

# Bahurupi Culture in the Light of Bakhtin's Carnavalesque: An Escape from Reality

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**Abstract-** This paper approaches the Bahurupi Culture of India, spread through many parts of the country, in the light of "Carnavalesque" a concept proposed and popularized by the Russian Philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin in his book *Rabelais and His World*. This paper will try to elucidate the Bahurupi Culture as an example of the spirit of Carnavalesque where all the social hierarchies are turned upside down and the only law people speak of is the law of freedom. The purpose of this dissertation is to show the importance of Carnavalesque in the lives of the Bahurupis and how they survive when they are out of that carnival world. This paper tries to present the Bahurupi Culture affected by the "decarnivalization" that is the state of these people when they are out of the Carnival world. Much like what Bakhtin proposed Bahurupis enjoy respect in society when they have their disguises on particularly because they put on the guises of Gods. This paper also tries to shine some light upon the Bahurupi art as it is slowly fading away.

**Keywords-** Carnival, Carnavalesque, Social hierarchy, Decarnivalization, Bahurupi.

## INTRODUCTION

Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin(1895-1975), Russian literary theorist and philosopher whose works became popular only in the 1960s; this was mostly due to the new translations of some of the celebrated Western Scholars for example Katerina Clark, Michael Holquist, Caryl Emerson and others who had seized upon his contemporary relevance. Bakhtin's large assortment of ideas and concepts significantly influenced Western thought process in Cultural history, linguistics, aesthetics, and literary theory. The world of literary theory is obliged to him for his groundbreaking concepts- *polyphony, heteroglossia, carnival, and, ofcourse, dialogism itself*- that he introduced in the world via his classic texts, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*(1929), *The Dialogic Imagination* (1934-5), and *Rabelais and His World* (1965).

The term 'Carnavalesque' originated in Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* and was further developed in his book *Rabelais and His World*. Bakhtin lived under the Soviet rule of Stalin who restricted open critiques of authority (in fact; Bakhtin spent ten years in exile only for that reason). As a result, Bakhtin tried to find new poetic means of telling stories that focused more on literature, lyricism, and laughter as strategies of resistance. For Bakhtin, the 'Carnavalesque' is both the delineation of a historical phenomenon and a certain literary tendency. Historically speaking, Bakhtin had great interest in the carnivals of the Mediaeval Europe. He regarded those carnivals as junctures in which the political, ideological, and legal authority of both the Church and State were reversed, though temporarily- during the anarchic and liberating period of the carnivals.

Bakhtin was attempting to find literary examples where power was subverted. Thus, he outlined a concept of the 'Carnival' via reading the works of Francois Rabelais, particularly from his novel *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. For Bakhtin, the bad language, comic violence, satire, exaggeration, and shape- shifting which fill this novel, are the greatest examples of Carnavalesque literature- like the carnivals themselves- dismantled tyrannical and moldy conventions and cleared the path for imagination and the never- ending project of emancipation.

"...it(Carnival) marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal." Introduction to "Rabelais and His World", Pg-10

The term 'Carnival' has been extensively plundered by various literary and cultural theorists to explain such texts and events in which the whole world is temporarily 'turned upside down'. Bakhtin writes in

his Introduction to *Rabelais and His World* that Carnivals are special and unique specifically because they permit the established social hierarchies to be altered or overturned, albeit only for the time being.

*“The suspension of hierarchical precedence during carnival time was of particular significance. Rank was especially evident in official feasts... it was a consecration of inequality. On contrary, all were considered equal during carnival...”*

Introduction to “Rabelais and His World”, Pg-10

Carnival’s true liberating potential can be seen in the fact that set rules and beliefs were not immune to ridicule or reconception at that time. Bakhtin presents four categories of the “carnivalistic sense of the world”:-

(1) Free and Familiar interaction between people: in the Carnival the people who are normally separated from one another can interact and freely express themselves.

(2) Eccentric behaviour: behaviour that was otherwise not accepted in normal life is legitimate in Carnival, and the hidden sides of human nature are revealed.

(3) Carnivalistic misalliances: The liberating attitude of the Carnival enables everything which is normally disconnected to connect- the sacred with the profane, the new and old, the high and low etc.

(4) Sacrilegious: For Bakhtin, the Carnival is the site of ungodliness, of blasphemy, profanity and parodies on things that are sacred.

The central ritualistic act of the carnival, according to Bakhtin is the false coronation and deposition of the carnival king. During the carnival, the complete opposite of the king- the slave or the clown- is coronated with all rituals, only to be shamefully deposed later. The core of the Carnavalesque sense of the world stands at the base of this act- the pathos of change and renewal, of death and rebirth. It is a time in which everything is exterminated and renewed.

For Bakhtin, Carnavalesque imagery is always dualistic and ambivalent. In “Carnival and Carnavalesque”, he mentions that the mediaeval people lived a double life. On the one hand stood the normal, serious, official and mundane life which were subordinated to strict hierarchical social order and full of terror and dogmatism. And on the other hand there was the Carnavalesque life which was filled with ambivalent laughter, sacrilegious and the defilement

of anything sacred, humiliations and familiar contact with everyone.

*“...all were considered equal during carnival. Here...a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age.”*

Introduction to “Rabelais and His World”, Pg-10

## BAHURUPI CULTURE

The word “Bahurupi” which literally means “multi-formed”, has been obtained from the Sanskrit language ( Bahu- many and Rupa- form). Bahurupis are the people who transform themselves physically into various characters, most of the time from Hindu Mythology. The Bahurupi Culture once had immense popularity in the Indian state of West Bengal. The Bahurupis belong to the ‘Bediya’ community, a Scheduled Tribe(ST) found mainly in eastern India. Bahurupi has also been termed as the ‘Chameleon art’ in some government documents, due to their ability to change appearances at will. In earlier times, the Bediyas were hunters, moving around the forests adjoining Mayurakshi River, catching birds and then selling them in the local markets. As a tribe considered low in the social hierarchy, the Bediyas were restricted from occupations like weaving, farming, and crafts. Later, when forest laws were enacted, they were forced to abandon their traditional hunting practices. Due to various restrictions, they had to discover alternative livelihoods for example snake charmers, herbal medicine sellers, monkey charmers, and other itinerant professions.

Around this time, a Bediya guard who was employed at a zamindar’s house, onlooked a stage performance by a ‘noti’ (a trained actor). Almost like the Bahurupi, the noti’s performance was a solo act with several makeovers. The guard was so much fascinated by the performance that he taught it to the other members of his close- knit Bediya community. Eventually the Bahurupi tradition emerged from there.

1.Social hierarchy overturned:-

One of the most important factors that makes the Carnavalesque theme successful is the idea of the reversal of the societal roles that exist almost in every era. There are certain roles set upon the humankind by the society and those roles must not be altered in any

case. For Bakhtin, Carnavalesque is the unofficial culture which had developed out of thousands of years of ancient folk ritual. Carnival opposed the official serious culture of the church and feudal court with a culture of feasts, fairs, pageants, clowns, fools, jugglers, trained animals, profanity, laughter and parody. Carnival was above all a culture of comedy, festival and the marketplace.

The reversal of the social hierarchy is also visible in the Bahurupi culture where the Bahurupis metamorphose themselves into different characters and the most liked role they take into consideration is the role of a Hindu God or Goddess. The very idea of transfiguring oneself into a God from a mere human being itself is a Carnavalesque idea. The set roles are being altered when a person changes himself to the almighty God. And the most important fact is that the people or the audience accepts it. The Bahurupis have always been aware of the discrimination and the dynamics of the caste system. When they visit any village, Bahurupis are not allowed inside homes, unless it belongs to a low- caste family. They are expelled as 'untouchables' by the upper- caste families. However, during their performances, their transformation into god's and goddesses seems to reduce the caste barriers momentarily. Regardless of their caste, people interact and seek blessings from the avatars even if they do not see the actual individual as an equal. The Carnavalesque theme is visibly apparent here. The Bahurupis, during their 'second life' or 'the carnival life' at least enjoy few privileges. Their 'second life' as it seems, becomes an escape from the reality. In normal life they are treated as untouchables and are not accepted in the society as respected human beings. Their carnivalized life helps them flee from the social stratification.

*"These occasions (carnivals) built a second world and a second Life outside officialdom."*

Introduction to "Rabelais and His World" pg-6

2. Act of Masquerading:-

*"Even more important is the theme of the mask, the most complex theme of folk culture. The mask is connected with the joy of change and reincarnation..."*

Rabelais and His World, pg-40

Carnival unmasks through the masks; the conformity to oneself gives way to the violation of natural

boundaries and the relativity of all identities. Similarly, in the Bahurupi culture, the Bahurupis take help of make overs for their performances. For the purpose of make up a Bahurupi usually takes help of zinc oxide, Vaseline, coconut oil, vermilion powder and alaktaka liquid etc. They transform themselves into various Hindu Gods and Goddesses through the help of make ups and costumes. The theme of the mask is equally important in both the Carnavalesque and in the Bahurupi folk culture. The mask is associated with the triumph of mutation and metempsychosis, the mask is connected "...with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity".

The idea of comparing masks to make up seems quite controversial but we must not forget that the Mediaeval Mystery plays depended heavily upon the masks and as the notion of realism took over the mindset of the world, cosmetics came to replace masks. The art of Masquerading was almost gone by the time of Shakespeare. So, both the art of masquerading and the art of make up can be considered equal in regards with concealing one's face. Because the face is too sensitive and too receptive. It comes au naturel in front of the world while the mask or the make up hides it and gives opportunity to a person to present his other self before the world.

*"...it(the mask) rejects conformity to oneself. The mask is related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries, to mockery and familiar nicknames. It contains the playful element of life; it is based on a peculiar interrelation of reality and image, characteristic of the most ancient rituals and spectacles".*

Rabelais and His World, pg-40

3. Relationship between the performers and spectators:-

The acts performed by the Bahurupis, most of the time are meant to educate, inform and entertain the audience. This might be the sole performing art where the actors do not have a particular platform to perform. The Bahurupis are humorous, talented and streetwise. They captivate the attention of the audience in several ways- mocking, teasing, scaring and chasing the spectators around, or indulging into bogus fights. The audience gets amazed by their unpredictable behaviors. They appreciate their playfulness and meaningless banter.

The idea of Carnavalesque, as we know, was inspired by the mediaeval carnival festivals. And Carnival does not accept any dissimilitude between the actors and the onlookers. During a carnival, there is no law except the law of freedom and there is no other life outside the carnival world. The official world remains constant until the carnival lasts. There is neither any boundaries nor any caste distinction between the actors and the spectators. The spectators merge with the performers and become a part of them. They also escape from the outer world through carnivals. Likewise, the audiences that witness the Bahurupis performing, do not only remain as spectators rather they also participate in their carnivalized world, a world where they are not bound to any social restrictions.

*“During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom.”*

Introduction to “Rabelais and His World”, pg-7to 8

People have also witnessed many times that when a Bahurupi performs a ‘humorous’ act which is addressed towards the audience, the audience also take part in it. The spectators not only just stands there rather they continue the bahurupi’s act through mocking an escape or running, jumping, fighting etc. It suggests that the invisible separation or barrier between the performer and the audience ceases to matter here. By merging with the performers, the audience also rejects the very idea of the societal stratification.

*“...Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it.”*

Introduction to “Rabelais and His World”, pg- 7to 8

The Decarnivalization:

*“As concerns Carnival. I didn’t have in mind carnival as something cheerful. Not at all! In every carnival image there’s the presence of death. Speaking with your terminology- carnival is tragedy. It’s only that here, tragedy is not the final word.”*

(M.M Bakhtin at his dissertation defense , 15 November 1946, Rabelais in the History of Realism) The word ‘Decarnivalization’ which means a world out of the carnival world where death is omnipresent, is taken from a research paper done by Barsony

Marton entitled *Shakespeare’s Clown: The Decarnivalization of the World in Three of His Dramas*. Here, decarnivalization simply means complete annihilation, a state where the laughter seems to lose its life and the cheerful environment of the carnival turns into destined death and destruction. As the time passes the newer forms of entertainments such as television, cinema, and internet have invaded upon the traditional folk-art forms. We are living in an age where only the west approved forms of entertainment can be termed as modern and the rest of the entertainment sources are either discarded or forgotten. A very intriguing question arises here that whether our mindset is still colonized? This is perhaps, the best definition of neocolonialism where we are willingly letting the cultural imperialism control our minds. We are so much occupied with the modern means of entertainment that we have totally forgotten our cultural and traditional art forms.

After going through a lot of documentaries on the internet regarding the Bahurupi culture, the final interpretation that can be clearly seen is that the Bahurupis are also living in a ‘decarnivalized’ world. In their carnival world they are free from every social stratification. They enjoy their profession which helps them escape their real world. The Bahurupi Culture had immense social relevance at a time when there was no sort of amusement or entertainment for the people. The Bahurupis were significant because they provided happiness and fun through mythological and fantastical performances in the mundane lives of people. There were times when the Bahurupis would continue their performances throughout the year, going from one door to another in search of audience. In return of their performances they would receive money or food and clothes.

With the flux of time, and increased availability of modern entertainment, they have been forced into a life of hardship and pain. The changing tastes of people accompanied with the advent of television and social media have virtually sounded *Coup da Grace*( death toll) for them, forcing them to find alternate means of livelihood. Through the statement of a Bahurupi woman from Birbhum West Bengal, Chabi Chowdhury, we find that one of the reasons of the decreasing numbers of the Bahurupis is their losing of respect among the people. The woman artist stated:

*“There were days when people touched our feet and took blessings though they knew we were just dressed as gods and goddesses”, she told to VillageSquare.in. “But things have changed now and it’s painful that some have even begun to look down upon us as beggars.”*

And now the people pass by the Bahurupi artists without even noticing them. It is very disheartening to see that even though there is government scheme which is meant to support the folk artists, the Bahurupis are still suffering because they do not possess the retainer ship card under the Lokprasar Prakalpa and also they have to go through a lot of formalities and continued pleas to the government officials to get the card. There are also some cases where the real Bahurupis suffer while the fake ones who do not even belong to the Bahurupi community possess the retainer card and perform stage shows and make money.

There were times when Bahurupis visited our localities and villages but now we hardly see them. This is the decarnivalization where there is no fun and laughter. There is only suffering and misery left for them. Their carnival life, in a way was an escape from the reality. If the concerned authorities do not make any convenient arrangements to change the bahurupi’s condition, the rich folk culture will soon only remain a part of our happy memories.

#### CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this dissertation paper was to throw light on the Bahurupi Culture in regards with the idea of Carnavalesque. The Bahurupi Culture is a very suitable example of the theme of Carnavalesque. There are many features of Carnavalesque infused in this folk art of the street performers. This paper describes how the Bahurupis overturn the boundaries by reversing roles. The masquerading (the make up) helps them reincarnate into Gods, Goddesses and various other characters and in a way the make up gives them opportunity to present the other selves to the world. This paper tries to elucidate the importance of the Carnavalesque in the lives of the Bahurupi people. And also it discusses the revived idea of the ‘decarnivalization’ in relation to the Bahurupi Culture. The difference between their disguised identity and real identity is visibly apparent. The treatment they

receive from people during and after their performances is agonizing. In conclusion this paper tries to present the idea that the carnivalized or other world of the Bahurupis is the only way to escape from their reality. Just like the carnival is slowly but surely losing its popularity so is the art of Bahurupis. The dying out of this art form will signal the death of a culture partly.

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