

A STUDY OF SINHTOO DANCE OF SIRMOUR DISTRICT OF HIMACHAL PRADESH: FROM ITS HISTORY, EXTINCTION TO REVIVAL

JOGINDER SINGH HABBI

Director, Habbi Maan Singh Kala Kendra, Sirmour, Himachal Pradesh

Abstract: The hilly state of Himachal has a priceless treasure of cultural heritage within itself. Here, the divine culture is unique and the folk music and folk dance have a deep connection with the divine culture. Apart from Natti, Mask dance is also associated with divine culture. There are many such dance traditions in a particular region which are associated with the dev sanskriti. One of these traditions is Sinhtoo dance of district Sirmour. This dance was performed on special festivals in the courtyard of the deity's temple or at a place marked by the deity. Gradually, this dance became extinct in the era of modernity and became limited to only one or two temples. One reason for this is that the youth are not interested in traditional dances. To revive this dance, it was necessary to bring it before the common people. With this purpose, this dance was made attractive and presented in a refined form to the audience at various places in the state and country through hundreds of stage presentations, as a result of which the extinct Sinhtoo dance has today become popular as a traditional dance in the entire state.

Keywords: Sinhtoo Dance, Sirmour

INTRODUCTION

Himachal Pradesh is the land of Gods and Goddesses. Divine traditions are very rich here. Folk dances and folk dramas have a special place in the festivals here. If we talk about the relation of folk music with Dev paramparas, Devtalas and Loktalas are important in this context, but apart from this, Mala dance, Rasa dance and folk drama Kariyala are also performed in various Dev festivals. There are dance traditions at many places during divine functions like *Shand*, *Jagra*, *Devthan*, *Diwali*, *Ekadashi* etc. The Guras of many deities even dance on the Loktalas. Folk dramas are especially related to Diwali and Ekadashi and in the dev paramparas of the hills, both the festivals of Diwali and Ekadashi are considered to be special Dev festivals. An ancient folk dance related to these divine festivals is Sinhtoo, which was performed during the day time on these festivals and many people also considered Sinhtoo as the farce (*swang*) of the day.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Anand (1982) studied folk music widely in his book Folk Music of Himachal Pradesh. In this book he has included folk music of different regions of Himachal Pradesh. Saraik (2006) have wrote a book named Sintoos in which he discussed about Sinhtoo Dance broadly. Kumari and Puman (2016) studied the folk culture of Himachal Pradesh: Some traditional dance, music performance of Bilaspur. In this study folk culture, traditional songs of Himachal Pradesh has been described. Sharma (2022) conducted the study on the vibrant culture of Himachal Pradesh. The study aimed to enhance our understanding of the culture and traditions of Himachal Pradesh and to highlight the unique aspects of the culture of this beautiful land to the world. The study has discussed about customs and manners; fairs and festivals; art and architecture; folk dance, folk drama, folk music, musical instruments. In this study some dances of Himachal Pradesh has been included. Freger (2023) have discussed about Sinhtoo Dance in his book 'Aam Aastha Indian Devotions. Tomar (2023) did a study on musical elements in Himachali folk music. The study described the folk

music, vocal arrangement, swara vyaavstha, rythem and rhythm arrangement, alaap paksh, swara samvad and raga chhaya.

Different studies have been carried out on the folk culture, folk dance and folk music of Himachal Pradesh but Sinhtoo dance of Sirmour district is untouched aspect of the culture of Himachal Pradesh and a lot of work needs to be done on these types of extinct dance forms.

SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

Sinhtoo dance is a folk dance which is becoming extinct. If we talk about 4-5 decades ago, this dance was performed in many temples, but today this dance is limited to only one or two temples. Although even today Sinhtoo dance is seen occasionally, today's youth is not aware of this dance form. Therefore, through this research, future generations and researchers will get unknown facts and detailed information related to Sinhtoo dance and this dance form will also get recognition through research, which will prove beneficial for its conservation.

MEANING OF SINHTOO

In Pahari dialect, a lion cub is called Sinhtoo. Shiva and Shakti are mostly worshiped in various forms in Mahasu area. On the basis of religious beliefs, lion is considered as a *vahan* of Maa Durga. This dance related to Dev tradition has been named Sinhtoo and the mask of lion is prominent in it.

SINHTOO: A MASK DANCE

On the festivals like Diwali and Ekadashi, various folk dramas were presented in which masks of different animals and men were used. For example, lion masks were used in *Sadh ka swang* and *Mhrhete* (men's mask) were used in various mimes. In different districts of Himachal Pradesh, there are different mask dances related to Dev traditions like - Fagli dance performed on the occasion of Fagli festival in Kullu district, *Madhale* dance in Mandi district, *Shanak Chham* dance in Lahaul Spiti. Similarly in Sirmour district, Sinhtoo dance is a mask dance related to Dev tradition in which the dance is performed wearing animal masks made of wood, sawdust and kidney beans' dough. In this dance, in ancient times, sheep's wool *pattu* and bark of tree branches were used for the costumes along with the masks, which the artists used to cover the rest of the body except the mask. With the passage of time, it was replaced by woolen dresses and dresses made by torn pieces of clothes.

SINHTOO DANCE ON SPECIAL FESTIVALS

Sinhtoo dance is performed in the mythological festival of *Diwali*, *Bhaiya Dooj* and *Ekadashi*. The night of *Govardhan Pooja* is celebrated here as the festival of *Padevi*. At night, Kariyala is organized in the name of the deity in the temple courtyard or at a place marked by the deity in the middle of the village. A *Ghena* is fired at the venue of the event, with the worship of which Kariyala begins and folk dramas are presented throughout the night. Sinhtoo dance is performed the next day. Similarly, during the festival of Ekadashi, the deities come from the big temple (*Thadot*) to the small temple (*Mod*) and along with this, *Jagra* i.e. *Bhandara* in the name of the deity is given in many villages. On the last day of this festival which lasts for three to four days, *Jagra* is held in

the village where the temple of the deity is located. On this night too, farces are performed and the next day the deities return from the small temple to the big temple. On this day, at least one person from all the houses in the area under the control of the deity reaches the deity with an offering to seek blessings. Sinhtoo dance is performed on this occasion. During the Sinhtoo dance, women and villagers put walnuts and new grains in the mouth of the masks of Sinhtoo, considering it to be the vahan of the goddess. This dance is performed with musical instruments like *Dhol*, *Nagada*, *Karnal* and *Shehnai* etc. Along with the Sinhtoo dance, the deities also move from small temple to a big temple.

INSPIRATION FOR MAKING THE MASKS OF SINHTOO DANCE

During the study on Sinhtoo dance, it was found that in ancient times, to make its masks, the artisans were inspired by wooden carvings done in temples, pictures of wild animals on the walls of temples, lion-headed corners of the roof and the lion-headed; cow-headed wooden water taps. Examples of this can be seen in temples like Shadi, Gajedi, Devathi, Guthan, Sharmala, Bageshwari etc.

CONSTRUCTION STYLE

Traditionally, masks were made of three types: wooden masks, masks made from sawdust and masks made from kidney beans' flour.

Wooden Masks:- Woodwork has had special importance in the ancient temples and building construction style of Himachal Pradesh, which is still intact today. The artisans here have carved pictures of various gods, goddesses and wild animals on wood in the temples. Similarly, the masks used in Sinhtoo dance are also made of wood. The specialty of these masks is that each mask is made from a single piece and for this the use of light weight wood is preferred. In ancient times, rhododendron wood was used for this.

Masks made of wooden sawdust:- The second style of masks are those made from sawdust. In ancient times, these types of masks were also used in folk dramas. These masks were made by mixing kidney beans' flour in wooden sawdust. These types of masks are also lighter in weight than wooden masks, however, at present, instead of kidney beans' flour, these types of masks are being made by mixing glue with sawdust.

Kidney beans' flour masks:- Kidney beans' flour is called *mashithi* in the local dialect. Just as today cement is used for masonry during the construction of buildings, in the same way *mashithi* was also used. As evidence of which there are palaces of many kings even today can be seen. *Mashithi* was also used for making masks. Masks made of *mashithi* were used in many folk dramas and Sinhtoo.

TYPES OF MASKS

Masks of many types of wild animals are used in Sinhtoo, however, as the name of Sinhtoo suggests, Sinhtoo is derived from the word '*Sinh*' and in the local dialect, *Sinh* is called a cub of a lion. The lion mask is prominent in this dance. Apart from this, this dance is performed wearing masks of wild animals like bear, orangutan, deer, monkey, birds, men, women etc.

SINHTOO ARTISANS

Sinhtoo masks were mostly made by the same artisans who traditionally carved wood for building and temple construction. In ancient times, Sinhtoo dance was associated with many temples; hence its artisans were easily available. Gradually, the Sinhtoo dance became extinct and the demand for masks decreased, as a result the artisans lost interest in making masks and their skills also decreased.

Mr. Jamnu Ram:- Mr. Jamnu Ram belongs to Tharu village of Sirmaur district. He is a local artisan who do masonry and wood work for building construction. The lion mask of Sinhtoo dance made by him has been preserved in the Himachal Pradesh State Museum, Shimla. Apart from this, the researcher got different masks made from them, some of which are preserved in Sirmaur Culture Museum, Trilokpur, Sirmaur.

Mr. Gopal Singh Habbi:- Mr. Gopal Singh Habbi is a young folk artist of Sirmaur district. He has been awarded the Ustad Bismillah Khan Yuva Award- 2017 by Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi for his excellent contribution in the field of mask making of Himachal Pradesh. He has prepared masks made of wood and sawdust for the Sinhtoo dance. Apart from this, he uses to make masks used in Dargali dance and folk dramas also.

Apart from this, the researcher has also made the masks of Sinhtoo himself by modifying the masks used in the dance of Sinhtoo.

REVIVAL AND PRESENT FORM OF EXTINCT SINHTOO DANCE

Sinhtoo dance had become extinct and in the study it was found that this dance tradition was associated with various temples of Sirmaur and Shimla district. Today the Sinhtoo dance is performed only in the courtyard of the temple of the deity located in Leu Kufar village of Sirmaur district. These masks are kept in a temple in Matlodi village located between Leu and Kufar villages and are taken out only twice a year for dance.

The researcher made efforts for the conservation and promotion of this extinct dance and Padmashree Vidyanand Saraik, Late Shri Jashram Thakur and Late Shri Hariram along with the researcher prayed the concerned village deity to revive this dance and to present a modified form of this dance. He took permission to prepare and present it to the public. After that, he went to various temples of Shimla and Sirmaur districts to collect evidences and information in the context of Sinhtoo dance. After that, masks were made for this dance and costumes were made for it. In the modified form of Sinhtoo dance, special care was taken that its masks and costumes should be made in traditional style.

In order to prepare masks of Sinhtoo dance, the making of wooden masks was done by Mr. Jamunram and the masks made of sawdust were prepared by the researcher himself. The costumes for this dance were made from bark of thin branches of Bihul tree; woolen and cotton threads. Miss. Saroj Kumari, Mrs. Seema Kumari, Mrs. Reena Kumari and Late Mr. Jashram Thakur worked with the researcher in dress making. In this, the researcher got the folk songs of this dance written by Padmashree Vidyanand Saraik.

As a result of this effort to revive Sinhtoo dance, today it has become a famous folk dance of Himachal Pradesh. Its presentations in many national level stages and international level festivals outside the state have been commendable. Sinhtoo dance has secured first place in the state level competition, first place in the national level competition and second place in the international level competition.

Sinhtoo dance indicates the dying divine traditions. It is also giving the message of protection of wild animals and environment very well. The dance which was limited to temples only is today being presented before the public in the state and outside the state as a result of the efforts of the researcher, Padmashree Vidyanand Saraik and other colleagues. Many cultural groups have started presenting this dance today.

CONCLUSION

When any dance form reaches the verge of extinction, it becomes necessary to make efforts for its conservation and promotion. As per the demands of the changing times, considering the need for minor modification in it, efforts should be made to revive it. But while making changes in it, it is necessary to remember traditional style so that the basic nature of the dance form does not get spoiled. Special steps have been taken to preserve and promote this dance form. Modified form of Sinhtoo dance has been brought out to wide range of public from small area. By making its masks and costumes in the traditional way, this dance form, which was limited to temples, was made widely popular.

REFERENCES

Freger, Charles (2023). Aam Aashtha Indian Devotions, Offset Printing Co. Ltd., China
Saraik, Vidya Nand (2006). Sintoo, Ministry of Tourism and Culture (Culture Department)

INTERVIEWS

Geeta Ram, Village Kuffar, Distt. Sirmour, H.P., August, 2020
Gopal Singh Habbi, Village Jalag, Distt. Sirmour, H.P., November, 2023
Hari Singh, Village Kunni Ser, Distt. Sirmour, H.P., August, 2020
Pyare Lal Sharma, Village Leu, Distt. Sirmour, H.P., May, 2018
Rikhi Ram, Village Kotla Bangi, Distt. Sirmour, H.P., July, 2021
Roop Ram Sharma, Village Jaghed, Distt. Sirmour, H.P., July, 2021
Vidya Nand Saraik, Village Devthi Majhgaon, Sirmour, H.P., November, 2023