



Echoes from the Margins: The Decline and Marginalization of Folk Theatre in Contemporary Indian Literary and Cultural Narratives

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ABSTRACT

Haryanvi folk theatre, specifically the forms of Ragini and Saang, faces profound decline and marginalization in contemporary Indian culture. This paper examines the origins and distinct characteristics of these art forms, tracing their historical role as vital modes of community communication and ethical instruction. It analyzes the complex interplay of factors contributing to their decline, including modernization, the dominance of digital media, and shifting cultural tastes. The study critically evaluates current preservation initiatives and contemporary representations of these forms in modern cultural narratives. Finally, this paper proposes a multi-pronged strategy for their sustainable revival, arguing for a balanced approach that integrates traditional art forms with 21st-century realities.

KEY WORDS

Haryanvi Folk Theatre, Ragini and Saangs, Cultural Decline, Marginalization, Traditional Indian Theatre, Cultural Preservation.

INTRODUCTION

Indian folk theatre, a composite art form fusing music, dance, and visuals, is deeply embedded in the nation's social fabric (Das, 2013). Evolving from ancient rituals, it has long served as a powerful, interactive tool for propagating social, political, and cultural awareness. Its participatory nature, which fostered community involvement, contrasts sharply with passive modern entertainment, highlighting a significant shift in cultural consumption.

Within this context, Haryanvi Ragini (a lyrical folk song) and Saang (a folk dance-theatre) are defining cultural markers of Haryana (Attri, 2023).

The forms are intrinsically linked: a Saang is incomplete without a Ragini, though Ragini can be performed independently (Kumar, n.d.). Their symbiotic relationship creates a distinctive “folk opera” character (AIIRJournal.com, 2023; Attri, 2023).

This paper argues the decline of Haryanvi Ragini and Saangs stems from a complex interplay of socio-economic shifts, technological advancements, and changing cultural consumption patterns. These factors have marginalized them in contemporary narratives, undermining their historical significance and challenging preservation efforts.

Haryanvi Ragini and Saangs

Defining Ragini: Lyrical Storytelling, Themes, and Performance Context

Ragini is a traditional Haryanvi folk music genre characterized by lyrical storytelling and poetic expressions, conveying tales of heroism, love, social issues, and historical narratives (RecentMusic.com, 2025). Performances often take a competitive singing format, accompanied by regional instruments like harmonium, dholak, and matka (TLHJournal.com, n.d.). Traditionally transmitted orally in local dialects with Hindi elements, Ragini’s thematic scope includes mythology, socio-political issues, education, women’s empowerment, social awareness, and nationalism (TLHJournal.com, n.d.). It plays a critical role in preserving linguistic heritage and folklore, acting as a living archive (Anjali & Suchitra, 2024; MDU.ac.in, 2017; RecentMusic.com, 2025). Its adaptability to address contemporary concerns like alcoholism and dowry underscores its potential as a dynamic tool for social commentary and moral education (Anahad.ngo, 2025; SDCollegeAmbala.ac.in, n.d.).

Defining Saang: Dance-Theatre Form, Characteristics, and Thematic Diversity

Saang, or Swang, is a popular folk dance-theatre and storytelling style across Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh, signifying “imitation” or “disguise” (Arya, 2023). It is primarily dialogue-oriented, incorporating theatrics, mimicry (naqal), song, and spoken word (AIIRJournal.com, 2023). Performances involve 10-12 individuals in open-air settings on minimalistic wooden platforms, with audiences seated around (AIIRJournal.com, 2023). Performers deliver lines in a high pitch, traditionally without microphones (AIIRJournal.com, 2023).

A distinctive feature is the traditional practice of male actors performing all roles, including female characters, which adds humor (AIIRJournal.com, 2023). This originated from historical bans on women in public performances, such as during Aurangzeb’s Mughal era (AIIRJournal.com, 2023). Thematic diversity is extensive, drawing from morality, folk tales, inspiring personalities, Indian mythology, and contemporary social issues like health, literacy, and women’s empowerment (AIIRJournal.com, 2023; IJIRAS.com, 2020). Dramas typically conclude with the victory of good over evil (AIIRJournal.com, 2023; IJIRAS.com, 2020).

The Interconnectedness of Ragini and Saang

Ragini and Saang share a profound and intricate relationship, leading many to call Saang a “folk opera” or “musical theatre” (AIIRJournal.com, 2023; Attri, 2023; TLHJournal.com, n.d.). Historically, Ragini was integral to Saang, providing the lyrical and musical backbone (Attri, 2023; TLHJournal.com, n.d.). Ragini’s long narrative poems were the “main attraction” of Saangs (IJIRAS.com, 2020). However, Ragini evolved to be performed independently and eventually competed with Saang, fragmenting audiences (TLHJournal.com, n.d.). This internal dynamic contributed to the overall decline of both forms, making them more vulnerable to external pressures.

Historical Evolution and Prominent Figures

Saang is considered one of India’s most ancient folk theatre forms, though its precise origin is debated, with theories ranging from a 13th-century origin with poet Shadullah to the current style founded by Kishan Lal Bhaat two hundred years ago (AIIRJournal.com, 2023; IJIRAS.com, 2020).

Haryana has produced numerous influential figures. Deep Chand Bahman is celebrated as the “Kalidas of Haryana” for his refined style, while Pandit Lakhmi Chand, the ‘Surya Kavi’ (Sun Poet), is revered for

infusing Saangs with moral messages (Dpublication.com, 2023; IJMIRM.com, n.d.). His work endures, inspiring the 2022 film “Dada Lakhmi.” Other key figures like Ali Bux, Baje Bhagat, and Pt. Ramkishan Vyas cemented the art form; their works are now slated for university curricula (AIIRJournal.com, 2023; Dpublication.com, 2023). The legacy of these artists underscores their profound impact on Haryana’s cultural memory.

Cultural and Ethical Significance

Haryanvi Ragini and Saangs are powerful conduits for transmitting cultural knowledge, beliefs, and ethics (Attri, 2023). Rooted in “folk knowledge,” they convey Dharma (righteousness) and Karma (action). Lakhmichand’s Saang of *Raja Harishchander*, for instance, provides a model of ethical conduct, illustrating values of justice, sacrifice, and contentment (Attri, 2023).

Beyond entertainment, Saangs “mend and entertain,” imparting social wisdom and moral virtues (GargiCollege.in, n.d.; IJRAS.com, 2020). This deep moral didacticism highlights their historical role as informal educational institutions. Their decline, therefore, represents not just the loss of an art form but the weakening of a traditional mechanism for moral instruction, value transmission, and community self-reflection, creating a potential cultural void (Odisha.gov.in, 2006).

The Ebbing Tides: Factors Contributing to Decline and Marginalization

Impact of Modernization, Mechanization, and Urbanization

The decline of traditional folk arts, including Haryanvi Ragini and Saangs, is significantly influenced by modernization, mechanization, and urbanization. The shift to industrial and digital economies altered the symbiotic relationship between humans, nature, and animals, often central to folk performances. For instance, tractors displaced bulls in agriculture, impacting art forms linked to agrarian life. This systemic disruption of socio-economic and ecological foundations has eroded the context for folk theater. Urbanization has driven rural artists to urban centers for livelihoods, causing them to abandon traditions and community spaces (IJIRT.org, 2025). Physical exhaustion and urban demands lead to shifts in performance style or abandonment, disconnecting art from its original significance (IJIRT.org, 2025).

The Rise of Electronic and Digital Media: Shifting Audience Preferences

The popularization of electronic media (radio, television, VCRs) and digital platforms (social media) has profoundly diminished audience loyalty towards traditional folk plays (IJIRT.org, 2025; IJRAS.com, 2020; Odisha.gov.in, 2006; Tribuneindia.com, 2018). Modern entertainment overshadows traditional performances, diverting public attention (IJIRT.org, 2025). Digital media transforms traditional festivals into “performative events” for display rather than devotion, reshaping cultural values (IJIRT.org, 2025). Modern entertainment, often focused on “sensuous pleasure” and “overdoses of sex and violence,” contrasts with folk drama’s educational and moral purposes (Odisha.gov.in, 2006). This dominance leads to decreased demand for live, locally rooted performances, contributing to cultural homogenization (Odisha.gov.in, 2006).

Loss of Traditional Patronage and Economic Challenges for Artists

Historically, folk theatre troupes thrived on royal patronage from kings and zamindars, which provided moral and financial incentives (Odisha.gov.in, 2006). With the abolition of these systems, professional troupes languished, many “at the verge of extinction” (Odisha.gov.in, 2006). This loss resulted in dwindling paid opportunities and severe economic struggles for practitioners (IJIRT.org, 2025; InsightsOnIndia.com, 2025). Lack of financial stability compels artists to seek alternative employment, leading to a significant loss of skilled performers and disruption in intergenerational knowledge transmission (IJIRT.org, 2025; InsightsOnIndia.com, 2025). Artists seeking donations are sometimes stigmatized as beggars, further tarnishing the art’s prestige and discouraging younger generations (IJIRT.org, 2025).

Weakening Transmission Mechanisms and Institutional Support Gaps

Traditional methods of passing down folk art forms are weakening, resulting in a significant loss of invaluable knowledge and skills (InsightsOnIndia.com, 2025). Despite Governmental and academic initiatives, there remains a pervasive “lack of institutional support” (InsightsOnIndia.com, 2025; Odisha.gov.in, 2006). This is compounded by negative attitudes from some “ultra modernists in bureaucracy” who view folk theatre as archaic (Odisha.gov.in, 2006). Institutions like the Dada Lakhmi Chand State University of Performing and Visual Arts (DLC SUPVA) have faced prolonged academic delays and infrastructural deficiencies, hindering effective cultural education and preservation efforts. These operational shortcomings indicate a disconnect between policy and effective implementation, failing to counter systemic challenges.

Contemporary Narratives: Representation and Challenges in Modern India

How Haryanvi Folk Theatre Is Portrayed (or Absent) in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Discourse

Haryanvi folk theatre finds various forms of representation in contemporary Indian discourse. Modern theatre adopts folk elements in scenic design and language (GargiCollege.in, n.d.; IJARIE.com, n.d.). Plays like Girish Karnad’s *Hayavadana* and *Nagamandala* successfully fuse folk forms and content (Gargi College, n.d.). Folk forms are also repurposed for social campaigns (health, family planning, anti-dowry) (Gargi College, n.d.). This adaptive resilience raises questions about preserving authenticity versus utility in new contexts.

Significantly, the marginalization is so profound that it is reflected in its near-total absence from contemporary Haryanvi literature. While cinema and digital platforms engage with the folk past, the region’s novelists and poets have largely remained silent. This literary silence reinforces the art’s cultural isolation, proving it has truly become an ‘echo from the margins’.

Haryanvi cinema is emerging as a significant platform. Films like “Dada Lakhmi” (2022), portraying Pt. Lakhmi Chand’s life, have won national awards and sparked global conversations on regional identity (Yadav, 2025). Digital platforms like ‘Stage’ focus on Haryanvi content, including films, folk music, and Nukkad Nataks (street plays), aiming to create a dedicated “cultural space” for regional languages and challenge negative perceptions of Haryanvi (Yadav, 2025).

Challenges in Sustaining Authenticity Amidst Modern Adaptations

While modern adaptations offer visibility, they challenge authenticity. Mainstream Bollywood’s portrayal of folk arts has been “disappointing and unfulfilling” (TheAligarhwala.substack.com, n.d.). Digital platforms, while offering reach, can lead to traditions being showcased “more for display than devotion” (IJIRT.org, 2025). This shift from organic community ritual to performance for an audience reshapes cultural values, potentially diluting or commercializing the art form (IJIRT.org, 2025). This paradox means tools for revival can simultaneously threaten authenticity, risking transformation into superficial commodities and eroding deep-rooted significance (IJIRT.org, 2025).

The Role of Haryanvi Cinema and Digital Platforms

Haryanvi cinema and digital platforms present a double-edged sword. Haryanvi films gain recognition at international festivals and national awards (“Dada Lakhmi”) (Yadav, 2025). Platforms like ‘Stage’ offer global outreach and commercial potential for Haryanvi content, fostering regional pride and countering negative perceptions (Yadav, 2025).

However, the nascent Haryanvi film industry faces internal challenges: lack of professionalism, unpaid actors, and a shortage of skilled artists and technicians (Yadav, 2025). While digitalization offers immense potential, these infrastructural and ethical shortcomings can undermine genuine promotion and preservation. The risk of “cultural disconnect” remains if quick commercial gains are prioritized over meticulous development and authentic representation (Yadav, 2025).

Reclaiming the Stage: Preservation and Revival Initiatives

Governmental Policies and Schemes

Governments have initiated policies to preserve traditional arts. The Haryana Government established the Dada Lakhmi Chand State University of Performing and Visual Arts (DLC SUPVA) in Rohtak in 2014 (DLCSUPVA.ac.in, n.d). While offering broad arts programs, explicit curriculum for Haryanvi folk theatre is not detailed (DLCSUPVA.ac.in, n.d.). The university has also faced academic delays and infrastructural deficiencies (Wikipedia, 2025).

More direct measures include the Pandit Lakhmi Chand Kalakar Samajik Samman Yojana (May 2025), providing a monthly honorarium of Rs. 10,000 to senior artists (Notopedia.com, 2025). Kurukshetra University offers Rs 2 lakh to four selected Saang teams annually, with Rs 25,000 per performance (The Tribune, 2018). The Sangeet Natak Akademi's Folk and Tribal Section organizes festivals ('Desaj,' 'Lok Jan Pratha Utsav') and a "Training and Preservation" scheme (SangeetNatak.gov.in, 2025). While providing crucial financial support, academic delays and curriculum gaps suggest these efforts may be insufficient without revitalizing contemporary relevance.

Academic and Institutional Contributions

Academic institutions increasingly contribute to preservation. Kurukshetra University's Department of Music & Dance promotes Haryanvi folk dance and produces PhD scholars (KUK.ac.in, n.d.). It organizes 'Ratnawali' cultural festivals featuring Ragini and Saang to promote Haryanvi folk culture among youth (KUK.ac.in, 2016; TimesofIndia.com, 2016). Maharishi Dayanand University (MDU) includes "Folk Music of Haryana" in its M.A. Music curriculum and researches Haryanvi folk songs (Anjali & Suchitra, 2024; MDU.ac.in, 2017). Pt. Ramkishan Vyas's autobiography and Raginis are slated for inclusion in both universities' curricula (Wikipedia, 2025). This integration into formal curricula provides academic rigor and a formal learning pathway but must be balanced with grassroots engagement to avoid detaching the art form from its community roots (Anahad.ngo, 2025; TLHJournal.com, n.d.).

Role of NGOs and Cultural Organizations

NGOs and local cultural organizations provide crucial grassroots support. Anahad NGO preserves Haryanvi folk music by supporting artists like Kirshan, who use traditional music to address contemporary social issues (alcoholism, dowry, education, and gender equality) and leverage technology for promotion (Anahad Foundation, 2025). Kurukshetra University's incentives for Saang teams also sustain performance groups (Tribuneindia.com, 2018). These grassroots efforts, combining traditional art with social messaging, offer an agile, community-responsive strategy that complements top-down policies.

Leveraging Digital Platforms and Cultural Tourism for Outreach

Digital platforms and cultural tourism offer new opportunities for outreach and revenue. Platforms like 'Stage,' for instance, provide dedicated Haryanvi spaces reaching millions (Yadav, 2025), while digital media disseminates cultural heritage (Anjali & Suchitra, 2024). Cultural tourism is also seen as a viable revival measure (InsightsOnIndia.com, 2025). However, this integration threatens authenticity. Digital tools, while offering reach, can reduce traditions to being "more for display than devotion" (IJIRT.org, 2025). The goal must be "digital preservation" that captures the "aura" of the original performance, not commercial exploitation that dilutes cultural significance (IJIRT.org, 2025; ResearchGate.net, n.d.). Balancing accessibility with authenticity is therefore crucial for sustainable revival.

Community-Led Efforts and the Importance of Intergenerational Transmission

Historically, Saangs were sustained by robust community support, with local contributions ("chamola" or "rasoi") often earmarked for social welfare (Tribuneindia.com, 2018). This model highlights the art's integral role in local social and economic life, suggesting genuine revival requires re-establishing community ownership beyond external grants. Fostering intergenerational transmission through informal channels, alongside formal

education, is critical for the art form to remain a living tradition (IJIRT.org, 2025). Artists like Kirshan emphasize the younger generation learning and continuing the art of their homeland (Anahad.ngo, 2025). This blend of informal and structured learning is essential for cultural continuity.

CONCLUSION

The analysis reveals that Haryanvi Ragini and Saangs, once integral to Haryana's cultural and social fabric, face profound decline. These art forms were not just entertainment but crucial communication tools and identity markers, acting as informal educational institutions that transmitted ethical values and community wisdom.

This decline is multifaceted, stemming from the systemic disruption of modernization, the shift in audience preferences due to digital media, economic precarity from lost patronage, and gaps in institutional support. This marginalization represents a significant loss of unique linguistic heritage, oral traditions, and community cohesion. The paradox of new media offering outreach while risking dilution further complicates preservation. Concerted efforts are urgently needed to prevent these forms from becoming mere relics (IJIRT.org, 2025).

For sustainable revival, a multi-pronged approach is essential:

- (1) **Holistic Policy Frameworks** integrating financial and infrastructural support;
- (2) **Curriculum Integration** in formal education, balanced with informal *guru-shishya* programs;
- (3) **Strategic Digital Engagement** that prioritizes authenticity over commercialization;
- (4) **Community Empowerment** to revive local patronage;
- (5) **Cross-Cultural Collaboration** between traditional and contemporary artists; and
- (6) **Enhanced Research** for a robust knowledge base.

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