

REVISITING INDIAN FOLK ART NAUTANKI FROM TRADITION TO CONTEMPORARY EXPRESSION: AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

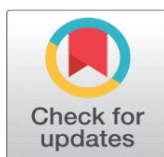
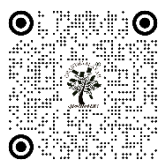
Jay Prakash Tiwari¹  , Dr. Adish Kumar Verma²  , Dr. Kulin Kumar Joshi³  , Bishal Prasad⁴  

¹ PhD Scholar, Department of Performing and Fine Arts, Central University of Punjab, Bathinda, India

² Assistant Professor, Department of Performing and Fine Arts, Central University of Punjab, Bathinda, India

³ Assistant Professor, Department of Performing and Fine Arts, Central University of Punjab, Bathinda, India

⁴ PhD Scholar, Department of Performing and Fine Arts, Central University of Punjab, Bathinda, India



ABSTRACT

The research article examines the development of folk theatre, with a special emphasis on the path taken by the folk-drama nautanki from its inception to the present. At first, nautanki captivated audiences with its performances, drawing sizable crowds both day and night. But as other kinds of entertainment surfaced, nautanki's plot, length, staging, and structure changed, though its music never stopped being a highlight. The core of this folk-drama is its focus on acting, dancing, and music, which captivates audiences in both rural and urban North India. At first, nautanki told stories that were deeply ingrained in the minds of the audience historical, mythical, and modern. But in an attempt to draw in viewers, commercial pressures forced the inclusion of profanity, which destroyed the original charm. The purpose of this article is to examine two aspects of nautanki: its original splendour, which highlights its classical singing, musical instruments, and storyline, and its current form, which considers the effects of market forces, changes in the genre, and popularity.

Received 13 December 2025

Accepted 11 March 2026

Published 28 March 2026

Corresponding Author

Jay Prakash Tiwari,

jaiprakashitiwari1989@gmail.com

DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v7.i2s.2026.72](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v7.i2s.2026.72)

11

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2026 The Author(s).

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.

Keywords: Folk Theatre, Folk Performing Arts, Theatre, Music in Performing Arts, Musical Instruments in Folk Theatre, Folk Theatre Nautanki



1. INTRODUCTION

India is a culturally diverse nation. The performing arts scene here is likewise replete with examples of this diversity. The various forms of folk theatre are the most prominent example of this. Folk dramas have been classified as a composite art form because they include dancing, music, dialogue, and acting; these elements have been presented more frequently. Everywhere in the nation, musicians such as Kuchipudi in Andhra Pradesh, Ankiya Natya in Assam, Jatra in Bengal, Bhavai in Gujarat, Swang in Haryana, Kariala in Himachal, Yakshagana in Karnataka, Bhand Pather in

Kashmir, Kutiyattam in Kerala, Mach in Madhya Pradesh, Lalit, Tamasha, and Dashavatar in Maharashtra, and Swang and Sangeet in Punjab developed according to similar artistic traditions. In Rajasthan, Khayal; in Tamil Nadu, Bhagwatmail; in Uttar Pradesh, Rasleela, Ramleela, Bhagat, Swang, Sangeet, etc. [Vatsyayan \(1980\)](#). Sangeetak is the name of the theatrical performance in which actresses, also known as Nati, sing in time with the rhythm and instrument. Song, instrumental, dance, theatre, and Nat-Nati (actor and actress) are the five components of music.

Interestingly, Nautanki, also known as Swang style, is primarily associated with Uttar Pradesh and Bihar and shares close ties with Khayal. This style blends sensual dancing, dramatic recitation of poetry, and traditional drumming and singing. While some song items in Nautanki use other Hindi dialects, the dialogue is primarily in flowery Urdu. Prose sections and comedic skits were added to Nautanki performances in the early 20th century, which had previously only included songs and recitative elements. These days, comedy and dance pieces usually open an evening performance [Hansen \(2023\)](#). The word Nautanki is connected to a myth. The most widely accepted myth states that the princess Nautanki of Multan, also known as Shahazadi Nautanki, is the source of the word Nautanki.

This idea suggests that there is another variation regarding Nautanki's beginning. The term Nautanki is composed of two words: 'tank', which is the unit of measurement for silver money equal to about four grammes, and 'Nau', which means nine. This exquisitely beautiful Shahazadi is said to have weighed just thirty-six grammes, or nine tanks, due to her delicate nature. The following describes her beauty: She lived in a fortress-like palace encircled by thickets and watched over round-the-clock. Her name had become widely known throughout the entire nation, even though she was a reclusive and elusive person. Her delicate nature surpassed that of the fairies. Her body had a glow that was greater than the moon's, her eyes were the colour of a doe's, and her voice had the sweet notes of a cuckoo. Every time she laughed, jasmine flowers opened all around her. Her lotus-like breasts and the three folds at her waist enthralled men when she was a young woman. She seemed to float on the wind gusts when she went outside. Her weight could only be compared to a few flowers because of her incredible allure [Hansen \(2023\)](#). The princess became doubtful that Phul Singh, who had made an amazing garland, was not her usual flower-girl. When she asked, she was informed that it had been made by the nephew's wife of the flower woman, who was temporarily residing with her. The princess insisted on meeting her enigmatic daughter-in-law. The flower woman arrived at her hut, disturbed, but Phul Singh reassured her that he was a skilled disguiser. Similar to Viola in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, but with the gender roles reversed, Phul Singh pretended to be a woman and offered himself as the princess's servant. Phul Singh was captivated by the princess's beauty and fell in love with her. The princess reciprocated his feelings and asked to be friends. With great pleasure, Phul Singh agreed to her insistence that he remain in her chamber. The princess confided in her new friend during a private conversation, saying, "Listen, most excellent gardener girl, I have been weighed down by flowers until now." Despite my impending youth, I have remained single because no man has shown me that he is worthy of me. A wave crashes into my heart at the sight of you, my friend. Oh my goodness, if only one of us could transform into a man, we could stay up all night in bed, embracing, giving, and receiving with joy and sipping from the union cup.

The storyline reads like a synopsis or passage from a play or story that features a transformation, a patriarchy-related symbolic scene, and a reversal of conventional gender roles. The narrative seems to question and challenge social norms, especially those pertaining to women's chastity and the repercussions that follow. The way that Phul Singh turns the protagonist's friend into a man at the start of the story, setting up a night together, emphasises how much society values female chastity and how breaking it can have dire repercussions—in this case, Phul Singh's arrest and execution. The idea that a woman's purity is determined by her weight and that any increase in weight indicates defilement is symbolised by the reference to the princess being weighed in flowers. This is consistent with Michel Foucault's "repressive hypothesis," [Foucault \(1978\)](#), which holds that institutions and society control sexuality in order to preserve power structures. However, when Nautanki steps in to save Phul Singh, the narrative takes an unexpected turn. Clad in a male outfit and bearing a sword and dagger, she contests the execution and requests her partner's forgiveness. In the end, the King agrees to their marriage, subverting gender norms by depicting Nautanki as a female warrior. This narrative turnup questions and subverts conventional gender roles, providing a different take on feminism that is compatible with Indian cultural settings. The story concludes with Phul Singh and his new bride returning home, highlighting the triumph of love over social expectations. In addition to highlighting Nautanki's beauty and individuality, the narrative also touches on themes of love, selflessness, and defiance of social norms. Additionally, it offers a distinctive viewpoint on feminism within the context of Indian culture [Hansen \(1991\)](#). From this description, we can easily guess the grandeur of Nautanki because, in its initial phase, Nautanki used to talk about various ironic issues related to society.

Khushi Ram's Sangit Rani Nautanki Ka, also known as The Musical Drama of Queen Nautanki 1882, is the first version of this tale to be published. As a result of later compositions and numerous performances, the form gained popularity and spread from the Punjab and Haryana region to Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Seeing how tales can change and circulate over time among various locales and cultures is fascinating [Singh \(2020\)](#).

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Using keywords like "Nautanki," "Nautanki in performing arts," and "Nautanki in Uttar Pradesh," a number of books, journals, articles, and magazines from databases like Scopus, JSTOR, Google Scholar, Project Muse, Historical Abstracts, and Vogue Archive were consulted in order to obtain pertinent information. In-depth interviews were conducted with the highly regarded Nautanki artists in order to gather information about the current state of this folk art form. The entire study explores the Indian folk art of Uttar Pradesh, or Nautanki. This study made an effort to concentrate on Nautanki's speciality, which is a special blend of singing with musical instruments, storyline, choreography, and extended periods of nonstop performance, all of which changed throughout the course of the troupe's arduous journey.

3. INITIAL GLORY OF NAUTANKI

Nautanki is the most important folk theatre form of North India. We know that diverse cultural, social, and religious traditions are a collective expression of the sensibilities and values of a particular society, same is with Nautanki too. In the 18th-19th century, folk dramas like Khayal, Bhagat, Swang, etc. were famous and prevalent in UP. Which was transformed into a Nautanki style as a result of the new consciousness of art and the innovative nature of folk artists. Later Nautanki flourished and became the famous, glorious, and prominent folk drama style of Uttar Pradesh. The uniqueness of its music and singing greatly influenced the public. By weaving mythological and historical characters into stories and making new Nautankis, which were a blend of NAV RASA (nine emotions), Nautanki has done an important task of generating hope and faith in have-nots. Even in that era devoid of communication resources, Nautanki started bringing joy to the hearts of people living in remote villages. The beginning of the 20th century can be considered the golden period for Nautanki. Which did not slow down even in the sixth-seventh decade. The wide audience that Nautanki received for the entire half-century was much more than other folk theatre forms of India. Mainly two schools of Nautanki were considered - one is Nautanki of Kanpur, and the other is Nautanki of Hathras.

Nautanki of Hathras gained great popularity in the second half of the 19th century, Pt. Natharam Sharma Gaur developed the Hathras style of Nautanki in such a way that it came to be known as a school or style. The main objective of this genre was to awaken the feeling of nationalism and patriotism in the hearts of the people through various stories. Dramas like "Dhruvcharit" and "Satya Harishchandra" are examples of it. In Hathras style, the dialogue was in verse only. This style was influenced by the Raas Leela of Braj, hence there is more inclusion of classicism in this style. In Hathras style, Paran, Tukda, Tihai, etc., are used. (Paran, Tukda, and Tihai are the singing and playing patterns of Nautanki of Hathras style) [Gargi \(1966\)](#).

In the tradition of Ustad 'Inderman' Akhara, P. Natharam Gaur of Hathras Nautanki was the creator, singer, and actor of Swang Sangit, whose name is still well acclaimed today. Satya Harishchandra, Amar Singh Rathore, Bhakta Purnamal, Laila Majnu, etc. have been the major performances of Hathras.

Kanpur School of Nautanki, Shri Krishna Pahalwan was the identity of Kanpur school. The Kanpur style developed after the Hathras style. Singing in Kanpur style is very simple, dialogue is emotional and different folk tunes are included in it [Gargi \(1966\)](#). Kirra (Singing Pattern) is used in the Kanpur style of Nautanki. The story of Nautanki can be an important event of a particular person, and may be based on mythological narratives like Harishchandra, Sita Banvas, Rama Ravana Yuddh, Satyavan Savitri, and Bhakta Purnamal. Based on social evils like the dowry system and based on love and kindness like Sultana Daku, Amar Singh Rathore, Laila Majnu, Sheeri Farhad, Alha Udai. Nautanki may be based on the freedom fighters and freedom struggle, like Rani Lakshmi Bai and Bhagat Singh, too. Love is the main and prominent emotion in all types of Nautankies [Sharma \(2020a\)](#).

Stage and costume of Nautanki, the scenery plays an important role in showing the locale and surroundings of any play-performance of Nautanki. Similarly, scenery is also an integral part of Nautanki, but in the long history of Nautanki, there was no permanent set, painted curtains were used. These curtains were very attractive, and the scenes were

painted exactly like that. They were created with such craftsmanship that they gave the impression of reality. If they had to show a scene of a palace, then a curtain was used on which the exact palace was depicted. To bring the curtains to the stage, it was either pulled down from the top or slid from the side. These curtains were in line with the plot of the drama. Normally, there were 3-4 screens in a Nautanki, but the commercial company had more curtains, which kept changing according to every scene.

In Nautanki, actors used to wear clothes as per their characters, for example, if someone played the role of a king, he would wear such clothes to make him look like a king. Similarly, if an actor played the role of a monk or a beggar, he would also wear clothes according to the character.

4. MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS OF NAUTANKI

Many musical instruments like Dholak, Harmonium, Manjira, etc. were used in Nautanki, but mainly Nagara, which people also called Nakkara. Nautanki cannot be imagined without Nakkara. The Nagara also has two parts – the left side Nakkara is big in size and produces a low pitch sound, and the right side Nakkara is comparatively small and produces high pitch sound. Nakkara has great importance in the singing style of Nautanki, or it can be said that the singing style of Nautanki itself was such that its coordination would not be possible without the Nakkara. There has even been a tradition of the audience coming after hearing the sound of the Nakkara.

The singing style of the Chhand (verse) used in Nautanki is such that only Nakkara can coordinate with that Chhand. For example, Doha from Sultana Daku can be seen as -

District is Bijnor, in between UP.

जिला एक बिजनौर है, यूपी के दरम्यान |

To the city of Najibabad, take life in it.

शहर नजीबाबाद को, लो उसमें ही जान | |

Followed by the sound ringing on the Nakkara -

Kad- kaddad kurr-kurr-kurr (कड़-कड़कड़ किर्र-किर्र-किर्र)

Kir-kir-kir kurr kadam (किर-किर-किर किर्र कडाम)....., (musical sound on Nakkara)

Nautanki cannot be imagined without these sounds. And this sound can be produced on the Nakkara only.

Texture: Nakkara is an instrument Like Pakhwaj (musical instrument), solemn lyrics are also played in it. There are two types of Nakkara. One is known as Nagadiya, and another big one is called Nakkara. Most of the Nagadiya are made in the flame by making them of clay. Nakkara is made of wood, iron, copper, etc.

The Nagadiya are overlaid with goat skin, and the Nakkara are overlaid with the soft skin of a big animal. By heating the Nagadiya in front of the fire, the essence is created, and the cloth soaked in the drum is swung so that a solemn sound can come out. In its playing, two sticks made of wood are attacked. The rhythms of Nakkara are so abstract that the listeners hear its solemn sound from a distance.

Nautanki has also developed two styles of singing and playing the instruments. Western Style of instrumentation is seen in Rajasthan, Haryana, the western part of Uttar Pradesh, which includes Mathura, Agra, Hathras, Aligarh, Meerut, and Saharanpur districts. In this style, Nakkara is used in such a way that on one hand it reflects the folk style and at the same time the special style of playing makes it classical as well. In the Eastern Style of Nautanki Kanpur, Bareilly, Hardoi, Shahjahanpur, Pilibhit etc, and the western part of Bihar is included. In this style, a soft rhythm is played.

5. SINGING STYLE OF NAUTANKI

The folk theatre Nautanki is an opera. Nautanki was the main source of entertainment in the Hindi-speaking region in the past. The audience used to flock to watch its performances, which took place night after night. Its biggest feature was the singing used in dramatic performances. When the Swarlahri (*musical wave*) took shape, and there was a combination of slow and loud notes, the tinkling sound of the Nakkara, then piercing the silence of the night, reached the hearts of the people. People would know by the sound of the Nakkara in which direction the drama was taking place. Not

only this, but which verse was being played at a particular time, and even the plot could be known from the tune being played on the Nakkara. The attraction of Nautanki was so much that even after hard work throughout the day, people could not stop themselves from watching the drama.

It is very difficult to trace the history of folk theatre, irrespective of caste or place, and still maintains its identity among the people. As far as the origin of Nautanki is concerned, there is no information about when it started. Often, this fact can also be tested in the context of various folk traditions. But still, we find some mention in Ain-e-Akbari, which we can call the initial description about Nautanki. Abul Fazl, in his book, mentions two traditions, Kirtan, and Bhagat. According to him, Kirtaniyas were Brahmins whose instruments were like those used in ancient times - they dressed smooth-faced boys as women and sang hymns in praise of Krishna and recited his deeds. 'In this period, folk plays of Bhagat tradition used to take place in temples' [Khemchandra \(2018\)](#).

6. THE MAIN THEKA THAT ARE PLAYED ON THE NAKKARA ARE

Nakkara is played at the beginning of the nautanki performance and its sound goes far and wide. The synchronized form of singing, acting and movements makes the audience crazy about nautanki. Nakkaara is the liveliest instrument of nautanki. Besides, sarangi, dholak, harmonium, chloronate, bella and bronze bowl are also played with carvings [Hansen \(1991\)](#). All this produces a special effect in totality.

Chartaal

×		0		2		0		3		4		
		3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11		12
1	2											
dha	dha	di	ta	kitu	dha	din	ta	titu	ta	Gurd		Ginu

Sooltaal

×		0		2		3		0		
		3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
1	2									
dha	dha	din	ta	kit	dha	tit	kat	gadi	gin	

Theka Tritala

×		2		0		3									
		5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16		
1	2	3	4												
Dha	dhin	dhin	dha	dha	dhin	dhin	dha	dha	tin	tin	ta	ta	kin	kin	dha

Dhmar

×		2		0		3							
		6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14			
1	2	3	4	5									
ka	dhi	ta	dhi	ta	dha	S	ka	ti	ta	ti	ta	ta	S

Deepchandi

×	2			0			3						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Dha	dhin	S	Dha	dha	ti	S	Ta	tin	S	Dha	dha	thin	S

Dadra

×	0				
1	2	3	4	5	6
dha	phi	na	ta	tee	na

Jhaptaal

×	2			0		3				
1	2		3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
dhee	na		dhee	dhee	na	tee	na	tee	tee	ka

Roopak

⊕	×	2			3	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
tin	tin	naku	ghin	naku	ghin	naku

Tevra

×	2			3		
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
dha	din	ta	tit	kat	gadi	gin

Chandrasakhi (2018).

7. POETRY AND MUSIC

Art and music are inextricably linked. Words take existence before they take shape in the form of music. After that, the ascending and descending of the voice, the instrument, and the artist together give it perfection. The main rhythms are Doha, chaubola, chaand, daud, lavani, bahere-e-tabil, and dubola, etc., like two characters of Amar Singh Rathore play to talk to each other using doha, chaubola, daud Hansen (2009). Which impressed the composer as well as the audience too.

Doha, in a Nautanki, Doha is used independently or with a Chhand and essentially before a Chaubola.

Chaubola, Chaubola is sung after the Doha in the Nautanki. Chaubola is used a lot in Nautanki, which shows its importance. In Chaubola, it is mandatory to use a verse called Doha at the beginning and Daud at the end.

Daud, this is a Chhand sung after Chaubola. It is called a Daud because it sings at a very fast pace. The daud is not sung separately. It is seen as a link to Chaubola. This Chhand also ends the scene many times.

Bahar-e-Tabeel, the most used Chhand in the Nautanki is the Bahar-e-Tabeel. Bahar-e-Tabeel is a popular Chhand among the *khayal bajas*. Which started to be used in Swang and Nautanki, but it is an old Chhand.

Lavani, the use of Lavani/Swang Chhand in Nautanki is the result of the thinkers. They are composed according to raga-ragas. According to the context, the poet used to write verses and according to the context, his restrictions were made in the raga, but due to the lack of songs and writers, many types of Lavani are not seen today.

Dubola, Due to consisting of two lines, it may have been named Dubola. It is basically a Chhand of Khayal which was brought by Khayal singers. In nautanki, there is a tradition of singing this Chhand at the beginning of the performance after Doha, Chaubola, and before the Daud.

Chhand, it is used in places like Mathura, Hathras, etc., it is sung without rhythm, it does not use rhythm and instruments. The Chhand begins with Doha. Therefore, the Doha comes first, followed by the singing of Chhand.

8. THE NATURE OF MODERN-DAY NAUTANKI

Today, there are some forms of musical, or drama that are beyond the concept and definition of drama that have been going on for centuries. There are also a lot of technical flaws in this, where artists must come and speak on two stand mics, and the singing is always emotionless. In such presentations, no principles such as acting, expression of emotions, and visual relations are applicable. The artists travel from one mic to another throughout the night and only perform singing. The absence of new stories/narratives and high-pitched singing has hindered the carrying forward of the tradition of rich drama. Due to such performances, the famous folk drama style of Uttar Pradesh is in danger of extinction.

It's interesting to note that Nautanki, while still holding an important place in people's collective imagination, is also facing dialectical tension. On the one hand, it continues to be an important part of North India's cultural heritage, with its unique music and singing style that deeply influenced the public. However, on the other hand, it is also struggling to deal with changing audience aspirations and the need to compete with other forms of entertainment. As mentioned in the abstract of the article, the popularity of Nautanki suffered due to the introduction of vulgarity in its plots to compete with Parsi dramas and films. Through this study, the article aims to analyze the initial glory of Nautanki as well as the damage to its popularity and how it is coping with changing audience aspirations any art form needs to evolve and adapt to changing times to remain relevant and popular [Sharma \(2006\)](#). Nautanki has failed to modernize the subject matter of its scripts. When a folk art form stops fulfilling its function, it loses its popularity and ceases to remain a popular form.

The term "nautanki" is often used to describe theatrical performances that are characterized by their vibrant and lively nature. "Modern nautanki" could refer to contemporary adaptations or reinterpretations of this traditional art form. In the context of modern entertainment and performance arts, artists and groups may blend elements of nautanki with contemporary themes, styles, and technology to create a more relevant and engaging experience for contemporary audiences.

Modern nautanki performances might incorporate elements such as Contemporary Themes: like current social, political, or cultural issues. Incorporation of Technology: Using modern audio-visual techniques, lighting, and sound systems to enhance the overall production value. Innovative Storytelling: to appeal to a diverse audience but it is important to note that the term "modern nautanki" can be interpreted in various ways, and different performers or groups may approach it differently. The goal is often to preserve the essence of nautanki while making it accessible and relevant to contemporary audiences.

Certainly, In a more metaphorical or colloquial sense, "modern nautanki" might be used to describe situations, events, or behaviors that resemble the lively and dramatic nature of traditional nautanki but in a contemporary context. It could be applied to situations that involve theatrical or exaggerated elements for effect, often with a hint of playfulness or irony.

For example, if someone describes a political event as a "modern nautanki," they might be suggesting that the event is characterized by theatrics, grand gestures, or exaggerated performances. It's a way of expressing that the situation

seems like a dramatic and entertaining spectacle. Keep in mind that the term's usage in this sense may vary depending on regional dialects and individual perspectives.

Digital Nautanki: With the rise of digital media, artists may explore creating nautanki performances for online platforms. This could involve live streaming or recorded performances, reaching a broader audience, and adapting to changing modes of entertainment consumption.

Urban Nautanki: Artists might reinterpret nautanki in an urban context, addressing contemporary issues faced by city dwellers. The themes, language, and characters may reflect the urban lifestyle and challenges.

Experimental Storytelling: Contemporary nautanki could experiment with narrative techniques and storytelling styles, incorporating elements of surrealism, abstraction, or non-linear storytelling to appeal to a modern audience.

Cross-Cultural Collaborations: Collaborations with artists from different disciplines, such as contemporary dance, digital art, or experimental music, could lead to innovative and hybrid performances that blend traditional nautanki elements with modern artistic expressions.

Socially Relevant Themes: Artists may choose to address current social and political issues in their nautanki performances, making the art form a platform for commentary and discussion on contemporary challenges [Sharma \(2006\)](#).

It is concerning to see that traditional forms of performing arts, such as nautanki, are facing the risk of being eradicated due to the impact of not only Western culture but also modern technology. It is important to preserve these art forms and promote their value to maintain the diversity and richness of our cultural heritage [Kramrisch and Vatsyayan \(1983\)](#).

If you look at the Nautanki of the present time and at the same time look at the traditional Nautanki, there have been many meaningful changes in the traditional Nautanki, the male characters used to act as a female character, for which a heavy mask was done and mainly such a character was selected which was beautiful to look at, he was dressed according to the character and perform on the stage. Gulab Bai was born as the first female character in the art of Nautanki [Mehrotra \(2006\)](#). Gulab Bai's acting and singing took fabulous changes in the drama and Gulab Bai's fame started spreading all around Nautanki played by Gulab Bai had Bahadur Ladki (brave girl), Aurat ka Pyar (Woman's love), Satyawadi Harishchandra, Laila Majnu, Sultana Daku, Sheerifarhad, Amar Singh Rathore, Jahangir ka Insaaf (Justice of Jahangir), etc. which were highly appreciated and songs sung by him, 'Challachhap Ki Mudaria', 'Mohe Maro Na Tirchhi Nazariya Valam', 'Nadi Kinare Na Jao, Shyam Paiya Paru, etc. became quite popular. She was awarded the Yash Bharti Award, Padma Shri Award for his contribution to folk art Nautanki. Gulab Bai was the first woman to act in Nautanki, after that now in today's era, now the male characters act as men, and the female character is being acted as the female character.

With the beginning of the electronic age, many meaningful changes were seen in the Nautanki, such as the artists who had to call the audience miles away with a loud voice, now the use of microphones has relieved that exhaustion. Musicians now started sitting on the left edge of the front part of the stage, and the singer artist of Nautanki got the freedom to sing the story only once. The entire duration of Nautanki, which used to last for 8-10 hours, has now started happening in one to one and a half hours, and the Nautanki with the big plot is also presented in a maximum of two hours [Sharma \(2020a\)](#). This change has also brought Nautanki to the big stage in the city because in the electronic era, people now have a shortage of time, and the audience wants to get entertainment in less time.

Nautanki art used to have Akharas earlier, and their income was mainly sourced from the audience or by the host on a special occasion, such as a birthday, wedding, or festival. There were even ticketed shows of Nautanki [Sharma \(2020b\)](#). Now there have been some changes in it at present, such as repertory establishment is done through the Repertory Grant by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, Nautanki is presented under the production grant by other government institutions, and Nautanki is also presented in the Drama Festival in India. The artists of Nautanki were either Dalits or less educated people in the traditional period, and then in the late 19th century, when women artists arrived, the women artists in some companies were associated with prostitution, whose arrival and in the process of getting cheap popularity, vulgarity and double-meaning words started being used, which has damaged the nature of Nautanki. It is not so easy to compensate for it, but at present, educated people have started coming to Nautanki. In traditional Nautanki, only men used to come to watch Nautanki, and in today's Nautanki, women, children, educated people and all types of audiences come to watch Nautanki [Hansen \(2009\)](#). Due to which efforts are being made to

improve the rich folk drama art of North India at many levels. The tradition of changing the scene on the stage of Nautanki was done by the curtain because in that period Nautanki was staged by putting up a Nautanki tent, but in this modern era Nautanki has started being staged in the auditorium, in which the tradition of changing the scene or the locale by the curtain has ended, one advantage of this has been that the rich audience has started getting the Nautanki, due to which the credibility of the drama There can be speculations about being found back, but the number of viewers has been limited. In traditional Nautanki, thousands of dramatists are used to get viewers simultaneously.

9. INTERVIEW INSIGHTS ON THE CONTEMPORARY TRANSFORMATION OF NAUTANKI

To understand the present condition and evolving aesthetics of Nautanki, an in-depth interview was conducted with eminent folk theatre practitioner Pandit Ramdayal Sharma, a leading figure who has witnessed the transition of the form from village-based all-night performances to contemporary stage productions. Honoured with national recognitions, including the Padma Shri and awards from the Sangeet Natak Akademi, Sharma's reflections provide valuable primary insights into the historical continuity and modern adaptations of Nautanki.

10. DURATION AND STRUCTURAL TRANSFORMATION

According to Sharma, Earlier most of the nautanki used to take place in the villages and people used to watch the nautanki all night in the comfort of their farm work. At that time, there were events of nautanki on every occasion, like on the occasion of marriage, on the occasion of tonsure, meaning this nautanki was called on every occasion from birth to death. Calling the team of Nautanki also showed the status. And later it was seen that the nautanki that earlier people used to watch full night began to change as people started doing jobs, started living in cities, and later television came, so that they could be entertained in 1.5 to 2 hours. which led to a change in the performance duration of the Nautanki. Otherwise, 60-70 years ago, when we used to go for the performance of Nautanki, there used to be the staging of Nautanki for 6-7 hours or the whole night, and at that time, there used to be only bullock carts. We used to take a bullock cart from one village to another to go to the stage. And in the morning, we had to sit with folded hands, please allow us to go now, the bullock cart has come for us. Now another village has to go for staging. But now there have been many changes. Now people have become accustomed to watching movies even at weddings, and the tradition of staying overnight on auspicious occasions like weddings has also ended. People started returning after eating food, so Nautanki should also be staged when someone stops. After the arrival of television, people started going to homes, watching serials, etc., for entertainment. Secondly, in the whole night staging of Nautanki, they had to face the effects of the weather also. Now, after the arrival of television, their entertainment started taking place in their homes. Due to all these reasons, the script also started getting smaller. We also shortened the old script, which used to be quite big. The duration is approximately 1:30 to 1:45 hours. Just like today's film has been limited in less time, similarly, the time of Nautanki also had to be limited because people have got used to it, so there was a change in its writing, and in modern times, Nautanki started being written for a maximum of 2 hours.

11. CHANGING NARRATIVE THEMES

Sharma emphasized that earlier, most of the nautanki were based on Shringar Rasa and Veer Rasa, and along with the literary plot, nautanki was also written on the religious plot, but in today's plot, the issue has dominated. Television and news show how many problems there are, and the same is filled in the mind, then based on that, Nautanki is written, so people watch more. In this, based on today's problems like foeticide, the problem of children's education, the problem of suicide, the problem of environment, and many other social issues, nautanki began to be written, which has a good response, which also encourages the writer of nautanki. There is a change now to write new nautanki, because of films, that in a short time, nautanki should be staged, so instead of editing old scripts, I want to write new scripts, write about today's problems, which affect and we also write.

12. GENRE IDENTITY AND TERMINOLOGICAL CLARIFICATION

Sharma said that First of all, let me tell you that Nautanki is not the name of any genre. There was a script by the name of Nautanki Shehzadi, and our ancestors staged many shows of Shehzadi Nautanki. This script was very popular, based on which this genre came to be known as Nautanki. The genre was mainly known by the name of Swang, and before

that was known as Bhagat, but Bhagat used to have only religious themes, and Swang used to have historical themes as well as themes based on all nine Rasa (nine emotions). Therefore, the books that will be available mainly for Nautanki will have Swang written in them.

13. PERFORMANCE SPACE AND STAGECRAFT

The advent of curtains can be said to be from the Parsi theatre because colourful curtains were used in the Parsi theatre, from the Parsi theatre, then the trend started in the Ramlila, then the trend of curtains started in the Nautanki also. Still, there is no need for the backdrop in the Nautanki. Earlier, the stage used to be made by collecting materials from the nearby houses in the open area to make a stage and by putting two bamboo sticks in the front and lighting them with gas lanterns or even before that, by lighting torches/flambeau. For me, an actor should be good, should be good in direction, should be good in his art, should be good at singing, should be good at acting, then the attention of the audience will not go anywhere; it will be immersed in the story. I still focus on these aspects today. Nowadays, people have started resorting to synthesizers and many other types of musical instruments, but it is also not needed so much.

14. ROLE OF SUTRADHAR AND PERFORMANCE CONVENTION

Despite modern changes, Sharma argued, It is not like this that even today there are Nat (actors) and Nati (actresses) who come before the beginning of the drama, then the Sutradhar (character of Nautanki) come, there is worship then the actors and actresses entertain, comedians come and a female character comes dancing, entertains the audience in this way. He is approached by the Sutradhar, who is also called Ranga, and he comes in all the nautankis because without him, the nautanki does not start. After starting the nautanki, even if the scenes keep changing on their own, no one of the nautanki gives any information about the upcoming scenes. Sutradhar is the main character of the nautanki.

15. CRITICAL REFLECTION

Sharma's interview reveals that as India has evolved, its cultural, traditional, and social landscapes have also changed. Because our folk traditions are deeply rooted in the common people, they take on changing forms with each development. However, its custodians must incorporate fundamental changes, such as urbanization, the use of technology, and the changing expectations of audiences, without altering its original form. These changes should be implemented not merely to demonstrate its decline but to make Nautanki more popular and accessible to the masses through meaningful use.

16. CONCLUSION

The Nautanki is constantly evolving. Nautanki, as a folk art, has come a long way. During its development, the basic form of Nautanki has changed as well. In Nautanki also it is the same as in other genres of folk. Nautanki, moving from folk to elitist, has managed to retain its original flair, but the influence of market and time has inevitably left its mark on Nautanki. Today, what we call the modern form of Nautanki or modern Nautanki. In fact, it is a modified form of Nautanki and, in many ways, a misguided form. Today, just as the market has influenced all our folk forms, it has also influenced Nautanki. Just as other folk expressions have not been able to evolve and assume a new dimension, Nautanki has also remained confined to its two abodes - Kanpur and Hathras.

During its development, Nautanki has continuously changed its form. This change has come at the level of content and form. For example, the performance of the first Nautanki used to go on throughout the night. At that time, there was no other means of entertainment. Now that there are so many media of entertainment, not only has the content of Nautanki changed, but the time of performance has also been reduced to 2-3 hours. Not only this, but the entry of Nautanki performed by making an open stage outside has now happened in the auditoriums. And in this way, this means of public entertainment is now luring the elites.

Today, there is a need to link all expressions of people with teaching, training, and research. They should be made an essential part of the curriculum and teaching-learning. Only then can the modern form of Nautanki be developed. The need today is not to modernize the Nautanki, but to preserve its unique and original form and performance technique.

So that Nautanki does not remain only a means of ideological churning and intellectual discussion of a handful of people, preservation of various folk-theatre forms, including Nautanki, is the need of the hour and also an inevitable necessity, and this work must be done by the institutions associated with teaching-training and archiving of literature, art and culture.

Sharma also noted the shift in the tradition of patronage. He said that earlier, Nautanki was performed at the invitation of the public, the cost of which was borne by the organizers or the audience through ticket purchases. Nowadays, this art form receives limited support from government funding, repertory grants, theatre festivals, and various institutions, due to which Nautanki's audience is limited to cities, and its reach to rural and remote audiences is diminishing. This requires reflection.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This paper has not previously published and is not currently under consideration by another journal and that all authors have approved of and gave agreed to submit the manuscript to this journal .

REFERENCES

- Chandrasakhi, B. K. (2018). Saangeet (Nautanki) Ka Pran Vadya Nakkara [Nakkara: The Soul Instrument of Saangeet (Nautanki)]. *Kala Vasudha*, 17(6), 36–40.
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1. An Introduction* (R. Hurley, Trans.). Pantheon Books.
- Gargi, B. (1966). *Folk Theatre of India*. University of Washington Press.
- Hansen, K. (1991). *Grounds for Play: The Nautanki Theatre of North India*. University of California Press. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520910881>
- Hansen, K. (2009). Staging Composite Culture: Nautanki and Parsi Theatre in Recent Revivals. *South Asia Research*, 29(2), 151–168. <https://doi.org/10.1177/026272800902900203>
- Hansen, K. (2023). *Grounds for Play: The Nautanki Theatre of North India*. University of California Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/924432>
- Kramrisch, S., and Vatsyayan, K. (1983). Traditional Indian Theatre, Multiple Streams. *Artibus Asiae*, 44(2/3), 235. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3249599>
- Mehrotra, D. P. (2006). *Gulab Bai: The Queen of Nautanki Theatre*. Penguin Books.
- Sharma, D. (2006). *Performing Nautanki: Popular Community Folk Performances as Sites of Dialogue* (Doctoral Dissertation, Ohio University). OhioLINK Electronic Theses and Dissertations Center.
- Sharma, D. (2020a). Community, Artistry, and Storytelling in the Cultural Confluence of Nautanki and Ramlila. *Asian Theatre Journal*, 37(1), 107–132. <https://doi.org/10.1353/atj.2020.0027>
- Sharma, D. (2020b). Reminisces with My Father, a Nautanki and Ramlila Master Artist. *Asian Theatre Journal*, 37(1), 133–146. <https://doi.org/10.1353/atj.2020.0028>
- Singh, S. (2020). Nautanki: Evolution, Issues and Challenges. *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 12(6). <https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v12n6.16>
- Vatsyayan, K. (1980). *Traditional Indian Theatre: Multiple Streams*. National Book Trust, India.