

*Nautanki* Performances: Creating Sites for Community Connection and Social Action

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Abstract: This paper explores *Nautanki* performances as sites of community connection and social action. *Nautanki* is an immensely popular folk musical performance tradition of India, which is currently being used to create progressive community dialogue around contemporary social issues in the villages of north India. This paper uses my own experiences and research as a *Nautanki* performer and audience member, Bakhtin's concept of *carnival*, and Dwight Conquergood's concept of *textocentrism* to understand *Nautanki*'s role in social change. In general, the paper explores the role and importance of indigenous performances as empowering events in the lives of rural people.

Five suggested key words: Folk performance, Community Dialogue, Social Action, Communication for Social Change, *Nautanki*.

Personal Narrative

I remember that night in village *Mudhera* in India 25 years back as vividly as the evening yesterday in the Donkey coffee shop in Athens, Ohio. These 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 around 500 families and a population of around 2,500 people. There was no electricity in the village, and we had to walk for five to six miles to reach to the nearest bus station. Our house was made of mud and reed. I remember it was a beautiful house. My grand parents 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 its walls with various folk motifs. She used to draw and sing really well. When I was born, 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 began working.

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 and paid taxes to them, were fairly autonomous in their internal matters. Thus when I used to sleep on a *charpai*<sup>1</sup> under an open sky in front of our mud house, my grandfather used to narrate stories of kings and princes to me. Staring at the Milky Way, I used to be transported to a different world.

There were other kinds of stories too that I loved to hear from my grandfather. These stories were about *Nautanki*. *Nautanki* is folk musical theater form and 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.

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 surrounding districts knew him by his name. He told me how proud he was of his son, i.e., my father, when he saw people in thousands thronging 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 from B.B.C. London when my father was visiting England for a performance and B.B.C. aired his interview. Every person in our village felt so proud; their own

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<sup>1</sup> a cot made of bamboo or other kinds of wood

boy was speaking from London, and *Angrez* (British) were giving so much respect to him! Through these stories of my grandfather, my father became my biggest hero. I dreamed of becoming a great singer like my father, to be worshipped by audiences like he was, to be on the top of that stage called *Nautanki*.

Let me now return to that night in Mudhera many years back from where I started this narrative. That night, I was attending one of my father's cousin's wedding in Mudhera, a 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 kids, I overheard that a *Nautanki* troupe had been invited to perform that night, and my father was going to make an appearance as the star performer. I got 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 *Nautanki* stage in a village. 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. I asked my uncle why they were being assembled. He informed me that the stage for *Nautanki* performance was being constructed with the cots. 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 for illumination. 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 and getting ready for the performance. I was immensely curious. I remember seeing a huge crowd behind the

stage. I tried to make my way through grownups but could not. However, I saw a glimpse of some people putting on glittering costumes. I guessed they were performers. I could not find my father there. It was very noisy. I heard many people inquiring about my father. They were shouting that they will not let the performance happen if Master Ram Dayal had not arrived from Delhi. I was praying that my father would be there. I did not want to miss this opportunity 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 ji had come. People were running back to take their place. I was thrilled. I tried to go back stage to reach my father. However there were so many people there, each pushing the other to see my father that I could not reach him. 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 his dress behind the stage. 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 me and my uncle and we were like friends. We both established ourselves firmly near the accompanying instrumentalists on one side of the stage. The *harmonium* player had started to play *Nagma*<sup>2</sup> already and the *Nakkara*<sup>3</sup> player was providing accompaniment. The sharp and loud sound of *Nakkara* was reverberating in the whole village. It could be heard over miles. Sitting on the stage I saw people still making their way to the performance grounds on foot, bullock carts, and tractors. Many bullock carts and tractors were parked in between the

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<sup>2</sup> The melodious compositions played on *harmonium* to set the audiences' mood for the *Nautanki* performance.

<sup>3</sup> 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*.

audiences. 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 *harmonium* and *Nakkara*, and waiting eagerly for the performance to start. Hundreds of people would occasionally shout a *jaikara* (a slogan spoken in a chorus) of Giriraj ji or Krishna ji (our local deity) --“*Bol Giriraj Maharaj ki Jai*” (Praise Giriraj!). The atmosphere was electrifying!

Finally the *Nautanki* started at around 11 pm. I was mesmerized as soon as it started. I am having a difficulty in describing it. I had not heard such melodious and powerful singing before that night and 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 even better. At one time, people were so absorbed in the performance that there was a 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 pimples. It was so good! The *Nautanki*, *Indal Haran* was performed that night. The audience participated in the performance in many ways. For instance, some audience members were giving spontaneous cash awards to performers after well sung 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 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 I felt 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 reward money would come in by the morning.

I remember at one point in the performance, two audience members competed in giving reward money to my father. One of them, my uncle told me, was the superintendent of the local police, and the other was 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 hail 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 had to stop singing. He requested those two audience members to not indulge in unhealthy competition and returned all the rewards given by those gentlemen.

The performance finished when the sun rose. The story of *Indal Haran* 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 after singing the whole night. He also reminded audiences that they also had to get back to their villages and get on with their work. I noticed that my father had a tremendous clout over the audience. Whatever he requested, they accepted. Reluctantly the audience agreed to my father's advice but demanded a final romantic number from him and the heroine of the *Nautanki*, a famous female artist named Prem Lata. After that song, the performance finally ended.

Surprisingly, even after being awake the whole night, I was not feeling tired. I wanted the performance to go on like other audience members. 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 the 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 than ever, I wanted to be a big *Nautanki* artist like him.

I have never quite been able to recover from that heady experience in Mudhera. There was something in that *Nautanki* performance that I have never found in any other medium of entertainment. Since that performance, I have performed live in hundreds of shows in cities, I have seen and heard the most acclaimed television and radio programs, and films. I have performed in all parts of India, in Europe, and in America. However, even after all this, I never was able to get the immensely satisfying and fulfilling experience that I got 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 that experience? I have not been able to put my finger on what exactly had appealed to me in Mudhera as an audience member. 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. What do they like it so much? I wanted to understand what made for that exciting community ambience during my first *Nautanki* experience in Mudhera. The present research paper is the result of this longing of mine.

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 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 study of communication as a subject, ignited my interest in the possibility of using *Nautanki* as a communication strategy for community development. I experienced myself that *Nautanki* had a very strong emotional impact on its audiences. As an audience member I had never experienced such a strong emotional bond after watching a TV program, or after listening to a radio program. I wanted to explore reasons for this impact.

Meanwhile, my father and I also started an organization called "Brij Lok Madhuri" to create and perform *Nautankis* and other folk performances on social issues. The Government of India and some international institutions such as Johns Hopkins University hired our organization to create folk performances in India and train other troupes to perform them. These field-based experiences showed that *Nautanki* and similar folk forms were highly 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. The research that formed the basis of this paper is also an attempt to explore these questions.

*Nautanki: A Brief Introduction*

History of *Swang-Nautanki*<sup>4</sup> goes back to the ancient Indian history (Agrawal 7-15). *Nautanki*'s origins lie in the folk performance traditions of Bhagat and *Raasleela* of Mathura and Vrindavan<sup>5</sup> in Uttar Pradesh<sup>6</sup>, and *Khayal* of Rajasthan<sup>7</sup>. *Nautanki*'s history becomes clearer in the nineteenth century with the coming of printing press in India and publication of *Nautanki* operas in the form of chapbooks (Hansen 87). In the late nineteenth century, Hatharas, and Mathura in western Uttar Pradesh, 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 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 more on singing, and is almost purely operatic in form, the Kanpuri School centers itself more on prose 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 faster paced than the Hathrasi School.

*Nautanki* reached the pinnacle of its glory in the early 20<sup>th</sup> 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

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<sup>4</sup> I will refer to *Swang-Nautanki* as *Nautanki* from now onwards for the sake of convenience.

<sup>5</sup> Mathura, Vrindavan, Hathras, Kanpur, and Lucknow are all towns in Uttar Pradesh.

<sup>6</sup> Uttar Pradesh is a state in north India.

<sup>7</sup> Rajasthan is a state in north India.

*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 till the coming of television.

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 (urban Indian theater style influenced by European theater techniques) troupes such as *Alfred Theater Company*, started to present their performances even outside the core region of its audience, as far as Myanmar. Storylines of *Nautanki* ranged from mythology and folklores to the 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*.

*Nautanki* still holds a strong influence over north Indian people's imagination, and even after the spread of mass media like TV and radio, a crowd of 10,000 to 15,000 can be seen at the top *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 native Indian artistic traditions by the powerful West-imitating Indian elites suffering from a *post-colonial hang-over*.<sup>8</sup>

#### Community Performance as *Carnival*

Mikhail Bakhtin (*Rabelais and his world* 4-5) argues that folk performances are like *carnivals*; they are participative in nature and may represent a revolt against the "official"

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<sup>8</sup> colonial after-effects on the psychology of Indian elites

oppression of people by the state. 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 feeling 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; Boal; Conner; Conquergood; Denzin; Harter et. al.; Jacobson; Mienczakowski and Morgan; Paget; Pollock; Richardson; Siegel & Conquergood; Singhal). Performance scholars have also tried to use formal stage theater performances to attract community attention towards social change (Brecht; Dion; Elam, Jr; Kruger; O'Brien; Reinelt; Schroeder; Sieg; Taylor; Trotter; Versenyi; Worthen). However, most of these scholars have thought performance 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 (like most of the works listed above). 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 by 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

*(Rabelais and his world 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 263). Carnival was a folk performative ritual in medieval Russian society. In a carnival, the King, a symbol of established oppressive order, becomes a target of people's ridicule:

...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 (*Rabelais and his world* 197).

Making the King a clown, and mocking at him in a controlled hegemonic system can strategically be done through communicative actions like performances, which can convey resistance through covert humor. Thus, performances function as symbolic resistance. Bakhtin 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 (Bakhtin 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 the people in power.

### 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 thus does not speak solely to the relevance of folk community folk forms in social change, Conquergood's work is very important to establish *performance in general* as a strategy for social change.

Conquergood 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 (*Performance Studies* 312).

So what are the modes of communication and knowledge transfer in non-textual cultures?

According to Conquergood, 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 (*Performance Studies* 318).

Following 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. As Conquergood puts it: *text* is just one of the many tools of performance (*Performance Studies* 318).

During his experience of creating participatory performances to give messages on safe health practices in Camp Ban Vinai, a Hmong refugee camp in Thailand, Conquergood found that performance was 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 (*Health Theater* 202).

#### Research Questions

Although performance scholars agree that indigenous performances (such as *Nautanki*) are firmly grounded in their culture and make strong connections with their audiences, no research has been done to study whether indigenous performance traditions such as *Nautanki* can be used for positive social change in their respective societies. Specifically, the present research attempted to answer the following questions:

1. How does *Nautanki* communicate social change messages to its audiences effectively?
2. How do social change messages in *Nautanki* lead to a dialogue on progressive social change among its audiences?

### Research Methodology

I used both reflexive ethnographic (Alexander; Chawla and Rawlins; Ellis & Bochner; Kincheloe and McLaren) as well as native ethnographic (Ellis and Bochner) methods in my research.

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 doing 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 voices of other participants and their experiences of *Nautanki*. These participants range from artists to *Nautanki* troupe managers to audiences. With participants I used the interactive interviewing technique, co-discovering probable “answers” to the research questions. Thus I incorporated both participants’ personal experiences and my own standpoints in this research.

To explore the research questions, I spent seven days in travelling 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 2 short duration daytime performances, and 2 all night *Nautanki* performances.

The two short duration daytime *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 facility to the local residents. *Nautanki* troupes were

hired to perform entertaining *Nautankis* incorporating health and social messages about HIV/AIDS, Polio, tobacco misuse, family planning, and dowry. Poor people from Mathura and villages around Mathura watched these performances while waiting to get free medicines and treatment for their ailments. Many people came to the health fair attracted by these performances, and in the process, also picked up medicines and health information.

I watched our first all night *Nautanki* performance on this trip in the village Kinarai in Mathura district. Kinarai is a small village on the bank of Yamuna. The *Nautanki* troupe had been invited there to perform on the occasion of a wedding. The bride's family had invited *Nautanki* to entertain the *Barat* (the groom's wedding party), guests, and villagers. *Amar Singh Rathore*, a traditional *Nautanki* was performed; it was entertainment throughout the night. 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*<sup>9</sup>. 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 around 40 *Nautanki* performers, managers, writers, producers, and audience members [15 performers, 15 audience members, and 10 managers, writers, and producers approximately]. 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 Delhi where my parents stay, I kept on reflecting on my field experiences and distilling the

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<sup>9</sup> Traditional *Nautanki* schools

meanings hidden in these experiences.

### Findings in the Field

From my conversations in the field with performers, managers, troupe owners, writers, and audiences of *Nautanki*, it clearly emerged that *Nautanki* has a strong influence on its audience members as a purveyor of social messages. Audiences are strongly impacted by the messages given through *Nautanki* performances. This impact is both on the attitudinal as well as behavioral level. Seeing *Nautanki*'s impact on its audiences, the government of India as well as many voluntary domestic and international organizations are supporting fresh *Nautanki* performances on contemporary issues such as dowry, population, women's reproductive rights, barren land farming and polio eradication..

*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, thought that *Nautanki* performances impact their audiences deeply:

I have seen it [*Nautanki*'s impact]. When Kamelsh Lata Arya ji<sup>10</sup> 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).

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

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<sup>10</sup> A famous female lead artist of *Nautanki*.

importance of speaking the truth, strong determination, sticking to one's promises-- that have 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 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 in his or her eyes. 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<sup>11</sup> 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).

During *Nautanki* performances on dowry, tobacco use, reproductive health and polio that were performed in the health fair at Mathura, I talked to audience members about the impact of these performances on their thoughts and whether these performances made them think about the issues depicted in them. Most of the audience members thought that performances did impact them. For instance, when asked for her reactions to the performances, a woman of around 40 years of age, who was providing health 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

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<sup>11</sup> A female Indian garment.

able to understand some good things... at least some people who are sensible will definitely grasp these messages. (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 am liking 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 am liking 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 and did not earn much money. She was concerned about her inability to give dowry and thus hinder the marriage prospects of her daughters.

Another audience member 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 here. 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).

However, audience members 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).

Madan Lal, a senior singer-actor of *Nautanki*, also believed that messages in *Nautanki* performances could also lead to behavior change among the audience members:

People respond positively. For instance, recently we performed *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. 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 can 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 loose heart: The government also helped them and today most of the infertile lands in the districts of Mainpuri, Hathras<sup>12</sup> and others where we performed, have turned into fertile lands (personal communication, May 14, 2005)

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<sup>12</sup> Districts in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh.

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* against drug and alcohol abuse yesterday. 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 (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.

#### Discussion

During my field research, I found that *Nautanki* audience members felt that there is a strong emotional and psychological effect of *Nautanki* performances on them. 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, as a result, modify their own thoughts in their light. 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.

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 many audience members, was that

*Nautanki* performances could be easily understood by the illiterate people.

In summary, my field experiences indicated that audiences were strongly impacted by social change messages given through *Nautanki* performances. This impact in some cases led to behavior change in audience members and adoption of progressive social practices. My conversations in the field supported Bakhtin's notion of folk performances as fun spaces, which can be used by indigenous people to make sense of their social surroundings and to resist practices imposed on them by oppressive social traditions. Audiences also use performances to absorb new knowledge to make their life conditions better. Importantly, the use of *Nautanki* to give social change messages to its audiences breaks the dominant, or the *textocentric*, paradigm of communication. *Nautanki* celebrates the oral culture of rural north India and is an important communication tool for the illiterate and semi-literate people to have a community dialogue on their local social conditions with dignity in global times.

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