



Bikhoti: Where Masks Come Alive through the Lens of Brechtian Theory and Practice

¹Deepshikha Dhiman, ²Prof. Hemant Kumar Shukla,
³Prof. Pramod Kumar Kukreti

¹ Research Assistant, Pt. L.M.S. University Campus, Rishikesh, India

²Prof. of English, Pt. L.M.S. University Campus, Rishikesh, India

³ Prof. & Head, Department of English, Pt. L.M.S. University Campus, Rishikesh, India

Email - ¹deepshikhad.141@gmail.com, ²hemantkumar.shukla1@gmail.com, ³parmodkukreti3@gmail.com

Abstract: *Bikhoti is a festival celebrated in the Lata village, which is situated on the bank of the Dhauliganga River in the Painkhanda valley. The term 'Bikhoti' comes from the Hindu month 'Veshaka', which starts in mid-April and ends in mid-May. Bikhoti plays a crucial role in religious rituals, making it a deeply meaningful event in the community. It is a theatrical mask dance, performed by the villagers to celebrate Nanda Devi, who comes to her Maika (mother's home) from her Sasural (husband's home), which is in the Himalayas. This paper highlights this festival with Brechtian theories and practices, principles and techniques. It presents the mask theatre of Uttarakhand in the light of Epic theatre by focusing on characters like Mor, Morini, Laatu, Laati, etc., making it the most colourful, dynamic and sacred folklore in the Himalayas.*

Key Words: *Bikhoti, Mask theatre, Uttarakhand, Culture, Epic theatre, V-effect, Taal, Dhol, Damau.*

1. INTRODUCTION: BIKHOTI

Nestled in the picturesque Painkhanda Valley- a valley which is known for keeping the culture of Uttarakhand still alive- is a serene village, Saloor-Doongra which has preserved the intangible heritage of the state: the festival *Ramman*. In this valley flows the Dhauliganga River, which "rises in the vicinity of the Niti Pass in the border regions between Garhwal and southwestern Tibet" (Dhauliganga River). At the bank of the River Dahuliganga lies a hidden gem, an idyllic village, which offers breathtaking views and a serene escape into nature's beauty, and that is Lata village, which is located at a distance of 25 km from Joshimath, Chamoli district, Uttarakhand.

Since ancient times, people of the upper Himalayas have traded with Tibet. These groups of people are called the Bhotia tribe. This tribe has been living there for centuries; they used to travel on foot, crossing those harsh mountains blanketed with snow and carry sweets, woolen textiles, livestock, etc., and trade with Tibetans in order to survive in the snowy mountains.

"Bhot means north, and it is a southern Himalayan custom to name people residing in or coming from the north as Bhotia. However, Bhotia is a misnomer, a practice started by the British who clubbed different ethnic tribes engaged in Trans-Himalayan trade with Tibet under the blanket term of Bhotia" (Mittal 113). This tribe is scattered around the four districts of Uttarakhand, namely Chamoli, Uttarkashi, Pithoragarh and Almora. The places near Mana valley and Painkhanda valley of Chamoli districts are inhabited by Marchha Bhotia and Tolchha Bhotia, respectively. Lata village is home to the Tolchha Bhotia tribe. A tribe abides in the lap of Painkhanda valley and the mountains.

Every year for centuries, people of Lata village celebrate '*Bikhoti*'. The term '*Bikhoti*' comes from the Hindu month '*Veshaka*', which starts from mid-April and ends in mid-May. In Uttarakhand, most of the festivals are related to agriculture. *Bikhoti* is not only a vibrant celebration of agriculture, but it also plays a crucial role in religious rituals, making it a deeply meaningful event in the community. It is a theatrical mask dance, performed by the villagers



to celebrate the *Nanda Devi*, who comes to her *Maika* (mother's home) from her *Sasural* (husband's home), in the Himalayas. The festival starts with the *Suppa* Ceremony, in which villagers offer *Phapher aata* (Buckwheat flour) to the *Nanda* Goddess. In this ceremony, all the villagers bring buckwheat flour in a *suppa* (a winnowing basket) and put it in a circle at *Chopta Kho* (a sacred area outside the temple) and *Maa Nanda* at the centre. "The Lata's village is a 10-day ritual ceremony that represents the indigenous version of the genesis of the cosmos through the masked dance theatre- a nonstop performance and various episodes performed with different masks- it brings by bringing the goddess *Nanda Devi* to the centre of the village" ("*Bikhoti*")

2. BIKHOTI IN THE LIGHT OF BRECHTIAN PRINCIPLES

Bikhoti is presented in the light of Brechtian theories and practices. **Bertolt Brecht** introduced **Epic Theatre** into the drama genre, which challenged the traditional theatre in some way. One of the core principles of his theories includes that "epic theatre must eradicate all forms of intoxication and intense emotional involvement on the part of the spectator" (Silberman et al. 19), that can be possible with the "discontinuous, segmented and interrupted" (Silberman et al. 19) episodic structures. Rather than offering passive entertainment, Brechtian theatre demands active, critical engagement from the audience. Elements such as people coming and going, actors breaking character to address the audience directly, and interruptions from music, props, or stage crew combine to create the alienation effect (Or V-effect) characteristic of Epic theatre.

Bikhoti is a mask theatre, where one can see the V-effect prominently in the performance of *Mor-Morini*, *Ganna-Ginni*, *Laatu-Laati*, *Ishwar Raja* and *Gaura Devi*, and *Chor* (thief), etc.

The construction of the plays of the 'epic theatre', which rejects the logically knit, well-made play, is free from the need of creating suspense, loosely-knit and episodic. Instead of mounting to a dynamic climax, the story unfolds in a number of separate situations, each rounded and complete in itself. The total effect of the play is built up through the juxtaposition and 'montage' of contrasting episodes (Shukla 115).

In *Bikhoti*, the performances of *Mor-Morini*, *Ganna-Ginni*, *Laatu-Laati*, *Ishwar Raja* and *Gaura Devi*, etc. are episodic in nature and each episode is self-contained. This resembles Brechtian theory.

A character-**Mor** is considered a postman of *Maa Nanda*, who is desperately waiting for his *Morini*. He roams around the temple, making jokes, throwing *aata* (flour) to random people, especially to married women, creating an atmosphere of laughter and fun. The *Mor* while performing humorous conversation with the spectators holds the mic close to his eye due to his large thick wooden mask. There is no hole on the mask except for the eyes, so he holds the mic close to his eye, so that his voice could be audible, which creates a hilarious atmosphere. Everybody around the temple keep laughing and enjoying, but at the same time hiding, as whoever is spotted by *Mor* could not be spared. He jokes around, kissing men, asking for a letter from the *Morini*. Spectators, aware of his actions, give anything- piece of paper, or a wrapper of a snack, anything to make it look like a letter that has come from the *Morini*. *Mor* opens the fake letter and makes one of the spectators read, which tells that *Morini* will be arriving soon in a day or two. *Mor* usually says to people, "*Hey Mora, na daura Mora, Devta admi chann*" (Hey human, do not be afraid of me, I am a God Man) and keeps repeating. The most humorous performance is when *Mor* is looking for cock, and the young audience start teasing him, making the sounds of a cock from different corners and running. *Mor* is running after them with his stick, creating a laughable situation. This is where another principle of Epic theatre highlights, comedy over tragedy and participation of audience within the performance. The appearance of *Mor* is funny and entertaining.



Figure 1: Mor

Bertolt Brecht tried various technical devices to discourage the actor's natural tendency to create empathy. In



case of *Bikhoti* performances, the actors wearing various masks of different characters never actually have the illusion of becoming their respective characters. The movement and verbal patterns are developed to the highest levels of abstraction.

According to Martin Esslin, it is essential for **epic actor** to forbid himself to 'complete transformation' in the character he is showing. He should not become the character he is portraying but show that, by putting forward character's way of behaviour to the best of his abilities. Once the idea of total transformation is abandoned, the actor speaks his part as if he is improvising a character like a story-teller (Esslin 114). The actors have scope for improvising his acting. In *Bikhoti*, many characters are often found indulging in exchanging comments with the audience. There are no ready-made dialogues to deliver. The people from the audience and the characters like *Mor* exchange their comments instinctively, much to the enjoyment of the rest of the audience. They have to respond quickly in the extempore way. In this way, *Mor* has the prerogative to improvise himself. The actor just shows the character of *Mor*. His 'complete transformation' is impossible. Sometimes, some of the audiences unknowingly start to act while talking to the actor enacting his part. The spoken words without any preparation add a distinct flavor to the atmosphere. This spontaneity leaves no room for any kind of '**empathy**'. So, **Brechtian** theories and practices are clearly visible in the performances of *Bikhoti*.

The next day, *Morini* finally comes to meet the *Mor*. Their coming together creates an atmosphere that is more energetic and hilarious, filled with laughter and awe. One can see the love between *Mor* and *Morini*, who comically dance, tease, and hug each other. They even perform the *Jai-mala* tradition, which happens in the Hindu marriage customs. This is where the fun starts: as the *Morini* is about to put *mala* to the *Mor*, some random audience member comes in between, holds her hand, places the *mala* on himself, creating laughter among the audience. Looking at this scene, *Mor* gets furious, kicks him, takes the *mala* back, and finally lets *Morini* put the *mala* around him. However, these activities are not pre-planned, it just happens with the flow. No one present has practiced beforehand, not even the characters wearing masks. Performing impromptu gestures or moves, outside planned presentation is one of the important **Brechtian techniques** and practices. Audience enjoys more and feels more included in the theatre during such type of performances.

Both the characters are played by men of the village for entertainment purposes, played by the men of the village. *Morini*, considered the lover of the *Mor*, played by a man wearing a skirt, and her mask is similar to the *Mor*'s, but with a feminine look. *Morini* covers her head with a red *Chunni* (or stole), wearing Bhotiya jewellery around her neck and Black *Pangru* (a traditional Bhotiya dress) and carries a basket around her back, filled with some random items. She also has a small *potli* tied around her waist that is filled with buckwheat flour. *Morini* is more playful than *Mor*; she throws flour and interacts more with spectators. Both of their clothes are old, torn, and comical.

These characters also perform some comic or serious act in a humorous way, which may have happened previously in the village. They mimic people to make the audience feel more included in the theatre. This emotional distance effect-where people are aware that they are watching clean entertainment, away from the **catharsis** described by Brecht- is known as the **Verfremdungseffekt of Brecht**.

On the final day of *Bikhoti*, many characters like *Narad Muni*, *Ganeshji*, *Ishwar Raja* and *Gaura Devi* (Lord Shiva and Parwati), *Kodiya-Rishi*, *Brahma-Vishnu*, *Sooraj Pattar*, *Bagh*, etc., plays. Each character comes in a proper order and has religious sentiments. Emotions and empathy are two important words in epic theatre. **Brecht** understood emotions can not be neglected but it should not be turned into **empathy**, "the emotional attentiveness of the audience and the actors should not be hindered, and neither should the portrayal of emotions or the actor's use of emotions. Only one of the many possible sources of emotions needs to be left unused or at least treated as a subsidiary source, and that is empathy" (Kuhn et al. 55). For instance, *Ishwar Raja* and *Gaura Devi* in *Bikhoti* symbolize Lord *Shiva* and *Parwati* of Hindu Mythology, and audience is connected to them religiously, but during performance they also entertain by making people laugh. *Gaura Devi*, during *Paath* (Story of the lord), acts like searching for lice on *Ishwar Raja*'s hair and burns them in the fire if found. On one hand, *Ishwar Raja* and *Gaura Devi* symbolize God and Goddess, while on other hand, they behave like mere human beings, by doing such things that are unacceptable for Gods such as picking lice from hair. Here, **emotions, alienation, and state of confusion** occur among the audience but not **empathy**. "A creation that more or less renounces **empathy** need not by any means be an 'unfeeling' creation, or one that leaves the spectator's feelings out of account. But it has to adopt a critical approach to the spectator's emotions, just as it does to the ideas" (Silberman et al 190).



Figure 2: Ishwar Raja



Figure 3: Gaura Devi

None of the acts in Bikhoti are prepared in advance; all of them are performed on the spot, whether it is a dance, acting, or any comedic movements. *Laatu's* character is similar to the *Mor*, except that his mask is different and he is not waiting for his *Morini*. *Laatu* is the most anticipated and humorous character entertaining people with his hilarious gestures and movements. His mask features a funny expression with bulgy, almost closed eyes, big nose, and fuller lips that are neither smiling nor despondent, along with a huge wrinkled forehead sunken cheeks.

The mask is grey in colour, making people believe he is *Laatu*-meaning "idiot"-whose face is covered in flour. His clothes match his demeanor: old, saggy and torn. *Laati* enters, the wife of *Laatu*, enters wearing attire identical to that of *Morini*, the wife of *Mor*. She is equally entertaining and hysterical, throwing at random people, especially women and young men. She dances with *Laatu* while holding a small teddy bear, which symbolizes their child. *Laatu*, on the other hand, mixes flour with water and tosses it at the spectators, creating a commotion in the audience.



Figure 4: Laatu



Figure 5: Laatu-Laati

Not only *Laata* and *Laati*, but *Chor* (thief) also, along with his gang *Ginni-Ginna*, continues the performance after *Laata* and *Laati's* exit. This group consists of five or six kids wearing masks, performing close to the audience. Their act involve stealing items like caps or glasses from unsuspecting people, without their knowledge, which makes the audience enjoy their lively performance.

Music plays important role not only in *Bikhoti* festival, but in **Epic theatre** too. "In Epic theatre, music or opera is visible to the audience; it narrates, communicates, and interprets the libretto" (Silberman et al. 75). *Bikhoti* has its own opera too, which is open and visible to all. Here music communicates in *taal*. The instruments that are present in the performances are:

- **Dhol**: It is a large double-sided drum.
- **Damau**: It is a single-headed drum.



- **Kaans:** It is a pair of clash cymbals, also called *Taal* or *Manjira*.
- **Bhonkra:** It is a long trumpet used traditionally in Uttarakhand.
- **Manav** (for *Suraj Patar*'s light music): It is a small *dhol* but has a longer and slimmer body.

Brecht explains that the dialogues should be rendered at three levels-plain speech, heightened speech and singing. The three levels must always remain distinct, and in no case should heightened speech represent an identification of plain speech or singing of heightened speech (Brecht 44-45). He further explains that particularly in the songs it is important that "he who is showing should himself be shown" (Brecht 15).

Here, it's only **Bhaan** who sings, narrates and direct the actors to perform accordingly. Only two levels of speech are practiced by Bhaan: plain and singing. He keeps plain-speech and singing entirely distinct from one another that is reflected in the acting performances of the actors.

The performance of **Suraj Patar** with his *Pehars* happens to be different from others. They dance in 18 *taals* (Music) in which 9 *taals* are loud and a little fast, and the other 9 are light and slow. Originally, there were 21 *taals* for their performance, but later on, one *taal* was dedicated to *Maa Nanda*, and two *taals* were dedicated to their ancestors. Hence, 18 *taals* remain, to which the characters perform. Rama and Lakshman dance in front of the *Suraj Patar*, while Bharat and Shatrughan dance behind him. Among the *Pehars*, *Suraj Patar* wears a mask above his head, symbolizing that the Sun moves above human beings.



Figure 6: Suraj Patar

In **Bikhoti**, music is played for each character. Even when no one is performing, the music sometimes continues. The music intensifies and interrupts the performance, much like Epic Theatre. Both characters and spectators enjoy the music and dance along with the actors.

3. CONCLUSION

All the fragmented episodes of *Bikhoti* highlight the principles of **Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theatre**, where spectators enjoy food and drink, and talk with each other because they already know what is going to happen like the concept of '**Smoking Theatre**' of Brecht. The V-effect, episodic structures, comedy over tragedy, extraction of empathy, music, etc., are the major principles of Brechtian theory that are presented in the **Mask Theatre** of Uttarakhand in general and **Bikhoti** in particular.

Bikhoti festival is also celebrated in nearby villages during the same month-from mid-April to mid-May (*Vaishak*), namely Sukhi, Tapovan, Dhak, Bara, Sailang, and Saloor-Dungra. These villages still preserve the diverse and rich heritage of Uttarakhand culture. Whether through cuisine, clothing, language, or lifestyle, they serve as a wonderful example of keeping traditions alive and making every Uttarakhandi proud. They celebrate all festivals, rituals, fairs, and events together, showcasing their unity, harmony, and peace. Although they live an arduous life, they have colossal hearts and love for one another, reflecting a profound connection between them and the land they inhabit.



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