

## **‘Sacred’ Grounds and ‘Profane’ Performances: Understanding Interaction between Hindu Islamic Identities through Bhavai Plays**

**Minakshi Rajdev**  
PhD Scholar  
Centre for Historical Studies  
Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi

### **Abstract**

Splits, ruptures and reverses are the threads with which the canvas of *Bhavai* performative tradition of Gujarat is woven and fashioned. The narrative of the play surprises spectators with its way of unfolding certain social categories in a very peculiar and dramatic manner. Performers couch meanings pertaining to social context of the spectators and even configure new dimensions with which their society is struggling. The paper tries to understand interactions between Hindu and Islamic religious identities at popular performative space which are often represented as hostile to each other in political space. It is an attempt to unfold popular understanding of cultural coexistence and religious syncretism through three *Bhavai* plays: *Juthan no Vesh*, *Zhanda Zhulan no Vesh*, and *Chhel Batau no Vesh*.

**Key Terms:** *Bhavai, Performance, Religions, Identities, Gujarat.*

*Bhavai* is a performative oral tradition in Gujarat and Western Parts of Rajasthan. The origin of this tradition goes back to 14<sup>th</sup> century according to myths and oral transmissions of knowledge which vary widely across cultures. It is not just a theatrical tradition but also a ritual practice still observed in rural society of Western India. Though modernity did not give desired space to ritual performative traditions like *Bhavai*, but it also could not uproot it from the rural grounds of the Indian society. Consequently, *Bhavai* is no more ritually significant in the urban cultures of the regions but it is still intact in the cultural ecosystem of the rural society so much so that no celebration is complete without *Bhavai* performance in the rural societies of Gujarat and parts of Rajasthan.

The performance and ritual-tradition of *Bhavai* could maintain its space and significance due to its spiritual character, political nature, and diffusion of static identities in the society through the medium of performance which gave space to rising entrenchment of identities. The plays of *Bhavai* project a powerful critique of the social structure and discrimination based on class, caste, religion and gender in the form of satire and humour. It deconstructs ‘clear’

identities at play in the society and leads to formation of a public sphere at popular level where basis of those identities are discussed and critiqued.

These performances were/are categorised as ‘anti-normative’ and thus ‘profane’ by the educated Indian elites from 19<sup>th</sup> century to present times due to their unconventional climaxes. Bhavai not only characterised the heroes of the society, but also created them. A married woman was not projected as ‘sinful characterless’ woman rather she is the hero of the play as her character sheds light on the larger contexts of her life rather than epitomising ‘social norms’. Similarly, elopement and love between a Hindu woman and a Muslim man is not ‘wrong’ in the performance in fact, it is depicted as platonic where social barriers are thwarted. Most importantly, the plays are not mere projection of kings and queens rather they are serious reflection of all those who are downtrodden, exploited and ignored by the high society.

This paper endeavours to analyse sacred Muslim bodies on the stage and concomitantly transcending borders of the religions. It focuses on the dialogue between two religions and religious identities which are placed antipodal to each other in contemporary political scenario and it tries to understand how it is perceived in popular performative space. The paper consists of three plays of *Bhavai* tradition which are still performed in the rural landscapes of India; Juthan no Vesh, Zhanda Zhulan no Vesh, and Chhel Batau no Vesh.

*Bhavai* being an oral performative tradition and it is primarily based on impromptu improvisation on the stage, therefore search for a wide array of archives is futile. Besides, the central theme and narrative of the *veshas*<sup>i</sup> have remained same and performers weave their own creativity with already existing plot of the *veshas* to make it more interesting and relevant for the spectators. Sources of the study are documentations of the *Bhavai* performances, observations and oral interviews of the performers.

*Bhavai Sangraha*, documentation of *Bhavai veshas* by Rao Sahib Mahipatram Rupram Nilkanth (1829-1891) was completed in 1866. *Shri Bhavani Bhavai Prakash* is another non-dated compilation by Munshi Harmanishankar Dhanshankar which consists plays from a long time phase from 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Deshi Bhavaino Bhomio* is also non-dated documentation written by M G Shukla, a *Bhavai* performer, with an approval of Bhagwandas Devshibhai who is supposed to be the original collector of the plays from different performers:

“Zikar kar zikar kar zakiri, fiqar kar fiqar kar faqiri; Tikar kar tikar kar tota, bina zikar tu khayega gota”<sup>ii</sup> (Munshi 154).

(discuss and discuss, reflect and reflect oh man! if you just keep parroting, you will end up being befooled)

The tradition of discussion is the heart of Indian folk performances and literary culture which made coexistence of multifarious identities possible. *Bhavai*, social satirical theatre not only comments on the skin of socio-political systems of the society but also constructs a public sphere for the larger deliberations on the same. *Bhavai* performances lead to emergence of a space where social stigmas are questions, conventional norms are reciprocated, ‘anti normative’ stances are evoked, anti-heroes are championed and religious dogma are destabilised.

The *vesha of Juthan* is an unparalleled play of the *Bhavai* tradition which was created in the sixteenth century by a Nayak community performer of Radhanpur Princely state in North Gujarat according to oral memories of the performing communities<sup>iii</sup>. *Juthan* is the essential character of *Bhavai veshas* so much so that *Bhavai* can only be inaugurated with its performance, and then the stage is opened for other *veshas* during the festival of *Navratri*<sup>iv</sup>.

### ***Juthan no Vesh (The play of Juthan)***

“*Balkh bukhare ka paadshash, sheikh hussain unka naam; Uthh faqiri le chale, juthan dharaya naam.*”<sup>v</sup>(Nilkanth 60)

*Juthan* is popularly known as a prince of the Bukhara (a city in the present day Uzbekistan), who denounced the materialistic world and became an ascetic to preach innate reality of this world. His character evokes satirical comic comments on the banal activities of society and materialistic nature of the human relations.

It is important to shed light on the cultural and ritual significance of the character of *Juthan* first who believed to have the power to predict monsoon and also agrarian productivity of the *garas*<sup>vi</sup> village.<sup>vii</sup> His cultural authority to predict monsoon on which Indian village life depends, makes him the most revered character in the performance. Predictions made by him are given great importance in the agrarian village society that all the local newspapers cover remarks made by *Juthan* during performance for wider circulation of his scared words.

*Juthan* inaugurates the play by making humorous comments on Brahmanism and sacred activities of Islamic ascetics. The first scene of his performance starts with a part of a play called *teen karamat* (three magic) and narrates that there are three magical powers that he knows:

*paise ki karamaat* (magic of the money), *aurat ki karamaat* (magic of woman or the magic to attract woman) and *Bachche ki karamaat* (the magic to bear children), the three important tenants of the social life of the village, money marriage and children. Juthan describes the magic to multiply the money- first collect all precious things and money of the house and then light them with a spark of match stick, and you will see heaps and heaps of money in the next morning. The second magic- to attract many women, one has to first drink a lot of opium followed by oil and then sleep in the veranda of the house covering whole body with a white quilt, and in the morning you will see oodles and oodles of women. He then asks audience, you know why there would be oodles of women? And then he himself replies, 'to cry and mourn for him'. The third magic to bear many children, he says that you go to sleep in a cremation ground (*samshan*) on *Jumme raat*<sup>viii</sup> and send someone else to your home to enjoy your decorated bed with your wife, and within a year you may have twins in the home with the grace of Allah.

Juthan speaks 'truth' camouflaged in 'nonsense' and 'illogic'. Since he speaks against the banal normativity of the world and does exactly opposite to the orders of the social system, he is called as Juthan meaning liar. The three 'magic' are designed to denounce the desires around which human life revolves and neglects the 'ultimate truth' of life. He not only deplors the earthy desires by contemplating nonsense but also unmasks corrupt practices of the ascetics and priests who promote blinkered faith by making people believe on their magical capacities.

In the second scene of the play, Juthan is asked for his introduction because he looked like a stranger in the village. He thoughtfully replies that he has many names- two, three, five, twenty five, and many more. But when he is enquired again about his identity, Juthan explains that he is *atharah mahine ki paidaish* (a man born after eighteen months of pregnancy). On realising about the surprise and dissatisfaction of the villagers, he narrates them the story of his birth because he thinks that his unusual story will make the villagers feel familiar enough with him and he would be paid respect as well.

Juthan narrates that, once upon a time, *Allah* and *Allahani* (wife of Allah), *Brahma* and *Brahmani* (wife of Brahma, the creator of the world according to Hindu mythology), *Bhatt* and *Bhattani* (a Brahmin and his wife) and, *Indra* and *Indrani* (Indra is the thunder god according to Hindu mythology and his wife) were playing *Chopat*.<sup>ix</sup> Then suddenly, *Allah* beats his brain out and realises that there is no one to look after the life on earth and asks in bewilderment-"if there

is anyone ready to go to earth?” Juthan says that he murmured that he would go to earth to take care of it, and at that very moment, *Allahani* conceived him as a child. Two months passed gradually and he started speaking to the air through the *Allahani's* womb. In the third month all heavenly beings played *Gilli-Danda*<sup>x</sup>, fourth month passed playing *Gedi-Dara*<sup>xi</sup>, fifth month passed playing *Lakhotia*<sup>xii</sup>, sixth month passed playing *Laakdi*<sup>xiii</sup>, seventh and eighth month passed flying kites, ninth month was also gone in playing in the streets, in tenth month they played *Kho-Kho*<sup>xiv</sup> and, similarly eighteen months passed playing different games. In the last month, Juthan thought of coming out of the womb and on the very moment *Allahani* screamed out of pain in the stomach. *Daiyyani* or mid wife was called to deliver the baby and as soon as he came out of the womb, he immediately slept on stomach's side, says Juthan. Mid-wife thought, Allah is blessed with a girl child but realising this confusion, he changed his position of sleeping so that the misunderstanding can be removed, Juthan narrates.

Nonsensical, non-imaginable, non-believable and non-rational, bizarre narrativisation is at the core of the *vesha* which in a very peculiar manner critiqued and subverted the norms of domination in society. The freedom of caricaturing *Allah* and *Allahni* (wife of Allah) with other mythical gods and goddesses of Hinduism in front of audience from both the religious backgrounds not only reflects boldness of the performers but also invents a space where any religion and any religious idea can be critiqued by the people. It thwarts the supremacy of religion which stops people to question the very integrity of it.

Juthan sings songs critiquing social norms, dogmas and evil practices by making satires on various castes and communities:

*Vaishnav vaniya na gaana*

(Songs for the mercantile caste of *Bania*, who is popular for the utmost exploitation of poor people in the village and living an extravagant life with the money earned from forgery and cheating)

*“Vadnagar visnagar vaishnave bharyu, gopichandan modhu karyu, Ubhu teelu ne vach ma daal, ae re vaishnav nu modhu baar, Ubhoo teelu ne vach ma cheero, rakhe raandi raando vaishnav no dheero.”* (Munshi 22)

(The villages of Visnagar and Vadnagar<sup>xv</sup> are full of *Banias*, who wear sandal *tilaka* on their forehead, crossed *tilaka* on the face, oh! Someone go and burn his face, crossed *tilaka* on his face, he is the one whose sons keep prostitutes at his place)

*Nagar vaniya na gana*

(On tradition of marriage of young girls with old men in *Bania* or trader's caste in India)

*“Maari re amba maa, pander pander panderiyaan  
Ghardo var na joje maa, pander pander panderiyaan  
Kuvo hawado joje maa, pander pander panderiyaan  
Ghardo var na joje maa, pander pander panderyiaan”* (Munshi 24)

(Hail! my goddess, I am just fifteen, fifteen and just fifteen, please mother don't look an old man to marry me, oh! mother throw me in the well, but don't marry me with an old man, I am just fifteen, fifteen and just fifteen, hey mother don't look for an old man, I am just fifteen, fifteen and fifteen)

*Dedhnu gaanu*

(Songs for the scavenging caste which depicts painful life of the untouchable caste in South Asian society)

*“Maavtar dedh no avtar bhundo, Maavtar dedh no avtar bhundo,  
Unadana khara tadka, chhato maheeno paet, Maa dedh no avatar bhundo”* (Munshi 28)

(Hail mother! The life of *dedh* is worst form of life, hail mother! The life of *dedh* is worst form of life, the rays of sun is killing me, and I am six-month pregnant, hail mother goddess! this form of life is the worst)

Songs of soldier's wife. Since her husband stays away from her for the most months of a year, she expresses her anguish and love at the same time.

*“Palang upar sej bichhau, karu paan ke beede, Mera miyaan ku avat dekhu, maaru gadhe ke leende”* (Munshi 29)

(I will decorate my bed with flowers and prepare beetle leaves, if I see my husband coming, I feel like beating him with donkey's dung)

Against exploitation by corrupt Kings and Princes

*“Kalyug tere raj me, bhaya andhera ghor, Chor kare kotwaali, phir ulta dande chor  
Haqme suba nawab, laanch lain yay chukave, Mare gaye gareeb, raaj kalyug aaye”*  
(Munshi 32)

(The age of *Kaliyuga*<sup>xvi</sup>, is the age of darkness, since the thieves have become protectors, they have no fear from the world, they are the Nabob, and they have the power, it is the poor who suffer in the age of *Kaliyuga*)

On Brahmins, Brahmins, Hindu priestly caste are believed as perpetuators of social discrimination and religious pageantry. Juthan attacks brahmins for promoting irrationality and blind faith in the society

*“Badi fazar me ganga jaave, sandhya tarpan vai karave,  
Laadu khai hote chamna, dhat teri bamna”* (Nilkanth 84)

(They go to the banks of scared river ganga in *fazar*<sup>xvii</sup>, and pay offering every day, the one who is a parasite and keeps eating, cannot be other than the brahmin)

On religious dogmatism

*“Dadhi rakhese khuda na milte, kyu rehta madmast,  
Dadhi rakhe se khuda mileto, gadar pahauche sab bhasht  
Kazi hokar Quran sunave, murgi bakri kabhu na maare,  
Allah Allah ki baat me razi, kahe gyani so sachha Kazi”* (Nilkanth 83)

(If keeping beard is the way to reach the God, then donkeys would have been the closest to Him, and true *Kazi* should abstain from killing birds and dividing people in the name of religion)

On *Rajput*, which is a warrior caste in India, it is a satire on the character of *Rajputs* who lost their power after the establishment of British Empire in India but still enjoys showcase of power that he once had.

*“Chore bethe Kasumba peeve, thar haath lokone gappa deve, Chadhe amal varandhe  
kutta, dhat teri chal Rajputa”* (Munshi 33)

(The one who drinks opium, and keeps boasting about himself sitting idle in the veranda of the house, and the one who never sticks to his own words, can be no other than a *Rajput*)

On *Bania*, *Banias* exploited illiterate poor people of the village as moneylenders and by forging records of the monetary transactions. Therefore, they are most prominent critiqued section of the society.

*“Vikat maar mare bharvaro, vikat raan khede vanjharo  
Hailofailo brahman praniye, dheer rahi lute bajare vaniyo  
Saat vare soni, tran vaare kansaro,  
Aek vaare koli, vaare vaare vanio”* (Munshi 25)

(A *Bharwad*, a shepherd is expert in beating people, *Vanjhara*, a wandering tribes man is expert in crossing desserts, *Brahmin* expertise cheating under the shadow of religion, But a *Bania*, the trader out rightly cheats with calm and patience in the market full of people. If a goldsmith cheats seven times, a coppersmith cheats three times, a *Koli*<sup>xviii</sup> cheats once, and then a *Bania* would cheat till he fleece off everything from a person.)

### **Zhanda-Zhulan no Vesh (The play of Zhanda-Zhulan)**

Another *vesha* performed by a Muslim is of Zhanda Zhulan which projects the trajectories of making of 'illegitimate love' and critiques the very idea of 'legitimacy' in a greater sense. The three main characters of the *vesha* are: Zhanda Zhulan, who is a newly appointed inspector in the Unjha village, Tejo Vanio who is a Modi (trader) of Unjha village, and Teji Modan, is the wife of the Tejo Vanio. Tejo Vanio is an old man married to Teji Modan, a young girl in her 20s. Tejo Vanio is shown as a greedy person who wants to grab the property of the newly-appointed inspector in Unjha. He plans a trick to trap Zhanda, and to execute the plan, he asks his wife to woo the inspector.

The satire on the condition of women is created by depicting the way a wife is considered a commodity by the men. It critically questions the institution of marriage which inevitably creates bondage for the women where man becomes sole proprietor of the woman's body. Tejo Vanio says that some precious belongings of Zhanda are already with me... now where my wife can go even if she robbed off all the body parts? Not only this, the performance is an outcry against certain clichéd understanding of a caste which believed to commoditise human bodies, relations and soul. The humorous projection of the *Bania*, the trading caste particularly in *Bhavai* performances is the voice against exploitative practices of traders and money lender in rural society. It is a strong critique of the very caste structure based on the exploitation of untouchables and outcastes.

Showcasing of the caste practices 'as it is' prevalent in the society on the stage, is an act of rejecting and shaking the base of entrenched caste identities, boldly questioning the 'dominant' normative 'morality' on the stage (Nilkanth 178).

Teji follows her husband and tries to woo Zhanda but unfortunately she herself falls in love with him and Zhanda also expresses his love for Teji. Zhanda and Teji Modan elope to Vadnagar (village of the Teji Modan) for marriage. Teji Modan rejects Zhanda's proposal of

marriage when she reaches her village Vadnagar and asks him to leave the village saying that they are not compatible for each other and thus their relationship cannot be materialised (Nilkanth 137). Zhanda asks for justice from the society and the world. The play takes this issue of ‘incompatibility’ as they realise that their religions are different and Teji is a married woman.

Teji Modan sings loudly that she is a daughter of a very poor family and above all she is a married woman. Her marital status establishes ‘illegitimacy’ of her love for Zhanda and her poverty further makes her insecure of her existence with ‘immorality’ in the society. The loss of ‘honour’ and her guilt of ‘deception’ cut her into pieces from inside. She eventually asks Zhanda to leave Vadnagar and she herself begs for mercy from the society against her ‘sins’ of adultery. Zhanda then leaves for the Mecca and Teji goes to Kashi for repentance of her ‘sins’.

The excerpts from Zhanda Zhulan play:

*“TEJI: (Sings and sways to the accompaniment of the music.)  
Don’t speak to me so roughly, please.  
Whisper tenderly with grace and ease.  
See, my petticoat adorned with flowers,  
My veil glitters like cooling showers.  
Silver bells on ankles shine,  
Tinkling joyously in time,  
As peacocks sing their prideful song  
And birds coo lovingly and long.  
You get your chosen mate  
Only when it’s in your fate.  
(Speaks) Oh, Zanda ! (Music stops)  
TEJO: Teji, that’s not my name. Whose name did you whisper?  
(TEJO moves away flirtatiously; TEJO follows)  
Whose? Then it’s true! You love someone else.  
TEJI: (Music resumes and TEJI sings and dances)  
You get your chosen mate  
Only when it’s in your fate.  
Alas!  
My true love came too late” (Richmond and Abrams 31).*

Teji Modan and Zhanda Zhulan are treated as legends of love in the *Bhavai* performance. Their graves are situated in Vadnagar, Patan District, North Gujarat, and they are still worshipped. The play neither projects Zhanda as a ‘sinner’ nor Teji as ‘immoral’, in fact, contradictions and conflicts of society are placed right across the audience. The notions like ‘love’ ‘deception’ ‘loyalty’ ‘guilt’ and ‘sin’ are deconstructed through the performance. Zhanda

is not cursed in the play, he is not punished either for his act of abscondment from the office of Inspector or for loving a married Hindu woman (Richmond and Abrams 31). Above that, the lives of the characters are laid bare so much so that it is open for subjective interpretation which ultimately turned them into legends of love.

***The Vesha of Chhelbatau (The Play of Chhelbatau)***

“*Jia hamara tumne lia, tum hamko kuchh do; Mai tamo par vari feri, dil chahe so lo*”  
(Nilkanth 281)

(Rani Mohana is depicting her love for a Muslim ironsmith Chhelbatau saying that I gave my heart to you now it is your turn to give your heart to me.)

The *Vesha* of Chhelbatau is one of the most popular plays of the *Bhavai* tradition. It consists of three main characters: Chhelbatau who is a Muslim ironsmith in Ahmadnagar, Santel is a spy of the King and Rani Mohana, the queen of Ahmadnagar. In this play, Rani Mohana, the queen of the Nizam of Ahmadnagar falls in love with Lalji Luhaar who was named as Chhelbatau by the Nizam of Hyderabad. Chhelbatau promised to supply weapons and ammunitions to the Deccan where the Nizam was engaged in the wars. This entails Chhelbatau’s frequent visits to the court. Rani Mohana then gets endeared by Chhelbatau and both of them fall in love with each other. Their love reaches such a pivotal point that Rani Mohana and Chhelbatau decided to elope to escape social sanctions. This act as expected bewilders Chimanshah, a minister of the Ahmadnagar Kingdom and he immediately orders four spies to catch Chhelbatau dead or alive. One agent finally caught Chhelbatau but he himself starts supporting the love of Chhelbatau and Rani Mohana. Chhelbatau is then ultimately catches by other spying agents and is produced alive in the court. This ‘immoral’ act of love between a married woman and, most importantly, the queen of the kingdom, and a mere ironsmith makes Rani Mohana’s mother-in-law seethe with anger and consequently she conspires to kill Chhelbatau and succeeds in her conspiracy too. But Allah listens to the scream of Rani Mohana and sends his messenger to Earth to infuse life back into the body of Chhelbatau for the reunion of the love between Rani Mohana and Chhelbatau.

A deep glance at the dialogues in the form of *kavitta dohas* and *chhand* is also important to understand the intricacies of the plot which critically comments on various social evils that perpetuate because of the rigid and ensconced understanding of the social system, as well as

produce the ‘naked’ truth of the hierarchically-structured society in adirect manner. Rani Mohana in a letter to Chhelbatau writes the agonies of polygamy and a man’s right to marry as many woman as he wants. Rani Mohana explicates her discontent by saying that *ek nar tene bahu naar, aavi rahi ulaase; bhogave maas be-char, pachhe koi na rahe paase* which means that a man marries many girls and discards them after enjoyment of just two –four months which ultimately throws women in the throes of darkness of the world (Nilkanth 185). In the fear of being caught, Rani Mohana requests Chhelbatu to move to such a place anywhere on Earth where there is no fear of being caught and Chhelbatau replies her that as far as sun and moon are there, there can be no such place without fear in this universe.

*“Sarge jau aekla mane moti visaaman thay (2)  
Chaalo piyu aapde tya jaiye jya jamno bhay na hoy  
Tame jeevo hame na mariye tenu dukh dekhe na koye  
Gheli naar kaa thay bavari taaru man vichari joye  
Jete uge soor chaandlo tetle jam bhay hoye”* (Nilkanth 245)

(Rani Mohana sings, I want to escape from this world full of fears, let’s elope somewhere my beloved, I don’t want you to see my death and I don’t want to see you being killed by my husband. Chhelbatau replies, oh darling! Don’t act so foolish, there is no corner in the world where fear cannot reach. Fear is omnipresent on earth like the sun and moon)

Rani Mohana gets to know about the murder of Chhelbatau and the conspiracy of murder being planned by her mother-in-law and finally climaxed by his brother-in-law, she sings in grief; *fat re saas kasayini tero kabuye bhalo na hoye; Tere sir par pado bijli, mero sai kare so hoye* which means that Oh mother! You the slaughterer of my beloved Chhelbatau, you cannot take his life... only God can give and take the lives of people. At the very moment, Zhando Asmaan *faqir*, the messenger of the God comes to Rani Mohana and explicates the purpose of his arrival. Zhando Asmaan *faqir* says that Allah has sent him to infuse life in the body of Chhelbatau and thus he resuscitates him by sprinkling milk on his body. Chhelbatau leaves the stage by bowing down and thanking the spectators.

The play of *Chhelbatau* gives an alternative understanding of the ‘righteousness’ of the ‘right’ by countering rigidity in the society. The act of infusing life into the body of Chhelbatau for the reunion of their love pinpoints that what is ‘wrong’ in the eyes of worldly beings is not ‘wrong’ in the eyes of heavenly beings, which boldly tries to question the superimposed codes of

‘right.’ Albeit, historicity of the narratives always remains under question since they do not walk along the recorded historical facts, in fact, they often move against the logics of historicity in a larger perspective, and try to unfold the social structure by placing elements of the very structure in a different manner so that a tint of fluidity can be infused into it.

In the retrospect, *Bhavai* draws attention towards three important aspects emerging from the narratives and their performativity in present society. Firstly, it accentuates fluid territories of religion in popular tradition and draws attention towards a potential medium of perpetuating accommodation and tolerance though mediums like satire and humour which were creatively used by *Bhavai* performers to maintain peace in the society. Secondly, *Bhavai* rejects superficially constructed ‘normative understanding’ which makes religious and caste identity entrenched and further compartmentalise the social structure. Lastly, it not only leads to liminal performative practices but also dissolves boundaries between faiths, and high and low casts in the society. It echoes multiple narratives of the ‘lived’ pasts by peoples which are still alive in the rural landscape of India.

---

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The literal meaning of *vesha* is costume or appearance. *Bhavai* plays are called *vesha* as they are based on depiction of various caste communities and religion through caste-community based attires.

<sup>1</sup>The lines are derived from the *vesha* of *Zhanda Zhulan* where performers are insisting on significance of discussion and reflection in society. He says that without discussions and debates people will end up just becoming fools. It is important to note here that the Arabic term *zikh* is creatively used here which in sufi spirituality means remembrance of the almighty and in popular language it is understood as discussion.

<sup>1</sup> Occupation are divided on the basis of caste in South Asian society and similarly traditional performances are also customarily tied to particular caste. *Nayak* among Hindus and *Mirasi* among Muslim have the customary right to perform *Bhavai*.

<sup>1</sup>*Navratri*, the literal meaning is nine nights. It is a festival of Hindu Goddesses celebrated for nine days which is also the most significant days for *Bhavai* performances. This festival falls in the month of *Ashvin* (September-October) according to Hindu calendar.

<sup>1</sup>The character of *Juthan* introduces himself saying that he was once the king of Bukhara and his name was Sheikh Hussain. He left everything to become an ascetic (called *faqir* in Islam) and then named himself as *Juthan* meaning a ‘liar’.

<sup>1</sup> The literal meaning of *garas* is the one who held the land. *Bhavai* troupes have traditional right to perform in a particular region or village and collect dues from the people of that village.

<sup>1</sup>It is the character of *Juthan* that gives power to forecast and predict future of the people. No other character has the same spiritual power. Whatever *Juthan* says becomes an ultimate ‘truth’ of life. He is considered as child of the God with all the charismatic powers endowed upon him.

<sup>1</sup>*Jumma* is an Arabic term for Friday. Friday is the culmination day of Islamic week just like Sunday is culmination day of week according to Christianity. On Friday Muslims offer prayers in the mosque. This day is also considered as most sacred and auspicious day by the Muslims.

<sup>1</sup>*Chopat* is a traditional Indian game played by four people. It is widely popular in Western parts of India.

<sup>1</sup>*Gilli Danda* is also a game played in rural areas of India. It is a game played with two sticks; one is smaller stick and the other is a long thin stick.

<sup>1</sup>*Geri Dara* is a game similar to Gilli Danda. In this game, *geri* is a long wooden stick and *dara* is small ball. Ball is hit with the long stick.

<sup>1</sup>Lakhoti is a traditional street game played with *Kancha* meaning marbles.

<sup>1</sup>*Lakdi* literally means wooden stick. It is a street game played with wooden stick by the children. A tyre or a small wheel is attached to a stick and then dragged by the children.

<sup>1</sup>Kho-Kho is one of the most popular traditional games of India. Its origin is believed to be in Maharashtra. The rules of the game were framed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century at Poona Gymkhana. Baroda Gymkhana was the first institution that printed its rules in order to make them universal in nature.

<sup>1</sup> Villages in North Gujarat, India.

<sup>1</sup>*Kaliyuga* is the fourth age after *Sat yuga*, *Treta yuga*, *Dwapar yuga* according to Hindu mythology and the last stage called *Kalayuga* symbolise contemporary times of socio-cultural corruption.

<sup>1</sup>*Fazar* is Arabic term for early morning.

<sup>1</sup> An untouchable caste in India engaged in menial work.

### Works Cited

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelias and His World*. Translated by Helene Iswolsky. Indiana University Press, 1984.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. University of Texas Press, 1981.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. Columbia University Press, 1993.
- Dave, Narmadshankar Lalshankar. *Narmakavita*. Kavi Narmad Yugavart Press, 1993.
- Jenning, Sue. *Theatre, Ritual and Transformation: The Senoi Temiars*. Routledge, 1995.
- Kadakhia, Krishnakant. *Bhavai: Swaroop ane Lakshno*. M S University Press, 1996.
- Nilkanth, Mahipatram Rupram. *Bhavai Sangraha*. Gujarat Sahitya Sabha, 1866.
- Nilkanth, Ramanlal. *Rai no Parvat*. Sahitya Academy Press, 1914.
- Panchal, Govardhan. *Bhavai ane tenu Lakshanik Aharya-Nepathyavidhan*. Gujarat Sahitya Academy Press, 2006.
- Richmond, Farley and Tevia Abrams. *Vanio and Zhanda Zhulan: Two Gujarati Folk Plays*. Adapted by Farley Richmond and Tevia Abrams from a translation by Harish Trivedi. A Writers Workshop Publications, 1971.
- Sebastian, V. "Cultural Elites and Disciplining Bhavai," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol No. 49: Issue 7, 2014, pp 59-66.
- Shah, AM and Shroff, R G. "The Vahivancha Barots of Gujarat: A caste of Genealogists and Mythographers," *Journal of American Folk Lore*, Vol. 71: Issue 28, 1958, pp. 246-276.
- Staal, Frits. *Ritual and Meaning: Ritual Without Meaning*. Motilal Banarsidas Publication, 1989.
- Udayram, Ranchhordas. *Natya Prakash*. Gujarat Sahitya Parishad, 1870.