

Actor Training Mentorship and Intergenerational Pedagogy in Swang Folk Theatre

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Abstract

Swang, a traditional north Indian theatrical form, has survived for centuries because of its solid base in oral traditions and performance-oriented pedagogy. One of the main reasons it has survived is the peculiar way knowledge is imparted—mainly through intimate, personal guidance and intergenerational transfer of knowledge. This essay examines how performers of the Swang tradition learn their art, with specific interest in the highly embedded relationship between student and teacher, referred to as the guru-shishya tradition. The research also examines how these traditional practices are adapting to contemporary influences and changing cultural conditions. Through observations of factors like oral teaching, practical engagement, and the modification of training practices, this research points out how Swang has managed to transform while retaining its cultural heritage. Through such observation, the paper illustrates how the tradition has been able to adapt and survive in the modern era, conforming to the challenges of today while maintaining its essence and traditions.

Keywords: Pedagogy, mentorship, Traditional, contemporary, swang folk theatre

Introduction

Swang, a traditional stage performance originating in the northern Indian Haryana, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh states, has been an integral part of the culture of these states for centuries. Its

enduring popularity and survival despite the forces of urbanization and modern entertainment owe much to its unique method of training and performance. At the heart of this resilience is the strong oral culture and the personal, intimate relationship between teacher and pupil. Swang performances are characterized by their musicality, improvisation, and a mix of comedy and moral tales (SWAANG: AN INDIAN FOLK OPERA, 2018). This distinctive form of theatre combines folk practices with art, employing music, dance, and drama to express socially and ethically meaningful tales.

What distinguishes Swang from other stage traditions is the way it is taught. Unlike many formalized, institutionalized education systems, Swang operates through an informal model of mentorship, where knowledge is passed on directly from master performers (gurus) to students (shishyas). The system, referred to as the guru-shishya tradition, favors learning through direct guidance and experience. The guru-shishya relationship is central to the transmission of skills and techniques. This paper examines the pedagogical system of Swang, with special reference to the guru-shishya relationship, the place of embodied learning in the training process, the problems Swang encounters in modern times, and the innovations being incorporated into the tradition to ensure its survival.

The major purpose of this study is to provide a full grasp of the Swang actor training process, focusing particularly on the role of mentorship and the transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next. Through both examining traditional and contemporary aspects of the training process, this paper highlights the resistance of Swang in the wake of speedy societal and cultural change. By this analysis, the way in which the art form continues to endure through holding onto its foundation but also adapting to the needs of the modern day is apparent.

Traditional Pedagogical Framework of Swang

The pedagogical model of Swang is deeply interwoven with the social and cultural practices of the communities within which it thrives. In contrast to traditional academic institutions, where formal curriculums and textbooks are employed to convey knowledge, the teaching approach of Swang revolves around experiential, hands-on learning and intimate mentorship. This ancient art form is generally transmitted through family or small local troupes, based largely on oral

transmission and lived experience. The young students, also known as shishyas, typically start early in life, driven either by family bonds with the art or by individual interest in education.

In contrast to a formalized classroom-style approach, Swang training relies on direct, experiential learning. Students watch their gurus—well-trained and experienced performers—and directly engage in rehearsals and performances in public. The pedagogical process is informal and very personalized, creating an individual and engaged learning experience (Muniandy & Abdullah, 2023). The guru, being a master performer, occupies a significant place since he has to guide the shishya through the nuances of both the practice as an art and the moral codes involved in the tradition. In Swang, the guru is not only a technical instructor but also a moral and cultural guide, influencing the student's understanding of both the art and the community values it reflects.

Swang's pedagogy is not guided by a rigid syllabus, characteristic of most schooling systems. Instead, learning occurs through practicing various elements of the performance, such as voice technique, rhythmic expression, music, storytelling, dance, and character. By such a process, the student can arrive at mastery of the art as living culture, not merely technical competence but cultural and affective richness to inhabit fully the art form. Learning occurs through the process of gradually developing from observation and imitation, through active engagement in performances, ultimately becoming a key component of the troupe's work.

One of the unique aspects of Swang's pedagogical framework is the incorporation of training into community festivals and rituals. These festivals offer a setting where learning takes place, integrating the artistic practice into broader social and cultural traditions. The cyclical nature of the seasonal festivals and rituals of the community has a very deep impact on the training process, and hence Swang is not just an artistic practice but also a meaningful cultural practice. This is a highly contextual model of training based on the traditions and customs of the community, and it guarantees that the values and cultural meanings of Swang are transmitted to the next generation. Through training within the context of community-based rituals, the shishya acquires not just their technical skill in performance but also develops an understanding of how the art form is responsible for keeping the cultural heritage and shared identity of the community alive. Therefore, the Swang learning process is just as much concerned with cultural continuity as with technical competence.

Mentorship as the Core of Swang Actor Training

Central to the Swang tradition is the relationship of mentorship between the guru (master) and the shishya (student), and this is what propels the development of Swang actors. This is built on respect for each other, care, and trust, and the guru is not just a technical teacher but also a moral and cultural mentor. It is the job of the guru to maintain the purity of the art form and convey its technical aspects as well as the underlying values. As part of this guidance, the shishya learns not only the technical know-how required for performance but also emotional resonance and cultural awareness that enables their own performances to have power and significance (Arnesson & Albinsson, 2017).

The process of learning Swang starts with the shishya watching the guru's practice sessions and live performances, a very critical phase when the student learns the subtleties of the performance tradition. The observation phase enables the shishya to get accustomed to the rhythm, timing, and emotional overtones characteristic of Swang performances. Observing the guru perform allows the student to see how every aspect of the performance, from the delivery of the voice to the movement of the body, is integrated into an action that is synergistic and highly emotional. The shishya learns not only the technical aspects of acting but also the manner in which to deliver the emotional depth, tone, and cultural meaning of the tale.

Concurrently with the student adjusting to the style, the student starts mimicking the movements, speech, and emotional expressions of the guru. This enables the student to witness how each element of the performance, from voice delivery to body movement, is woven into a cohesive and emotionally charged experience. The shishya not only learns the technicalities of acting but also how to convey the emotional depth, tone, and cultural significance of the story.

At the same time as the student adapts to the style, the student begins emulating the movements, words, and emotional displays of the guru. This is where active involvement in the process of learning commences, where the shishya begins filling small roles before gradually taking up more roles within the performance. It is now that the guru provides personalized inputs, giving guidelines on technique, characterization, as well as depth of emotion during the performance. The guru's role is central in facilitating the shishya to develop their acting and to understand the more profound cultural and moral undertones embedded in every character.

A critical part of Swang training is the enactment of gender roles, especially when male actors enact female characters. This involves a sensitive understanding of gender expression and emotional delivery. With the guidance of the guru, the shishya learns to internalize these roles convincingly through a mix of physical gestures, vocal skills, and emotional expression. The process of representing such deeply gendered characters is directed by the guru's experience, guiding the shishya to execute a performance which is technically valid as well as emotionally real.

As the shishya becomes more advanced in their training, they assume increasingly challenging roles, demanding higher emotional complexity and technical mastery. The guru continues to offer individualized direction, so that the student may fully inhabit the character and the moral lessons the performance conveys. This stage in the process of learning is transformative, for as the shishya comes to a more profound understanding of the art, they are instructed in how to bring together both the technical and affective aspects of performance. The guru's continued guidance also instructs the student in how to reference their performances in relation to the wider cultural, social, and moral spheres of the Swang tradition. Through this developing relationship, the shishya learns to view their place in society as a guardian of tradition, employing their performances not just to entertain but also to reflect and uphold social values like justice, integrity, and devotion. Therefore, the mentorship in Swang is not merely about mastering how to perform, but about becoming an artist who maintains the moral and cultural value of the tradition.

Intergenerational Knowledge Transmission

The sustainability and dynamism of Swang as a living tradition are to a great extent dependent on the process of transmitting knowledge from one generation to the next. The transmission is informal and is firmly rooted in repetitive practice, memory recall, and the performance of cultural rituals. Central to this process is the oral tradition, which is a key factor in preserving the heritage of Swang. Through oral narration, live performances, and conversation, crucial aspects of Swang including stories, songs, and character portrayals are transmitted. It goes beyond mere memorization of dialogues or lyrics as it is an in-depth internalization of a rich cultural heritage that is transmitted with every performance.

In most instances, families are the main conduits through which information is passed down. Fathers tend to pass on tasks to their sons, or uncles transmit to their nephews, allowing for a direct and personal link to tradition. This family tie heightens the interaction between generations, allowing for an uninterrupted transmission of cultural knowledge. Families are the initial spaces in which younger participants first become acquainted with the art form, creating a solid connection to Swang's traditional practice and values. Yet although family transmission is the basis of Swang, it is not confined to family structures alone.

Swang performance troupes also bear a critical responsibility for upholding and transmitting this tradition. These groups exist as larger families, within which knowledge is collectively shared. Rehearsals, story-telling sessions, and performances provide critical venues for knowledge transmission. Within this environment, the learning process is informed by communal experience and repetition, which reinforce the comprehension of Swang's diverse elements. This communal learning environment ensures that the art form remains deeply rooted in the local community's customs, maintaining its connection to both cultural practices and social rituals. With each new generation, the tradition is continually refined and developed(Das, 2013).

The passing on of knowledge in Swang is similarly adaptable. As every new generation learns the art form, they introduce their own experiences and worldview, adapting the tradition to encompass issues of today's society. This adaptability is observed in the manner that stories and songs are revised to incorporate contemporary themes, and the way humor and commentary can evolve. This flexibility allows Swang to keep up with changing society, enabling it to expand while retaining the spirit of its cultural origin. Through this perpetual change, Swang is kept alive and makes sense, bridging the continuity between the past and the present.

Training Through Embodied Practice

Swang's training methodology is rooted in embodied learning wherein performers learn their art form through both physical behaviors and affective engagement. This methodology emphasizes habitual practice in order to hone control over aspects such as voice, movement, gestures, and facial expressions. Through this emphasis on the body in training, actors develop a stronger

connection with their characters and actually internalize the subtleties of the characters they enact.

One of the essential elements of actor training in Swang is the development of the voice. As part of the training, actors are able to refine musical intonation, extend voice projection, and enhance their rhythmic speech delivery (Tseng et al., 2005). Due to the major role that music plays in the performance of Swang, voice exercises are adapted to focus on both clarity and musicality. The objective is to help actors sing and deliver speech rhythmically, with their performance engaging emotionally with the audience.

Physical training is just as important. Swang performances tend to involve actors in extended periods of physical exertion, and hence physical conditioning is vital. Physical conditioning helps actors provide the endurance, flexibility, and strength to provide physically taxing performances, complete with complex movements and dances. Physical training goes beyond fitness—it also helps actors learn how to convey emotions and character traits through physical expression, enriching their acting even further.

Character work is a key part of Swang's actor training. Actors are led to internalize a wide variety of roles, including those which subvert mainstream gender expectations. A distinctive element of Swang is that the male actors regularly play female roles, which creates a high degree of gender knowledge. This means not only physical transformation but emotional depth, too, as actors have to create the emotional range of these parts.

Improvisation is an important aspect of training in Swang also. Actors are trained to respond spontaneously and think quickly to the alteration that happens in live performances, like the audience's reaction or a sudden alteration in the play. This talent is developed through active engagement in performances, where actors are encouraged to respond spontaneously to the changing scene. Improvisation helps them become more flexible, react spontaneously to the audience, and produce a lively, interactive performance.

Challenges in the Pedagogical Model

Though Swang's conventional mentorship style has numerous positive aspects, it is challenged by numerous issues in today's world. One of the major issues is the declining population of veteran gurus. Since most veteran artists die without having taught potential apprentices, there is a fear of losing priceless information. This problem is also exacerbated by younger generations migrating to cities in pursuit of improved economic prospects, depriving rural areas—where Swang has long been popular—of an adequate number of committed performers.

The second major challenge is the economic burden on Swang practitioners. The tradition does not offer high monetary rewards, so most artists find it difficult to sustain themselves exclusively from their performances. This economic uncertainty deters long-term commitment to the tradition, as younger people tend to seek more secure career paths. This financial instability jeopardizes the continuity of Swang since it relies on devoted people who are ready to commit themselves to keeping the tradition going despite the absence of sufficient monetary rewards.

In addition to this, the traditional education system poses another impediment. Swang's intensive training requires a lot of time and physical exertion, which usually does not tally with formal school demands. Consequently, most students struggle to balance both school studies and Swang training, resulting in a drop in engagement and threatening the art form's future.

Adaptations and Innovations in Contemporary Contexts

In order to deal with the problems Swang is encountering, practitioners have begun incorporating new models of teaching that blend both old and new approaches. For example, they have developed short-term training camps and workshops designed to provide younger generations with an introductory exposure to Swang. These courses provide participants with an opportunity to experience major components of the art form without the long-term commitment of mentorship. In the process, they are not only attracting new students but also reviving the tradition.

Additionally, internet platforms have emerged as important players in protecting and popularizing the existence of Swang. Internet sites, web performances, and instructional videos on YouTube have enhanced accessibility to the art form. Such digital applications present a

potential for Swang to be engaged by audiences around the globe, upholding its cultural significance and ensuring it does not become extinct in the ever-changing world

Conclusion

To conclude, the pedagogical strategies of the Swang tradition of mentorship and embodied learning have been found to be enduring amidst modern challenges. The guru-shishya norm of traditional training is confronted by challenges such as urban migration, economic hardship, and limitations within the education system. Yet, the integration of new methods involving workshops and virtual platforms offers hope for renewal and wider access to the art. By embracing transformation and remaining loyal to its cultural heritage, Swang continues to evolve and be an active element of India's vibrant performance heritage, ensuring its longevity and pertinence for generations to come.

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