

Giving Voice to a Marginalized Performance Tradition in Contemporary Society

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### **Abstract**

The lead author was one of thirteen artists selected from across California to receive a unique grant to create an original performance piece. The goal of the piece was to experiment with a traditional performance form to communicate a contemporary issue to California audiences. The lead author used his traditional folk form called *Nautanki* to achieve two goals simultaneously--to give voice to the marginalized community of *Nautanki* artists in India and also to communicate a contemporary social issue relevant to audiences in America. In this paper, the authors examine the process of creating this unique performance through the theoretical lenses of Mikhail Bakhtin and Dwight Conquergood.

### **Preview**

The lead author was one of thirteen artists selected from across California to receive a unique grant to create an original performance piece. The goal of the piece was to experiment with a traditional and/or folk art form to communicate a contemporary issue to California audiences. This prestigious grant was given to the lead author by CounterPULSE, a prominent non-profit organization in San Francisco that is supported by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Walter and Elise Haas Fund, among others.

As a performance-cum-scholar belonging to both the marginalized community of folk artists in rural India and the privileged community of English-writing scholars living in American cities, the lead author used his traditional folk form called *Nautanki* to achieve two goals simultaneously--the performance piece served to give voice to the marginalized community of *Nautanki* artists in India and also communicated a contemporary social issue relevant to audiences in America. *Nautanki* is a folk musical theater tradition of South Asia that

used to be the most popular form of entertainment for village folk before the advent of cinema and television in the last several decades. Much of the lead author's previous work with *Nautanki* has served to revitalize this art form in rural India, through writing and directing new *Nautankis* centered on contemporary social and health issues such as HIV/AIDS, girl child literacy, population, environment, dowry, and others. There are many such projects in which the lead author has played prominent roles, including the United Nations Joint Program on HIV/AIDS from 2007-2008, which was a big step in keeping this art form alive in India and giving importance to marginalized rural communities.

However, this project represents an even bigger step in giving voice to India's marginalized communities, as it took *Nautanki* outside of its core region to give it voice on an international platform that had never seen or heard *Nautanki* before. This required a number of innovations with the traditional *Nautanki* format, structure, and content to make it accessible and enjoyable to culturally and geographically diverse audiences. These innovations are discussed in detail later in the paper.

The lead author was the writer, director, and main actor for an original performance piece titled "Mission Suhani" relating to immigration, dowry, domestic violence, and women's empowerment. The piece examined the phenomenon of Indian men who come to America from India to study or work and have two romantic partners, one in India and another in America. This piece was an innovative method of communicating this controversial issue to the local communities living in the Bay Area, where "Mission Suhani" was performed. Because of this theme, the piece not only gave voice to the marginalized community of *Nautanki* artists but also to the marginalized community of women living in India who are suffering from fraudulent marriages, domestic violence, and lack of empowerment in their relationships.

The piece endured a rigorous peer-review process through three Work-in-Progress performances and feedback sessions over a period of four months. The final piece premiered at CounterPULSE's Performing Diaspora Festival, which took place from November 5-22, 2009. The lead author and his/her troupe performed for four consecutive nights to sold-out houses. The final performances were co-sponsored by the Center for South Asia Studies at University of California, Berkeley, Narika, and Maitri, a non-profit organization that empowers women who are victims of domestic violence, emotional abuse, cultural alienation, and human trafficking (Maitri, 2009). Due to the success of the shows, the lead author was invited to direct and perform his/her original piece at the University of California, Berkeley, in May 2010. The lead author was then shortlisted as one of only four artists out of the thirteen to receive a larger grant from CounterPULSE to create a bigger performance on the same issue. The lead author went through a second rigorous peer review process culminating in four 1.5-hour long shows from October 28-31, 2010, which were covered by prominent media such as San Francisco public radio, India West, and San Francisco Public Press, among others. The success of these shows led to an invitation by the South Asian immigrant diaspora community in San Ramon, California, to perform "Mission Suhani" there in November 2010. Already, "Mission Suhani" has been seen by over one thousand people of diverse cultural backgrounds. Recently, the lead author was selected as one of ten applicants from across California by California Presenters (an art organization that supports original performance tours) to take this piece on a 5-venue performance tour across California.

In addition to giving voice to the marginalized community of *Nautanki* artists, this project made significant contributions to performance and communication research and scholarship by communicating an important and relevant contemporary and controversial social issue through

performance. The performance piece, titled "Mission Suhani," was an original *Nautanki* relating to immigration, dowry, domestic violence, and women's empowerment. The piece examined the phenomenon of Indian men who come to America from India to study or work and have two romantic partners, one in India and another in America. This *Nautanki* was an innovative method of communicating this controversial issue to the local communities living in the Bay Area, where "Mission Suhani" was performed. Because of this theme, the piece not only gave voice to the marginalized community of *Nautanki* artists but also to the marginalized community of women suffering from fraudulent marriages and domestic violence, who are disempowered in their marriages.

The lead author's performance piece built upon the work of several performance and communication theories, including Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of *performance as carnival* and Dwight Conquergood's notion of performance as *resistance to textocentrism*, which provide a theoretical base for a *performance paradigm* of communication. Michael Bakhtin (1984) talks about how community folk performances are like *carnivals*; in community performances, people come together and engage in role playing, make sense of their life conditions, and resist practices that are oppressive, but through entertainment. The lead author built upon Bakhtin's work by communicating a serious social issue in a non-threatening, humorous, and entertaining way.

The lead author's performance piece also took inspiration from Dwight Conquergood's scholarship (2002), which sees performance as a challenge to *textocentrism*--the undue privilege that is given to written forms of knowledge, which undermines the vast amount of non-written forms of knowledge in non-Western, oral (non-textual) cultures, such as community performances, songs, and spoken language. The lead author's *Nautanki* piece was a community performance that challenged *textocentrism* by giving voice to non-written forms of knowledge,

and allowing for the community engagement and participation that non-written knowledge forms engender through the real, first-hand experience of performance.

Performing Diaspora was a unique and valuable experience for the lead author and his/her troupe, and was very well-received by audiences. Participation in the Performing Diaspora program provided valuable and much-needed support and resources to bring attention to a contemporary social issue through the indigenous performance tradition of a disempowered culture.

### **Folk Opera Performance “Mission Suhani”**

The lead author's original *Nautanki*, "Mission Suhani," critically examined the increasingly common phenomenon of Indian men who come to America to study or work, but go back to India and get married, either because of parental pressure or to get a big dowry (cash given to the groom's family by the bride's side). Many of these men leave their wives in India and lead separate lives in America, where they often have another wife or a girlfriend. Their wives in India sometimes do not see them for years and are crying for them. Because of societal constraints, they can neither divorce their husbands nor have sexual freedom. To make matters worse, the society leads women to blame themselves for their husbands' lack of interest in the relationship.

N.R.I. marriages typically take place between an Indian woman from India and an Indian man residing in another country (who is thus called a non-resident Indian, or N.R.I.). The bride's family, due to the aura surrounding N.R.I.s and their eagerness to fix the marriage, often fails to consider the possible negative outcomes. Oftentimes, these women are abandoned in India by their husbands and never even set foot in their husband's country of residence. In other cases, the women are treated like maidservants and abused by their husbands both mentally and physically.

The number of deserted N.R.I. brides in India is now at 25,000 according to some estimates by the Indian government (Indian Express, 2008).

It should be noted that not all Indian men leave their wives in India. In fact, only a small percentage do. Nevertheless, due to the large number of N.R.I.s in America, it poses a serious problem to the Indian diaspora community living in the U.S. and their relatives in India.

This new *Nautanki* script not only brought a contemporary issue to light, but also helped *Nautanki* as a performance form to update itself to emerging issues in contemporary society both in India and around the world. It was one of the first *Nautanki* scripts involving a global social issue connected to Indians and Indian immigrants in other countries.

#### **Synopsis of *Nautanki* “Mission Suhani”**

Suhani’s parents arrange her marriage with an N.R.I. (Non-Resident Indian) named Chaliya, who is working in the U.S.A. Chaliya comes to India, marries Suhani, takes a huge dowry (\$20,000), and flies back to San Francisco (where he lives) on the same night. He does not even see Suhani’s face properly. Suhani keeps waiting for him but he does not return. Her parents abandon all hopes, but Suhani is a strong woman. She takes the bold decision to travel to the U.S. to find her husband and claim her rightful place with him. Her parents are frightened about her decision. They discuss with her all the dangers of going to a foreign country alone. Suhani tells them that Lata, one of her friends, lives in the U.S. with her husband (another N.R.I.). She informs her parents that she would stay with them and they would help her to find her husband. Her parents reluctantly agree.

After reaching the U.S., Suhani meets Lata. Lata introduces Suhani to her husband and also to her brother, Devesh, who works in the U.S. and is still unmarried. Lata was not in touch with Suhani for a long time and was actually thinking that Suhani would be a good match for her brother. However, after listening to Suhani’s story, she had to abandon that thought. Lata and Devesh promise to help Suhani find her husband.

Meanwhile, Chaliya has a girlfriend in the U.S. who does not know that Chaliya is already married. From time to time, she urges Chaliya that they should get married, but he does not pay attention to her. He has a good business but is a heavy gambler and drinker. While making inquiries about Chaliya, Devesh finds out that he actually knows him through other friends. In fact, Chaliya is famous in the local community for his errant ways. Devesh also finds out about Chaliya’s girlfriend and hesitantly tells Suhani the bitter truth. Suhani is heart-broken, but somehow pulls herself together. She decides that she does not want to get back with Chaliya, but also becomes firm about getting back the hard-earned money that Chaliya swindled from her parents in the form of dowry.

Suhani and Devesh make a plan. Devesh knows that Chaliya and his girlfriend

frequent a particular dance club in San Francisco. Suhani dresses herself glamorously as a “hot” and sexy South Asian woman living in the U.S., and goes to the dance club with Devesh. In the club, she dances around Chaliya, who has never seen his bride properly and who obviously does not recognize her. He gets very attracted to Suhani and starts flirting with her. Suhani encourages this flirting and starts frequenting the dance club, enticing Chaliya firmly into her grip. Chaliya’s girlfriend notices this, and there is a big fight between the two. Chaliya never wanted to marry his girlfriend in the first place, and uses this as an excuse to break up with her. Now, he is totally after Suhani. However, Suhani says that she has come to the U.S. to earn money because her parents are in heavy debt of \$20,000, and she wants to help them repay their debt. Before earning that money, she cannot think of anything else. Chaliya, who is a rich man, says that it is not a problem and gives \$20,000 to Suhani.

Once Suhani gets the money, she calls Devesh, who comes with other community members, and asks Chaliya if he is married. Chaliya does not give a straight answer. Suhani confronts Chaliya and discloses her real identity. Chaliya is shocked and becomes afraid that he may be turned into the police, as all the community members are on Suhani's side. He accepts his mistake and begs Suhani to come back to him as his legitimate wife. However, Suhani is in no mood to pardon Chaliya. She and Devesh have come close during these days. She divorces Chaliya. Devesh and Suhani marry, leaving Chaliya high and dry!

There were many challenges that the lead author faced in bringing the art form of a marginalized community far away from its traditional roots to the contemporary mainstream culture of audiences in America. One of these challenges was finding and training people who could perform in the *Nautanki*. The lead author auditioned local people in the San Francisco Bay Area who worked full time as doctors, engineers, and other professions, and who had some previous amateur singing and/or acting experience. Although most of the cast members were originally from India, they were brought up in Indian and American cities, so they had no exposure to India's rural folk traditions. Through *Nautanki*, the lead author introduced them to indigenous Indian culture for the first time by training each of the performers in the *Nautanki* operatic and theater style from scratch. Through this process, the lead author gave legitimacy to an unempowered art form by bringing it to people who did not know anything about it and who thus attached no value to it in the context of the mainstream, privileged forms of entertainment



that they did know about, such as Indian film songs ('Bollywood'), and Western music and theater forms. Furthermore, through the process of learning and performing *Nautanki*, each of the performers became sources of knowledge and communication channels that could spread awareness and create recognition of the *Nautanki* art form by exposing it to their friends and colleagues.

Besides giving the *Nautanki* form access into the urban Indian culture, this *Nautanki* performance project exposed other, non-Indian communities in America to Indian culture. In fact, the majority of audiences who attended "Mission Suhani" shows were not from South Asia, and were of various European ethnic backgrounds.

The interactive, participatory peer-review process of creating the "Mission Suhani" performance piece for CounterPULSE's Performing Diaspora festival resulted in several important innovations in the *Nautanki* that were critical to the success of communicating the social issue in the performance piece to American audiences. The lead author experimented with *Nautanki* on many levels: first, on the content level, by introducing a contemporary theme, second, on the structural level, by incorporating a different language (English) in the script, and third, on the design level, by contemporizing the traditional *Nautanki* format.

The lead author began work on the *Nautanki* for the Performing Diaspora festival while in India during July of 2009. While in India, the lead author co-wrote the script with his/her father, a world-renowned *Nautanki* artist and guru. After coming to California from India in late August, the lead author prepared a new cast of performers for CounterPULSE's first Work-in-Progress (WIP) showing on August 29, 2009. The WIP process was very helpful in taking the piece in a positive direction. CounterPULSE set guidelines for the Work-in-Progress showings, which stated that in order to help the artists and also protect their artistic vulnerabilities, the

feedback after the Work-in-Progress would start with the artist himself/herself asking the audience specific questions to improve his or her piece. Sometimes, people giving feedback may have genuine intentions to be helpful, but may not have any knowledge of an artistic tradition. Thus, it was a great opportunity for the lead author to ask questions himself rather than getting caught up in the questions of audience members.

The main concern that the lead author addressed and received valuable feedback on during the Work-in-Progress showings was that of communicating a colloquial Hindi script about an Indian-American issue to an audience that largely speaks English. As a result of the feedback received after the first WIP showing, the lead author evolved the piece from having a pure Hindi script to a bilingual script which incorporated English dialogues amid the Hindi lines. Writing the entire piece in English would have killed the traditional dimensions and feel of *Nautanki*. However, it was crucial to communicate the social issue to the audiences; for that, it was critical that the audiences understood what the script was saying. At the first WIP show, the lead author kept the entire piece in Hindi and gave a background of the issue and story to the audience before the performance started. The lead author's main concern during this performance was that the audience might see it as an exotic artistic experience devoid of any actual meaning. However, the audience was very sympathetic towards the piece and gave several suggestions on how to realize the full communicative potential of the piece. The lead author asked, "What should I do in order to break the language barrier?" There were many options thrown out by audience members, such as providing super-titles, giving the full story and background in text in the performance program, or orally giving a background before the performance. Although these suggestions were helpful, the lead author felt that super-titles would distract audiences' attention from the performance. In addition, giving a lecture beforehand about the performance would

defeat the purpose of the performance as a medium of communication: the performance should speak for itself.

The audience's feedback led the lead author to the idea of making the performance bilingual, which would save the essence of *Nautanki* by retaining the colloquial Hindi, while having supporting English dialogues so that the performance itself could connect to audiences. This solution protected the traditional operatic and artistic elements of *Nautanki* while effectively communicating the story and contemporary social issue to the audience.

At CounterPULSE's second Work-in-Progress showing on October 18, 2009, the lead author's efforts to incorporate English dialogues into the *Nautanki* script were validated by the audience. Audience members commented that they understood the script completely, that the script flowed well, and that they thoroughly enjoyed the *Nautanki*. The new script was so successful at conveying the story to an English-speaking audience that the lead author realized there would be no need to put the story of the performance in text or give an oral explanation at the beginning of the performance. By incorporating English dialogues in the Hindi script, he was able to cross the difficult-to-surmount communication barrier of performing for an audience belonging to a different culture, and still retain the wonderful artistic elements of the *Nautanki* tradition. The lead author was able to get the best of both worlds.

Besides innovating with the *Nautanki's* content and script, the lead author made significant changes to the structure of the traditional *Nautanki* format to make it as effective as possible as both an entertainment and communicative piece. While traditional *Nautanki* performances range from eight to twelve hours, going from 10 p.m. at night until sunrise the next morning, in today's society--both in India and America--people do not find the time to watch an all-night *Nautanki* performance. As a result, the lead author created the full-length *Nautanki*

peice to be just 1.5 hours , while making sure to include all of the key elements of a traditioanl *Nautanki* performance in the piece. Furthermore, instead of performing *Nautanki* in an open-air theater as it is traditionally done, the lead author directed and performed the *Nautanki* in a closed theater, introducing technical lighting enhancements, microphones, and other effects to make the performance more accessible to contemporary global audiences.

The lead authors' *Nautanki* piece “Mission Suhani” sits at the crossroads of tradition and change. It both worked to preserve a dying traditional art form by giving it a voice in contemporary society while at the same time changing the art form in certain fundamental ways so that it could be accesible to global audiences in today's world.

### **Community Performance as “Carnival”**

Most scholars have situated performances as a modern, urban phenomenon. They have not specifically focused on using indigenous performance traditions for social change. Mikhail Bakhtin’s work becomes especially important for this project as it highlights the role of indigenous performance traditions in society. These traditions, according to Bakhtin, are products of people’s ordinary lives, not consciously designed as performances for social change. As such, it becomes important to discuss Bakhtin’s work in detail here.

Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) argues that folk performances are like *carnivals*; they are participative in nature and may represent a voice against the oppression of people by socio-political authorities. Bakhtin assigns two major functions to community performances: (1) they help people in understanding oppressive practices; (2) they help people to resist these practices by making a connection with other members of their community, and feel united through a realization of their common conditions. According to Bakhtin, community performances resist

oppression by not being serious but rather being fun:

A boundless world of humorous forms and manifestations opposed the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture...folk festivities of the carnival type, the comic rites and cults...the clown and fools...manifold literature of parody--all these forms...were sharply distinct from the serious official forms and ceremonials. (pp. 4-5)

Bakhtin's work establishes performance as a potential communication strategy for understanding the established and oppressive practices through social dialogue. His notion of carnival celebrates liberation, even if temporary, from the established order (Hansen, 1992). In *carnival*, a folk performance ritual in medieval Russian society, the King, a symbol of established oppressive order, becomes a target of people's ridicule (Bakhtin, 1984):

King is the clown. He is elected by all the people and is mocked by all the people. He is abused and beaten when the time of his reign is over, just as the carnival dummy of winter or of the dying year is mocked, beaten, torn to pieces, burned or drowned in even our times. (p. 197)

Making the King a clown and taking digs at him in a controlled hegemonic system can be done through communicative actions like performances. According to Bakhtin, although popular folk festive forms resist oppression, they are never serious. One of the essential conditions of folk-festive forms, whether a carnival or *Nautanki*, is audience-engaged entertainment. In folk performances, people come together and engage in role playing, make sense of their oppression, and resist it, but through the medium of entertainment. Bakhtin (1984) explains this positive nature of folk forms:

There is no pure negation in the popular-festive system of images; it tends to

embrace both poles of becoming in their contradiction and unity. The one who is thrashed or slaughtered is decorated. The beating itself has a gay character; it is introduced and concluded with laughter. (p. 203).

Bakhtin's theory was used to guide the lead author's direction and depiction of the controversial contemporary issue portrayed in *Mission Suhani*. Abuse and abandonment of Indian brides by NRI men is not an issue to be taken lightly. However, as a performance form, *Nautanki* has a lot of humor. Thus, the lead author used a lot of comedy in the script to keep the performance entertaining and raise this serious issue in a non-threatening way. In the male-dominated contemporary society, the NRI men who marry Indian brides and abandon their wives in India have the power in society--they may have multiple girlfriends or another wife in the U.S., both of which are completely taboo for women in India. Thus, like the "King" in Bakhtin's example, the lead author purposefully depicted Chaliya (the NRI groom who abandons his wife, Suhani, in India, and has a girlfriend in the US) as a comical character whom the audience laughs at and makes fun of.

In the context of the issue of NRI marriage frauds, Chaliya's behavior is not at all funny. Portraying a serious issue such as NRI marriage frauds can easily become touchy. Through "Mission Suhani," however, the lead author managed to raise a serious issue in a very non-threatening way. In fact, the success of the performances was a direct result of their entertaining nature, and also served the underlying purpose of communicating a social issue in an effective way. The entertaining nature of the performance made it uniquely capable of creating awareness of a controversial issue more successfully than conventional written rhetoric. In the next section, Dwight Conquergood's theory of *textocentrism* provides valuable insight into this line of thinking.

### **Performance as a Challenge to “Textocentrism”**

An important voice that supports using performance as a communication strategy is that of Dwight Conquergood. Although his work uses both traditional as well as modern performative forms and does not exclusively speak to the relevance of community folk forms in social change, Conquergood’s work is very important to establish *performance* as a strategy for social change. Conquergood (2002) views performance as a communication strategy, which is a revolt against what he calls *textocentrism*. *Textocentrism*, according to him, is the undue privilege that is given to written forms of knowledge. According to Conquergood, this text-centered privilege undermines the vast amount of non-written forms of knowledge in non-Western cultures. He says: “The root metaphor of the text underpins the supremacy of Western knowledge systems by erasing the vast realm of human knowledge and meaningful action that is unlettered” (p. 312).

Conquergood further discusses the value of performance as an effective tool for communicating a message by comparing “two different domains of knowledge: one official, objective, and abstract—“the map”; the other one practical, embodied, and popular—“the story.” A *Nautanki* performance falls under the second domain of knowledge; it is part of the “subjugated knowledges...the non-serious ways of knowing that dominant culture neglects, excludes, represses, or simply fails to recognize” (p.312). Conquergood points out that

the dominant way of knowing in the academy is that of empirical observation and critical analysis from a distanced perspective: “knowing that,” and “knowing about.” This is a view from above the object of inquiry... This propositional knowledge is shadowed by another way of knowing that is grounded in active, intimate, hands-on participation and personal connection: “knowing how,” and

“knowing who.” This is a view from the ground level, in the thick of things. This is knowledge that is anchored in practice and circulated within a performance community (p.312).

Indigenous performances like *Nautanki* are an antithesis to *textocentrism*, enhancing social change communication by their public nature. As a live performance, *Nautanki* “Mission Suhani” informs audiences about a contemporary social issue by showing them, rather than telling them, *who* the issue affects and *how* it affects them.

Conquergood also quotes Frederick Douglass (1855), a former American slave, who expresses that the “mere hearing of those songs [sung by the slaves] would do more to impress [people] with the soul-crushing and death-dealing character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes.” Those songs are what enabled him to “quicken [his] sympathies for [his] brethren in bonds” (p.314). Much like the songs of slavery, the operatic nature of *Nautanki* is able to communicate a social issue in a way that captures audiences' attention and elicits sympathy for the plight of these women. As Conquergood states, “[Knowledge] must be *engaged*, not abstracted...proximity, not objectivity, becomes the epistemological point of departure and return” (p.315). Thus, the impact on audiences of a live *Nautanki* performance cannot be created only through written texts about the issue.

Conquergood stresses the point that “textocentrism—not texts—is the problem” (p.318). He says that we can

challenge the hegemony of the text best by reconfiguring texts and performances in horizontal, metonymic tension, not by replacing one hierarchy with another...The constitutive liminality of performance studies lies in its capacity to bridge segregated and differently valued knowledges, drawing together legitimated as well



as subjugated modes of inquiry (p.318).

In the present project, the lead author communicated with audiences through a diversity of written and non-written modes of communication. These included the lead author's blog (with both text and pictures), in which he discussed issues related to bringing the traditional folk art form of one culture into the contemporary culture of another society. He took the blog's readers with him on the journey of creating the "Mission Suhani" performance piece, sharing the challenges he faced and the simultaneous goals he was pursuing of empowering a marginalized culture while also communicating a relevant contemporary issue. Other forms of communication were live video-recordings of interviews with the lead author about the performance, videos of Work-in-Progress showings, and the final performances themselves. All of these communication channels helped to increase the impact of communicating the social issue to audiences to a much greater level than purely written rhetoric could have done.

### **Analysis**

The lead author's performance project showed how *Nautanki* and other performance forms are important communication channels that can be used to bring concerns of marginalized communities into the mainstream culture as well as communicate messages effectively through community engagement and participation.

*Nautanki* performances belong to a participatory paradigm of communication, which make them a powerful communication tool. One of the most important reasons for *Nautanki's* strong effect on its audiences lies in the participatory control that resides with audiences over the performance process. CounterPULSE's support system for the Performing Diaspora artists created community interaction that mirrored the kind of community participation that makes

*Nautanki* an effective tool for communication and social change in rural north India.

During traditional *Nautanki* performances in rural India, audiences have a say in deciding the particular performance they wish to see. For instance, they may demand songs or comedy in the midst of a *Nautanki* performance and give rewards to their favorite performers, deriving a sense of pride as patrons when their name is announced on the stage. This participation makes *Nautanki* audiences an integral part of the performance, engaging them to a level where they pay careful attention to the messages.

With a modern twist, CounterPULSE utilized modern technology to provide a platform for audience interaction with the performers. Even while the lead author was in India, he wrote about the development of “Mission Suhani” on the CounterPULSE blog, which was open to public commentary. Through the four-month process of preparing the *Nautanki* for Performing Diaspora, the lead author wrote three blogs including both visual imagery and text to describe and share the process of working on “Mission Suhani” with readers who represented the audiences in California. The lead author also participated in a live panel interview by CounterPULSE called “TALKS! From India to the Bay Area” where he discussed the *Nautanki* art form with a live audience and answered audience members' questions. The lead author also participated in an individual interview which was posted on YouTube in which he discussed the “Mission Suhani” *Nautanki* piece more specifically. CounterPULSE maintained an individual web page for each of the thirteen artists with each of the artist's blogs, interviews, and video recordings of the two Work-in-Progress showings, which people could view and access from anywhere around the world.

The Work-in-Progress showings, in which the lead author received direct feedback from audiences, were particularly helpful in providing the interaction and dialogue between artists and

audience members that makes *Nautanki* performances such an effective tool for communication. The lead author's field experiences in India showed that audiences' participation in social events such as *Nautanki* not only enhanced the degree of message reception but also strengthened audiences members' perception of belonging to an emotional and cultural community. By having a say in its proceedings, they perceived the *Nautanki* as their event—*for* them and *by* them (Sharma, 2006). Similarly, CounterPULSE's unique efforts to involve public audiences in the creation process of the author's *Nautanki* resulted in a final performance that effectively catered to the audiences' tastes and sensibilities and also became a more effective tool for communication.

One might think that the discussion and participation by community members prior to the performances could take away from the entertaining aspect and effectiveness of the final performances; however, the lead author's research with *Nautanki* in the past revealed that watching a *Nautanki* over and over again did not bore audiences in the least. On the contrary, audiences they enjoyed watching their familiar characters such as the *joker* (clown) on the stage again and again (Sharma, 2006). Thus, the Work-in-Progress showings and the lead author's discussions about the piece helped to create interest and community involvement in the shows rather than taking away from the audience members' experience of the final performance.

There are many reasons that support why the entertaining nature of *Nautanki* performance form makes it so effective in communicating messages and spurring interpersonal communication. One of these reasons was brought up during the discussion of Bakhtin's theory, which emphasized the ability of community performance to raise issues in an entertaining and non-threatening way. This point was supported by the lead author's research in India during a *Nautanki* performance about social issues.

During the performance, the lead author noticed that some people did not even realize that there was a social change communication going on, and thought of the performance simply as entertainment. However, during conversations with audience members, it became apparent that audiences were concerned about the social problems featured in the performance, such as dowry. After watching the performance, many were motivated to discuss the plot, to see parallels in their life, and to do something to solve these problems. This subtle effect of *Nautanki*, which makes people aware of the social problems around them subconsciously, suggests that messages provided through *Nautanki* come to people not as *imposed* but *naturally*. Using Foss and Griffin's (1995) terminology, performance can be viewed as an "invitational rhetoric" that encourages the exploration of other rhetorics that do not involve the singular interactional goal of persuasion. In addition, since performances like *Nautanki* are less rigid compared to literal text, being inherently improvisational in nature, they provide more space for its participants—both performers and audience members—to derive multiple expressions and interpretations (Barba, 2000).

Another value of performance as communication is the "real" nature of a performance, which leads to a greater effect in audiences. In a *Nautanki* performance, audiences can see *real* people as opposed to the abstract, *imagined* people in written text. Thus, a *Nautanki* like "Mission Suhani" was able to create an effect that was life-like and stronger by embodying the issue with real people. Audiences could directly relate to disempowered women in India whose husbands had abandoned them by seeing Chaliya's behavior and feeling Suhani's emotions. For instance, audience members cheered during the performance when Suhani got her dowry money back from Chaliya and told him she was leaving him for Devesh, the man who really cared for her. Audience members also said after the shows that they cried during scenes when they saw

and felt Suhani's plight. Knowing or seeing somebody personally who has a specific experience makes the issue feel more real than reading about the issue as happening to people outside of one's realm of direct experience. By being a form of primary rather than secondary knowledge, performances are an effective tool for communicating messages.

In addition, participative community performances are more effective in communicating social issues to diverse audiences because they are more inclusive than text-based forms of knowledge (discussed in the section on Conqergood's work), as they do not require literacy. *Nautanki*'s effect in impacting audiences is so much stronger because it invites people to involve all of their senses (auditory, sight, smell, etc.) in the performative process. If *Nautanki* performances were solely about the script or the text, then the majority of the audience watching "Mission Suhani," who could only understand English, would have been bored for the majority of the performance, as most of the script was in Hindi. In fact, during the very first Work-in-Progress showing of "Mission Suhani," audience members commented that they thoroughly enjoyed watching the performance, even though they could not understand a single word, since the entire script was in Hindi at that point. However, *Nautanki* is just as much about the script as it is about the performance: acting and singing the story and stimulating the senses to engage the audience in the strongest physical sense leads audience members to engage their minds in turn.

### **Conclusion**

Through his original *Nautanki* performance for CounterPULSE, the lead author tried to bridge the gap between India and America and build an avenue from tradition to modernity. Though field experiences in India, the lead author realized that while *Nautanki* is not dying, the older form of *Nautanki* is. Like a mother gives birth to her child, a new form of *Nautanki* is

coming out of the old *Nautanki*. As Bakhtin (1984) points out, this transformation of *Nautanki* is natural. As Bakhtin claims, folk forms are reflections of their community's situation and changing tastes. In India, the traditional form of *Nautanki*, which was mostly operatic, is being replaced with a newer form of *Nautanki* that has an equal emphasis on singing and dancing, following the demand of contemporary times. In India, this change is full of complications. The older *Nautanki* artists complain that dances in *Nautanki* are becoming too vulgar for them to watch. According to them, these dances are killing *Nautanki* as a community entertainment form because families can no longer watch them together. On the other hand, people in the younger generation say that they enjoy these spicy dances. For them, dancers are the star attractions of *Nautanki*. In the contemporary, vastly varied, media atmosphere, spicy dances can be assets to *Nautanki*, helping it to retain its popularity. *Nautanki*, like any other indigenous folk form, has to make some changes to keep up with changing times.

Just as with any traditional art form, a fine balance must be reached in order to retain tradition while adapting to change. The lead author attempted to strike this balance with the *Nautanki* for CounterPULSE. The lead author tried to adapt *Nautanki* to a global, contemporary audience without taking away from the traditional operatic and artistic elements of *Nautanki* by creating a bilingual script and incorporating a contemporary issue affecting the Indian diaspora in the U.S.

As Conquergood discusses the contrast of elite and subjugated forms of knowledge, *Nautanki*, as an indigenous operatic folk performance tradition, is part of the subjugated forms of knowledge. In post-colonial times, folk performance traditions have not been given their due respect in India, and are associated with the illiterate and poor. In addition to *Nautanki*'s internal problems regarding tradition and change, the folk form faces a lack of support from cultural

elites in India and the Indian government. Furthermore, as those who are involved in *Nautanki* are not educated and remain simple-minded rural folks, they cannot argue their case in “enlightened” powerful elite circles. Hence, there is a need for those involved in *Nautanki* to obtain an education and also learn to speak in the language of the elites, i.e. English, so that they can raise their voices and be heard. Through many of the lead author's *Nautanki* performances, including those for CounterPULSE, the lead author has made an effort to use education and scholarship to expose *Nautanki* to global audiences and renew the traditional *Nautanki* form into one which communicates contemporary messages to a diverse, modern audience. The lead author thus attempts to help indigenous folk forms achieve their due place in the modern global society and strengthen community while breaking the *textocentric* paradigm of communication.

Indigenous art such as *Nautanki* is not important for its own sake. It is important because it brings people together and gives them an opportunity to engage with the art form, with each other, and with their cultural roots. It is not the performers but the community bond between people that makes *Nautanki* appealing. A *Nautanki* performance is a process and a space that represents *collectivity*. Without collectivity, a *Nautanki* performance loses its effect, however good the performance might be. The lead author's *Nautanki* performance at CounterPULSE was largely successful due to the collective nature of its creation. Through “Mission Suhani,” the lead author has worked to preserve, maintain, and enhance a more participative, community-centered paradigm of communication.

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