

Contesting Identities, Caste and Power: Reshma-Chuharmal Nautanki, A Dalit Folk Theatre in Bihar

The Background

In recent decades historically oppressed and untouchable communities of North India, especially in the state of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, have created a new political space through their own cultural resources and traditions. This process of carving out a public space of their own against the persisting domination of Brahmanism has also led to development of conflicts, contradictions and renegotiations among upper castes, OBCs and the Dalits. It primarily emerged with the articulation of contestation, conflict and negotiation in the political sphere around the issue of *Izzat*. Different oral forms of communication like community-based Nautanki have been instrumental in facilitating this struggle. Nautanki has not only instilled 'we-feeling' within the marginalised communities but also has become a vehicle through which the multiple voices of the community reach to the millions of people.

Nautanki, a folk theatre, has been an immensely popular performing art among the Dalits of Bihar. One such Nautanki popular in the Bhojpur and Magadh regions of Bihar is 'Rani Reshma—Chuharmal ka Khela'. The love story of an upper caste aristocratic lady Reshma and a lower caste hero Chuharmal represents defiance and resistance from below to the caste-feudal domination. The lower caste people of Magahi and Bhojpuri regions of Bihar recite it as a folk ballad and perform it as a nautanki. For the lower castes particularly the Dusadhs, it is a story of their glorious past and the rich tradition of their community. But the Bhumihars receive it as a conscious attempt by the lower castes to insult them. Melas (fairs) are held in the name of Chuharmal every year for 2-3 days in the month of April in this region. Lakhs of people come here to worship the hero. The first harvest is offered to Chuharmal. The people not only worship the hero but also indulge in festivities during the fair. They beat the danka (a large drum) and some of them sing, dance and play Gadaka. The orality, festivity and rituals continually revive the memory of Chuharmal.

Different versions of the story have been reproduced over time, in which Chuharmal, the hero, is represented differently, as a romantic hero or as a social bandit, as a popular nationalist acting against the British or as a

hero of the underclass who challenges upper-caste, landlord authority. The story of Reshma and Chuharmal are in circulation in print form also, mostly in the form of booklets produced by the upcoming section of dalit intelligentsia whose presence is now pronounced in the region. The objective of bringing out these booklets is revealed by the authors in the introduction to the various editions. These literatures are in circulation mostly in the small towns and rural areas of Bihar that form the core readership. The popularity of such literature points to the emergence of a new consciousness, visible in certain sections of society that had hitherto slumbered at the periphery of history but have now acquired a new outlook. Not only writers but also the publishers of such literature come from the lower-caste political activist groups and intellectuals. Interestingly, this emerging trend has not only facilitated the popularity of the Nautanki itself, but has also expanded the communication space among diverse groups.

In view of the above, a study of the Reshma- ChuharmalNautanki was undertaken by Deshkal Society, with financial support from IFA, Bangalore, in order to unravel the socio-cultural and political significance of this cultural tradition and its continued practice among the marginalized communities. The study sought to seek answers to the following key questions.

- Why and how the cultural tradition of Nautanki has been a source of inspiration for Dalit communities to fight against oppression and subjugation of Brahmanism and landlordism?
- How does conflict and negotiation among Dalits and non-Dalits operate in the public space, particularly in public fairs?
- What are the regional variations in Nautankis? In what ways these variations represent the internal contradictions within the Dalits?
- What makes the Dalit communities nourish such cultural traditions against all odds?

Findings of the study

- The study shows that the cultural performances of Reshma-Chuharmal-Nautanki and Chuharmal Mela are part of the emancipatory endeavors of the Dusadh community against the oppression and subjugation of the dominant castes. These performances empower the community which is placed slightly higher in the caste

hierarchy among Dalits and is known for its militant nature; enable the community to gain 'self-respect' and contribute to their assertion against the socio- cultural oppression of the dominant castes and communities. It also shows how the community asserts its identity through such performances by reinventing its culture and tradition.

- The performance of the Nautanki in the Chuharmal Mela for commemorating the saga of Reshma-Chuharmal has become an important phenomenon in recent decades. Its increasing representation of in the mainstream public space is a sign of collective assertion of the community against the dominant castes and communities, and has a direct impact on the social, cultural and political landscape of the state. For example, if we look at the key distinctive feature of the Reshma-Chuharmal Mela which is organized each year near Mokama in Bihar, we find that this Mela works as a critical means for giving a new meaning to the identity of the Dusadh community and the associated political and social churnings in the community and the society.
- The study also shows that the basis of the Reshma-Chuharmal myth/history is the community memory that has been preserved through oral transmission of the stories for generations. In recent decades, there have been several changes in the narration of the myth/story of Reshma-Chuharmal within and across the regions. The various versions of the story are also available now in the form of printed booklets which are sold on footpaths and public places across small towns and districts in the state. The availability of the print versions has also led to an increase in the outreach of the cultural forms and expressions signified by the stories.
- Cultural performance of Reshma-Chuharmal Nautanki is full of profound meanings. There are many signifiers of the cultural performance of the Nautanki, and the most important are those that represent the expression of the 'cultural identity' and the 'tension' that these communities have in their 'practice of identity politics' and 'everyday relationship' vis- a –vis the dominant communities and their cultural and social practices. These signifiers are explicit and perceptible in this study in relation to the everyday culture of the Dusadh community and their Nautanki.
- There has been a significant socio-economic differentiation within the Dusadh community in recent decades, and this has influenced the profile of community participation in the Nautanki of Reshma-Chuharmal. While

on the one hand the upper layers among the Dusadh community have started distancing themselves from the Reshma-Chuharmal Nautanki, respectability of the Nautanki has increased among the poor Dusadhs in rural areas, There is a direct impact of such differentiation on those who are performing the Nautankias they are not getting the required economic support for their performance from the affluent sections among the Dusadh community. Such a differential support appears to be creating a difficult situation for the sustainability of this cultural form. There is also no systematic state support to the artists involved for making their livelihoods sustainable. In this sense, there is an urgent need to protect the future of this special cultural practice and cultural practitioners and develop a cultural policy from the perspective of livelihoods.