



## Interview



*Balwant Thakur by  
Archana Kumari*

## **Balwant Thakur: A One Man Institution**

### **Interview**

**by**

**Archana Kumari**

*“He is shy, hesitant to talk about himself or his work almost as if act of speech would be a desecration of art. It is not easy to corner Balwant Thakur. But it is important to know how this 30 year-old from Jammu had managed to produce bewilderingly brilliant plays twice in succession. Once going he let off steam! ”.*

- Kavita Nagpal, Delhi based theatre critic wrote in **Hindustan Times**.

Those who have even the slightest interest in theatre must have heard this name once in their lives – “Balwant Thakur” – known as the magic man of theatre, is one of the most creative theatre directors of the country who has given a new identity to Indian theatre with his highly innovative theatre productions. Decorated with the highest Indian honor in performing arts i.e, Sangeet Natak Akademi Award for Direction in theatre, Balwant Thakur is credited for being the youngest theatre director of India who has participated in over two hundred National Theatre Festivals as a director, which is a record in the country. His outstanding visual poetics on stage like ‘Ghumayee’ ‘Bawa Jitto’ ‘Suno Eh Kahani’ and ‘Mahabhoj’ have vibrated the theatre scene of North India. It was indeed a matter of pride for the interviewer to get to see a glimpse of this incredible personality. It’s a small endeavour to bring forth his mesmerizing journey to you.

**Q.1. How did you get attracted towards theatre?**

**Ans.** I was born on 25<sup>th</sup> of December 1960 in a hilly village, Bakkal, Distt. Reasi of J&K which is a repository of traditional performing arts. It had an indelible impact on my early childhood where I grew up singing and dancing with traditional performers. My father Hari Saran Thakur was a patron of traditional performers, so he represented the State at many national events. It inspired young artist in me further. After completing my primary education in this village, I was shifted to Jyotipuram (Reasi) town where I studied till 12<sup>th</sup> standard. Jyotipuram being a metropolitan town gave me a diverse cultural exposure in these formative years by which I developed leadership qualities. I joined an evening group and started assisting them in all their allied jobs including, publicity, back-stage work, house management etc. I formed a group with the help of his six friends ‘**Seven Stars**’ and staged plays like ‘**Sabhya Saanp**’ and ‘**Kanyadaan**’. Thus I got inspiration for theatre around me and my passion kept me attached to it wherever I went.

**Q.2. Did you take any formal training in theatre?**

**Ans.** No. I didn’t take any formal training in theatre. However it was deeply imprinted in my mind and my heart followed it. Like the son of the soil, I learnt theatre from my surrounding and improved my vision. When I shifted to Jammu for graduation in Business Management and Economics from MAM College, I started writing for Radio Kashmir, Jammu and presented talks, short stories, poetry, and short plays in their Yuva-Vani service. I continued acting, directing and writing plays for the inter-college competitions during this period. That was how I groomed a perfect theatre person inside me.

**Q. 3. What challenges you faced while your journey to become a theatre personality?**

**Ans.** Despite my ultimate ambition to do post graduation in dramatics, I was forced to join LLB (professional) to fulfill parental aspiration. Three years in the University turned out to be a turning point in my career where in quest of achieving excellence I strived hard, contributed in the renaissance and brought top honours in Dramatics for University of Jammu

in Zonal and National events. However, there were unnecessary interference and less creative liberty with which I had to struggle hard.

**Q. 4. How ‘Natrang’ came into being and gave you a separate identity?**

**Ans.** I established ‘Natrang’ in 1983 with the help of my colleagues in order to get creative freedom. In the first year of the inception of Natrang, we won the State Academy award for best production ‘**Chauraha**’ directed by me. Within a short span of time Natrang became a brand name for producing and directing successful plays like ‘**Neeli Jheel**’ ‘**Nanhen Kandhey Nanhen Pair**’ ‘**Singhasan Khali Hai**’ and ‘**Rang Nagri**’. In 1984-85, I wrote two plays ‘**Ek Sangharsh Ka Ant**’ and ‘**Yeh Laash Kiski Hai**’, the later won best short play award in many All-India play competitions. Gradually I made my presence felt in Punjab, Himachal and Haryana by winning best director awards in the All-India cultural competitions and central Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi selected my play ‘**Kaun Nachaye Naach**’ for the North Zone theatre festival held at Chandigarh.

**Q. 5. It is said that inspite of being very well recognized, you were unable to make it to national festival, that’s why you shifted to Dogri plays? How far is it true?**

**Ans.** Though I established myself as creative and innovative director but could not make it to the national festival. This gave a new turn to my theatre work and I started exploring new possibilities in the themes rooted in my own soil and the language. I had not done any play in Dogri till 1986. The first Dogri play ‘**Bawa Jitto**’ surprised everyone at the North Zone Theatre Festival at Kurukshetra organised by Central Sangeet Natak Akademi and was selected for National Theatre festival, New Delhi. Bawa Jitto, a premier play became a much vaunted production and I travelled with it to the whole length and breadth of the country and covered the distances from Jammu to Travandrum, Madhurai, Kolkata, Bhubneshwar, Bhopal, Jaipur, Jodhpur, Udaipur, Bhilwara, Kota, Lucknow, Nanital, Haryana and Shimla. Later I devised its format and staged its twenty shows in open-air on Indo-Pak borders.

**Q.6. You got a very attractive offer from Himachal Pradesh Govt. but you rejected it. Kindly throw some light on it.**

**Ans.** Himachal Pradesh Govt. gave me a major project to devise an opera on the cultural history of Himachal covering the history from Rig-Veda to present day. The work required extensive research and study of the history and heritage of Himachal Pradesh and in a record time of six months I produced a mega musical performance ‘**Himachal**’ with the help of sixty performers on stage using all major performing modes of Himachal which was staged for over hundred times within and outside the state. At this time I was prompted to continue my stay in Shimla and was offered to head the centre for performing arts but I left Himachal for Jammu and started working on a fellowship project on the regional performing traditions of Jammu awarded by the Ministry of Human Resource development. This further gained momentum with the help of my wife Deepika- a journalist who was expertising in theatre criticism.

**Q. 7. In 1989 in order to set the innovative conventions of theatre, you dared to experiment with Manu Bhandari’s popular novel ‘Mahabhoj’. Tell us your experience in this new venture and its outcome.**

**Ans.** In order to explore new alternatives, this idea of converting Manu Bhandari’s popular novel ‘**Mahabhoj**’ into drama, came into my mind. The idea was to transform the text into images, using actor’s bodies to have better and deeper communication across language barriers. Realizing the actor’s potential, I have always been advocating that in most of the conventions their creative vocal and physical resources are not being utilized to the fullest. But unfortunately my lead actors deserted me for not being convinced with this new methodology. Thus I mounted ‘Mahabhoj’ with almost new actors and resultant work was declared best in the North zone and was selected for National theatre festival, 1990. Like Bawa Jitto, Mahabhoj featured in almost all the major theatre events of the country.

**Q. 8. You also encourage new comers and young actors by providing them proper training under the banner of Natrang and provide them a platform to perform. Kindly tell us about it in detail.**

**Ans.** With a view to extend the horizon of Natrang's work and also to introduce young crop of actors two new annual projects '**Theatre Camp**' for freshers in 1989 and **Children's Summer School** in 1990 were started. Theatre Camp used to be a residential production oriented training programme and brought much successful plays like Badal Sarcar's '**Bhoma**' '**Ghera**' based on Brecht's '**Caucasian Chalk Circle**' and Mahesh Elkunchwar's '**Holi**'. Theatre camps strengthened Natrang team further which enabled the group to put up over hundred shows a year.

In children's theatre altogether a new concept was introduced. We have been thrusting adult theatre on children and no serious effort has been made to evolve a theatre which suits to their needs and has the power to explore immense possibilities in them. I am in the process of evolving a theatre which is different both in content and form. The theme of my children plays focuses the world as seen by them. My first project with children '**Mere Hisse Ki Dhoop Kahan Hai**' (Where is my share of sunlight) was supported by UNESCO. This play also broke the tradition of children's theatre 'Last rehearsal final show' and the play was staged over fifty times at a stretch within and outside the state. Later its film represented India in Asia-pacific week at Bangkok (Thailand).

**Q. 9. In 1992 for outstanding contribution to theatre you received the National 'Sanskriti Award' and with it in the same year you got The Ford Foundation (USA) Grant Award. What was its outcome?**

**Ans.** Yes I got **The Ford Foundation (USA) Grant Award** for work '**Search for a new Theatre language**'. From this grant I established a theatre laboratory and started experimenting on the further exploration of theatre of images, a visual poetry which not only transcends language barriers but also heightens the multi-dimensional theatrical impact. These magical images create a new language, which have not only the poetic sensibility but universality too.

**Q. 10. Simultaneously you needed to expand Natrang too. What steps you had taken to improve its infrastructure and activities?**

**Ans.** In the process of the expansion of Natrang's jurisdiction and the activities an equipped Studio Theatre, a Resource centre and a Rural touring theatre wing which started staging plays based on the highly socially relevant themes, were established. Plays like '**Suno Eh Kahani**', '**Aaj Ki Aurat**' '**Is Gran Gi Surg Banai Lo**' '**Anpaden Da Hall**' '**Jalo Khala**' '**Mere Bi Ehen Kish Khaab**' and '**Aag**' were written and staged in 240 remote villages of J&K including in the most inaccessible areas of Udhampur, Doda, Rajouri and Poonch districts to shape up the rural minds through the magical power of theatre. On the other hand children's theatre got a new momentum when the play '**Aap Hamare Hain Kaun**' was created. The play created vibrations and Natrang became the first group of the country which started travelling with a group of forty children to almost all the major cities of the country which included Chandigarh, Shimla, Delhi, Lucknow, Allahabad, Jodhpur, Hyderabad, Kolkata, Goa, and Bhubneshwar.

**Q. 11. You were assigned the challenging task of reviving the cultural life of the troubled state of Jammu and Kashmir in 1995. How did you meet the challenges in the new assignments and did justice to your old love of creative innovations?**

**Ans.** I joined the state Govt. as Secretary of Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art Culture and Languages- an organisation of 317 employees responsible for the development of art, culture, languages, literature, arts education of the state. In the process of re-building the cultural infrastructure of the militancy affected state and rejuvenate its art, literary, and cultural activities as the Principal Chief Executive officer, I gave a shape to over 3000 programmes including many National and International events in over eight years of service. Here also I tried to bring top honours for the state and made a history by winning best Tableaux award five times in eight years in the Republic Day Celebrations, New Delhi. Despite being busy with the new assignment I continued my creative endeavour and gave yet another innovative production '**Ghumayee**' in Dogri. '**Ghumayee**' broke all-time record and

became most demanded production of the times which was staged on repeated requests even in non-Dogri speaking areas like Kolkata (Thrice) and Mumbai (Twice). Another mega production ‘**Hum Hain Na**’ with 325 children on stage will be remembered for years to come for creatively handling such a large group on stage, its emotionally charged content and stunning visual imagery.

**Q. 12. After that you introduced two new projects in Natrang. Kindly throw some light on them.**

**Ans.** After quitting the job of Secretary J&K Academy of Art Culture and languages in the October 2003, I started giving full-time to my ultimate passion theatre and introduced two new projects. The first was Natrang Theatre Festival- an annual event featuring the running repertoire plays of Natrang. In this series the group broke all the records in 2007 and created a history in Indian Theatre by showcasing seventeen major plays by the same group of actors in Seventeen days and most of them were directed by me. The second historic initiative was the starting of a weekly show ‘Sunday Theatre’ in the year 2004 which will complete non-stop 500 Sunday Theatre shows by the end of this year. History has never witnessed this kind of longest sustained regular theatre activity in this part of the world. Despite having curfews, Bands and disturbances in Jammu, Natrang actors sacrificed everything but never allowed this rarest weekly theatre happening to stop. There have been instances when the main group of actors was touring with productions, within the country and outside but Sunday Theatre series was never stopped. One group of actors always stayed back to let this longest living weekly theatre show to continue.

**Q.13. Which new innovations took place in Natrang and how it unified the otherwise disturbed and scattered regions of J & K?**

**Ans.** In 2005 the horizons of the group was further extended and a wing of traditional and contemporary dance performances in Natrang was introduced. The first major event was ‘Jashen-e-Kashmir’ organized at Delhi Haat featuring the diverse performing art traditions of Jammu & Kashmir in a thematic order. With the introduction of this new wing in Natrang,

the state of J&K witnessed the beginning of new era of professional presentations based on the diverse variety of the performing art traditions of the region. This project touched the ultimate heights when Jammites witnessed ‘Jammu Festival-2007’ at mini Stadium Parade Jammu on a multi-level stage featuring 500 artists demonstrating the cultural strengths before an audience of over 20,000 people. This followed series of such presentations like ‘Rangla Jammu’, ‘Bhadarwah Festival’, ‘J&K Utsav’, ‘Jammu Mega Cultural Show’ ‘Celebrating diversity’ These programmes were the virtual cultural statements, professionally crafted and designed to showcase the celebration of diversity through a unique cultural album of Jammu region showcasing the variegated variety of different colors, rhythms, costumes, design patterns and artistic expressions comprising the dances, narratives and theatre of J&K. This amazing bouquet of rarest cultural traditions beautifully unfolds the mesmerizing artistic expressions of this part of the world. The programmes used to culminate into the presentation of unity in diversity of J&K, the harmony and the cultural co-existence of the people of Jammu and Kashmir, thus performing a major cultural responsibility and cause. This initiative carved a new role for culture in the troubled state of Jammu & Kashmir which aimed at bringing people together being divided by vested politics. Taking a step ahead, I scripted and devised two major travelling open-air theatre shows ‘Kahani Hamari’ and ‘Choon Hai Aasmaan’ addressing the issues of larger public interest and staged at all the district headquarters of the state for lacs of audiences. Rooted in the cultural soil of the state these plays played the role of a catalyst by bringing a new cultural renaissance in the region and inspired many smaller groups to follow such initiatives. This was followed by my mission ‘Theatre for Peace’ which was an eye-opener for all those who never recognized the role of arts and culture in the state of Jammu and Kashmir and ever undermined its utility and relevance.

**Q. 14. How you blended theatre to the lives of common people in Jammu and inspired them?**

**Ans.** A new dimension was given to the age old festivity ‘Jhiri Mela’ which is organized annually to pay obeisance to a farmer hero ‘Bawa Jitto’. In 2005, I brought live before an audience of over 50,000, the performance on the life of legendary folk hero Bawa Jitto using

the live performance supported by video projections on a huge open-air stage. Earlier Jhiri Mela used to be an affair of mere ritualistic performances but with the introduction of the presentation of mega theatre show, a new attraction has been added to the Mela which has the participation of Lacs of devotees who get mesmerized on being transported through a electrifying theatrical performance to a 15<sup>th</sup> century saga of supreme sacrifice. This is perhaps the only theatre happening of the country which has the largest public participation and is all set to become a global cultural destination.

**Q. 15. What is your contribution in the growth of local theatre?**

**Ans.** In 2009 I took the Dogri theatre to International heights by making it to four theatre festival held in Russia, Germany, Hungary and Poland with highly acclaimed Dogri play ‘Ghumayee’.

The initiative of the revival of age-old theatre tradition of Kashmir ‘Bhand Pather’ is recognized as one of major contributions to Indian Theatre. In the year 2010 a major initiative was taken to revive the dying cultural tradition of Kashmir. Involving over 1000 traditional Bhand Pather performers, with the help of eminent playwright Moti Lal Kemmu I brought together twenty prominent Bhand Pather groups spread over the entire length and breadth of Kashmir Valley and trained them in new performatic idiom by infusing in them the latest developed techniques of play scripting, production and direction. The resultant work witnessed 40 new productions in Bhand Pather style which vibrated the entire Kashmir Valley through new innovations and attracted huge crowds. This initiative not only revived the dying theatre tradition but is also seen as a major community mobilization effort which saw the participation of over two lac audiences.

**Q. 16. What message you would like to give to the lovers of theatre?**

**Ans.** We should encourage our children and family members to inculcate the habit of going to theatres. It adds value to life and strengthens culture. Everybody who works sincerely and

thoughtfully in the theatre adds something, however small, to the art: theatre is for man, not man for theatre.

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