersubjective methodology. Human experience is always intersubjective and embodied. Intersubjectivity allows us to enter into a dialogue with various socially constructed entities based on differences such as, caste, class, and gender. For example, this approach helped me understand the experience of women performers of *Nautanki.* By being an observer participant, I was able to collect multiple subjective stories in the field.

I should make it clear here that this research project was not intended to be an intervention. In the past, scholars and practitioners have designed experimental performances as social interventions and have studied them. For instance, the Avant Garde theater movements introduced new practices in theater at both the content and form levels, and then studied these new practices. In 1980s and 1990s, sociologists and communication scholars transformed their ethnographic notes into performances. Thus performance became a mode of ethnography (Becker, McCall, & Morris, 1989; Conquergood, 1985; Denzin, 1997; Harter et. al., in press; McCall, 1993; Mienczakowski & Morgan, 2001; Paget, 1990; Pollock, 1990; Richardson, 1997; Siegel & Conquergood, 1985, 1990; Smith, 1993, 1994). In these works, typically, ethnographers would use performance as a method of research to know more about their subject of research, or to intervene in social settings with an activist agenda. Conquergood's theater among Hmong refugees (Conquergood, 1988), or Ohio University's School of Communication Studies' research team's participatory theater with radio listeners' groups in Bihar, India (Harter et al., in press) are good examples of this approach. Ethnographers, in these projects,

collaborated with local community members in co-writing scripts based on local issues, performed them in the community, and then researched their impact on the community. In this activist-research approach, the scripts are written sometimes by turning field notes of ethnographers into scenes and sometimes using local community experiences.

The present research project did not use performance as an intervention tool. Instead it studied an already existing community performance tradition. Performances in this tradition have continued for several hundreds of years, and are extremely popular among local communities. However, it is possible that outcomes from this research may be used for activism and can contribute to the betterment of the community of *Nautanki* artists.

Field Notes and In-Depth Individual and Group Interviews

To explore specific research questions outlined in the previous chapter, I moved from village to village with performing *Nautanki mandalis* (troupes). The core area of the present field research was in Mathura, Hathras, and Bharatpur districts of Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan. These districts have been the historic centers where *Nautanki* developed. In Bharatpur district, I focused on the *Swami-Khera* School of *Nautanki*, located in village Samai near the town of Deeg. The *Swami-Khera* School is considered to be one of the oldest schools of *Nautanki*. In Mathura and Hathras district, some of the troupes that I specifically studied were *Chajjan Singh Mandali, Awara's Mandali, Lataji's Mandali,* and *Hetram's Mandali*. These troupes were located in Hathras, Mathura, Vrindavan, and Kosi towns. The owners and performers of all these troupes supported this research endeavor, enthusiastically cooperating in the present

research. Apart from these troupes, I also spent time, and interviewed *Nautanki* legends such as Master Chunni Lal, Shri Giriraj Prasad, and Pundit Ram Dayal Sharma. I not only had an easy access to all the *Nautanki mandalis*, but on previous occasions had established a personal rapport with many of the artists (on own account of me being a *Nautanki* artist).

It will be appropriate to mention here that talking to women audience members and taking their photographs in the field was difficult. Most Indian rural women are shy in public, particularly when they are amidst male community elders. Being a man and also an outsider posed additional hurdles in my talking to women audience members during the performances. Women audience members usually sit together and separate from men while watching *Nautanki* performances. Many times they may watch the performances from rooftops to avoid mixing with the male audience members. Thus my access to women audience members was limited. However, I had relatively easy access to women artists because of my position as a *Nautanki* artist and also due to my father's contacts.

I closely observed and participated in two daytime and two all-night *Nautanki* performances. These *Nautankis* incorporated both traditional and new themes. For seven days, I totally immersed myself in the *Nautanki* world-- living, and conversing extensively with *Nautanki* performers, troupe owners and managers, their clients, and audience members before, during, and after the performances. I took detailed notes not only on the performances, but also on the rural ambience, and dug deep to understand the socio-economic and historical factors that influence the performance of a *Nautank*i. I

interviewed a mix of audiences-- both males and females of all ages and castes, from various sections of society, before, during, and after the performances.

Field Operationalization of the Research Plan

I planned my time in the field on the basis of feedback provided by my research committee members before and during my dissertation proposal defense. Following this feedback, first, I carefully divided my time between watching *Nautanki* performances, talking to performers and other people involved in *Nautanki* production, and interviewing *Nautanki* audiences. Second, I built in time for reflection in the field. To achieve this purpose, I prioritized my interviews. I first interviewed some very prominent *Nautanki* artists who are in their mid-eighties and nineties such as Master Chunnilal and Master Giriraj Prasad. These artists proved to be gold mines of information about *Nautanki.* Third, I spared time to interact with my father, a well-known *Nautanki* artist. He has not only seen and experienced traditional *Nautanki* in its full glory, but is actively involved in modifying the *Nautanki* art form to fulfill the changing demands of audiences and society. Although, before this research, I had talked to him on countless times about *Nautanki*, this time our conversations had a specific purpose-- focusing on issues surrounding my research questions. Fourth, I used my time in the field to know more about *Nautanki's* history, its growth process, its historical glory, and its contemporary status. Specifically, I spent my time in the field:

1) To gain a deeper understanding of *Nautanki*, its social role, its history, and its present condition by interviewing senior and contemporary artists, producers,

and audiences. Here I also reflected on my own field experiences, and perused old and new *Nautanki* publications.

2) To understand how *Nautanki* is modifying itself to suit changing social conditions. I had several related questions in my mind such as: What is the status of *Nautanki*? Is it dying and/or thriving? How are its artists doing financially? What age group identifies with *Nautanki*? What are the characteristics of new *Nautanki* scripts? What issues are being addressed?
3) To develop a deeper understanding of the changing artistic dimensions of *Nautanki* such as changes in its musical instruments, singing styles, compositions, acting styles, and other techniques.
4) To reflect on how different generations of artists within a *Nautanki* family perceive this art form differently? Consequently, how do they use and practice this art form differently?

My conversations in the field related to these questions helped me to arrive at the general overarching research questions: How does *Nautanki* as a performance tradition contribute to strengthening the feeling of community? How does *Nautanki* function as an engaging communication strategy for social change?

On my journey from the U.S. to India to conduct field research in May 2005, I stopped in London for two days to peruse early *Nautankis* publications in the collection of the British library. These are unavailable in India. During British colonization of India, many old *Nautankis* scripts made their way to various libraries in England. Out of the *Nautankis* that I went through in the British library, some are worth mentioning. One of

them is the legendry *Nautanki Shehzadi* by Muralidhar Kavi published in 1906. Many scholars believe that this *Nautanki* became so popular that it was instrumental in replacing the previously used term to describe the art form, *Swang,* with *Nautanki.* My time in the British library provided an opportunity to have a glimpse of the historical growth of *Nautanki,* and also to take notes on its various social and artistic dimensions.

The air travel between U.S. to London, and then from London to New Delhi, gave me a valuable opportunity to reflect and write my pre-thoughts on my field trip, its directions, and its implications. These rough notes have helped me to see how my thoughts changed or were modified as a result of my field experiences.

One of the finest things that happened during my field trip was my father's support. He, on my request, had started talking to various *Nautanki* artists, directors, and producers a month before I arrived in India for the field research. He lined up many interviews for me. He not only encouraged me in this research endeavor but also accompanied me from town to town and village to village to see *Nautanki* performances and interview audiences and performers. He sustained me through the unbearable temperatures of Indian summers (over 100 degrees F) in areas where there were no electricity or other basic utilities. Despite his age (he is around 60 years now) he was as active as me, if not more, in the field. The degree of access that I got to *Nautanki* circles due to my father's presence cannot be described. Ordinarily, any other researcher without such support might have taken months to gather the amount of information that I could in two intense weeks.

I and my father spent three days in the beginning of our field research to talk to *Nautanki* performers and their agents in towns and villages (many *Nautanki* artists live in remote villages where there are no phones), to keep abreast of the ever-changing dates and times of *Nautanki* performances and fix up interview times with artists. Performance times and dates kept changing and it was only after much running around (or to be precise driving around in our car on mud roads) that we were able to catch the performances and our interviewees. We (I and my father) also used these initial days to have extensive discussion with each other about *Nautanki*. We continued these discussions throughout my field trip.

We spent the next seven days moving in and around a number of towns and villages in north India—watching *Nautanki* performances and interviewing performers, back stage people, and audiences. These places were—(1) Kaman village in Bharatpur district, (2) Goverdhan village in Mathura district, (3) Mathura town, (4) Village Kinarai on the banks of Yamuna on the opposite side of Mathura (5) Village Sonkh (6) Hathras town (7) Kosi town and (8) Vrindavan town. During our stay in these areas, my father and I watched two short duration day-time performances, and two all-night *Nautanki* performances.

The two short duration day-time *Nautanki* performances were sponsored by the government of India in a health fair organized in the town of Mathura. The purpose of this health fair was to provide free medicines and other health services to local residents. *Nautanki* troupes were hired to perform entertaining *Nautankis* incorporating health and social messages including HIV/AIDS, polio vaccine, tobacco control, family planning,

and elimination of dowry. Poor people from Mathura and villages around Mathura watched these performances while waiting for free medicine and treatment. Many people came to the health fair attracted by these performances, and in the process, also picked up medicines and health information.

We watched our first all-night *Nautanki* performance on this trip in the village Kinarai in Mathura district. Kinarai is a small village on the banks of river Yamuna. The *Nautanki* troupe was invited to perform on the occasion of a wedding. The bride's family had invited the *Nautanki* troupe to entertain the *Barat* (the groom's wedding party), guests, and villagers. *Amar Singh Rathore,* a traditional all-night *Nautanki* was performed. The second all-night performance was a *Bhagat*, a *Nautanki* based on religious or devotional themes. It was organized in the small town of Vrindavan by a traditional *akhara.*[18] This *Nautanki* was organized on the occasion of a local festival and the whole community had contributed money to make it possible.

During these four performances, I interviewed and interacted with about 40 *Nautanki* performers, managers, writers, producers, and audience members. The breakdown included 15 performers, 15 audience members, and 10 managers, writers, and producers. I interviewed audiences from different castes, classes, gender and ages. Between most of the performances I took a break of a day or two so that I had time to reflect and make sense of what was happening. I also used this time to have intensive discussions with my father about the various topics related to our experiences in the field and also general issues regarding *Nautanki.* I also used the time between the performances to write and refine my field notes. After returning from the villages to New

[18] Please see chapter one for explanation.

Delhi where my parents stay, I kept on reflecting on my field experiences and distilling the meanings hidden in these experiences.

Summary

The present research project employed *reflexive* and *native* ethnographic methods to understand the role of *Nautanki* in strengthening the feeling of community and in assessing its role in social change processes in the towns and villages of northern India. This research does not use performance as activism or as a research methodology. Instead, it studies an already existing community performance tradition, *Nautanki,* and its communicative potential through (1) observation of participation while living with *Nautanki* troupes, (2) in-depth interviews with *Nautanki* performers, troupe managers, their clients, and audience members.

In my field trip spanning 15 days, I perused historical *Nautanki* publications at the British library in London, interacted with my father to understand his perceptions of *Nautanki* from an intergenerational point of view, observed and participated in two day-time and two all night *Nautanki* performances, and interviewed 40 people comprising *Nautanki* audience members, performers, troupe owners, and managers across gender, caste, class and age. I felt, experienced, and imbibed the performative and dialogic ambience of rural north India where *Nautanki* is performed, and reflected upon it. I also wrote extensive field notes based on my experiences. I draw upon these in the next chapter to address the posed research questions.

CHAPTER 5

Reflections from the field

In this chapter, I summarize my primary reflections from the field. I begin by describing the architectonics of a *Nautanki* performance, and then organize my reflections under three main themes that correspond to the three broad research questions previously posed in chapter three. These themes emerged out from my conversations in the field with performers, managers, troupe owners, writers, and audiences of *Nautanki*. Under these three main themes, there were several sub-themes.

The Architectonics of Nautanki Performance

Nautanki performances can take place in any open space available in or around a village that can accommodate audiences in hundreds or thousands. Sometimes this space is available by the village *chaupal*;[19] other times the playground of the local school becomes the performance site. A *Nautanki* stage is elevated above the ground and is made up of wooden cots (usually provided by local villagers). Other times a *chabutara*[20] in front of a house can serve as stage. The stage is open on three sides. There is a back drop on the fourth side, usually made of a colorful cloth. Behind the stage is a temporary enclosure that serves as a make-up/changing room. Audiences sit on all the three sides of the stage. Usually children sit immediately near the stage. Male adults sit behind them. If the performance is overflowing, youngsters often climb the surrounding trees to get a birds-eye view. Women audiences sit together, physically separate from their male

[19] A central place in the village where villagers meet to discuss local issues and for leisure
[20] A permanently constructed platform in front of a traditional village house where elders of the house can chat with visitors before they enter the house.

counterparts. Social norms dictate that newly-wed daughter-in-laws should not mingle in public, so many of them watch the performance from the roof-tops of their homes.

On the stage, musicians and percussionists sit on one side and actor-singers occupy the center-stage. *Harmonium, Nakkara,* and *Dholak* are the main musical instruments that are used in *Nautanki* performances. Sometimes a clarinet might be employed. There is often a person in the back-corner of the stage who acts as a prompter, helping performers to remember the next line of the piece they are singing. *Nautanki* scenes are written in a way that there are usually only two to three performers on the stage at one time. The pleasure of *Nautanki* lies in the intense melodic exchanges between the two or three performers; chorus is usually avoided. For a spatial depiction of a typical *Nautanki* performance, see Figure 1 (p. 120).

Traditional *Nautankis* usually start late at night, often around 10 p.m. or so, and go all night until sunrise the next morning. *Nautanki* performances start with a collective *vandana.*[21] After the *vandana,* performers sing individual *Bhents.*[22] In addition to serving a spiritual and auspicious purpose, *Vandana* and *Bhents* help *Nautanki* performers to warm up and to gauge their voice before the actual performance begins. After *Bhents,* the actual performance starts, which is usually an opera based on a popular folk theme derived from romantic tales, mythology, or biographies of local heroes. The performance is often punctuated with individual songs and dances, and skits, which serve as breaks and comic relief for audiences. Audiences sometimes also use these breaks to go to the toilet or pick up food from their homes or nearby shops. There is no intermission in

[21] A devotional chorus that is sung by performers to please the gods so that their performance is a success.
[22] A devotional *Nautanki* song.

Nautanki performances. As the sun rises, performers and audiences collective shout a slogan to praise the local deity of the area to mark the end of the performance. For instance, in and around Mathura region, *Nautanki* performance ends with the following slogan: *Bol Giriraj Maharaj Ki Jai* (Holy Giriraj [the local deity] be praised).

However, new *Nautanki* performances centering around social messages on health, women's empowerment, dowry, and family planning usually happen during the day or in the early evening. They are also of a much shorter duration -- around 2 hours. This is to give audiences an opportunity to watch performances during a break in their daily routine. Also, many times pro-social performances happen as a part of local health fairs or other cultural events.

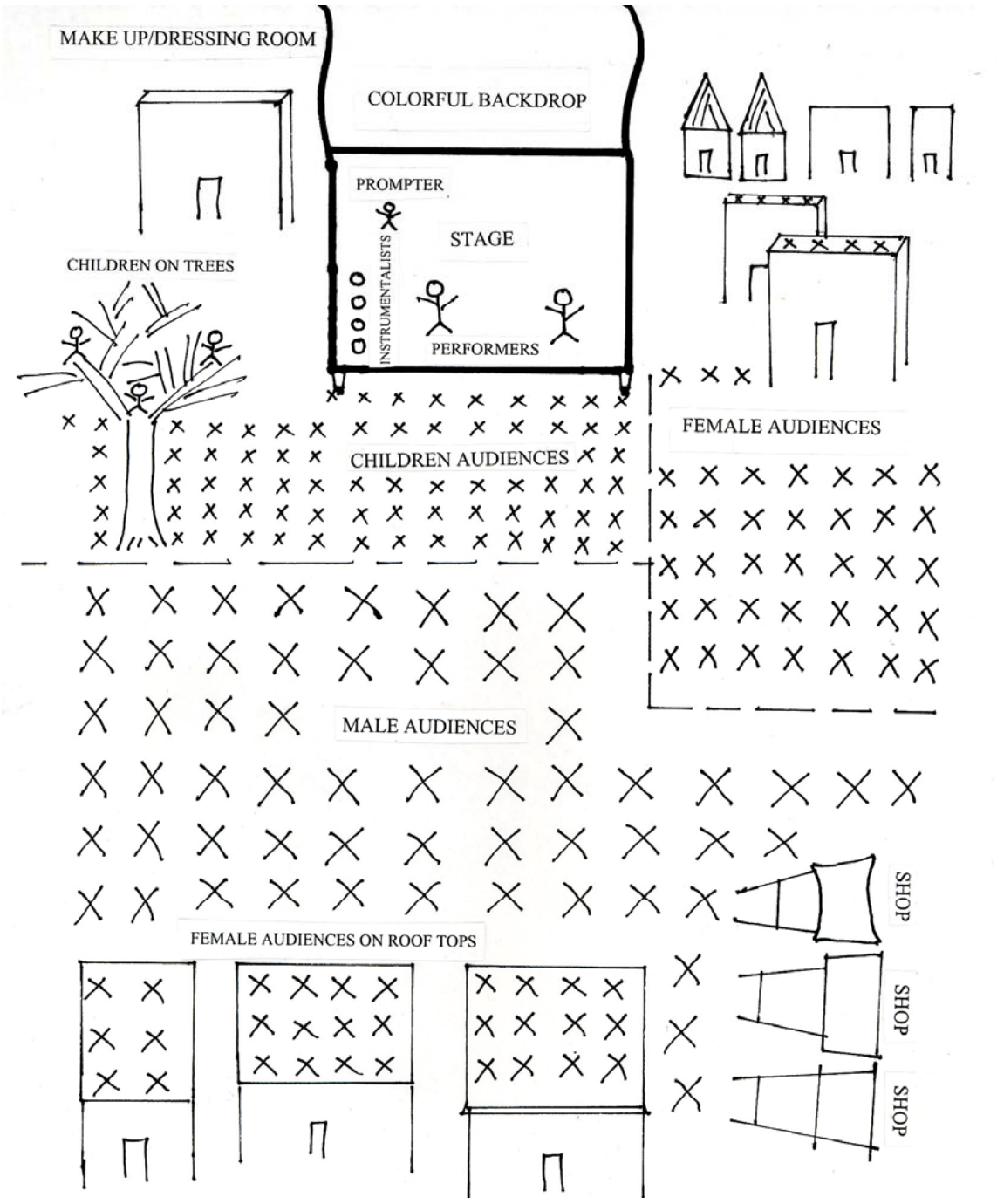

Figure 5: A spatial depiction of a typical Nautanki performance

The first theme that emerged from my conversations in the field elaborated on the role of *Nautanki* performances in strengthening the feeling of community among its audiences. *Nautanki* helps to achieve this community feeling by facilitating community members' participation in its performances at various levels, from acting to logistics. It also emerged that *Nautanki* helps community members to connect with their cultural roots and heritage.

The second theme that came out was the strong influence that *Nautanki* has on its audience members as an entertainment form. Audiences are affected by the messages in *Nautanki* performances. This impact was reflected both on the attitudinal as well as behavioral level. Seeing *Nautanki's* impact on it audiences, the government of India as well as many voluntary domestic and international organizations are supporting *Nautanki* performances on contemporary issues such as dowry elimination, population control, women's reproductive rights, barren land farming, and polio eradication. Interestingly, many *Nautanki* performers and audience members compared *Nautanki* with the mass media. They discussed how *Nautanki* is an easier medium for them to understand in comparison to the technology-based mass media.

Finally, the third theme centered on our respondents' concern about the place of folk forms such as *Nautanki* in an increasingly global society. They discussed the need for supporting folk forms like *Nautanki* so that they can fulfill their entertainment and community-building functions in the society. Finally, they discussed the challenges that *Nautanki* is facing such as obscenity, non-professionalism, and competition from the

mass media, and how *Nautanki* can effectively face these challenges to retain its place among its audiences.

In the sections that follow, I discuss these themes and their sub themes one by one in the context of the posed research questions.

Figure 6: A humorous scene from the Nautanki "Beti ka Byah" [The Marriage of Daughter] at Mathura

Theme 1: Nautanki and Community

RQ 1 asked: How does *Nautanki* reinforce the feeling of community in its audience members and help them to connect with their cultural roots?

During my conversations with audiences, organizers, performers, and others involved with *Nautanki*, it clearly emerged that *Nautanki*, in addition to an entertaining performance tradition, also serves as a community event that demands community participation and encourages community bonding. Secondly, it actively involves audiences in the process of performance. Thirdly, as a cultural tradition, *Nautanki* fulfills audiences' need to relate with their cultural roots and traditions. Talking to people in the field, I found that these three functions of *Nautanki* make it an important form of cultural expression and community cohesion for the rural people of north India.

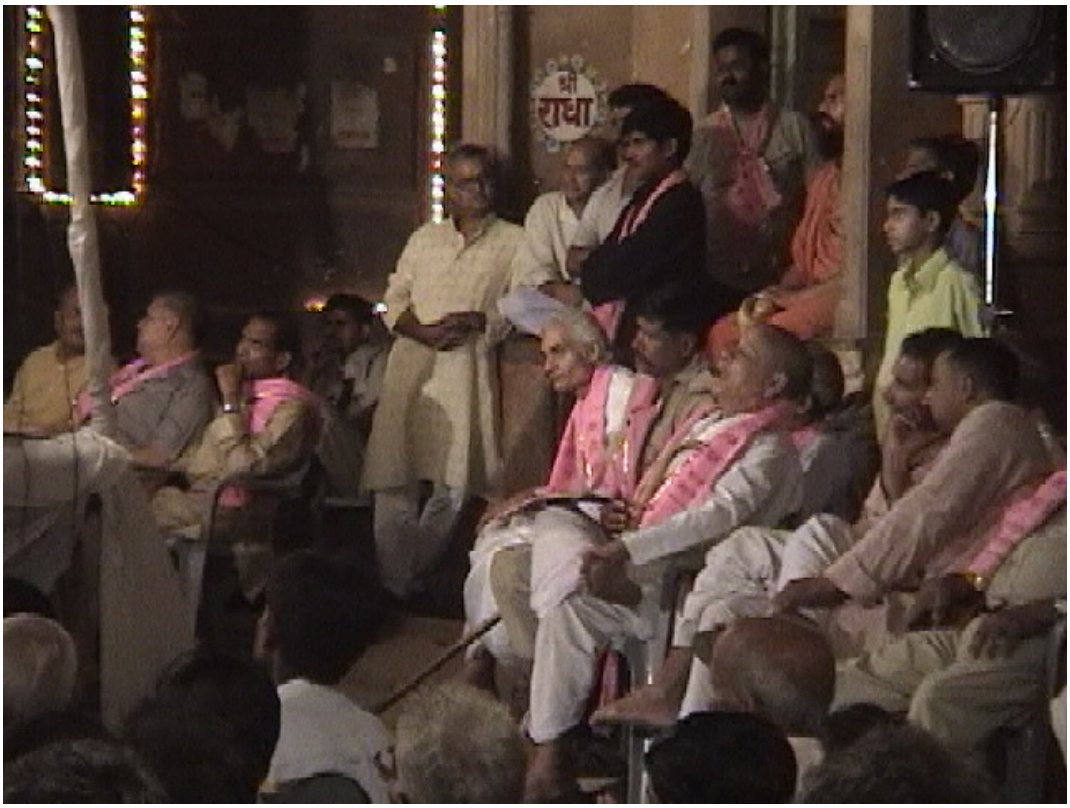

Figure 7: Community members enjoying a traditional Nautanki in Vrindavan

Nautanki and the Feeling of Community

From my conversations in the field, it emerged that *Nautanki* is by its very nature a public event. *Nautanki* performances are open for all. Anyone can come and watch them. *Nautanki* performances are organized usually on important community occasions such as fairs, festivals, marriages, or other family functions. The following conversation between me[23] and an audience member named Gulab Singh, in the middle of a *Nautanki* performance in his village Kinarai in India's Mathura district, is illustrative:

Dev: What are you watching?

Gulab Singh: I am watching *Mehfil.*[24] So many people are sitting here. People are liking the performance. They are absorbed in the performance.

Dev: What is your opinion about this performance?

Gulab Singh: This is a social assembly. The whole community is here, enjoying this performance. Public is so much involved in it and watching with interest without making any noise. That is why this is good!

Dev: When are these performances organized?

Gulab Singh: On the occasion of a wedding like this one; or the occasion of death anniversaries when old people die. These are the occasions when *Nautankis* are invited. These are the important events in our social life. *Nautankis* are invited on special occasions.

Dev: Are *Nautankis* organized in all villages?

[23] I have abbreviated my name from Devendra to Dev for the sake of simplicity.
[24] A Hindi-Urdu word for "community performance".

Gulab Singh: *Nautanki* is performed wherever people have good sense and have taste. It happens in many villages, not just in one village.

Dev: Are these people in the audience only from this village or have people from other villages also come here?

Gulab Singh: There are people from a *Barat*,[25] from this village, and also from many other villages such as Berua, Gawali, Paali, Tayyapur, and many others. (personal communication, May 16, 2005)

Asked about the possible benefits of organizing *Nautanki* performances, Gulab Singh noted:

Every one knows the benefits. *Nautanki* provides pleasure to this huge crowd. People are getting entertained. The family of the bride has a taste for *Nautanki*; that is why we invited the troupe. (personal communication, May 16, 2005)

Like Gulab Singh, other audience members also emphasized the social aspect of *Nautanki* performances. Pannalal, a person in his mid-forties, while watching *Nautanki* at village Kinarai, told me that *Nautanki* performance brings the rural community together:

I like that people from many villages come to see the performance and collect at one place. Right now at this place there are people from at least 20 villages. People keep bound to their homes when they are watching television. On this occasion, people have come from a radius of 5 to10 miles around this village. This is good! (personal communication, May 16, 2005)

[25] Groom's party usually consisting from 100 to 300 people, which comes from groom's village to bride's village on the wedding day.

Srivastav, a *Nautanki* troupe manager in Mathura, for more than 30 years, informed me about the multi-village audiences attending *Nautanki* performances:

> People from many villages come to watch [*Nautanki*]. For instance our show tonight is happening in a fair and people from at least fifty villages will come there to watch. (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

According to audiences, *Nautanki* provides an occasion for friends and relatives to get together. In addition, they are entertained. This community formation aspect of *Nautanki* came up in many conversations. Following is an excerpt from a conversation I had with a group of *Nautanki* audiences in Mathura. It included four men-- three in their late twenties and one in his early thirties.

> *Dev*: Do you go with your friends to watch a *Nautanki* performance?
>
> *Than Singh*: We definitely go out with friends.
>
> *Dev*: How many of you go together?
>
> *Than*: At least 20 people. Well, our whole group likes it. That is why we think that if we see it together we will enjoy even more.
>
> *Satyavan Singh* (indicating towards Than): Well, Than came back after watching *Nautanki* and he told his other friends. Then his friends also watched it. Now all of them like it and want to watch more.
>
> *Than*: It is like a picnic for us. Last time when we watched a *Nautanki* in Nagar,[26] we were inspired by the performance. The performance was about princes and in the story it was mentioned what a luxurious life princes used to live, like their huge beds, palaces, and other things. So while returning, we took a detour and

[26] A small town in district Bharatpur.

> requested a day off from our office to peep into the princes' lives. We saw Deeg's[27] palaces on our way. We were really awed. It was great! Why don't you come to see *Nautanki* on the 24th of May with us? Come with our group! You will enjoy a lot! (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

Like Than and his friends, when people go to watch *Nautanki* with their friends, they are not limited to just watching *Nautanki* but also do other group-based social activities. Srivastav, the *Nautanki* troupe manager in Mathura gave an example of how *Nautanki* performances provide an occasion for a community to cook food collectively and enjoy a feast together:

> Well many of the audiences are friends or relatives of each other. For instance in Tarauli's[28] fair of *Thakurs,*[29] *Thakurs* of the whole region assemble at the occasion of *Nautanki* performance. Similarly, in the fair of *Ahivasi Brahmins*[30] of this region, the Ahivasi Brahmins of the area assemble. *Kheer-Puri*[31] is cooked there. The whole community eats, watches the *Nautanki* performance, and enjoys the whole night. Anyone is welcome to come and eat. There are similar fairs in most of the villages. Performances serve as occasions where people come together, meet each other, and cooperate with each other in organizing fairs. In my villages, residents of different villages bring milk when they come to attend the fair. They together contribute the milk to prepare *kheer* in a public kitchen.

---

[27] Deeg is a town in Bharatpur district and is famous for its beautiful palaces.
[28] A village in Mathura district.
[29] Thakur is a sub-caste of Kshatriyas. Kshatriya is the warrior caste, second in Indian caste hierarchy, first being the Brahmins.
[30] A sub-caste of Brahmins.
[31] Kheer is a preparation of milk and rice; Puri is circular fried bread. Usually they are eaten on festive occasions in rural India.

Dev: What are other examples of such instances?

Srivastav: As I said, this happens among the *Thakurs* too. For instance, Tarauli's fair goes on for two to three days. In this fair, people of various *Thakur* sub-castes and from the whole region assemble and stay for four days. They eat at homes of the local families. Each family stores around 350 to 400 pounds of flour in advance for this occasion. Thus all the relatives, friends, and guests, coming from outside eat, enjoy *Nautanki*, stay in local villagers' houses, and have a lot of fun! *Nautanki* performances happen for three to four nights continuously at these fairs. (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

The above descriptions are examples of community formation, team-work, and collective enjoyment revolving around *Nautanki* performances. Apart from collective enjoyment, audience members emphasize that the *Nautanki* performances give them a chance to meet other people in the community and exchange niceties. However, they also noted that it is getting increasingly difficult to have such opportunities in small towns and villages of India. Thus *Nautanki* performances become important occasions for people to interact face-to-face with other members of their community. Mukund, an audience member that I met during the *Nautanki* performance at Vrindavan,[32] said:

Life these days has become so busy that we do not get time to meet other people in our community. These performances become excuses for people to meet each other. Through these performances, people come together to save their shared heritage. People cooperate with each other in organizing these performances. I definitely think these performances strengthen unity in society. I want these

[32] A small town in Mathura district with high religious importance.

> [performances] to continue, they should not stop happening. The government should give encouragement for supporting them. (personal communication, May 18, 2005)

A desire to connect to his community heritage through *Nautanki* is clear in Mukund's statement. However I will separately discuss *Nautanki's* role in reinforcing people's connection to their common culture later.

Figure 8: Villagers watching Nautanki at Kinarai

Nautanki watching is not limited to one social caste. It is an occasion where people from all castes assemble to watch performances. *Nautanki* performance is one of

the rare social occasions in rural India where different castes mingle with each other with relative ease. Usually, upper and low caste members do not mingle in public events. Gulab Singh of village Kinarai throws more light on this opportunity that *Nautanki* provides to his community:

> See, the houses in this neighborhood [where the *Nautanki* was being performed] belong to only one caste but here in the audience, people of all castes are present.
>
> *Dev*: What castes are present here?
>
> Gulab Singh: All castes-- *Brhamin*, *Baniya*, and others. You see, people who want to see *Nautanki* will come and watch it, whatever caste they belong to. This is a story, a performance; all people come to watch this. How can you limit this to one caste? (personal communication, May 16, 2005)

The democratizing effect of a performance on the local community is worth noticing in Gulab Singh's statement. According to him, all community members have equal right to watch it. The conversation went on:

> *Dev*: But do people of all castes socialize with each other when there is no performance?
>
> *Gulab Singh*: Not really, except on special occasions such as political meetings when it is really needed. (personal communication, May 16, 2005)

It is interesting to notice that lower castes in rural India get an opportunity to mix with higher castes through *Nautanki* performances. *Nautanki* helps in reducing segregation in Indian rural society, even if temporarily.

Another fact that I learned in the field is that *Nautanki* performances have been widely used in northern India in the past several decades to collect huge amounts of money to maintain community services such as schools, temples, and shelters for the poor. Srivastav, talks at length about *Nautanki's* role in these activities:

> People like Pragalbhji, Krishna Kumari ji,[33] mostly did performances for charity. They decided that they would do ticketed shows to help in the construction of schools and temples. There are so many schools and other public buildings that were built this way. For instance, there is a *dharamshala*[34] in district Alwar called Sanatan Dharmashala. In that *dharamshala*, an investment of at least 5 to 6 million *rupees*[35] has been made through the earnings from the annual *Nautanki* shows. Similarly, the school in Akabarpur,[36] a couple of schools in Aligarh[37] and many other schools have been constructed from the money earned through *Nautanki* shows. (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

Awara, an eminent *Nautanki* comedian who also owns a *Nautanki* troupe told me:

> There is a huge contribution of *Nautanki*. I have worked with Krishna Kumariji, Kamleshji, and other senior artists. From the earnings of *Nautanki* shows done by these people, at least 500 schools in Haryana[38] and Uttar Pradesh have been opened! (personal communication, May 19, 2005)

---

[33] Famous artists and managers of *Nautanki*.
[34] Dharamshala is a place where people can sleep for free, or on nominal charge.
[35] Indian currency
[36] A village in Mathura district.
[37] A district in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh.
[38] An Indian state.

I found that not only *Nautanki* performances provide occasions for community to engage in socially constructive activities, but even organizing these performances demands a high degree of cooperation among community members. My conversation with Vijay Kishore, the *ustaad*[39] of the eminent "Vipra" *Nautanki akhara*[40] highlighted this aspect:

> There is a lot of cooperation and mutual affection among all the members of our *akhara*. Bhagat[41] ties everyone into one chain of bonding; it produces brotherhood and good beneficial feelings. We all sit together and work together and then this performance happens. (personal communication, May 19, 2005)

Organizing a *Nautanki* performance requires lot of money. Usually all the families in a community contribute to make a *Nautanki* performance possible. Vijay Kishore explained:

> All people are doing their efforts. People of our *akhara* are quite well off financially and if they take a resolution that they have to do something, they can do it. Like this time we did two [*Nautanki*] performances in just one year! The last *swang*[42] that we organized few months back was performed for three nights continuously, and we collectively spent one hundred thousand *rupees* on that. We have spent around 35,000 to 40,000 rupees on the present performance. (personal communication, May 19, 2005)

Another social contribution of *Nautanki* has been its role in alleviating misunderstandings between community members. After the performance in Vrindavan, Bal Gopal Sharma, a

---

[39] Chief writer and teacher of a *Nautanki* akhara.
[40] The traditional *Nautanki* troupe or school. See chapter 1 for details.
[41] *Nautanki* with a religious theme.
[42] Another name for *Nautanki*

local politician and a member of the local "Vipra" *akhara*, highlighted this role of *Nautanki*.

> Definitely we will continue this performance tradition. This is team work. If you organize any community event, 10 people sit together and develop cooperation and connection with each other. Even if there are misunderstandings among them, they are cleared when they work together. If people would not work together then misunderstandings would naturally increase. (personal communication, May 19, 2005)

I learned that *Nautanki* performances have ended many community conflicts and animosities. The prominent *Nautanki* comedian Awara talks about this positive effect of *Nautanki*:

> Animosities and misunderstandings exist among community members. For instance, rivalries abound due to competition in *sarpanchi* and *pradhani.*[43] We *Nautanki* people resolve these conflicts and make people friendly to each other again. We tell people—'since there is a conflict in your area, it might create problems in our performances. However we would love to come and perform for you. Therefore we request all of you in the community to sit together and end the conflict so the performance can happen in a friendly and affectionate atmosphere'. (personal communication, May 19, 2005)

Such social interventions from *Nautanki* artists can have magical effects. Awara tells us more:

---

[43] Political offices that require election. People contesting for these offices often develop conflicts in rural India.

> On innumerable occasions we have been instrumental in ending animosities and conflicts between people. We have made them hug each other, put garlands on each other as a sign of their renewed friendship. We have evidence of these events. We have prevented community fights. (personal communication, May 19, 2005)

In summary, *Nautanki* performances provide occasions that enhance the feeling of community among its audience members. *Nautanki* performances are usually attended by residents of at least 20 to 30 local villages. *Nautanki* performances are rare social occasions where people of different castes mingle with each other. *Nautanki* watching is a group activity. People go with their friends to watch *Nautankis.* While going to watch *Nautanki* performances, they engage in other social activities such as sightseeing and picnicking with their friends. They also enjoy collective feasts and stay at their friends' and relatives' homes during *Nautanki* performances that go on for multiple nights. All these activities strengthen community members' mutual bonding. In the villages of north India, *Nautanki* performances have been used for various community-enhancing efforts such as collecting money to construct schools, temples, and shelters for the poor. *Nautanki* artists have been instrumental in ending many community conflicts and animosities due to their influence on the community.

Community Participation in Nautanki

My respondents highlighted the relationship between community and *Nautanki* on another level. That is, the audiences' participation in the actual performance of *Nautanki.* During a *Nautanki* performance, audiences are not passive, but actively shape the

performance's course and some times even control it. The following conversation with Srivastav sheds light on how audiences participate in a *Nautanki* performance:

> *Dev*: What happens at the time of the performance?
>
> *Srivastav*: Often the audience decides which *Nautanki* would be done. This decision is taken by the audiences just before the beginning of a performance. (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

Not only do the audiences decide on the performance, they also control the course of the performance. Srivastav noted:

> When the main opera is performed continuously for one to two hours, audience members naturally feel a little bored. Then they want some change. They say, 'now perform some songs', like one wants to eat a spicy dish after a sweet dish (laughs) to change the taste. After a couple of songs and dances are performed, then their mood is refreshed! After getting refreshed, performance again returns to the main opera. (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

Srivastav also discussed how different generations of audiences can shape a *Nautanki* performance as per their different tastes:

> Audience members from the older generation mainly like to see the opera, but the new generation wants to see more dances of girls. So these two segments of audiences have a kind of conflict. The older generation says, 'stop the dances, let the opera resume' and younger generation says 'we have seen enough opera now we want dances'. This push and pull keeps happening during a *Nautanki* performance. (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

However Srivastav noted that performers have an important say in the conduct of the performance:

> It is a two-way process. We have to keep in mind what the audiences want from us and we have to respond to them. We keep a careful eye on audiences during a performance. If we see that a person in the audience is getting restless, that might be a sign that he or she is bored. Sometimes, audiences do not voice their dissatisfaction openly due to the fear of upsetting the community elders who are present, or due to some other reason. In any case, when we feel that the audiences want some change, we spontaneously decide to perform a couple of songs in between to change the mood, and then again resume the opera. (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

The above comments point to improvisational and interactive nature of *Nautanki*. It requires continued cooperation and adjustment from both performers as well as audience members to make a performance that is satisfying to all parties concerned.

Figure 9: A community member engrossed in Nautanki at Kinarai village

The structure of the *Nautanki* performance is very flexible. It does not require audience members to sit for a fixed duration of time. During a *Nautanki* performance, audience members are not only watching the performance but engage in many other activities. My conversation with Srivastav illustrates this:

> *Dev*: *Nautanki* show is around six to eight hours long. Are there other activities that audiences engage in apart from watching the show?
>
> *Srivastav*: Yes they are involved in many activities. In the local fairs, there are shops of *paan*[44] and *jalebi*[45] that are open during all-night performances. You might not get *chai*[46] sometimes, but it is sure that you will get *jalebi* and *paan*. Audiences take a break, eat delicious hot *jalebis* and *paan,* and then go back and continue to enjoy the *Nautanki*. There are no bounds in a *Nautanki* performance. Audiences come and go as they wish.
>
> *Dev*: Doesn't that disturb the performance?
>
> *Srivastav*: No, not at all. Audiences go and do whatever they want to do, and then come back. It is a gathering of thousands. What difference does it make if some of them come or go? Generally, *Nautanki* performances happen in vast open spaces so people can go use the toilet, etc. in nearby agricultural fields. In ticketed *Nautanki* shows, performances happen in a closed enclosure. This enclosure is also quite large. Shops of roasted peanuts, tea, and other things are present, as are toilets and drinking water. So eat roasted peanuts, drink tea or water, go to the

[44] *Paan* is a special kind of leaf that is chewed with beetle nut and other kinds of herbs. It is very popular throughout India.
[45] An Indian sweet, very popular in rural areas.
[46] Tea.

> toilet, and enjoy the performance whole night! (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

The above conversations indicate that *Nautanki* is a type of carnival, a fair, a festival, where performers and audiences come together to create a festive mood. It is an occasion to eat, drink, perform, and be happy, in other words, total fulfillment.

There are no fixed and marked seats for audiences to sit in a *Nautanki*. Most of them sit on the ground. Many a time audience members sit on the stage itself. An audience member, Pappu Chaudhary, describes his and his friends' experience during a *Nautanki* performance:

> When the *Nautanki* happened at Nagar, it happened in a fair. So people could first eat and then go and watch the performance or they could go out in between the performance and eat. When we go to watch a performance, we sit on the stage because of our connections. Tea is served to us when it comes for the performers. We also take some snacks in our pocket to eat during the performance. We also smoke *bidis.*[47] Thus, our time passes well. (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

When *Nautanki* audiences are not happy with a particular performance, they do not sit silently but take over the control of the performance. Sometimes they achieve this by demanding a popular song or comedy. However, sometimes, audiences' dissatisfaction can boil over. Munna Master, a veteran *Nautanki* performer, described the reaction of dissatisfied audiences:

---

[47] Locally made Indian cigarettes

> Sometimes stones or other things are thrown at the performers if they are not able to present a good show. This happens when troupe owners hire substandard people to perform. If audiences do not get a good performance, they inevitably get angry and would throw stones! (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

On one hand Munna Master's statement reflects some of the problems that have crept into *Nautanki* performances (to be discussed in detail later); on the other hand, it indicates the strong influence that the audience has on the course and quality of a *Nautanki* performance. Further, as the *Nautanki* performances are attended in huge numbers, conflicts among certain audience members are inevitable. As Munna noted:

> Sometimes there is an enormous audience. For instance, recently in Nagar, there was a gathering of 50,000 people. Now, some people were not able to even see our faces. They got annoyed and started throwing sand in the air. As a result of this disturbance, other audience members stood up. It gave people at the back a chance to force their way towards the front. It resulted in so much pushing and shoving in the audience. Even the police got tired of controlling the situation. You know 50,000 people in audience…. it means something. Even in situations like this, the audience does not let us finish us early. They keep watching passionately until the sun rises! (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

In summary, a *Nautanki* performance represents an interactive process in which, performers and audiences together shape the course of the program. Audiences participate on various levels in a *Nautanki* performance. They have important say in choosing what script would be enacted in a particular *Nautanki* show. During the

performance, they encourage and reward the performers. When they get bored, they ask performers to perform dances and songs to bring in some variety in the show. The flexibility of *Nautanki* allows audiences to come in and go out of a performance at their will. During a performance, audience members eat popular food delicacies such as *jalebis* and *paan* and bond with their friends. Overall, *Nautankis* are very similar to Bakhtin's description of a carnival where people participate in performances, eat, joke, and enjoy together.

Figure 10: A vendor sells "Paan" (a special plant leaf chewed with beatle nut and other spices) to the audience members during the Nautanki performance in Vrindavan

Nautanki as a Means for Audiences to Connect with Cultural Roots

Based on people's responses in the field, another important contribution of *Nautanki* to the community is that it provides audiences an opportunity to get a glimpse of their heritage and connect with their cultural roots. *Nautanki* helps in unifying community members around their culture. Mukund, an audience member watching *Nautanki-Bhagat* in Vrindavan said:

> This is our very old tradition. *Nautanki- Bhagats* have been performed from very old times, at least from the last 100 years, like *Rambha Shuk Samvad, Vrinda Charitra, Swami Haridas,*[48] and many others like these have been performed here earlier. (personal communication, May 19, 2005)

Figure 11: A traditional "Bhagat" (a Nautanki with religious theme) in progress at the holy town of Vrindavan in north India

[48] Names of old *Nautankis.*

Notice the nostalgia in Mukund's comments on *Nautanki.* He remembered his childhood days when, according to him, *Nautanki* was at its "prime":

> I am around 32 years old. My grandfather whose name was Harswaroop Pathak, used to cooperate a lot in organizing *Nautanki*s and *Bhagats*. In his time, these performances that you are seeing were at their prime. What you are seeing now is just a faint shadow of those times. (personal communication, May 19, 2005)

When asked about the differences between the *Nautankis* of past and present, Mukund said:

> At that time, there was no dishonesty in people's hearts so performers were decorated with huge amounts of gold and jewels. At present you do not find that tradition. And now we do not have skilled performers like of older times. Also there are no more good *ustaads*--people who used to write great *Nautanki*s and *Bhagats*-- left now. (personal communication, May 19, 2005)

In my conversation with many audience members, I noticed this longing for the past, the attraction towards the "golden age" of culture that has passed. *Nautanki,* for many in their middle and older ages symbolizes their lost culture, a link to their heritage that is being endangered and eroded by global culture-- by the commercialization trends of the new age. Many audience members wanted to hold on to this fragment of their heritage and preserve it. Mukund went on:

> This art form is slowly disappearing. To save it would be like saving our culture. The sweetness that you would find in this poetry, you will not find anywhere in the world! Now we have developed materially, but there remains no affection and

> love in people's heart. People call these [*Nautanki*] arts unsophisticated but they do not see the love and connection that is present behind them. (personal communication, May 19, 2005)

Mukund was definitely bitter about the new materialistic culture which, according to him, seems sophisticated on the surface but lacks the depth and the "sweetness" of the older culture that he longs for. *Nautanki* symbolizes that lost culture for him. Vijay Kishore, the *ustaad* of "Vipra" akhara, also pointed to the importance of *Nautanki* as a showcase of local culture: "*Swang-Nautanki* is our cultural treasure. People get immense pleasure in watching it. We include narratives from our history and our past heroes". (personal communication, May 19, 2005)

Overall, most of the people with whom I talked to, believed that *Nautanki* helps to unify a community around historical-cultural traditions, while also giving pleasure to its audiences. Mukund noted:

> Overall, I think these performances have impacted the society in a good way. People derive pleasure out of these performances and these performances offer an opportunity for us to know our culture more. They help us, firstly, to get a message of unity. Secondly, we get to know our heritage through *Nautanki* performances. If we can not do anything to make our culture stronger, at least we can encourage those people who are doing it, by enthusiastically becoming a part of the audience. Another advantage of coming to these performances is that we come to know each other's thoughts. (personal communication, May 19, 2005)

A famous *Nautanki* performer Master Vishnu said that although *Nautanki* brings a community close to its heritage, audience support is needed to fulfill this function:

> Surely *Nautanki* has contributed to the community. Whatever scripts we have in *Nautanki*, for instance, the scripts of Pundit Nathram ji, are all historical and have some lesson. They teach us bravery. They have all kinds of moods-- romantic, somber, adventurous. All these flavors are there in *Nautanki*. They influence people very much. However, the condition is that audiences should be appreciative. When audiences are not appreciative then what can we give them? (personal communication, May 19, 2005)

To summarize the overall theme, my conversations in the field revealed that *Nautanki* encourages connection and cohesion in the community on various levels. *Nautanki* performances represent one of the very few public occasions in rural north India that provides an opportunity for people from different castes to participate in a community event together. *Nautankis* are big public performances, often involving an audience of many thousands. Organizing an event of such big scale demands a lot of teamwork and cooperation among community members. This teamwork brings people closer. *Nautanki* performances many times have been used to end conflicts among communities. Since most of the community members are admirers of *Nautanki* and its artists, *Nautanki* artists often use their influence to end social animosities in a public space. *Nautanki* performances have been used on a wide scale to raise money for socially ameliorative projects such as constructing schools and shelters for the poor.

Also, the structure of *Nautanki* performances demands a lot of participation from its audience. Audience members may influence what script will be performed, on the spot, at the time of performance. Audiences have a lot of influence over the course of a *Nautanki* performance. When they get bored, they demand variety, which is fulfilled by the performers spontaneously. Further, audiences not only watch the performance but also engage in various other social activities such as community feasts, meeting relatives and friends, discussing their problems and participating in local fairs. Some people also use this occasion to picnic with family and friends.

Finally, *Nautanki* is used by its audiences as a medium to connect with their cultural roots. *Nautanki* itself was perceived by many audience members as an important part of their cultural heritage. Overall, *Nautanki* as a performance tradition supports and enhances the feeling of community among its audiences.

Theme 2: Nautanki as Entertainment and Purveyor of Social Messages

RQ 2 asked: How does *Nautanki* communicate social change messages to its audiences effectively?

During my fieldwork, I observed that *Nautanki* is immensely popular as a rural folk entertainment form. Awara, a famous *Nautanki* comedian and troupe owner, informed me that *Nautanki* is still an integral part of the weekly fairs and festivals in rural north India:

> In certain places in Alwar district such as Bansoor tehsil, Kothputli, Behrod, Karana, there are 200 to 250 villages where local fairs are organized every

> Tuesday and Saturday in the respect of Hanumanji.[49] These fairs never happen without *Swang Nautanki* performances. Same is the case in our Brij[50] and Haryana region, from Faridabad up to Hisar and Hansi. Then in the direction up to Bharatpur and Muraina, Gwalior and Dholpur[51] also, there is a lot of demand of Hathrasi Swang *Nautanki*. (personal communication, May 19, 2005)

Lata, one of the busiest female *Nautanki* artists at present, says that even in the remotest of villages, she finds thousands of people waiting to watch *Nautanki* performances:

> We go to remote villages where there are no means of entertainment-- in the desert. Even there, an audience of 20,000 to 50,000 gathers to watch our performance. Audiences begin to sit at 9 pm and continue to watch till 6 in the morning. There is something in this art form because of which audiences sit for so long! (personal communication, May 19, 2005)

One reason for *Nautanki's* popularity is that there are few entertainment options in remote rural villages. *Nautanki* is affordable entertainment for the rural masses. Giriraj Singh, an ardent fan of *Nautanki,* described how audience members, even those who are initially indifferent toward the *Nautanki* performance, get so absorbed in it:

> Gradually and subconsciously, an audience member would make space for himself in the crowd and slowly, slowly, inch by inch, absorbed in the performance, he would keep moving and would be sitting on a different spot without even realizing it himself that he has moved! Initially, when people come

[49] A popular deity of Hinduism.
[50] A cultural zone in Uttar Pradesh.
[51] Districts in the Indian state of Rajasthan

they would not sit, just watch from the distance but slowly they would get closer and closer to the stage. (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

Figure 12: Nautanki being performed on a makeshift stage made of cots at Kinarai village. Note that audience members are sitting on ground. Some audience members are lying down on cots [on the left of the stage] casually while watching the performance

Giriraj told me that even on cold winter nights audiences sit in the open with few clothes on their bodies and watch *Nautanki* performances. He goes on:

In winter nights, the performance goes on for seven to eight hours. During those seven to eight hours people remain totally absorbed in the performance--

> demanding what they want to see. It does not matter if it is severe cold. Many young audiences would not leave the performance even if they are feeling tired. They would sleep where they are sitting but would not leave their spot for someone else might take it. (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

Than Singh, Giriraj's friend, chimed in:

> The main thing is that we do not want to get away from the stage. When you are sitting right in front of the artist, if you get up, your seat is gone. Someone else will occupy it and by the time you come back, you can miss an exciting moment in the performance. Also, it would be hard to come back as there is such a huge crowd during *Nautanki* performances. (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

Giriraj also shared with me a very interesting anecdote from his childhood. This anecdote shows how popular *Nautanki* is and has been in rural India.

> I have been watching *Nautanki* for the last 30 years. I used to come by foot in the night in the coldest of weathers walking three kilometers from my village to Davooji[52]without telling my parents, who would be sleeping at that time. I would watch *Nautanki* the whole night and after it finished, I would walk back to my home before my parents woke up. (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

Than Singh also jokingly compared the scenario shared by Giriraj with the present day consumption of entertainment in India:

[52] A semi-rural town in Mathura district

> [Laughing] These days if we go to watch a film in a cinema house that is very near to our homes, we would still go in an auto-rickshaw.[53] Forget about walking. (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

Than's comment suggests that *Nautanki's* appeal in the past went beyond the present day appeal of cinema. Than Singh also described his first experience of seeing a *Nautanki* with much excitement:

> We like *Nautanki* very much. I saw it in Nagar, live! And I liked it so much that I can not tell you. There was a crowd of thousands of people. Audiences were sitting even on the stage. There were so many people that they surrounded the stage from all four sides. (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

There are two things that one notices clearly in Than's statement. First, the popular nature of *Nautanki* ("thousands of people" attending it), and second, it being a flexible, informal performance occasion ("audiences were sitting even on the stage"). These two characteristics suggest *Nautanki*'s appeal as a community-based entertainment medium.

In talking to audience members, I found out that different sections of audiences come to watch different things in a *Nautanki* performance. *Nautanki* offers a different kind of entertainment for different sections of the audience. As discussed earlier, the older generation likes the operatic part (the main narrative part) more. The younger generation believes that songs and dances, which are often not related with the main narrative and which come on as a break in the main opera, are more entertaining. These songs and dances usually involve young women dancing on "hot" numbers. My conversation with a youth at the performance at Kinarai village yielded the following

[53] A kind of taxi.

response: "I definitely liked the girls' dances more. Pleasure comes when songs and dances are performed" (Personal communication, May 16, 2005).

Figure 13: A spicy dance number in progress in the Nautanki performance at Kinarai village. The performer in the picture earned hundreds of rupees (Indian currency) in reward from the audience members in a matter of few minutes

In addition to spicy dances and songs, the comic interludes within the main opera are also very popular among the younger generation. According to Than Singh:

> As we are young, we particularly like the dances. Chandni ji, Chand Tara ji.[54] We really liked their dances! I liked the comedy also, comedy of Chajjan ji.[55] He is so

[54] Names of female dancers.

> funny that audiences just keep laughing on his acting and jokes. (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

Although the entertainment desires of different audience segments may be in conflict with each other, they eventually get sorted out. The *Nautanki* performance usually offers a mix of entertainment elements that satisfy both older and younger audiences. For instance, Giriraj who liked the main opera part of *Nautanki,* agreed that sometimes the main opera can be a little dragging, and the dances and comedy breaks that come in between the main opera, keep audiences' interest alive, especially in an all night performance: "Sometimes when performance drags, then comedy interludes come. So in the middle of the night, when audiences start getting sleepy, the comedy wakes them up" (personal communication, May 17, 2005)!

Several audience members compared *Nautanki* with other entertainment forms such as cinema and television. Given the recent spread of television and cinema in rural India, this comparison was inevitable. According to Giriraj:

> In films and television, you can get bored sometimes but in *Nautanki* you can never get bored because the show is shaped by people's choice. For instance, you [audience] want to see comedy at this very instant and here comes Chajjan Singh Master who will entertain you with comedy, and your desire for comedy is fulfilled. If the audience does not like the performance of a particular artist, another artist can replace that artist immediately. (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

Than Singh compares *Nautanki* with the modern media:

---

[55] One of the top *Nautanki* comedians.

> Well we do not feel like taking a break during a *Nautanki* performance at all. You are so much into the performance. In a cinema hall, even when you are sitting in a comfortable chair, you feel distracted. However in *Nautanki*, audiences many times do not have space to stand sometimes, then also they are totally hooked by the performance. (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

Some audience members, who are connoisseurs of *Nautanki*, usually from the older generation, appreciate a diversity of performance elements. Mukund liked the following in *Nautanki*: "I like the overall performance, the wonderful poetry, in which every word has many meanings. What these artists sing has a narrative" (personal communication, May 19, 2005).

Different audience members might like different elements of *Nautanki* but they all agreed that the reason they are attracted towards *Nautanki* is because it is an immensely entertaining art form. Than Singh, Giriraj Singh, and Satyavan Singh summarized well what audiences get out from *Nautanki* as an entertaining art form:

> You keep get everything [from *Nautanki*]. There is comedy, there is dance, there are *Rasiyas*,[56] and there are stories like Amar Singh Rathore, Indal Haran.[57] Even if you see these stories 10 times, or 20 times, you get the same pleasure. Thus you get so much variety and you enjoy it so much. In films, we do not get so much variety. You can not control anything [in films]. (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

[56] Folk songs
[57] Names of different *Nautankis*.

Thus *Nautanki* is popular among its audiences due to various reasons. These include its affordability for poor villagers, its flexible structure, its cultural closeness to people, and its educational value. Awara noted:

> See, for the people who are rooted in their culture the glamour of modern media does not mean anything even today. The entertainment that we [*Nautanki* artists] provide to audiences on live stage, they can not get even from a 50 crore[58] film. We give different flavors in *Nautanki*. We perform educational *Nautankis* on various social themes such as dowry, family planning, environment protection, child marriage, health issues, and the caste system. Thus we already spread awareness about the issues that the government wants to talk about. That too without charging any fees. (personal communication, May 19, 2005)

For those who consider folk traditions as unsophisticated, unworthy to be called as "arts", and unable to carry intellectual messages, Awara noted:

> Our program goes on from 10 p.m. in the night until 5.30 a.m. in winters and 6 a.m. in summers. Even rich audience members who are wearing expensive clothes of Rs. 4,000 have no seat, no bench, not even a cloth on the ground to sit. They do not mind sitting on the soil. People are connected to this art form and even today, audiences walk 15 miles, or spend money on transport, to see *Nautanki*. You see, people who are attached to this form are actual lovers of literature and music. People who have no understanding of *Nautanki* think that it is useless. Only the pretentious call it rustic. (personal communication, May 19, 2005)

[58] Crore is a unit in Indian numerical system. One crore consists of 10 million.

In summary, *Nautanki* still retains its popularity in the remote villages of north India. Some performances are attended by 20,000 to 50,000 audience members. Respondents said that even on cold winter nights they walk long distances and sit all through the night to watch *Nautanki* performances. Different sections of audiences liked *Nautanki* for different reasons. Older audiences liked the singing and poetry of *Nautanki* while the younger generation said that they watched *Nautanki* for its spicy dances. Some audience members said that they liked *Nautanki* because it offered a mix of different performative elements such as song, dance, and comedy. However, some *Nautanki* artists complained that elite people lacking the proper understanding of *Nautanki* do not give it the respect it deserves.

Nautanki's Influence on Audiences

Upon hearing audiences' views on *Nautanki*, I wondered how the *Nautanki* performances impacted the audiences' emotions, thoughts, and actions. Different kinds of responses were provided by different people. Some said that they were deeply influenced by certain *Nautanki* performances, while others said the influence was milder and withered away with time. Srivastav, a *Nautanki* manager, believed that *Nautanki* performances impact most audience members deeply:

> I have seen it [*Nautanki*'s impact]. When Kamlesh Lata Arya ji[59] used to perform as Taramati in *Nautanki Harischandra*, I have seen thousands of people crying. What would you call this except the emotional effect of the performance? *Nautanki* performances have such strong narratives and acting that they are bound to influence audiences. (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

[59] A famous female lead artist of *Nautanki*.

When I asked Srivastav whether he himself had ever been influenced by any *Nautanki* performance, he said:

> I really like *Nautanki* Harischandra. There are things depicted in this *Nautanki*—the importance of speaking the truth, strong determination, sticking to one's promises-- that have deeply influenced me. Whenever this *Nautanki* is performed anywhere, I still watch it. Also, it is a good tragedy and it is very entertaining. Therefore I am really influenced by it. (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

Giriraj Singh shared with me the impact of a *Nautanki Bhakt Puranmal* on audiences, including himself. He told me that the particular performance he saw had an audience of about 50,000 people:

> They [audiences] were totally absorbed in the performance. When the comedy came, they would laugh. When there was a sad scene, they cried.
>
> When Bhakt Puranmal died, there was not a single person in the audience who did not have tears. And you were talking about teenagers; they were also so involved in it that they became very serious! I saw them myself. In another *Nautanki Harischandra Taramati*, when the queen Taramati tears off her sari[60] and puts it on the dead body [of her son], at that moment audiences always cry. They just flow with the emotions created by the performers. You will not get this effect in any other media. (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

However when I asked about any behavior change that he had adopted as a result of watching *Nautanki*, Giriraj said that although *Nautanki* performances did lead him to change some behaviors, these changes were temporary and short-lived:

---

[60] A female Indian garment.

If I saw *Harischandra* tonight, for the next two days until the influence of the performance remains on me, I will follow its message. For those two days I would resolve firmly that I should not speak lies. I would tell myself—see Harischandra faced so many difficulties but he did not shy away from truth. So let me start speaking truth (laughs). However after sometime, I will forget everything. It is hard to continue that way because sometimes without lying you can not sustain. In the matrix of this world [soon after the performance] you forget everything and return to your old ways (laughs). (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

Figure 14: A female audience member enjoying the Nautanki performance in Mathura

Certain performers noted that they got so influenced by the character they were playing in a *Nautanki* that they started living like that character in real life. Mukund told me: "I remember that when *Swami Haridas Bhagat* was performed, the person who enacted the character of Swami Haridas ji[61] himself took *sanyas*[62] after the performance. Even today, he wanders around as a saint of Bihariji's faith" (personal communication, May 18, 2005).

Figure 15: The "Nakkara" (the main percussion instrument in Nautanki) player accompanies singers in the Nautanki performance at Vrindavan.

[61] Swami Haridas ji was a famous 16th century Indian musician and saint.
[62] When a person takes "sanyas", he renounces the material world, and follows celibacy.

I dug deeper to find out the reasons for such an impact of *Nautanki* performances. Madanlal, a famous performer of *Nautanki* said:

> *Nautanki* has beautiful melody. People get hooked to its music. God lives in music. Audiences love it. Singing, instrumental music, and dance-- all these arts-- go together in *Nautanki* and that is why it has such power over audiences. (personal communication, May 14, 2005)

Vijay Kishore, the *ustaad* of "Vipra" *akhara* of Vrindavan, thought that the reason for *Nautanki's* impact on its audiences is explained by the presence of all performative *rasas*[63] in it:

> Some people call it *Saangit*, some call it *Bhagat*. Rural people usually call it *Nautanki*. They call it *Nautanki*[64] because it has nine entertaining *rasas*. It has got romantic, devotional, bravery, repulsive, sad, and other kinds of moods. A performance that has this mixture of all *rasas* is effective and impactful. (personal communication, May 19, 2005)

Furthermore, according to Vijay Kishore, *Nautanki* usually has beautiful poetical meters and musical ragas:[65]

> *Saangit* is a very old performance tradition. It has *Doha, Chaubola, Lavani, Langadi Lavani, Radheshyam, Daud, Thumari, Gazal, Dadra, Bhairavi* and many others old meters of poetry. This poetry is composed in traditional *taals*[66] such as

[63] According to Indian performance theory, *rasa* is the essence of a performance. It can be variously translated as "pleasure", "mood", "flavor", or "performance bliss".
[64] The first three syllables "Nau" in the word "*Nautanki*" literally means nine.
[65] Indian musical airs that change with different moods.
[66] Percussion meters

> 14 *taal*, 7 *taal*, etc. This poetry is sung in classical and folk *ragas.*[67] When this poetry is sung with proper orchestra, it is wonderfully melodious to ears. (personal communication, May 19, 2005)

In fact, Vijay Kishore believed that Hindi cinema has borrowed a lot from *Nautanki*: "Film people have stolen many musical meters from this tradition. For instance, there is *Dadra*, there is *Ghazal*. Film people have stolen these from *Nautanki"* (personal communication, May 19, 2005).

Awara summed up *Nautanki's* various contributions to society and the reasons for its impact on audiences:

> The first thing is that through the medium of *Nautanki*, people in a community get a very good opportunity to connect with each other. Second, because people are attracted towards *Nautanki*, we can communicate messages to people. Any organizer can get his or her message across to the community through *Nautanki*. Third, it helps to end animosities and misunderstandings that exist among community members. Fourth, we expose the new generation to our artistic tradition. Fifth, we bring history to life in our performances. The audience comes to know about characters like Maharana Pratap, Amar Singh Rathore, and Shahjahan. Thus the new generation becomes more aware about their history and their roots. People can not experience these narratives as well through reading. These performances have both audio and visual elements so they are more communicative. So the community gets lots of things from *Nautanki.* (personal communication, May 19, 2005)

[67] Musical airs.

To summarize, *Nautanki* strongly affects some audience members. For some, the impact was so intense that they cried and laughed with the performers. Some audience members said that their thoughts were deeply influenced by the messages depicted in *Nautankis* such as speaking the truth and honoring one's word. Some changed their behavior as a result of watching *Nautanki.* However, respondents also pointed out that translating the change in thoughts into change in behaviors was tough and usually short-lived. In addition to audience members, many times, performers also get influenced with the role they play in *Nautankis.* For instance, one performer became an ascetic as a result of a role he played in a *Nautanki.* Respondents said melodious music and poetry added to *Nautanki's* strong emotional impacts. They also pointed out that because *Nautanki* is part of their cultural heritage, the messages conveyed through it appeal to them strongly.

Communicating Social Messages through Nautanki

It evolved from my conversations in the field that *Nautanki* is being purposely used these days by government and non-profit organizations to provide pro-social messages to rural audiences. I also found that *Nautanki* is being used both consciously and unconsciously to communicate both traditional as well as contemporary social messages to its audiences. I saw both old and new *Nautankis* scripts enacted in the field--the ones that were consciously designed to give social change messages to its audiences, and ones that were written around traditional themes. The following conversation took place with an audience member in the health *mela* (fair) in Mathura. In this fair, the local government officials hired a *Nautanki* troupe to present performances giving messages on eliminating dowry, reproductive health, eradicating polio, and tobacco misuse. I

interviewed an audience member while he was watching the anti-dowry *Nautanki* performance.

Dev: How is the performance?

Shankar: It is educational and gives knowledge to people. It is very good.

Dev: What education are you getting from this?

Shankar: That do not give dowry in girl's marriage. They [in the performance] marry her in the right way. These performances should not be limited only to this place. If these kinds of performances are done in every neighborhood, in every village, it would be better for people. Not all people are able to come here [in the health fair] to see the performances. (personal communication, May 14, 2005)

Figure 16: Audiences watching Nautanki performance based on social issues such as dowry eradication and women's empowerment in the Mathura health fair

Shankar was able to understand the messages given to him through the *Nautanki* performance very clearly. I asked him how other communication strategies such as speeches or mass media would fare in giving these messages. He replied:

> Nobody will be influenced by just lecture or watching television. They will forget that. The performances have much more impact. People remember this because this (performance) is our old tradition. The message through *Nautanki* enters in people's minds quickly. People understand this language faster. (personal communication, May 14, 2005)

Shankar compared *Nautanki* to a "language" that is easily accessible to local people; a language in which they can understand and remember messages better. I probed Shankar on why he thought that *Nautanki* comprises a better "language" than other media. He said:

> In *Nautanki*, they sing in the style that illiterate people can understand very quickly. Now this modernity—television etc., have come. People are not able to understand them. When does the television show these kinds of entertaining programs? I like these performances. We forget those television programs very fast. For instance, I saw a film just now, and after five minutes I cannot even explain what exactly I watched and what I heard. Neither one remembers any song nor anything else. People remember old *Nautanki* songs even now. (personal communication, May 14, 2005)

When asked why *Nautanki* has such impact on its audience, Shankar said: "Because the real thing is real thing. It will enter people's mind more effectively. Other things will

distract you for some time but then you will forget them" (personal communication, May 14, 2005).

Shankar himself has only basic education, i.e., he can read and write but he did not go to high school. In the health fair, illiterate and semi-literate audience members like him found the messages given through *Nautanki* easier to understand and remember in contrast to other media. They considered local performance forms like *Nautanki* as real, and television and other new media as unreal or alien.

Figure 17: Two women from remote villages in Mathura district watching Nautanki at the Mathura health fair. One of them breastfed her child while enjoying the performance

Impact of Nautanki's Social Messages on Audiences: During the *Nautanki* performances on dowry, tobacco use, reproductive health, and polio eradication that were performed in the health fair at Mathura, I talked to audience members about their impact. Most of the audience members thought that performance did impact them. A woman of around 40 years of age, who was providing heath information to visitors, said:

> They are showing things about health. They are showing the ill effects of tobacco. Before that, they showed a good performance on the issue of dowry. In this way people would be able to understand some good things….at least some people who are sensible will definitely grasp these messages. (personal communication, May 14, 2005)

An elderly man in the audience thought that *Nautankis* should impact audiences' thoughts:

> There should be some influence of these performances on public about the issues depicted. There are educational lessons for the public in these performances on what is happening around us these days i.e., dowry and other issues. (personal communication, May 14, 2005)

A woman in the audience who had come to get some medicines articulated how the *Nautanki* performances in the health fair related to her own life:

> I am watching this and thinking about my children, about the marriage relationships, and inequality between people. I like this performance because I also have sons and daughters. We should not take or give dowry as is shown in this performance. From where will a poor person give dowry? Am I right or not?

> Some people burn brides to death because of unmet dowry demands. They expel them. They threaten them that 'either you get dowry from your parents or we will kill you'. But when poor parents do not have money, where they can they get it from? That is why I like it. (personal communication, May 14, 2005)

The woman quoted above told me that she had three daughters and they were of marriageable age. Her husband was a laborer who did not earn much money. She was concerned about her inability to give dowry and thus hinder the marriage prospects of her daughters. She added:

> I think people will improve their circumstances by watching these performances. Why would they not? People who are understanding the message in these performances will definitely think about it. I am understanding them. I will like to get my daughters married in a family where there is no dowry demand. That is firm. (personal communication, May 14, 2005)

Several other audience members told me that they understood the educational messages in *Nautanki* performances clearly and were influenced by them. However, there were some audience members who thought that watching *Nautanki* was purely an entertainment experience. A young male audience member said: "To tell you the truth, I think it is pure entertainment and people take it that way. It is drama and people take it as drama" (personal communication, May 14, 2005).

However the same man thought that community performances like *Nautanki* help social causes by serving as huge crowd pullers for pro-social initiatives (such as the

health fair). Once people gather at one place to watch the *Nautanki* performances, the location can be used to give helpful information to them. As the respondent noted:

> I think that this performance serves as an attraction to collect people. In our society, people love cultural performances and they assemble very fast to see them. When they gather to watch performances here in the health fair, they can know about the health messages and the information given here. Thus they would be benefited by it. These performances are very useful that way. I definitely think the number of people attending this health fair has increased quite a bit due to these cultural performances. (personal communication, May 14, 2005)

Figure 18: Women watch Nautanki performances on social issues while waiting to get medicines at Mathura health fair

According to a health worker in the fair, the entertainment dimension of *Nautanki* provides an educational gateway to its audiences:

> The people who have organized this health fair and who want to give helpful health information to people have hired this *Nautanki* troupe to perform here. The organizers want to take advantage of this crowd that has assembled here to watch *Nautanki*. Now when the crowd has gathered in this tent, they can give them information and provide them various health facilities. So you see people will definitely get benefit from that. (personal communication, May 14, 2005)

However, this health worker also thought that to fully understand the health messages in the performances, it was important for people to watch them from the beginning to the end:

> People who are watching these performances from the beginning understand the messages in the performances. However people who come in the middle of the performances, take some time to make sense of the storyline and the messages within them. (personal communication, May 14, 2005)

When I asked him if he thought that such messages as HIV/AIDS should be given through a *Nautanki* performance, he got very excited:

> Oh, that would be very nice! I think it will make a lot of difference. In fact there was a performance on the day before yesterday in which the plot incorporated messages on HIV/AIDS. Doing more performances on this theme will definitely make a difference. (personal communication, May 14, 2005)

A female health worker named Shabnam also thought that *Nautanki* performances helped her to spread health awareness by attracting crowds to her health stall. She thought that villagers particularly liked cultural performances such as *Nautanki*: "I personally think public is attracted to our work due to these performances. Actually a lot of people from villages are coming here. Because they like these performances, they are spending more time in the fair" (personal communication, May 14, 2005).

Madan Lal, a senior singer-actor of *Nautanki*, performed in the health fair. He thought that audiences from villages were enthusiastic to receive social messages in *Nautanki* performances:

> Wherever we have gone to perform *Nautanki*s as part of the SIFPSA[68] campaign, audiences have really liked them and received them with enthusiasm. People demanded for more performances everywhere. These *Nautanki*s supported by SIFPSA and created by Shri Ram Dayal Sharma[69] are very good and suit the need of the time and society. (personal communication, May 14, 2005)

Madan Lal also believed that messages in *Nautanki* performances could lead to behavior change among the audience members:

> People respond positively. For instance, we recently performed a *Nautanki* telling farmers how to grow crops on less fertile lands. When we initially performed on this issue, people did not take much interest. They were afraid to take risk to cultivate less fertile lands. They thought that nothing could grow on barren lands.

---

[68] SIFPSA is an Indian government organization that hires *Nautanki* troupes to give messages about reproductive health, and other health and social messages in villages.

[69] My father Shri Ram Dayal Sharma wrote new *Nautankis* to give SIFPSA's messages. With other experts, he also trained a number of *Nautanki* troupes to perform these new scripts.

> The well respected Hindi poet Tulsidas ji has written that: 'Like plants can not grow on barren lands, in the same way, no lust can get born in the hearts of saints'. So people did not believe that anything could grow on barren lands. But we did efforts and created good performances on this issue and performed them from village to village. By watching our performances, farmers were persuaded that infertile lands can be actually turned into fertile lands and they should not lose heart. The government also helped them and today most of the infertile lands in the districts of Mainpuri, Hathras[70] and others where we performed, have turned into fertile lands. (personal communication, May 14, 2005)

I was intrigued by *Nautanki's* role in enhancing arable land and so I requested Madan Lal to explain the process of this change in more detail. Madan Lal told me:

> First of all we *created Nautankis* about leveling the land and enthused them through songs to actually do it! Then we told them through *Nautankis* to dig water drains in the land, to add gypsum to soil, then pour water on the land. In this way, that land is now minting gold! (personal communication, May 14, 2005)

Dan Singh, an audience member and a health worker in the fair, shared with me an incident of attitude change as a result of watching a *Nautanki* performance on an anti-alcohol story:

> There was this person who was watching the *Nautanki,* which had anti drug and alcohol messages. After watching the *Nautanki* he swore that he would never again drink liquor, and he did it seriously-- with much faith. It happened here yesterday. (personal communication, May 14, 2005)

[70] Districts in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh.

However, watching the *Nautanki* was not the only reason for this person's attitude change. His interpersonal communication with Dan Singh after the performance about the ills of drinking also influenced his decision. Dan described the process:

> This person used to drink heavily. After watching the *Nautanki* performance against drinking, he told me that the performers were saying the right thing. I also talked with him and joked with him and tried to persuade him against drinking. He got so much influenced that he told me that he would not drink from now onwards. I challenged him 'I will see whether you can actually quit drinking or not'. (personal communication, May 14, 2005)

Dan Singh's statement indicates that performances with social change messages have a potential to generate interpersonal discussion among audience members. This discussion might lead to discussions and actions at a later time. Dan Singh further added:

> People get education out of these performances about family planning, eradicating polio, and many other issues. They are influenced. I liked "the stories of Tota and Mayna",[71] and "Beta Beti ka Byah"[72] on the issue of dowry. I definitely think these performances were effective in conveying their social messages. (personal communication, May 14, 2005)

However many audience members, performers, troupe owners, and other people associated with *Nautanki* made it clear that *Nautanki* performances have to be done professionally to influence people towards positive social change. According to them, half-hearted, unprofessional attempts to use *Nautanki* to communicate social messages

---

[71] *Tota* and *Mynah* are name of two birds who feature as narrators in traditional folk stories.
[72] "Beti ka Byah" literally means "Daughter's wedding"—it is *Nautanki* created by my father on the issue of dowry.

might not be effective. Srivastav, a *Nautanki* troupe manager, believed that many troupes, which are hired by the government these days to spread awareness about social and health messages, are not very professional:

> *Nautankis* can communicate social messages effectively but the condition is that artists and presentation should be first rate. The central government and many state governments are using *Nautanki* to spread awareness about HIV/AIDS and family planning. This is good thing. However, many *Nautanki* people perceive this work as a way to make money. They do not work hard enough on these shows. If shows on these [social] themes are done with interest and hard work, I think they can be even more effective with the audience. (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

As Srivastav noted, *Nautanki* has been used in recent times by the government and other organizations to promote social messages. However, *Nautanki* has also been used historically to convey moral and social messages. Mukund, an audience member in Vrindavan told me:

> Yes, there have been performances from time to time to increase public awareness about social issues. For instance in the *Nautanki Vrinda Charit*, Vrinda was the wife of Jalandhar. Vishnu violated her modesty[73] before killing Jalandhar. If Vrinda was not distracted from her loyalty to Jalandhar, then Jalandhar could not have been killed. The message was that even good people leave their morals to

[73] This is a mythological story. As the legend goes, Vishnu seduced Jalandhar's wife Vrinda in order to defeat Jalandhar. Jalandhar was invincible because his wife was virtuous and devoted to him single-mindedly. Once Vishnu tracheously destroyed Vrinda's loyalty towards her husband, Jalandhar became vulnerable and eventually got defeated.

> achieve their ends. We as citizens should be extremely cautious of slipping from our morals. (personal communication, May 18, 2005)

Like *Vrinda Charit*, social messages are given through many mainstream and religious *Nautankis.* For instance, Vijay Kishore, the *ustaad* of *Vipra Akhara* told me that his *akhara* is writing *Nautankis* on contemporary social issues: "We are at present writing a *Swang* about widow remarriage and the problem of child marriage. So our pen is on work at this and we will make efforts to write on more contemporary issues" (personal communication, May 19, 2005).

Figure 19: Nautanki performance against dowry in progress at Mathura health fair

In summary, some audience members were strongly impacted by social change messages given through *Nautanki* performances. Many audience members drew parallels between the problems in their own lives and the situations depicted in *Nautanki* stories. After watching *Nautanki* performances, some felt a need to resist oppressive social practices such as dowry. Respondents felt that *Nautanki* helps to communicate pro-social messages in two ways: first through their content, and second, by serving as an event to draw crowds at public occasions such as health fairs organized by the government. Both *Nautanki* performers and audiences felt that *Nautanki* performances should be done professionally if they have to be effective purveyor of social messages. Also, while giving pro-social messages, they should retain their entertainment quality. Recently, even traditional schools of *Nautanki* have started to focus more on creating scripts on the contemporary issues.

Message Impact: Nautanki versus Mass Media

Intrigued by the comparison made by Shankar between television and *Nautanki,* I asked other audience members about their preference between television and *Nautanki*. Nathi Lal felt that although television has wide reach, he did not gain much knowledge from television:

> I like these [*Nautanki*] performances. Television is in every household these days. But we do not get much meaning out of television. There are many things that are not watchable on television. *Nautanki* performances have some concrete essence that we can learn. Television does not give us much knowledge. (personal communication, May 14, 2005)

Figure 20: The comic character "Moteram" does a humorous act in Nautanki "Beti ka Byah" at Mathura health fair

When asked what was so special about *Nautanki* performances, Nathi Lal said: "This is entertainment. All these people who have come to this health fair—it is entertainment for them. At the same time there is some educational message in it and that is why people like it" (personal communication, May 14, 2005).

Dan Singh, a health worker, said that he liked live performances like *Nautanki* more than television:

> There is one difference between television and *Nautankis*. In television programs, there is lot of cheapness and obscenities. While watching the programs on the

> religious television channels such as Astha and Sanskar,[74] people are thinking about God and suddenly these cheap ads come in between. That is bad and wrong. But in live performances, they do not show any obscenities. There are no advertisements in *Nautanki*. Whatever they show, they show directly and fully. (personal communication, May 14, 2005)

During the more traditional[75] *Nautanki* that I watched in village Kinarai on the banks of the river Yamuna[76] in Mathura district, audience members from the older generation said that they did not like to watch television. They liked *Nautanki* more than television. As one audience member noted:

> I personally like *Nautanki* performances. This is good work (with an emphasis) Television is a trashy thing. Do you think television is good? Television has ruined the people. It has corrupted our teenagers. *Nautanki* is much less corrupted than television. (personal communication, May 16, 2005)

However, I found that the younger generation in villages liked both-- the *Nautanki* and television. A conversation between me and a teenager named Hari Om in Kinarai is illustrative:

> *Dev*: What do you like more? *Nautanki* or television?
>
> *Hari Om*: I like both. I like good programs on television and I also like this performance.

---

[74] Private religious television channels in India.

[75] I am using the word "traditional" for the want of a better word. What I mean here is that this performance did not have consciously designed social or health messages in its narrative as the one that was performed in the health fair at Mathura had.

[76] One of the biggest rivers of India, which along with Ganges, is responsible for fulfilling most of the water demand to the plains of northern India.

Dev: What do you like in this performance and what do you like on television?

Hari Om: I like the good story in *Nautankis*. On television, I like sports programs, and informational programs, and sitcoms. At different times, I like different things. When I watch television comfortably in my house, I like television. When I come out and watch *Nautanki*, I like this as well. I like to sit here with everybody. We all talk and enjoy with friends. We talk about going to different places. We talk about the food that we like. We also talk about sports. When I watch television, I watch it alone; when I go out to see a *Nautanki*, I go out with friends. (personal communication, May 16, 2005)

Figure 21: Young audience members enjoying Nautanki in Kinarai village

Like Hari Om, other teenagers also liked *Nautanki* because it offered them an opportunity to hang out with their friends, something that television does not provide. They also liked the stories in *Nautanki* performances.

Rural people like *Nautanki* because of its "real" nature compared to the "unreal" nature of television and films. According to Srivastav:

> On screen we see only 'ghosts' whereas in our performances we see real people. There is a lot of difference between ghosts and reality (laughs). When we announce on stage that Hotilal Panda is coming in front of you to perform, then it would be Hotilal Panda himself who will come and perform. On the other hand, on screen, it would be only the image of Dharmendra[77]-- only his speech and image. What we do on stage is real. Our audience is in front of the actual artist, deriving pleasure. Screen is abstract. We watch it from a distance. This is the main difference. That is why *Nautanki* is much stronger than film and other mass media. (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

Many other respondents emphasized the above point, as the following conversation shows:

> *Dev*: You have to sit the whole night to watch *Nautanki*. Why not get some sleep?
>
> *Pannalal*: No sir. Sleeping is an every night affair. We don't have an opportunity to watch *Nautanki* every night. I do not have any problem in staying awake whole night.
>
> *Dev*: What about watching television at home?

[77] A popular male cinema star in India.

> *Pannalal*: I like *Nautanki* more. Television does not show us real people. Here we are watching live from our own eyes. In television we watch them through the screen. (personal communication, May 16, 2005)

Even the younger generation in villages finds the "live" nature of *Nautanki* to be engaging. Than Singh noted:

> I got hooked to *Nautanki* from the first performance that I saw in Nagar![78]
>
> The special thing about a performance is that it is live: it is original--face to face! I saw this wonderful dance and could appreciate the dancer and her art while sitting right in front of her. And a person is impacted more by what he or she watches live! (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

Than Singh said that he also liked to watch television and films. However given a choice, he would prefer to watch *Nautanki* more than television or films:

> We wait for *Nautankis* for long. If I have a choice, I will watch *Nautanki* first and then films. Of course I want to watch the new film that is coming soon. However, I would like to watch *Nautanki* first because if we miss a film, we can see it again but if we miss *Nautanki*, we cannot watch that show again. (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

This "unrecorded" nature adds to *Nautanki*'s popularity. According to Srivastav, *Nautanki* is "old but gold" and the mass media have developed on the shoulders of *Nautanki*:

> We spend three hours in the cinema hall with great difficulty even when we are sitting in luxurious seats. In *Nautanki*, people spend six hours sitting on the

[78] A semi-rural town.

> ground with pleasure. This art form has so much attraction. Even films borrow from it. *Nautanki* has been the central entertainment form. (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

In sum, although *Nautanki* faces increasing competition from the modern mass media at present, it is still a highly popular entertainment medium in rural north India. People whom I talked to gave different reasons for this popularity. According to many, *Nautanki* is an affordable medium of entertainment for rural people and also closer to their culture and lives. That is why they preferred watching *Nautanki* to television or other mass media. People also thought that *Nautanki* is more impactful and engaging because of its "live" nature as compared to the "recorded" nature of mass media. According to many audience members and performers, *Nautanki* has a "real" nature as opposed to the "unreal" nature of the mass media, contributing to its impact. Also, many audiences said that they liked *Nautanki* because of its flexible nature. They thought that they could mould a *Nautanki* performance according to their own entertainment needs as opposed to cinema or television where they had no control over the medium. Some people liked *Nautanki* because it provided them with combination of various entertainment elements--singing, instrumental music, good poetry, and drama. When all these elements were presented live, they made *Nautanki* a highly powerful entertainment medium. *Nautanki* audience members also felt that there is a strong emotional and psychological effect of *Nautanki* performances. Many audience members accepted that they often cried and laughed with the performers on the stage. This emotional impact led many of them to think about the messages presented in the performance and modify their own ideas. Some

of the messages they mentioned as a result of watching traditional *Nautanki* performances were: speaking the truth, taking care of parents, and becoming fearless. Some audience members also said that they tried to change their day-to-day behavior after watching *Nautanki* performances. For example, after watching *Satyavadi Harischandra*, Giriraj tried to develop a habit of speaking truth. However they said that this behavioral change was more short term rather than long term.

Figure 22: Nautanki actress Lata with other performers performing in Vrindavan

In recent times, *Nautanki* performances have been used by the government of India and many non-profit organizations to convey social change messages to rural

people in north India. New scripts embodying messages on social and health issues such as dowry, HIV-AIDS, tobacco misuse, polio eradication, and women's empowerment are being written and performed. My conversation with audience members of these "new" or non-traditional *Nautankis* showed that audience members clearly understood the social change messages given through these performances, and thought about them. They also echoed the need to change certain behaviors as conveyed through these performances. The resolution taken by one audience member to never drink alcohol after watching the anti-alcohol *Nautanki* performance at the health fair in Mathura is a case in point. A performer stated that people adopted new agricultural practices after watching them in *Nautanki*. Some audience members noted that they wished to change oppressive social practices (such as dowry) even before watching the *Nautanki* performances on these issues but felt that they did not have power to change them alone. After watching the performances on these issues, they felt supported and reassured that other people were also thinking like them. Thus in the company of others at *Nautanki* performances, they felt more empowered to affect social change.

Many social and health workers in the field thought that the educational messages conveyed through *Nautanki* are processed more enthusiastically by the audiences, inspiring them to change their behaviors. Others, however, thought that the main contribution of community performances like *Nautanki* was not their message delivery but their crowd pulling capability. Once the community assembled to watch a *Nautanki* performance, social change workers could use that occasion to communicate pro-social messages to people. Another important contribution of *Nautanki* in conveying

educational messages, as per audience members, was that *Nautanki* performances could be easily understood by the illiterate people.

However, people pointed out that in order to be an effective purveyor of social messages, *Nautanki* performances should be of high production quality and be done by professional artists. Then only they would be effective. Also, audience members emphasized that audience members should watch the performances from beginning to end for maximum effect. Watching from the middle would not give them a good sense of the story, and thus would not be so effective.

Theme 3: Nautanki's Changing Form, Challenges, and Future possibilities of Growth

RQ3 asked: What are the present challenges before *Nautanki* and what is its place as an indigenous folk form in a global world?

Nautanki has adapted itself over time. These adaptations have been more pronounced in the last decade or so. They have taken place at all levels— in terms of content, form, management, and performance styles. I talked with both veterans as well as young people associated with *Nautanki* to understand how *Nautanki* has changed itself over the years as a community performance tradition, including my father Pundit Ram Dayal Sharma. *Nautanki* has had a very interesting history. Srivastav, manager of a premier *Nautanki* troupe, who began in the 1970s, provided an overview of the development of *Nautanki* in the last century:

> In the very beginning, *Nautanki* troupes used to tour from village to village and perform in exchange for food and a couple of hundred *rupees*. Then some big artists of *Nautanki* thought 'why should we beg for food?' They started ticketed

> shows in village fairs and exhibitions and started big troupes such as "Bharat Theater", "Hindustan Theater", "Nambardar's Party", "Krishna's Party", "Gulab's Party", "Neelam-Sandhya's Party", and other troupes like that. They had investments of hundreds of thousands of rupees. They had a lot of infrastructure. (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

According to Srivastav, everything was going fine with *Nautanki*, but the entry of women in *Nautanki* in the second half of the 20th century impacted the growth of *Nautanki* in a negative way:[79]

> Women entered in this profession. Many of these women were professional (Srivastav is indicating that these women did not mind using physical relationships to get what they wanted). They got troupe owners under their control and started to harass and boss over other artists. Gradually as a result of mismanagement, these troupes failed and got bankrupt. 'Booking methodology' was the next stage in *Nautanki* business. People like Pragalbhji and Krishna Kumari ji decided that they will do performances to help construction of schools and temples. The local community used to keep whatever earnings came from the sale of tickets of these shows after giving a fixed payment to *Nautanki* troupes. These earnings were used for construction of schools and other pro-community activities. However inflation became even higher and the committees [that were organizing these performances] became dishonest. They kept most of the

[79] According to him this happened because audiences saw and liked women as heroines in cinema (cinema was introduced to rural India in the second half of the 20th century). Under cinema's influence, women were also introduced as heroines in *Nautanki*. Earlier, even the female roles were enacted by males in *Nautanki*.

> earnings. Thus gradually this system also ended. (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

Presently, there are three major systems of *Nautanki* performances in vogue. First, *Nautankis* are invited on the occasions of weddings in villages. Second, they are invited on the occasions of local fairs. Third, government and other non-profit organizations hire *Nautanki* troupes to communicate social and health messages. Srivastav went on to explain the first two systems:

> People who have weddings in their families call *Nautanki* troupes [primarily] for entertainment. A lot of people gather on these occasions. Not only does *Nautanki* keep the guests and hosts engaged for the whole night, it also increases the social status of the family that invites the *Nautanki*. The family can proudly say that Chaudhary Chajjan Singh or Chaudhary Dharampal Singh's[80] troupe performed at their house. This system has become popular these days. The second way is when people invite us to perform on the occasion of festival and fairs. Local village committee thinks that people will come in large numbers. So they invite us to entertain the fair participants. They use their previous funds or collect community donations to organize *Nautanki* performances. By inviting the *Nautanki*, two purposes are served. First, people get entertained, and second, the huge mass of people attending the fair remains busy and engaged. (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

My father, Pundit Ram Dayal Sharma, described the third system: "These days, government and many non-government organizations are hiring *Nautanki* troupes to

[80] Leading *Nautanki* troupes at present.

impart development and social change messages to rural people. This has opened new avenues of employment for *Nautanki* people" (personal communication, May 20, 2005).

Challenges before Nautanki

As we have seen in previous sections, *Nautanki* is still highly popular among the rural areas of north India. However, it is facing many challenges also. Talking to *Nautanki* people in the field, I found out that many times these challenges were real and other times they were product of psychological fear of changing times. In the following sections I discuss these problems as shared with me by *Nautanki* people.

Nautanki and the Mass Media: One problem that *Nautanki* faces is competition from the mass media. Although many audience members said that they preferred *Nautanki* over television or film, several performers, audience members, troupe owners, and managers feared that *Nautanki* might lose the battle of survival against the mass media. They believed that mass media is cutting into *Nautanki's* popularity. Master Vishnu, one of the top *Nautanki* performers sounded pessimistic about *Nautanki's* future:

> From the time television and videotapes have started, the new generation has lost its interest in *Nautanki*. If we are still surviving, it is because of the older generation of patrons. Only they are *Nautanki's* connoisseurs; only they call us and only they listen to us. (personal communication, May 19, 2005)

However, others were more optimistic. For instance Srivastav said:

> No, television has had no impact on *Nautanki*. Television has mostly impacted cinema. When I was in a college in Kanpur,[81] we had to stand in long line to buy cinema tickets. We could reach the box office window only by walking over other

[81] A city in northern India.

> people. Often there used to be violence to get tickets. Now, you can just walk to a cinema hall and get tickets to any film easily. This is because of the spread of television and VCDs (video cassette discs). Mass media has not impacted our *Nautanki* much. *Nautanki* belonged to rural people and still belongs to rural people. (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

However I found out that rural people are also watching VCDs. When I asked Srivastav about this, he responded: "Yes they do watch VCDs but it is again 'ghosts' vs. 'reality'. Performers on VCDs are like ghosts. In *Nautanki*, they are real. Thus, television or VCDs cannot replace *Nautanki*" (personal communication, May 17, 2005).

Many other *Nautanki* performers and troupe owners also believed that the mass media are competing among themselves and the niche for *Nautanki* remains. However, according to them, danger lurks inside. Srivastav told me that some *Nautanki* performers themselves are making VCDs of their performance and selling them in the open market. According to him:

> I would say that *Nautanki* artists who are making VCDs and who are selling their art for small royalties and becoming greedy are doing wrong. This is not appropriate. If we can watch the *Nautanki Indal Haran*[82] in our homes, then why would we waste our time going to distant places to watch it live? But VCD watching does not have the same pleasure as watching it live. Ghosts will remain ghosts and stage will continue to have the real impact. (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

[82] *Indal Haran* is a popular *Nautanki.*

But apart from weaning away audiences, mass media is posing challenge to *Nautanki* in other ways too. Obscenity is one of these challenges.

Obscenity in Nautanki: According to many artists, troupe owners, and managers the biggest problem that *Nautanki* is facing is the increasing depiction of obscenity in its performances. Because of this reason, the performative art has declined and the number of authentic *Nautanki* performers is decreasing. The rise of the mass media is seen as one of the factors responsible for increasing obscenity in *Nautanki.* For instance, Mukund said:

> Previously, tunes of film songs were never used in Bhagats-*Nautanki*s. Now *Nautanki* people are using film tunes to compose *Nautanki* songs. Earlier, they used to have only folk tunes. Now although we occasionally see glimpses of earlier glory it is nothing like before. (personal communication, May 18, 2005)

I learned in the field that the number of *Nautanki* performances may have actually increased in the last couple of decades. However, when I mentioned this to a leading *Nautanki* female artist, Lata, she noted:

> All these performances should not be called *Nautanki*. In many of these shows, people just want obscene songs and dances. Indulging in obscenities the whole night and listening to cheap songs can not be called *Nautanki*. I do not accept offers to act in these kinds of performances. Also, I do not do any obscene cassette, VCD assignments. I do not like it. (personal communication, May 19, 2005)

Figure 23: A hot dance number in progress at the Kinarai Nautanki performance

According to many *Nautanki* performers, the obscenity that has come into their art form has reduced its prestige and its performers' social status. Puran, a famous *Nautanki* artist in his early forties noted:

> Because of the obscenity that has come into *Nautanki,* its prestige is going down. New *Nautanki* owners take substandard artists to perform. This destroys the impression of *Nautanki* artists. These substandard performances also spread a bad name for *Nautanki* among audiences. Audiences think 'oh is this *Nautanki*? It is nothing'. (personal communication, May 14, 2005)

Baldev Singh Azad, another *Nautanki* performer, supported Puran's contention:

> We are sent to the field to perform by the Song and Drama Division.[83] When we reach villages and they hear the word '*Nautanki*', they do not take us seriously. They do not give us respect saying 'these artists have been send by the government to perform in our village for our benefit'. They do not know our true value. (personal communication, May 14, 2005)

Baldev also shared his recent experience to show how some people disrespect *Nautanki* artists:

> Yesterday we went to See-Parson [a village in Mathura district]. We had two women artists with us. People started to speak obscenities to them. Things like—'I will keep you in my home', etc. Can you believe this was the situation when we were sent by the government to perform in this community? (personal communication, May 14, 2005)

This disrespect for artists has hindered the entry of new artists in *Nautanki,* particularly of women. When I asked Lata if she would encourage her daughters to become *Nautanki* artists, she said:

> No, I have married my daughters already. One girl is left. I have to marry her also. The thing is that when I myself did not get much from *Nautanki* after spending my whole life in it, then how can I throw my children in this profession? I do not have courage to do that as there is not enough money or respect in it. (personal communication, May 19, 2005)

---

[83] "Song and Drama Division" is a government department that hires artists of *Nautanki* and other folk forms to do performances giving social change and development messages.

Master Vishnu also thinks that new artists are not joining *Nautanki* as in the past:

> Earlier it was like from every village and from every house, young people used to come to learn *Nautanki*. So lots of new stars used to come up in *Nautanki*. Now the present generation is not very interested in *Nautanki*. Now they either see obscene dances on television or they see orchestra.[84] (personal communication, May 19, 2005)

I personally witnessed some "obscene" songs in the *Nautankis* I saw. One song's lyrics ware based on a popular cinema number. It went on like this:

> "Sarkaye le khatia jada lage,
>
> Jade me balma pyara lage"
>
> ("Sleep close to me and make me hot. I am feeling cold. I like you more oh my loved one in the winter")

However, it is important to clarify the definition of obscenity in the Indian rural context to understand why this song may be obscene. Youngsters in rural India are expected to publicly respect family and community elders. In fact many times it is considered rude for youngsters to sit on the same platform with their elders. One is also not expected to talk loudly when elders are present. In this social ambiance, even referring to sex in a public setting is considered inappropriate and obscene. In the above lyrics, the indirect but fairly explicit reference to sexual intercourse through the words and phrases such as "hot" and "sleep close to me" lends this song an obscene tone, especially in a community where community elders, youngsters, and women are watching the performance together. In addition, there are physical gestures made by the dancer such as gyrating the waist or

[84] Performances that feature dance numbers on film songs are called "orchestra" in north India.

pelvic thrusts, suggesting sexual intercourse. In essence, the song's lyrics by themselves do not fully capture the perceived obscenity of this song. But couple it with the gestures, and there is little doubt about what is being said or suggested. Incidentally, after coming back from the field, when I shared the translation of the lyrics with my American colleagues, they could not understand what exactly was obscene in it. In fact they asked me whether or not I had properly translated the words. Reflexively thinking, I realize that I, because of my Indian values, was shy of translating the idea of sexual intercourse in the song too explicitly for my readers.

Several of my respondents blamed *Nautanki* performers and troupe owners for bringing obscenity into *Nautanki.* According to Munna Master:

> Some of our performers have weaknesses. These people in their greed start performing dirty things. Thus encouraged, younger men in the audience start giving money for obscene dances and songs. Now, the daughters and sisters of villagers are also sitting in the audience. When the obscenity starts, respected and sober people in the audience do not want this to happen. So first they request mildly to the performers—'please stop this, sing something else'. But due to monetary greed, these guys keep performing obscenity. Then the situation goes too far and sometimes the performers may be greeted with stones. (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

Specifically, many respondents believed that the comedians[85] play the biggest role in making *Nautanki* obscene. Munna Master continued:

[85] Incidentally, many of the comedians are also owners of *Nautanki* troupes.

> The people who are responsible in bringing obscenity in *Nautanki* are these comedians. As soon as people announce their giving of cash awards like Rs. 50, Rs. 51, Rs. 101,[86] the comedians stop the main performance. They announce to the audiences that 'Now xyz kumari, Chandni kumari, or Neelam is coming in front of you, and there are saying to you, 'Babaji ko sallam sota' [*sallam sota*- a double meaning word referring to the male sexual organ]. Now if you yourself [the artists] serve obscenity to audiences, than audience will ask for more obscenity. If you are encouraging trash, than the whole atmosphere changes. When that happens, how can a real genuine performance take place? (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

Other *Nautanki* managers and performers also agreed with Munna Master. Srivastav said:

> Audiences usually do not initiate the demand for obscene dances and songs. Comedians encourage obscenity. They will tell the young girls, 'dance on obscene songs, it will fetch more cash from the younger men in the audience. Whatever cash we receive we would divide between us'. These people [comedians like Chaudhary Dharam Pal and Chajjan Singh], are the bosses i.e. they are the stars. The *Nautanki*s get booked and the business runs in their name. So if people like me give any suggestions, they do not listen. (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

Hotiram, a younger performer who runs a *Nautanki* troupe, also blamed the comedians for making *Nautanki* obscene:

---

[86] Audiences often give cash awards to performers in the middle of a performance. Here Munna Master is referring to cash awards that some audience members give when a "hot" dance is performed.

> In the last 10 years, these comedians have ruined *Nautanki*. Comedians want only 10% *Nautanki* and 90% obscenity. They do it themselves and encourage others to do it just because of their greed for money. Otherwise, even now in Mathura, there are so many good artists who sing good *Nautanki*, both old and new. (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

Hotiram came to *Nautanki* in his childhood. His dream was to become a big artist. However, he feels betrayed as he helplessly watches the status of *Nautanki* plummet in society.

> I feel sad. I am the only son of my parents and due to my fanatic interest in *Nautanki*, I came to learn it in Mathura. However I see here the destruction of *Nautanki*, and it is been destroyed by our own artists. (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

Lata said that some *Nautanki* performers, mostly comedians, also produce *Nautanki* VCDs, which are full of obscene dialogues and dances:

> There are the people who are making these VCDs. They are our artist colleagues. I do not want to judge them. However if they create VCDs, they should do that in a proper way. They are showing more cheapness in VCDs than their stage performances. If audiences could watch obscenities on VCDs sitting in their homes, who will come to watch your live performances? (personal communication, May 19, 2005)

However, Awara cited another reason for the general increase in obscenity in *Nautanki:*

> Strong performers are able to carry and mould the audience according to their wishes. However, not every *Nautanki* troupe, now-a-days, is capable of doing that. Thus for the troupes which do not have talented artists, the situation becomes difficult. They have to take help of obscene dances to boost their popularity. (personal communication, May 19, 2005)

With regard to the challenges that *Nautanki* faces by inclusion of obscenity, it became increasingly apparent to me that *Nautanki* is experiencing a tension between the likes and dislikes of the older and younger generation. I personally felt a clash of tastes and changing aesthetics among audiences. I noticed that the older generation, of both performers and audiences, is finding it hard to negotiate with the younger generation's tastes. Puranlal, a middle-aged performer, reflected on this situation: "The younger generation views *Nautanki* just as entertainment. They do not understand the artistic aspect of *Nautanki*. They do not know what *Nautanki* actually is" (personal communication, May 14, 2005). Gulab Singh, an audience member in his forties said: "Earlier they used to like the enactment of the actual story. Now the new people want songs and a little bit of that [indicating "hot dance" numbers]" (personal communication, May 16, 2005).

The older women artists also do not like the new generation's attitude towards *Nautanki*. As Lata said: "During a performance, somebody is whistling, somebody is making noise and passing cheap comments. I do not like that" (personal communication, May 19, 2005).

However, the younger generation is not solely to be blame for this deterioration of artistic taste. Most of them have not been exposed to the good singing of *Nautanki*. A young woman, a *Nautanki* audience member told me: “Well I am a student. I have not been exposed much to these performances. That is why I do not have a special interest in these. I have never seen them from my childhood” (personal communication, May 14, 2005).

Many audience members told me that if young people were exposed to good *Nautanki* singing, they would like it. Mahavir Singh, a *Nautanki* troupe owner told me:

> Once the *Nautanki* performance gets going and there are good performers in it, then for the whole night nobody demands any cheap songs. When there are no good artists, only then do the young audiences ask for cheap songs. They think that if they are not getting to see a good performance then why not entertain themselves with songs. The new generation is not exposed enough to the actual splendor of *Nautanki*. (personal communication, May 14, 2005)

Satyavan Singh, a troupe owner reiterated that as his troupes’ performances are of high quality, the youth enjoy them as much as the older audience members.

Non-Professionalism in Nautanki: Another critical problem that is contributing to *Nautanki*’s woes is unprofessional management. The following conversation with Puran, a famous artist of *Nautanki*, sheds light on this issue:

> People do like our performances but the management of *Nautanki* is very bad these days. I mean, the facilities for the performances are not there. There is no well-constructed stage. Artists often do not get their payments on time. There is

> no money for costumes. There are many limitations because of insufficient money. There is a lack of money because government is not taking any interest. There is no encouragement for the *Nautanki* artists. (personal communication, May 14, 2005)

When I asked Puran why they needed government's support and whether or not people who hired them, paid them, he replied:

> Yes they do pay but they do not pay enough. Sometimes people even keep our money. We do not get paid.
>
> *Dev*: Why do you not increase your asking rate?
>
> *Puran*: Then we will keep sitting. No one will call us for performances. Other *Nautanki* people will come and perform for less. Suppose we charge Rs. 500, another troupe will come and perform for only Rs. 200. (personal communication, May 14, 2005)

Puran's statement is reflective of the internal rivalries among *Nautanki* troupes. Add financial mismanagement, and *Nautanki* becomes a losing business.

However this situation has nothing to do with *Nautanki's* popularity. Srivastav, who is responsible for booking performances for his troupe said that contrary to what many people think the demand for *Nautanki* performances has increased manifold in the last two decades: "When I entered the *Nautanki* business, we did not use to have a booking on the festival of Janamashtmi.[87] But now we are booked all year round. So much that we even do not have breathing space" (personal communication, May 17, 2005).

---

[87] An Indian festival

Figure 24: Nautanki actor Puran [right] puts on his costume and converse with another performer at the Nautanki performance in Matura health fair

Satyavan Singh, another *Nautanki* manager echoes Srivastav's views: "The business of *Nautanki* has not decreased. In fact there are more fairs now than before. There is lot more work available now. The recent performance in Nagar where 50,000 people attended is an example" (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

The above comments suggest that even after the coming of modern media like television and film, folk forms such as *Nautanki* are still highly popular. What these folk forms need in order to flourish is sound management. However, now *Nautanki* is not as *universally* popular among rural north India as it used to be half a century ago. According to some performers and managers, *Nautanki* at present is more popular in the state of

Rajasthan[88] than in Uttar Pradesh (U.P.).[89] Earlier U.P was the main strong hold of *Nautanki*. Madan Lal told me: "Now *Nautanki* is quite popular in Rajasthan. In that state, 20,000 to 30,000 people [at one time] assemble to watch us. No obscene dances are performed there. There people still listen to pure *Nautanki*" (personal communication, May 14, 2005).

Thus the problem of lack of money, referred to by some *Nautanki* artists and organizers seems to be a self-created problem. Troupe owners retain most of the profit and performers are not paid well. There is no fixed pattern of troupe management and artists hardly do rehearsals. This situation obviously results in weaker performances, which, in turn, result in less profit. Hotiram, a famous performer expressed his pain about this lack of professionalism:

> What can I say brother? I am not able to express my true inner feelings and nobody is there to listen to them. Some of us who love our art think that all artists should work hard together and prepare new performances. But others do not listen. They do not do rehearsals at all. As soon as they get Rs.1000 per performance, they think they have arrived in life. They come to the performance at the last moment. Many a time the situation is such that the bus is leaving for the performance but there is no sign of the main performers; everybody waits for them. Managers are often paranoid and say 'How can the performance be done now? We have given our word to the client'! So these are the kinds of artists that *Nautanki* is left with today. (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

---

[88] Rajasthan is a state in north-western India.
[89] Uttar Pradesh is another Indian state, supposed to be the birth place of *Nautanki*.

According to Giriraj Singh, an audience member and a friend of *Nautanki* troupe manager Satyavan Singh, inner politics plague the *Nautanki* world:

> The environment of this place is becoming worse. One troupe is stealing artists of another. As these [*Nautanki*] people are finding it hard to keep their flock together, how can they even think about bringing innovations (laughs). Just now, when you came, one of Satyavan's troupe artists was tempted to leave his troupe to join another. (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

Satyavan Singh agreed: "People have become dishonest and they take commission from others and supply artists to other groups by tempting them with more money" (personal communication, May 17, 2005).

According to many insiders like Srivastav, the established artists of *Nautanki* rarely mentor new talent properly. Instead of giving the newcomers opportunities, they exploit them:

> Some new people come to *Nautanki* but the problem is that old timers trap them. Now suppose a young artist makes some progress, big performers such as Dharampal and others would not let him develop in an independent way. They would suppress his talent. As new artists need money to survive, they have to do whatever old timers want them to do. These big artists are greedy. Some of them do not care about their honor and are jealous of young rising talent. (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

Giriraj Singh, a *Nautanki* fan, similarly observed:

> The problem is that they [owners and managers] pressurize young artists to work as per their wishes. As a result, new artists feel suffocated and they do not work with their heart. They leave one troupe and go to another troupe, often leaving troupe owners high and dry at a critical moment. (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

But the crucial question is: why are the *Nautanki* artists not able to adopt a progressive attitude towards their art form? Awara thinks that the lack of education among artists is a major reason for the lack of professionalism and mismanagement in *Nautanki*: "Our performers are mostly uneducated. This is the reason that *Nautanki* is not well managed. *Nautanki* people do not listen to each other's advice" (personal communication, May 19, 2005).

According to Awara, performers remain so busy earning their livelihood that it is difficult for them to think about reforming the system:

> You see, the performers' bread and butter come from performances. The system does not become professional because the performers are busy in their work. They are so busy that many times they eat while the performance is going on. If tea comes, they think that they might not get it later, so they want to grab it. Who has time to be professional? (personal communication, May 19, 2005)

Non-Contemporary Scripts: Awara also pointed to another critical challenge that *Nautanki* faces presently. This challenge is the lack of fresh *Nautanki* scripts that reflect contemporary issues in society. According to Awara:

> Performers keep doing the same old scripts. Neither the *Guru-Shishya* tradition[90] is left today, nor any body wants to improve their drawbacks. There is a lack of fresh input. That is why aberrations and fissures have appeared. (personal communication, May 19, 2005)

Madan Lal, a famous *Nautanki* artist also thought that the lack of new contemporary scripts is a big reason for *Nautanki's* problems:

> The main reason for it [*Nautanki*] not doing so well at present, as compared to the past, is because *Nautanki* people are not creating new scripts. The same *Indal Haran, Amar Singh,*[91] and other *Nautanki* shows are based on the same four to six scripts that audiences have been watching for the last 50 years. (personal communication, May 14, 2005)

Giriraj Singh shared Awara and Madan Lal's concern:

> If *Nautanki* artists and producers introduce new performances, they can attract more audiences to their shows and earn a lot more. At the same time, more historical themes should be introduced. I think many people watch *Nautanki* to know about our history and to understand what our ancestors did. Even the new generation will like it. (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

Interestingly, according to Srivastav, the lack of fresh scripts and the decline of *Guru-Shishya* tradition is because of the change from a monthly salary system to a per performance night payment system. According to Srivastav:

---

[90] Mentor-Disciple tradition.
[91] Name of *Nautanki* scripts.

> Earlier performers used to work on a monthly salary. *Guru* [teacher] used to teach and *shishya* [disciple] used to learn. It was more systematic. From the 1990s, performers began to work on a per night basis. That affects learning. The situation is increasing getting worse. (personal communication, May 19, 2005)

Another problem was brought to my notice by some *Nautanki* artists. According to Baldev Singh Azad, a popular *Nautanki* performer, some people riding on *Nautanki's* popularity, do fake *Nautankis,* resulting in bad advertising for the art: "There are people who run fraud *Nautanki*s. They just assemble some girls and display obscenity on stage. They do not perform opera at all. Audiences who do not know the nuances of *Nautanki* think that this obscenity is *Nautanki*" (personal communication, May 14, 2005).

According to Azad, due to these fake artists, genuine artists of *Nautanki* are losing their respect. Before this obscenity started, *Nautanki* was perceived as a family centered entertainment: "Previously, there was not even a trace of obscenity in *Nautanki*. Whole family--brothers and sisters and their parents-- all use to watch *Nautanki* together. Also people used to get lot of knowledge from *Nautanki*" (personal communication, May 14, 2005). Hotiram expressed the sentiments of genuine *Nautanki* artists on this issue:

> I cry. I am telling you honestly. This *Nautanki* is such a wonderful art form. People sit it in mud, dirt, whatever, to watch performances. But today these so called *Nautanki* artists do not give the audiences their money's worth. In the morning, audiences curse them and everybody says 'oh *Nautanki* has failed. Why do you say that *Nautanki* has failed? It is not *Nautanki* that has failed, it is

> today's' *Nautanki* artists that have failed'! (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

In summary, *Nautanki*'s content and style has undergone some changes in the past decade or so. *Nautanki* is facing many challenges such as increased competition from the mass media, obscenity in its performances, non-professionalism, and non-contemporary scripts. Some respondents believed that the mass media is weaning away audiences from *Nautanki*. However, others believed that the mass media is competing within, that is, television is reducing the popularity of films not *Nautanki*.

Some respondents pointed out that increasing obscenity in *Nautanki* is ruining it as an art form. They believed that increased obscenity in *Nautanki* is a result of the influence of mass media. Many artists said increasing obscenity in *Nautanki* performances has decreased the respect of *Nautanki* artists in the public eye. They said that it has also discouraged younger generation of artists, particularly women, from entering *Nautanki*. Many *Nautanki* artists themselves do not want their children to become *Nautanki* performers. Rather than blaming audiences for *Nautanki's* increasing obscenity, most *Nautanki* artists believed that they themselves were to blame. According to many of them, *Nautanki* comedians (or the *jokers*) were mainly responsible for introducing obscenity in *Nautanki* performances. In their greed of monetary gains, they encourage young women performers to perform obscene dances. Audiences from the older generation generally thought that the younger generation is more attracted by the spicy obscene dances in *Nautanki* rather than by its more artistic and aesthetic dimensions. However others disagreed. According to them, if a *Nautanki* performance

was done competently and professionally, the younger generation liked its artistic components as much as the older generation.

Non-professionalism is another problem that is plaguing *Nautanki*. Performers complained that they do not have sufficient facilities to perform well. Troupe owners and star performers retain major profits from the performances leaving crumbs for the smaller artists. Sadly, a majority of *Nautanki* artists live in poverty even though the number of *Nautanki* performances has increased in the past few decades. Also big artists lack punctuality, which results in a lower credibility of *Nautanki* artists among its clients. Many *Nautanki* artists complained that older artists of *Nautanki* do not mentor the young, and instead exploit them. Strong rivalries exist among *Nautanki* troupes. This often results in different *Nautanki* troupes sabotaging the other's performances by weaning away their artists. According to many respondents, *Nautanki* performers remain so busy in their work that they do not have enough time to focus on bringing innovations to their art form. Other felt that the non-professionalism is due to a lack of education among *Nautanki* artists. Many performers believed that if the government helped them financially, they could make their art form more professional. Finally, many *Nautanki* performers, troupe owners and managers felt that fresh scripts reflecting contemporary problems and issues should be written in order for *Nautanki* to retain its popularity.

Suggestions to Strengthen Nautanki and Future Directions

During my conversations, the *Nautanki* performers, troupe owners, managers, and audiences expressed several ideas to make this community performance form stronger and more responsive to the changing times. These ideas are discussed below.

Change in Nautanki's Form and Content, and Government Support: Two suggestions were forwarded strongly to make *Nautanki* more effective. Some *Nautanki* producers and performers felt that the performance duration of *Nautanki* should be shorter to suit the changing times. Added with fresh scripts, this would make *Nautanki* more contemporary and competitive. Madan Lal Sharma said:

> *Nautanki* performances should be of three to four hours duration only. If *Nautanki*s modifies itself according to needs of contemporary time, even now *Nautanki* has so much substance that it can attract an audience of 50,000 people. No film or media can attract an audience this big. (personal communication, May 14, 2005)

Figure 25: Male audiences enjoying a Nautanki performance on family planning at Mathura health fair

Many people involved in *Nautanki* felt that the government should support *Nautanki* more. This support, according to them could come in the form of financial help as well as cultural recognition for folk arts. One of the leading female performers of *Nautanki*, Lata, said: "If the government helps then something can happen. If the government opens a school where *Nautanki* artists can train new kids who have potential then *Nautanki* can progress" (personal communication, May 19, 2005). Lata added: "When the government will think, then society will think. When government will give some recognition [to the *Nautanki* folk tradition] then only society will give us recognition" (personal communication, May 19, 2005).

In Lata's statement, one senses an artist's pain for not getting her due from society. All the *Nautanki* artists whom I talked to urged for respect and validation for their folk art from the "powerful" in society. In addition to government's support, senior artist Madan Lal also emphasized that *Nautanki* artists should help themselves by writing new *Nautanki*s: "New *Nautanki*s should be written and government should support it. Then only this *Nautanki* will live" (personal communication, May 14, 2005).

Is governmental support a feasible way to save a popular folk form like *Nautanki?* I talked to a local politician of Mathura and Vrindavan,[92] Bal Gopal Sharma, about *Nautanki* artists' demand for government's support. He himself turned out to be a *Nautanki* fan. However, he thought that first the community should make efforts to support *Nautanki*, only then the government will take notice:

[92] As mentioned in the previous chapter, I collected most of my data in the region around Mathura, Vrindavan and Bharatpur.

> Well, we can demand government's help only if we ourselves are capable of doing something. For instance, in our *Vipra Akhara*, we have done performance this year after 32 years. *Nautanki* experts belonging to the older generation slowly died. However, people of a new generation came together and formed a group and did a performance. Now we will continue doing more *Nautanki* performances and will also write to the government for help to strengthen this tradition. (personal communication, May 19, 2005)

Figure 26: A scene from "Bhagat" in Vrindavan

Encouraging a New Generation of Artists: Another suggestion for *Nautanki's* improvement was that youngsters be mentored. According to Srivastav:

> There are many new comers in *Nautanki* who, if get proper guidance, can definitely be very successful. If older *Nautanki* artists get ready to mentor, we can open a school where *Nautanki* people can sit and practice, exchange notes about their art, and learn from each other. However, who has time to learn, and who has time to teach [speaking sarcastically]? Most put Rs. 300 for a day's performance in their pocket, put the towel on the shoulder, and go away. (personal communication, May 17, 2005)

Lata agreed:

> The new kids who want to come to learn *Nautanki*, their minds are open. They can learn new things. Older people think, 'we have to do it only for few years more, why should be waste our energy and time'? (personal communication, May 19, 2005)

Similarly, according to Puran: "Some schools should be opened where *Nautanki*'s training is given to kids" (personal communication, May 14, 2005). Some artists like Awara and Lata were even ready to find the time to teach youngster. Lata noted:

> I think a lot about this. If somebody asks me to train students, I am ready to teach, whatever I know. I do not want this (*Nautanki*) to decline because even today this art form has so much life left. (personal communication, May 19, 2005)

When I asked Awara where a *Nautanki* school might be located, he warned that if it opens in a city (like New Delhi), it will not benefit rural society:

> See, there is glamour towards Delhi. You will not get people there who are interested to learn *Nautanki*. You will get 'hi-fi' people there who will steal from

> us and put in their television episodes. You might have seen that advertisement of soap in which they sing: 'teri banki ada pe mai khud hoon fida'[93] [I am infatuated by your beautiful looks] or take the example of Ravindra Jain[94] and many other big people, they take the art of small people, gold plate it, and then earn *crores*[95] of rupees. We should do efforts for *Nautanki* in the rural areas where it is popular, where it is performed. Its artists are born in this rural soil. (personal communication, May 19, 2005)

Awara also felt that if honest and educated people from outside get involved in *Nautanki* that might help this art form:

> I have been in the company of great *Nautanki* artists such as Master Giriraj Prasad ji and our Guru Shri Ram Dayal Sharma ji from my childhood. I have seen them working with educated urban directors. It has contributed to *Nautanki*'s growth. For instance, in 1962, film music director Anil Biswas and theater director Shanta Gandhi came from Mandi House to Hathras. They made a lot of efforts on behalf of *Nautanki*. They started Brij Kala Kendra. Seth Babulalji invested a lot of money in it. (personal communication, May 19, 2005)

It was interesting that for *Nautanki* people, I seemed to symbolize a promising younger generation of *Nautanki* artists. I felt that they were proud of the fact that the son of a *Nautanki* artist has earned a high degree, and was still interested in *Nautanki*. Many of them urged me to do something to strengthen *Nautanki*. Awara urged me:

---

[93] A television ad that has used *Nautanki* poetry – without paying money or giving credit to its writer.
[94] A film music composer who uses a lot of folk music.
[95] 10 million rupees

> I want to say Devendra Babu that young people like you who have feelings for this art form should spare some time from their work, and organize training workshops. You should bring performers together and give them the right direction. If people like you help us then there is a probability that *Nautanki* might improve. (personal communication, May 19, 2005)

Artists like Awara expressed a need for establishing a cooperative organization of *Nautanki* under which *Nautanki* people can come together and work to sustain and enhance their art:

> A cooperative should be formed of *Nautanki* people. People who are committed to *Nautanki* should come together. They should set some standards for *Nautanki*'s performance quality. They should say, 'we will maintain *Nautanki*'s quality and will not do anything sub-standard'. Then our clients will also listen to us and watch quality performances. So in essence, I want that new scripts should be written, workshops should be organized, and artists should discuss and spend time together. Then some improvements in *Nautanki* can be possible. We are capable of doing this. But nothing can happen in the way things are at present. If some system is formed then it can happen. (personal communication, May 19, 2005)

Conclusion

Overall, *Nautanki* faces many challenges in contemporary times. The challenges are both from the outside as well from the inside. *Nautanki* is no longer the primary entertainment medium for rural north India. Now it competes with newer forms of entertainment such as television, VCDs, and cinema. However, according to respondents,

Nautanki, due to its unique characteristics-- closeness to rural culture, its flexibility, and its live nature-- will continue to retain its niche in rural India. However, the more difficult challenges that *Nautanki* faces are from within-- increasing obscenity in its performances, non-professionalism, and old non-contemporary scripts. For *Nautanki* to continue to hold its place as a popular community entertaining form, its practitioners would have to encounter these ills. However, the reasons for these problems run deeper. *Nautanki* performers, producers, managers, and audiences feel that the modern, city-based elites in India do not respect indigenous cultural forms. This disrespect results in a negative social attitude towards local and indigenous heritage. As a result, new people are not attracted towards indigenous folk art forms like *Nautanki.* This attitude has also resulted in lesser facilities and opportunities for *Nautanki* artists. Most of them have remained illiterate, non-professional, and non-progressive, limiting their ability to enhance this art form.

However, in recent years, due to the efforts of some *Nautanki* artists and a rising need to effectively communicate social change messages to rural communities, new possibilities for reinventing community folk forms have emerged. Use of *Nautanki* for social change communication campaigns is resulting in fresh contemporary scripts, and in some places, more dignity for its artists. These campaigns are also opening new employment avenues for *Nautanki* artists. Also, *Nautanki akharas* in Mathura and Vrindavan are trying to revitalize *Nautanki* .

However, a lot remains to be done if performance forms such as *Nautanki* have to realize their full potential of contributing to the development of their communities. For this, *Nautanki* artists call for more financial support from the government. They also feel

the need to bring in a new generation of artists in *Nautanki*. They want to create more scripts on contemporary social issues. Last but not the least they want more cultural and social recognition from the powerful elites so that indigenous forms such as *Nautanki* can reclaim their self-confidence and self-respect in their own land.

Figure 27: Pundit Ram Dayal Sharma and Sitara performing a light hearted song in Nautanki Amar Singh Rathore

CHAPTER 6

Discussion and Implications

In this concluding chapter, I discuss and analyze my findings, and reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of my study. I also discuss possible avenues for future research. Broadly, I discuss four overarching reflections that came out of the findings in the field.

First, how can *Nautanki* do a balancing act between reinforcing community traditions on the one hand, and voicing contemporary concerns of its audiences, which involves resisting certain community traditions, on the other. While reflecting on this issue, I return to Bakhtin (1984)'s analysis of carnival and examine the role of indigenous festive and performing traditions in a community.

Second, I reflect on how my field experiences speak to Dwight Conquergood (2002)'s call for challenging *textocentrism* through performance. I discuss how indigenous folk forms like *Nautanki* put oral culture at the forefront of social change discourse, thereby bringing together the dominant and subjugated knowledges. I also discuss how the ability to participate in the community discourse through *Nautanki* can empower people in north Indian villages to support progressive social change.

Third, I discuss the place of local festive folk forms in a global world. I examine whether or not the concept of a community that supports these festive traditions will itself survive in a fast changing world. More specifically, I discuss the challenges that *Nautanki* faces in rural India given the rapid changes in the last decade or so. I also discuss the future directions for *Nautanki* and how it might possibly strengthen itself, thereby strengthening the community itself.

Finally, based on my reflections, I visualize *Nautanki* performances as sites of struggle to claim dignity for the ordinary culture (Williams, 1958). I examine how the artists of ordinary folk forms like *Nautanki* have suffered due to elitism in India. In the present scenario, I argue that *Nautanki* artists' struggle to get a dignified life reflects the struggle of all ordinary rural people in contemporary north India.

Nautanki's Role in Preserving and Changing Community

My experience in the field suggests that *Nautanki* enhances the feeling of community. *Nautanki* audiences, performers, managers, and producers believe that a *Nautanki* performance gives them an opportunity to sit together and enjoy an entertainment event. Through this event, they meet their friends and relatives from neighboring communities. Organizing *Nautanki* is a huge collective effort. Many people, often several hundred, come together to arrange for resources, artists, costumes, stage, and props. This cooperative organizing of *Nautanki* strengthens community bonding. *Nautanki* also provides an opportunity for sub-communities (based on caste, age, or gender) to come together and interact in one space.

Respondents emphasized that *Nautanki* fulfills another function: It provides a link between them and their cultural heritage. Many audience members said that they used *Nautanki* performances as opportunities to reconnect with their traditional roots. For them, *Nautanki* served as a medium to learn about their history and famous historical personalities. *Bhakt Pooran Mal, Amar Singh Rathore, Indal Haran,* and *Harischandra Taramati* are some *Nautanki*s that are frequently cited in this historical category. *Nautanki'*s popularity as a folk form thus lies in part in its role in reinforcing the

traditional historical-cultural heritage.

However, *Nautanki* is also being used in rural north India to oppose certain oppressive social traditions. Popular *Nautanki*s such as *Beti ka Byah* (Marriage of Daughter) based on the problem of dowry, and *Naya Savera* based on the theme of overpopulation are examples of this category. Community members seemed to be quite favorably disposed toward *Nautanki*s that challenged oppressive traditions. This use of *Nautanki* for social change speaks to Bakhtin's (1984) claims that folk forms help people in understanding oppressive practices and to resist these practices by making a connection with other members of their community. *Nautanki* audiences seemed to unite themselves through a realization of their common conditions. Also my research findings support Bakhtin's (1984) claim that folk forms acquire a new meaning by absorbing the new hopes and thoughts of the people. *Nautanki* at present is doing this, i.e., changing its structure and acquiring new meanings by responding to the hopes and thoughts of a new generation of audiences.

However, the contradictions involved in the *process* of folk forms acquiring a new meaning by absorbing the aspirations of people has not been adequately addressed by Bakhtin. It is important to note that oppressive traditions are not always imposed by the "king" or the authority as Bakhtin claims. Many times they come from within the ordinary people's culture. The social practice of dowry in India is an example of such an internally generated practice that over time has become oppressive. The process of changing its own outdated social practices is a difficult process. Community performance forms such as *Nautanki* experience a dialectical tension in the social change process. On

one hand, folk forms are used by people to express their faith in their communal traditions, while on the other they are to challenge some of these very traditions. The use of *Nautanki* to oppose patriarchy, breaking taboos around sex, and opposing dowry are examples of this tension. The change in *Nautanki*'s themes and structure with time has been tough for the older generation of its audiences. These people are simple folks for whom traditions are still dear. So boys are encouraged to attend school, girls to stay home and help with the chores. However, not all social traditions are outdated or undesirable. For instance, collective cooking on the occasions of fairs organized by *Ahivasis* in India are examples of positive social traditions that strengthen community. These traditions should certainly be preserved if rural people want to preserve their community.

The critical question here is whether folk forms can be used to oppose traditions selectively? In other words can *Nautanki* support traditions that are socially desirable in contemporary society and oppose others that are oppressive? Can *Nautanki* enhance the feeling of community even when it attacks deep-rooted traditions of a community?

On the basis of my field experiences, I argue that the community building function of *Nautanki* is separate from its tradition-supporting function. In other words, even when folk forms are used to resist certain undesirable community traditions, they continue to bring the community together. For instance, huge crowds watched *Nautanki*s on the issues of family size, dowry, and women's empowerment as also the traditional *Nautanki*s such as *Amar Singh Rathore*. In both traditional as well as contemporary *Nautanki*s, people joked, laughed, and participated in activities that enhanced the feeling

of community. However, I observed that the younger generation of audiences took more interest in *Nautanki*s that addressed social themes while entertaining them with songs and dances. However difficult it might be, this process of change and adaptation is essential for any folk form to survive and value audiences' aspirations. Thus, I am hopeful that *Nautanki* can be used to question oppressive traditions while at the same time bringing the community together around progressive issues.

However, a related issue to reflect on is whether the *intentional* introduction of new themes in *Nautanki* allows its natural growth as a folk form. Bakhtin says that folk performing traditions such as carnival are natural communication channels in a rural society as they reflect the state of the society at that time. This means that perhaps the indigenous rural community should itself be an important player in introducing social change themes in *Nautanki* performances along with the government or other progressive non-government organizations (NGOs). At present, however, most *Nautanki* scripts highlighting social change themes are being produced at the behest of the government and national and international development agencies. Theoretically, one can compare the government and these NGOs with the "king" or the authority in Bakhtin's analysis. The question is whether the social themes introduced by the "king" into people's "carnival" are truly reflective of ordinary people aspirations. In other words, will the introduction of pro-social themes by the government and other organizations hinder *Nautanki*'s natural growth? A future study that compares the community-organized performances with government-organized performances in terms of message integration, audience reception, and popularity, may be useful in this regard. However, while this question demands

further research, the favorable reception of government supported pro-social *Nautanki* performances by the local people in the Mathura health fair indicated that rural community does like these new types of *Nautanki*s and reflects on the social issues featured in them. This acceptance of such developmental *Nautanki*s by people indicates that as a folk form, *Nautanki* is evolving naturally. Also, I noticed that even traditional *Nautanki akharas* have started to create *Nautanki*s on social change themes such as child marriage.

Questioning the Dominance of Textocentrism

Drawing upon Dwight Conquergood's (2002) terminology, the dominant knowledge paradigm among elites in India is very much text centered. I use the term text here in a broad sense. Like Conquergood, I interpret text as the dominant knowledge paradigm, which remains mostly inaccessible to the common people. The rhetoric of social change conveyed through official communication and the mass media is hardly participatory in India. A huge section of Indian population is still illiterate. Most people in rural India have only basic school education and, if so, in their native languages. The working language of ruling elites, i.e. English, is hardly accessible to them. The lack of English education keeps ordinary people from being a part of dominant socio-political rhetoric. In these circumstances, social change communication efforts, mostly originating in cities with elites remain alien to most people and are often ineffective.

In the field, it was quite apparent to me that folk forms such as *Nautanki* are potentially powerful public tools that can make the official social change discourse more understandable for rural folks. By privileging oral communication, *Nautanki* is bringing

the subjugated knowledges to the forefront of social change efforts in parts of rural north India. Audiences' positive reactions to the *Nautanki*s in the health fair in Mathura, which was organized by the government to give messages about reproductive health, women's empowerment and other social change issues provides support for this perspective. Audience members clearly understood and identified anti-dowry and pro-health messages featured in the performed *Nautanki*s.

Based on my field experiences, I argue that performance belongs to a participatory paradigm of communication that is accessible to indigenous people on various levels. Many of my respondents could narrate the stories of the pro-social *Nautanki* performances by heart. They said that watching a *Nautanki* over and over again did not bore them. On the contrary, they enjoyed watching their familiar characters such the *joker* (clown) on the stage again and again. I noticed that some people did not even realize that there was a "social change" communication going on through *Nautanki* performances in the health fair. Many of them thought of it as "just entertainment". However during conversations, it came out that they were concerned about social problems featured in the performances such as dowry. After watching the performances, many were motivated to discuss the plot, to see parallels in their life, and to do something to solve these problems. This subtle effect of *Nautanki,* i.e. making people aware of the social problems around them, suggests that messages provided through indigenous performing forms come to people not as *imposed* but *naturally*.

What are the reasons for this effect of indigenous folk performances? My field experiences inform me that there is more than one reason. I observed that the "real"

nature of a performance was one the biggest reason for this effect. In a *Nautanki* performance, audiences could see *real* people as opposed to the *unreal* (or "ghosts" to use the audience term) people on television or cinema. Audiences said that when they see another person talking or performing in front of them, the effect is more life-like and stronger. In future research, it may be interesting to probe deeper the differences between participatory aspects of "real" performances such as *Nautanki* versus "unreal" (mediated) performances such as those on television, and their different effects on audiences' thoughts. Future research could also compare the elements of other live communication genres (e.g. speeches and interpersonal communication) with public performances like *Nautanki*. For instance, a comparative study between door-to-door interpersonal communication, often used by rural health workers in India, and live folk performances such as *Nautanki* might bring out the key components of *real* and *live* communication's impact on audiences.

A second reason for *Nautanki*'s effect, as per our respondents, was that such performances invite people to involve all their senses (auditory, sight, smell, etc.) in the performative process. Audience members also liked *Nautanki*s because of indigenous acting, singing, instrumental music, and dances. Further, *Nautanki*'s strong effect on its audiences lies in the participatory control that resides with audiences over the performance process. I saw that whenever a *Nautanki* was performed, audiences had a say in deciding what particular performance they wished to see. Also, they could demand songs or comedy in midst of a *Nautanki* performance. They also gave rewards to their favorite performers deriving a sense of pride as patrons when their name was announced

on the stage. This participation, I argue, makes *Nautanki* audiences an integral part of the performance, engaging them at a level where they pay careful attention to the messages. In contrast, the mass media do not give audiences this control and that is why, arguably, have limited impact.

Reflecting on my field experiences, I also argue that audiences' participation in social events such as *Nautanki* not only enhances the degree of message reception but also strengthens audiences' perception of an emotional and cultural community to which they belong. Since they have a say in its proceedings, *Nautanki* is perceived as their event-- *for* them and *by* them. Mass-mediated entertainment genres can hardly fulfill this function. Many audience members whom I talked to were visiting their villages specifically for the *Nautanki* performance from nearby towns where they worked and lived. For these people, their *real* community was present where their collective festivals like *Nautanki* were performed. They revisited these festivals again and again to feel a part of *their* community. No other form of media could give them their community back. In fact, they found many of the modern communication forms such as the media in conflict with their conceptions of their community. For these *Nautanki* fans, watching *Nautanki*, I felt, was kind of a "symbolic pilgrimage" (Aden, 1999) to their own soil.

Indigenous performances are thus an antithesis to *textocentrism*, enhancing social change communication by their *public* nature. An important effect of indigenous performances like *Nautanki* is their ability to spur interpersonal communication. In the Mathura health fair, for instance, there was a remarkably high degree of interpersonal discussion among audiences after the performances about issues such as polio

eradication, dowry, tobacco misuse, and reproductive health. Many audience members said that upon returning to their homes, they would talk to their friends, relatives, and neighbors about some of the social issues highlighted in the performances. This observation supports findings from previous studies where indigenous performances enhanced interpersonal communication about gender equality, caste discrimination, and others (Singhal et al., 2004; Harter et al., in press).

Based on my field experiences, I feel that *Nautanki*'s influence on its audiences exists more on a *motivational* level. In other words, audiences are motivated to think differently about the social issues after watching the *Nautanki*s with pro-social themes. It is difficult to determine whether or not audience members actually change their *behavior* after seeing these performances. In some ways, even if people talk to one another about a social issue, that represents some form of behavioral action. To determine what long-term changes occur a different kind of a study needs to be designed. For instance when an audience member says that he/she will not take dowry after seeing a *Nautanki* performance, what does that exactly mean? If a researcher can follow that particular audience member's social actions after the performance for a prolonged period of time, then concrete results might be obtained about *Nautanki*'s short and long-term impact on its audiences' behavior. However, there were indications that *Nautanki* performances, in some cases, lead to a behavior change. Well-known *Nautanki* performer Madanlal's example of how *Nautanki* performances motivated people to cultivate barren lands is a case in point. Also, many people in the health fair said that they were more sensitized towards the issue of dowry after watching the *Nautanki*, and they would like to *do*

something about it. Some audience members vowed that they would not drink alcohol after watching the *Nautanki*, which had anti-alcohol messages.

However, audience members noted that the influence created by *Nautanki* performances is usually short-lived. After a couple of days as the time passes, the impact fades away. Any agency using live performances such as *Nautanki* for pro-social goals should plan on more than one performance to amplify the impact.

More than anything else, *Nautanki* provides a communication platform for social change agencies to reach their audiences. This is a phenomenon worth examining. The social change messages in many contemporary *Nautanki*s are usually crafted in cities by urban, educated, "subject matter" specialists. In that way, the content in these *Nautanki*s reflects, using Conquergood (2002)'s terminology, the *privileged* knowledges. However, the medium through which this content is conveyed, i.e. *Nautanki*, belongs to a *subjugated* knowledge realm. In this way, the *Nautanki* performances focused on social change bring the *privileged* and *subjugated* paradigms of communication together. This integration of the two paradigms can potentially be liberating for marginalized rural people of India as they become part of the mainstream development knowledge. However, one should guard against the danger of the dominant knowledge systems appropriating indigenous art forms such as *Nautanki* for its vested interests divesting these forms of their function of conveying subjugated sensibilities. However, it is a risk worth taking if we assess the pragmatic side of bringing together dominant and subjugated knowledges. The *Nautanki* in the Mathura health fair was an example of this.

It served as an appropriate platform for disseminating and discussing pro-social messages while being respectful to people's indigenous cultures.

Nautanki in a Global World

The critical question remains: Whether or not the social structure that gives birth to folk forms such as *Nautanki* will itself survive in a global world? *Nautanki* is a community folk form. If community survives, it will survive. If community and communal festivals die, it will die. If the community changes, *Nautanki* will change accordingly. Some *Nautanki* audience members pointed out that in the changed socio-economic circumstances, i.e., after the coming of economic liberalization/globalization in India, in the early 1990s, they do not get enough time to fully participate in community events such as *Nautanki*. According to them, life has become very fast-paced these days. Rural India is no more a sole agricultural community. Many rural people have opened local businesses. It has become harder for them to watch a nightlong *Nautanki* performance and then attend to their business in the morning. Earlier, when the rural population was predominantly agricultural, people could watch and organize *Nautanki* leisurely in the agricultural off-season. Also, these days, many villagers have migrated to cities in search of employment. Thus they find little time to return to their villages to participate in community festivals.

Secondly, *Nautanki* is no longer the sole entertainment medium for rural population. Thanks to the advent, expansion, and diffusion of modern technology, people now have more entertainment channels such as television, VCDs, and cinema. However technology can be a double-edged sword. On one hand, technological innovations such as

VCDs can provide *Nautanki* artists an opportunity to take their folk form to more people, gaining recognition for themselves and the art form; on the other hand, these technology-mediated presentations can wean audiences away from live *Nautanki* performances. Additionally, threats to *Nautanki* also come from its inner ranks. Many *Nautanki* artists have started to produce VCDs of their own performance. So now people can watch a *Nautanki* on their television sets in their home. Some *Nautanki* performers thought that these developments might reduce audience participation in initiating and watching live *Nautankis*, further reducing opportunities for experiencing community.

Reflecting upon my own experiences in the field, I think that these fears are only partially true. I would like to make it clear though that before this research experience, I, as a *Nautanki* artist, had thought that folk forms like *Nautanki* would not survive for long. However, in the field, it became increasingly clear to me that *Nautanki* is definitely *not* dying. What *is* dying is the older from of *Nautanki.* Like a mother gives birth to her child, a new form of *Nautanki* is coming out of the old *Nautanki.* Going back to Bakhtin (1984), this transformation of *Nautanki* is natural. As Bakhtin claimed, folk forms are reflections of their community's situation and changing tastes. The traditional form of *Nautanki*, which is mostly operatic, is being replaced with a newer *Nautanki* that has an equal emphasis on singing and dancing, which is the demand of contemporary times. However, change, often is full of complications. One of the complaints of the old timers of *Nautanki* in the field was that dances in *Nautanki* were becoming too vulgar for them to watch. According to them, these dances were killing *Nautanki* as a community entertainment form because families could not watch them together. On the other hand,

people in the younger generation said that they enjoyed these spicy dances. For them, dancers were the star attractions of *Nautanki*.

As a member of the younger generation of *Nautanki* performers, I argue that in the contemporary vastly varied media atmosphere, spicy dances can be assets to *Nautanki,* helping it to retain its popularity. *Nautanki,* like any other folk form will have to make some changes to keep up with changing times. Also, I argue that spicy dance numbers, many times, support the main opera in a *Nautanki* performance. For instance, in the performance at Kinarai, I noticed that youngsters were quite satisfied with a couple of hot dance numbers in the beginning of the performance and then took keen interest in the operatic part of the performance. I also saw a large number of women in the audience. I noticed that women were enjoying the performance as much as men. They sat together separate from men, chatting and having fun, and also watching the performance. After an hour or so into the performance, a couple of spicy dances were performed again, followed by the next part of the opera —and this continued. I think that this pattern, on contrary to weakening *Nautanki,* is giving it a new life and dynamism.

However, interestingly the “spicy” or “hot” dance numbers in a *Nautanki* performance also takes one back to Bakhtin’s concept of *carnivalisque*. Doesn’t the younger generation mock the rules established by the “king” or the traditional social order by enjoying the hot songs in public? In other words, enjoying songs with sexual content and also demanding them again and again can be understood as a revolt by younger generation against the older community values and as an assertion of freedom from the old order (Hoy, 1994). Incidentally, the increase of sexual content in *Nautanki*

performances in Indian villages has come at the same time as the penetration of electronic media (such as television) in rural areas. There is a possibility that the new values propagated through the electronic media such as individualism and relatively unrestricted body displays influence the preferences of the Indian rural youth. How this new media-generated influence will affect the feeling of community and traditional values (such as respect for elders) is unclear. However, one thing is clear that *Nautanki* artists and managers will have to be careful to not go too far with spicy song and dance numbers as they can potentially create ruptures and fissures in community life.

The danger from too many "hot" dance numbers in a *Nautanki* performance also exists at a more subtle level. Having too many "hot" dance numbers can possibly affect not only *Nautanki*'s content but also its form. Every performing tradition has its own specific form. The *form* of a performance tradition, independent of its *content*, connects its audiences to their roots by reassuring them of a cultural continuity (Burke, I am checking with Bill about its pub date). *Nautanki* too has its own specific pattern of songs, dances, and acting that gives it a unique identity. This identity is important for its audiences as a means to connect to their cultural heritage. Although changes and modifications with time are inevitable in the form of any folk tradition, their coming too fast and unnaturally can harm the folk tradition. Thus both audiences and performers of *Nautanki* need to be careful to strike a balance between tradition and change in their folk form. Dances and songs under a reasonable limit can help *Nautanki* become more popular, whereas going to the extremes can fundamentally harm its identity.

One should also not forget that *Nautanki* as a community folk form is a *collective ritual*. When a *Nautanki* performance is organized, community members go through steps that are ritualistic in their nature, such as writing of a script under the guidance of an *ustaad* (traditional teacher), collective rehearsals of the script, collective organization of the show, and a pattern of performance beginning with *vandana* and *bhents* (devotional songs), and moving on to a secular storyline. Even watching their favorite traditional scripts in *Nauatnki* is a ritual for many audience members, especially the older generation. *Nautanki* needs to maintain this ritualistic dimension in order to remain a part of the community. While new rituals have to be, and will be introduced in *Nautanki* with continually changing community life, this change should come gradually.

A related notion that I found circulating among the older *Nautanki* artists and audiences was that the new generation was not taking any interest in *Nautanki.* Based on my field experience, I would say that this, again, is partly true. When we went to watch the Kinarai performance, the teenaged son of my father's friend accompanied us for this all night event. We tried to dissuade him, saying he would miss his sleep. But he insisted as he was excited about the opportunity to watch a *Nautanki* performance. He told us that usually his father did not allow him to watch *Nautanki.* However, being with us would give him a legitimate excuse to watch it. After seeing his unbridled enthusiasm for *Nautanki*, I had to rethink the myth that the younger generation was not interested in *Nautanki*. In all the *Nautanki* performances that I watched, I saw a big presence of younger audiences, sometimes more than 50 percent. From these experiences, I argue that the younger generation is very much interested in *Nautanki.* However they are

interested in a different version of *Nautanki.* Yes, they especially like the spicy songs and dances. Thus, *Nautanki* is definitely not outdated, although, for some, a particular form of it might be.

Regarding the competition between mass media forms and *Nautanki*, after hearing people in the field, I am convinced that all these media have different roles to play in audiences' lives. Most respondents said that they watched *Nautanki* and television for different purposes. According to them, television was informative but provided an individualized experience. They watched it alone or with their family but not with their friends and community. When they wanted to go out and get entertained with their friends as a group, they preferred to watch *Nautanki.* Watching *Nautanki* is a group activity that helped to amplify and multiply their enjoyment. Unlike television or cinema, *Nautanki* watching does not bind audience members to a fixed seat where they sit passively. Audiences can move freely in and out of the performance space, eat or drink while watching the performance, and can also talk to their friends. *Nautanki*, in this sense, represents a fun space similar to a *carnival*-- as described by Bakhtin (1984).

Rural audience members also noted that television showed them a lifestyle that they could not afford to live. With their paltry income, they could hardly make their ends meet. *Nautanki* is an affordable entertainment medium for them. For a small sum of money, *Nautanki* not only provides entertainment to its audiences but also gives them an excuse to get together. Audiences said that although television watching provided them with an escape from their harsh living conditions, television programs did not speak to their lived realities. It served them an unfamiliar glossy, affluent culture. *Nautanki*, on the

other hand, provided them with a sense of emotional security and they felt more comfortable and grounded watching it. On a deeper level, folk forms such as *Nautanki* can check, or at least lessen, the negative impacts of alienation and frustration, an essential by-product of globalization, by making their audience feel more "connected" to their culture. Based on these comments, I argue that all forms of mass media and folk forms like *Nautanki* can co-exist. It is not the case of one against the other.

Regarding the lesser time available for audiences to watch *Nautanki* in the contemporary fast life, many *Nautanki* performers and troupe owners are advocating a shorter version of *Nautanki,* of around two to three hours. Also there is a huge demand for fresh scripts to replace traditional outdated *Nautanki* script. Performers and audiences feel that fresh shorter scripts will increase the popularity of *Nautanki.* Already some *Nautanki* writers are working on these concerns. For example, my father's new *Nautanki* scripts, based on social themes, are approximately two hours long. Audiences' response to these scripts in the Mathura health fair was very encouraging.

My field experiences suggest that in contemporary circumstances, the role of folk forms such as *Nautanki* become even more critical. They can play a crucial role in bringing the community together in these times of social fragmentation. Occasions such as *Nautanki* performances can help the marginalized rural people to come together and reflect on their lived realities. They can tell stories through *Nautanki* for which the elitist commercial communication channels such as television, do not have the time or motivation.

A Struggle to Privilege the Ordinary Culture

In the post-colonial times, folk performing traditions have not been given their due respect in India. They are considered as fare for the illiterate and poor. In addition to *Nautanki's* internal problems, the folk form is also facing a lack of support from cultural elites and the Indian government. Other rural-based folk forms in India face a similar fate. To use Raymond Williams' term, the *ordinary culture* (Williams, 1958, 1973) hardly gets its due respect from elite power centers in India. As those who are involved in *Nautanki* are not educated and remain simple-minded rural folks, they cannot argue their case in "enlightened" powerful elite' circles. Hence ordinary culture becomes even more ordinary. I clearly saw a need for those involved in *Nautanki* to obtain an education and, also learn to speak in the elites' language, i.e. English so that they could raise their voice and be heard. Education will, on one hand, give them ability and resources to renew their art form, and on the other hand, give them more confidence to face and neutralize cultural snobbery.

Reflecting on my conversations with *Nautanki* artists in the field, I can confidently say that *Nautanki* artists do realize the need for modern education and more professionalism. Most of them want to get their children educated. However, they often do not have enough resources to do so for all children and rarely have funds to send their children to college. Although many of them earn just enough to make a livelihood for their family, working in *Nautanki,* at present, does not provide them either the time or the vision to improve their lot. Without much educational capital to improve their art form, it is hard for them to innovate. Many get frustrated with this situation and discourage their

children to enter the *Nautanki* profession. So over time the human and resource capital invested in the art form declines.

To overcome this situation, many artists strongly felt (if not demanded) that *Nautanki* should receive more respect, visibility, and support from the government. With support from the government, many veteran *Nautanki* artists are eager to open schools and centers to impart *Nautanki* training to the new generation. Interestingly, for most *Nautanki* artists, I was not merely a researcher writing about their art form, but symbolized a younger generation of the modern, educated *Nautanki* artist, who could take the art to a more respected level. During my conversations with my father, he reminded me of my "duty" to represent *Nautanki's* situation honestly to my readers. He said that however small, this would be an effort to help folk forms to achieve their due place in the Indian society.

Agreeing with my father, and all the *Nautanki* performers and audience members whom I met in the field, I argue that if we want to strengthen community, if we want to celebrate ordinary culture, and if we want to break the *texto-centric* paradigm of communication, we need to create conditions for a better future for our folk forms and their artists.

In closing, I come back to the same night in Mudhera where I watched a *Nautanki* performance as a child. That exciting heady performance had inspired me to delve into the reasons for this folk form's appeal among its audience. After seeing *Nautanki* performances during my present research trip, 25 years after that night in Mudhera, I have realized that indigenous art is *not* important for its own sake. It is important *because*

it brings people together and gives them an opportunity to engage with the art form, with each other, and with their cultural roots. This experience has humbled me as a *Nautanki* performer. Before this experience I believed that it is *I* or the other *performers* who made *Nautanki* appealing. Now I realize that it is the *community* aspect of *Nautanki* that makes it exciting. It is the bond between people that makes *Nautanki* performances appealing. Now I realize why I never experienced the Mudhera feeling when I performed *Nautanki* in cities, devoid of its community context. I have found out that *Nautanki* performance is a process, a space that represents *collectivity*. If you minus the word *collective* from *Nautanki*, it looses all its effect, however good the performance might be. I suspect that this insight from this research about *Nautanki* might be true for other community performance traditions too. If my research has any theoretical or practical value, it lies in the call to preserve, maintain, and enhance a more participative, community-centered paradigm of communication.

I think this research has been a personal symbolic pilgrimage (Aden[96], 1999) for me as a *Nautanki* artist and fan. During this research, I revisited my performance tradition in its natural surroundings with my father. It was an opportunity to take a modest stock of my art form's present condition. This research has value for me as a folk artist as it has informed me about the problems and possibilities that my art form faces in the future. I hope my research will help *Nautanki* artists to shape their art according to the needs and aspirations of their audiences. From a communication perspective, I realize that folk

[96] I would like to note my appreciation here for the idea of *symbolic pilgrimage* in Dr. Roger Aden's book titled *Popular stories and promised land: Fan cultures and symbolic pilgrimage.* This concept resonated a lot with my own thoughts and helped me to understand the nature of my relationship with *Nautanki* since my childhood.

performance-based strategies are not inherently *good* or *bad*. They are like any other communication tool that can be used both for progressive as well regressive social purposes. Thus *a Nautanki* performance can potentially be used effectively to *oppose* an oppressive tradition such as dowry, or it can be used to *support* an oppressive tradition such as the caste system. Therefore, I realize that like any other responsible communicator, folk artists should also be more aware of the ethical and political dimensions of their performance. Earning an education may be important for them in this regard.

Finally, now I feel more confident of my identity as a folk performer. From a researcher's perspective, I realize that *Nautanki does* have value in its own context. Now I do not need validation from the elites to feel good about my folk form, which I think I was searching earlier, even if not overtly. This confidence has a flip side too. My field trip has also made me realize that *Nautanki does not* have value *outside* its natural, rural context. It is an entertainment form of its people set amidst their natural surroundings. Why then I, as a folk artist, should expect recognition from the city people or the elites? I realize that indigenous forms need no support from any quarter except from its own people. If outside support comes, it is great. If not, then the community members should continue to work together to support their folk art traditions.

May the *Nautanki* journey of the eight-year old boy in Mudhera village of India, which began some twenty-five years ago, continue to shape my multi-dimensional world of performer, researcher, critic, activist, and advocate.

References

Aden, R. C. (1999). *Popular stories and promised lands: Fan cultures and symbolic pilgrimages.* Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.

Agrawal, G. S. (2000). *Gyarah nukkad natak*. Bijnaur, India: Hindi Sahitya Niketan.

Agrawal, R. (1976). *Saangit, ek lok natya parampara*. Delhi, India: Rajpal and Sons.

Awasthi, S. (1983). Drama: The gift of gods. Culture, performance and communication in India. In M. Yamaguchi (Ed.), *Symbolism and world view in Asia and Africa*. Tokyo: Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa.

Bakhtin, M. M. (1984). *Rabelais and his world*. Bloomington. USA: Indiana University Press.

Barba, E. (2000). The deep order called turbulence: The three faces of dramaturgy. *TDR, 44:4.* 56-66.

Basu, L. (2000). Taking it to the streets: The activist theater of Ngugi WaThiong'o and Safdar Hashmi [Electronic version]. *Samar: South Asian Magazine for Action and Reflection, 13.*

Becker, H. S., McCall, M. M., & Morris, L.V. (1989). Theater and communities: three scenes. *Social Problems, 36,* 93-116.

Bernstein, M. A. (1986). When the carnival turns bitter: Preliminary reflections upon the abject hero. In G. S. Morson (Ed.), *Bakhtin: Essays and dialogues on his work.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Berrong, R. M. (1968). *Rabelais and Bakhtin: Popular culture in gargantua and pontagruel.* Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press.

Boal, A. (1985). *Theatre of the oppressed.* New York: Theatre Communication Group.

Bordenave, J. D. (1976). Communication of agricultural innovations in Latin America: The need for new models. *Communication research, 3(2),*135-154.

Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A critique of the judgment of taste.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard.

Brecht, B. (1964). A dialogue about acting. In J. Willet (Ed. & Trans.), *Brecht on theatre.* Hill & Wang.

Brij Lok Madhuri (2003). *SIFPSA's folk media campaign: A report.* Lucknow: SIFPSA.

Buber, M. (1994). Genuine dialogue and the possibility of peace. In R. Anderson, K. N. Cissna, & R. C. Arnett (Eds.), *The reach of dialogue: Confirmation voice and community.* Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Burke, K. (1969). *A grammar of motives*. University of California Press.

Campbell, K. K. (1973). The rhetoric of women's liberation: An oxymoron. *Quarterly Journal of Speech, 59,* 74-86.

Census of India. (2001). *Population and sex ratio.* New Delhi, India: Census of India.

Chawla, D., & Rawlins, W. K. (2004). Enabling reflexivity in a mentoring relationship. *Qualitative Inquiry, 10,* 963-978.

Cohen-Cruz, J. (2001). Motion of the ocean: The shifting face of U.S. theater for social change since the 1960s. *Theater, 31* (3), 95-107.

Cohen, R. (1988). Realism. In M. Banham (Ed.), *The Cambridge guide to theater* (p. 815). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Conner, L. (1996). "What the modern dance should be": Socialist agendas in the modern dance, 1931-38. In J. Reinelt (Ed.), *Crucibles of crisis: Performing social change.* Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press.

Conquergood, D. (1985). Performing as a moral act: Ethical dimensions of the ethnography of performance. *Literature in Performance, 5,* 1-13.

Conquergood, D. (1988). Health theatre in a Hmong refugee camp. *Theater and Drama Review (TDR), 32,* 174-207.

Conquergood, D. (1991). Rethinking ethnography: Towards a critical cultural politics. *Communication Monographs, 58,* 179-194.

Conquergood, D. (2002). Performance studies: Interventions and radical research. *TDR. 46:2.* 145-156.

Dahiya, P. (Ed.). (2002). *Lok.* Uadaipur, India: Bhartiya Lok Klala Mandal.

Dagron, A. G. (2001). *Making waves: Stories of participatory communication for social change.* New York: The Rockefeller Foundation.

Danow, D. K. (1991). *The thought of Mikhail Bakhtin: From word to culture.* New York: St. Martin's Press.

Denzin, N. K. (1997). *Interpretive ethnography: Ethnographic practices for the 21st century*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Dion, G. (1996). From no man's land to no man's theater: The theater of the 8th day returns to capitalist Poland. In J. Reinelt (Ed.), *Crucibles of crisis: Performing social change.* Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press.

Downs, G. W. Jr., & Mohr, L. B. (1976). Conceptual issues in the study of innovations. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 21,* 700-714.

Elam, Jr. E. J. (1996). Social urgency, audience participation, and the performance of *Slave Ship* by Amiri Baraka. In J. Reinelt (Ed.), *Crucibles of crisis: Performing social change.* Ann Arbour, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press.

Ellis, C., & Bochner, A. P. (2000). Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity: Researcher as subject In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

English in India. Retrieved April 14, 2005, from http://www.indianchild.com/english_in_india.htm

Fine, E. C., & Speer, J. H. (Eds.). (1992). *Performance, culture, and identity.* Westport, Connecticut: Praeger.

Fisher, W. R. (1984). Narrative as a human communication paradigm. *Communication Monograph, 51,* 1-22.

Foss, S. K., & Griffin, C. L. (1995). Beyond persuasion: A proposal for an invitational rhetoric. *Communication Monographs, 62*, 2-18.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M. B. Ramos, Trans.). New York: Herder and Herder.

Freire, P. (2004). The banking concept of education. In A. S. Canestrari & B. A. Marlowe (Eds.), *Educational foundations: An anthology of critical readings.* Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

Freire, P. (2005). *Education for critical consciousness*. London: Continuum.

Frey, L. R., Pearce, W. B., Pollock, M. A., Artz, L., & Murphy, B. A. O. (1996). Looking for justice in all the wrong places: On a communication approach to social justice. *Communication Studies, 47,* 110-127.

Friedman, M. (1993). *What are friends for? Feminist perspectives on personal relationships and moral theory.* Ithaca: Cornell University.

Gangal, A., & Hosterman, C. (1982). Toward an examination of the rhetoric of ancient India. *The Southern Speech Communication Journal, 47,* 277-291.

Gargi, B. (1991). *Folk theatre of India.* Delhi, India: Rupa.

Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life.* Garden City, N. Y.: Double Day.

Gonzalez, D. (2003). Young lives transformed, guided by a camera lens: Guatemalan fotokids capture pain and joy. New York Times, May 7, 2003. pp. 1 & 5.

Goodnight, T.G. (1982). The personal, technical, and public sphere of argumentation: A speculative inquiry into the art of public deliberation. *Argumentation and Advocacy. 18.* 214-227.

Hansen, K. (1992). *Grounds for play: The Nautanki theatre of north India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Harter, L. M., Sharma, D., Pant, S., Singhal, A., & Sharma, Y. (In Press). Catalyzing social reform through participatory performances in rural India. In L. Frey & K. Carragee (Eds.), *Communication and social activism.* Creskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Havens, E. A. (1975). Diffusion of new seed varieties and its consequences: A Colombian case. In R.E. Dumett & L. J. Brainard (Eds.), *Problems of rural development: Case studies and multidisciplinary perspective*. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill.

Haynes, D. J. (1995). *Bakhtin and the visual arts.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hirshkop, K. (1999). *Mikhail Bakhtin: An aesthetic for democracy.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Holquist, M., Liapunov, V. (Eds.). (1990). *Art and answerability.* Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press.

Hoy, M. (1994). Joyful mayhem: Bakhtin, football songs, and the carnivalesque. *Text and Performance Quarterly, 14,* 289-304.

Indian Institute of Mass Communication. (1981). *Communication and the traditional media*: *Papers and proceedings of seminar organized by I.I.M.C. and the Film and Television Institute of India, Pune*. New Delhi, India: Indian Institute of Mass Communication.

Jackson, S. (1993). Ethnography and the audition: Performance as ideological critique. *Text and Performance Quarterly, 13,* 21-43.

Jackson, S. (1998). White noises: On performing white, on writing performance. *Drama Review: A Journal of Performance Studies, 42(1),* 90-97.

Jacobson, T. L. (2002). Participatory communication for social change: The relevance for the theory of communicative action. In P. J. Kalbfleisch (Ed.), *Communication Yearbook* (Vol. 27, pp. 87-123). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Jain, N. C. (1967). *Rang darshan*. Delhi, India: Akshar Prakashan.

Jones, J. (2002). Performance ethnography: The role of embodiment in cultural authenticity. *Theater Topics.12:1:* 1-15.

Joshi, L. D. (1967). Lok rangmanchiya kala. In D. Samar & M. Bhanavat (Eds.), *Lok kala*. Udaipur, India: Bhartiya Lok Kala Mandal.

Knowles, R. (Ed.). (1998). *Shakespeare and carnival: After Bakhtin.* New York: MacMillan Press.

Kruger, A. C., & Tomasello, M. (1996). Cultural learning and learning culture. In D. Olson and N. Torrance (Eds.), *The handbook of education and human development: New models of learning, teaching, and schooling*. Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell.

Laing, R. D. (1994). Confirmation and disconfirmation. In R. Anderson, K. N. Cissna, & R. C. Arnett (Eds.), *The reach of dialogue: Confirmation voice and community.* Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Lamphere, L. (Ed.). (1992). *Structuring diversity: ethnographic perspectives on the new immigration.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Lerner, D. (1958). *The passing of traditional society: Modernizing the Middle East.* With the collaboration of Lucille W. Pevsner. New York : Free Press

Lucaites, J. L., Condit, C. M., & Caudill, S. (Eds.). (1999). *Contemporary rhetorical theory.* New York: Guilford Press.

Macovski, M. (Ed.). (1997). *Dialogue and critical discourse.* NewYork: Oxford University Press.

Manuel, P. (1993). *Cassette culture: Popular music and technology in north India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

McCall, J. E. (1993). The new negro. In C. Cullen (Ed.), *Caroling dusk: An anthology of verse by black poets of the twenties.* Secaucus, N.J.: Carol Publication Group.

Melkote, S. R., Steeves, L. H. (2001). *Communication and development in the third world.* New Delhi: Sage Publication.

Merton, T. (1994). Love and need: Is love a package or a message. In R. Anderson, K. N. Cissna, & R. C. Arnett (Eds.), *The reach of dialogue: Confirmation voice and community.* Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Mienczakowski, J., & Morgan, S. (2001). Ethnodrama: Constructing participatory, experiential and compelling action research through performance. In R. Reason & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *Handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice* (pp. 219-227). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Morris, N. (2003). A comparative analysis of the diffusion and participatory models in development communication. *Communication Theory, 13*, 225-248.

Morson, G. A. (1986). Dialogue, monologue, and the social: A reply to Ken Hirschkop. In G. S. Morson (Ed.), *Bakhtin: Essays and dialogues on his work.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

O'Brien, A. (1994). Staging whiteness: Beckett, Havel, Maponya. *Theater Journal, March 1994,* 45- 62.

Okeley, J., & Callaway, H. (Eds.). (1992). *Anthropology and autobiography.* London: Routledge.

Paget, M. A. (1990). Performing the text. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 19,* 136-155.

Peters, J. D. (1999). *Speaking into the air: A history of the idea of communication.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Pollock, D. (1990). Telling the told: Performing like a family. *Oral History Review, 18,* 1-36.

Prashad, V. (1999). Theatre of the people [Electronic version]. *Himal: South Asian,* January 1999.

Premchand, M. (1932). *Godan.* Delhi: Abhivyakti Prakashan.

Rangacharya, A. (1971). *The Indian theatre*. New Delhi, India: National Book Trust.

Rawlins, W. K. (1992). *Friendship matters: Communication, dialects, and the life course.* New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

Reinelt, J. (Ed.). (1996). *Crucibles of crisis: Performing social change.* Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press.

Richardson, L. (1997). *Fields of play: Constructing an academic life.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Rodriguez, N. M., & Villaverde, L. (2000). *Dismantling white priviledge.* New York: Peter Lang.

Rogers, E. M. (1962). *Diffusion of innovations* (1st ed.). Glencoe: Free Press.

Rogers, E. M. (1976). Communication and development: The passing of the dominant paradigm. *Communication Research, 3,* 121-148.

Rogers, E. M. (1986). Models of knowledge transfer: critical perspectives. In G. M. Beal, W. Dissanayake, & S. Konoshima (Eds.), *Knowledge generation, exchange, and utilization* (pp. 37-60). Boulder, Colrado: Westview.

Rogers, E. M. (1997). *A History of communication study: A biographical approach.* New York: Free Press.

Rogers, E. M. (2003). *Diffusion of innovations.* (5th ed.). New York: Free Press.

Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism.* New York: Random House.

Sangeet Natak Akademi (1971). Proceedings of the round table on the contemporary relevance of traditional theatre. *Sangeet Natak: Journal of the Sangeet Natak Akademi, 21,* July- September 1971.

Sangeet Natak Akademi (1985). Traditional idiom in contemporary theatre. *Special Issue of Sangeet Natak, Journal of Sangeet Natak Akademi, 77-78,* July-December 1985.

Schechner, R. (1983). *Performative circumstances: From the avant garde to ramlila.* Calcutta, India: Seagull.

Schramm, W. L. (1964). *Mass media and national development; the role of information in the developing countries.* Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Schiappa, E. (1989). The rhetoric of nukespeak. *Communication Monograph, 56,* 253-271.

Schroeder, P. R. (1996). Transforming images of blackness: Dramatic representation, women playwrights, and the Harlem renaissance. In J. Reinelt (Ed.), *Crucibles of crisis: Performing social change.* Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press.

Schultz, E. A. (1990). *Dialogue at the margins: Whorf, Bakhtin, and linguistic relativity.* Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press.

Sharma, D. (2004). *Using folk performances to communicate health messages in rural India: A case study in rural India.* Presented at the International Communication Association: New Orleans, 2004.

Shastri, R. (1987). *Hariyana ka lok manch*. Chandigarh, India: Hariyana Rajkiya Press.

Shefner-Rogers, C. L., Rao, N., Rogers, E. M., & Wayangankar, A. (1998). The empowerment of women dairy farmers in India. *Journal of Applied Communication Research, 26:3,* 319-337.

Shome, R. (1996). Postcolonial interventions in the rhetorical canon: An “other” view. *Communication Theory, 6,* 40-59.

Sieg, K. (1955). Subjectivity and socialism: Feminist discourses in East Germany. *Genders, 22,* 105-133.

Siegel, T., & Conquergood, D. (Producers & Directors). (1985). *Between two worlds: The Hmong shaman in America* [Video Documentary].

Siegel, T., & Conquergood, D. (Producers & Directors). (1990). *The heart broken in half* [Video Documentary].

SIFPSA. (2003). *Communication channels.* Lucknow: SIFPSA.

Simons, H. W., & Billig, M. (Eds.). (1994). *After postmodernism: Reconstructing ideology critique.* London: Sage.

Singhal, A. (2004). Entertainment education through participatory theater: Freirean strategies for empowering the oppressed. In A. Singhal, M. Cody, E. M. Rogers, & M. Sabido (Eds.), *Entertainment-education and social change: History, research, and practice* (pp. 377-398). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Singhal, A., & Howard, W. S. (Eds.). (2003). *The children of Africa confront AIDS: From vulnerability to possibility.* Athens, OH: Ohio University Press.

Singhal, A., & Rattine-Flaherty, E. (2006). Pencils and photos as tools of communicative research and praxis. In *The International Communication Gazette, 68:4,* 313- 330.

Singhal, A., Rogers, E. M. (2003). *Combating AIDS: Communication strategies in action.* New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Singhal, A., Sharma, D., Papa, M.J., & Witte, K. (2004). Air cover and ground mobilization: Integrating entertainment-education broadcasts with community listening and service delivery in India. In A. Singhal, M. Cody, E.M. Rogers, and M. Sabido (Ed), *Entertainment-Education and social change: History, research, and practice*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Smith, A. D. (1993). *Fires in the mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn, and other identities.* Garden City, NY: Anchor.

Smith, A.D. (1994). *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992.* Garden City, NY: Anchor.

Taylor, D. (1990). Theater and terrorism: Griselda Gambaro's *information for foreigners. Theater Journal, May 1990,* 165- 182.

Tedlock, B. (1991). From participant observation to the observation of participation: The emergence of narrative ethnography. *Journal of Anthropological Research, 47,* 69-94.

Tedlock, B. (2000). Ethnography and ethnographic representation. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research.* Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Thapar, R. (1966). *A history of India.* Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Todorov, T. (1984). *Mikhail Bakhtin: The dialogical principle.* W. Godzich (Trans.). Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.

Trotter, M. (1996). Women's work: *Inghinidhe na hEireann* and the Irish democratic movement. In J. Reinelt (Ed.), *Crucibles of crisis: Performing social change.* Ann Arbour, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press.

Turner, V. M., Bruner, E. M. (Eds.). (1986). *The anthropology of experience.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Varadpande, M.L. (1992). *History of Indian theatre*: *Lokranga, panorama of Indian theatre*. New Delhi, India: Abhinav Publications.

Vatsyayan, K. (1971). Aesthetic theories underlying Asian performing arts. In J. R. Brandon (Ed.), *The performing arts in Asia*. Paris: UNESCO.

Vatsyayan, K. (1995). *Traditional Indian theatre: Multiple streams*. New Delhi, India: National Book Trust.

Versenyi, A. (1996). The Mexican revolution: Religion, politics, and theater. In J. Reinelt (Ed.), *Crucibles of crisis: Performing social change.* Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press.

Wadley S. S. (2001). Popular culture and the north Indian oral epic Dhola. *Indian Folklore Research Journal, 1(1),* 13-24.

Wander, P. (1984). The third persona: An ideological turn in rhetorical theory. *Communication Studies, 35,* 197-216.

Wesling, D. (2003). *Bakhtin and the social moorings of poetry.* London: Associated University Presses.

Williams, R. (1958). Culture is ordinary. In N. Mackenzie (Ed.), *Conviction.* London: McGibbon and Kee.

Williams, R. (1967). Literature and Rural Society. *The Listener, 78.*

Williams, R. (1976). *Key words.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Williams, R. (2000). Cultural production and the labor process. In V. N. Paananen (Ed.), *British Marxist criticism* (pp. 189-196). New York: Garland Pub.

Wills, C. (2001). Upsetting the public: Carnival, hysteria, and women's texts. In K. Hirschkop, D. Shepherd (Eds.), *Bakhtin and cultural theory.* Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Wolff, K. H. (1964). Surrender and community Study: The study of Loma. In A. J. Vidich, J. Bensman, & M. R. Stein (Eds.), *Reflections on community studies* (pp. 233-263). New York: John Wiley.

Worthen, W. B. (1996). Convicted reading: *The island*, hybridity, performance. In J. Reinelt (Ed.), *Crucibles of crisis: Performing social change.* Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press.