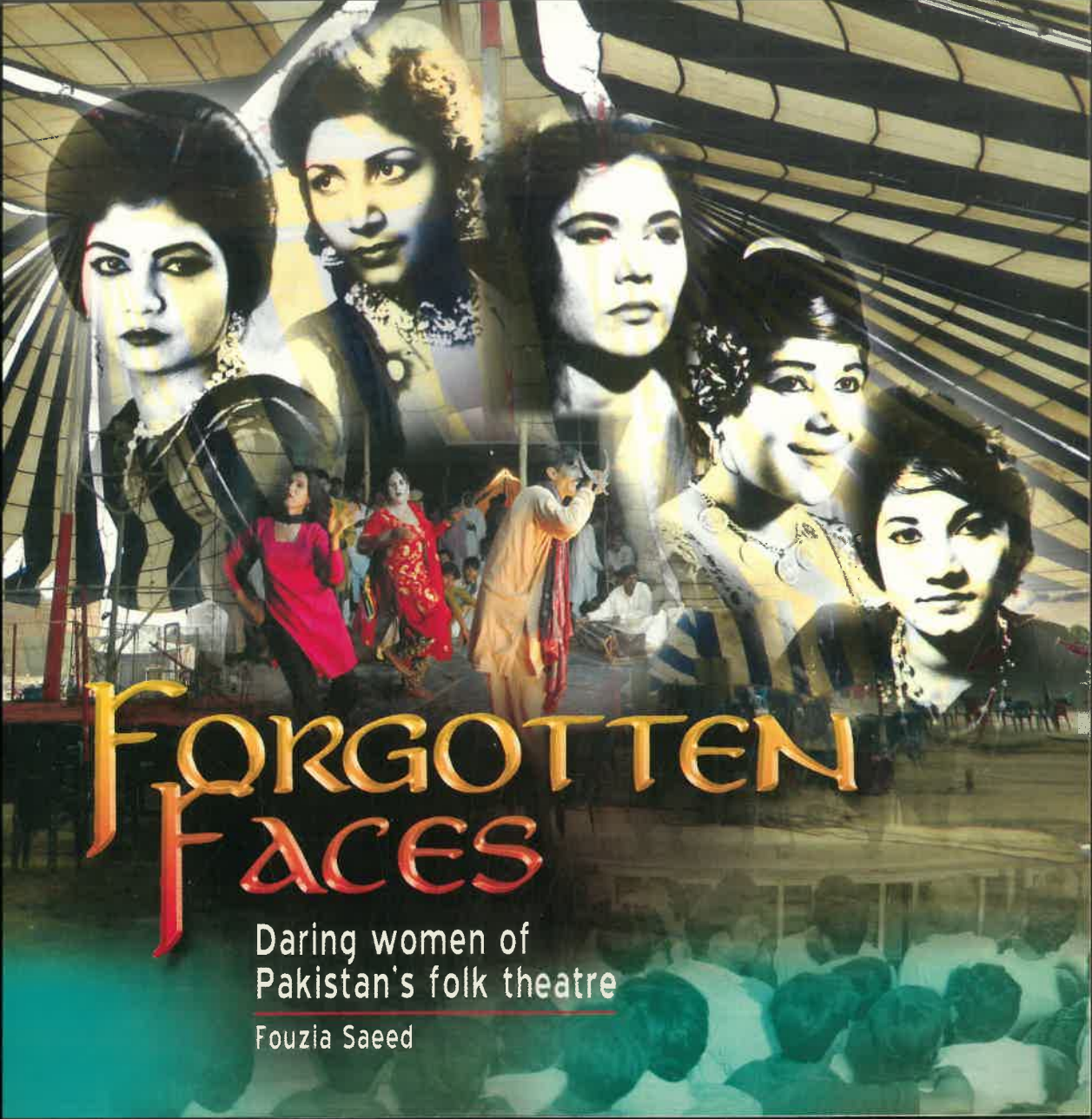




FORGOTTEN FACES

Daring women of
Pakistan's folk theatre

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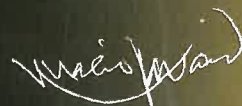
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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

The mission of Lok Virsa (National Institute of Folk and Traditional Heritage) is to foster the excellence, diversity and vitality of all facets of tradition and to broaden public access to this knowledge.

Lok Virsa is committed to document and revive folk culture to ensure a strong link of our society with the indigenous layers of our heritage. The role of women in performing arts has been a theme which has not received the attention it deserves. Dr. Fouzia Saeed did pioneering research work in 1990-91 on this theme, when she herself was a part of this institute. We are proud that she, upon our request, took on to further this work and add to her research. Lok Virsa intends to revive folk theater and encourage folk music, folk dancing and other forms of folk entertainment, so that the youth learns about its own roots and gets inspired.



Khalid Javaid
Executive Director
Lok Virsa



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I wish to acknowledge the inputs of the managers, clerks, performers, musicians, announcers, stagehands and fans of the folk theatre. I would also like to thank Bali Jatti and her family as this research is mostly based on her story.

Although she is not with us anymore, her fond memories will continue to reside in our hearts. In addition, I would like to acknowledge the other brave women of the theatre tradition who confided in me.

I appreciate my parents and family for trusting my abilities in taking up any unconventional topics of research. I used to roam around in the middle of the night, in remote villages of the Punjab and Sindh, chasing these nomadic entertainers, without any objection from my near and dear ones.

I would also like to convey my appreciation to my colleague and friend Yasser Nomann, who initially suggested the idea of researching the folk theatre, and later, enriched the discussions with his insights. I am thankful to my talented friend, Asif Shahjahan for designing this book and making the text alive. I also thank Sajid Munir and other photographers, for their help in capturing the spirit of this tradition with their camera.

Finally, I would like to thank Mr Khalid Javed, Executive Director of the Lok Virsa, for his encouragement in pursuing this publication.

Fouzia Saeed
Islamabad, 2011

PREFACE

I conducted my research in the late nineteen eighties when the remnants of the famous folk theatre groups from this nomadic tradition of folk entertainers were struggling to survive. At that time, some of the stars of this, mostly rural, entertainment, were still alive, and some of those workers who constituted the hard core of this tradition, were trying their best to prop up the few remaining theatre troupes and companies. I was fortunate enough to meet these people and listen personally to their accounts. Some of them like Bali Jatti, were so disillusioned by the downfall of this kind of theatre that I had a hard time convincing them to even talk to me. While conducting this research, I ended up building such strong bonds with these people that they started considering me a part of their family. In all this, I was not only able to obtain precious data for my research but also came to know them as persons of immense qualities and possessing strong personalities. I interviewed and spent time with men and women from all trades associated with the folk theatre, but my main focus was on the women, as I wanted to learn about this tradition, mostly, from their eyes.





Many of those women such as Bali Jatti, Khurshid Kuku and many others, are no more in this world. Likewise, many of the men, who embodied the tradition of this particular kind of theatre, have also left us. Among the last few I interviewed were Master Ismail, Inayat Hussain Bhatti, and Gaman. The workers, the organizers, the artists and the musicians, have almost all departed. What I see now is their children trying to make their ends meet by trying to hold on to the left-over remnants of the trade by trying to incorporate them into television, folk-singing, and stage shows. I even see parallel and issue-based theatre, experimenting with incorporating the style and the spirit of the folk theatre into their plays.





It is unfortunate that not much has been written on any kind of theatre in Pakistan, especially its folk theatre. I wrote a book in 1991 when I was the Deputy Director of Research at Lok Virsa. I conceived that research, got official approvals and initiated the work as part of my official assignment but, later, it turned into a personal venture, that I continued. I chased these nomadic groups through the rural towns of Punjab and Sindh during the day and watched their performances all through the long, brightly lighted nights. There were times when I was the only woman amongst tens of thousands of men-folk at a mandi or a mela performance. Knowing the struggles of the actors, the organizers and the owners, I felt bad that they have not been acknowledged as they should have been.



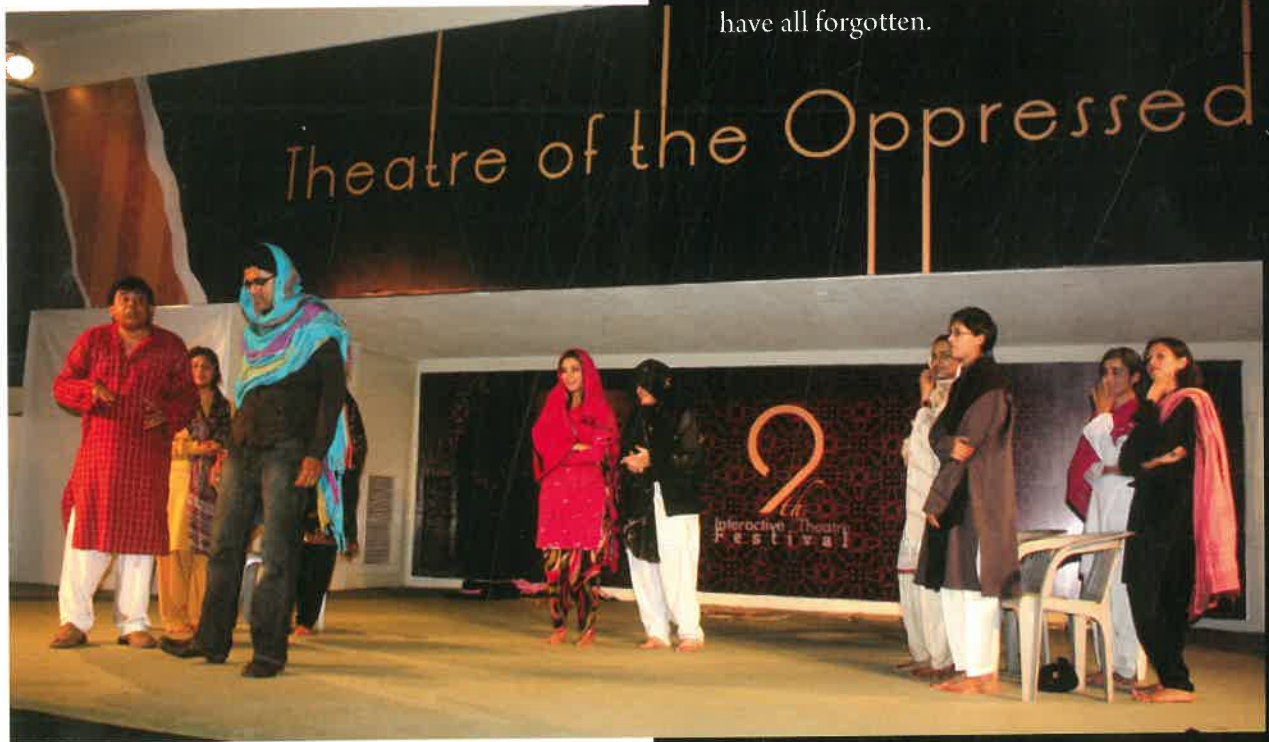
My research was published by Lok Virsa with the support of my supervisor, Dr Adam Nayyar, who was the Director of Research at that time, and whose name I respectfully added as a co-author. Although he was not a part of the research, I acknowledged his verbal support in convincing the Lok Virsa to publish that work. Over the years, this work was used by many Departments of Communication and other performing arts students as a reference book. It gave them a simple description of the tradition of the folk theatre, the famous groups involved in it, and some of its artists. Unfortunately, that book has remained one of the very few works of Lok Virsa that brought forth the women's perspective in our folklore.

This book is dedicated to the memory of those brave women who were an integral part of Pakistan's rural and traditional theatre genre. It is based on the research I did primarily in the nineteen eighties when many of these people were still alive, but, I have added insights gained over the years by my association with the next generation of these performers. It also includes my perception of what this tradition has been faced with in the last two decades.

I strongly feel that much more should have been written about them, but unfortunately the oral history died with the people who carried this tradition in their hearts and souls. The only other comprehensive work that I am familiar with, and which came out after mine was called Raaz Dhariey, a work in Urdu by Afzal Pervaiz, which was also published by Lok Virsa. Preparation of this new text was motivated solely by my desire to present my documentation in a new light. I hope that this effort will inspire the younger generation, so that they can learn, about our older traditions and link them with their new world. Hopefully, this learning will also instill a pride in our heritage that will foster a continuation of the positive aspects of our traditions. I was also motivated to write about this tradition once again because I strongly feel that our society is dangerously neglecting its traditional and classical performing arts. This includes ignoring the need of the people (the artists) for a creative expression as well as the need of the masses to be entertained.

Instead of seeing progress in theatre music, dance and the other performing arts, one has seen a constant deterioration. Some brave groups like the Rafi Peer Group, Ajoka Theatre, and the Interactive Resource Center, have continued their efforts against all odds, but it seems that our society, in general, has less appreciation of live performances of music, dance, and theatre, now, than it used to have.

The intent on reviving this work is also aimed at getting in touch with our past traditions and taking pride in reading about people who considered performing arts not only as their passion and profession but their life as well. We appreciate women who went through hard times in the face of restrictions and violence in their social circumstances, but contributed to this rich tradition that we have all forgotten.

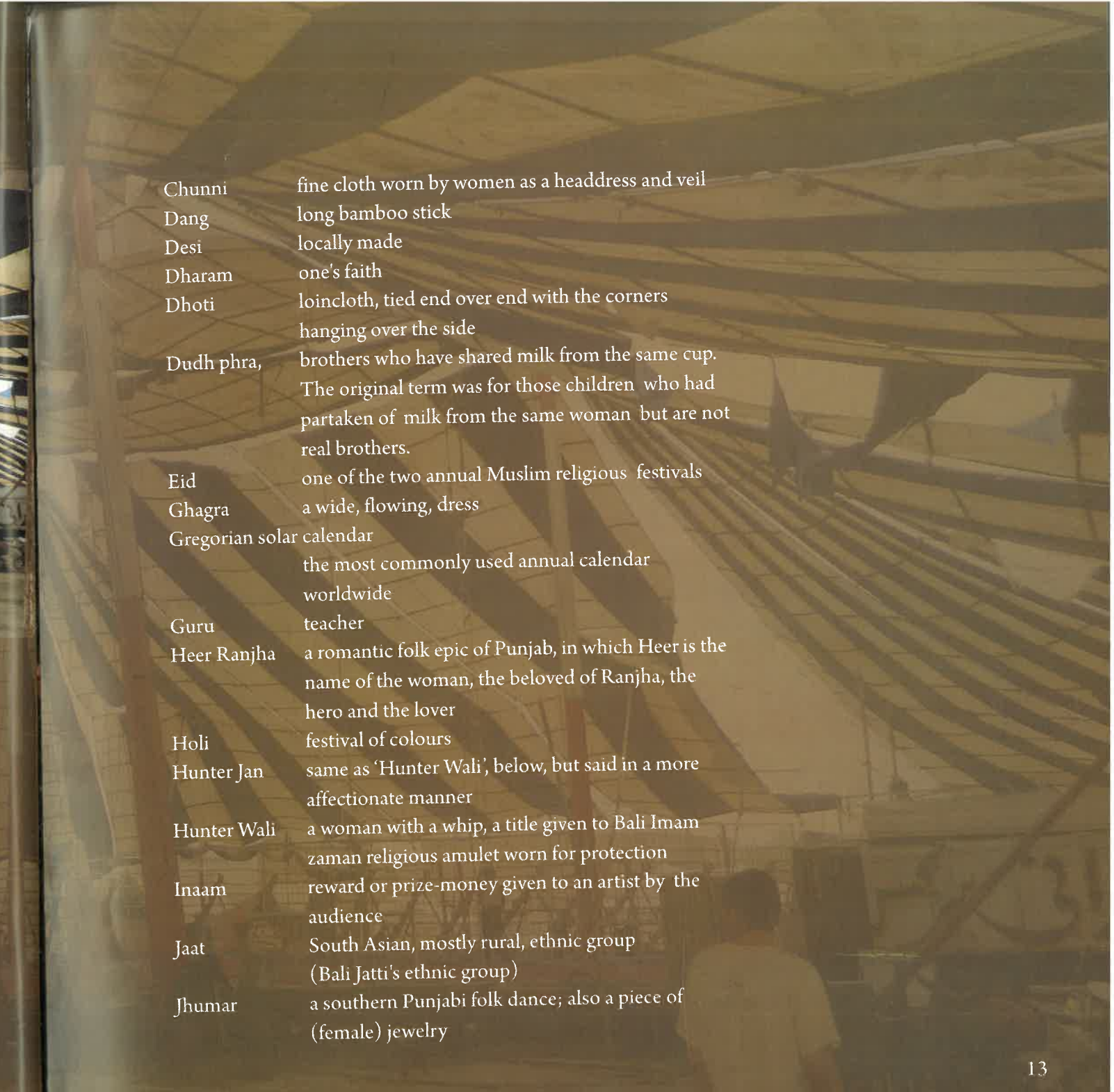


Interactive Resource Center (IRC) has been leading a theatre movement using interactive techniques with the audience. Issue based theatre groups like Ajoka, Rafi Peer and IRC do take the inspiration from the folk theatre at times and use the colours and music to make it more relevant to their rural audience.

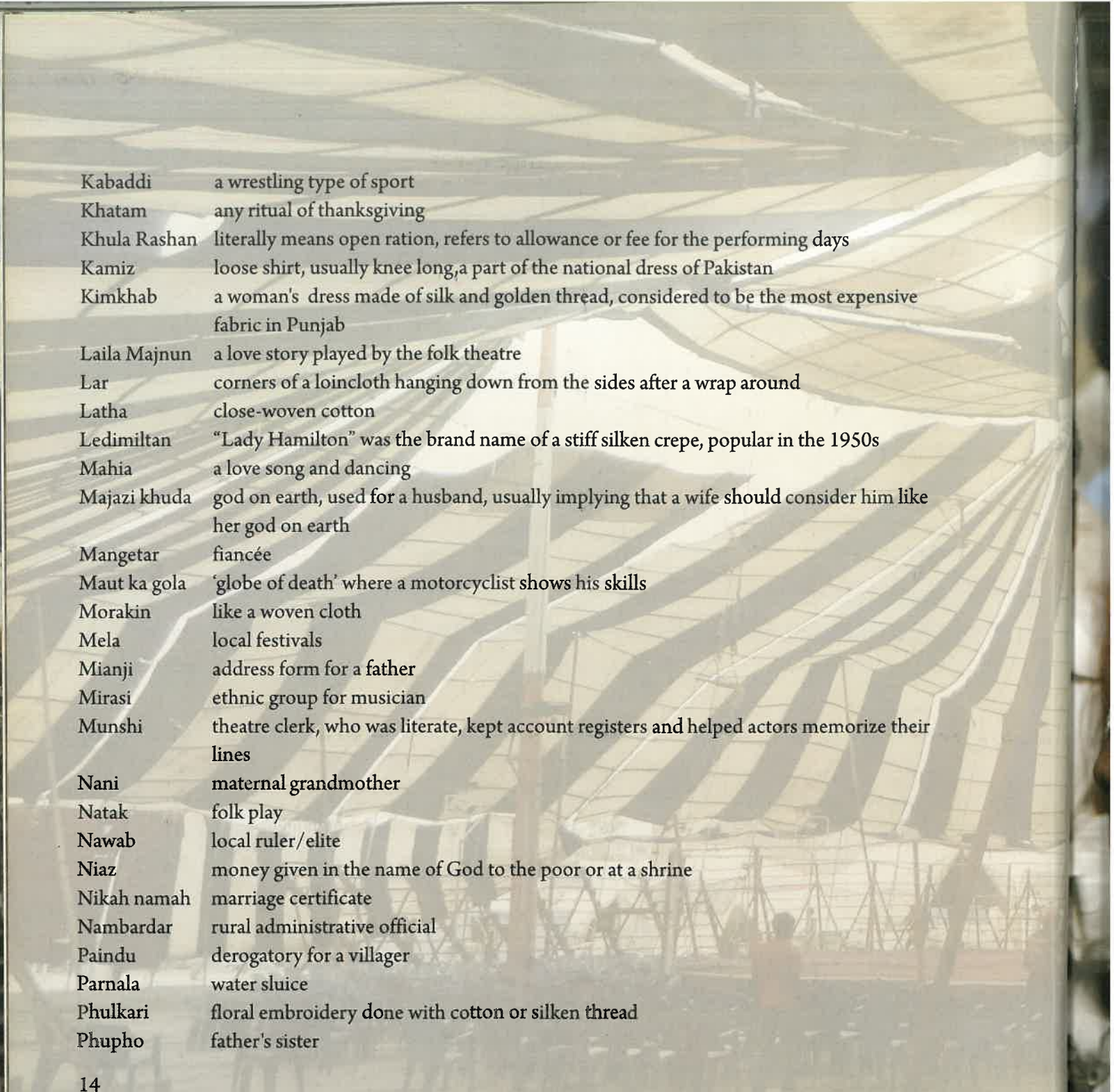
GLOSSARY

Arain	South Asian ethnic group, mostly associated with farming
Babbar Sherni	lioness
Badmash	a person of bad character or a gangster
Band Rshan	literally means closed ration, refers to subsistence allowance
Barak	a war cry
Bebeji	form of address for the mother in Punjab
Bhaand	folk comedian entertainers
Bhati Gate	name of one of the entrance gates to the old, walled city of Lahore
Bikrami Calendar (South Asian)	Annual calendar mostly in use in the Punjab
Boski	silk, a desired cloth for men's shirts
Burqa	a loose cover worn by a woman on top of her clothes
Chaddar	large sheet of cloth, used to take to a shrine as an offering.
Charpai	cot, bed
Chela	student or intern
Chimta	a long, tong-like, musical instrument





Chunni	fine cloth worn by women as a headdress and veil
Dang	long bamboo stick
Desi	locally made
Dharam	one's faith
Dhoti	loincloth, tied end over end with the corners hanging over the side
Dudh phra,	brothers who have shared milk from the same cup. The original term was for those children who had partaken of milk from the same woman but are not real brothers.
Eid	one of the two annual Muslim religious festivals
Ghagra	a wide, flowing, dress
Gregorian solar calendar	the most commonly used annual calendar worldwide
Guru	teacher
Heer Ranjha	a romantic folk epic of Punjab, in which Heer is the name of the woman, the beloved of Ranjha, the hero and the lover
Holi	festival of colours
Hunter Jan	same as 'Hunter Wali', below, but said in a more affectionate manner
Hunter Wali	a woman with a whip, a title given to Bali Imam zaman religious amulet worn for protection
Inaam	reward or prize-money given to an artist by the audience
Jaat	South Asian, mostly rural, ethnic group (Bali Jatti's ethnic group)
Jhumar	a southern Punjabi folk dance; also a piece of (female) jewelry



Kabaddi	a wrestling type of sport
Khatam	any ritual of thanksgiving
Khula Rashan	literally means open ration, refers to allowance or fee for the performing days
Kamiz	loose shirt, usually knee long, a part of the national dress of Pakistan
Kimkhab	a woman's dress made of silk and golden thread, considered to be the most expensive fabric in Punjab
Laila Majnun	a love story played by the folk theatre
Lar	corners of a loincloth hanging down from the sides after a wrap around
Latha	close-woven cotton
Ledimiltan	"Lady Hamilton" was the brand name of a stiff silken crepe, popular in the 1950s
Mahia	a love song and dancing
Majazi khuda	god on earth, used for a husband, usually implying that a wife should consider him like her god on earth
Mangetar	fiancée
Maut ka gola	'globe of death' where a motorcyclist shows his skills
Morakin	like a woven cloth
Mela	local festivals
Mianji	address form for a father
Mirasi	ethnic group for musician
Munshi	theatre clerk, who was literate, kept account registers and helped actors memorize their lines
Nani	maternal grandmother
Natak	folk play
Nawab	local ruler/elite
Niaz	money given in the name of God to the poor or at a shrine
Nikah namah	marriage certificate
Nambardar	rural administrative official
Paindu	derogatory for a villager
Parnala	water sluice
Phulkari	floral embroidery done with cotton or silken thread
Phupho	father's sister



Qasai	butcher
Razdharey	traditional folk performers
Saukan	relationship between two wives of the same husband
Sehti	a "side heroine" role in a romantic tale
Soang	traditional form of theatre
Surma	kohl, used as a make-up for eyes
Syed	a descendant from the family of the Prophet
Syed zada	son of a Syed
Tasbih	prayer-beads
Theka	contract
Tilla	gold thread
Ton	town, meaning performance in a town
Varati	variety show, a performance of mixed songs, dances and comedy skits
Warna	to rotate money over someone's head to keep the evil eye off.
Watta satta	exchange marriage, in which two men exchange their sisters in marriage.

A WINDOW INTO THE WORLD OF FOLK THEATRE

My journey to discover and document the nomadic groups of folk theatre began with a search for the 'lost queen' of this theatre tradition, Bali Jatti. I had heard so much about her and her world of entertainment from my uncles, their friends, and even some of my own friends who had been associated with the traditional folklore of Pakistan. With bright lights, gaudy makeup, and a wit touching on vulgarity, these makeshift theatre halls made of tents, blared out their loud music to volatile audiences whose whims determined the fate of the theatre-owners.

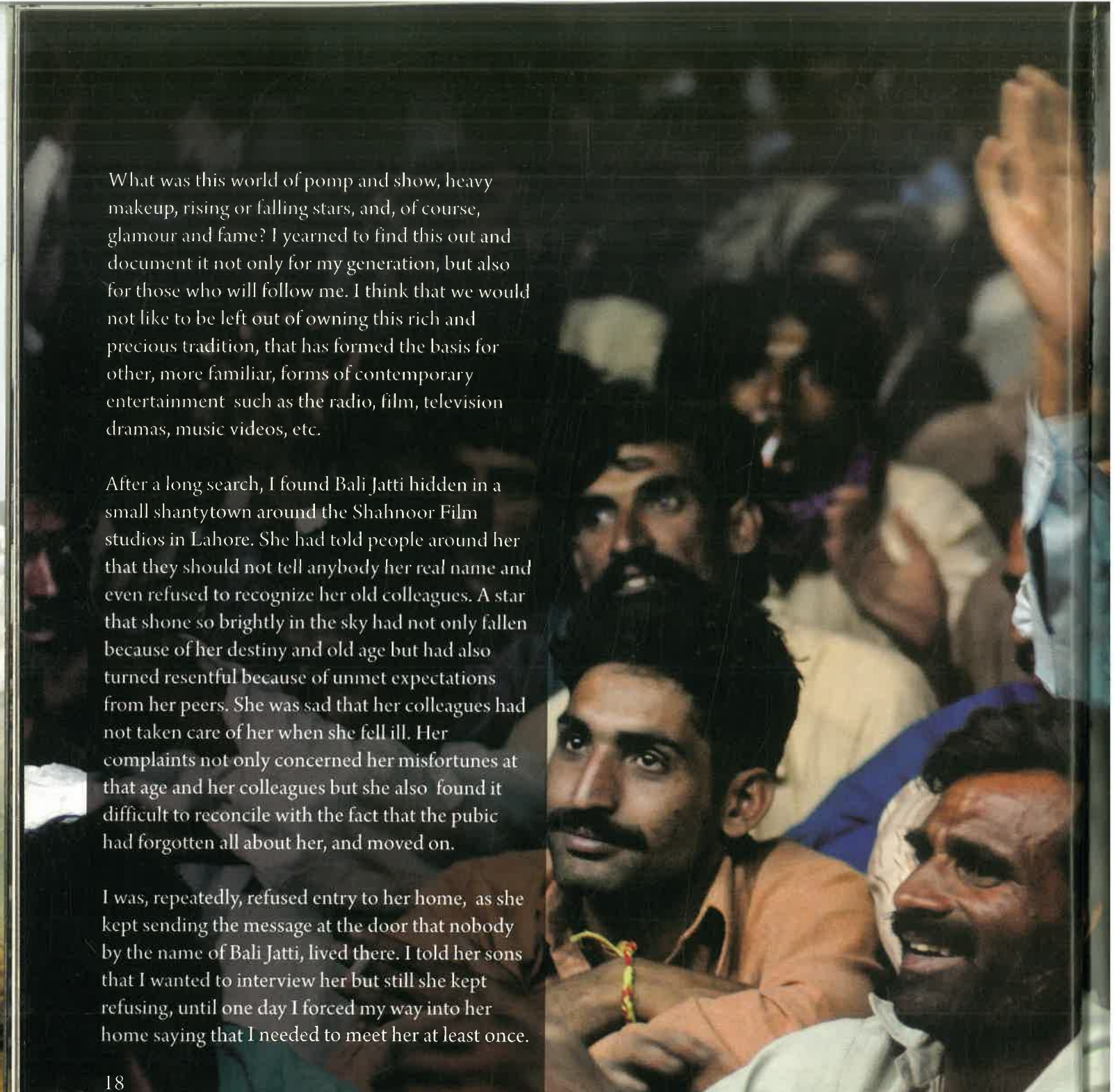


Bali's fans, who were then in their 60's, described her with a daze in their eyes. They remembered the long jump she used to make as her entry onto the stage to enchant her audience. They would go crazy, clapping, calling her name, and throwing money at her.

A wink from her, or just a smile at the audience, was enough to drive them crazy. She held the pulse of her audience in her hand, and made them jump with excitement, cry for more or make them laugh, with a single gesture or movement of her eye. They responded to her as if totally mesmerized with her

charm, impressed with her wit and fully in tune with the acts that she put on. Her fans followed her from village to village, hoping to get a glimpse of her off the stage. The rich hoped for the theatre-owners to arrange a meeting with her over tea. However, Bali enjoyed controlling her audiences' hearts only from the stage, from where she could make them laugh or cry, as she desired. She never wanted any other links. She offended several theatre-owners and wealthy fans by refusing their offers for longer-lasting links.





What was this world of pomp and show, heavy makeup, rising or falling stars, and, of course, glamour and fame? I yearned to find this out and document it not only for my generation, but also for those who will follow me. I think that we would not like to be left out of owning this rich and precious tradition, that has formed the basis for other, more familiar, forms of contemporary entertainment such as the radio, film, television dramas, music videos, etc.

After a long search, I found Bali Jatti hidden in a small shantytown around the Shahnoor Film studios in Lahore. She had told people around her that they should not tell anybody her real name and even refused to recognize her old colleagues. A star that shone so brightly in the sky had not only fallen because of her destiny and old age but had also turned resentful because of unmet expectations from her peers. She was sad that her colleagues had not taken care of her when she fell ill. Her complaints not only concerned her misfortunes at that age and her colleagues but she also found it difficult to reconcile with the fact that the public had forgotten all about her, and moved on.

I was, repeatedly, refused entry to her home, as she kept sending the message at the door that nobody by the name of Bali Jatti, lived there. I told her sons that I wanted to interview her but still she kept refusing, until one day I forced my way into her home saying that I needed to meet her at least once.



It was my fluent Punjabi, a red paranda tied into my long hair, and my curled-tip khusa that touched her heart in our first meeting. She also felt the pride I carried with me about our traditional culture. She made me sit with her on a cot next to where she was lying down and kept looking at me affectionately. After some small talk and allowing me to explain the purpose of my visit, she decided to open up to me. The bond, then, became inseparable.

My entry into Bali's life opened up a new world for me. I started exploring the context of her life, the business of theatre, the role of this kind of entertainment in the rural people's lives, her peers, and the other women who worked with her. Moving on from the anecdotal bits I used to hear from her fans of the folk theatre, I was able to get descriptions and personal stories of many women who had spent their whole lives in that business.

Most of the history and documentation of folk traditions come from descriptions provided by men, however, I decided to learn about the folk theatre and the life of its performers, primarily, through women's eyes.

Many of them had left the world of theatre and were living on the outskirts of Lahore. I found one such group in Shahdara, where they had bought small plots of land, together, about twenty years ago, when the residential colonies were being developed in this area. Acting upon a *munshi's* advice,



they had made that investments quietly, as nobody knew what the future held for her. The news had spread in a hush-hush manner and many of the women artists, without letting their husbands in on it, had quietly put away their reward money for payments of installments on these modest properties. Now in their elderly age, when they could not find any work in the theatre, they found themselves living very close to each other in this crowded area. I found out that their children, now grown up and with their own families, were also living with them in the joint-family set ups, but were too embarrassed to mention their mothers' profession. The children never acknowledged, appreciated or boasted about their mother's work. They had taken on other trades and were eager to bury their past. Some of the mothers, desirous of not burdening their children with the stigma of having once been performing women, had changed their names and were living anonymous lives, in that lower middle class community.

I also met several *munshis*, organizers, musicians, and managers of theatre companies. All these people, when talking to me, tried to communicate the intoxication, they had experienced from their work and nomadic life. They tried to explain how the business used to be, before radio, film, television, and video, when the stage provided the height of glamour for the masses. With their help, I was able to understand the significant aspects of the scenario.

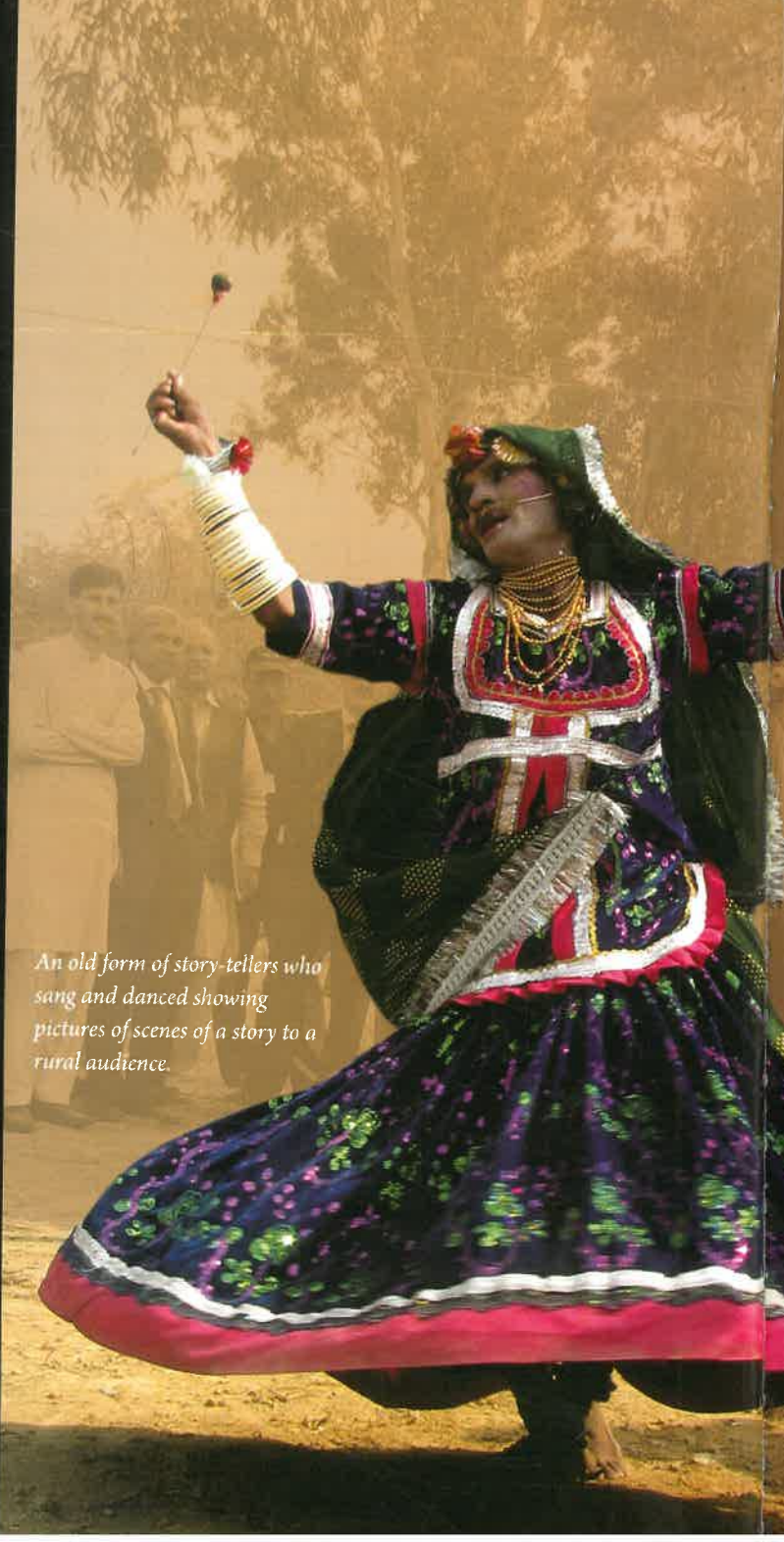
I traveled from village to village chasing the theatre companies that had survived the downfall of the nomadic folk theatre tradition. I interviewed the theatre-owners, their colleagues in the circus, and others managing entertainment businesses like the death-well, the human zoo, and other such festival entertainments. These were people trying hard to survive.

The information provided in this book is a compilation of what I found out from long conversations with Bali ji, all the women I met who performed the roles ranging from heroine to character actor or dancer, the work-hands, owners, managers, and all sorts of workers in the theatre community. I kept following up Bashir Lohar's Theatre, which was one of the few that survived for a while, at least, until his death. The Gaman Theatre is the only one which presently continues but only with male performers. A few others survived but these were mostly only into entertainment shows rather than long plays. My last chapter touches how theatre has been, somewhat, absorbed into other forms of entertainment. I was also anxious about writing briefly about the children of the theatre artists, the next generation of Balis and her other peers, to see how they have maintained with their ancestor's traditions.

MAGIC OF THE FOLK THEATRE

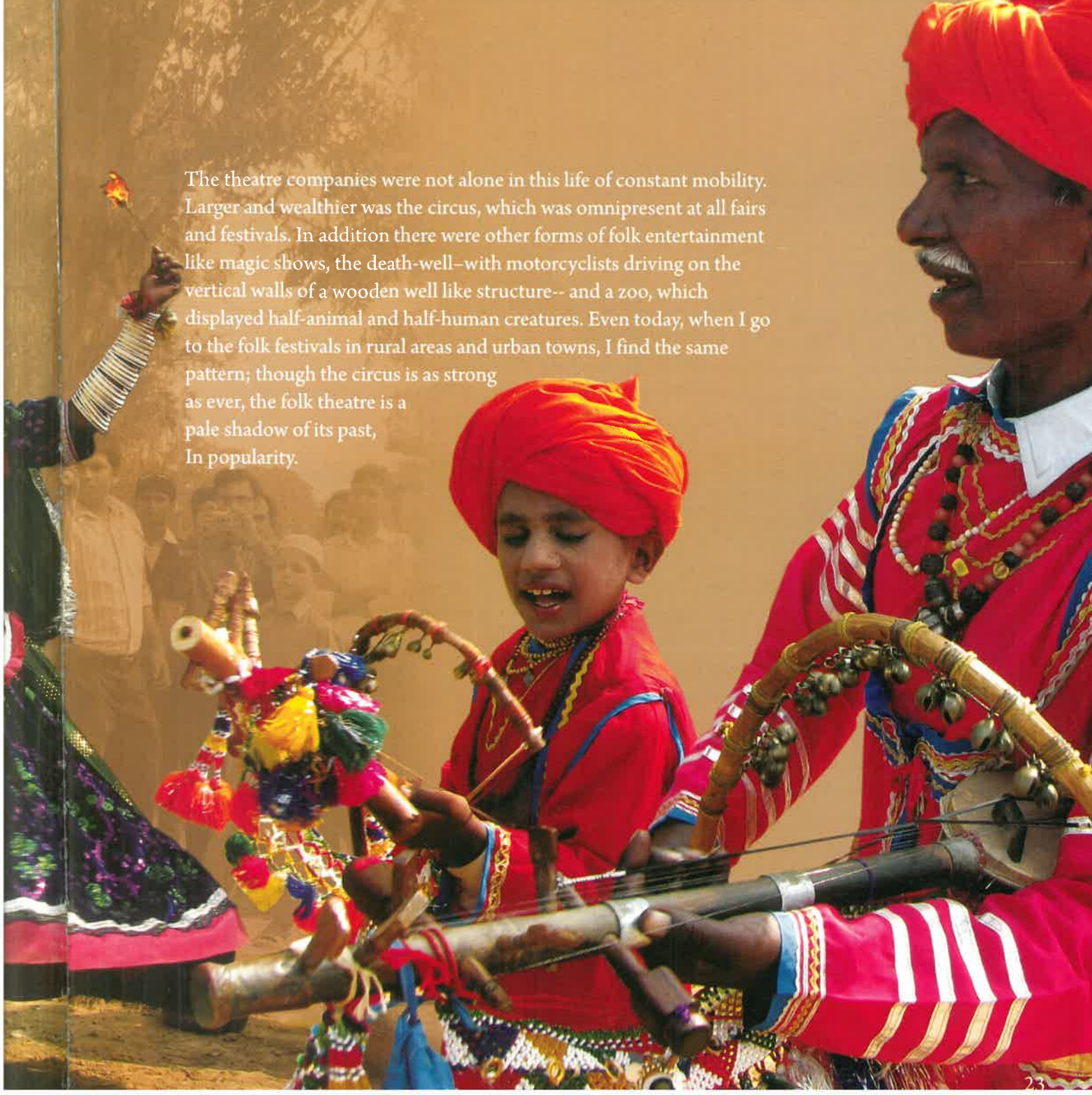
Theatre, in all its varied forms, has a deep-rooted history in the subcontinent. It has been an indigenous expression for those polarities of human life, like happiness and sadness, calamities and miracles, heroes and villains, and romances and tragedies. South Asia, being an oral culture, has counted on story-telling as one of its main modes of transferring cultural knowledge from one generation to the next. The story-telling, over a period of time, has taken the form of *natak* and has become the main source of entertainment for rural masses. A more folkloric version of theatre was seen among *Raaz Dhariey* in the Punjab, *Swang* in the Potohar, and *Natakaar* and the *Bhaand*, scattered all over the Punjab. At times, during the colonial era, it was also referred to as the Parsi Theatre.

Unlike the classic theatre, where a proscenium stage was the standard setting and the plays were performed in proper theatre halls, the folk theatre was more of a nomadic entertainment for the rural masses. It consisted of theatre companies, which were like mobile groups that kept moving from one festival to another, throughout the year. They carried make-shift equipment to set up a performance arena and living quarters, along with their caravans.

A woman in traditional folk theatre costume is performing a dance. She is wearing a dark blue or purple sari with a wide, colorful border in red, white, and green. She has multiple necklaces and a headpiece. She is holding a small object in her right hand, which is raised. The background is a warm, golden-brown color, possibly a wall or a backdrop. The overall style is that of a vintage photograph or painting.

An old form of story-tellers who sang and danced showing pictures of scenes of a story to a rural audience.

The theatre companies were not alone in this life of constant mobility. Larger and wealthier was the circus, which was omnipresent at all fairs and festivals. In addition there were other forms of folk entertainment like magic shows, the death-well—with motorcyclists driving on the vertical walls of a wooden well like structure-- and a zoo, which displayed half-animal and half-human creatures. Even today, when I go to the folk festivals in rural areas and urban towns, I find the same pattern; though the circus is as strong as ever, the folk theatre is a pale shadow of its past, In popularity.



Just as all other forms of entertainment were influenced by the colonial era, the folk theatre was also deeply influenced in its substance as well as form. In addition to the folk tales like *Laila Majnu*, *Sasi Punnu*, and *Heer Ranjha*, inspirations from plays of Shakespeare adapted by Agha Hashr, like the 'Gungi Joru', were also performed.

After the partition, this form of theatre was rooted in north and south Punjab, where plays in Punjabi, Siraiki, and Urdu were the primary productions; however, these groups also travelled to Sindh and Balochistan, where they were well-received. In Pakistan, these groups gained popularity from the early fifties onwards, holding their own against other forms of entertainment, but tapering off, eventually, in the seventies. Today, with hardly any performing groups remaining, this tradition has almost disappeared.



These groups performed at festivals usually adjoining an annual religious gathering at the shrine of a Sufi saint, called *Urs*, a festival for a cultural celebration like *Eid* or *Holi*, or a market-fair referred to as a *Mandi*. This folk entertainment attracted audiences from the neighbouring villages and towns, and entertained those who had come for religious or trading reasons.

The annual market-fair, held for a group of villages, was an important event for farmers: cows, buffaloes, and goats, were bought and sold, along with items of daily use. Deals were struck following prolonged haggling and money changed hands. The milieu was male, with hardly any woman to be seen. As most of the theatre performances lasted all night, many peasants bought a ticket and sat through the entire performance until the small hours of the morning, preferring to be entertained rather than either paying for a night's lodgings or going back to their village by night. In any case, village life was a dull proposition compared to the dream-world of the theatre.



The folk theatre had its own stars, heroes, singers and dancers, each having an audience of admirers, who waited impatiently for the theatre to come and perform in their village or the nearby town. Both the performers and the audiences usually belonged to either modest peasant stock or minor occupational groups, such as the tailors, blacksmiths, carpenters and barbers. Once a performer had adopted a role, he/she stayed with it for the rest of his or her acting career. Memorizing the lines, for the mostly illiterate cast was difficult. They needed the help of a *munshi*, who could read the script, so the actors stayed with that role throughout, and used mastery of these roles as their credentials when switching a theatre company.



Circus continues to be the strongest business. Festivals grounds are mostly contracted by Lucky Iranian Circus or a big contractor and then subcontracted to other smaller entertainment companies.

Due to the social circumstances and stigma that was attached to the performing artists, there was always a shortage of female performers, therefore, many men had to perform the female roles as well. Some of the male artists I met, happily took a dupatta and performed parts of their roles for me. Some even had the mark of a pierced nose, while the reverse also occasionally took place. For example, Bali Jatti used to play the role of a male hero, Ranjha, in the folk epic love story, *Heer Ranjha*.

Women, however, were an important part of a theatre Company's employees. Faced with an all-male audience, the performing women of the folk theatre went beyond being mere crowd-pullers. They developed a high level of professionalism in the field and competed with the best of the male performers. The constraints placed on their personal lives by society and family notwithstanding, they effectively penetrated the male domain, surpassing them in their virtuosity and art. Career women in South Asia and Pakistan today in all fields will see familiar constraints that social pressure had, at one time, pushed on the professionalism of these theatre women.

The fortunes of each folk theatre and its specific cast of stars rose and fell dramatically. Notable among star performers in the late 1960s and 1970s were Inayat Hussain Bhatti, Alam Lohar, Bali Jatti and Khurshid Kuku. Their popularity was further boosted by radio programmes that people listened to, avidly, in an era where television and video were unknown.

NUTS AND BOLTS OF THE THEATRE

The nomadic theatre groups would catch their breath after a long journey from performing at one fair and make themselves at home at a new festival ground. While performers opened up their tin cases and folded treasures, workers would dig out a gentle slope for a theatre-hall right in front of the living area. A high stage was made with mud, lined with barbed wire at the front, to keep the hyped-up audience at a safe distance. While tents of the managers and key performers were the first to be erected, workers stretched canvas sheets or corrugated tin sheets to make a surrounding wall for the theatre hall. The seating for the audience could be arranged on the floor covered with cotton mats, *dari*, or chairs. At times, it was a combination of the two providing chairs for the VIPs, which included the local town's management, high police officials or the wealthy businessmen of the area, in the front.



The hall is dug out on a slope for the audience and the mud taken from the stage is used to make a wall which is then covered with dari.



Big and small tents are erected for artists and workers.

Tents, whether big or small, when finally pitched, at least provided all the performers and workers with roofs on their heads, but the hall made for the audience was left open to sky. The stage was the only part that was covered in that arena.

Entrance of this hall was framed with high platforms, where the transvestites danced, an hour or two before the show began. With glaring music and dressed in colourful clothes they attracted the audience for the theatre performance. Rather than having a booth with a window like in the cinema theatres of today the theatre tradition had ticket-seller sit on a high platform, stooping down to sell tickets to the crowd.

A simple apparatus divided the front and the back of the stage with pulleys to pull down gaudy cloth backdrops at the sound of a bell or a bongo drum. Six to seven backdrops with painted scenes were an essential part of the performance. In the course of a performance, the number of backdrops could vary from two to twenty, depending on the wealth of the theatre-owner. Coloured lights, mostly at the base of the stage, and the scenes painted on the backdrops created this magical theatre world of make-belief.

The theatre featured dramas (*khel*) based on folk tales, which appealed to the rural psyche. Colourful love stories with poetry and music, were interspersed with comedy. The day's performance would kick off with *salami*, a welcome song, where at the sound of two gongs all the performers came on stage. This was followed by a shorter performance of an assorted collection of songs, dances and comedy skits. This was



called *vareti* (variety show). Shows of a shorter duration filled up the hall, as well as the money boxes, at the ticket booth. At about nine o'clock, when the darkness had set in deep and the stage lights could show the magic, the artists and the audiences settled down for the main course. An involved performance, studded with a standalone song or a dance, as entrée to give a breather to the performers for a change, won the hearts of the audience. The men in the audience had finished selling their cattle in the market and planned on spending the whole night watching the theatre. They would only return to their home villages in the morning.



One *mandi* or *mela* could have several competing theatre shows going on at the same time. Sometimes cooperating with each other, usually, however, they were involved in a never-ending fight for audiences. This often led to attempts by rival theatres to lure away star performers from the others.

Transvestites dance to attract the audience on a high platform while ticket sellers reap the results sitting at a pedestal stooping down to take the ticket money from the people.

POPULAR FOLK THEATRE GROUPS



Bali Jatti and Alam Lohar.
A display of traditional folk theatre
at National Heritage Museum, Lok Virsa.

Although there were many theatre companies that survived during the three decades when the folk theatre was a major art form, it is important to know about a few that could be considered truly representative of this tradition. Some of these companies were owned by people who were investors or managers. They pulled together a core team, which included the various managers, one or more *munshi*, and the main actors. Many times, an actor or a manager, having gained enough experience, would take off to set up his own company. In many cases, considering the tough competition between the companies, the actor-manager would marry a rising star to ensure a permanent heroin for his company. The theatre then became a sort of a family enterprise, with the performer-owner acting more like a benevolent father than simply as a business-owner. In a group of sensitive, temperamental, and high-strung performers, normal rules of business could hardly apply, and a performer-owner was often better suited to understanding the needs of his existing or former colleagues.

The complexion of the theatre was determined both by its owner and by the major star performer, resulting in popular reference to them by the names of these performers or owners. For example, the Kissan Theatre was popularly known as the Inayat Hussain Bhatti Theatre because of the latter's fame in that theatre. Similarly, the Wattan Theatre was more popularly known as the Alam Lohar Theatre, as he remained attached, mostly, to this particular theatre company.

A brief description of some of the most representative theatres is given here to pay homage to the carriers of this tradition.

Phaji Shah Theatre

This was one of the oldest folk theatre companies in Pakistan. It played a central role in popularizing the folk theatre in Punjab and neighbouring provinces. It also became a kind of a training academy for several artists, who went on to establish theatre groups of their own.

This theatre was owned by Syed Fazal Shah, nicknamed Phaji Shah. Phaji Shah was himself an actor, director, and a theatre manager. His wife, Iqbal Begum, was also a theatre actress. Both of them performed as a hero and a heroine in several plays of their Theatre. In later life, they contented themselves with character roles. The Phaji Shah Theatre did not survive their death and closed soon after.

All performers are unanimous in their praise of Phaji Shah as a humane and sensitive person who had the welfare of the performers at heart. Unlike other theatre owners, he never used physical violence, abuse or threats. He has become something of a legend in the arena of folk theatre.

Gaman Theatre

Unique in the sense that the entire cast consisted of male performers, this theatre was owned by Gaman, who came from a small village near Multan. It continued even after his death and is even now an all-male theatre, the female roles being played by male performers dressed up as women. This theatre continues to survive well and draws its strength from the southern Punjab, especially the city of Multan. Gaman's family and the people who had worked with him, carry on the tradition.



Shahjehan Theatre

This theatre company was owned by Mian Anwar, who named this theatre after his daughter, Shahjehan. She acted in the leading female roles in the theatre. Though Mian Anwar was not an actor himself, he married the famous theatre actress Khurshid Kuku, and later, befriended Bali Jatti as well. Thus, a part of his cast was from within his family. Like some of his fellow businessmen, who had made big money in the entertainment business, he was said to have spent most of it on gambling and women. Coming from a relatively low-status social group, Mian Anwar has been described by his admirers as violent and quarrelsome, but also courageous and handsome. A traffic accident and long illness caused his theatre to collapse, and he died as a heartbroken man.

Wattan Theatre

Mohammad Ismail was the owner of this theatre. True to the tradition of theatre owners, he married the popular theatre actress Firdous. The rise of the famous folk singer Alam Lohar was during his time with the Wattan Theatre, and his son Arif Lohar also performed for this theatre for a while. Ismail's personality was opposite of Phaji Shah, and he has been described by people who worked for him, as a firm person and a strict disciplinarian. After Ismail's death in 1979, Arif Lohar attempted to revive the theatre to ensure some livelihood for the senior theatre artists but could not sustain the venture, economically.

Kissan Theatre

The owner, Mohammad Sharif Cheena was popularly known as Cheena Pehlwan (Cheena the Wrestler), because of his considerable strength and girth. Both Cheena and his wife Gulzar Jatti worked in the theatre in the leading hero and heroine roles. His roles as a hero were mostly of the comedy type and he was very popular in the audience because of that. His only daughter, Bilo, inherited the Theatre on his death and her husband, Mohammed Nasim, managed it. Cheena's widow, Gulzar Jatti, played occasional character roles in the Wattan Theatre.

The famous theatre actor and singer, Inayat Hussain Bhatti, was associated with this theatre for several years, at which time it was popularly known by his name.

Wali Shah Theatre

Wali Shah was himself a theatre actor. He had four sons: the eldest one, Yaqub Shah, became a successful

hero in the theatre for a long time; another son became the manager of the theatre, while a third developed considerable skill with the harmonium and became a theatre musician. However, the female members of his family were kept strictly behind the veil. The Wali Shah Theatre was considered a theatre of quality that did not depart significantly from the tradition of drama. It shared the fate of most of the theatres of its time in that it died with the demise of the owner.

Tufail Theatre

The nationally famous folksinger, Tufail Niazi, worked in several theatres. Finally, he joined hands with his relatives and friends and formed his own theatre company. He played the leading role as the hero in his theatre and rose to fame as a singer. His brother Qurban Niazi also worked with him for a while. Their theatre did not have a long life, but the family kept up its contribution to folk music through other theatres, and still later, through the stage variety shows. Tufail Niazi died in 1990.



Other Theatres

Apart from the theatres described above, numerous theatres sprang up during the 1960s but had a short-lived existence. Bali Jatti's Shama Theatre was the only one owned by a woman and it lasted for twelve years. The traditional Bau Jan Theatre existed for a very long time, but never rose to the heights of either the Wattan or the Kissan Theatre.

A group of people who was associated with arrangements of this entertainment business and focused on supplying the festival grounds with generators and electrical equipment, started the Lucky Theatre. It soon merged with a circus, which was by then, quite well-established and became the Lucky Irani Circus. Even, today it is the best-known of the Pakistani circuses.

With the exception of the Wattan and the Gaman Theatres, which proved resilient and retained their popularity until recently, most of the theatre Companies ceased to exist by the end of the 1970s. The Bashir Lohar Theatre survived until early 1990s, but with the owner's demise, this theatre company closed as well.



Bashir Lohar's theatre

THE ECONOMY OF THIS ENTERTAINMENT BUSINESS

For a proper understanding of the lives of the folk theatre performers an understanding of the business aspect of this entertainment is important. The economy of the theatre was the core aspect of its existence, and to some extent the existence of its performers, as well. Like any other business, profit-making was the main objective for the owner and the management. Thus, a theatre's competition with the other theatre groups, and the theatres' rivalry with other forms of rural entertainment, was high. Popularity among the potential audience was key to the success of these theatre ventures, and, therefore, just like the films or TV plays of today, casting the most popular and desirable artists was crucial to getting the theatre group among the top contenders in the theatrical field. The race for booking the most popular artists, then, obviously, was at the core of the business dynamics. Higher fees and facilities, options for bigger advances, personal attention and affections, were all used to lure the best of them. Those who did not make the top popularity list had to sell themselves short to survive. In the same spirit, some performers were paid more than others. Payment, on booking an artist, was made according to a signed contract. However, the actual process of booking the artists, making payments, and remuneration, was much more complex than a simple written contract would indicate.

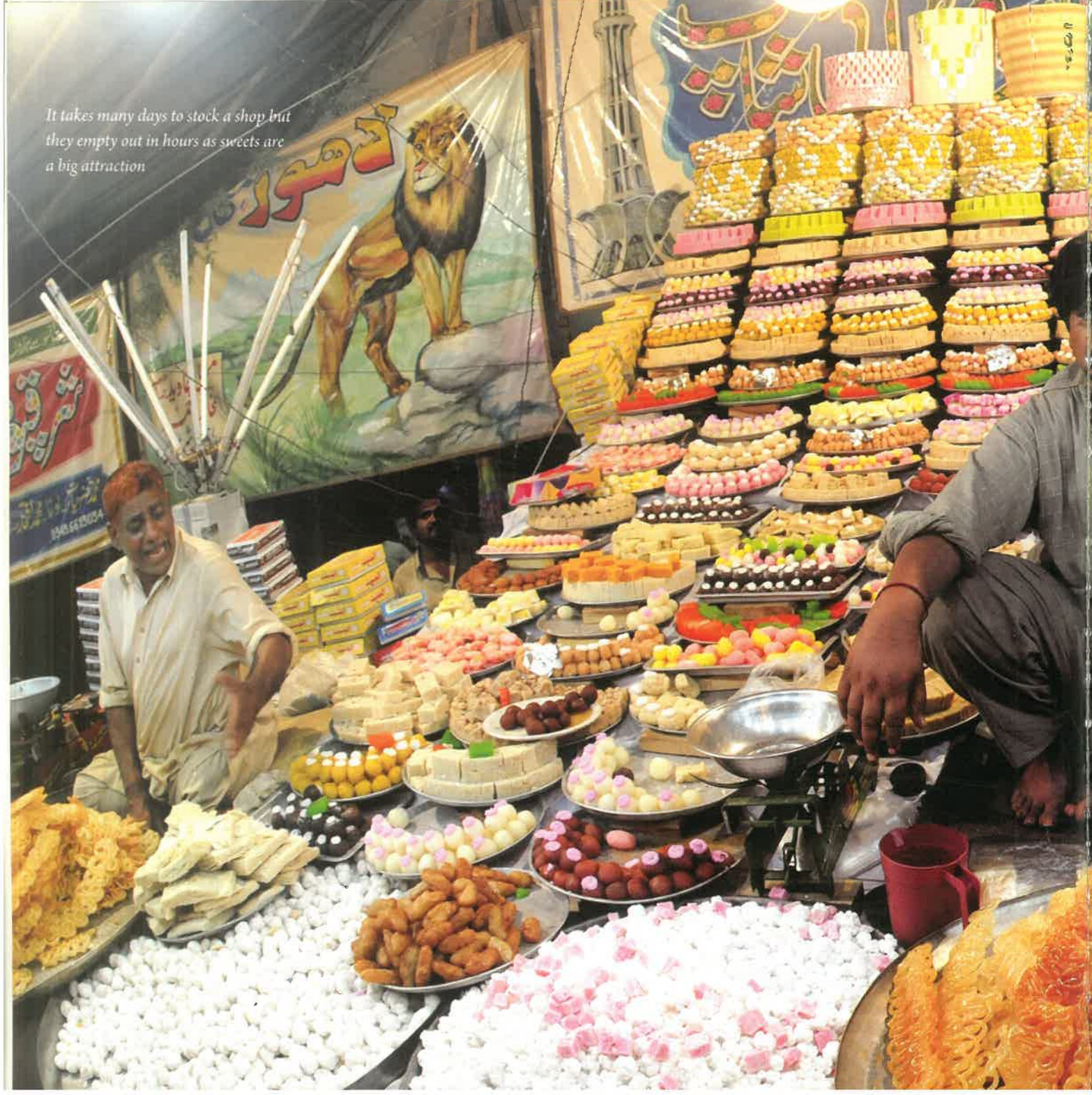
This complexity developed a further twist when the performers happened to be women. Unlike men, they operated through their agents, who were often close male relatives. Here, in this section, the economy of the folk theatre is described, with some details about the operational mechanics that were in place. It is interesting to understand how women fitted into this male-dominated venture and survived.



Hot and deep-fried jalebi--equally popular among adults and children. (Top)

Snack shops attract the public to have traditional sweets. (bottom)

It takes many days to stock a shop but they empty out in hours as sweets are a big attraction





MAKING THE INVESTMENT

The theatre owners were a little hesitant to open up about their money matters with me but gradually I pieced together the picture by getting information from the managers, workers, performers, and eventually the owners themselves. *Munshi* were my key informants as they kept the business books and could tell me the going rates for every expense.

If the owner also performed, one can say that the objective was not just the profit but also his intoxication with the art form and the desire to prove to other colleagues that his theatre could outdo theirs. Thus, there was a social status to be gained within the world of artists by running a successful theatre company.

Like every other enterprise, the folk theatre also needed both fixed and running capital investments, in order to ensure viable returns. This investment was made mainly by the proprietor, augmented by the performers. For some it was a rational business decision and for some a passionate step. They say some gambled even their life on it, especially when the going got tough.

The initial fixed investment was usually in the form of stage equipment, consisting mainly of the stage structure, painted backdrops, decorative panels, sound system, and the electrical illumination equipment. This initial investment was considered high. In the course of evolution of any particular theatre, more and more equipment was gradually acquired during a lucrative season to enhance the returns. On the other hand, a bad season could force the owner to sell some equipment to recoup the losses. When a theatre collapsed for lack of popularity, its equipment was sold at bargain prices.

The stage costumes and jewellery used by the performers were normally their own, though the owner could contribute a part of it. The proportion of such a contribution depended on the solvency and generosity of both the performers and the owners. For example, costumes for kings, queens and slave girls were usually provided by the proprietor, while other dresses for the traditionally romantic folk themes, such as *Heer Ranjha*, could come from the performers themselves. "Getup" and "Makeup" was the jargon for body props, false beards, moustaches, wigs, etc., which were provided by the owner. The collective term *saman* (literally luggage) was used to describe all kinds of fixed investment.

The running costs included the renting out of space for the performance, paying the wages of the employees, and booking of the performers for the season. Renting the grounds for a performance, when the group was operating independently, usually involved contacting the Municipal Committee of the town or village and paying a tax directly to the Committee.



More commonly, for a general fair (*mela*) than with a market (*mandi*), the entire festival grounds were normally leased from four to fifteen days by one person, who then subcontracted out the space for different groups: circuses, acrobats, wrestling competitions, and other rival theatres. Such a contract was termed *theka*. A tradition developed whereby the owner of the circus rented out the entire space and sublet it to the other performing groups on the undertaking that they would pay back all or most of the money on completion of their performance tenure. The only permanently covered space hired by a folk theatre was a cinema house, occasionally rented out by its owner.





Maut ka gola; outside view



A three legged sheep & other unique animals astonish the audience.



Cigarette shop run by a transvestite



The management relied totally on the ticket-money, which was the only source of income for all their investment. The cost of a ticket for the folk theatre rose over the years from half a rupee and stayed at two rupees for a long time during the nineteen sixties. Finally, it rose to ten rupees in the late eighties, but people complained about this increase. The owner had to pay five *annas* to the government out of every rupee of income as the entertainment tax. As there were sixteen *annas* in a rupee before the introduction of the decimal system, about 30% was given in taxes.

Despite the costs, many theatre groups flourished. However, those that could not compete with the big theatre companies struggled and died out over the years.

*Daring motorbike riders
drive on the walls of
Mout ka gola.
(Bottom left)*



ROPING IN THE PERFORMERS

All the women and men related to folk theatre talked to me about the time of the year when the annual contracts were renegotiated. This was a challenging and exciting time where promises and covenants were made and broken, wages raised and lowered; in short, all skills and tools of bargaining were brought to bear in intense activity. As we would learn, emotional incentives and pressures, particularly employed on the women, played a significant role in the hiring policy. All these activities were termed as 'booking' of the artists.

The use of this English word 'booking' seems to confirm the assumption that the folk theatre in its present form was influenced during colonial times. However, as discussed earlier, the theatre traditions of the Punjab go back much further in history to the times when traditional themes were staged at night in the light of flickering torches. We may thus conclude that the written contract and the yearly booking in the present form are legacies of the colonial period. However, with the frequent use of the Islamic lunar calendar instead of the traditional Indian Bikrami or the colonial Gregorian solar calendar, we are confronted with a historically composite picture as far as origins of the mode of payment are concerned.

Muharram, the first month of the Islamic calendar, which is also the month of mourning for the *Shia*, because of the tragedy of *Karbala*, has a dual significance for them. Most of the people associated with the folk theatre refer to themselves as *Shia* and observe the rituals associated with the first ten days of this month of mourning. The festivities and all kinds of theatre activity came to a stop and all the performers, managers, and workers, departed for their permanent homes. These could be their personal or family homes in their villages or that of a close relative where they could go in their off days.

This time of the year was also important for the theatre communities as all the annual contracts were renewed at this time. Artists were shuffled around different theatres. The owners and managers tried their best to offer more and grab the most-popular artists for their theatre. The 10th of *Moharram*, which is an official holiday, and two days after that were full of such activity when the decisions about the hiring of the artists' and their fees were finalized. They also assessed the competition from rival theatres based on information gathered through their informal, oral, networks.

The women I spoke to told me that they were booked from their homes. Some of them were booked for life with these theatres but some were open to changing their contract annually, if they wished. However, men gave me a more detailed picture of the dynamics and excitement that went on at this time of the year. According to them, all performers collected on the 9th and 10th of *Moharram*, i.e., during the climax of the

ritual mourning for the *Shia*. They met in one specific hotel in Lahore, where complex bargaining patterns determined the final composition of each theatre group for the season. The women were generally booked by proxy, with their menfolk doing the bargaining for them and finally closing a deal with the owner.

An advance payment was necessary in order to book a good performer. The amount advanced was written into the yearly contract of the performer. All performers were in need of ready cash and the process of obtaining an advance from the theatre-owner was, in the performer's jargon called, advance *pharna*. The actual amount taken by the performer depended on his or her popularity. Once the advance had been distributed and the show was finally on the road, the performers were at the mercy of the owner and the actual income from the ticket money.

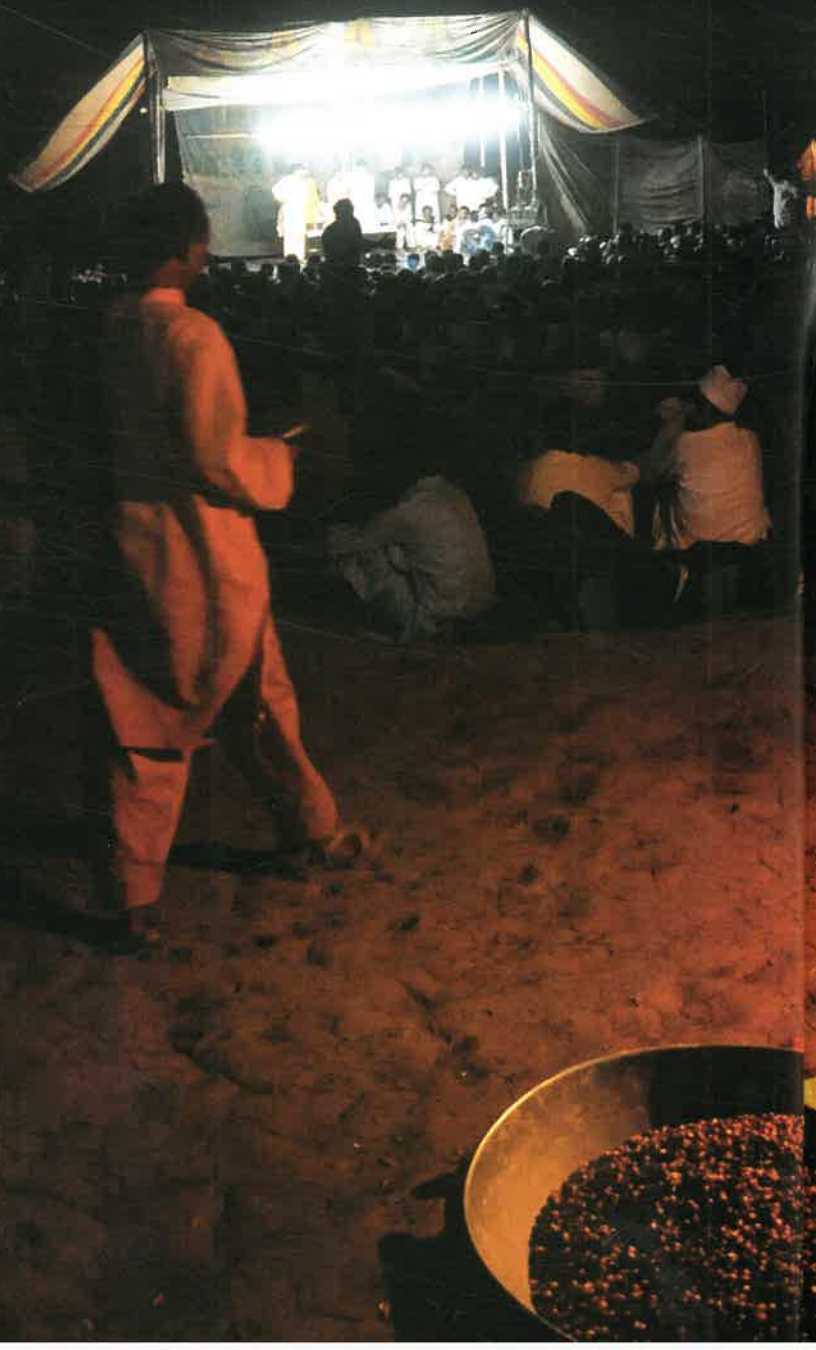
The owner could suddenly announce that no wages would be given on a particular day and ask the performers to adjust their wages against the money advanced to them. However, the owner was not interested in breaking even with the advance too early, for that would have left the performer free to leave. Instead, he maintained a hold on them by keeping them in a state of indebtedness, for a performer had to pay back the advances before breaking a contract. To enhance their own performance and weaken their rivals', the owners constantly attempted to entice the top performers away by increasing their offers of advance. These performers were motivated by the simple arithmetic of how large a new advance was being offered compared to their current state of indebtedness. This, however, was counterbalanced by a complex and sophisticated system of loyalties, relationships, emotional motivations, and linkages, all of which form a separate theme. These forms of persuasion were particularly effective with the female performers, who were highly susceptible to emotional or romantic ploys. The owner would promise or even consummate a marriage or a friendship, in exchange for saving on wages due to the performers. For the moment, it may be kept in mind that the social skills of the owner and his charms could, and sometimes significantly, did reduce expenditure on wages with the female performers.

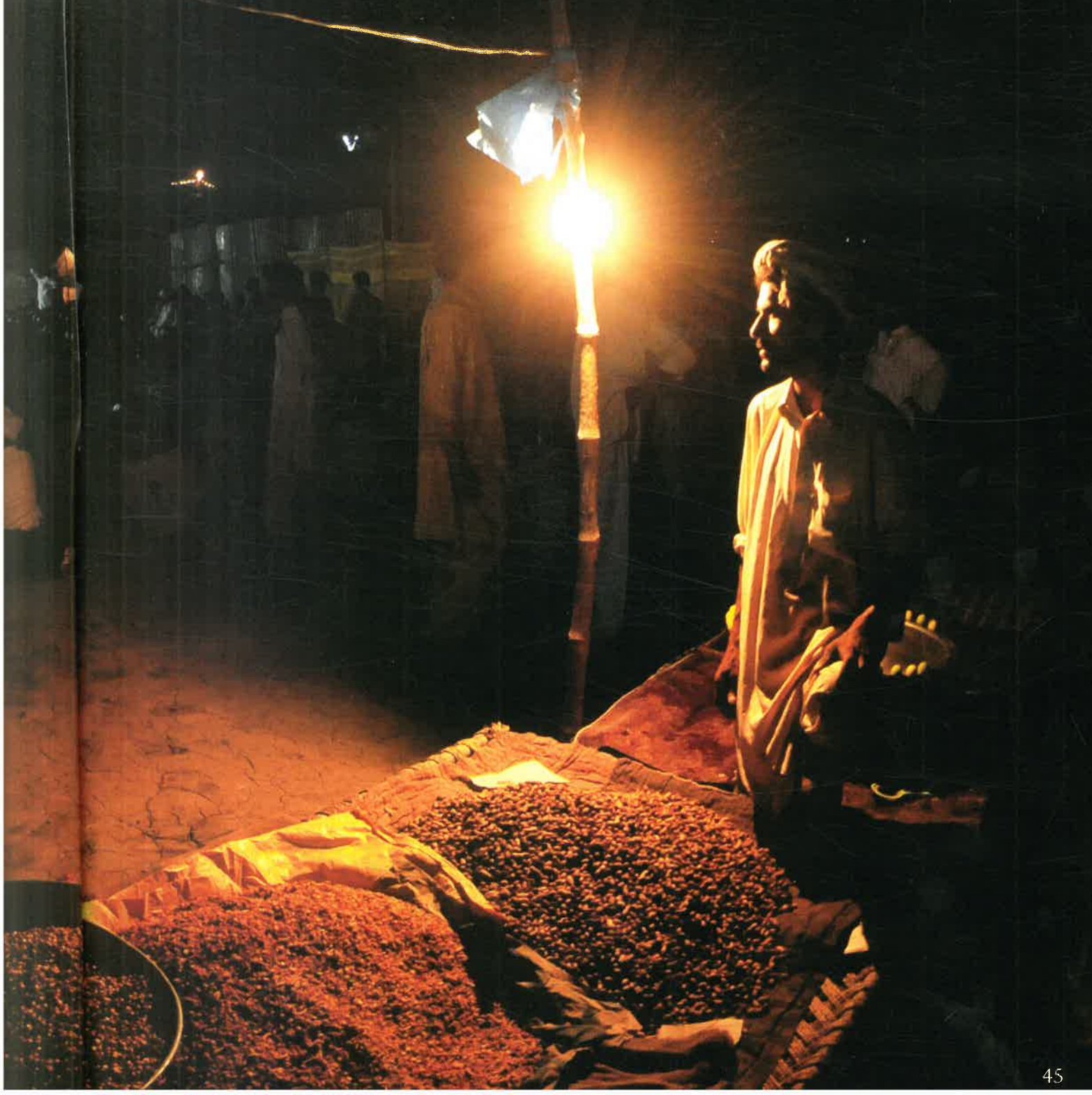
The conditions of contract were determined based on either a monthly salary or a daily, nightly wage. The latter was split up into two major categories: the first was a minimum 'subsistence' wage for non-performing periods termed *band rashan*, while the second consisted of full wages for performance nights termed as *khula rashan*.

Band rashan constituted one fourth of the *khula rashan*. The term for allowance, *rashan*, was a local rendering of the English word 'ration', which may have crept into the vocabulary during the World Wars, which had created shortages and rationing.

While the proportional relationship between these two categories remained fixed, all reckoning was based on the *khula rashan*. Depending on the location of the performance, *khula rashan* was further subdivided into two categories, *ton* (from the English word 'town') and *mela* or *mandi* (fair or market, mostly rural performances).

Ton was a less lucrative category and referred to, as the name suggests, a longer run (ten days to a fortnight) of performances in urban areas. *Ton* usually meant setting up a performance at an open site and waiting for an audience in a town. Such a performance could be held during the *Eid* Festival, but was not necessarily related to any special occasion. A *mela* or *mandi*, on the other hand, constituted a set of performances for a specific fair or festival, usually limited from two to four days in a rural area. This was a short but intensive shift of performances, requiring increased effort and sleepless nights, by the theatre people. Accordingly, the rates were normally twice that paid for the *ton*.





A further differentiation existed in the rate depending on the nature of performance, of which there were two major types, the *vareti* (English 'variety'), and *khel* (a play). A *vareti* consisted of a medley of songs and dances, interspersed with dialogues and jokes, and was a short performance in the late afternoon. A *khel* was a complete play that lasted all night. If a performer was performing in either a *vareti* or a *khel*, but not both, he or she was paid a 'single rate'. If, however, a performer acted or performed in both the *vareti* and the *khel*, the performer received twice the money, called 'double rate'. A written record of all the payments was kept by a *munshi*, in a register, under the watchful eye of the owner. The distribution of wages based on the system of reckoning described above, was done by the owner at the end of every performance in the morning. The payment was usually made in a pragmatic and business-like manner, though performers who had put on a show to the satisfaction of the owner, sometimes received a single chit, against which the *munshi* gave them a packet of cigarettes.

When the gate money was low, neither *band* nor *khula rashan* were distributed. Instead, the owner declared a state of emergency termed as *hal sharik* (literally, 'sharing in the situation'). This meant that everyone shared the profits after deducting the amount for expenditures and losses. The money was distributed proportionally, and was sometimes even less than the minimum for the *band rashan*. In such a condition of crisis, a person normally getting 200 rupees a night, could well end up with as little as fifteen to twenty rupees. Nevertheless, the rules of proportion were broken for the big stars, which were paid full wages, as the owner apprehended that they would move to another theatre. The other performers always viewed *hal sharik* with great suspicion, for they were never sure how much the gate money actually had been but they were sure that the owner had somehow cheated them out of their rightful share.

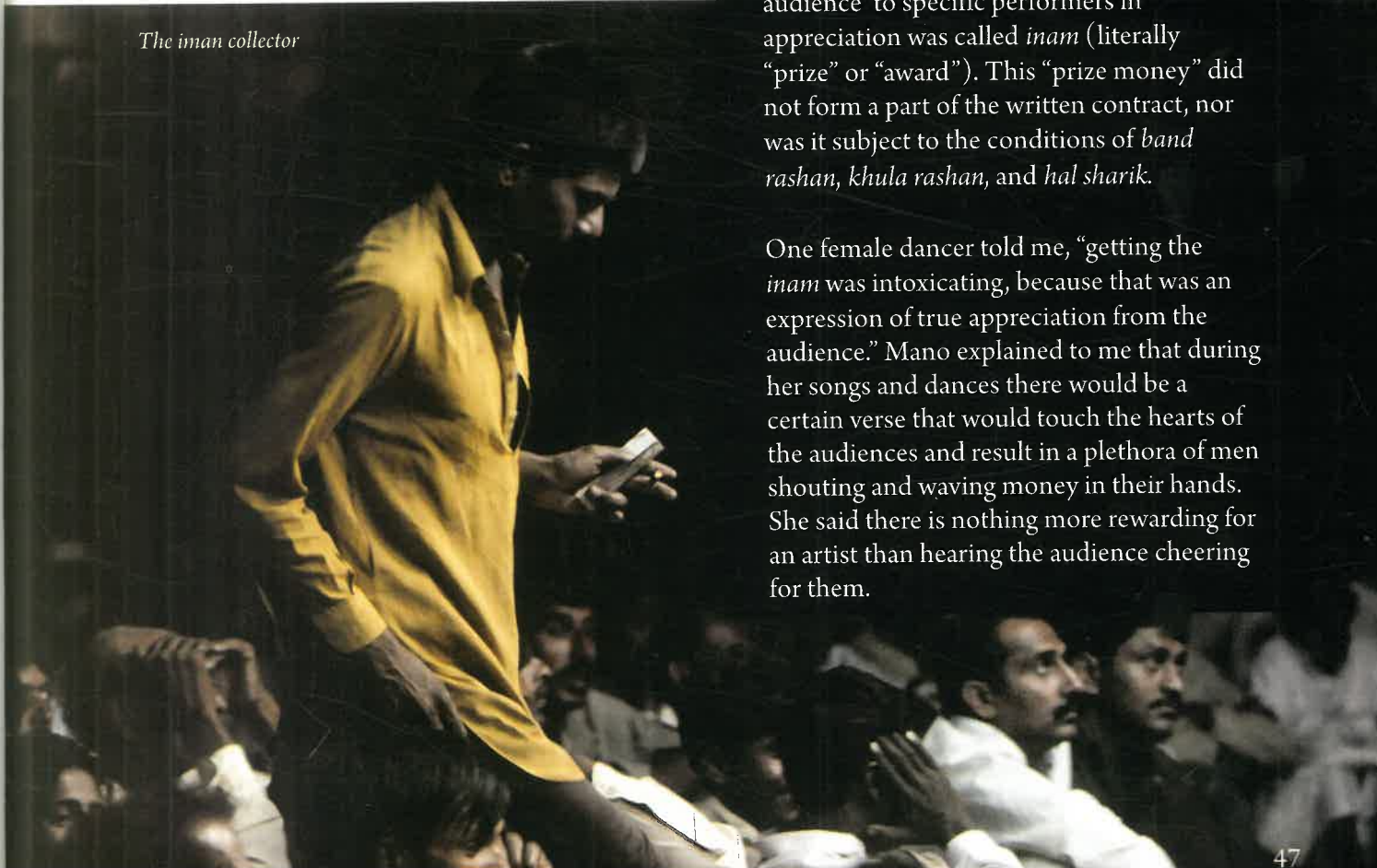
When the frequency with which *hal sharik* was declared, grew, it usually meant that a particular theatre was dying commercially, and the disgust of the performers changed into fears for their own survival. They, accordingly, began making plans to leave the dying theatre for the profitable ones. The problem for the lesser performers was compounded by the fact that the star singers who had been paid the full wages also hogged the performances. They stayed on stage for most of the performance, leaving little time for the other performers, whose frustration at this egocentric attitude grew and was compounded by the pittance paid to them.

ADDITIONAL INCENTIVES FOR THE PERFORMERS

The iman collector

The men and women performers did not just rely on the advance money and fee promised in the contract by the owner. If they were good and won the hearts of the spectators, they were rewarded by the audience also. This established a direct relationship of each performer with the audience and continued to provide a motivation for them to excel in their performances. The money given by the audience to specific performers in appreciation was called *inam* (literally “prize” or “award”). This “prize money” did not form a part of the written contract, nor was it subject to the conditions of *band rashan*, *khula rashan*, and *hal sharik*.

One female dancer told me, “getting the *inam* was intoxicating, because that was an expression of true appreciation from the audience.” Mano explained to me that during her songs and dances there would be a certain verse that would touch the hearts of the audiences and result in a plethora of men shouting and waving money in their hands. She said there is nothing more rewarding for an artist than hearing the audience cheering for them.



Apart from the money given by the audience in appreciation of the acting or singing talent, sometimes a rivalry developed among individuals in the audience, as they competed with each other in the amount given to the performers. There were times when such a tussle would begin between two landlords from two different villages and they would keep trying to outdo each other. It all went in favour of the performers so they did not mind.

The collection of money from the audience was a phenomenon in itself. The money was collected by two helpers who "caught" the *inam* and the amount collected given to an announcer, who called out the name of the donor, the amount given by him, and the performer being awarded, on a loudspeaker. The banknotes were placed between the fingers of the announcer and each niche held the prize money awarded to different performers. Thus, one hand could hold award money given to at least four different performers. The announcement was specific and each subsequent amount received for a given performer from the audience was added to earlier amounts held between the fingers allocated to that performer. For example, the announcement "Choudhry Hashmat Ali gives an award of ten rupees to Naznin Mano, Number Twenty!" meant that the performer Naznin Mano had so far received a total of twenty rupees including the amount being announced, and thus, another ten rupees got added to her niche between the announcer's fingers.

For his efforts, the announcer allegedly received a fourth of the prize money. The performers attempted to monitor the amount of their awards while in the midst of their performance. After each performance, the awards were distributed among the performers according to the amounts against specific names that had been called out by the announcers. No written records were kept and the money was paid out immediately. The accompanying musicians were not favoured by the audience in the same way and were dependent on the generosity of the performers, who would sometimes give them some money from their own *inam*.

Inam of each artists is held separately and remembered by heart by the iman announcer



A client throwing money on a woman artist. This, however not allowed by most of the theatres where the audience was prevented from coming on to the stage.

Several women performers who had left the profession, told me that many lapses occurred when making such announcements. They laughed and told me how the announcers tried their best to cheat the artists, especially women. Assuming that the women were not good with arithmetic, they would announce the single award amount correctly but at times fool them with the total figure that also got announced every time. Gulzar Jatti, a known theatre artist, narrated, laughingly, that once she was dancing and keeping a close tab on the award money announced for her because she had developed a deep mistrust for the announcer. She said her total figure for the award money went up to forty-five and then slid back to twenty. Later, it went up to eighty-five but again slid lower, this time to sixty. That night, when the performance ended, she grabbed the announcer by his ear, took off her shoe and gave it to him. These kinds of incidents were not taken seriously and the announcer was not properly reprimanded by the management. Everyone just laughed about it and such incidents provided entertainment for the community.

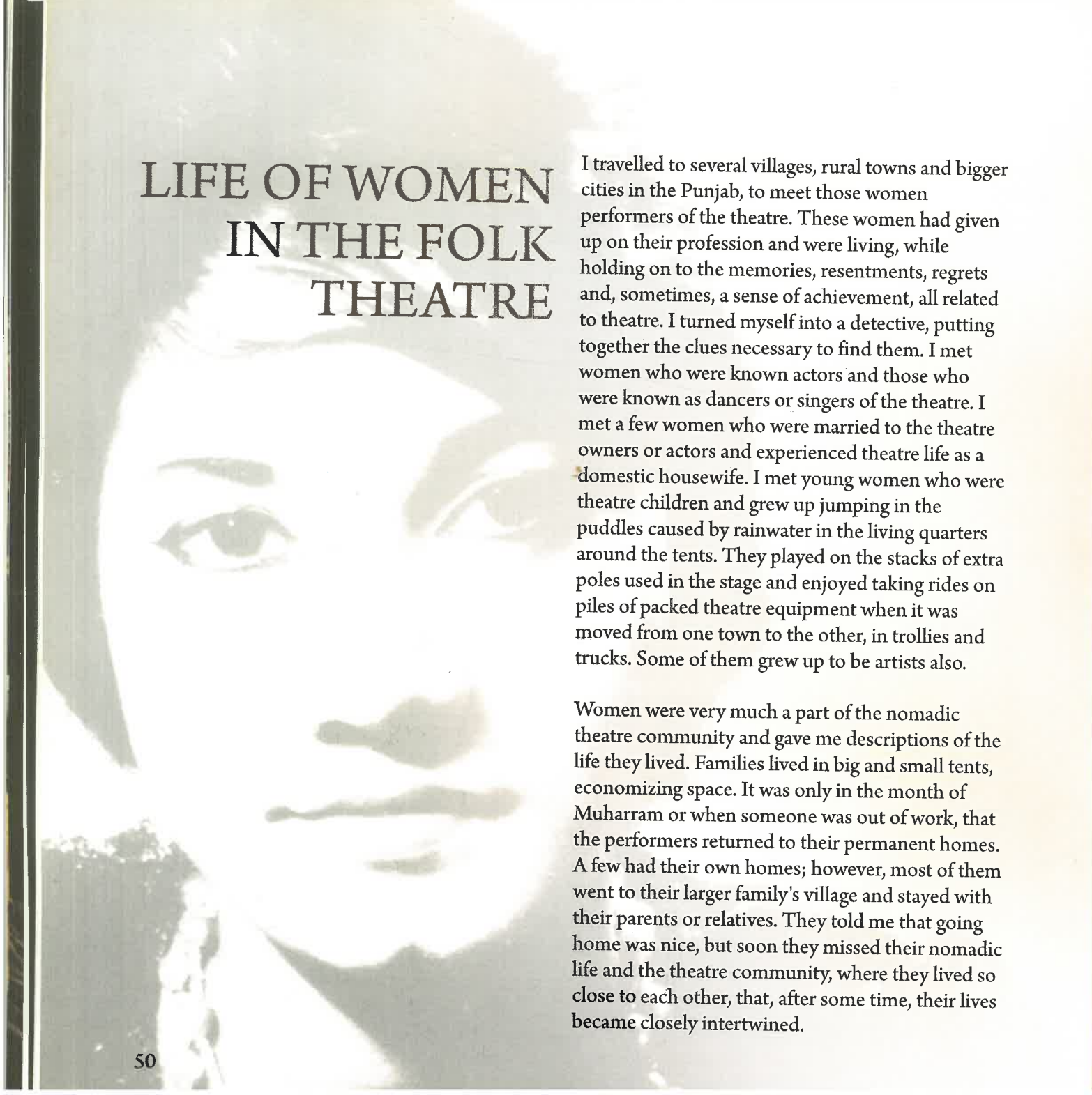
Although the money was given to the performer in whose name the *inam* was awarded, it was assumed that the women would give their hard-won money to their male patrons (husband, brother or father), while the males receiving awards could keep the money for themselves. In some cases, it was possible for the women to make some money for themselves by secretly holding back parts of the amount from their menfolk. This alone gave them a sense of empowerment. Having some resources on which they had control was a big deal, although it was never more than one-fourth of the total award money. It is interesting to note that the little money they acquired in this fashion was spent much more wisely than all the money their guardians took.

At times money was awarded to a certain specific performer (usually female), in order to get her attention in the hope of favours to come after the performance while enjoying the erotic exchange of the present. Women had to handle such instances carefully.

There were also occasions when wealthy people among the audience would be strongly attracted by both the glamour of the theatre and its performers, mainly the women. The management often tried to talk them into investing money in a theatre company. This was done with the collusion of all the key performers, who brought every possible enticement and gentle pressure to bear to make sure the would-be investor would part with his or her money. Alluring such impromptu patrons of the arts was a highly developed skill at which certain performers excelled.



Gulzar Jatti, a theatre heroin of her time, remembering days of performing and collecting *inam* money (1989)



LIFE OF WOMEN IN THE FOLK THEATRE

I travelled to several villages, rural towns and bigger cities in the Punjab, to meet those women performers of the theatre. These women had given up on their profession and were living, while holding on to the memories, resentments, regrets and, sometimes, a sense of achievement, all related to theatre. I turned myself into a detective, putting together the clues necessary to find them. I met women who were known actors and those who were known as dancers or singers of the theatre. I met a few women who were married to the theatre owners or actors and experienced theatre life as a domestic housewife. I met young women who were theatre children and grew up jumping in the puddles caused by rainwater in the living quarters around the tents. They played on the stacks of extra poles used in the stage and enjoyed taking rides on piles of packed theatre equipment when it was moved from one town to the other, in trollies and trucks. Some of them grew up to be artists also.

Women were very much a part of the nomadic theatre community and gave me descriptions of the life they lived. Families lived in big and small tents, economizing space. It was only in the month of Muharram or when someone was out of work, that the performers returned to their permanent homes. A few had their own homes; however, most of them went to their larger family's village and stayed with their parents or relatives. They told me that going home was nice, but soon they missed their nomadic life and the theatre community, where they lived so close to each other, that, after some time, their lives became closely intertwined.

The highest within the hierarchy of women in this field were those who played the lead role in the plays. They were in high demand and the ticket of the show was mostly sold in their name. Khursheed Kuku, Bali Jatti, Gulzar Jatti, Firdaus, Jehan Ara, Roshan Ara, were among the most famous names of that era of the folk theatre. Other famous actresses were mostly known for character acting. Some of them started as heroines and with age relented for character acting. Among these Iqbal Begum, Asha Posle, Shamshad, Shagufta, Khatoon Begum, and Sabiha Khanum, were quite well-known. Iqbal Begum was a famous heroine of the Phaji Shah Theatre who moved over to character roles as she grew older. Khatoon Begum also started her career as a heroine and slowly relinquished her position to make way for her daughters.

These women also played a significant role in grooming the young actresses and over the years of their careers earned a lot of respect from their peers. Some women were known primarily for their singing or dancing talent. They were either hired for small roles in the play that required singing or dancing, or did single entries for the part of the show that was called 'variety show'. They sang and danced in the first few hours before the play started or in the break time when the artists needed to change. Some of the famous singers and dancers were Naznin Mano, Nargis Amrikan Putli, Rukayya Katar, Surayya, and Shado.

These women not only performed but also managed their families. They cooked and looked after their children. The husbands of some of these women also did small roles or were somehow involved in labour work within the company. However, some were dependent on their wives, using their income on the pretext of being their agents.



Naznin Mano, a singer and character actress.



Nargis, a theatre actress mostly known as Amrikan Putli

The living style in the semi-nomadic circumstances, as described by the women interviewed, was similar to that of an extended family. Most of the people in the theatre company were on one-year contracts. They thus developed a feeling of belonging to a community while travelling together from place to place, with families sharing their good times and bad. They took part in resolving conflicts between husbands and wives. They gave advice to each other about raising children, saving money, and career-building. Jealousies, competition, and fights, were very much a part of this community living. However, with all this closeness, on one hand they always found support when they were in trouble but on the other, there was always someone ready to replace anyone with a problem.





There were a few male artists who chose not to keep their wives and children with them all year round. This was because they wanted their children to live in a stable neighbourhood and

attend school. These families usually visited the father once in a while. At times male artists with more than one wife would settle one family in their village and kept one with them. For women artists, at times, leaving one male child with their parents for some years in hope to get him schooling or take care of an elderly parent, was not uncommon.

I spent long hours behind the stage, in the living area for the artists, to understand how these families lived. This compound area was skirted by a cloth wall and was dotted with big and small tents, made available to the team according to their social and economic status in the theatre company. The owner, obviously, had the biggest tent. Key stars also enjoyed a comparable status with an independent, big, round, tent. The other support artists and musicians had small A-frame tents, while the stagehands, labourers, and electricians, had modest arrangements or were left to find their own place to stay. They kept their families in some village and visited them on their off days.

As most of the artists had their families with them, each tent functioned like a separate household in the compound. Married women had their husbands and children, whereas unmarried, separated or divorced women lived with their fathers, brothers or some other, usually male, blood relative.

I would follow the women around to understand their routine in the world of theatre and was amazed at how efficiently they used their time, the resources, and most of all, the living space, they had.

Exhausted after performing all night, the woman of the theatre returned to her little tent in the early hours of the morning. She removed all her make up, put aside her jewellery and stepped into her “real world”. For her, show business was an artificial life, which an actor puts up for the public. Stripped of all glamour, her real life was a struggle for survival.

After changing her clothes, she said her morning prayers and went to sleep. She got up in the afternoon, cleaned her tent and sprinkled water on the dirt floor to make the dust settle. Depending on her prosperity and support, she cooked her own food or had it cooked either by a less fortunate member of the family or a servant.

After finishing her household chores, she had to go in the afternoon for the rehearsal of the performance to come. Rehearsals were held usually in, either the owner's tent, or in a separate tent, where a literate *munshi* would help the generally unlettered performers, memorise their lines. After the rehearsal, she took care of her children if she had any, and then prepared for the variety show, which started in the late afternoon and evening. At sunset, she began to prepare her clothes and jewellery for that night's performance, which usually started around nine o' clock and continued all night.

Performing all night was hard work. As women were the ones doing most of the dances, it would get very tiring for them. Bali Jatti still bears the scars of heavy anklet bells (*ghungrus*) on her ankles. She said that her ankles would start bleeding after several hours of dancing.

On days when there was no performance, women would get together and go shopping. Most of their free time was spent



Living in the tents



It was rare that the women in the folk theatre went out from their compounds, but when they did they enjoyed a lot

in cooking large amounts of food and entertaining the guests of their menfolk.

The theatre performances were a part of a bigger festival community where the other performances of skill and courage like the “Well of Death” (*maut ka kuan*), circuses, and magic shows were also going on. All these performers were bound by their occupations and developed a feeling of belonging to one community. Despite the competition in attracting audience and profit-making, a great deal of ad-hoc solidarity developed among them if there was a problem with people they considered as 'outsiders'. Men stood for each other within the community if there was an issue with the local administration or a fight with rowdy gangsters in the audience. Women interacted with other women from different groups within the entertainers' community. Sometimes they would visit each other and go out together.

Brave women like Bali Jatti crossed the gender divide. Being a theatre-owner, she dealt with other key partners in this trade and stood by them when the time came. Once, at a festival, a policeman used his stick on Mian Shaukat, a lion-tamer in a circus. Bali got so angry that she grabbed a microphone to make an emotional and impassioned speech on the spot: “We are all in this business together and we must protest against such injustice. If we do not, these attacks on our integrity will continue to increase. I will be the first to close down my theatre in protest and everyone should do so.” Her powerful speech sparked a general strike of the performing groups. This strike, allegedly, proved strong enough to pressure the police into making an unconditional apology to the lion-tamer.

Such cases of courageous female engagement, however, were not common. In general, all the business dealings were done for the women by their fathers, husbands, or other male relatives. Women were never permitted the opportunity to develop any business skills. Even in cases where their husbands were the owners of the theatre, very few were able to gain any power in terms of managing the business. The suppression and control of female entrepreneurial talent by males was thus a built-in feature of this theatre world. Their creative ideas and astute business sense was simply appropriated by their men and used for their own advancement.

THEATRE WOMEN AND THEIR ADMIRERS

The private lives of these women were completely cut off from their public exposure. This private world was well-guarded and no one was allowed to enter that area. It was surrounded by a thick canvas wall and barbed wire. The general public was kept strictly away from the living quarters.

However, a certain degree of permeability in this strongly held value did exist, as some people who had given award money to the female performers during performances, at times, expected to meet them. The important point here is that the major donors did try to get into the compound,



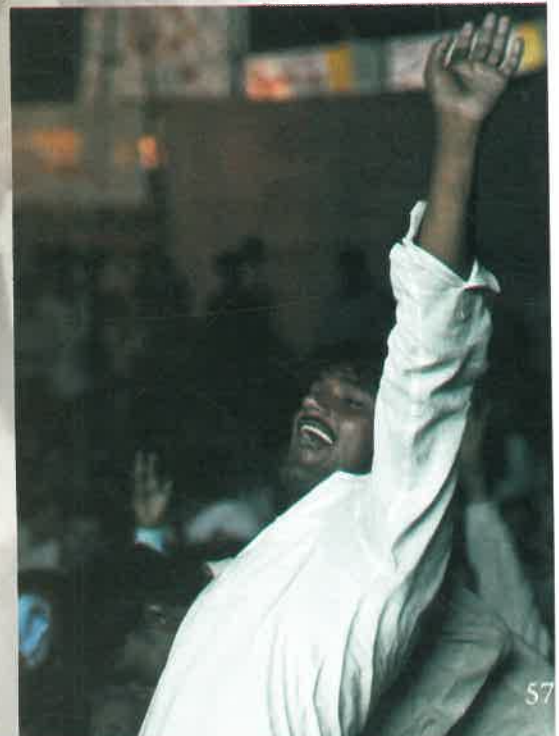
using the money they had already spent as a lubricant. But the theatre community devised a procedure for that. They refused to allow anyone, even a rich admirer, to barge in. He had to contact the man related to that woman. Sometimes this man would accept the message of admiration from him on behalf of the woman and convey her gratitude back to him, to satisfy the visitor. At times when the admirer was insistent upon having a personal meeting with the female performer, the male member of her family would go back in and ask the female performer if she wanted to have a cup of tea with him. If she agreed then the meeting would mostly take place in the owner's tent, in the presence of the man of the family. This man could be the woman's husband, brother, father, or any other male relative. Group meetings, where the admirer would come with a few friends, and the woman,



accompanied by a few family members, chit chatted with him for a while, was also acceptable at times.

No woman interviewed mentioned any use of force by their menfolk, though some cajoling in favour of particularly wealthy admirers was done. It was up to the woman if she wanted to meet with them or not. If a woman actor refused to see any admirers after the performance, she would make a point of proudly letting everyone in the compound know. She would also take pride in boasting that men from the audience were making bets with each other to see her face without make-up or to have a cup of tea with her.

Fans chasing their favourite artists from mela to mela



Naznin Mano related an incident when they were performing in a cinema hall. The owners of the cinema wanted to meet her and her father for tea. Her father sensing ill intention in this invitation refused them rudely. This resulted in the owner making it into an issue of his honour and retaliated. The news leaked that the owners and their friends planned to break into their living quarters and kidnap some women performers for their pleasure. Theatre-owner, Cheena Pehelwan, ran away to safety with his wife Gulzar Jatti, and her friend,



Bali Jatti, leaving everyone else behind. The silver-tongued Inayat Hussain Bhatti, who was known for his sophisticated mannerism and a good head on his shoulders, saved the situation: he talked with the cinema owners in an obsequious and reasonable manner, with the result that they agreed that the kidnapping plan had been the result of an ill-founded rumour. The incident was thus averted. However, when it was discovered that Cheena Pehelwan had run away with Gulzar and Bali, much laughter ensued: the girls said, "He took the old women with him and left all the young girls behind!"

Khurshid Kuku mentioned a case where one of her admirers was a very rich man. He begged his way to her tent and talked to her husband. He wanted to give Khurshid a large amount of money as *inam* directly: "My husband came in the tent several times to convince me that all the man wanted was to reward me for my wonderful performance on stage. Finally I told my husband to take the money on my behalf."

An atmosphere of erotic tension was thus maintained between the theatre women and their admirers, who had to run the gauntlet of watchmen, fathers and husbands, in order to be able to see and talk to the women. The cup of tea was the symbolic threshold to other possibilities: wealthy or assertive members of the male audience could, with luck and resources, end up with a love affair or marriage with a performing woman, or they could be talked into investing money into the theatre as an enterprise. If,

however, neither was forthcoming, their linkage with the inner sanctum of the theatre compound was terminated rather hastily.

INTERNALIZING THE STIGMA

In many South Asian patriarchal societies it is common to observe women in a secondary position as far as social hierarchies of power and control are concerned. Men tend to take on the leadership role, may it be of the family, community, religious, or political institutions. Women, who are seen more in a supporting role, are directed towards following the path laid down for them to play. Through socialization, guilt is induced if they act otherwise. Somehow creative expression on a woman's part is seen as a threat that might transform her and facilitate her to get out of the groove that has been carefully carved out for her. Thus, in many societies, performing arts especially, have been stigmatized for women. When the permission is granted, it is mostly for the entertainment of men. However these women are stigmatized to be sure that the creative expression does not become a desired attribute for the women in the society in general. This, in the minds of patriarchs, could question the established hierarchies and disturb the "order" set by them over the centuries. There are very few women who overcome the internalized stigma, and eventually, assert themselves. They also, at times, take on leadership roles. However, they are considered to be 'classificatory males'. In other words they are accepted as men in the social hierarchy, rather than allowing them to expand the role of women in the society.

Despite all these controls women in Pakistan have continued to make their contribution to the arts in every generation. Women in the folk theatre are also a group of brave women, very diverse in their backgrounds and interest, but who shared this common struggle of dealing with the societal pressure and stigma.

Most women working in the theatre did not join this field of their own free will. They were generally brought into the theatre by their fathers or husbands. Those who were born and brought up in the theatre community were socialized to do that work. All the women I contacted for this study expressed the guilt and burden they carried because of the stigma attached to their occupation. They said it was not their talent or capabilities that prompted them to perform, but the obligation to obey their family. Through this 'obligatory' response one could see the yearning of showing their talent of singing and dancing in the eyes of many. It was very clear that many continued to struggle to even admit the sense of power and satisfaction they had when performing on the stage. They openly talked about their internalized stigma and their ways to handle it. They told me that according to their religious and ethical socialization, performing in front of men who were strangers (ghair mard) was not allowed. To resolve the contradiction between their socialized value system and their practice, they developed a two-tiered conceptual framework: a "true face"

(Asli chehra), juxtaposed with a "false face" (naqli chehra). They thus brought themselves to believe that the men who are strangers, in other words, their audience, saw only their false face, a face they made up for the stage. Their true face, without the makeup, remained essentially their own. Therefore, in their everyday public life they mostly wore the traditional veil (*burqa*) covering the whole body, including the face.

Most of them sought support for this ideology from the mystic holy men, *pir*, who would obligingly absolve them of guilt and assure them that the work they did with the sweat of their brow was indeed permitted (*halal*), as opposed to dishonest (*haram*) labour. Reinforcement of this ideology was also provided by the older men of the theatre, who helped them to believe that there was nothing wrong with their profession.

This discrepancy between their learned religious values and the demands of their profession resulted in an exaggerated emphasis on religion. It was very common for performing women to say their prayers six times a day (including the late night prayer of *tahajud*) and fast for the full holy month of Ramadan. A deep religiosity was thus used to nullify the distress and the guilt that confronted them because of their calling.

The predominant religious sect of choice for the female performers, whatever their actual religious origin, was the Shia. The universalistic world view of this sect and its close association in the Punjab with Sufi mystic saints lent itself to this end. Even those theatre people who were not Shia, followed the rituals associated with this faith.

THEATRE WOMEN AND THEIR GUARDIANS

The women I interviewed were unanimous in asserting that they felt very comfortable with the men in the theatre company. Even though romances and marriages took place within this group, there was no danger or feeling of insecurity among women from the men living around them. Actually, many women I talked to, specifically mentioned, that many men had provided active support in developing them as a person and as a professional theatre artist.

The only physical danger they had was from their own "guardians". Wife-beating was very common. When asked about the frequency of such incidents in the theatre community, an old experienced actor said, "Some women in our group would get beaten up every day." Bali Jatti spoke of the time when her husband put her hands under the bedposts and sleep with his second wife on the same bed.

At times, people from other tents would come to help but they usually ignored such incidents as an internal affair of the immediate family. Nevertheless, the theatre community occasionally acted as a buffer against

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At times, people from other tents would come to help but they usually ignored such incidents as an internal affair of the immediate family. Nevertheless, the theatre community occasionally acted as a buffer against

extreme cruelty. One senior *munshi* tried to explain this phenomenon to me saying. "The most common reason for a man to beat his wife was to get more money when they were short of cash; however, the excuses used always emphasized jealousy towards her admirers or her intolerance of his love affairs."

These women were brave and despite the social sanctioning by their husbands, they continued to develop their confidence, would gradually learn about managing their money, and developed more and more social linkages to gain some balance in their support network.

Regardless of the reasons for their joining the theatre, many developed their unique ways of expression on the stage and that became the main pivot of their life. Even having affairs at times with other men in the community became an expression of defiance. Through that they were able to explore their own sexuality and other aspects of their personality.

Another pattern that I explored through my interviews with women and theatre managers was that a theatre-owner had one wife which was referred to as *Gharelu bivi* (domestic wife), who was kept in his village with his larger family. This was his permanent home where he returned from time to time. Then he would marry another woman who was referred to as his 'theatre wife'. This was mostly a famous rising star of the stage, whom he would befriend. There were examples of such people marrying a third wife in the film industry in a later period, if they had access to that medium as well. That wife facilitated their success in the film arena. In addition, they would have one or more mistresses from time to time. Not all would follow this pattern but it was quite common.



Shado, a famous theatre actress.

When asked about the reason for such a pattern, the informants explained that control of women through emotional manipulation was essential for maintaining the core team of the theatre: for example, a wife and a mistress, who were a heroine and a character actress, respectively, could both be kept tied to the theatre by bestowing attention on them. This then worked as a permanent source of, in most cases, unpaid labour in the tough and competitive world of the folk theatre, thus ensuring its stability and success.

Even when popular performers were booked for one year, the owners constantly lived with the apprehension that a rival theatre would take them away by offering more money to them. In case the artist left in the middle of the year, the performance of the theatre would suffer enormously. However, when the owner of the theatre could play the hero and his wife the heroine, a large part of his troubles was taken care of. In addition, the owner would employ his own as well as his wife's relatives, so that they would stick together and could be manipulated when necessary. For example, Mian Anwar, owner of the Shahjehan Theatre, saw Khurshid Kuku at Phaji Shah's Theatre, where she was making her career debut. An understanding developed between Mian Anwar and Khurshid Kuku and he booked her for his own theatre for the following year. He married her in the same year. In return for the prestige and security that marriage to an owner gave her, she had to relinquish any remuneration. For more than sixteen years, she was never paid by her avaricious husband, who even took away the award money that an appreciative audience showered upon her. The amount of award money she got was an indicator of her popularity. With only about one-fourth of this money, which she had secretly held back from her husband, she was able to buy land and build a house of her own in Lahore.

One should have faith in the magic of love and should not doubt the intentions of these men in power positions. However one sees such patterns repeated in the film industry where famous directors married rising stars. Although they were given opportunities to work in big productions they were rarely paid for their work. Many famous actresses in Hollywood, Bollywood, and Lollywood, are also known to have husbands who were somehow linked to the trade but eventually turned into their agents, managing their funds. At the end of their acting careers these women found out that they were left with nothing.

The pattern experienced by the theatre-women echoes in the lives of women in the performing arts, trying hard to strike a balance between their romantic life, family obligations, and professionalism.

*Shado with her
family and friends
(opposite)*



PROMINENT WOMEN STARS

It is important to acknowledge the prominent women in the world of folk theatre that created magic by their performance for the masses over more than three decades. Those visiting religious gatherings, which are normally centered upon the burial places of holy saints (*urs*), or farmers' markets to sell or buy animals, forgot the worries, and hassles of their daily lives, and drowned themselves in the tales of romance, adventure, and magic. These tales were performed by beautiful female performers who left their viewers in awe. For the duration of the performance, at least, they knew they could treat their eyes with such beauty. They engaged in these romantic tales for as long as they could, before the play ended, and then went back to their bitter realities.

These women contributed significantly to the folk theatre. Stories of their lives tell us so much about the world of theatre and its glamour. But more importantly their lives inform us of what went on behind the stage; the way they tried to cope with contradictory realities, with tensions between the private and the public spheres, and with the atrocities they went through in a male-dominated world.

It is important to rewrite history and document the traditional culture from the women's perspective, alone. In addition to the issues related to glamour, we might see the agony that only they experienced and only they could narrate.

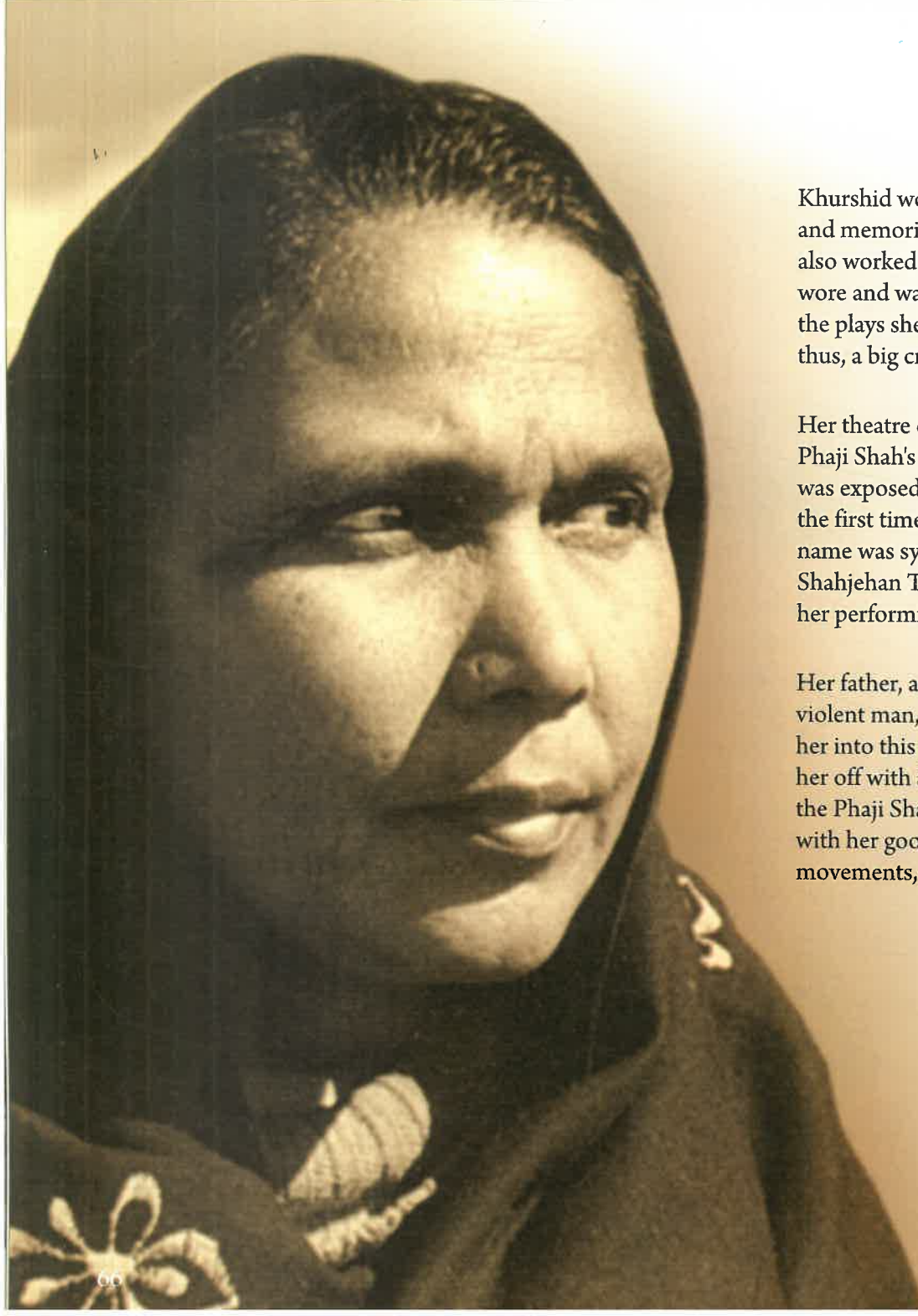
Here some of the women stars of the theatre world have been highlighted to get some glimpses of their lives. I made sure that I selected women artists from all the categories; those who played the role of a heroin, character actresses, or a one-item star for singing or dancing in the intermissions.

*Khurshid Kuku
a famous heroin of
the Shahjehan Theatre
(opposite)*



KHURSHID KUKU

Khurshid was one of the most popular heroines of her time, who played the leading roles in a repertoire of twenty-one plays. With her beautiful features and poised movements she was considered a classic beauty. She was considered the epitome of femininity and one of the most graceful actresses in the theatre world, and therefore, won the hearts of people like nobody else.



Khurshid worked hard on her roles and memorized the lines well. She also worked on the dresses she wore and was a major attraction in the plays she acted in, and was, thus, a big crowd-puller.

Her theatre career started from the Phaji Shah's Theatre, where she was exposed to this business for the first time. Later, however, her name was synonymous with the Shahjehan Theatre for the rest of her performing career.

Her father, a very brutal and violent man, had, initially, pushed her into this profession. He started her off with a year's contract with the Phaji Shah's Theatre, where, with her good looks and graceful movements, she became very

*Khurshid Kuku and
Mian Anwar, the owner of
Shahjehan Theatre
(opposite)*

popular. Mian Anwar, who owned the Shahjehan Theatre, astutely, saw in her a rising star, and promptly booked her for his Theatre for the following year. He married her the same year.

Mian Anwar was also known for his brutality and violence. Despite the hardships Khurshid endured during her time with him, she remained his wife for twenty years until his death.

Like most of the theatre-owners, Mian Anwar had a "domestic wife" in his permanent home in Faisalabad. Other than that, he had married and divorced several women and had numerous mistresses. Fearful of meeting the same fate as his previously divorced wives, Khurshid submitted to him totally. She became a virtual slave to Mian Anwar, cleaning, cooking, washing clothes, not only for him, but also for his mistresses and friends. An indolent man, he was too arrogant to use the common toilet of the theatre people, preferring to relieve himself in his own tent and forcing Khurshid to take the excrement outside. When interviewed, Khurshid put out both her hands in a dramatic gesture and said, "These two hands removed his shit from our tent."



As Mian Anwar was the owner of the theatre, Khurshid was paid nothing for her performances. Even the prize money that the audience showered on her (which usually ranged from fifty to two hundred rupees per performance) was taken away from her. In desperation, she contrived to hide about a fourth of the prize money to pay for the expenses of her children, while living a life of extreme poverty herself.

Despite her unremitting slavish loyalty and devotion Khurshid was subjected to the fate she had always feared: Mian Anwar developed ties with Bali Jatti and unceremoniously threw Khurshid out of his tent; this made her realize how tenuous and insecure her existence had become while living with him. She recalls how this ejection made her painfully aware of the future of her children.

Khurshid had four daughters and two sons from Mian Anwar. Interestingly, in her later age, she was very proud of the fact that she didn't let any of them join the theatre world. Her only focus in life was her children. Her own theatre career ended with the downfall of the Shahjehan Theatre and the subsequent death of her husband a few years later.

After leaving the theatre, she and her children had to work very hard to make a living in the world of "virtuous" people, i.e., people who were not in the entertainment business.

She tried her hand at several business ventures to stay alive. She sold clothes as a retailer, made plastic clamps and even ran a small letter press for some time. During her time with the theatre, she had never once ventured outside the compound without the veil (burqa) and her only experience of "outsiders" had been from the safety of the stage. The sudden exposure to the outside world, that her work now demanded, was a shock that she surmounted with great difficulty. Nevertheless, she managed to overcome the stigma attached to a performer by doing "respectable" hard work, a fact that she was very proud of.

She married again after prolonged pressure from her father and other relatives and friends. The final decision was prompted by the fact that she wanted to marry off her second daughter, but had no money for the dowry. Her new proposer was a man from Faisalabad who knew her from the times when she used to perform on the stage and had been proposing to her ever since Mian Anwar's demise. She finally accepted his proposal and he helped Khurshid provide the dowry for her daughter. He also supported Khurshid, financially, for two years, after which both his visits and gifts of money began

*Khurshid Kuku
doing Tilla embroidery
in her house
(opposite)*

to taper off. She bore him a daughter, who became a big support for her, as her other children had grown up and got on with their lives.

Khurshid placed great value on the education of her children. All of them had at least ten years of schooling with a matriculation certificate. One daughter has gone for further study and completed her Intermediate (twelve years of schooling). Three daughters and a son are married, but the daughter who is still studying is ambitious and refuses to marry until she has acquired some professional skills. She plans to take a course in airline ticketing and work for the Pakistan International Airlines or a travel agency, at the very least. In her last days, Khurshid, along with her daughter, worked as embroiders, doing *salma* (gold-thread work) on festive female dresses.

Khurshid felt sad about how she was manipulated by her father and then her husband, but she was also proud that she had regained her respect through her children, who according to her, all married into "respectable" households and worked at "respectable" jobs. That she thought was her biggest achievement.

NAZNIN MANO

Naznin Mano, mostly referred to with love as Mano, by her peers and fans, was known for her melodious voice. Besides being an excellent singer, she was also a good dancer and an actress. Although she had performed some significant roles in her career, she was still seen more as a side-heroine or as a character actress.

Naznin Mano's parents were not associated with the folk theatre. Her father, Akhtar Ali, was a tailor by profession and this brought him in touch with some theatre and film people. When Naznin was still a child, her father's friend



*Naznin Mano
at the pinnacle
of her career*



*Naznin Mano serving lassi
to an old Munshi, living in
the Shahdara area. She and
other women memorized
their scripts with his help.*

managed to find her a small role in a Punjabi film, Chan Wah ("Hail the Moon"), in which she danced with other children in a scene. Among the people who were watching the shooting of the film was the well-known theatre owner, Syed Fazal Shah, commonly known as Phaji Shah. He recognized the talent in the little girl and asked her father to bring her to the theatre.

Father and daughter both began to live there. Mano started off her career by performing children's roles. As she grew older, she was given side-roles and finally the main ones. Apart from the Phaji Shah Theatre, she also performed in several other famous theatres, such as the Kissan, Ittehad, and the Lucky Theatre.

Her father became her agent. The theatre owners would contact and settle the performance rates with him and he would collect the money on her behalf. She lived with him in a separate tent with a servant during her performing tours.

When Naznin Mano was working in the Kissan Theatre in the early sixties, she met



Naznin, full of dreams for her future.



Inayat Hussain Bahtti, who was then rising rapidly to fame as a folksinger. A romance developed and he married her in 1964, but she continued working in the Theatre after her marriage. With her husband's domestic wife she was not sure what her place in his life would be. Thus, she wanted to continue earning her own income. Besides she truly liked performing. Her work was almost devotional for her.

Mano bore Inayat Bhatti a girl after a few years, but she did not give up the theatre. She requested her own father to take care of the girl while she was on stage but during the other times she gave her more attention than needed just to convince herself that she was a responsible mother. When Mano's father died in 1971, she was left with the difficult responsibility of looking after a four-year-old child and performing at the same time. Her husband was not much help, as he only lived with her when both were working in the same theatre.

Not coping well with child-rearing and not having enough means to hire help, Mano left work in 1972 and moved into the house that she and her father had started building. He had planned on having a small tailoring shop right next to the house so that he could restart his tailoring profession but he did not live long enough to complete either the house or to realize the dream of living a retired life with Mano and his granddaughter. Later, Mano's husband contributed towards completion of the house.

Mano's daughter completed her Intermediate Science Certificate. She taught as a science teacher in a school for a while. Mano rented out half of her house to a family of another theatre performer to get a modest income.

For a while, her husband sent her a modest amount monthly, but this dwindled to an occasional amount from time to time. With his own family in the city and a high social standing, he never publicly acknowledged his relationship with Mano or her daughter until his death. Although she lived in extreme poverty, Mano successfully raised and educated her daughter and later got her married. However, due to unfortunate circumstances, the marriage did not last and the daughter came back with her two children to live with Mano. The daughter has a serious weight problem, that restricts her mobility, but she occasionally finds children who wish to be taught privately.

Renting out most of the space, her house has been reduced to only one small room where the family does not have enough room to put cots for all the family members. Thus, when the night falls Mano takes out a cot on the side of the street to sleep.

Mano is still gifted with a beautiful and melodious voice. Even though it has been a long time since she left the theatre, she still clearly remembers her repertoire of theatre songs and the lines of the characters she used to play. It seems that her grandchildren will revive that creative spark and follow the tradition of being child stars like their grandmother. Both of them are very interested in modeling and acting and are just waiting for the right opportunity.

SURAYYA

Surayya was a theatre child who grew up in the theatre environment and turned into a seasoned character actress. Her parents, Bashir Salam and Khatun Begum, were a famous couple of Bau Kale Khan's Theatre in pre-partition India. Both of them were good singers and actors. Her mother, Khatun Begum, was particularly well-known for her portrayal of tragic characters.

Sharing the guilt that dogged many performers, Surayya's parents tried to keep the children away from the theatre by sending them over to their relatives. They would send these relatives money for the upkeep of their children, but very little of it was actually spent on them. When the children visited their parents, they were always astonished at the abundance of food and other luxuries they saw at their place, so they used to beg their parents to allow them to stay there. The children also liked the colourful entertainment and were very attracted to it. Eventually, the parents relented, and Surayya finally entered the profession her parents had tried to keep her away from.

Surayya, and her sister Rukayya, started by working in children's roles. They were encouraged by the other performers and took up the art of acting rather quickly. Surayya remembered the day when she first performed the role of the young Laila (in the love story *Laila Majnun*). She was only twelve at that time, and Shahjehan Theatre was performing at the small Punjab town of Chuharkana. She was both nervous and excited at the same time. She remembered her audience clapping for her when Majnu was beaten up with a stick by his teacher and the marks of that beating were seen on her hands. Talking to Surayya I could still see the excitement in her eyes when she talked about her performances.

By the end of her career, Surayya had performed several character roles in most of the plays. She had also performed in most of the big theaters: Phaji Shah, Ittehad, Shahjehan, and Wali Shah.



Surayya Jabeen, a famous actress of the folk theatre

In Pakistani cultural context men usually take a relative or a close friend to the parents of the girl they like to make a proposal for marriage. A man who really wanted to marry Surayya brought in his aristocratic friend, Nawab Sadiq, to watch her performance and later help him talk to her family to arrange his marriage. When the Nawab saw her performance, he found himself strongly attracted to her. He discouraged his friend from marrying her and instead talked to her parents about allowing him to take their daughter out to see a film.

While at the film he tried to touch her in an inappropriate manner. Surayya got angry and slapped him. According to Surayya, he became even more determined to marry her after this incident. He pursued Surraiya's parents and got their permission.

The Nawab, however, kept his marriage a secret even from his own parents, who would never have permitted him to do so with a "commoner" like her. The main reason for this secrecy lay in the fact that he had never worked for a living and lived off a monthly stipend he received from his parents. Three years after the marriage, his family found out and drastically curtailed the money they were sending him. After five years of married life, he apologetically divorced her, preferring a regular income to a romance. Besides, as Surayya hesitantly mentioned, there was another woman involved.

During the five years of married life, Surayya gave birth to two sons and a daughter, all of whom she had to clothe and feed from her own earnings. After her divorce, she went back to her parents. At that point, she was able to get only small contracts for singing. She ventured further afield by going with her sister to Karachi, where they both tried to make money in Qawwali performances (chorus singing with rhythmic hand-clapping). She stayed in Karachi for about five years, after which she gave up her performing career. Both she and her sister had made enough money in Karachi to invest in a house in Lahore, in which both of them settled down in 1974.

Survival was still difficult for her and her children, so Surayya chose the option of remarrying, this time to Malik Arif. In retrospect, she sees both her marriages as unpleasant and bitter experiences.

While her eldest son and daughter both completed twelve years of schooling, her second son got a law degree. Unfortunately, her children do not want to be associated with the theatre in any way. They tend to treat their mother's career as a skeleton in the family closet and avoid all references to it.

RUKAYYA JABEEN (MISS KATAR)

Bashir Salam and Khatun Begum's other daughter was Surayya's sister, Rukayya. For reasons unknown, she was given the theatre nickname of Katar ("dagger"), starting off as Baby Katar and later Miss Katar. Taking cues from her elder sister, she started performing at a very young age. Her first performance was at the age of seven in Mola Phelwan's Theatre at Sargodha *Mandi*, where she danced on a playback of an Urdu film song, *tera jadu na chale ga o sapere* ("Your magic will not work o snake-charmer"). Thereafter, she performed dances and small roles in several different theaters.

At one point, Katar's whole family was employed by Mian Fateh Mohammad, owner of the Lucky Theatre. Following the tradition that a theatre owner gets a wife from the theatre field, he decided to marry Katar, whom he had a liking for. Thus, he had her entire family working for him for quite a long time, and at quite a low fee.

Fateh Mohammad later amalgamated his Theatre into a circus, which was called Lucky Circus. Rukayya started developing her acrobatic skills and special entertainment items for the circus. When the famous female Irani acrobats joined the circus it was named the Lucky Irani Circus. Unable to turn the circus venture into a profitable one, he handed it over to his brother Farzand Ali, who was able to manage it very successfully and remained its key manager for a long time.



Rukayya Jabeen, known as Katar, started her career as a theatre actress and later managed a circus with her husband Mian Fateh Mohammad.



Rukayya with her brother.

In mid-seventies Katar and Fateh Mohammad started another circus called the Nasir Circus. This circus ran until the late nineteen eighties and performed mostly in Sindh. While her husband took care of the public dealings, she looked after the internal matters of the circus: the acrobats, comedy skits, dance interludes and the animal performances, which included the lions, horses, and goats. Rukayya had developed high level skills of working on specific acts with the lioness, and was also doing acrobats on the tight rope. In the days when public dancing by women was allowed, she also performed the opening dance of each show.

Katar's husband helped his brother in law (sister's husband) to set up his own circus called the Jubilee Circus. The same family in Pakistan thus owned the three most popular circuses in the country: Lucky Irani Circus, Nasir Circus, and the Jubilee Circus. Since the family network plays an important role in maintenance and growth of the business, all of them kept borrowing equipment, animals and performers from each other, in a unique support system.

Though the circus was a lucrative affair, the hearts of Katar and Fateh Mohammad remained very much with the theatre. They would put up a show under the old name of Lucky Theatre every once in a while, whenever the opportunity presented itself. However, they did not own any theatre props and equipment and went in for a variety show. Their preferred area used to be Balochistan, where they thought there was less restriction on female dancing than anywhere else in the country.

Katar was a courageous woman whose genius for organization enabled her to rapidly take over a major part of the circus enterprise. There were times when her husband was bed-ridden. At such times she made a living for both of them by renting out equipment and animals to other circuses.

After getting these glimpses of the lives of theatre women, one realizes that the dazzling world of colors and lights, viewed from the women's eyes, looks like quite an uphill struggle for survival. For some it did become a place to express themselves. Their souls found peace in internalizing certain roles and expressing on the stage what they could not in the real life. However, for some it remained a burdensome profession and they carried the guilt with them.

To understand the dynamics more clearly and to get a feeling of the highs and lows of their lives it becomes necessary to look at one of these women's life in detail and see what theatre meant for her. For this purpose I would write about no other than Balli Jatti, the queen of folk theatre.



*Rukayya dressing up
for her performance.*

THE LEGENDARY BALI JATTI

Bali Jatti was one of the most popular folk theatre artists who ruled the hearts of her audience for almost three decades. In times when it was difficult for women to be a part of this male-oriented entertainment, with exclusively male audiences and male theatre managers, Bali came across as a woman of real depth and substance. She not only competed with the top-most male actors of her time, Inayat Hussain Bhatti and Alam Lohar, but also set up her own theatre company, something even many of her male colleagues could not accomplish.

Bali was known for her courage, bold actions on the stage, and show of stamina, as she would continue to sing Mirza into the small hours of the night in full competition with the other theatres performing side by side at the site of a festival. She was so versatile that she played the lead roles and the character ones on the side. With her heavy voice she also used to perform male roles, particularly that of *Ranjha* in the folk epic, *Heer Ranjha*. She was a good singer and a vibrant dancer. Later, with her proven business management skills, one can say that she became one of the most proficient people in this field. She was woman with many talents and had the courage to fully take on this male-dominated theatre world.

She also lived two lives like all other women in the folk theatre. In one life she was beautifully costumed and heavily made up, singing and dancing on the stage under the glaring lights, facing an audience that went crazy about every move she made. Her second life, lived behind the stage, was filled with heartaches, violence, rejection, and humiliation.

I made a strong connection with Bali Jatti through my research. At the time, she lived in a small house in a residential community called Shahnoor. The name was taken from the once famous Shahnoor Studios on the Multan Road, Lahore. This residential area housed hundreds of hopeful artists who wanted the opportunity to be a stunt man, a chorus singer or an extra in a film scene. It also housed tailors, set designers and other work-hands, whose help was required in the studios from time to time.

Her house was a small heaven for her, built with the last of the theatre-money which provided her some security, although it was just a string of rooms built around a small courtyard. I used to visit her often and spend the whole day with her. In the winters we used to sit in the sun in the small courtyard of her house. She would ask her daughter Jino to massage oil in her hair as she enjoyed the winter sun. When I visited her while this was

happening, she would say to me, "Aa tere vi sir.nu tel la dian, parh parh ke khushki ho jandi e" (Come I will put some oil in your hair; you study so much it can make your scalp dry).

I recorded her stories, mostly, on a tape recorder. There were times when she narrated the sad aspects of her life. That is when she would ask me to shut off the machine and sit close by her. We both would sit together for hours as she would go back in her memories to express her pains and struggles to me. Her eyes were full of tears, but I could still see the spark of her courage. In her wrinkled face I could see the youthful beauty that drove rich landlords crazy. In her crouched body I could still see the pride that broke the hearts of so many.

People would follow her theatre from one festival to the other like addicts. Rich landlords were ready to give up all their wealth for one smile of hers. She had to wear a burqa, with her face fully covered, when going to a public place like a market or visiting a shrine. Later, living a life of anonymity, this super woman felt quite satisfied with the attention she got from a curious researcher.



It was stories she told me about both of her lives that I have compiled here to give a sense of both the glory and the troubles she went through in her career. These cover her childhood, her struggling times, the climax of her career, and her downfall. Her life embodied a wealth of learning and insight about women who sacrificed and contributed to the history of our performing arts. She certainly is a woman who should be celebrated.

Bali was born in the village of Chak Parana near Lala Musa in the Jehlum District. Her father was a wealthy village revenue collector. He had a brother who died early, thus leaving him as the only son of the family, powerful position in the patriarchal structure of Pakistan and also has the obligation to maintain the traditions and status of the family.

In the traditional social value system of the Punjab, the brother-sister relationship is very intimate and is held in high esteem. Her father had only one sister, Lakshmi, who was very close to him. They were married on the same day with another brother and sister pair, so in the Punjabi tradition this is seen as a sister exchange between two men. This tradition is called *watta satta* and is now considered a tradition that our modern society wants to get rid of.

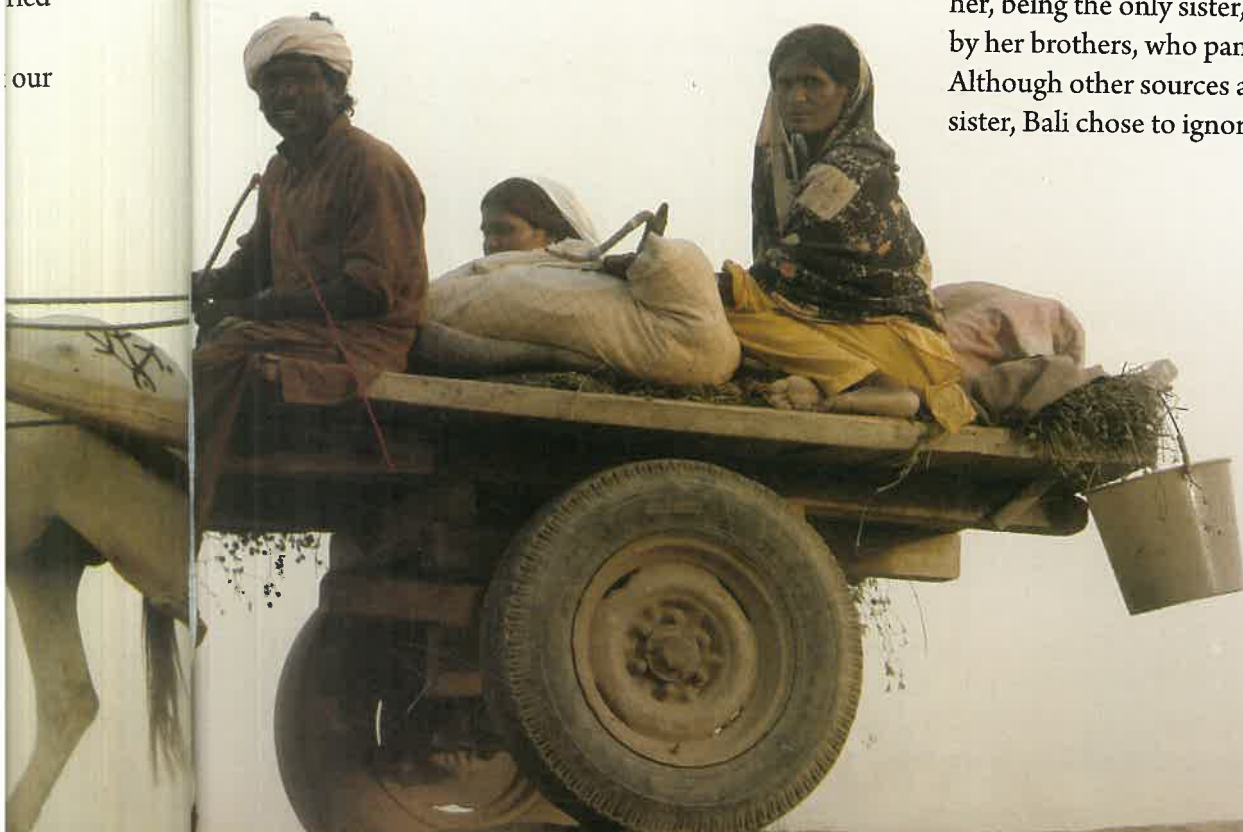
He sold some of his property to buy utensils for her sister's dowry so that he could show off his wealth. The extent of love for his sister and his uncompromising attitude culminated into forcing even the family of his sister to settle down in his village. His sister's husband, who farmed his own land in another village, was made to move over to Chak Purana. On the other hand he minimized his own wife's visits to her parents' home. The pretext he used for enforcing this decision was that since her parent's modest village (in the Sialkot District) did not have



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even a road for a tonga (horse cart), visiting them would be difficult, if not impossible. Compared to Bali's mother's village, which was considered very backward, her father's village and lifestyle were viewed as more relatively modern and forward-looking. This view was constantly used as a spurious argument by the father to maintain his authority.

Bali's father, whom she called *Mianji*, already had two children from an earlier marriage, while Bali was one of the six children from this second marriage. She had four real brothers. According to her, being the only sister, she was thoroughly spoilt by her brothers, who pandered to her every whim. Although other sources assert that she had an elder sister, Bali chose to ignore this fact altogether.

Bali's rambling recollection of her early life captured glimpses of her childhood.

"Once I fell ill, my parents took me to the shrine of Shah Daula in Gujrat and put me under a water sluice, a *parnala*, there to get the strength back in my bones". Talking about her religious beliefs she said, "I have my religion from *Bebeji*, my mother: my prayers are of the Sunni sect, but my belief is Shia. *Mianji*- may God send him to Heaven - used to give *niaz* on the 11th of each month. If trees bore new fruit, he gave a *khatam* even on that. In Muharram, he did not shave his beard or wear new clothes or love his children as a sign of mourning. I was always attracted to the Shia faith. I constantly wanted to wear a black dress".

Where she used to live, women wore *ghagra* and dhoti. They tied their dhoti so as to leave the *lar* hanging over the top. Her stepmother also wore a dhoti, which had a pocket with buttons. She explained, "On the festival of Eid, we loved to wear a *ghagra* and a shirt of *morakin*. Add to that a *chunni* and some bangles, and you had a happy child. Adult women mostly wore dhoti.

Shalwar kamiz was not yet worn by people in the rural areas. They used floral embroidery (*phulkari*), done both with cotton and silk thread by women. A *phulkari* of gold thread, *tilla*, was considered precious. Fabrics like *kimkhab* were considered the most expensive. If a *kimkhab* dress was given by a man to his daughter, it was said that he had given his daughter a buffalo, considered a valuable asset in the rural areas. A buffalo cost five to six hundred rupees in those days, while a *kimkhab* dress would cost anything from five to eight hundred rupees.

I noticed Bali's string of holes pierced along the edge of her ears one day as we chatted away sitting on a *charpai* in her courtyard. She smiled and said "In those days, families would make women wear a lot of silver on their ears and hands, so that daughters and sisters wouldn't think sinful thoughts." With a laugh, she showed me her nose also. It was pierced from both sides but the holes had close down over time. She said, "They would make us wear all this and put the fodder on our heads to carry so that we would only think about the weight on our heads and not let our thoughts wander elsewhere, just like a prisoner. Why do they put a nose-ring on a camel? Because the camel is forced to throw its head down and can be loaded to one's heart's content. It cannot protest or lift its head in defiance".

The death of Bali's father saw a rise in the influence of her mother's family. To cement this influence, Bali's marriage was proposed with her maternal aunt's son. Her mother felt that by agreeing to the proposal, she would, once again, restore the links to her family that had been broken by her late husband. However, Lakshmi (Bali's paternal aunt), reacted sharply at what she perceived was an attempt by the mother's side to

strengthen their hold. She accordingly schemed and plotted to thwart their attempt. She was interested in getting Bali for her own (adopted) son, Munir. When all ploys to convince the family failed, she incited Bali into refusing the proposal by saying: "They will send you to the place where your father never let your mother visit. You have been raised with love, but they will force you to grind wheat on a hand mill until you die."

Lakshmi convinced Bali to run away from home for a few days. The motive behind this was Lakshmi's belief that nobody would marry Bali if it became known that she had run away to an unknown destination, as this would generate gossip implying loss of honour. She planned out everything carefully. She told Bali to run away with Munir Ahmed, an adopted child who was raised in Lakshmi's house. Bali was told that she would get to ride on a train and also see the city of Lahore. Excited at the prospect of adventure, Bali tied her clothes and jewelry in a bundle, leaving home silently in the night when everyone else was fast asleep. Lakshmi gave food to the couple to eat on the way.



Munir Ahmad took her to Lahore where his father's sister lived inside the Delhi Darwaza (one of the gates of the city). The next morning, when her family found out about the elopement, they blocked all roads going out of the village. Finally, when they found out what had happened, they registered a case with the police against Munir.

Munir's father, Raja Mohammad Shafi, who was a police officer in Sahiwal, shrewdly solved the problem by legally registering a marriage and obtaining a nikah namah for the couple. The elopement was thus converted into a regular marriage and the family honour was preserved. However, the stamp of disgrace for running away stayed with Bali, causing most of her family to cut off ties with her for a long time.

This naïve and indulged, but spirited, village girl, was taken to the city of Lahore for the first time by her husband, Munir. With Munir, she saw the crowds milling around Bhati Gate (one of the gates to the walled city of Lahore). Until this time, her entire universe had been her home village of Chak Parana. Now in the big city, with her husband bent on taking her to the theatre, she grew confused and afraid of the overwhelming male crowds, even though Munir had bought her a burqa made of *Lediamiltan*.

This burqa became her bastion of retreat. It was equipped with two sheer veils to cover the face and she used both. With both veils in place, the face could not be seen clearly, although it was visible if only one diaphanous veil is thrown over the face. Munir would constantly throw back one veil and Bali would immediately pull it back down. This went on for a while; finally it incensed Munir so much that he removed both the veils, uncovering her face totally. Exposed in an alien environment Bali broke down and cried. Munir, while comforting her, began his first attempts to change her attitudes: he explained that city life was entirely different from village life, that she would have to learn to adapt and that the city life he intended for her was even more different than normal city life she had seen so far.

When Bali saw a theatre performance for the first time, she was swept away by the colours, lights and beautiful faces. "How beautiful these women are!" she exclaimed to her husband, who told her that he would like her to meet them during the day. They met them the next day and Bali saw them without their makeup and richly coloured clothes. The contrast was startling: How beautiful they had looked at night time and how utterly ordinary without their makeup by day, she thought.

Munir's obsession with the stage sprang from a boyhood desire to act in films. When he saw Bali, he was convinced that if he teamed up with her, he would get a chance to perform in the theatre or even in a film. A young and charming wife would ensure a lucrative and successful future.

At the time he needed to handle the elopement and look for a temporary refuge. Munir kept Bali with his stepmother, first in Sahiwal, and later, with his real mother, in Vihari. There she had her first child, named Abid. Munir then quarreled with his mother on some issue and left with Bali for Lahore, leaving their son behind.

This was Bali's second visit to Lahore. Munir was interested in working for the films so he wanted to try his luck there. This big city's life was very different from what Bali was familiar with. She would meet Munir's father's sisters and other relatives and find their lifestyles very different from what she had been used to. She used to put butter in her hair, whereas here women used perfumed oils. She used *desi* (homemade) soap to bathe, whereas the city women used scented soaps. In this modern world, she considered herself a *paindu*.

There were certain aspects of the city life she didn't like. The sight of women running around with their heads uncovered clashed with her training in the village, where a woman was not supposed to even show the heel of her foot. She found city women too loud-voiced. Little did she realize then, that one-day, as a career woman of the theatre, she would not only outdo them in fashion, but also be the loudest of them all.

Once he had brought her to the city, Munir started convincing her to start a career in the theatre. This clashed with all the values of her rural upbringing had given her. She was unwilling even to show her face to other men, and actually singing and dancing on the stage before a male audience was unthinkable. Munir pleaded, cajoled, argued, and threatened.

Bali was trapped and forced to consider the alternatives: she had run away from home, so she couldn't go back there; she was sick of her mother-in-law, at whose home she had spent a year after marriage. It had been a year of drudgery and boredom. She had no choice but to stay with Munir. Furthermore, Munir had now taken to beating her in his effort to intimidate her and in trying to persuade her into joining the theatre.

The pressure on Bali was now unbearable and Munir was all too aware of this. He resorted to an emotional ploy: he went with her to the shrine of Data Ganj Baksh (the patron saint of Lahore), where they swore vows of eternal love to each other. They swore that they would stay together and that Bali would obey her husband. It was a religious and moving experience for Bali. In real terms, however, Munir promised his love and loyalty in exchange for Bali's acquiescence to a career in the theatre. Meanwhile, Bali resolved her moral crisis by arguing to herself that performance was a form of labour and that she would be like a labourer working for wages. This was a justification she was to use several times in the future when the pangs of conscience struck her.

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD OF MAKE-BELIEVE

Munir took her to Phaji Shah's Theatre. Her first chance came when the owner of the Theatre, Syed Fazal Shah, asked her to sing a song. Thereupon Bali sang a song that she was familiar with from the Indian film, *Aan*. The *burqa*-clad village girl was now in the theatre business, starting at the lowest rung. Her debut was as a servant maid in a drama called *Yahudi Ki Larki* (The Jew's Daughter- a play based on a translation of Shakespeare's play, *The Merchant of Venice*). According to Bali, her appearance was generally liked both by the audience and the actors.

Bali was learning rapidly to adapt to the new environment, with Munir teaching her, what he considered, 'appropriate' behavior. Bali followed the dictates of the village customs where the husband is respectfully addressed as the father of the male child. Accordingly she always used to call him "Abid's father", after their son Abid. This artless village usage embarrassed Munir to no end and he forced her to break this habit by threatening dire consequences if she persisted.

Bali had to learn to dress up as well. She still did her hair in the village fashion- a parting down the middle and thin plaits framing her forehead. One of the actresses of the theatre, Iqbal Begum, taught her how to dress properly and make up her face. Once Munir bought her some makeup and asked her to put it on. She hastily applied the rouge thickly to her face and came out, resulting in loud laughter from the theatre people sitting together. Munir was embarrassed that "his woman" had become a source of amusement and asked her to wash it off and to use only *surma* and lipstick in future. Bali began to adapt to the world of the theatre. She eventually learned to dress and groom herself in the theatre tradition, but memories of her childhood and life in the village stayed with her.

Together with her husband, Bali spent a year and a half working at Phaji Shah's Theatre. During this period, she was not given any significant role, but had to content herself with household chores for Iqbal Begum, Phaji Shah's wife. She describes herself in this period as a daughter of the house, but other sources say her role was more of a servant-maid and she was also permitted to act during this period. Munir was similarly employed as an odd-job man with small roles coming his way.

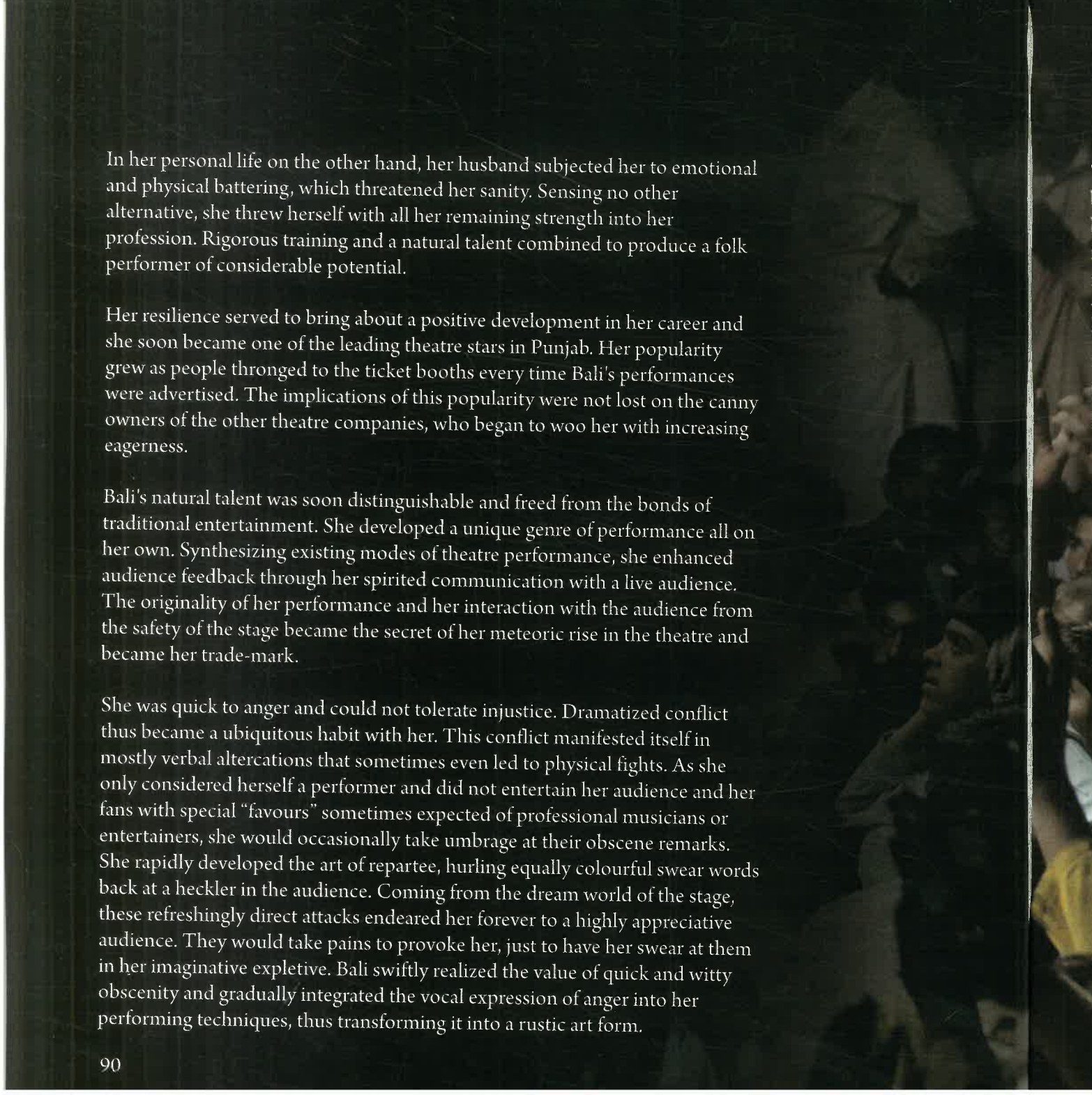
This period of initial service to a master without any significant formal teaching is an ancient South Asian tradition. Under the name of Guru and Chela in the Punjab, this form of absorbing the pupil at the lowest level and slowly educating him or her by example, still exists throughout the Subcontinent.

Bali described her first performance for the Shahjehan Theatre with a big smile on her face. "I had long hair then and I was an instant success when I performed on the stage. I knew how successful I was when Phaji Shah ran after me and offered all the advance money I needed if I rejoined his Theatre. But Phaji Shah was paying me sixteen rupees a night and at Shahjehan, I had started with twenty-five rupees a night. Even Munir had started making sixteen rupees for character roles."

Once with the Shahjehan Theatre, she worked with Ashiq Hussain, considered in the theatre world to be the doyen of all performers and a singer of great fame. Under his tutorship, she proved to be an able student and a quick learner. He soon gave her a part in a duet with him. Bali fondly remembered those days saying, "Even when I didn't sing, people showered money on me just because I was walking on the stage with him." Bali enjoyed that attention from the audience and the praise she got for her work. She developed the taste for enjoying the interaction with the audience.

The couple worked with the Shahjehan Theatre for two years and Bali's nightly rate rose to fifty rupees. Her hard work paid off. She was given the role of *Sehti*, a "side heroine" in a folk epic drama, *Heer Ranjha*. Her talent was becoming evident even during the rehearsals and she was encouraged by all the other performers, who did not feel threatened by her unsophisticated and direct manner. The performance was a big success and Bali had come of age in the folk theatre.

Bali started taking her work seriously and Munir started her training. He would help her memorize the lines of her roles, going over them with her patiently. Bali started improving the delivery of her lines, the moves of her dance and engagement with the audience.



In her personal life on the other hand, her husband subjected her to emotional and physical battering, which threatened her sanity. Sensing no other alternative, she threw herself with all her remaining strength into her profession. Rigorous training and a natural talent combined to produce a folk performer of considerable potential.

Her resilience served to bring about a positive development in her career and she soon became one of the leading theatre stars in Punjab. Her popularity grew as people thronged to the ticket booths every time Bali's performances were advertised. The implications of this popularity were not lost on the canny owners of the other theatre companies, who began to woo her with increasing eagerness.

Bali's natural talent was soon distinguishable and freed from the bonds of traditional entertainment. She developed a unique genre of performance all on her own. Synthesizing existing modes of theatre performance, she enhanced audience feedback through her spirited communication with a live audience. The originality of her performance and her interaction with the audience from the safety of the stage became the secret of her meteoric rise in the theatre and became her trade-mark.

She was quick to anger and could not tolerate injustice. Dramatized conflict thus became a ubiquitous habit with her. This conflict manifested itself in mostly verbal altercations that sometimes even led to physical fights. As she only considered herself a performer and did not entertain her audience and her fans with special "favours" sometimes expected of professional musicians or entertainers, she would occasionally take umbrage at their obscene remarks. She rapidly developed the art of repartee, hurling equally colourful swear words back at a heckler in the audience. Coming from the dream world of the stage, these refreshingly direct attacks endeared her forever to a highly appreciative audience. They would take pains to provoke her, just to have her swear at them in her imaginative expletive. Bali swiftly realized the value of quick and witty obscenity and gradually integrated the vocal expression of anger into her performing techniques, thus transforming it into a rustic art form.

The robust verbal expression of her power soon became popular. Her loud and boisterous remarks soon became a part of the folklore of the fans, who either followed her from village to village or waited for her return to their area. Very often, they sat through a performance waiting for a certain outrageous remark, which they knew, was forthcoming. On every such remark, the fans showed their appreciation by roaring applause and giving her money. They even held out paper currency and asked her to swear at them.

Her fans appreciated her bravery and started calling her a lioness, *Babbar Sherni*. This almost became a formal title for her and was written next to her name in the advertisements for the theatre performances. She also used a long bamboo stick on the stage with great alacrity. This *dang*, embedded with shiny brass nails, rapidly achieved notoriety. It was her main prop when she played the male role of *Ranjha*, the folk, hero-lover, of the famous Punjabi epic. At times, she used a heavy whip in her act, which gave her the nickname throughout the Punjab, *Bali Jatti Hunter Wali* or simply *Hunter Jan*, with affection.



Her quick temper once found expression during a performance when Bali jumped high while performing a dance and a man close to the stage got carried away. He opened his arms and shouted, "Come, jump into my lap you slut!" This so incensed Bali that she picked up a tabla from a musician sitting close by and hit the man over the head with it. Everyone applauded.

An unpredictable part of the audience were the students that Bali referred to as the 'college boys'. Caught up with the desire for all things modern, they often requested Bali to present the western

dance craze, 'The Twist'. Bali used to perform Bhangra and other traditional dances, which she called "village dances". However, just to make the 'college boys' happy, she would make a few gestures approximating a Twist. This made the boys delirious with joy and they would stand up on their chairs and dance with her. She said that she did this to oblige them because they would otherwise make trouble, thus reducing the money she would, otherwise, receive from the audience. Nevertheless, even the apprehension caused by the presence of these 'college boys' had its limits: once, when she had finished her



entry and returned backstage, the 'college boys' raised their voices raucously, insisting that Bali came back and do the Twist for them. They also used some swear words which got Bali angry. Bali picked up her *dang*, uttered a powerful *barak* and waded into the audience, swinging the bamboo with great efficacy and devastation. Inayat Hussain Bhatti, her fellow performer, followed her into

the fray with a chimta in his hand. Both of them laid thickly into the crowd and soon drove all the college boys away. Bali crowed: "mey sat mahi nai jammi san" ("I wasn't born after seven months." This is a reference to the belief that prematurely born infants are physically weak, and that she was born with enough strength.)

Bali was particularly popular in the Sargodha and the Mianwali areas. The Sargodha *Mandi* is still one of the largest fairs, and consequently, had the biggest *mela* in the Punjab. The importance of this centre was not lost on performing groups, which descended on the Sargodha *Mandi* in large numbers when the festival around the big market drew near. Most of the people who were drawn to the Sargodha *Mandi* spoke Punjabi in the rough northern idiom, a dialect in which Bali rapidly learned to excel. She ensured her popularity by rendering special love songs and swear words in the Sargodha-Mianwali dialect, winning enthusiastic applause from the audience. All other major performers were either unwilling, or unable, to sing and talk in this dialect, thus Bali reigned supreme. Her fans worshipped her.

Bali enjoyed recounting incidents and anecdotes related to her fans in a dramatic manner. She narrated the story of a wrestler who was the champion of a local sport *kabaddi*. Bali was at the festival of Sargodha *Mandi*. She was singing a *mahia* and performing a *Jhoomer* dance, typical of that area. This was driving the audience crazy. One man, who was dancing in full vigour, tore off his *boski* shirt. He tried to climb up the stage to throw money at Bali, and in his intoxication, tried to grab her. Bali turned around and slapped him. The police that was designated for the theatre, also got hold of him and beat him up. After that they locked him up in the police station and asked Bali to come to the station the next day to make her statement. A woman going to a police station was looked down upon. Bali felt offended that she had been called to the station, but Mian Anwar, the theatre owner pushed her into going, as he did not want the police to stop his business on the pretext of this case. He sent his colleagues, Manzoor Jhalla and Nazar, to accompany her.

As she was leaving for the police, the old father of the wrestler fell at her feet begging her forgiveness, telling her that his son's team, of which he was a star player, used to defeat the police's team in the *kabaddi* match every year and that they were using this as an excuse to get even with him. He informed her that the next match was scheduled soon and they wanted to beat him up and render him incapable of playing in the upcoming match.

The magistrate sent a police car for them. Bali wore her *burqa* and refused to show her face to the magistrate. The crowds which gathered outside his office, surprised him. He made jokes about selling tickets to the people gathered outside and wondered why a stage performer didn't want to show her face. Bali was already bitter about being forced to come to the police station and lashed out at him saying,



*Alam Lohar
with his two
wives. Bali is
standing at
the extreme left
(opposite)*

“You may be the magistrate of this place, but I am the magistrate of the stage.”

He asked Bali to lift her veil and give a truthful statement. Manzoor Jhalla convinced her to throw back her veil saying that the magistrate was a *Syed Zada*. Bali finally lifted her veil and said she had her back towards the audience and she got afraid when this man approached the stage. She slapped him only because she was afraid that he might grab her. He actually never touched her. The police inspector, feeling the case slipping away out of his grasp, was angry at this statement and reminded her that the man was creating quite a scene, but Bali, trying to play both sides, appreciated the police for fulfilling their duty of protecting the artists, strategically saved the high-spirited *kabaddi* player. When she explained to the magistrate that it is the performance that makes people lose their mind, he expressed his desire to personally see one.

Special arrangements were made, chairs were put in the wings of the stage for a special performance, and the magistrate and his men were received, and chicken roast and soft drinks were served. Bali making sure to be at her best in front of the *Syed Zada*, dressed in black clothes and started off with a religious song specifically linked to the Shia faith. The public whistled and made noise as they were not expecting Bali to be in simple black clothes. The magistrate appreciated the gesture but told her to be herself and do what she usually did. He said he was there to see how they do their business. On this green light Bali got into her colourful *lacha*, put all her silver jewelry and accompanied with loud music, she jumped on to the stage. The public went crazy and danced with her. They were so thrilled to see her dance that they threw money at her. The magistrate witnessed the hold she had on people and realized that men can certainly lose themselves during her high-spirited performances. The magistrate gave Bali an imam zaman, an amulet, for one and a quarter rupee and asked her to keep it for her protection. He also gave her a set of prayer beads, a *tasbeih* from Medina, as a sign of respect for her. He was moved by how true she was to her profession and how brave she was to be performing in front of the all-male audience. He said, “My prayers are with you, may you succeed.” The police was not very happy to release the man but he and his old father were indebted to Bali. The old man also prayed for Bali.

Recounting another incident related to her audience Bali described the evening when she was singing a wedding song on the stage. Though it was a film song it had become as popular as a folk song and was commonly sung on weddings by the sisters of the bride-groom. The words of the song 'veer mera kohri charia', meaning, that my brother got on the horse for his wedding procession. There was a rowdy group of men who, for fun, kept asking Bali to point towards one man while calling him veer (brother). They wanted to tease him and offered Bali a lot of award money to play along. After a while Bali caught on

with their joke and did what they had told her to do. They all laughed, but their friend who was targeted got very serious. He got up and screamed that if Bali was his sister then she could not perform anymore and must accompany him to their home.

The joke turned into a big commotion when the man would not let the show go on. Even when his friends tried their best to control him he continued to make his demand after the performance was finished. He refused to leave and contacted the management of the theatre. The management talked to him and tried to make logical arguments explaining that he should not take a joke so seriously, but there was no way the man would back off. He insisted that Bali called him her brother and he is obligated to take her away from this place and this business. Finding herself stuck in this awkward situation, Bali told him that she had twenty-four children and if he insisted she go with him, she would have to take all her children along. In his state of intoxication, he believed her and figured that it might not be such a good idea to take the whole family. Bali's quick thinking had once again saved her from an unsavory situation. Regardless of the mishap, Bali remained in touch with him until her last days. Throughout his life, he fulfilled all the obligations required of a brother in our traditional system.

DEALING WITH HER HUSBAND'S SECOND MARRIAGE

Munir and Bali became prosperous as Bali's stage career took off. They were working for Wali Shah's Theatre, where Munir got closer to the Theatre owner's family, particularly to one daughter who observed purdah (living in veiled seclusion away from other males). Her name was Zohra Jabin and everyone called her Zara.



Zara, later called Chakori, following her association with the Lucky Irani Circus. 97

She was young and beautiful and a romance developed between the two. Bali's narration was laden with emotions about this part of her life:

"Yes, I have also seen those days when Munir used to wear three-piece suits and had a camera slung over his shoulder, an automatic camera that took 12 pictures. He used to live like a prince. People called me 'the money machine' and 'the hen that lays the golden eggs'. He was a gambling man, who gambled away my money and jewelry."

"Once, during a performance, he started gambling backstage with a *mirasi*. He started losing and soon lost everything he had. He promised to pay back if the gamble could continue on loan. When I heard about the figure of the loan, I started dancing on the stage and kept changing the songs to hold the attention of the audience. Sure enough, the money started rolling in and I kept going backstage and giving him the cash until his gambling debt was cleared."

"I began to hate every man in the world. I promised myself I wouldn't do anything else except sing and dance. I began to think thoughts of revenge. In the beginning, he used to love me and thought of me as his wife and never went to any other woman. When my fame reached its peak, it was my ill luck that he began to spend my hard-earned money on gambling and women. The news began to reach me that he had spent a night with a woman in a hotel, or has deflowered a sixteen-year-old virgin in a brothel. I couldn't even tell him what I had heard, because he would doubt the man who had told me this."

"When Munir was carrying on this kind of life with my money, I fed my children with my own milk and loved them like no one else. I worshipped my husband as no one ever worshipped a husband. People used to respect me and my art. Inayat Hussain Bhatti used to stand up and offer me his chair and admired me for my work and stamina."

Bali gave me a blow by blow detailed description of how Munir made his moves on Zara. We had to stop many times during these sessions because it would become very painful for Bali, but the way she remembered it was as if all this had happened just yesterday.

Munir started off by becoming the *dudh prah*, of Wali Shah. This is a ritual by which people become brothers by drinking from the same glass of milk and sealing the brotherhood by an exchange of gifts. The amount spent on such an exchange to cement a relationship, depends on the wealth and social status of the participants. Munir told Wali Shah: "One does not give milk and sons to anyone. Now take this milk and defend my honour."

"In our days" Bali explained with a romance about her professional community, "people were generous and trusting; they were not greedy. In that world of flimsy tents which used to blow away in a strong wind, people protected you. It was much nicer than the harsh and clever world I am experiencing right now."

Bali did not know how the initial attraction between Munir and Zara started but she did find out later that Zara used to send him love letters hidden in the magazines she would borrow from Bali to look at. The replies from her husband were also sent through those magazines. One day he took his automatic camera and took pictures of himself and Zara together in different intimate poses.

Wali Shah Theatre was performing in Sargodha Mandi. There was a celebration in Wali Shah's tent. Bali got all dressed up with her best jewelry but Munir had told her not to go. On the other hand he got all dressed up in black pants, black shirt, black jacket and a black bow tie. He brought a large wicker basket of mangoes and seven bottles of liquor to Wali Shah's tent. He was looking very handsome and the gesture puzzled Bali. Everybody was having fun without Bali. Wali Shah's whole family was there including the women. As Bali waited in her tent all dressed up she felt pangs of jealousy without being able to put her finger to what was causing it. Munir was surprised to see Bali still waiting for him with all her jewelry still on, late at night when he returned. Without giving any explanation he told her to take off her jewelry unless she intended to go to bed in it. He took it as she was taking it off and tied it in a piece of cloth putting it away in a suitcase, a little surprised, Bali didn't make any comment.

When Bali and everyone else had fallen asleep, he took the suitcase he had prepared, slipped Zara silently out of her tent and eloped with her. The next morning every one woke up to find Zara and Munir missing. Zara's mother was the first to realize what had happened. She screamed, "Munir has eloped with my daughter!", and people began to gather around.

Wali Shah's family was convinced that Bali must have had a hand in the elopement of their daughter, because it was common knowledge that Munir depended on Bali for all his money. They were furious at Bali and had her arrested by the police. Munir's brother, who happened to be visiting at that time, was also arrested. Zara's family believed that Munir would come back if he knew Bali was in jail, because he would then have no money.

Although she was arrested as an accomplice in the elopement, she also expressed the desire to register a case

against Munir. The police initially refused to register a case, as they were only too aware of the extremes theatre people would go to in their intense and temporary fits of passion. Bali had to go through a lot of explaining to the effect that she had come from a "good family" of farmers and had been pushed into the theatre business; furthermore, the abduction involved a Syed girl. The final most convincing argument that moved the police to register a case against Munir was when Bali sold her gold earrings to bribe them.

This action did not change her personal situation. After a thorough body-search by a woman police, she was put in prison along with her nursing infant, Zahid, her third son. This was Bali's first experience of the prison.

Bali's fame in Sargodha was considerable and the word spread fast in the area about her imprisonment. An influential Jat, an elder of the area came to know and felt obligated to help because he shared the same ethnicity as Bali's. The Superintendent of Jails informed Bali of the bail offered but she refused fearing the favour which might be required in return from her. The Superintendent of Jails told her that he knew Bali's father-in-law well and as a family member would give her the confidence that the man offering to bail her out was an honest and old man, and was only trying to help her because Bali was also a Jaat. Thus Bali accepted the offer and was released on bail after twelve days of imprisonment. The news had already spread that Bali the Lioness, would be released on bail. A milling crowd of admirers waited for her at the jail's gate. They threw money and flowers at her when she emerged from jail.

Free at last, but without any money or husband, Bali left for Lahore and took refuge in Phaji Shah's Theatre for a while. In those days, Karachi Hotel near the Lahore Railway Station, was the meeting place for all performers. The role of this hotel was central for the booking of new and old artists. Bali also went there to try her luck. She was comforted by the supportive and sympathetic response she got from all her colleagues. Cheena Pehelwan, the well-liked theatre owner, put his hand on her head and publicly declared Bali to be his sister. He asked her to work for him in the Kissan Theatre against a payment and she agreed.

Meanwhile, Munir had invariably run out of money and was looking for Bali. He found her when the Kissan Theatre was performing at Sharappur. One evening, as she was getting ready for the show, a very skinny man, with part of his face hidden under a cap, lifted the entrance curtain of her tent. Not recognizing him, Bali shouted, "Who is this ill-mannered person?" Munir replied, "It's me, my dearest moon" and walked in. Dressed to kill in his three piece suit, he broke down and started crying, and then fell at her feet.

Earlier, she had never raised her voice in his presence, but this time her sorrow and resentment broke

through. She lashed out at him with her hands and feet and shouted at the top of her voice; "Who are you, are you my husband or some beast? You have no right to come into my tent ... get out!"

Bali's screams attracted a crowd. Cheena Pehelwan also arrived on the scene. When Munir saw that he was in trouble with the majority of the crowd supporting Bali, he concocted a story to justify what he had done. Hurriedly, he explained that Wali Shah's family owed him a lot of money and that he had abducted his daughter to get the money back. He disclaimed any link with Zara. He said that he had taken her for his brother. He convinced the others that he truly considered Bali his beloved wife and the mother of his children. He then appealed to the bystanders to explain the situation to Bali and calm her down. While this altercation was going on, Bali rummaged his pockets and found a marriage certificate in his jacket. This certificate was in the name of Munir and Zara. Undeterred by this damning evidence, Munir changed his story once again and explained that he had only done this to protect himself from a police case. Bali did not believe him anymore. She screamed and wept in great pain and sorrow.

Bali had every reason not to believe him, for it transpired that he had brought Zara along with him. She was waiting outside the theatre compound and Munir had come to Bali only to squeeze out some more money from her. Cheena called the police and sent Zara back to her parents. The police arrested Munir as the warrants were out in his name from Wali Shah and every police station of Punjab was searching for him. When Wali Shah came to claim his daughter on the following day, Bali begged the police officer to let Munir go. She said that the parents had found their daughter so he should be forgiven. The police officer felt sorry for Bali and released Munir after giving him a second round of beating. When he got out, Zara ran and clung to him and wouldn't let him go. Cheena Pehelwan looked at Bali and said ironically, "look, how touching the scene is. Just like a love scene from Laila Majnun! Take courage now and don't cry, for the more you cry, the more he will make you suffer. If you go back to him, he'll make your life miserable. Earn on your own and eat on your own and look after your children." Bali did take his advice but not for long.

Bali described Munir's relationship with Zara using the rural idiom: "He exchanged a buffalo for a mare. Not only did he stop getting milk, he had to clear away the mare's dung."

Zara was taken away by her parents to Kashmir and Munir went back to Bali. Soon after Zara's departure, Munir broke into Bali's boxes and took all the money she had earned. He went all the way to Mirpur in Kashmir to find Zara. Having found her, he eloped with her again.

Zara's family registered a case against Munir again and had Bali arrested as an accomplice in Kharian, where

she was performing with the Kissan Theatre. She was brought to the Mirpur Police Station along with her children. She had never been to Mirpur before and found its buses and narrow roads strange. The police inspector finding out about her theatre career asked Bali to lift the veil of her burqa and uncover her face. When she did so, she claims that he was surprised to see her beauty, and could not understand why her husband had left her. He let Bali go after he had prevailed on her to do a charity show together with Alam Lohar for the local girl's college in exchange for her freedom.

True to Bali's idiom, she was the milk-giving buffalo and Zara was the pretty but useless mare. It was difficult for Munir to get along without Bali's financial support, so he managed to appeal to her generous nature again. First he asked her to bring some money to a predetermined meeting place, saying that he would think she had been unfaithful to him if she did not bring the money. To prove her total loyalty towards him, she did exactly what he had asked her to do. He then persuaded her to stay together with Zara and himself. This ensured a regular income for Munir and his second wife.

Bali decided to keep her husband with her for the sake of her children. Munir and Zara stayed with Bali for about five years. Bali remained the main income generator while Munir dabbled with some small roles. These times were very hard for her. She joined Master Ismail's Wattan Theatre, and then the theatre run by Maula Baksh Kasai. Munir also acted in small roles with her. Munir had taken back his role as Bali's agent and signed the contracts and received the money on her behalf. Although Bali was not living as a dependent of Munir, still he kept a close watch on her reward money.

Meanwhile, Munir's physical abuse of Bali reached extreme proportions. Munir would beat her up and would take away all her reward money. Zara did not work or participate in the housework. According to Bali, her own position was like a maid. She cooked and cleaned for them, took care of the children, went for the rehearsals and performed to make money for all of them.

The people working with her began to wonder at her patience and were convinced that there was something wrong with her, for how else a woman could live with someone who was so cruel and on whom she was not economically dependent. If Bali showed distress and wept when he showed love towards Zara, Munir would punish her by placing the palms of her hands under two bedposts. He would then sit on the bed and get up only when he thought she had been punished sufficiently.

There was only one incident when Bali was goaded into beating Zara. Zara came to Bali and asked her to divorce Munir. Bali reacted and screamed that only a woman who wanted another husband would divorce

the first one. She then threw Zara to the floor and butted her several times with her head. This was the only time that Munir remained silent and made no attempt whatsoever to intervene. He just sat and watched. Bali was mentally prepared for a beating after the incident, but nothing happened, for how could he feed Zara without Bali?

Once Munir was playing the Nawab, while Bali played Tamizan in the play Qatal-e-Tamizan (Tamizan's Murder). This made Zara very jealous. Even though Munir explained to her that he was just acting out a role, Zara attacked him with a ladle from a cooking pot and ruined his nice new suit. The resulting loud altercation culminated in the separation of Bali and Zara's tents. To placate Zara, Munir also assured her that he would not have any physical relations with Bali and that from then on she would be like his sister or mother. Bali was pregnant at that time.

One night, when the show was over at about two or three in the morning, Munir came into Bali's tent and wanted her. She said, "No, I'm about to have a child and you've told that woman that I'm your sister.' Have you come to sleep with your sister or mother? Get out of my tent, the people will think my child is a bastard anyway. I'll scream and get you beaten up by your other wife. When you couldn't keep us together in one household, why did you enter my tent as a thief?" Munir left, but this incident upset Bali so much that she tried to set fire to herself.

Bali recounted, "I put my head over the charcoal brazier and shook it to raise sparks. My chiffon dupatta and my hair caught fire immediately. I had started to do away with myself, but when the heat reached me, I wanted to stay alive and so I covered my face with a pillow to protect it." She was saved by her peers but the damage was devastating. All her hair, even her eyebrows were burnt. Her neck was scarred badly. She was convinced that her career was over and she won't be able to work anymore.

She left soon after for Vehari, where she stayed with her mother-in-law until her wounds healed. She also gave birth to a daughter, who did not survive. Regaining her strength, Bali returned to the world of the theatre.

Bali now determined never to live with Munir, could not stop him from forcing himself on her only to extract money. Munir continued his extortion. Feeling that his beloved wife Zara deserved something better than a simple tent of the compound, he moved her out and rented a room in a hotel with Bali's money. He used to come to Bali's tent at night for money and beat her up every now and then. In one such incident, he was beating her up just before a performance. The transvestites had already started dancing in front of the entrance to attract customers and a crowd had begun to gather for the show. Her colleagues of the theatre tried their best to stop the beating but couldn't. Finally, to shame Munir,

Inayat Hussain Bhatti shouted sarcastically that what Munir was doing was a good show and the ticket office should be opened for the crowd to see what was going on. Even this did not deter Munir, who continued to beat her. After that particular performance, he took away all the money she had earned.

His beatings were so regular that every time he visited Bali's tent, the flaps of the other tents in the compound were lifted in curiosity and people said sadly to each other, "Bali is going to get beaten today." On rare occasions, they intervened to save her from an all too severe beating, but getting used to the situation, she was often left alone to deal with her situation. Inayat Hussain Bhatti was among those who had the moral courage to come to her rescue at times. He reminded her of Cheena Pehelwan and Master Ismail who had provided her that kind of support in the past. Their intervention, however, was prompted as much by humane considerations as by a need to protect their investment in Bali.

Munir sometimes dragged her away from the compound so that the people wouldn't hear her scream. When she turned up for rehearsal after one such incident, Inayat Hussain Bhatti said, "My God, he has really beaten you badly. Even the makeup won't hide this tonight." Bali covered up for Munir with the now familiar and oft-repeated lie, "Nobody beat me. I fell down", she replied.

Why then did Bali tolerate a husband who lived off her, beat her, gambled and lived with another wife lavishly? For Bali, the answer lay in the prevalent belief she had internalized from her childhood that the husband is a woman's majazi khuda, and that a wife is there to serve him until the end of her days. On a more pragmatic level, the stigma of divorce even in the comparatively liberal theatre milieu was high and Bali could not entirely risk this break in ritual norms.

The beatings, however, were crushing this myth she had been holding for long and her mind questioned whether the elders had left any words of wisdom for how the majazi khuda should treat his wife. She wondered if his bad treatment should relieve her from this concept of serving him until death. She wondered if by signing a nikah nama he had bought her body and life. Her image of a nikah nama was changing from a culmination of a sacred bond to a contract of slavery. Despite all the anger and questioning of this lopsided abusive relationship, the term divorce made her shiver with fear. After all, the socialization of a 'good woman' that is responsible for keeping the marriage together, had deep roots. With all this turmoil in her head she continued to count on her work on the stage as the only act that kept her sane. Of course no one in the audience had any clue to what this queen of hearts was going through in her personal life. The lights continued to shine on her, the people in the audience continued to shower money on her and they all envied the man who could get close to this beautiful star who ruled their hearts.

ESTABLISHING THE SHAMA THEATRE

Sometimes one goes so low in terms of experiencing humiliation and pain that there is no possibility of going down any further. The only alternative is to rise up. Grave personal pains inflicted by her husband, tensions of raising her children in the midst of professional demands and domestic humiliations, and challenges of maintaining her popularity to sustain the professional space, had brought Bali so low that there was a sense of liberation only because of the high intensity of pain. She suddenly started feeling lighter as if nothing Munir could say or do would touch her soul anymore. She felt an inner strength that she could not describe. Her mind had left the parameters of normal restrictions of morality and relationships.

*Bali emerges as a strong woman
after experiencing abuse and
violence in her life.*



Her reaction to the situation with Munir and his continuous womanizing took a form of defiance of the 'sacred bond of marriage' in her mind. She was already finding comfort in the fact that her colleagues were trying to protect her against her husband. She was now breaking the norm by making more intimate links with a few people, and by developing her own contacts without Munir being around.

The owner of the Shahjehan Theatre, Mian Anwar, belonged to the Arain family. Arain and Syed families dominated the ownership of most of the theatre groups. He was considered to be handsome and brave, brooking no nonsense in his rule over his domain. Curly haired, thickset and of medium height, Mian Anwar walked with a slight limp. The hooligans and rowdies that inevitably were attracted by the theatre wherever it was set up, had to be dealt with, and Mian Anwar became famous for personally coming to terms with these badmash. Mian Anwar would place one powerful forearm in front of them at the ticket booth, saying, "remove this arm and you are free to go in!" This challenge usually sufficed to dampen the enthusiasm of the unruly customers.

Like all theatre owners, he was a man known for his great "love of women". Staying true to the pattern, he had a gharelu bivi, a woman living in his hometown with his children in a joint-family setting, and a theatre wife who was occasionally replaced, as were other women, with whom he had close relationships. His seemingly romantic love also had a canny motive; Mian Anwar's women served him by performing on the stage for little or no money, in return. His roving eye for a pretty face was balanced by an ability to recognize talent.

Sick of the treatment and exploitation meted out by Munir, Bali increasingly looked elsewhere for support. Munir's second marriage and continuous beatings proved to be the last straw and the stage was set for Bali's liaison with Mian Anwar. Her youth, beauty and talent were not yet gone, and the theatre-owner soon took her under his protective wing. Initially, a conflict developed with Khurshid Kuku, who predictably tried to defend what she thought was rightfully hers. Bali remembers: "She slapped me once so I hit her back." By threats and force, Mian Anwar soon put an end to this unprofitable rivalry and had them performing together on stage. The pair of women proved to be a great success, as the surge in the gate money showed.

Hard times began for Munir, however, as he could no longer extort money from her. He came several times to get money from Bali but was not successful anymore because Bali had found herself a lover and a protector. After several attempts, Munir gave up.

Bali had first met Mian Anwar when she joined the Shahjehan Theatre after she and Munir left Phaji Shah's Theatre, early in her career. She started with small roles, but one incident earned her the gratitude of the

owner. A character actress named Hoor Bano, had an altercation with him and left just before the performance. Bali volunteered to take the role of Sassi's old mother that she used to perform in the play Sassi Punnu. Bali quickly whitened her hair, blackened two of her front teeth, painted wrinkles on her face and dressed up in silver bracelets and buttons with a short shirt over a ghagra.

Bali and Munir left Mian Anwar after working for a year. Bali was then very young and a mother of two children. A decade later, when she rejoined Shahjehan Theatre, Munir had left her for Zara and her bond with him had deteriorated. This time, the decision to join the Shahjehan Theatre was her's alone. During the two years with Shahjehan Theatre, Bali's career took a new turn. Since Mian Anwar already had a heroine in Khurshid Kuku, Bali's deep voice and extrovert personality made her a natural choice for a male role. In her partnership with Khurshid, she played the "hero" in all the romances of the theatre she was Ranjha, Mahinwal and Punnu. In another crowd-pulling tactic, Mian Anwar dressed them up as a matched pair of women and had them sing duets. With Bali, his Theatre competed well against those of Alam Lohar and Inayat Hussain Bhatti.

These were the years when Bali had her first and only exposure to films. Mian Anwar produced and directed a Punjabi film, "Mangetar", in which Bali was also given a role. Nevertheless, she remained a woman of the theatre, a place where she felt both comfortable and confident.

During her time with Mian Anwar, Bali gave birth to a girl. Of the two daughters she had earlier, none had survived, so she was very happy to finally have a daughter. She called her Abida, who is affectionately called Jino. To maintain the facade of legitimacy, Bali maintained that Jino was Munir's daughter.

Mian Anwar proved instrumental in freeing Bali from Munir's tyranny. The new relationship had been one of mutual convenience. Mian Anwar ensured that Bali would stay and work for his Theatre, and for Bali this was a way out from the miseries inflicted by Munir. All this helped Bali break away from her shackles and attain new levels of professionalism and learning within her own field.

PROFESSIONAL RIVALRIES

At the big mandi and mela, most of the theatres got together, which gave an opportunity to meet each other. During the peak of the folk theatre in the late sixties and throughout the seventies, a trio of major performers, which included, Alam Lohar, Inayat Hussain Bhatti, and Bali Jatti, emerged, each competing for the larger audiences. They were to be associated with three theatres: Alam Lohar with the Wattan Theatre, Inayat Hussain Bhatti with the Kissan Theatre, and Bali Jatti, who moved among various theatres, finally starting one of her own, by the name of the Shama Theatre.

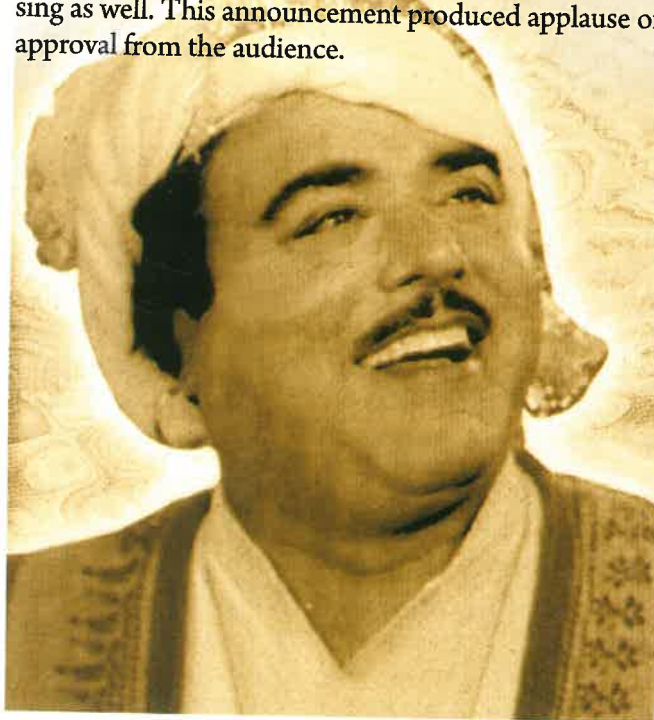
In performances, lively competitions developed among artists on the stage, competitions which were generally appreciated by a perceptive audience. If more than one theatre was performing in a *mela*, a competition to woo the audience among the different theatres took place.

Although Bali, Innayat Hussain Bhatti, and Alam Lohar, had been personally close to each other, they still shared a professional rivalry. Alam Lohar had made her his 'sister' and she was acknowledged in his family as such. His children always called her *phupho*. Similarly, Inayat Husain Bhatti also respected her and at several occasions had sided with her in the course of many conflicts.



Innayat Hussain Bhatti

Before all three of them started referring to themselves as super stars and associated with three different theatre companies, they used to work together on one stage. According to Bali, while she was performing with Alam Lohar on stage, he often used to put her down by announcing that she would only act and dance, since singing Mirza was only possible by a strong man like himself. Bali had been listening to Alam singing Mirza, but she claimed that she had never practiced singing it. Once, when working in the same theatre at Mola Qasai, Alam talked about her on the stage in a similar manner and announced that he would sing and Bali would dance. Bali took it as a challenge. She impulsively announced that she would sing as well. This announcement produced applause of approval from the audience.



Alam Lohar

Alam Lohar, puzzled with that response, got into a mentor mode and said he would help her start and she could accompany him in repeating the lines. Bali, in her *babbar sherni* mode, told him to get away from the microphone. She took over and started the song. The audience applauded and she proved her point. Each time she felt Alam trying to cut in, she held his shoulder and pushed him away. Once she was in the middle of the song and heard the cheering of the audience, she felt even more confident and let Alam join. This was the first duet she sang with Alam Lohar. The joint singing of *Mirza* continued for about eight days but then according to Bali, Alam requested the theatre management to have only one of them as the key star, either him or her.

From then on, for both Bali and Alam, ending their performances with *Mirza* became a tradition and a regular expectation of the audience, regardless of which theatre they worked in. Whenever Alam and Bali were performing in competing theatres together at a *mela*, they would start singing *Mirza* in competition and would not stop until dawn. It was quite common that the police would have to intervene and stop both of them. Bali claimed a higher popularity as she could dance as well as sing.

The lively competition between Bali, Alam, and Inayat Hussain, continued wherever they set up theatre, to the great delight of the crowds that came to see them. This sometimes deteriorated into an exchange of insults. There are confirmed incidents where only Inayat Hussain Bhatti backed off and did not want to use the same language with Bali saying he would only respond back in the same spirit if there was a man in her place. This could be seen as 'respect for women' on Inayat Hussain Bhatti's part, who was known for sophisticated communication skills and mannerism. At a different level, however, it is a reinforcement of women's inferior place, which could never be equal to men in a patriarchal society, however, Bali Jatti was determined to prove them wrong.

ESTABLISHING THE SHAMA THEATRE

The two years with Mian Anwar were a time for Bali to unfold her own personality. The initial romance with Mian Anwar began to wear off once Bali realized the situation she was in. She had moved away from one relationship because Munir had taken a second wife, but life with Khurshid Kuku and Mian Anwar was not too different. She saw that she had moved from one dependent relationship into another, for here too, she had to deal with a *sautan*. Her lifestyle began to be more open in her likes and dislikes of other male companions. Initially, Mian Anwar tended to be tolerant, as he needed her for his theatre to thrive. However, even his tolerance had its limits and Bali began to chafe in the increasingly restrictive relationship with him.

During all her difficulties in her relationship and her work, she had become more aware of how the theatre business operated: her proximity to the owner of a theatre, her rise to more important roles in her work, her encounters with the police, all gave her an insight that she would normally not have had access to. The traumatic experiences with Munir and the lawsuits that followed made her a tough and competitive person. In her career the tough competition and the constant battle with other leading artists to win a larger share of the crowds changed her into an even more outgoing and aggressive personality. This awareness coupled with a natural aggression and strong drive made her see alternatives to the existing situation.

Bali's entrepreneurial skills began to show themselves when she decided to launch theatre business on her own. Such an enterprise naturally needed help and support and when she looked around her, she realized that she had no relatives willing to support her except her stepbrother, Ishaq, and her son, Abid, who was only fourteen.

In order to generate a large network of support, she used the device of dharam relationships to reinforce existing friendships by moving them into the domain of classificatory kinship. A dharam brother or sister was a sister made by a religious ritual. This entails gift exchange and drinking of milk or water from the same vessel after passing it over the head of the person in a circular movement called waarna.

Thus, after gaining the help of some of her friends and colleagues in the initial investment, she established the Shama Theatre, the first theatre in Pakistan to be owned by a woman.

Bali made the Shama Theatre her world. She loved all the artists that worked for her like her own children and was very sensitive to their needs. She went around and worked with labourers in setting up and dismantling the theatre and lifted heavy equipment with them. She ran a clean and fair theatre by all accounts. If someone needed medicine or money to send home, Bali's generosity had no limits. On the other hand, she sharply discouraged gambling, drunkenness, and soliciting by women. Having seen her earnings gambled away by Munir and the wasteful violence of drunken performers, she proved very strict on these accounts. She prohibited the booking of any artist known for such propensities. Similarly any woman who tried to solicit males was thrown out of the compound of her Theatre. Wandering prostitutes looking for customers at a festival sometimes tried to filter into the compound and Bali was very harsh with them. Her strictness was tempered by understanding: if an artist happened to be an alcoholic, he was permitted to drink unseen in his own tent to get some sleep, but no one was allowed to drink during a show. In Bali's words: "These old theatre people are all gamblers and drunks. Whatever

they earn on the stage they'd finish off the next morning. I told my children not to hire such people. The police would be there only to guard the performers during the show and not to be involved in the gambling and drinking that goes on after the shows in other theatres. This I never allowed."

Shama Theatre, eventually, developed into a stable venture and lasted twelve years. When she started her own theatre, Bali was the mother of one daughter and three sons. Abid grew from being just a helper into a full partner during this time. Her stepbrother helped her build a house, while her son Sajid and his wife became performers in the Theatre.

Despite the success of this family venture, Bali spent disproportionate amounts of money in maintaining the standards set by the well-to-do artists of the theatre community. It mattered to her what people thought about her. She, therefore, spent a large amount of money in inviting people over for food, distributing gifts during the holy month of Ramazan, and Muharram, and otherwise, spending money on new clothes for her children.

The lavish expenditure, required to maintain her standing among fellow performers and theatre-owners, ensured that apart from the house her stepbrother had helped her build, Bali did not save for herself or invest further in the theatre. The structure of her Theatre was becoming hollow and it was just a matter of time before this structure would collapse.

THE DECLINE AND RESOLUTION

Bali's performing career had begun to decline after reaching its peak in the late seventies. The big festival at Sargodha Mandi was coming up and Bali decided to put all her eggs in one basket and give her Theatre a long-needed boost. She pooled all her resources with Ishaq Ali, and her son Abid. She had half the shares, with the other two shared a quarter of the expenditure each. Bali took a loan for the preparations and booked the best possible artists, giving them generous advances, while brand new sets and backdrops were made. On reaching Sargodha, she hired tents, chairs and work-men, setting the stage for what she believed would be her big success.

However, tragedy struck right on the first night: the director of the play had a heart attack and died. He was a well-known and senior theatre artist and Bali stopped the show because it would not have been appropriate to have singing and dancing so soon after the death of a respect colleague. Even the resilient Bali could not handle the shock of losing such a financial investment and a colleague. In a hysterical fit, she started tearing off her clothes. She does not remember what happened after that, but regaining consciousness several days later, she found herself in a hospital. She was under sedation and needed three injections a day. Electro-shock therapy was also used to "cure" her, the adverse effects of which remained with her for a long time.

Shafi Pehelwan, owner of the Itefaq Hotel, and her dharam bother, Ahmad Nawaz Qureshi from Sargodha, came to see her in the hospital and told her what had happened after she had lost consciousness. Mian Shaukat, the owner of the Lucky Irani Circus and the contractor for all the land of the Mela grounds had confiscated the equipment of all those who had been unable to pay for the rent of the grounds he had subcontracted to them. The two men assured her that Mian Shaukat would not do any injustice to her, but Bali wanted to talk to him personally. She went over to see him and was received with respect. Mian Shaukat said that Bali was like his sister and she did not have to worry about paying him back immediately. She could pay him whenever she had the money. He was even willing to help her with renting a truck for moving her equipment.

She told her son Abid that she would bear the entire losses of the theatre. She gave him whatever she could to compensate him and told him to leave. Being indebted bothered Bali, because she believed that if one died leaving behind debts, the body would become heavy during the funeral procession. In her last days she was proud of the fact that she didn't owe anyone any money.

In order to fix the situation, she sent her dharam daughter Rino, a stage artist to Faisalabad to meet her dharam brother

Amin with a request for a loan of five thousand rupees. She also sent the message that she would be taking the theatre to Shahkot and she would return the money to him there. She used the money to arrange transport of the equipment to Shahkot, only to find no sign of either Ishaq Ali or Abid. It seemed that her dharam relatives were still supporting her, but the real ones had left the sinking ship.

Bali was still very ill and it was difficult for her to perform. She wasn't even able to put on her makeup properly. One of her friends, Afshan, a famous singer, came to her rescue. She indicated her solidarity by a ritual at the shrine of a saint in Shahpur. She offered a chaddar at the shrine, gave a niaz of one hundred and one rupees and distributed sweets. She assured Bali that she would not take any advance from her and would perform wherever she would take her theatre.

Ill-luck dogged Bali even there. It rained in Shahkot and the theatre was washed out, throwing Bali deeper into debt. She asked the owner of the Itefaq Hotel to pay for the rent of the land on the condition that she would pay them later. He agreed, but warned her to stop taking loans. To recover from this situation Bali booked herself with her team to do a special show for twenty thousand rupees, got an advance and prepared her team for it.

Hearing that Abid and Ishaq Ali had returned, Bali gave some money to Ishaq as advance, but did not give anything to Abid thinking he should stick it out with her. They needed to do their best to make it work rather than keep the advance money for themselves. The gesture bothered Abid as he expected to get some of that money. He asked her to give him his share of the equipment, so he could leave. She lost her temper at him and told him to behave himself, at the same time assuring him that he would get his share when they performed at Lon Miani, which she had planned next.

Meanwhile, Bali's dharam brother Raza, arranged for the Theatre to perform at Kamoke, so she changed her mind about Lon Miani and went to Kamoke instead. Meanwhile, Abid waited in Lon Miani and was in a rage at not finding his mother there after the promises she had made. Bad luck remained with Bali. While she set up the Theatre at Kamoke, there was a big harvest fair called a Besakhi mela at Eminabad, which, therefore, attracted all the people, while Kamoke remained deserted. Her performance at Kamoke was a total flop. The theatre companies usually think of all these things in advance and then chalk out a plan for the coming year but Bali's quick and haphazard choices were not bringing her luck.

As Bali told her story, she sadly revealed that she sold off the jewelry she had been collecting for her daughter's dowry to recoup the losses. The painful expression on her face showed how she had saved every item for her daughter. She counted, "...all household items, carpets, mats, dinner sets, electric iron, thermos, flasks, and even clothes!"

Undaunted, Bali took her Theatre to Qaidabad. This time, her luck turned for the better and the performance was successful. It had been a long time since she had done such a good show. However, little did Bali know that this would be her last successful performance. She paid the artists, got all the equipment repaired, sent Jino five thousand rupees and paid off some of her loans.

On the last performance at Qaidabad Festival, Bali was performing with her son Sajid. As she stepped down from the stage, she was unable to see properly and had to ask the announcer to hold her hand. This temporary loss of vision came as a result of rapidly advancing cataracts. Bali claims that it was the result of the electric shocks and medication she had received at the hospital earlier.

After Quaidabad, Bali tried her luck at Khanewal and Vehari, but she lost money at Khanewal and was not permitted to perform at Vehari. According to her, it was "some fuss raised by Maulvis". She returned to her home in Lahore. She had at that time completely lost the use of one eye and was able to see very little with the other. She decided to close down her Theatre.

Her daughter Jino took her everywhere for tests. An operation was essential and Jino had to sell a lot of household goods and borrow money to put her mother in a private room in a Faisalabad hospital. Both Jino and Bali were proud of the fact that despite great poverty, Bali was able to maintain her status by having a private room all to herself for the eye operation at a hospital in Faisalabad. Jino said that her mother was such a big star that she did not want people visiting her in a general ward. Her children accompanied her and many relatives and friends visited her in the hospital.

The family returned to Lahore after the operations, but Bali went regularly to see her doctor in Faisalabad every week for several months. The seriousness of the follow-up was motivated by the image that had to be maintained for others. After all, she was still the star of a high caliber. With the income from the theatre gone, Bali's lifestyle took a dip.

The sons who were used to taking money from their mother could hardly be a support. Having seen the family money dry up, they started acting crazy. Abid left his wife and married a prostitute, who further drained them financially. Sajid tried to survive in other theatres by looking for some chance at small roles. The grandeur faded and Bali's expensive dresses were replaced by old rags. It was the daughter who supported the mother by taking up a job as a school teacher and ensuring a basic subsistence. It was at this stage of her life, when she could not reconcile with her situation and did not want anyone to see the Queen of Hearts in such decline that I contacted her.

RECONCILIATION and COMPLETION

Being interviewed by me, daily, over several months, proved therapeutic for Bali. She started reflecting on her life, her regrets, her achievements, her pains, and her high points. This very intense process helped her to reconcile with her situation and she started becoming satisfied that at least she had her own roof over her head. She noticed that many theatre women had lost everything to their husbands and had nothing. She had rented one portion of the house for some income. She was also very proud of her daughter who had out-done her brothers and was now taking care of her mother. She liked her little house close to the Shahnoor Studios, especially the little courtyard, where she spent most of her time.



She liked her regular visitors during the day; a little boy from the neighbours wanting to borrow a cup of yogurt, the tax man, a neighbour woman complaining about her daughter's behaviour, a relative from Faisalabad bringing news of an engagement in the larger family, Zara with her children, Jino's in-laws, etc.

Bali also was seen as the informal "bank" of the house where she constantly gave her family small amounts of money from a little pouch she carried, to buy and fetch small articles of everyday use and spicy snacks. Each item was discussed before the neatly folded rupee notes were taken out. The purchaser was shrewdly cross-questioned on his or her return. Bali enjoyed the ritual of little purchases and would be extremely offended if the items she asked for were to be bought all at once, for this would make her day empty.

*Bali in
in Sha
Lahor*

Beetle leaf 'paan' remained her steady companions. She kept getting a few at a time, sending a child time and again to the vendor. I made sure that I took five with me on every visit. Of course I knew exactly how she liked her 'paan', with bitter lime and not sweet. This gesture of mine always brought a smile to her face.

In 1990, as Deputy Director at Lok Virsa, the Institute of Folk and Traditional Heritage, I organized a theatre festival. This was for the urban-based theatre groups who did plays on social issues. This festival was going on as a part of the annual folk festival with stalls of artisans, dance groups, entertainers and many other attractions that gathered crowds for a week. I thought of this as an ideal opportunity to bring Bali back into the public. I discussed the idea of having a concluding ceremony and inviting Bali as the chief guest with the senior management of the Institute and got a lot of support. I wanted to make it a flamboyant affair.

Bali agreed to travel to Islamabad with Jino and her fiancé and stay at my home. She was hesitant, yet excited, anticipating being in the limelight yet once more. She was nervous about her run-down face and the thick glasses she wore, yet couldn't wait to reconnect with an audience, and that too in Islamabad.

I had arranged for her to get off at the gate of the Institute that was farthest from the huge open air auditorium. I made her walk through the crowded mela all the way to the other end, with different dance groups welcoming her with their exuberant dances in turn, making way for her. Drum beats, loud singing of the folk music groups, jingling of the dancers and a continuous shower of rose petals, made the former theater 'queen' sway with intoxication by the time she reached the auditorium. A huge crowd of people in the auditorium welcomed her with an applause that reminded her of the old days of her glory.

She had prepared for the occasion by wearing her black lacha set with glittery silver work. Her lar hung down from the sides with tassels attached at the end. Before coming here she had spent hours in my house painting her face trying to fix the stamp of old age and the marks of endless torture she had suffered. I specifically remembered her telling me that she is wearing a shalwar underneath her lacha to be sure her behind looks full enough and has decided not to wear her thick glasses which distorted the view of her eyes badly. She knew that without her glasses she could hardly see things but she had told Jino not to let go of her hand. With all this preparation she expected a good reception. What she got was ten times more than she had imagined. She was overwhelmed and had a hard time containing herself.

As she entered the large open air auditorium the last team of dancers welcomed her with garlands and danced in front of her to make way upto her seat. This was a group dancers from Jhang. With red and green lachas, red turbans with white shirts and gold vests, the dancers looked like proud peacocks. Jino recognized

me first, dancing away in the lead position, the only thing separating me from the male dancers was my long black hair flowing from under the red turban. She screamed with excitement and told Bali who could only see a blur of colours. Bali concentrated and figured out that it was me who was paying her a tribute myself with the most sacred way I knew for celebrating such an occasion. I remember our cultural giants, Ahmad Faraz, Agha Nasir and Aslam Azhar, sitting in the front row, clapping away with big smiles on their faces.

When I invited her on the stage Jino brought her close to the steps from where I took over and held her hand tightly to make sure she found her way up to the stage safely. Without her glasses she could only see a blur, but knew the cheering and applauding as all too familiar to her from her past.

*Bali Jatti being welcomed
at a ceremony organised
at Lok Virsa, 1990*



She spoke well and thanked the people who had organized the event. She equated my research with her return to life. She said that she had embraced isolation and darkness in life, but it was me, whom she considered like a long-lost daughter, who had brought her back to life. Telling her story was cathartic and she felt good that her respect and shadows of her fame were still there.

Later, on several occasions she was heard saying that after attending this event she felt that all the hard work and struggles that she had gone through had been finally acknowledged. She felt that this was a high point in her life, a climax, following which she exonerated the society for not caring about her. She had found peace in her heart, after all.

Bali Jatti, the queen of hearts, the legend of folk theatre, passed away quietly on the 8 June 1995. Her daughter remained her closest support until her last days.

CHILDREN OF THE THEATRE ARTISTS

Almost all the famous artists of the folk theatre have passed on, now, only their stories and memories remain in the minds of people who had, once, seen them shine so brightly. A few dwindling theatre groups are still occasionally seen roaming the rural festival grounds, living the nostalgia, presenting a few singers to gather the crowds. Every big art form transitions into a new one, just as a flower withers away leaving its seeds for a new life in continuation. The process of one medium of entertainment transforming into the other goes on. The more successful artists are those who make the transition into the new art form, but careers of many of them die with the old art form itself. Their memories are immortal but lives end in despair. Those who flourish into the new forms of entertainment open paths for their children also and give them a head start to 'make it' in that field. The children then become extensions of their parents' fame and many eventually make their own name. There are many good examples of

children of male artists going through such transitions. I wanted to know if women theatre artists had also provided such opportunities and opened paths for their children to continue in the same field? Curious to find out, I reconnected with the children of these artists.

Theatre artists like Alam Lohar, transitioned as a singer from the folk theatre into the field of radio, and became known, even abroad, in the late nineteen sixties and seventies. His son, Arif Lohar, who also started from the stage quickly followed the path of his father and sang on radio, international music shows, and later transitioned successfully into television. Similarly Inayat Hussain Bhatti, first known for his performance on the folk theatre stage, transitioned into making films and eventually became a well-known playback singer. His children transitioned onto television and Waseem Abbas made a name in acting for television plays.

Ashiq Jatt, a star in folk theatre and was a known singer, transitioned into a 'cassette singer', as the term is used among the musicians. He had a series of cassettes/albums of his most famous soni mahinwal songs. He had his share of fame from television stage shows also. His children, though they did not reach the same level of fame as Inayat Hussain Bhatti's or Alam Lohar's sons did, are also now picking up small roles in television plays. They also sing in the same style as their father on the stage with a chimta and lacha. Fazal Jatt is better

known and gets invited to urban and rural melas and for television plays that have the ambiance of a natak or a folk theatre. Under the pressure of the current religious trends he feels he needs to make the theatre work kosher and attempts to develop the 'Muslim' roots of the folk theatre. He also tries to develop folk myths around the naat, originating in the folk theaters. He tries his best to sell whatever knowledge he has concocted about the roots of folk theatre and tries to impress those who know less than him about this field.

I thought it would be important to find what the children of the famous women theatre artists were doing now. Did they make the transition into other forms of entertainment or did they abandon the career path of their parents' altogether? I followed up with the families of the women that I had interviewed for my research.

In Pakistan the tradition is for the children to follow their parents' profession. One observes this pattern among the families of businessmen, politicians, military men, and professionals like doctors, writers, and engineers. There are many reasons for this. Lacking any proper training facilities, children find themselves in a domestic academy and without realizing, acquire the taste for that profession. Another reason that can be attributed to this trend is that in our country professional contacts do matter a lot and are almost critical to the success of a person in that field. With a parent in a certain field one inherits these contacts and family linkages, that guarantee success. Although one finds exceptions all the time, the trend of following parents into a profession is a common one, especially in the performing arts.

I had been visiting the homes of the women artists of the theatre and was familiar with their grown-up children. I took time to talk to them and figure out how they viewed the arena of the performing arts; did they intend to follow their mother's profession and did they feel that they could benefit from their mothers' connections and fame from the past? My search included the children of Khurshid Kuku, Surayia, and Naznin. However, being so close to Bali I thought I would begin my quest from Bali Jatti's family.

Bali Jatti had three sons and one daughter. Her eldest, Abid, who became a partner in her Shama Theatre for a while, did not succeed in any profession or business; for that matter not even in his domestic relationships. He took after his father in being violent. He married a well-established stage artist, Rehana Akhtar, who continued to make a living for her family. They had five children. Abid passed away recently.

Bali's second son, Sajid, also developed acting skills, performed in the folk theatre while Bali was alive and later did small roles on television and in stage plays in Lahore. He later moved to Karachi with his wife and five children, trying his luck at some work in the field of entertainment and also trying out his hand in some business on the side. He also took after his father in terms of violence in his domestic relationship.

Wajid, the third son, was not able to do much on his own. Being the youngest son, he was spoiled by Bali, not that she didn't spoil the others, but he, in particular, saw Bali only as his source of income, till the time of her death. Alam Lohar's son, Arif, one of the big celebrities, is known to help out senior folk theatre artists and their children. Having made it in the big competitive world of entertainment, he is generous about sharing his good fortune with others. He has taken Wajid into his team to take on small tasks. Wajid got half of Bali's house and continues to feel bitter that he should receive more material resources from society because his mother worked so hard and he deserves to be pampered by all. It seems that he still has not reconciled with the fact that he has to come up with the means of living for himself, his wife, and their three children.

*Saima Akhtar
Bali's grand daughter
(opposite top)*

*Jino,
Bali's daughter
(opposite bottom)*

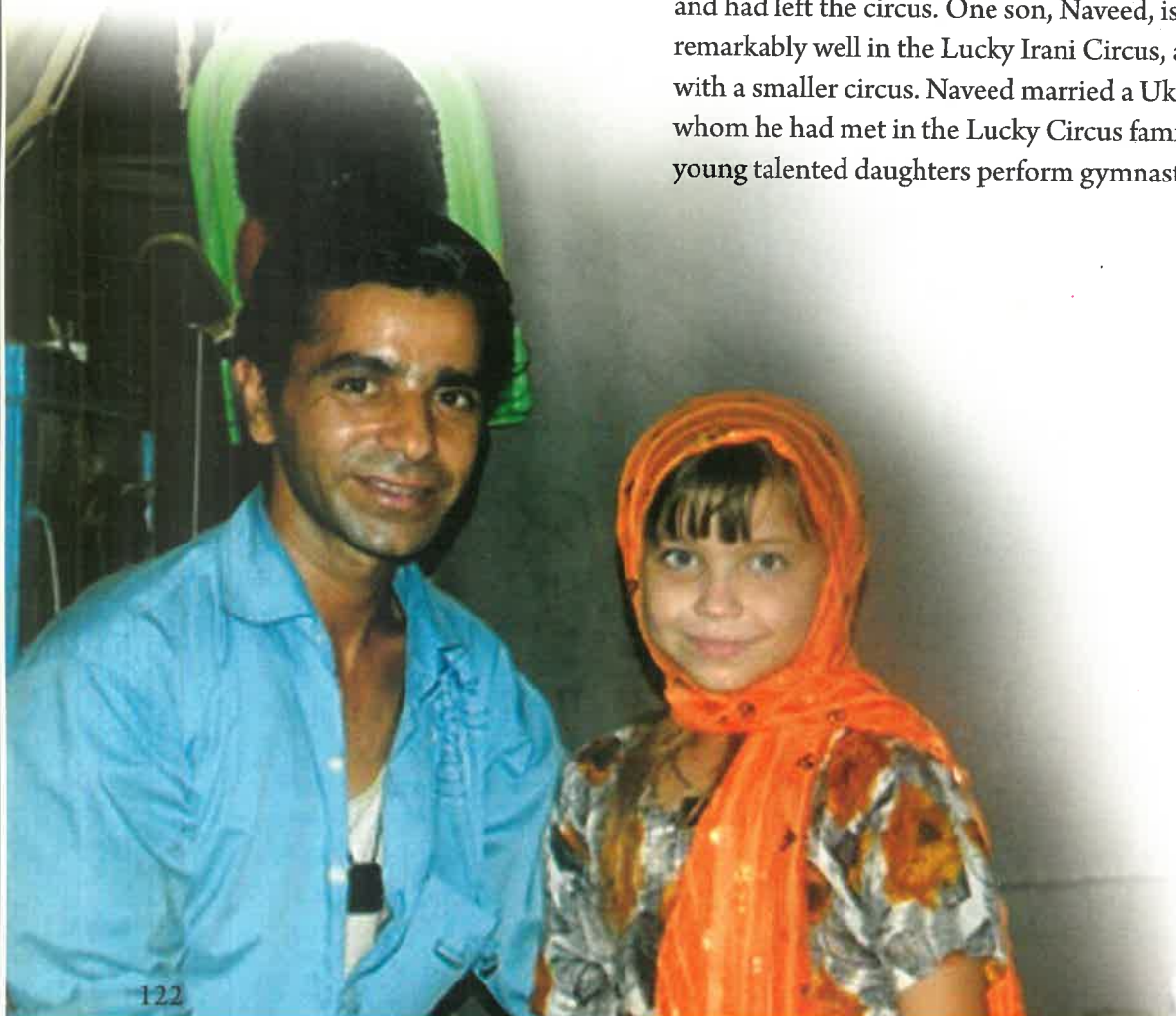
Bali's only child who actually reciprocated her in her last days, was her only daughter, Abida. She was married to an actor trying out small roles and stunts in the big community of 'wanabees' at Shahnoor. Bali was very proud of him in her last days as she pinned her hopes on him to be successful and keep her daughter happy. Jino, as Abida was called with love, left her school teaching and is now raising three girls and a son. She lives in the other half of Bali's house and is determined to get her children educated. Making ends meet remains a big challenge and the grumbling about the Government not doing much for the children of hard working artists echoes every time I go to see her.



As far as keeping the tradition of acting or any other form of performing arts I could say that Bali's one son and the son-in-law are struggling artists. Bali's granddaughter, Saima, has taken up singing. She is Abid's daughter. She is more under the influence of her mother, who was herself a stage actress once. The continuation of the stage tradition is a weak strand but at least Bali's soul must be proud of Saima for becoming a rising star as a singer. She is performing in Lahore and has done music videos and stage shows all over the country.



Zara, Wali Shah's daughter, and Munir's wife, never acted herself but got all her children into the circus at a very young age. Munir, who was husband to both Zara and Bali, always needed someone else to earn for him. All of his daughters and sons worked. During my most recent visit to their family I found out that as the children grew up most of them left this work. The daughters had been married off and had left the circus. One son, Naveed, is still performing remarkably well in the Lucky Irani Circus, and another one with a smaller circus. Naveed married a Ukrainian woman, whom he had met in the Lucky Circus family and now his young talented daughters perform gymnastics in the show.



*Zara's son Naveed
and grand daughter.
Both astonishing
acrobats*

Naznin Mano had only one daughter with Inayat Husain Bhatti. As described in an earlier chapter that after finishing her school the daughter started teaching, but was soon married off. The marriage didn't work and she was back with Naznin Mano, along with her two children. Naznin survives on money she gets by renting a major portion of a very small house she owns, leaving only a single small room for her family, which looks more of a little shop just off a main street. The daughter, who has a weight problem, does some tuition work with students to make a modest income. She never had a desire to join performing arts and felt that she did well not to join the profession of her mother. Naznin's grandchildren do have a spark and have expressed a desire to join performing arts. A girl and a boy wait for a chance to come by in plays or advertisements.

Suraiya's children fully internalized the stigma the larger society puts on the women in the performing arts. They all have gone in their personal fields of choice, with daughters married off. They seem ashamed of their mother's past. No one in the family wants to continue that tradition anymore.

Khursheed Kuku's children made sure that no one in their community would know about their mother's connection with the performing arts. None of them could think about going into this profession, which they consider a curse. All her children, including her two sons and four daughters that she had with Mian Anwar, as well as her youngest daughter that was born during her second marriage, have stayed away from the entertainment industry.

Looking at the children of the male and the female artists it was quite evident that it was mostly the children of the male artists who talked proudly of their fathers. There were more frequent examples of them following their father's profession. Even when they had not followed the same profession they had photographs and awards of their fathers visibly displayed and talked about them with pride when their name came up as an artist. On the other hand, the children of women artists inherited the stigma that our society attaches to a woman in the performing arts. As a result, they hide any information regarding their careers and fame, fearing an embarrassment. Care was taken never to mention anything about the mother's profession in front of the in-laws of the daughters as that seemed to be the most sensitive area. Realizing the consequences, almost all of these women wanted their daughters to avoid that profession. They were brave enough to face the resistance themselves but wanted their daughters to take the approved path for a "good woman", knowing well that they would hardly have a chance to express themselves and live their potential.

I remember going to the house of a singer, Zubeida Khatoon, who was as famous as Madam Noor Jehan at one point. Her top hits included, Teri ulfat me sanam dil ne bohat dard sahey, ae chand un se ja ker mera salaam (film: Sarfarosh), Kia hua dil pe situm (film Raat ke Raahi), Aae musam rangeeley suhaney, ghungat uthaun ke ghungat nikalun (film: Saat Lakh) and rotey hen chum chum nain (Film: Sola Aney). Her Punjabi hits also acclaimed popularity across the country like, Desan da raja mera babal da piara (Film: Kartar Singh), Reshum da lacha (Film: Yaakey wali), Bunday chandi de soney di nath (film: Chun Mahi), sayio ni mera dil dharkey (Film: Shiekh Chilli) and meri chuni dian reshmi tandan (Film: Shehri babu). The rising star caught everyone's attention in the 1950s and took over the business of playback singing. Noor Jehan at the time was only singing for her own roles in the films. At the initial height of Zubeida's career her mother agreed to get her married to a brother of a known film director. It was negotiated that Zubeida will continue her career. However, soon after her marriage the husband and in-laws gradually pressured her to give up her singing.

It was 2002 and I was doing a TV show on women artists who had been very famous at one time and then disappeared from the public eye. The name of the programme was Bhuli hui hun dastan from Pakistan Television produced by Zulfiqar Ahmad. I was a big fan of Zubeida's and was in search of her to do a comprehensive interview and pay a tribute to her glorious past. With a lot of effort I was able to find Zubeida's address. I will never forget the moments I spent with her. I saw a woman who yearned for a creative expression and was totally restrained. Some women are brought into the field of performing arts and some are born artists. She certainly was from the second category... a soul born to perform!

I pestered her to tell me her story. Her in-laws were a Syed family, which was reiterated in front of her frequently, to show that her profession was unbearably shameful for them. Interestingly enough, the men of that Syed family were fully in the showbiz and that was considered okay. Her husband was a photographer in the film studios, and the brother-in-law, a film director in the Lollywood. Let alone the chance of going back to the performing arts, Zubeida's past association was made to weigh on her as a stigma, a crime, and a burden.

Especially when it was time to marry off her daughters, her past association with the film industry became much more of a burden. Similarly, gestures of the sons to almost forbid her to appear on television or openly sing her songs even in private gatherings showed how much of a taboo this was in

their family. She had a hard time opening her heart to me but spoke in half sentences with a lot of hesitation. She only satisfies herself by singing religious songs during muharram. She gets invited by other families in private majalis. Even giving her the permission for this is considered a big favour. She told me that every time when her daughters come to visit her with their in-laws, any mention of her talent is forbidden.

I found out that, ironically, her son was associated with the entertainment industry and had started directing plays on television. Even he did not allow her to appear on television in my show to be acknowledged for her supreme talent. My heart bled for her as I saw the yearning and helplessness in her eyes.

Later, when her son was making his own place in his career I assume he did not mind revealing his relationship to Zubaida to the senior television directors. While this relationship was obviously helpful, it still took tremendous pressure from some of the most senior people at the PTV for him to allow her to appear in the shows of Munizah Hashmi and Khawaja Najmul Hassan. He could not refuse them. Her short interview is available on youtube, and dozens of song lists from her old days have been uploaded.

I also noticed that among the theatre women, bragging about the fathers in the entertainment industry was acceptable but hardly anyone spoke about their mothers as part of the entertainment industry. For men in the theatre, as I have mentioned before, it was common to have a domestic wife and a theatre wife. It is interesting to note that one finds famous artists like Arif Lohar bragging about his father Alam Lohar, but one rarely hears much about his mother, who was also a well-known performer, commonly known as Wajanti Mala.

Since Bali Jatti was among the few who had broken through the barriers and made her place as a star and a theatre-owner in the competitive folk entertainment world, her children could not deny her identity. Other than her's, one rarely sees the pride and praise in the off-spring of female artists. These women fought their whole lives to deal with the stigma of being a performing artist. They walked on the tight rope where praise and insult were both in abundance, but it was their love and attention of their audience that balanced out the negativity. In their last days, however, the stigma was not balanced by anything and they had to be sure not to burden their children with their past.

AUTHOR'S REMARKS

Over the past two decades, studying women in folk theatre, traditional circus, folk entertainment groups, and professional singers and dancers coming from a particular background, I have seen patterns that I would like to share as my observations.

With women artists in particular, being creative is tantamount to being 'bad'. The 'bad' is translated into immoral. Her reputation and her character come into question. The stamp of being 'bad' legitimizes harassment, abuse, and humiliation, by those who feel they have a right to do so.

My research showed that although our society appreciates the performances of these theatre women, it stamps a moral stigma on their personal lives. While they were adored by their audiences, their families weighed them down by disowning their popularity and talent, resenting their association with that 'bad' profession.

The wave of a particular kind of religiosity in our country has successfully tarnished any entertainment associated with music and dance as immoral activity, and puts pressure on the professionals, who earn their living through it, to continuously prove themselves as a 'Muslim' or chaste people. To attract their audiences in the past, the loudspeakers of a circus and small entertainment outfits used to blast loud film songs but now many have switched to film naats, at least as the first few items. Each compound has a tent mosque and they claim to be praying five times a day in that. This mosque is shown to the visitors as proof of the people engaged in this business as chaste.

There is a hierarchy within performing arts as far as level of stigma is concerned. Actors have relatively less of a stigma than singers and singers have it better than dancers. Other than a few brave women who are determined to maintain the space for women in the field of dance, even the folk entertainment has mostly resorted to men and transvestites dressed up in women's clothes to taking on that role in their shows. The roots of the stigma on dancing have become so deep in our psyche over the past three decades that other than the minimum opportunity at the wedding celebrations, which is now becoming

rare as well, and some television advertisements, it has almost disappeared from our lives.

Women performing artists today, know the challenges well. Amateur performers often hesitate to turn professional and even well-known artists from television hesitate to move up to films because of varying degrees of stigma attached to them.

The stigma attached to the theatre women continues to haunt women in today's entertainment field, whether in stage plays, television, film or modeling. The subtle impression that women in the entertainment industry are of easy virtue is an unfortunate conception that our society has yet to overcome. Performing artists have to survive in small pockets of supportive sub-cultures. The women in this profession have to be brave, tactful, and persistent to survive and become successful.

If modern-day women artists have difficulty dealing with their stigma and social pressure and are still dependent on their family's permission and acceptability levels, imagine how brave those folk theatre women were, coming from lower economic groups, at a time when women in general were not as empowered. They faced hardships, social pressure and stigma, yet continued to perform.

Although just being a woman in our society also acquires some level of stigma, these creative women opened doors for our current generations who have it relatively easier because of the space created earlier by the women in the performing arts.

This study also has implications that go beyond the scope of women in the entertainment industry. Professional women in contemporary Pakistan all too often surrender most of their earnings to their menfolk, who exercise control over their mobility and decision-making. They also have a stigma lurking over their head by not complying with the traditional picture of a home-maker and a mother. These impressions are being challenged fast and we hope to see a new image of a Pakistani woman, one whose morality is not questioned at every stage in her life, especially when she is creative and associated with the performing arts.

What we need to realize is that performing artists not only satisfy their own yearning for creative expression but also fulfill a societal function that prevents our society from turning dry and rigid. As

Manganhaar M

dogmatic traditions take root, society loses its tolerance, creativity and colour. Today, we increasingly recognize the burden of living in such a lop-sided society. Therefore, it does become the society's responsibility to thank its artists and these brave women, in particular, for their contribution. We appreciate the dreams they bestow upon us. In return, we need to protect the space where they can perform and realize, how performing arts brings a balance to our society.

The desired state for a society is when the creative arts are a part of everyday life. In addition to professionals who entertain and create art as a profession, every member of the society should feel free to practice all kinds of arts and incorporate them into their lives, without any fear of being stigmatized, or being put down.

I, for one, want to be among those citizens who promote creativity and performing arts in this country. This book is my tribute to the brave women whose faces we have forgotten. Despite the pressures of their times, they stood with pride on the stage and contributed the colour, the creativity and happiness to millions in our society. I appreciate their bravery. I also admire the women in performing arts today as they face similar pressures, yet continue to perform. I salute to them, for it is citizens like them who will ensure the sanity of our society in the long run.

The author, hosting a festival of Manganhaar music, which is a part of a movement to revive traditional singing among the musician communities of Manganhaar and Bhil.

FORGOTTEN FACES

Daring women of
Pakistan's folk theatre

Throughout our history, women in the performing arts have contributed immensely to Pakistan's cultural heritage. They have enriched our lives through their artistic performances, despite experiencing serious personal hardships and social stigma for engaging in their chosen profession. *Forgotten Faces* acknowledges the contribution of the women who performed in Pakistan's rural folk theatre and provides a women's perspective on this entertainment business.

This book describes the nomadic theatre companies that once roamed widely across the sub-continent, providing entertainment for the rural masses. The book covers the period of the folk theatre in Pakistan from their heyday in 1950s until the 1980s when this entertainment genre had all but disappeared. The culture of these theatre groups, the lives of the actors, their engagement with their audiences, and the dynamics of their business and personal relationships have been captured in a manner that removes the veneer of romance to reveal the reality beneath.

The core of the book highlights the lives of several prominent women of Pakistan's folk theatre. The life of the legendary Bali Jatti, a widely popular theater actress who became the only woman to own and manage a theater group forms the centrepiece of the narrative. Her bittersweet reminiscences reveal both the joys she obtained from the adulation of her audiences as well as the sorrows she endured throughout her entire life whenever she was off the stage.

The historical patterns seen in the lives of these women continue to echo in the lives of the female performers in our modern television and film industries, but working women in any field can easily relate to the balance these women had to strike between family, the public and the calling of their profession.

From the author of best selling "Taboo!"



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