

## ***Ekoham, Bahu Syam: The Divine Art of the One Becoming Many***

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In the vivid rural ambience of Shilpgram, Udaipur, a figure emerges dressed as Maharana Pratap-complete with a velvet tunic, a handcrafted spear, and a gaze that commands the bustling fair into a momentary silence. Days later, the same figure may appear near the Albert Hall in Jaipur, transformed into a wealthy Seth whose satirical wit draws belly laughs from a gathered circle. One moment, he is a terrifying manifestation of the Goddess Kali, tongue crimson with rage; the next, a bumbling village constable or a serene saint.

This is the *Bahurupiya* of Rajasthan-the impersonator or the "performer of many forms" and the term itself is derived from the Sanskrit words *Bahu* (many) and *Rupa* (form). For the *Bahurupiya*, life is not lived in a single skin, but in the dozens of identities and his theatrical brilliance entertains, educates, and occasionally unsettles their audiences. Their history is one of resilience; they were once the "living newspapers" of the desert, carrying news from one kingdom to another through satire.

While the art exists in many pockets as a living tapestry of myth, satire, and seer across India, it is also in the desert soil of Rajasthan that it found its most profound patronage, its most daring spies, and its most intricate mythology. Today, however, these performers are struggling to survive in an era where social media has replaced the village *Chaupals* & *Melas* as the primary stage of life.

### **The sacred and the secular: A syncretic legacy**

As a performing art, *Bahurupiya* art is thought to have originated from Indian drama tradition dating back to the Rig-Vedic dialogue

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mantras. *Natya Shastra* written by Bharat Muni is believed to be a key work on the subject of stagecraft and other vast range of subjects for playing a drama and explicit instructions for performers and writers. The *Bahurupiya* tradition is considered to follow the *Aangik* (Body Gestures), *Vaachik* (Voice and Speech) and *Aaharya* (Costumes and Props) Abhinaya concepts of the *Natya Shastra*.

The roots of the *Bahurupiya* Art in Rajasthan are inextricably linked to both the sacred and the secular. Most *Bahurupiyas* belong to the *Bhand* community (traditionally storytellers and jesters) and the community is split into two primary religious tapestries, yet they share a singular creative spirit. The state is home to a dwindling number of practitioners from both the pantheons. Hindu *Bahurupiyas* often trace their lineage to the *Brahm Sankalp* (the oath of Brahma), believing the Creator took many *Rups* (forms) to build the universe. This is further anchored in the *Avtarvaad* (doctrine of incarnations). The Shaivites believe Lord Shiva frequently descended on Earth in disguise to observe the plight of mortals or to catch a glimpse of the child-forms of Rama and Krishna. Similarly, the Vaishnavites look to the Mohini Avatar, where Lord Vishnu assumed the form of an enchantress to restore cosmic order. For the *Bahurupiya*, the act of transformation is a spiritual lineage. According to the *Upanishads*, the universe began with a divine desire: "*Ekoham, Bahu Syam*"-I am one and wish to become many. In this worldview, the *Bahurupiya's* *Rup Dharna* (assumption of form) is not a deception, but a tribute to the ultimate reality that the Almighty resides in every form.

In contrast, Muslim *Bahurupiyas* of Rajasthan- often belong to the *Mirasi* community, traditional genealogists and musicians who transitioned into the art of disguise. For the Muslim *Bahurupiyas*, the art finds its hero in Umar Ayyar, the legendary spy, equipped with a magical cloak and an arsenal of disguises, from the *Dastan-e-Amir Hamza*. He used mimicry and disguise to defeat the foes of the Prophet's uncle Amir Hamza. To these artists, disguise is an inheritance of wit and survival. This shared cultural history is most visible at the *Tala Mela*, held annually in the month of *Vaishakh* at Achrol to commemorate the *Urs* (death anniversary) of the Sufi saint Sheikh Burhan. Here they exchange stories and fables that blend

Islamic lore with local Rajasthani folklore. This dual heritage makes the *Bahurupiya* a rare, syncretic symbol of Rajasthani folk culture.

Historically, the *Bahurupiyas* were far more than mere entertainers. *Ain-i-Akbari* describes itinerant performers and mimics who entertained the public through disguise, imitation, and dramatic transformation, a tradition that closely resembles the *Bahurupiya* art form. In the context of Rajasthan, they were essential cogs in the machinery of the erstwhile princely state of Rajputana and under the patronage of the Kings, *Bahurupiyas* often served as the eyes and ears of the *Durbar*. Their preternatural skill to vanish into a character—be it a wandering mendicant, a merchant, a cobbler, an opium merchant, a sage or a common labourer—made them the perfect intelligence gatherers. In a land defined by shifting sands and shifting loyalties, the *Bahurupiya* was the ultimate spy, often navigating the delicate line between royal informant and folk hero.

### **The alchemy of the 'Vesh': Crafting the illusion**

The Rajasthani *Bahurupiya's* craft is a masterclass in indigenous sustainability. Long before the arrival of synthetic theatrical makeup, these artists turned to the commodities of their vicinity. The transformation, known as *Vesh Dharna*, begins with the earth colours including *Sona Geru* (golden ochre), *Multani Mitti* (Fuller's earth), *Hinglo* (cinnabar) and *Sindoor* (vermilion); and create skin tones that can withstand the harsh sun of Rajasthan. These performing artists treat the mixing of their pigments as a sacred act, often comparing the dispensing of water over mineral chunks called *Bodar*, to a ritual called *Jal Abhishek*; offering water to a *Shivalinga*.

Wigs, moustaches, and beards are meticulously crafted from the hair of camels, goats and humans; and are adhered to the skin using the sticky milk of the Banyan tree or natural gelatine, which allow the performer to leap and dance without losing his face. With the passage of time, the craft has evolved to include a variety of modern cosmetic products. Today, *Bahurupiyas* prevalently utilize polymers, plastic fibers, faux fur, and various synthetic materials to create their elaborate disguises.

The history of the *Bahurupiya* is punctuated by fables of incredible skill. The legends of their skill are the stuff of folklore.

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There is the tale of the *Bahurupiya* in Akbar's court who imitated a bull so perfectly that when a child threw a pebble at the hide, the fake attire pulsated exactly as a bull's skin would. Their repertoire is vast and includes icons of Hindu deities, Seths, Monkey Man, The Satirical Policeman, Doctor and Politicians. *Ardh-Narishwar* (Half-Man, Half-Woman), a particularly ingenious form of *Vesh* (attire) is the one in which the *Bahurupiya* splits his body vertically; one side represents the masculine power of Shiva, the other the feminine grace of Parvati. Through masterful pivot-work and voice modulation, a single artist performs a celestial dialogue, while the *Guru-Chela* involves a puppet "disciple" attached to the performer's chest. Similarly, the *Lat* (Noble Man) costume uses bamboo strips to create the illusion of a man sitting on a chair, while the performer is actually standing-a feat of physical endurance disguised as leisure. Even contemporary icons like Charlie Chaplin, Michael Jackson, film actors from the Indian film industry have entered the fold and keeping the craft relevant for modern audiences.

The message from Padma Shri recipient Janki Lal Bhand, the great practitioner of *Bahurupiya* art, serves as a warning for us. He says-when there are fewer people left who understand and appreciate art, how can its value survive? The 82-year-old artist hailing from Chittorgarh has kept the *Bahurupiya* tradition alive in Bhilwara for over 65 years. He not only performed but also preserved forms like *Gadolia Lohar*, Fakir, Monkey-Man, *Guru Chela*, and Hanuman.

But today, due to inadequate support and respect, the younger generation is moving away from this tradition. Once, this art supported many families; now the same tradition stands on the brink of extinction. Despite receiving national honors like the Padma Shri and international recognition, no one in his own family is willing to carry forward this heritage. This is not just one artist's pain, but a question about the future of our cultural legacy. We all need to come together to protect such folk arts, provide them platforms, and connect future generations to them. Because when art dies, we lose not just a tradition, but a part of our identity.

#### **From spying to satire: A modern crisis of identity**

As the age of Maharajas faded, the *Bahurupiya* transitioned

into a social and political critic. In the *Chaupals* of rural Rajasthan, they began to satirize the social and political lacunas of the day. They became the social satirists using mimicry to poke fun at corrupt officials, orthodox rituals, and the changing social mores of post-independence India. However, the 21st century has brought a different kind of challenge. The digital screens and now the ubiquitous internet have marginalized the support available from the public and this stigma is driving the younger generation of these traditional street performers to the fringes. For them, the meagre earnings from performances are no longer enough to sustain a family. Many have traded their greasepaint for daily wage labor, leaving the art to a dwindling number of elders.

#### **Digital metamorphosis: Adapting to the global gaze**

Resilience, however, is a Rajasthani trait, thus the *Behrupiya* tradition remains anchored in ancestral strongholds like Bandikui, Thana Ghazi, Sikar and Achrol, where historical ties to espionage have transitioned into modern cultural revival and festival performances. The traditional mythological characters are being joined by new icons and in the streets of Jaipur, in the fairs of Pushkar or other parts of Rajasthan, one might see a *Bahurupiya* dressed as Charlie Chaplin, Michael Jackson, or even a modern doctor, catering to the changing tastes of tourists and locals alike.

But as performers from the community point out, the government cannot be the only answer; there must be a cultural reawakening among the populace to recognize the *Bahurupiya* not as a relic of the past, but as a master of performance art. However, there is a flicker of hope and their work is being reinterpreted not just as folk entertainment, but as a sophisticated precursor to improvisational theatre. They are learning that the modern audience demands not just a visual disguise, if one portrays a Bhopa, one must also master the *Ravanhatha*. Performers have started finding work in stand-up comedy, TV serials, and family parties; and are moving to YouTube and Instagram. They use "Shorts" or "Reels" to showcase their quick-change transformations, reaching a global audience.

**Future reflections: Preserving the multifaceted soul**

The story of the Rajasthani *Bahurupiya* is the story of India's oral and performing traditions-brilliant, adaptive, yet fragile. The *Bahurupiya* is a reminder of our own fluidity-that we all play many roles: father, son, professional, and fool. To lose the *Bahurupiya* art would be to lose a mirror of the Indian soul-and the many faces of Rajasthan itself.

Fareed Khan, son of the late *Bahurupiya* maestro Subrati Khan, shares his perspective: "While the government has taken steps to support folk artists, more sustained institutional backing and comprehensive welfare schemes could make a significant difference in preserving this art. My father, Subrati Khan (also known as Shivraj *Bahurupiya*), was an international-level performer who passed away due to kidney failure. Today, most *Bahurupiya* artists have turned to running small shops in their villages to make ends meet. With stronger support systems, we could dedicate ourselves fully to *Bahurupiya* instead of abandoning it for daily wage labor." Fareed and his brothers now lead the family's *Bahurupiya* troupe that performs regularly at *Melas*. Their father performed internationally yet remained financially precarious, highlighting the urgent need for artist welfare programs.

As they continue to don their *Vesh* in the face of poverty and indifference, they remain the most enduring mystery-reminding us all that reality is often just a well-crafted disguise. These torchbearers deserve to be awarded, acknowledged, and integrated into the modern cultural fabric. For in their many faces, we find the true, multifaceted face of India itself.

