



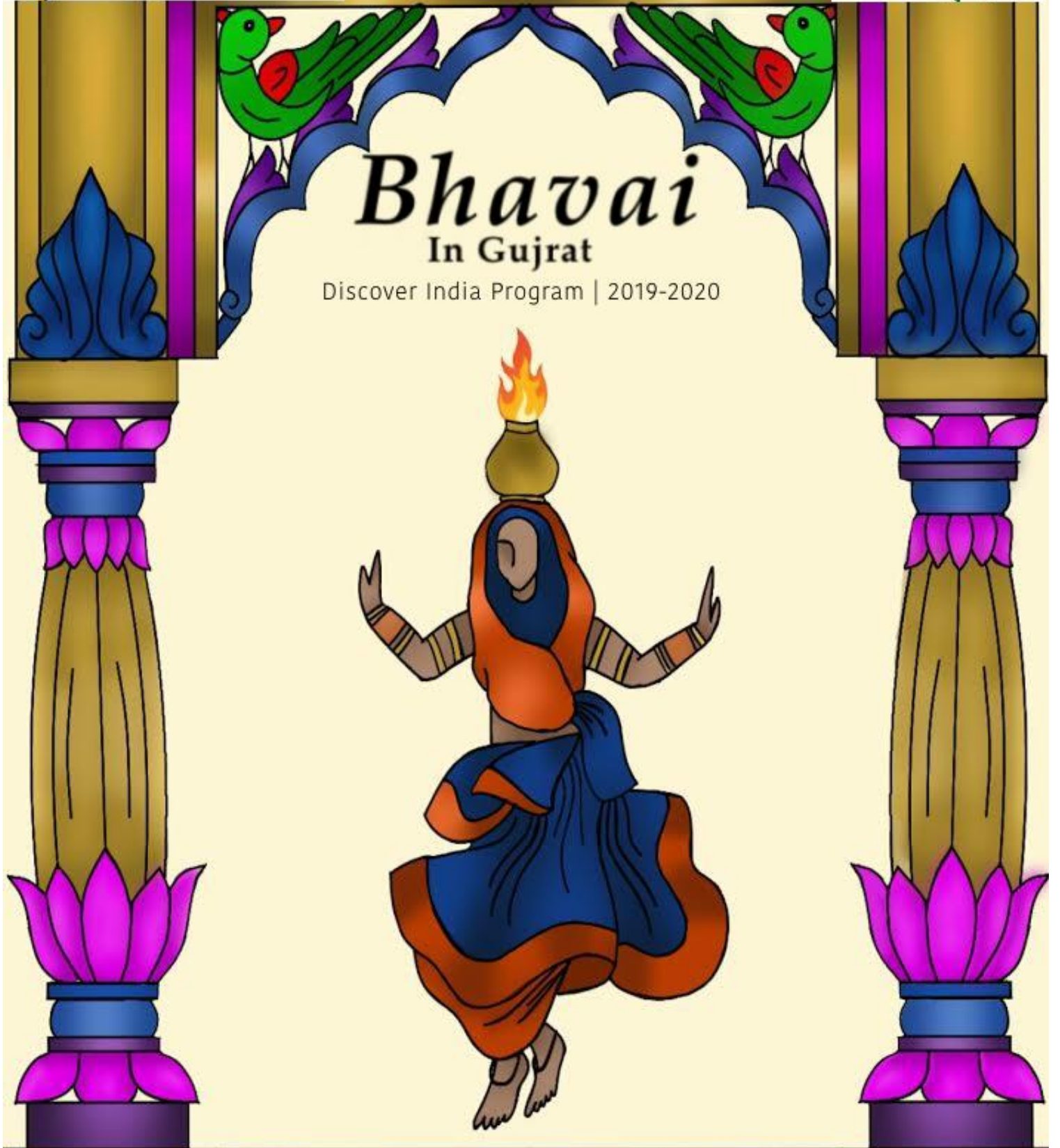
FLAME
UNIVERSITY



Bhavai

In Gujrat

Discover India Program | 2019-2020



Bhavai in Gujarat

Discover India Program

2019-2020

Certificate

This is to certify that the work incorporated in this report titled “Bhavai in Gujarat” submitted by the undersigned Research Team was carried out under my mentorship. Such material as has been obtained from other sources has been duly acknowledged.

Sr. No	Name	Designation	Signature
1	Sowjanya Kandi	Group Representative, Finance Team. Logistics Team	
2	Anushka Prapanna	Logistics Team, On-field Researcher	
3	Anvita Kotha	Editor	
4	Arushi Chopra	On-field Researcher, Writer	
5	Chaitya Shah	On-field Researcher, Finance Team	
6	Ishita Singh	Documentary Team	
7	Keerthi Gaddam	Writer, Content Team	
8	Shristi Chhajer	Content Team, Documentary Team	
9	Shruti Shete	Content Team	
10	Siddhant Nair	Content Team	
11	Sravanthi Vempalli	Head Writer, Content Team	
12	Sukriti Mittal	Content Team, On-field Researcher	
13	Taarini Mocherla	Content Team	
14	Tanishq Puri	Illustrator, On-field Researcher	
15	Vinamra Pattapu	Documentary Team	

Mentor Name: Suniti Vadalkar

Signature:

Date:

Table of Contents

Certificate	i
Acknowledgements	iv
Abstract	1
Chapter 1:Introduction	3
1.1 <i>Overview of Bhavai</i>	3
1.2 <i>Geographical Information</i>	3
1.3 <i>Research Statement</i>	4
1.4 <i>Aims and Objectives</i>	5
1.5 <i>Research Methodology</i>	5
Chapter 2: Literature Review	8
2.1 <i>Introduction</i>	8
2.2 <i>Elements of Bhavai</i>	8
2.3 <i>Bhavai: Religion, Caste, and Gender</i>	12
2.4 <i>Bhavai in the 21st Century</i>	14
2.5 <i>Gaps in the literature</i>	15
Chapter 3: The Art Form	17
3.1 <i>Origin Of Bhavai</i>	17
3.2 <i>Intricascies of Bhavai</i>	19
3.3 <i>Role of Religion</i>	21
3.4 <i>Vulgarity in Bhavai</i>	22
3.5 <i>Social Awareness in Bhavai</i>	23
Chapter 4: The Artists	25
4.1 <i>Gender in Bhavai</i>	25
4.2 <i>Caste in Bhavai</i>	28
4.3 <i>Socioeconomic</i>	30
Chapter 5: Conclusion	33
5.1 <i>Limitations and Scope for Further Study</i>	34
References	36
Figures	37

Acknowledgements

DIP has been an incredible learning experience, which would not have been possible without the help of a few people. We, as a team, would like to take this opportunity to thank them.

We would firstly like to thank the entire community at FLAME University, Pune, that helped in making this program a success. We would like to sincerely thank the DIP committee of 2019-2020 for presenting us with such a unique and meaningful program. A special thanks to Professor Kunal Ray, Professor Viraj Shah and Professor KS Mochish for constantly clearing doubts that arose during the research and for giving feedback. Thank you for helping us with topic selection and prepping for the on-field research. We would also like to thank Professor Jaslene Bawa for helping us find easier ways to manage our finances. We genuinely learnt a fair amount about research and teamwork through DIP.

We would like to extend this Gratitude to the Bhavai artists in Baroda, Ahmedabad and Kalol, Gujarat, without whom the research would not have been possible. We would especially like to thank Rajesh Dani Ji and Archan Trivedi Ji for arranging contacts of other performers and organizing performances for us.

We would finally like to thank our faculty mentor, Professor Suniti Vadalkar for her immense help and support before, during and after the field-work for DIP. Her meticulous notes helped us to understand many concepts easily. Without her help, the research would have been incomplete.

Abstract

Originated in the 14th, Bhavai is a folk art form that was once very popular in Gujarat. The research aims to study the history of this commendable art form, to understand the contemporary changes in the art form, draw comparisons between the rural version of Bhavai and its urban counterpart, and to study various aspects such as gender, identity, caste and income of the artists who are involved in the production of a Bhavai performance. The rationale for this research is the uniqueness of Bhavai in terms of its opposition to the caste-system through its performances, its looseness in structure allows performers to improvise and adapt as per the situation and audience, and its goal to educate its audiences about various social issues through entertainment.

The research was conducted in the cities of Baroda and Ahmedabad, and in a village called Kalol that is known for performing Bhavai for generations. In order to acquire qualitative data to give the narrative of the artists a holistic approach, various methods, besides secondary research were used including secondary research, personal interviews, focus group discussions, and non-participant observation. Audiovisual means and audio recordings were also used to collect data.

The research has contributed to understanding the life of the stakeholders of Bhavai, the role of women in Bhavai, the subtle yet broad differences between rural and urban Bhavai, and the various reasons for Bhavai's deterioration, like vulgarity and irrelevance, as well as attempts at its restoration through its modernization. The report will give an overall understanding of the folk art form from its origination to its developments to its current contemporary form, the significance of the art of form as well as a study of the lives of the people affected by Bhavai. Despite some setbacks, the art form was much ahead of its time and continues to work to stay relevant, entertain and educate the people of Gujarat.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION



Illustration by Tanishq Puri

Chapter 1:Introduction

1.1 Overview of Bhavai

A culmination of theatre, art, music, and dance, *Bhavai* is a folk art form popular in Gujarat. Said to have been created by Asaita Thakar over 600 years ago, the 14th-century folk art form continues to exist today in many parts of Gujarat. The term ‘Bhavai’ is made up of two words, i.e. ‘Bhav’ which means Universe and ‘ai’ which means Mother; Bhavai means Mother of Universe, a direct reference to goddess Amba (other names for the goddess include Bhavani, Kali, and Durga) (Desai, 1972). Bhavai is both a form of entertainment and a homage to goddess Amba.

Bhavai was created in Gujarat. It stands apart as an art form that continues to be traditionally based but has contemporary objectives. While the technical aspects of art have not changed much over the years, the content of the plays changes frequently. Plays, or *veshas* - as they are known in Bhavai, are built on current social issues that exist in society. Some of its unique aspects include the incorporation of criticism of the caste system through subtle humour and by displaying the behaviour of people from different castes. Bhavai is a travelling art form, where performers moved from village-to-village to put up shows. These *veshas* have, therefore, been used as a medium of educating and spreading awareness among masses since its inception. There are three hundred and sixty-Five *veshas* that were initially written by the creator- Asaita Thakar (J. Nayak, personal communication, February 12, 2020).

1.2 Geographical Information

While Bhavai takes place in various areas around Gujarat, Baroda and Pansar, Kalol were chosen to study Bhavai as the two areas offered a very different outlook in the way they choose to perform Bhavai. Baroda, a city in Gujarat, offers a view into the way that Bhavai in its “urban” state is performed. Rajesh Dhani and P.S Chari’s theatre troupes are some of the foremost troupes that perform Bhavai locally and elsewhere and are known for their performances amongst the urban Bhavai Community.

Pansar, Kalol, located about 50 kilometres from Gujarat is a village wherein almost every family living in that community are Brahmins. It is one of the places wherein Bhavai

still is performed in its more traditional state, and the association with religion is more prominent. This village is located in an area accessible only by the Pansar Road, from Kalol (a town in Gujarat). The descendants of Asait Thakar lead the Bhavai performances in the village are well known in the area.

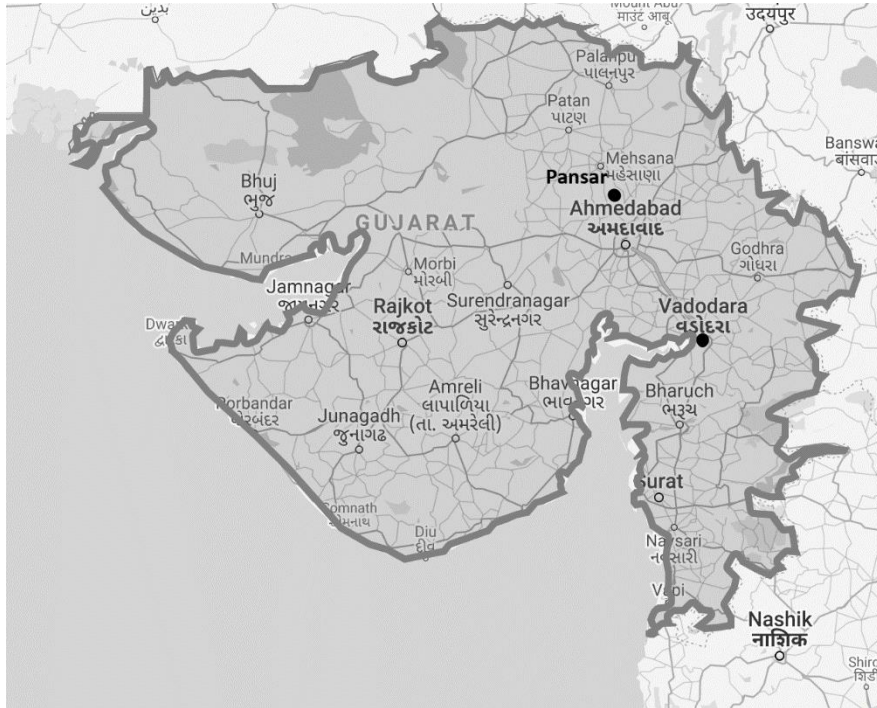


Figure 1: Map of Gujarat indicating sites of research. Source: (Google Maps, n.d)

1.3 Research Statement

The literature found before the research began, outlined the origin and minor technical details about Bhavai. However, a significant portion of the art form was unavailable in English. There was only a sliver of literature on the artists who perform and write Bhavai, as well as the artists who play the musical instruments or design the costumes. The lives of the artists have not been the centre of Bhavai research, especially research about their socio-economic conditions. Moreover, this research was decided to be carried out in geographically urban as well as rural areas, presenting an opportunity to map the differences and similarities between the two, if any. Bringing all these various aspects together, the research statement of this study is as follows:

“To study Bhavai and the various aspects such as gender, identity, caste and income of the artists who are involved in the production of a Bhavai performance.”

During the research, it was decided that Bhavai artists are not only the people who perform but also the individuals who play the instruments, design the costumes, compose the songs, write the plays and do the make-up.

1.4 Aims and Objectives

The main aim of the research is to add significant information in the English language to the sparse existing literature. This study aims to provide an insight into the Gujarati folk art form - Bhavai, stressing on details that have not been stressed on in earlier studies. The further objectives of the research are as follows:

1. To study and understand Bhavai and its technical aspects
2. To study the artists or the stakeholders of Bhavai
3. To study how factors such as caste, gender and income, affects the artists surrounding Bhavai
4. To map the differences and similarities in Bhavai that is performed in the urban areas versus that which is performed in the rural areas of Gujarat

1.5 Research Methodology

To ensure that coherent data is found, secondary data played an important role. Based on the findings in the literature and the gaps in them, the research statement was built. The research statement, in cooperation with the information acquired from initial contact with artists from Gujarat (before the research was conducted), was used to decide which method of collecting data would be most suitable. The research was aimed at acquiring qualitative data to give the narrative of the artists a holistic approach. The research was collected in the cities of Baroda and Ahmedabad and the village of Kalol, Gujarat. Data was decided to be collected through interviews and focus group discussions.

1. Forty-five to fifty individuals were interviewed. Out of these individuals, around thirteen were scholars, professors, writers or performers who had been involved with Bhavai for over a decade
2. Around twenty of those interviewed, were performers, both from Urban as well as the rural setting

3. In Baroda, a focus group discussion was conducted, with the performers of an Urban Bhavai group
4. Non-participant observation was used while watching performances and while trying to understand the life of an artist
5. Visual means of documentation were used to capture the performances in Baroda and Kalol
6. Audio-visual means and audio recordings were used to collect data and record the face-to-face interviews that were conducted

The interviews were semi-structured with a majority of the questions being open-ended. The semi-structured format ensured that the interviewee did not feel the need to cut down on any information to fit the questions. The interviews were conducted in a manner that felt more conversational than structured. The focus group discussion was led by a researcher, where the participants discussed a common topic. An oral history of the art-form was documented along with the other aspects of the art-form. Interviewees were informed in advance of the objectives of the research and were requested to give consent to use the information that they provided for this study.

In addition to the interviewees, the Maharaja Sayajirao University in Baroda was visited to garner information from the School of Performing Arts. This data, along with interviews, were used to base the research for the remaining portion of the on-field study. A significant limitation of the research was the language barrier. While it did not pose a problem in the cities of Baroda and Ahmedabad, communication became slightly strained in the village of Kalol. The language constrained the number of interviews that could be conducted overall. In addition to this, because of time constraints and logistic problems, some crucial contacts could not be interviewed.

The data was analyzed periodically and was organized in chronological order. The important topics of gender, caste, and income, as mentioned in the research statement, were sorted out before other miscellaneous topics were studied. Data was not excluded from the study. Initially, the research was aimed at the above broad topics; however, after the secondary research was done, it was found that the art-form has not been studied in detail

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW



Illustration by Tanishq Puri

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The origin story of Bhavai varies amongst sources. Varadpande's book on the history of Indian theatre describes a popular narrative of Ganga Patel, the daughter of a rich upper-caste Hindu, who was kidnapped by a Muslim Subhedar. Their family priest, Asait Thakar, approached the Subhedar and requested Ganga's release claiming that she was his daughter. The Subhedhar agreed to release Ganga under the condition that Asait, must eat from the same plate as Ganga. It was forbidden for a Brahmin to eat from the same plate as a person belonging to a caste lower than theirs. Nevertheless, Asait was determined to save Ganga and shared the food with her. His actions had repercussions, and he was excommunicated from his caste (Varadpande, 1992). Another source describes a different version of the story wherein Asait married Ganga to save her. Thus, he became an outcast, and in order to survive, he wrote 360 veshas which resulted in the birth of Bhavai in the 14th century. These veshas are performed by Bhavai artists to date (Desai, 1972).

Bhavai focuses on socio-cultural issues similar to the caste discrimination faced by Asait. Social evils such as sati have been described in various veshas like that of *Sadhra Jesung* and *Sijro*. The vesha of *Kajodo* was also a social commentary upon the unacceptable union between a young man and an older woman. Finally, the vesha of Dhedha critiques the practice of untouchability. Besides being a tool to combat social evils, Bhavai is also a popular form of entertainment that pays homage to the Goddess Amba. Thus, the art form also has religious roots (Desai, 1972).

2.2 Elements of Bhavai

Sudha Desai, in her book 'Bhavai: A Medieval Form of Ancient Indian Dramatic Art (Natya) as Prevalent in Gujarat' focuses on the various elements that define Bhavai. Troupe, veshas, plot structure, music, costume, and makeup are a few examples of these elements.

Troupe

The Nayaks (the head of the Bhavai troupes) designate villages for various Bhavai troupes called the *tolam*. Typically, a Bhavai troupe should not be more than 20 and less than nine persons in a group. The troupe tours from village to village eight months a year. The villages that they stay at, levy taxes to host them- usually four to eight annas per house (Pathak, 2004). A typical troupe consists of six types of members. The first is the *Nayak*, who is the chief. Next is the *Veshacharya* or *Veshgor* who plays the leading male roles. The third is the *Kanchaliyo*, who plays the leading female parts. Next is the *Rangla* and then the instrument players. Lastly, there are the *kamgaro* who are the labourers (Pathak, 2004).

While extensive research has been done on the Bhavai troupe, unfortunately, none of the sources has studied about the existence of a hierarchy within the Bhavai troupe.

Vesha

There are various connotations to the word *vesha* in Bhavai. It is commonly used to refer to the costume worn by the Bhavaiyya to inhabit their character. Hence, *vesha* means ‘to wear the character through costumes and actions’ (Desai, 1972).

The word *vesha* is also used to refer to playlets that formulate a Bhavai performance. Therefore the ‘bhav’ of Bhavai indicates feelings invoked by the composition of the *veshas*. The oldest *vesha* written by Asait is the *Ramdev vesha*. This *vesha* alone lasts three and a half days, and it narrates the story of the Earth from its birth to its death (Desai, 1972).

The *veshas* can be divided into the following three subsections:

- Mythological- Eg: Ganapati, Mahadev Parvati, Kan Gopi, Ram Lakshman, and so on
- Historical- Eg: Viko Sisodia, Sadhra Jesang, Jasma Odan, Raja Degam, and so on
- Social- Eg: Juthan, Chhel Batau, Zhanda Zhulan, Main Brahmini, Kabo, and so on (Pathak, 2004).

Though over 30 *veshas* exist in Bhavai, not enough has been published. These have been memorized by the Nayak and Targala communities and are orally passed on from generation to generation. In this way, thousands of poems, couplets, songs, stories, anecdotes, music and dances have been preserved (Desai, 1972).

Plot Structure

The plot structure often coincides with the *veshas*, whose main elements are Ganesha, Kali, and a Brahmin. The Ganesha and Kali plots are introduced at the beginning to pay

homage to the gods and ask for their blessings. The priest present in these two plots is portrayed by a Brahmin. Over time the Brahmin community began to be critiqued through the use of satire in these veshas. Following the Brahmin, various characters joined the Bhavai performance and helped progress the storyline. These characters incorporated the Gujrathi language, but also included dialects such as Hindi, Urdu, Marwadi, and Maru-Gujjar when required (Desai,1972).

Music

Music is an essential feature of Bhavai as it helps to keep the atmosphere lively. Numerous ragas and beats are incorporated into the performance. These require specialized musicians to play different instruments. The following are the principal instruments in Bhavai:

- Bhungal: A long metal horn in the shape of a pipe that is five feet long.
- Pavo: A wind instrument that is similar to a flute and is made of metal.
- Vanasali: A type of flute made of bamboo.
- Dholak: A leather instrument shaped like a small barrel that is played on both sides.
- Tablan/Naraghan- Also a leather instrument but it is present as a pair. One is called Naraghun and the other Bayun.
- Nagar: A single small drum that is played with two sticks.
- Cymbals: A small pair of circular disks used to track beats. It is often used for Bhajans and prayers.
- Kansi Joda (Brass clappers): A large thin pair of brass disks that give out a resonant sound used to keep time and beats.
- Karatala: A pair of small wooden rectangular pieces of different shapes and sizes. It creates jingling noises when hit.
- Pakhavaj: It is similar to a Dholak but larger.
- Ravnatho: A string instrument played with a bow.
- Ektaro: A string instrument that is played with one finger.
- Harmonium: An instrument indigenous to India (Desai, 1972).

The voices of Bhavai artists are usually high pitched. Their pronunciation of words is precise and rhythmic. The predominant ragas are *Mand, Paraj, Desh, Sorah, Sarand, Sameri,*

Sohni, Purvi, Prabhat, Ramkeli, Bilawal, Kalingda, Asavari and Maru. Some other forms are Bhajan, Ghazal, Garba, Garbi, Ras, Duha, Dohra, Sakhi, Soratha, Chhappa, Rekhta, and others. These are commonly used in popular music (Desai, 1972).

Dance

Veshas in Bhavai, generally begin with dance and end with one too. Different veshas are interspersed with dance movements. Incidents within these veshas, such as romantic, tragic and heroic ones are also connected through dance. Garba, which is a popular folk-dance in Gujarat, is also employed in Bhavai. Kathak, a regional art form hailing from North India, is also similar to Bhavai (Desai, 1972).

A unique feature of Bhavai dance is that the dance itself portrays various characters in the veshas. Though there is little variation in the dance steps, the changing rhythmic speeds convey different meanings. The grace with which the steps are performed can also express valour, expectancy and intricacy. The same step can tell the audience whether the character is a King, a fakir or a shepherd from the way they move and turn in addition to their speed and grace. For example, the Vanio can be identified from his typical dancing movements with short jumping steps and peculiar bodily gestures. In summary, Bhavaiyyas have developed a sort of 'character dance' where the dance serves the plot in a dramatic way (Desai, 1972).

Costume and Make-up

Since Bhavai is a folk art form and is generally performed on the streets, it does not require elaborate scenic paraphernalia. Instead, the actors use colourful costumes and bold make-up to enhance various aspects of the performance. The make-up material consists of kumkum, kajal, and khadi (Desai, 1972).

As Bhavai is a purely male art form, the female characters are played by men as well. Those actors who specialize in playing these female roles are called Kancalias. 'Kanca' literally means bodice. These men often have slender bodies, soft shaven faces, and a thin voice (Desai, 1972).

Specific costumes are assigned to various characters. For example- the saree of the goddess Kali in all performances is black, and the actor wears no make-up besides kumkum smeared on his forehead (Desai, 1972).

2.3 Bhavai: Religion, Caste, and Gender

Religion

Bhavai is a form of dramatic propitiation of the Mother Goddess, also known as Mata. There is a close resemblance of Bhavai with the religious form of worship. Performances always take place on some holy day pertaining to the Hindu calendar and near some temple. For example, Sudha Desai mentions in her book the importance of Ekadashi and the first nine days of Ashvin/Navratri for Bhavai. Before the performance begins, the place where it is to be enacted is delimited and sanctified by invoking and establishing the presence of the Mother Goddess. She is symbolized by a burning torch that is kept ablaze throughout the performance. The Bhavai performance always starts with songs. The performance commences with a group of singers accompanied by instrument players so that when the veshas begin, the audience is settled. However, these songs are not merely for entertainment; they are prayers or Garabis mostly in honour of the Mother Goddess or sometimes in honour of other deities like Krishna. (Desai, 1972)

In all the performances of Bhavai, a definite sequence of the first three veshas, viz, Ganpati, Kali, and Brahman is always maintained. The regular occurrence of these three veshas in a fixed sequence proves them to be a part of a propitiatory ceremony in honour of Mother Goddess. Moreover, the thali which Ganpati keeps before his face is marked by a Swastika and also a Trishula which once more connects it with the Mother Goddess since the Trishula is a symbol of Shiva and Shakti (Desai, 1972).

Apart from the Hindu origin of Bhavai, there is also an influence of the Islamic religion. For example, the language in some of the veshas reflects Muslim speech. Moreover, while the veshas show traditional romantic interest in the Bava (monk), they also lustily welcome the figure of the Fakir. This Muslim Fakir became the stock figure of many veshas such as those of Juthan, Zanda Zulan, Kansara, and Jasma Odan. Finally, the passionate love of a Hindu woman for a Muslim man is a popular troupe in many veshas (Desai, 1972).

Caste

As mentioned in origin, the Brahmin Asait was banished from his caste and left with no way to provide for himself or his family. He later arrived at the village Unza with his three sons Madan Tha, Naram Tha and Jay Tha. The rich peasant Hemala, grateful to Asait Thakar for saving his daughter, gifted him three houses, some land, and provided them

support from his own caste, the 'Kadwa Patidar' peasants. The tradition continued for generations wherein this community served and supported the descendants of Asait. (Pathak, 2004)

As mentioned earlier, Asait wrote 360 veshas that addressed important social and religious issues. These veshas were performed with the help of his sons. Eventually, Bhavai became extremely popular, and Asait formed a community of Brahmins that did not follow the ascribed duties of their caste. The Bhavai performers come from the caste Targala or Tran Gharwala whose literal transition is 'those who had three homes'. Some believe that 'Targala' also refers to the three castes of Brahmin that were outcastes and hence came together to marry their children. Professionally, they are called Bhavai Nayaks, which means 'organizer of drama troupe'. (Pathak, 2004)

Prateeksha Tiwari mentions in her article, "Bhavaiyya's tale" that the caste of Bhavai performers has numerous names depending on the region. Some examples are Nayak in Mehsana, Bhojak in Kutch and Vyas in Saurashtra. In 'Bhavaiyyas Tale', Prateeksha Tiwari discusses the issue of stigma surrounding Bhavai artists in recent times. She proposes that it could be rooted in the idea of them being nomadic tribes. The Bhavai artists interviewed by her also recall an incident where they were treated shamefully, even though Bhavaiyyas claim they belong to upper castes. They believe this treatment is due to them being performers, as high caste individuals do not generally engage in performing arts (Tiwari, 2018).

Gender

Women are not allowed to participate in the Bhavai performance in rural areas, and men are required to play the female characters as well. The male artists are often praised for their female performances by the audience. However, Prateeksha Tiwari's article highlights a staunch difference between the perspectives of the performers' families. Very often, their wives and children were embarrassed and ashamed of their men portraying women's characters (Tiwari, 2018).

Tiwari further moves on to discuss the reason behind women's exclusion from Bhavai. She emphasizes how women were not allowed to exit their houses after dusk. It is believed that this was the rationale for Asait Thakar not allowing women to take part in Bhavai. Further, he believed that women's participation would expect them to dance and act

coily. This would result in men looking at them with a lustful gaze, which would tarnish the reputation of women . (Tiwari, 2018).

A woman's perspective is showcased in the article through the interview of Sukhiben, the wife of a Bhavai artist. Sukhiben points out that she takes care of the household, income, and children when her husband is away with the troupe. She further states that the stigma surrounding male actors playing female roles is baseless since they are simply actors playing their part like movie stars. Sukhiben also adds that with the blessing of the Mother Goddess, men may portray women but do not inhibit their feminine qualities (Tiwari, 2018).

Most of the literature on Bhavai touches upon the aspect of gender in Bhavai. Nevertheless, the concept of a breakdown of masculinity amongst male actors playing women's roles has not been discussed. Moreover, existing literature does not talk about transgender people and their potential participation in Bhavai.

2.4 Bhavai in the 21st Century

“The acting is tortured out of shape, the pious fakir these days makes ridiculous gestures, wears senseless costumes and makes people laugh by hook or by crook” (Pathak, 2004).

Dina Pathak, the author of 'Bhavai: the Gujarati folk drama' in her article, published in 2004, comments that Bhavai has consistently deteriorated over the past 70 years or so. She believes that the art form has not only lost popularity but also reduced in quality. The leading causes of this decline are poverty and negligence (Pathak, 2004).

Bhavai for a long time was an immensely popular art form in Gujarat. Being a Bhavai artist came with honour as well as recognition in the form of gifts. For the rich poetry in Bhavai, its organizers would win ministerial posts in the State. On the other hand, many dance performers were heard of winning whole villages as gifts (Pathak, 2004).

However, the reputation of Bhavai plummeted over time. Firstly, many of its actors joined the newly started Parsi-Gujarati-Urdu professional drama companies and shifted to the cities. Secondly, the children of Bhavai artists took to stage theatre and began considering the traditional Bhavai art form as below their dignity. Moreover, the income that was procured from the artform was no longer enough to pay the ever-increasing cost of living. Finally, one

of the primary basis for Bhavai's popularity was its use as a mode of communication between villages. With the advent of technology, Bhavai's contribution became unimportant (Pathak, 2004). To summarize, the significant challenges faced by the Bhavai community include lack of training centres, lack of use of technology in the promotion of Bhavai and dominance of the mainstream Gujarati literature and commercial theatre (Patel, Khanushiya, 2019).

The Cambridge Paperback Guide to Theatre examines contemporary Bhavai through a rural-urban lens. The discourse surrounding Bhavai in the 21st century is shaped by an urban Bhavai, incorporating some elements of the traditional rural art form (Banham, 1996). Moreover, Prateeksha Tiwari noted that lately, women have started entering the performing sphere in cities while the same does not hold true for villages (Tiwari, 2018). This gives us an insight into the transformation of Bhavai in the 21st century.

The unique characteristics of urban and rural Bhavai have been mentioned in the above literature. However, there is no research on the extent and impact of these differences on the art form.

2.5 Gaps in the literature

The literature, as mentioned above, has been invaluable in gaining insight into Bhavai. Nonetheless, various gaps have risen from the study of this literature.

Firstly, most of the sources are outdated as they were written in the late 21st century or early 21st century. An example of this is one of the primary sources, Sudha Desai's book *Gujarati Bhavai As Performing Arts-Folk Theatre Drama* which was published in 1972. Additionally, this book has romanticized the art form and is thus not an objective source of information.

The article by Prateeksha Tiwari, "A Bhavaiyya's Tale" is very recent since it had been published in 2018. Unfortunately, it is one of the only articles that investigate the life of a Bhavaiyya and their family through a socio-cultural lens. This exemplifies the gap in the literature from a Bhavaiyyas perspective on the art form.

Finally, the literature on Bhavai written in English is scarce, and that which is written in Gujarati is also inaccessible.

CHAPTER 3 & 4

THE ART FORM AND THE ARTISTS



Illustration by Tanishq Puri

Chapter 3: The Art Form

Bhavai is a people-centric folk art form that, though has its roots in religion, is geared toward depicting ordinary people and their lives. Although it is more geared towards the people and their lives, Bhavai does have its roots in the Hindu religion with Vishnu and *Mataji* being popularly associated with it. There are, however, many interpretations as to what Bhavai represents in today's time. Contemporary Bhavai exists in many forms which coincide yet oppose the "true" purpose of the art form.

3.1.Origin Of Bhavai

The origin of Bhavai itself is something that is debated among scholars. The various retellings of the origin story seem to follow a similar outline as that of Sudha Desai's Book, *Bhavai*. Dr Bhanuprasad Upadhyay, who had done his PhD in the "Alienation in Bhavai", through his research, discovered and concretized how Bhavai came to be. In the 14th Century, Asait Thakar, a Brahmin from the Bhardwaj Caste was the one who started Bhavai. Like most Brahmins, during that time, he would tell stories, do poojas, sing and dance as a way to earn money. Hosts from Unjha and Mehsana would call him for these skills. The money that he earned from this supplemented his income alongside farming (B. Upadhyay, personal communication, February 8, 2020).

Allahuddin Khilji had come to Gujarat to meet his minister, Jahanroz, who was a Sikh. Jahanroz was located in the area near Unjha, and during his visit, there were *chavdi* (big tents) set up on the outskirts. Many women used to be invited to these tents for the minister's pleasure. The daughter of the head family, Ganga Hamada Patel, was caught near these *chavdi* and held captive by the minister. Upon hearing this, the Hamada Patel family sought Asait's help to release her (B. Upadhyay, personal communication, February 8, 2020).

Asait approached the minister and showcased his skills as a performer. Impressed, the minister granted him one wish as repayment for the entertainment offered. He asked the minister to let the woman that was held captive to be released as she was his daughter. (There are some narratives which state that Ganga was his sister). After doing so, the minister's guards informed the minister about the caste difference between the two. The minister then fortified a

condition stating that if Ganga prepares food and Asait eats it, they both would be free to go (B. Upadhyay, personal communication, February 8, 2020).

The Patels and Thakar were of different castes, and because the Thakars were of a higher caste than the Patels, during that time, Thakars would not eat food prepared by the Patels. Asait, despite this, ate the food prepared by Ganga in order to free her (Upadhyay, 2020).

When the people of the village found out, they cast Asait out of the Brahmin community, ostracising him. Stripped of his rights as a Brahmin, he was not allowed to perform rituals or sing and dance. Asait went to the Saraswati Temple and prayed to the goddess, and the goddess presented him with a saree and told him to use this in Bhavai. However, there is another version of the origin which states that he used his skills as a performer in order to develop a form of art that came to be known as Bhavai. This was done as a response to the ostracization that he faced from his community (B. Upadhyay, personal communication, February 8, 2020).

According to Dr Jaswanth Nayak, the Patels when they learned about what happened to Asait Thakar and his brothers decided that they should help them earn a living. Mata Botraji and Mata Uma advised Asait to write a vesh for every day of the year. After writing the vesh, they asked him to go to Patel's village and perform. The Patels gave him food and helped Asait during his performance. This was because they were grateful for his help in saving Ganga (who was also Patel). This relationship between the Patels and Nayak dates back to the 1350s, which was referred to as "Asait Thakars era" by Keka Shastri, a well-known Gujarati writer (B. Upadhyay, personal communication, February 8, 2020) and is continued today (J.Nayak, personal communication, February 13, 2020).

Asait Thakar and his two brothers joined different castes after being exiled from their community. One of the brothers became a Bhojak, the other a Vyas while Asait Thakar became a Nayak. Asait then went on to get married and had three children. Due to him being an outcast, there were no proposals made from families of other Brahmin or upper castes for marriages. The Bhojak community who were Shremani Brahmins joined hands with Asait Thakar through marriage and became a Bhavai community. The Bhojaks, during the reign of Ahem Chandcharya, used to sing Bhavan in temples. They converted into Jains which subsequently

got them thrown out of their community (B. Upadhyay, personal communication, February 8, 2020).

3.2 Intricacies of Bhavai

Traditionally all the performers involved in the art form are male. There are 21 artists, each with their own designated roles. The *Matas* or the "Mothers" are the female characters played by men. The five *matas* are usually played by younger men because they have high-pitched voices which are "sweeter". The artists remained celibate, and their wives were forbidden to accompany them in order to maintain the "purity" of the role. The artists, when playing the female role, would refer to themselves in female pronouns for the duration of the performance. Five *Tatas* are stronger and more powerful characters played by older and more experienced artists. The *Gatas* are the instrument players and the singer. There are two *bhungad* players, one *kaasi* player, one *tabla* player alongside the singer. The *veshgor* is the leader, producer and director of the entire performance (B. Upadhyay, personal communication, February 8, 2020). Alongside the leading performers, five *Samatas* manage the logistics or the *vayasta* of the performance. They would also act as stand-ins for the other performers in the case that they were unable to perform. When the Bhavai troupe goes to a village (or area) for a performance, the *Samatas* are in charge of asking the host to provide equipment for the performance, food, and other such needs. They usually leave before the rest of the troupe in order to prepare for the performance and their stay beforehand. They gather information from the village about the number of people who would attend the performance, the type of place that the village is and other such factors."They used to respectfully welcome them (*Sammam*) like how they would do in weddings" (B. Upadhyay, personal communication, February 8, 2020).

The dialogue of Bhavai is in a poetic and prose format. This format can be seen in Bhavai that is done in urban areas as well as the more traditional forms of Bhavai. The first dialogue done is usually in a poetic form. It can be assumed that it is done in order to quiet the audience down and grab their attention. The dialogues in the play are interspersed with dancing and singing, which allowed for the performance to be more entertaining. Bhavai does not intend to involve its audience into the performance emotionally. The art form calls for engagement but not involvement. For example, the singing and dancing done throughout the performance are done in order to keep the audience engaged but also to create a distance between the artists and the

audience members. Emotional scenes are quickly replaced with comical ones in order to prevent the audience from dwelling on them too much (B. Upadhyay, personal communication, February 8, 2020).

Bhavai is done in order to communicate a message, but it aims to do so without much involvement from the audience members themselves. The play does not have any "elements of curiosity" which would invest the audience into the story. Bhavai detaches the audience from their emotions while simultaneously bringing about awareness and educating the people who watch them (B. Upadhyay, personal communication, February 8, 2020).

The actors dictate the flow of the play by giving stage directions via singing. While there is acting going on, there is a narrator alongside as well. The story is narrated in the past tense, while the dialogues of the performers are in the present tense.

Bhavai performed in urban areas has taken inspiration from traditional Bhavai. P.S. Chari () who is a director for a Bhavai troupe in Baroda took elements from the traditional Bhavai form and made it his own. He found that the traditional form of Bhavai was restricted in terms of the community that was allowed to take part in the art form as well as the style itself. While he does not aim to deconstruct or demean the traditional form, Chari states that "It is only when you get educated, you start looking at it from a very different view altogether, and you try to define the grammar of Bhavai in a very different way altogether.". By keeping the premise the same as the original, he adds other elements alongside in order to keep it relevant and to bring it to the masses (P.S. Chari, personal communication, February 9, 2020).

His primary motivation behind this is to bring awareness amongst the younger generation in regards to their heritage. He does this by reviving the art form in a modern way with elements that more closely relate to the issues that are prevalent today (P.S. Chari, personal communication, February 9, 2020).

Bhavai, although not meant solely for entertainment, is also used as a means of entertainment in various instances. Bhavai is played in weddings, but the content performed is "unrelatable and trivial" (Morshada Desai, personal communication, February 9, 2020). In the village Pansar, whose performance and artists were the subject of research to understand the more traditional form of Bhavai further, the performance was a significant source of entertainment for the villagers. When the performance takes place, a majority of the people living in the village attend the performance with their families. The performance also caters to

the entire audience with references that both the adults and the children were able to relate to. A significant part of the performance took place in comedic scenes, and there were various references to popular household brands in the jokes, which made it more appealing and relevant.

3.3 Role of Religion

Bhavai is said not to be the worship of one religion; however, in regards to the selected sample, almost all of the performances had some aspects of the Hindu religion attached to it. Vishnu and Mataji have often been attached to Bhavai (B. Upadhyay, personal communication, February 8, 2020). Most of the performances that have elements of traditional Bhavai in them start with a prayer Ganesha or Amba Mata. There is also a prayer that is done at the start of a legendary Bhavai performance that is longer than the ones performed in the urban areas. This prayer is a plea to the Goddess Amba to give her blessings for the performance. It also signifies that Kaali Mata has entered the bodies of the female performers and lent her power (personal communication, February 13, 2020).

The prayer itself also acts as a deterrent from people criticizing Bhavai as it is believed by doing so "Kaali Mata" will end them. People who watch this performance with "goodwill" will be blessed with prosperity in their homes. People also offer bracelets and anklets in return for Mata's blessing. This was one way for the performers to earn their living as well (B. Upadhyay, personal communication, February 8, 2020).

Although it is primarily a Hindu based performance, there are ways that Bhavai incorporates the depictions of other religions in it. In some performances, there are characters of different religions. The representation of these characters is said to be done in a "non-offensive" way as not to hurt any community's sentiments. The performances, in the urban areas, are used to promote "communal harmony", particularly between the Hindus and Muslims. Other than through character representation, Sufi music was also incorporated (B. Upadhyay, R. Dani, personal communication, February 8, 2020.)

There is an underlying problem as to how these characters are represented. Although the representation is said to not be offensive, the characters are still represented in a stereotypical, cliched manner. The characters representing other religions are put in the same roles and are made to behave as "they would be expected" to. This might not be the case for

all performances, but it can be observed that even when there are other religions represented, the Hindu characters are often shown as "superior" to the others. The other characters seem to be there mainly for the comedy aspect of it and are not seen in the same light as the others.

3.4 Vulgarity in Bhavai

As Bhavai is done for the audience, various elements and additions are made to the performance in order to capture the attention of the audience. One such element is vulgarity. It is often depicted through the dialogues, songs, and actions of the performers. This, however, was not something that Asait Takar included in his original Vesh (A. Desai, personal communication, February 15, 2020). Although many performers say that Bhavai does not include as much vulgarity as it used to and that it is looked down upon, there are different standpoints on this issue among the Bhavai community.

According to Dr Bhanuprasad Upadhyay, Bhavai in the past was thought to be a vulgar art form. The humour aspect of the play was introduced through vulgarity which made it "inappropriate" for women and children to partake in the viewing of this play. This vulgarity caused an uproar among the writers for Bhavai and caused some writers, although small in number, to reject Bhavai "Some writers boycotted Bhavai itself, and they turned the public against Bhavai as well," Dr Upadhyay recalls (B. Upadhyay, personal communication, February 8, 2020).

Jagdish Bhatt also came face to face with the adversity regarding Bhavai when he was younger. The vulgarity that was showcased in the art might have also caused mixed feelings for the audience members. Although most of the public did enjoy the way that it was portrayed, there was also some sense of shame associated with consuming that content as well. Bhatt says that "he was overly conscious of the fact that he was watching something like this" (J. Bhatt, personal communication, February 9, 2020). Vulgarity is often associated with the older and more traditional Bhavai, and the decrease in the usage of it allows the performers to feel less "shameful" and be freer.

Chari adds to this saying that vulgarity was also added into the performances because of the rise of cinema. In some sense, it was a tactic employed by the writers in order to make Bhavai stand out more as the art form was being overshadowed by the film. As Bhavai started to lose audience members, the performers were not able to generate enough income from their

performances. In order to make the art form more "entertaining" and "appealing" to the audience of the film, salacious and scatological jokes were included in the performance (P.S. Chari, personal communication, February 9, 2020).

Although vulgarity is thought to be something of the past, it still is present in many of the performances today. It might not be as crude as the jokes were before, but instead, it is showcased in more subtle ways through double entendres. The words are used quite often in people's lives today and are a way of gaining laughter from the audience (Ishita, personal communication, February 9, 2020). Some performers, documented amongst the urban troupes, have been welcoming of using subtle forms of vulgarity in their performance because it is something that is quite commonly used in conversations and other forms of entertainment. The "shock factor" might come from the fact that it is a very traditional form of art, and it is also associated with a goddess, it might be perceived as tainting it. Protests against it were done because it would "spoil society". Aditi Desai says that these protests were unnecessary because they did not tackle problems that had significance (A. Desai, personal communication, February 15, 2020).

3.5 Social Awareness in Bhavai

Bhavai, as mentioned earlier, was a way to raise awareness about issues that society faced. Asait Thakar initially started Bhavai as a response to the ostracism that he faced by his community. Bhavai was started as a form of protest; that is what the core of the art form is. Aditi Desai, the founder of Jaswant Thakar's Memorial Foundation, believes that Bhavai is a more effective medium of protest and awareness than any other medium. Since theatre appeals to the audience rationally and emotionally, it is more equipped to bring about change in comparison to seeing a billboard on the street. Because of its theorized effectiveness, the Gujarat State Government often propagates its schemes by enlisting Bhavai groups. These groups have a better understanding of their region and the language that they speak, which in hindsight should make it easier for the troupes to connect with the people there.

Since Bhavai is more rooted in protest, the change in the content of the performance causes a disconnect between the audience and the performance. Since the government does not know the problems of the villages and the areas that the troupes are performing in, there is no bond

built between the performance and the villagers. The information that is provided to them through Bhavai is out of context, and most of the time does not have any relevance. By treating the villages as one and not understanding the process of change that takes place in these different areas, it is rendered as ineffective and also "wastes the potential of an important art form" (A. Desai, personal communication, February 15, 2020).

Most of the performances done by Rajesh Dani's troupe are centred around some of these schemes from the government. They often pay the troupe to perform an original script of theirs for some time in order to raise awareness about issues like cleanliness (Swachh Bharat), digitization and other such topics. His troupe also works in companies as part of their CSR programs. Many people from the city do watch these performances, but the impact of them on their lives and elsewhere is unknown and should be further looked at.

Chapter 4: The Artists

The essence of the art lies within the artists. In Bhavai, the Bhavaiyas are the soul of the art form. Each of the artists involved in the performance plays an important role.

The Bhavai community has a complex viewpoint on caste and gender issues which are the result of the clash between traditional values and modern thought. Alongside this, the artists face difficulties in their lives because of the state of Bhavai today. There are stark differences as to what these issues are and how they are dealt with in the urban areas in comparison to the rural. Bhavai has been declining in recent times, and this decline has impacted the socioeconomic status of the performers at length.

The following chapter takes a closer look at the caste, gender, and economic issues faced by the artists in Bhavai.

4.1 Gender in Bhavai

Bhavai is traditionally performed by an all-male cast with no women being involved in the performance at all. In Pansar, Kalol the Bhavai troupe that performs there follow this tradition and this holds true for other troupes that do traditional Bhavai as well. The art form is a devotion to *Amba Mata* meant that religious beliefs about the impurity of menstruation were enforced. Having women perform Bhavai was prohibited because, during the time that they would be menstruating, they were thought to be impure. Even older women, who have undergone menopause, were not allowed to perform Bhavai because of this. The link between impurity and menstruation is still seen even in contemporary Bhavai, more so in the rural areas where traditional Bhavai is performed (T.K Naik, personal communication, February 14). Aside from this, there is much emphasis on keeping Bhavai "pure" and how this purity is maintained through the female artists

Bhavai in the urban areas is said to be more "progressive" in that sense because Bhavai that you see in Baroda has women playing the female characters and in one instance, a male character as well. The women in Rajesh Dani's and Chari's troupe have described their experiences while performing Bhavai to be liberating and empowering. The leader's of both these troupes are older men who have been part of Bhavai troupes where it was only men, but

they too welcome this change and say that it is necessary in order for the art to grow. Mokshada Desai, an artist part of Chari's troupe, believes that:

"Either you lose out on your art form, or you let it grow by inviting more people to perform. As an artist, when you are given the space to perform, you can adopt anything. Although the tradition is important, till when?". (Mokshada Desai, personal communication, February 9, 2020)

Some performers believe that the rural areas would benefit from allowing women into the closed-off sphere of Bhavai. It can be used to empower women and also act as a source income for them. This, in turn, would provide the women with a sense of security.

Kalol's performance had a mix of older and younger performers playing the female roles. The *Kali Mata* was played by an older male while the *Chakti* (Hindu Female) and *Bhati* (Muslim Female) were played by younger males (N.B Channalal, personal communication, February 13, 2020). In the performance that took place in Kalol, *Kali Mata* was played by one of the village residents (a Nayak Brahmin) whereas the "lesser" female roles were played by "outsiders". The men who play the female characters have pride in their role. Preparing for the role is also a difficult task because they need to mimic the way that a woman talks, the way that she would walk and other gestures. When asked if they were ridiculed because of their role in the performance, the responses received were mixed. It is said that when the males are performing the role of females, Goddess Amba enters their body, meaning that the female characters in Bhavai in some sense have Goddess Amba "in them" and therefore are to be respected.

Regardless of this, some of the men who perform female roles are still faced with ridicule outside of Bhavai. They are highly respected and praised for their performance for the duration of the performance. However, after the performance, they are harassed and called names for the same. While not many of the performers interviewed reported of this, it can be assumed that this is something that might happen quite often. When asked about if they would encourage the younger generation to take part in Bhavai, many of the artists say that while they would like the younger generation to continue the tradition of Bhavai, they do understand that

playing this kind of role is not "appealing" and that it might not be viable as of now because of the lack of income.

Nayak Bacchubhai Channalal, a descendent of Asait Thakar, remarks that "It will give me tremendous pleasure if the next generation goes ahead in bhavai, but I do not want them to force them into it. My requirements are not getting fulfilled by Bhavai, which is why I am not forcing them into it" (N.B Channalal, personal communication, February 13, 2020). This holds for many of the artists.

The issues surrounding gender extend beyond only having an "all-male cast" and not including females. The female characters in Bhavai are also rooted in patriarchal notions of what a woman is and her role in society. There are little glimpses of this in urban Bhavai. However, gender roles are enforced to a great extent in the depictions of these characters in traditional bhavai performed in villages. The Veshs that they perform are from Asait Thakur's time, but there seems to be little to no change in how the woman characters are represented. This could be because the performers and the director wanted to retain the authenticity of the vesh. These Vesh themselves do not showcase progressive viewpoints of what a women's role is.

The "male gaze" is something that one becomes familiar with during the performance of Bhavai (the more traditional performances). The women characters are subjected to "forceful" marriages, and there are numerous instances wherein the actions and the dialogues of the male characters are aimed towards the women's body and her appearance. It becomes all too jarring and in some sense, uncomfortable to witness because of how realistic these situations seem to be because of the way that the male artists embody the female characters.

The representation of the female characters themselves is passive both in the traditional performance witnessed at Kalol and in Baroda. The *Rangli* was a female character added as part of the performance by CC Mehta, a well-known figure in Gujarati literature, in the 1960s (P.S.Chari, personal communication, February 9, 2020). The role of a *Rangli* although sought out to be one of the more domineering roles in the performance is overshadowed by the *Rangla*, the male counterpart to her role. Her role often echoes the actions of the Rangla and her words are more questioned and put under scrutiny in comparison. Although the Rangli's role is perceived to be on the same standing as the role of the Rangla and the Vidushak (the leading

roles), because the role is of a woman, it is seen to be inferior acting as a supporting character rather than an independent one

The power disparity amongst the male and female roles is not limited to solely just the main characters but the supporting ones as well. They are subservient to the other male characters and react in a very passive way with little to no resistance when there is wrongdoing committed against them. Women characters both in the urban and rural performances more often than not, are given gender-conforming roles, thereby limiting the image of what the social standing of a woman is to a regressive standpoint.

This conservative viewpoint of women also extends into the community of Bhavai, more obviously seen in Kalol. When women who were part of the audience were asked about their views on the play and how they feel about the representation, the men of their family were quick to be dismissive of their views, sidetracking them. "She does not know anything", "Why are you asking her" were phrases often thrown around during the conversations. When asked about more "domestic" aspects of their life, they were able to share their experiences readily, but when it came to questions about Bhavai and surrounding issues, there was some hesitation. The men of the Bhavai community also resisted questions that broke the barrier of the social system that was in place for Bhavai and their community.

4.2 Caste in Bhavai

"The caste system has remained just as rigid as it was at its inception, and that is a failure on the part of Bhavai" (R. Barot, personal communication, February 12, 2020).

Bhavai came about as a way for Asait Thakar to sustain himself after being ostracised from his caste because he ate food made by a lower caste woman in order to save her (Bhavai itself came to be a caste-based occupation, only providing income and the right to perform to the people who were of the same caste (P.S Chari, personal communication, February 9, 2020).

People part of the Bhavai community were extremely particular about caste and that only a specific caste(s) can perform the art form or be part of the organising of it. This is ironic in some sense because Asait himself was cast out of his caste for breaking the rules, yet the rigidity of caste still stands strong (P.S Chari, personal communication, February 9, 2020).

Mingling amongst different castes was done sparingly. People who were part of the same caste relied on each other and sought out help from people of their caste rather than elsewhere.

The prayer at the beginning of each performance represented the Brahmins, and even the Vesh performed were all brahmin Vesh. If the Vesh belonged to or signified the lower castes, Bhavai would not have the same audience that it did now because people from the higher castes would look down upon it or take offence to it. Janak Dave justifies using the Brahmin Vesh so that "everyone from every caste would listen to the play and not feel bad about it" (J. Dave, personal communication, February 10, 2020). This clearly shows the inherent casteism that is present within the art form wherein people who are Bhavai performers think of themselves above the "lower castes" even though the vesh that they perform is meant to highlight and tackle social issues some of which are related to caste.

Pansar, Kalol was the village that was the subject of the research to understand the more traditional form of Bhavai that is still performed today. Nayak Kamlesh Bhai Atmaram was very proud and held that the village comprised of 400 brahmin families. This was mentioned quite often, and it was evident that this was held to high regard. Caste plays a vital role in the rural areas (in Bhavai), but this is not seen as much or at all in the urban areas. In the village, while interviews were being conducted, caste was usually the second or third piece of information that they offered up about themselves whereas, in Baroda, the artists avoided the question altogether or were more apprehensive about offering up this information. Caste seems to play less of a role in Bhavai performed in urban areas and is more welcoming of performers from different backgrounds.

In Kalol, N.B. Channel's family were the only ones who were allowed to perform the roles of women. These roles are held in high regard and are a source of prestige for the performers. Although they seem to hold the idea that only a particular caste is allowed to perform Bhavai and even within that only some castes could perform specific roles, this idea seems to be dissolving because there are now not enough people from those castes who are willing to do Bhavai anymore. People of other castes, still Brahmins, are now entering into Bhavai because the original community is not able to sustain the art form by themselves.

Although the art form itself was centred around certain castes, every person regardless of their caste or class, would play a role in welcoming the Bhavai troupe in the villages. Farmers would organise the meals, and the wealthier families would provide milk, ghee and

other "rich amenities". The people from lower castes were tasked with arranging for castor oil in order to light the *Mashaal* and keep it burning for the duration of the performance, which usually lasted all night.

Archan Trivedi, a well known Bhavai artist and actor. When he started learning Bhavai, his teacher would joke about how his name should have been Nayak and not Trivedi. This brings to light that no matter how much one was passionate and a talented performer, the need to be part of the community was a necessity.

4.3 Socioeconomic

For audiences to watch Bhavai, no fee had to be paid to the troupe. For sourcing income, the performers were and still are dependent on the audience in the form of a donation. The performance would often incorporate scenes where they were able to obtain money from the audience without making it seem like they were directly asking for it. For example, in the death scene of one of the performances, the Fakir involves the audience into the performance by asking one rupee from the audience members to bring the character back to life. They were able to involve the audience members into the performance and also source money as well (B. Upadhyay, personal communication, February 8, 2020).

The amount earned by the performers through the performances is meagre and has only been decreasing in recent times. As there was no money being made in Bhavai, the art form has lost many significant writers and performers. The professional theatre started to pave its standing in Gujarat, and an unintentional side effect of this was the downfall in Bhavai. Performers chose to move into doing professional theatre in order to make enough money to sustain themselves (B. Upadhyay, personal communication, February 8, 2020).

Performers who are still associated with Bhavai do it out of passion and respect for the art form, not the money. This holds in the urban areas, but this pattern is disruptive when looking at rural performers. Many of the established artists got into Bhavai because of the money associated with it, but now they continue to do it because of their passion. At the time, some theatre schools offered money to learn Bhavai. This was used as a way to incentivise theatre performers into learning and performing the art form.

Performers in urban areas do Bhavai out of passion and not for the money because there is no money associated with the art form, especially in cities. Chari states that he does not get any

fundings for his performances, most of them being self-funded. He finds himself "begging" for money in order to pay the performers and also to help sustain themselves (P.S.Chari, personal communication, February 9, 2020). Bhavai now also have a fewer number of performances in comparison to how it initially was, both in cities and villages because they cannot afford to be paid.

"There are a few main characters, as we cannot afford to pay many people. If there are more people on the payroll, we can not pay many people as they will get less money and will not be able to survive with that" (J. Bhatt, personal communication, February 9, 2020).

Many of the performers in Baroda said that they work other jobs apart from doing Bhavai and would not consider doing only Bhavai full-time because they would not be able to sustain themselves.

Bhavai, although being a popular traditional art form in Gujarat, did not get any additional help from the government in order to promote the art form or to sustain it. They are hired by the government in order to promote the state's agenda, but there is not enough money given to the groups that perform Bhavai. Most of the money given to them is only enough for the costs for the performance. Another source of income for these performers is from the companies that hire them to do CSR activities, but that too is not enough. Bhavai in the urban areas seems to take a more commercialised route (or at least in an attempt to).

In Pansar, where more traditional Bhavai is performed, older performers themselves discourage their family from doing Bhavai and instead ask them to pursue education or do another job instead. In Pansar, some of the performers take up other jobs to support themselves alongside Bhavai. Raju Bhai, a performer, does other side jobs as a cook, driver, farmer, and runs a catering business too. During the rainy season, it is hard to find work, so he faces a strain in income then. He says "If there were enough money in Bhavai, I would not need other jobs" (R. Bhai, personal communication, February 14, 2020). Some performers do not earn enough money from the jobs that they had, so they took up Bhavai in order to earn money and support their family (N.B.M. Das, personal communication, February 14, 2020).

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION



Illustration by Tanishq Puri

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Bhavai is an admirable folk art form, with its bold take on street performance. With a mix of theatre, dance, songs, and humour. The 600-year-old art form has worked (and continues to work) to remain relevant even today. At a time when the caste-system was widely pervasive, the Bhavai performances criticised the caste-system and educated people about various social issues through the use of slapstick comedy. Today, it continues to address more socially relevant issues like Swachh Bharat in its performances. It seeks to entertain and educate.

Though considerably progressive for its time, Bhavai does have some hitches, particularly in the areas of caste and gender. Ironically, an art form that originated due to the unfair ex-communication of its creator, an art form that sought to break the walls of caste-based restrictions through its performance is now, itself, trapped in the caste-system where only Brahmin Thakars and Nayaks can partake in Bhavai. In terms of gender, too, Bhavai has strictly set rules against the participation of women. During research in Kalol, it was surprisingly found that women unquestioningly abide by this 'tradition'. In terms of the male performers performing female characters, we came across mixed views about the *Kancalias*. They were appreciated by some, but also looked down upon by others.

However, our research on urban Bhavai suggests that the folk art form has been making progress on those fronts in the contemporary theatre setting. Women actively participate in Bhavai (sometimes even taking the vesh of a man) and caste does not seem as central to being a Bhavai artist as it was in Kalol. However, rural Bhavai has a long way to come as they continue to not only implement these caste and gender-based restrictions but also criticise urban Bhavai for not doing the same. The rural Bhavai artists insist that urban Bhavai is not truly Bhavai as it does not perform veshas written by Asait Thakar. They believe it is merely a theatre performance inspired by Bhavai.

Popularly known for centuries, the art form, Bhavai, is slowly but surely dying. Less and fewer people are willing to watch Bhavai and even less want to perform as the pay is meagre, and the title is no longer honourable. Though not strictly authentic, by including women and creating new stories, Urban Bhavai has paved the way for a possibility of Bhavai

remaining relevant to the future generations by adapting to the changing times. In other words, modernising Bhavai may be the only way to keep the ancient folk art form alive.

5.1 Limitations and Scope for Further Study

In this section, various limitations during the study and further scope for study while overcoming these limitations are discussed.

Due to time constraints, only a handful of Bhavai scholars could be interviewed. A few audience members and only one village specialising in Bhavai were studied. The impact of Bhavai on the audience can be further researched as Bhavai aims to entertain and educate. Questions like in what kind of issues has Bhavai educated the audience on and how has (if) it affected/improved their lives.

In Kalol, it was mainly the Nayaks who performed Bhavai. Further study can be done on how Bhavai is performed and perceived by other Bhavai performing castes like Bhojak and Vyas. They are located in various parts of Gujarat like Kutch and Saurashtra hence expand our research to these parts to understand their take on Bhavai.

Meger pay is something that was often reported by artists in the rural area. There seems to be a pattern of low income plaguing Bhavai artists which are also supported by the literature review. Further study needs to be done on Bhavai in other villages and by other castes as well. This will also give more data to understand problems with income and other shared concerns among Bhavai artists.

Additional groundwork needs to take place to understand the persistence and rigidity of the caste system and its impact on performers and audiences. Is this a cause for why Bhavai is dying? Why is caste so prevalent in Bhavai despite many of its original veshs have many scenes mocking the pompous behaviours of the upper caste people. The main issue faced while trying to research on this is that artists and scholars were very uncomfortable talking about caste; nor were they ready to answer questions, especially critical questions, about caste and its relevance to the art form. While the urban artists were uncomfortable with the caste topic itself, the rural artists proudly proclaimed their caste but were not willing to answer counter questions about why these caste-restrictions remain so.

In Kalol, women were not allowed to freely speak about Bhavai by the male members of the village, despite having considerable knowledge about it. For over 600 years, women have not been able to participate in Bhavai. Now, though this remains the situation in rural Bhavai, urban Bhavai has included women performers who have described being on stage and performing Bhavai as empowering. A women's perspective of Bhavai can also be an excellent area to focus on for further study where we can focus on providing a space for women, especially in the rural setting, to voice their outlook on Bhavai as well as their struggles as families of Bhavai artists.

As mentioned in the report, since women were not allowed to participate in Bhavai, men took up the roles of woman characters as well, i.e. they cross-dressed as women. However, from research in Kalol, its often cis-gendered people taking up these roles and the Bhavai people claimed that the Kancalias could not be called because they were playing the role of the female goddess. Why was there no active participation by transgender people in Bhavai? Have there been cases where transgender women have taken up these roles? What does the Bhavai community feel about this? What does the transgender community feel about this?

Lastly, while conducting on field research, contacts withheld information or were not too keen to talk about the angle in our research. Therefore in scope to further the current research, expanding in terms of contacts, geographical region and time spent researching. Besides this, the research was successfully conducted, and the researchers managed to get an in-depth understanding of the sharp yet discreet differences between rural and urban Bhavai as well the role of women in Bhavai.

References

- Banham, M. (1996). Cambridge Paperback Guide to Theatre. Cambridge University Press.
- Desai, S.R. (1972). Bhavai: A Medieval Form of Ancient Indian Dramatic Art (natya) as Prevalent in Gujarat. Gujarat University.
- Patel, J.V., & Khanushiya R.K.D (2019). GUJARATI BHAVAI AS PERFORMING ARTS-FOLK THEATRE DRAMA. University News, 57(4).
https://www.academia.edu/36629280/GUJARATI_BHAVAI_AS_PERFORMING_ARTS_-_FOLK_THEATRE_DRAMA.pdf
- Pathak, D. (2004). Bhavai: the Gujarati folk drama. Sangeet Natak Akademi, 38(3), 51-66.
<https://indianculture.gov.in/Bhavai-gujarati-folk-drama-0>
- Tiwari, P. (2018). A Bhavaiyya's Tale. Retrieved 17th December 2019, from
<https://www.sahapedia.org/Bhavaiyyas-tale>.
- Varadpande, M.L. (1992). History of Indian Theatre: Loka Ranga. Panorama of Indian Folk Theatre. (Vol. 2). Abhinav Publications.
- Google. (n.d.). Gujarat. Retrieved from
<https://www.google.com/maps/place/Gujarat/@22.4064199,69.0752489,7z/data=!3m1!4m1!4m5!3m4!1s0x3959051f5f0ef795:0x861bd887ed54522e!8m2!3d22.258652!4d71.1923805>

Figures



Figure 2: Urban Bhavai Performance



Figure 3: Still from a performance in Pansar, Kalol



Figure 4: The Female Characters Played by Men



Figure 5: Vesha of the King and Goddess Kali During the Climax



Figure 6: Male Performers Transforming Themselves into their Female Roles



Figure 7: An Older Bhavai Performer Showing a Picture of Himself as a Female Character.



Figure 8: Music Performers Performing during Pansar's Performance

List of Interviewees

Jagdish Bhatt is an 85-year-old male Bhavai actor who has been performing various theatre forms 'all his life'. He is very well known for adapting Marathi plays into Bhavai. He is also one of the few artists who perform Bhavai in Hindi, English and Gujarati.

Rajesh Dani is an actor, writer and director who Has performed and written Bhavai on various topics such as environment, cleanliness, global warming, saving the girl child, universal brotherhood and peace. He had established sanskruti theatres - a theatre troupe - in Baroda in 1990. He has been doing Bhavai with his wife since then. His biggest hope is to establish a pocket theatre in Baroda to make performances much more comfortable to watch.

Jayashree Dani has completed her BA in Psychology and theatre is her passion. She has been performing the role of Rangli in Bhavai, since 1974. Alongside this, she has performed full-length Gujarati plays as an actor and even has her dance group. She has researched different Gujarati Folk and is interested in anything to do with acting.

Bhanu Prasad Upadhyay is one of the few individuals who has a PhD in Bhavai. He has studied and written a book about 'Alienation in Bhavai'

Mokshada Desai (female performer at Rajesh Dani's show) has done her diploma in performing arts from MSU Baroda and is currently a media professional and a media educator. She has a theatrical experience of 10 years, performing Bhavai is weddings and occasions every now and then

Neerav Pandya (male performer at Rajesh Dani's show) is an environmental engineer and performs drama, Bhava because they are his passion. He has been doing drama in Baroda for five years now, and this current performance was his first time performing Bhavai.

Janak Dave is the Head of the Drama Department at Gujarat University, Ahmedabad. He encouraged his students to perform the vesh/plays written by Asaith Thakar till the beginning of 2016. He had to stop teaching the art form due to poor heart conditions. He is only able to sing now. However, he used to perform many Bhavai Vesh before 2016.

Vinod Patel has completed his masters in dramatics and has taken part in many plays where he acted as well helped in lights, sound, stage management. He writes a lot of Bhavai Vesh now. He has played *rangla*, the main character, many times. He also claimed to have played the role of a transgender person in a Bhavai Vesh once.

Professor P.S Chari teaches theatre as a medium of communication in the journalism faculty of MS University, Baroda. He conducts, writes and directs theatre in non- commercial genres. He has staged famous works of S.L. Bayarappa from Karnataka or U.R. Ananthamurthy from Karnataka and even Tendulkar and Alekar from Maharashtra. He has been working with many students in the field of theatre and Bhavai so that the younger people know what their heritage is.

Ishita is a 24 years old, network engineer in ATOS. She is very passionate about theatre and has been performing theatre for the past 3-4 years. She works with Professor P.S.Chari.

Mohammed (Actor) has been taking part in dramas since he was eight years old. He started performing Bhavai in 9th grade of school. He is a freelancer and works in movies and plays to make a living. He completed some basic training in Bhavai when he was young, from a reputable organization. His grandfather was also a Bhavai artist.

Shweta Sharmani (Actor) has been taking part in theatre for the last two years. She is a teacher by profession but is more interested in acting, directing and singing. The performance viewed for this study was her first Bhavai Vesh done professionally. She has taken part in them only in college.

Mego Thakkar (Actor in the MSU) is an engineer and a student who is interested in theatre and has a grip on comics. He has written many scripts for plays as well. The performance viewed for this study was his first Bhavai.

Nisarg Trivedi was introduced to Bhavai in 1982. He got selected in the Darpana academy and was trained there to become a Bhavai performer. After completing his training, he has performed many plays and taken part in quite a few Bhavai Vesh.

Raju Bharot has studied drama from MS University and learnt about Bhavai from Jagdish Bhatt. He is a singer and an actor who has conducted workshops on Bhavai for NSD students.

Nayak Kamlesh Bhai Atmaram belongs to the Nayak caste and has been doing Bhavai since he was ten years old. He has studied only until 3rd grade. He learnt Bhavai from his father and grandfathers. He has performed many small roles as well as female roles over the years and has no other occupation outside of Bhavai.

Raju Bhai Nayak is a comic actor who is 49 years old and has been doing Bhavai for 30 years. To make a living, he cooks food in a catering service business. He also drives a taxi or tractor sometimes. He has been a part of many performances (including 2-3 women roles). He manages the group and takes them to different villages to perform there.

Trambak Bhai Kantilal Nayak started performing Bhavai at the age of 10. His brother and grandfather introduced him to Bhavai. He has done both new and old forms of Bhavai. Whatever he earned from performing Bhavai, he raised and educated his children and got them jobs.

Nayak Bhairal Bhai Mittal Das has been involved in Bhavai for the past four years. Outside of Bhavai, he does small jobs such as doing mechanical work for CNG and auto-rickshaws and also drives autos.

Vishnu belongs to the village of Kadhi and has been involved in Bhavai for 15 years. He has no other means of earning other than Bhavai. He has been performing female roles for the last 15 years. His brother and father also perform Bhavai.

Daya Bhai M Naik has been performing Bhavai since 1987. He only played the role of the hero for 40 years.

Nayak Nisha Bhailal Bhai's (audience) father used to drive a rickshaw but then stopped to start performing Bhavai to earn a living. She has studied till 9th grade of school.

