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Performance, Music, and Narrative Structure in the Haryanvi Ragni Tradition

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Abstract:

The Haryanvi tradition of Ragni is seen as a complex form of syncretism of oral literature, music, and socio-cultural performativity. It began as the narrative center of *Saang* folk theater but has transformed into an independent form of performance with the strictures of meter and regional musicality. This paper undertakes the study of the Ragni tradition with the critical exploration of the performance theory of Richard Schechner and the application of the psychodynamics of orality by Walter Ong to understand the process of meaning. In addition, the study undertakes the exploration of the role of gender in the contemporary process of performance, where women struggle to assert their agency in patriarchal society, and the role of platform capitalism in the process of audience engagement. This study of the Ragni tradition is located within the intermediate space of North Indian music.

Keywords: Haryanvi Ragni, Ethnomusicology, Saang Theatre, Orality, Performance Theory, Gender Dynamics, Platformisation, Intermediate Sphere.

Introduction

Haryanvi folk music serves as a sonic repository for regional identity, inextricably linked to the socio-economic and patriarchal frameworks of agrarian North India (Kumar, 2024). At the crossroads of this cultural landscape, Ragni emerges as a narrative-based music genre that fuses melody, poetry, and theatricality. Ragni occupies the "intermediate sphere" in North Indian music a heterogeneous genre that defies simplistic classification as either "folk" or "classical" music, instead employing classical frameworks to achieve communal resonance and linguistic vernacularity (Manuel, 2015).

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Traditionally, an integral part of the overall dramatic structure of the *Saang* folk opera, Ragni served as the means of narrative progression (Hansen, 1992). However, since the mid-1970s, the tradition has undergone an important shift, moving from an integral part of the overall theatrical structure to a highly competitive standalone performative tradition, now known as the *Dangal*. This shift has had important implications in terms of socio-cultural disruptions. A society with an overall patriarchal ruling structure, in which the spatial boundaries of women are subject to important regulation through customs such as the *ghunghat* (veil), is witnessing the emergence of the female Ragni performer (Chowdhry, 1994). Moreover, the emergence of digital media has had an important impact in terms of the overall tradition of the genre, moving from its status as a localized communal tradition to its status as a digital commodity in the platform economy (Nieborg & Poell, 2018).

To ensure a thorough examination of this process, the research is informed by three research questions: (1) How do the structural mechanics of Ragni's music and poetry enable the process of narrative transmission in an agrarian society? (2) What are the ways in which contemporary female performers interact with the very patriarchal spatial boundaries of the traditional Ragni stage? (3) How do Western models of performance theory and orality intersect with the epistemological realities of North Indian folk theatre? The research concludes that the Haryanvi Ragni tradition is not an antiquated remnant of primary orality; rather, it is an extremely malleable form of folk theatre that employs rhythmic cyclicity to continually negotiate agrarian collective memory, spatial boundaries of patriarchy, and the forces of digital platformization.

Literature Review

The academic discourse surrounding North Indian folk traditions has historically marginalized Haryana's specific contributions. However, Kathryn Hansen's (1992) *Grounds for Play: The Nautanki Theatre of North India* provides a critical comparative baseline, detailing how contiguous folk operas utilize metrical structures like *Doha-Chaubola* and *Bahr-e-Tavil* identical to those in Haryanvi *Saang*. While Nautanki focuses on secular romances, Haryanvi Ragni is entrenched in local mythology and strict agrarian ethics (Kumar et al., 2023).

In terms of spatial dynamics, Prem Chowdhry's (1994) *The Veiled Women* provides an essential socio-political background to the area, highlighting the patriarchal segregation of the public (male) and private (female) spheres. This is essential in comprehending the subversive power of the women's intervention in the *Dangal*, now an arena of contested agency and objectification (Tokas, 2019). Analyzing this objectification necessitates engagement with feminist visual theory, specifically Laura Mulvey's (1975) "male gaze," which provides a framework for understanding how patriarchal audiences project fantasies

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onto female performers. Furthermore, Peter Manuel's (1993, 2015) research on the "intermediate sphere" and David Nieborg and Thomas Poell's (2018) theory of platformisation highlight how technological shifts alter the recording careers and distribution networks of regional musicians.

Theoretical Framework

Critiquing the Psychodynamics of Orality

Walter Ong's (1982) theory of the psychodynamics of orality suggests that in the absence of writing, thought must be highly rhythmic and repetitious to render itself memorable. Ragni's work is intrinsically reliant upon this auditory-based environment, using refrains *(tek)* and archetypes in a repetitive manner.

Nevertheless, when Ong's theory of "primary orality" is applied to Haryanvi culture, it is essential to critically modify it (Finnegan, 1989). Haryanvi folk culture is not isolated from literate culture; it is part of a constant dialectic process with classical literate traditions, which are highly dependent on texts written by highly literate poet-scholars such as Pandit Lakhmi Chand (Kumar et al., 2023). Ragni is a product of a complex interplay between oral culture and a broader textual culture, which transcends the oral/literate dichotomy posed by Ong.

Performance Theory and the Efficacy-Entertainment Braid

According to Richard Schechner's (1988) model of the "efficacy entertainment braid," performances fall somewhere on the continuum between efficacy, where the focus is on the creation of social cohesion, and entertainment, where the focus is on aesthetic pleasure. *Saang* performances have, in the past, had an efficacy focus, providing cohesion in society. However, as Ragni developed into competitive *Dangals*, and then moved into the digital domain, the focus shifted towards entertainment.

Although the model is applicable, there are certain drawbacks in the model when viewed in the context of North Indian Rural Theatre. Efficacy and entertainment in the Haryanvi context cannot be viewed as two separate streams, but rather as two sides of the same coin. The highly entertaining, eroticized performances of modern female singers are also highly efficacious performances, dismantling caste and gender barriers in the socio-political sphere (Tokas, 2019). The Western model does not take into consideration the role of folk entertainment as a direct socio-political efficacy against the value systems of the people, thereby making the efficacy/entertainment model simplistic in its approach.

Methodology

This interdisciplinary study utilizes ethnographic observation of live performance dynamics and audience interaction within modernized *Dangals* to capture nuances of participatory culture. Textual analysis deconstructs the lyrical content of compiled *Saang*

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texts to map poetic meters (*Bahr-e-Tavil*, *Chaubola*) (Hansen, 1992). Finally, acoustic analysis is employed to understand melodic frameworks, avoiding the epistemological trap of forcing microtonal folk fluctuations into rigid Western staff notation.

Analysis

Historical and Cultural Context

Ragni emerged as the lyrical core of *Saang*, an itinerant folk dance-theatre that served as the primary medium of mass communication in North India. Reaching its zenith under the influence of Pandit Lakhmi Chand (1905–1945), *Saang* utilized tales from myth and local legend not merely as entertainment, but as vehicles for philosophical inquiry, projecting a utopian vision grounded in Haryana's agrarian lifestyle (Kumar et al., 2023).

This agrarian reality is patrilocal, patrilineal, and patriarchal. Ragni poetry functions as a living archive of this landscape, frequently invoking two powerful cultural symbols: the *hukka* and the *ghunghat* (Chowdhry, 1994). The *hukka* (community pipe) represents male fraternity and strict caste exclusivity; sharing it denotes equality, while refusing it constitutes severe ostracization. Conversely, the *ghunghat* (veil) acts as an ideological boundary segregating the private female domain from the intensely masculine public square (Chowdhry, 1994).

Musical Patterns and Interpretive Dynamics

Ragni operates firmly within Manuel's (2015) "intermediate sphere," subordinating classical melodic grammar to immediate emotional efficacy. The *Raga* serves not as a strict rulebook, but as a psychological framework dictating the emotional character (*rasa*). For example, the reliance on flat (*komal*) notes in *Raag Bhairavi* provides a somber atmosphere suited for themes of sacrifice, while the complex semi-tones of *Raag Pilu* grant a distinctive *desi* (country) flavor utilized to evoke profound regional nostalgia.

Rhythmic cycles (*taal*) transcend metric accompaniment to operate as socio-cognitive frameworks. The ubiquitous *Kaharwa* cycle a symmetrical eight-beat structure functions as a psychodynamic anchor propelling the narrative. From the perspective of embodied music cognition, this rhythmic cyclicity operates as an enacted cognitive scaffold, entraining the somatic responses of the audience to facilitate the collective retention of oral narratives (Clayton, 2000; Leman, 2016). This driving cyclicity compels physical engagement from the audience, mirroring the repetitive cadence of agrarian labor and establishing a shared temporal reality. In contrast, the sixteen-beat *Teental* is deployed in complex verses where the singer demonstrates virtuosic breath control, turning the rhythm into a spectacle of endurance. Vocally, Ragni demands a robust, full-throated delivery marked by sharp percussive articulation, utilizing rhythmic play (*layakari*) to intentionally delay or accelerate phrasing, structurally engineering an escalating emotional arc.

Poetic Structure and Metrics

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Ragni's lyrical composition is bound to the linguistic idiosyncrasies of the Haryanvi dialect. Haryanvi diverges sharply from standard Hindi in its phonology, characterized by a heavy reliance on harsh, curled-tongue retroflex consonants (/ɖ/, /ɖʱ/). In Ragni, these retroflexes act as percussive acoustic strikes within the vocal delivery, allowing the singer to strike phonetic notes with physical force.

Metrically, Ragni relies on structures adapted from North Indian and Persian traditions. The *Doha-Chaubola* sequence operates as the declarative engine of the plot (Hansen, 1992). Sung almost exclusively to a major scale, it provides a bright auditory experience that establishes diegetic authority. In stark structural contrast is the *Bahr-e-Tavil* meter. Originating as a Persian verse form characterized by hypermetricality, *Bahr-e-Tavil* enables rapid, dense lyrical delivery mimicking the unregulated cadence of intense human speech (Hansen, 1992). Strategically reserved for high-stakes character dialogue, it is sung using a mode laden with minor tones. This modal shift functions as a powerful, non-verbal auditory cue, immediately signaling a shift from omniscient narration to dramatic confrontation. Narrative sequencing is tightly controlled through the *tek* (refrain), ensuring the audience remains grounded in the core emotional register, aligning with Ong's (1982) theories of necessary redundancy in oral preservation.

Stage Presentation, Gender, and the Male Gaze

Urbanization extracted Ragni from the theatrical *Saang*, establishing it as the standalone *Dangal* competition. This shifted spatial dynamics from the egalitarian, open *akhara* to raised proscenium stages, establishing a strict, hierarchical demarcation between performer and spectator.

The most profound disruption in the Ragni tradition is the entry of women onto the public stage, representing a radical subversion of patriarchal boundaries (Chowdhry, 1994). This necessitates an interrogation through feminist performance theory. Applying Laura Mulvey's (1975) "male gaze" to the live arena, the female performer is systematically stripped of her auditory agency and reduced to a visual commodity. The patriarchal audience projects its fantasies onto the performer, enforcing a voyeuristic paradigm that forces the singer into a dual identity. While male performers are evaluated on musicality, women must negotiate their status as artists against the compulsory demands of being visual entertainers (Tokas, 2019).

To appease this gaze and maximize financial returns, the genre has shifted away from moralistic narratives toward seductive subjects. Furthermore, female performers from marginalized communities frequently adopt fictitious dominant-caste surnames to achieve a semblance of protection. Reclaiming the public square comes at a fatal cost, as performers

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endure public humiliation and physical violence. Despite these realities, the Ragni stage remains a crucial medium of agency, allowing women to achieve financial independence and challenge entrenched norms.

Platformisation and the Digital Era

The traditional Ragni is built on an auditory setting that requires audience participation. However, this setting is being altered by the advent of digital media, which, according to the process of platformisation, is "the process of extension of economic and infrastructural extensions of digital platforms into cultural ecosystems" (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). The traditional performances are therefore truncated according to this platform capitalism, which seeks to sensationalise performances, hence altering a traditional community-based practice to a state of dependency on a digital platform. Although this diminishes the physical closeness of traditional performances, platformisation also provides a platform for regional artists to transcend geographical limitations, hence facilitating a visual record of a historically oral art form (Manuel, 1993).

Limitations of the Study

This study recognizes the following limitations. Firstly, the historical use of oral tradition means that there is a lack of archival audio materials before the 1970s, making diachronic musicological comparison challenging. Secondly, the use of ethnographic observations of female performers in the midst of active trauma, as well as the male gaze, is subject to self-censorship. Lastly, the use of the micro-tonal vocal styling of Haryanvi folk music, through the use of traditional musicology, is subject to inevitable reduction, making the use of advanced computational signal processing necessary in the future.

Conclusion

The Haryanvi tradition of Ragni music functions as a very sophisticated cognitive and structural form. Placed within the intermediate sphere of North Indian music, the strict metrical systems (Bahr-e-Tavil, Chaubola) and the calculated application of major and minor scales serve not simply as aesthetic devices, but as essential psycho-acoustic mechanisms. These systems serve the agrarian audience through the shifting emotional topography, extending Ong's criteria of primary orality beyond the bounds of the complex, textually informed folk music's application of somatic rhythm as a form of collective memory.

Concurrently, the Ragni stage has emerged as a fluid socio-political site that is in a state of flux. The shift towards a competitive Dangal has created a contested site for women artists that must navigate the deadly crossroads of patriarchy, caste mobility, and the commodified male gaze to achieve a degree of public presence. As the tradition resists the threat of algorithmic platformisation, its survival depends upon its immanence as a fluid site that can constantly reinterpret ancient forms to comment upon contemporary socio-political realities, creating a new understanding of existence in North India.

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