BHĀVĀI: FOLK THEATRE
FORM OF GUJARAT

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Traditionally, two broad categories of Gujarati literature include the main-stream literature and the folk literature and both of the categories have their long tradition in Gujarat. The main-stream literature is authored and written and heavily relies on the trends and traditions cultivated by Gujarati men of letters, while the folk literature is anonymous, forms an integral part of Gujarati oral tradition and is preserved by the folk tradition. While the main-stream Gujarati literature is subdivided into poetry, prose and drama, the folk literature of Gujarat is subdivided into five categories: Lokgeet or folk song, Lokgāthā or Geetkathā (a ballad-like form), Lok-kathā or folklore, Lokokti or typical folk expressions reflecting human wisdom and related to social life, mysteries of nature and traditional predictions and Loknātya or folk theatre. Bhavāi, evolved mainly from the Uparupakas, falls into the category of Loknātya of Gujarat. Being a folk theatre form, its existence heavily depends on sponsorship and financial assistance from people of Gujarat. Bhavāi employs all the folk elements—folk songs, folk dance and folk tunes; it employs popular folk songs, folk dances like Garbā and Raas and heavily relies on folk music. It is a music-dance oriented folk theatre form; for Bhungals, Tabla, Cymbals and Harmonium produce folk tunes, and Kathak style dance and especially Garbā and Raas, strengthen its folk theatre spirit. Since the fourteenth century, Bhavāi playlets have been a part of Gujarati oral tradition as Targālā community has handed down them to the next
generations by word of mouth. Later, Mahipatrām Ruḍrām, Sudhā Desāi and other scholars collected and published the collections of Bhavāi playlets, but to study Bhavāi playlets dramatized in Chāchar would be a more fruitful experience for a researcher than to read them in anthologies and collections by the scholars. The anthologies and collections include the texts of Bhavāi playlets only, and obviously, the performance aspects are excluded, and therefore, the collections of Bhavāi playlets contain only the skeleton, but the lifeblood of Bhavāi playlets would be found in their performance in Chāchar. The light of lamp, the effulgent torches, the tunes of Bhungals, the steps of Bhavāi players in dance raising dust and the response of the audience—these aspects are covered only through field visit. Still, in the rural parts of Gujarat, Saurastra and Kutch, Bhavāi players with a very poor educational background can remember many Bhavāi playlets from the beginning to end. They do not need a pen to write down their speeches and to remember them. Bhavāi is in their blood. They know very well not only the text of Bhavāi playlets, but also the accuracy of performance. They know what kind of facial expression, movement and dance are required in a particular scene by the player playing a particular character. They have art of dramatizing the same playlet differently keeping in mind the nature of their audience. They would play Garbā for a long time in the performance of Patāi Rāval for the audience consisting mainly of the new generation and would sing a number of religious verses for the audience consisting of the devout men and women. Their versatility is note-worthy as they can act, sing and play musical instruments during the performance of Bhavāi.

Asāit Thākar is believed to be the exponent of Bhavāi. Culturally, Bhavāi is associated with Shakti Pujā, with revolt against the caste-discrimination and social injustice and with livelihood of Targālā community of Gujarat also. According to the folk-history, Asāit Thākar, a Yajurvedi Brāhmin and a family priest of Hemā Patel of Unzā, dined with Gangā, the abducted daughter of Hemā Patel in order to save her honour and to relieve her from the clutches of the Muslim Sardār. Asāit, who should have been honoured for his heroic and altruistic act, was thrown from his conservative Brāhmin community for dining with a girl of lower origin. He lost his priesthood, his home-town Siddhapur. After losing his priesthood—the source of income, survival was the biggest issue
for him. A great devotee of Ambā, Shakti Pujā was also the greatest challenge for him as he had lost his official priesthood. Hemā Patel gave shelter to Asāit and his three sons in Unzā after his excommunication from the Brāhmin community of Siddhapur. Hemā Patel gave three pieces of land (in Gujarati ‘Tran gālā’) to Asāit’s sons and from this ‘Targālā’ community came into existence in Gujarati society. Asāit was an artiste and a devotee. He was in search of a form that would earn him livelihood and would provide him a platform for entertaining and enlightening the rural people of Gujarat. Asāit Thākar, therefore, developed Bhavāi and expressed his talent of acting, singing and dance. Bhavāi was the most appropriate form to satisfy the artiste in him. By entertaining the rural masses, Bhavāi was also the most appropriate vehicle of survival for the father of three sons in hostile social circumstances dominated by caste-system in the medieval era. By enlightening the rural masses against social evils and injustices, Bhavāi was also the most significant theatre form for the social reformer in him. Asāit Thākar, therefore, developed Bhavāi. In fact, Bhavāi is connected with ‘Shakti’ (Goddess Ambā), ‘Bhakti (devotion), ‘Roti’ (livelihood) and ‘Samāj Sudhār (social reformation). While Bhavāi is connected with Ambā Bhavāni and rituals performed in Her honour, this folk theatre form gave ‘Roti’ not only to Asāit, but also to Targālā community of Gujarat. It is also connected with social re formations. Though popularly called to be the father of Bhavāi, Asāit did not invent Bhavāi, but developed a ruralized form, relying on Uparupakas and other similar existing regional theatre traditions. He continued the theatre tradition of Gujarat adding ritualization and ruralisation of performance. He declared that he was only a speck of dust of the virtuous men of the old times who had strengthened theatre activities before him and he continued the theatre tradition of Gujarat developing a theatre form that heavily relies on the folk elements or the rural elements of performance. He wrote playlets and performed them. He developed Bhavāi tradition in Gujarat—the tradition of travelling Bhavāi troupes performing playlets from village to village and town to town. This is how Asāit Thākar, thrown from his Brāhmin community and his native town Siddhapur, embraced the whole Gujarati society. Travelling and playing various roles in the interior parts of Gujarat gave an exposure to his talent. He knew psychology and manners of different communities and imitated them in his role playing in the performance of Bhavāi playlets.
How did Asāit develop the form of Bhavāi? Asāit Thākar is traditionally called to be the father of Bhavāi, but in fact he developed it freely borrowing from the Uparupakas and the desi theatre forms of his times and his eclecticism is discernible in the development of Bhavāi in his hands. Bhavāi was not altogether a new phenomenon during the times of Asāit as he picked out the constituent elements of this folk theatre form from the Uparupakas and the regional theatre traditions of Gujarat. In this sense, he was not the ‘maker’ of Bhavāi; he was the systematiser systematizing the elements of the existing theatre traditions in the pattern of Bhavāi. In fact, Asāit seems to have ruralized the dramatic forms prevalent before and during his times in order to develop Bhavāi for the communities living in the rural parts of Gujarat. The Sanskrit theatre witnessed its decline in the medieval Gujarat dominated by the Muslim rulers and the regional theatre lost its charm on account of its over-sophistication. Asāit borrowed from the Uparupakas and the existing regional theatre forms—the two theatre traditions. Asāit Thākar’s Bhavāi owes to the Uparupakas and the regional theatre forms and falls into the category of the third generation drama forms. In fact, Bhavāi seems to have evolved from Uparupakas, dance and music oriented plays like Bhāmika, Prerana, Kāvya, Sattaka, Nartanaka, Ullāpya, Bhāna, Srigadita, Rāsaka, Preksanaka and several others of the medieval era. The dramatic forms like Nātya Rāsaka and Prekhnna with their one-act structure seem to have influenced Bhavāi as most of the Vresas appear to be one-acts. Constituent elements of Uparupakas like music and dance find their continuation in Bhavāi Vresas; for music and dance significantly contribute not only to the texture, but also to the structure of the Vresas. Every character in the Vesa would come dancing and the entry would be signified with singing called Āvnu and blowing of Bhungals. Dance in Bhavāi resembles to Kathak and singing with musical accompaniments like Tabla, Cymbals and especially Bhungals creates a magical influence on the audience. Bhavāi then may be called to be a desi or a ruralized Uparupak which aims at fusing art forms like acting, music and dance in a fashion that the ultimate result would be a unified performance aiming at the rural masses located in Gujarat. However, Bhavāi seems to specifically owe to Prekshanaka, a type of Uparupak, played in a street or in the temple courtyard.
Bhavāi exemplifies its own lessons of management. It demands internal co-ordination, mutual support and harmony among members of Bhavāi group. Ultimately, unity of Bhavāi troupe depends on the internal co-ordination of its members. Harmony and unity are the greatest principles which every member of Bhavāi troupes learns as they have to travel to unknown areas and to entertain the unknown people. Often, Bhavāi troupes travel to Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh and their harmony and unity bind them together. Allotment of work seems to be a pre-requisite quality for success of a Bhavāi group. The members of Bhavāi Mandal include generally twenty to twenty one persons for acting, singing, dancing and even for miscellaneous jobs. Generally, a Bhavāi troupe acts for seven to eight months during the year and moves from village to village and town to town for performance. The chief of Bhavāi group is called Nāyak. Besides Nāyak, Bhavāi group consists of Upanāyak and Pratināyak among others. Six to eight male role players are called ‘Moustache bearers’ and female role players like Nāyika, Upanāyikā and Pratināyikā are called ‘Kanchaliyā’. The one who makes others laugh is called Dāglo, Vidushak, Juthan, Hasāulo and Natāvo. Besides, music players like two Bhungaliyās (Bhungal players), Tabla Player, Cymbal players also form Bhavāi troupe. Additionally, the person called ‘Parpariyo’, a technical assistant, and Kotwāl, generally a young boy for miscellaneous jobs, form Bhavāi troupe. The complete troupe of Bhavāi players is called ‘Pedu’ in Gujarati language. Probably, the word ‘Pedu’ has derived from the Gujarati word ‘Paidu’, meaning a wheel. The complete troupe of Bhavāi players is called ‘Pedu’, that is, moving wheel as Bhavāi troupes travel in distant areas for their performance. However, management in Bhavāi can be observed before and during performance of the Vesas also. In applying make-up—darkening eye-brows, applying Soot, powdering face and reddening lips with kumkum or lipstick, wearing ornaments like bangles, rings and anklets and apparels like blouses and saris ---Bhavāi players self-reliantly prepare themselves for performance. Generally, the players who are to enter the acting arena get ready well in advance, but if they are not prepared, then the players occupying acting arena would entertain the audience a little more or directly talk to the audience and would give time for the players in the backyard to get ready for the succeeding playlets or scenes. Chatku or a series of Chatku and Āntri appear to be theatrical devices in order to address issues respectively of fatigue of players who
need relief and of obstacles during performance. Chatku is the device of introducing small Vesas in a particular long Vesa, and therefore, it is often called ‘Garbh Bhavāi’ (Bhvāi in Bhavāi). In several Vesas, Sākhis and Garbās are introduced in order to temporarily relieve the players who need some rest. Often a series of Chatku or Chatki is introduced during performance of Bhavāi like bottle-dance, magic tricks, acrobatics in such a fashion that the spectators would feel that these items are part and parcel to the performance of main Bhavāi playlet. Āntri appears to be a device in order to remove the obstacles like sudden stumbling or falling of a player and falling of the garment or ornament of the player. In such adverse circumstances, Āntri is introduced in the form of music produced by Bhungals, recitation of narrative poems or asking puzzles to the audiences. Management of Bhavāi is remarkable in yet other way. Players, when their role is over, would frequently sit to play Tabla or Bhungals and would play the role of relievers for the musicians. Bhavāi reflects also the social management. When Targālā community plays Bhavāi in the villages of North Gujarat, Chamār community (cobbler community) provides oil for the holy torch, Vankar community (weaver community) provides cotton for lamps to be lighted in the honour of Ambā and Nāyi (barber of the village) holds the holy torch pouring oil on it throughout the nightlong performance of Bhavāi. Prajāpati community (potter community) provides small pitchers to Bhavāi players and Pātidār community (farming community) provides shelter and food to Bhavāi players. Patidār community, in North Gujarat, is considered to be the chief sponsor of Bhavāi troupe; for this community takes care of Bhavāi troupe and gives grain as an expression of gratitude to Bhavāi players whose ancestor had saved the honour of the daughter of their community. On the whole, all communities provide their contribution to Bhavāi in the rural areas of Gujarat, and in this sense, Bhavāi is a collective task. At the end of Bhavāi performance, the group is rewarded with the fixed amount by the host village. Today, many Bhavāi groups collect ten rupees from every family of villages of North Gujarat and come once or twice a year to claim their share, when the farmers heap their grain to be sold at Marketyard of surrounding Talukas or districts in North Gujarat. During playing of Vesas, actors find opportunities to earn more on occasions like Aarti and Kanyādān (ceremony of giving away the daughter to bridegroom in marriage).
Bhavāi performance is an outcome of team-work. All the members of Bhavāi troupe perform Bhavāi from village to village and town to town too often changing their roles in different playlets, filling the gap of the players who are absent due to personal reasons, arranging meeting with the village-head, deciding the nature of their audience and chalkout the plan of their performance in the next villages. One of the remarkable aspects of Bhavāi is the lack of director; for Bhavāi does not have the director. In the main-stream theatre, the director would often impose upon actors his subjective interpretation and vision of the drama to be performed and the actors would lose their freedom of performance. In Bhavāi, interpretations of the playlets are shared and the roles are assigned keeping in mind the interest and ability of each member of Bhavāi troupe. Bhavāi exhibits team-spirit in a remarkable way. It is, generally, the chief of Bhavāi troupe who leads his troupe with a democratic spirit of fraternity, equality and unity. To effectively communicate with members of their troupe in unknown areas among unknown people, Bhavāi players have developed their own ‘secret language’ so that they would be able to communicate with one-another successfully even in the presence of unknown people.

The word which is used to suggest performance of Bhavāi in Gujarati is ‘playing’/ ‘playing Bhavāi’ (Ramvi/Bhavāi Ramvi) and the word implies ritualistic act towards Goddess Ambā. In fact, playing of Bhavāi does not appear to be equivalent of English ‘acting’. Playing suggests innocence of Bhavāi players; they play Bhavāi as a form of worship to Bhavāni. ‘Playing Bhavāi’, in Gujarati culture and language, includes the total theatrical performance—acting, dance and music—with internal devotional elements that shape this folk theatre form to certain extent as the Theatre of Rituals. Bhāvna (emotional celebration of the divine with dance and music) plays a dominant role in the performance of Bhavāi. ‘Staging’ a play, in western theatre tradition, includes complete professionalism sans rituals. Acting is a term in western discourse pregnant with a number of meanings and implications concerned with the professional aspects of theatre. Acting in itself includes career of an actor, stage, rehearsals, pronunciation training, training of stress and intonation, training with the aid of dictionaries and thesaurus. In the history of performance of English plays, there have been actors who have got specialization in a particular type of dramatic form
as a result of professional training. On the other hand, in Bhavāi, there is no stage, no director, no training schools and no systematic rehearsals as made by English actors with plethora of equipment, reference books and dictionaries. What one roughly calls ‘acting’ in Bhavāi is, in fact, ‘playing’ of mythological figures and of various communities in Gujarati society to celebrate their greatness and also to laugh at their demerits, and ultimately, to please Goddess Ambā. A series or sequence of such playlets is, therefore, called Bhavāi in Gujarati language. For Targālās Bhavāi is more an inherited art than acquired. A nascent boy of Bhavāi player naturally inherits the tradition of Bhavāi to be a great player for tomorrow; for Bhavāi seems to fall into the category of inherited Theatre Art. Bhavāi, then, is not to be acted, but to be played, to be celebrated, and therefore, there are no tickets in Bhavāi as it is a folk theatre form played in an open space. Ever since its origin, ‘Chāchar’ (acting arena) and ‘Jātar’ (a holy pilgrimage) in Bhavāi have been perceived as inseparable aspects leading to festivities full of fun and devotion to the mother of the Universe—Goddess Ambā. In this sense, Bhavāi seems to share its characteristics with Jātrā or Yātrā, a music- dance oriented folk theatre form of the West Bengal.

Being Loknātya, Bhavāi is identified in Gujarat as a mobile theatre moving from place to place and gathering its audience for pleasing and preaching. Travelling is an important aspect of Bhavāi players as they travel to interior areas of Gujarat, Saurastra, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh to perform Bhavāi. People have to visit well-built theatres and buy tickets also in order to witness a dramatic performance, while Bhavāi, being a mobile theatre, moves from village to village and town to town to serve its purpose of pleasing and preaching the rural people. In other words, well-built theatres stay to serve, while Bhavāi theatre moves to serve; the former passively depends on its audience, while the latter actively gathers its audience by blowing Bhungals before the commencement of the performance of Vesas. In this respect, Bhavāi theatre has a more active role to play. It actively gathers its audience; it actively studies the interest of the audience in the kind of performance it is interested in witnessing and above all it makes the audience think.

Bhavāi emerges to be both religious and secular folk theatre form in character. The initiatory Vesas of Ganapati, Kāli and Brāhmin include the Hindu
rituals—lighting of lamp and torch, singing of prayers, Bhajans and Ārṭi and these rituals appear to be theatrical device to deepen the faith of Gujarati communities in Hinduism in the hostile political set up of the medieval era. In fact, Bhavāi emerges to be a powerful medium to strengthen the faith of Hindu lot bereft of the knowledge of Sanskrit scriptural works as the initiatory Vesas are dramatized with practice of the Hindu rituals and their essential ideas are conveyed through religious verses and Bhajans replete with North Gujarati dialects. Bhavāi is played in an open place from all the four sides called ‘Chāchar’, the threshold or the place of Goddess Ambā. Chāchar is marked with a chalk or powder and invocation to Goddess Ambā is made by Bhavāi players. In the centre of Chāchar, the picture of Goddess Ambā is placed as the presiding deity of Bhavāi. A lamp to the honour of Goddess Ambā is lighted. This lamp symbolizes the divine element in every human heart. With the use of Kumkum, two important symbols, Swastika and Trishul (Trident), are drawn; the four ends of Swastika are symbols of Dikpāls (protectors of directions), Trishul is believed to be symbol of the firmament and the earth. The light of the torch is traditionally believed to be symbolic of the divine light of knowledge and blessing from Goddess Ambā. Till the last moment of Bhavāi performance, the torch is kept burning by constantly filling oil in it. The sacred fire of the torch giving light to the surrounding area is viewed also as purifying fire, removing all darkness and pessimism of mankind and giving all warmth, strength to survive, and optimism to the mankind. Bhungal is played first keeping its mouth to the earth, then to the surrounding area and at last to the sky. Nature, then, is invited to witness Bhavāi. The music of Bhungal, so played, awakens the divine element in the human heart and purifies both the outer world and the inner world. All the spectators sit in a circular way around Chāchar, and thus, Chāchar becomes a place where the players and the spectators together begin the journey of Bhavāi. Vesas then begin, the audience expects a spectacular performance and the players exert their powerful influence on the audience. The association of Bhavāi with ‘Shakti-Pujā’ provides spiritual strength not only to players, but also to spectators. Bhavāi has, then, contributed in strengthening the faith of the Hindu spectators in the Goddess Ambā and in bringing together people of all caste and class to Chāchar. Yet, Bhavāi, which is generally considered to be a Hindu theatre, frankly includes the playlets centred around the Muslim protagonists. Immediately after the dramatization of the
initiatory Vesas, the first Vesa performed in Chāchar is that of Juthan, a Muslim protagonist. Juthan would sing in the honour of Āmba and would also harp upon the communal harmony and unity. Zandā-Zulan is one of the most popular Bhavāi playlets performed in the rural parts of North Gujarat. It is romantic, and at the same time, full of ascetic ideas. In the playlet, Zandā, a Muslim Kotwāl of Unzā town of North Gujarat, falls in love with Teji, a young Bniyā wife of an uncouth, old Baniyā. But realizing the difference of their socio-religious backgrounds, both Zandā and Teji turn towards the spiritual world. Zandā becomes a Faquir and Teji goes to Kāshi renouncing the world. It is a mature playlet beautifully dramatized by Bhavāi troupes in North Gujarat. The Vesa includes romantic elements, philosophy, dance, songs and a bit of comedy and provides a treat to the simple folks of North Gujarat. However, the most important aspect of the Vesa is its eye-opening end; for Zandā and Teji, the great lovers, do not run away to make a new world, but turn to God. The ultimate aim of the Vesa is to open eyes of star-crossed lovers and to establish the love for the divine element and to orient the common people towards the spiritual world. Bhavāi includes other Vesas like Pathān-Bāmni and Miyā-Bibi centred around the Muslim protagonists.

Bhavāi aims at folk education—educating the rural masses through acting, music and dance. This has been one of the clearest aims of Bhavāi since the medieval era. Asāit Thākar himself was a religious priest and a fighter against the social evils. In the times when the formal education in Gujarat was limited only to Brāhmins and when the Hindu educational system suffered marginalization in the medieval period, Asāit’s Bhavāi provided a big role in strengthening the Hindu faith among the rural people of Gujarat. In the adverse political circumstances during the Sultanate Period, Bhavāi preached the lessons of communal harmony and unity, lessening the communal tension in the medieval Gujarati society. By satirizing the follies, short-comings and vices of different communities of Gujarat, Bhavāi aimed at social reformation through amendment of vices. Bhavāi dramatizes the higher ideals of the human life—love, fraternity, harmony, unity, patriotism and sacrifice and teaches the common people ‘what’ should be. Bhavāi exhibits its relevance with the newer ideas and issues of the modern times. Modern Bhavāi playlets, dramatized on Health issues, effectively make the
people of Gujarat aware of Cancer, AIDS, and Menopause, and those, aimed at de-addiction, open the eyes of the people against tobacco-chewing and liquor.

Bhavāi has entertained the rural audience of Gujarat since the fourteenth century. Bhavāi, being a music-dance oriented folk theatre form, holds a great charm; its music, especially produced by Bhungals as well as the foot-work of Bhavāi players, enrapt the rural audience. Bhavāi has a broader sweep; for it includes mythology, history, folklores, folk songs, music and dance, magic and acrobatics. In the medieval era, Bhavāi was the only source of entertainment for the rural people of Gujarat, but in the modern times, when the entertainment industry has spread its powerful wings from television and cinema to the Internet, Bhavāi is losing its charm in the urban areas, although it is played in the rural parts of Gujarat. If the mythological Vesas mix up the human world with the divine world, historical Vesas dramatize for the rural people what has gone by; folk elements—lores, tunes and dances entertain the masses in a remarkable fashion. Magical tricks and acrobatics, often included in Bhavāi theatre, make a spectacular show for the rural audience of Gujarat.

One of the most important aspects of Bhavāi is its importance as socio-cultural document as it reflects ethos, ethics, ideology, religious faith, social customs and manners. Bhavāi playlets mirror the specific characteristics and eccentricities of Gujarati communities like Brāhmin, Baniyā, Rājput, Kumbhār, Sarān, Vanzārā, and Dalit. Bhavāi has mirrored the social evils like corruption, dowry and mismatch in the medieval era; it has reflected the political events of the Solanki Period, the Vāghelā Period and the Sultanate Period. Siddharāj Jaysinh’s renovation of Sahastraling Tank and his assault on Junāgadh are reflected in Bhavāi playlets like Jasmā Odan and Sadhrā Jesung. Allāuddin’s assault on Pātan is reflected in the Vesa of Suro Shāmlo. Bhavāi playlets refer to the historical monuments and cultural centres like Sahastraling Tank, Pāvāgadh, Vadhvān, Junāgadh, twelve gates of Ahmedabad and many others. Janak Dave’s Bhavāi playlets reflect the modern ideas and issues like Blood Donation, Human Rights, Forest Preservation and Literacy Program.

Bhavāi exemplifies the ideas of Women Empowerment, and in this sense, its modernity is remarkable. Even in the playlets written and performed in the
medieval era, the ideas of Women Empowerment recur in Bhavāi. In fact, the medieval Vesas, written on female protagonists, indeed evoke the concern of this folk theatre with women. Playlets like Jasmā Odan and Sadhrā Jesung portray Jasmā and Rānakdevi as the folk deities for their loyalty to their husbands and for their resistance against the political exploitation. Temple of Jasmā in Pātan and Rānakdevi in Vadhvān symbolize the faith of Gujarati people in these folk deities. Manibā Sati appears to be one more Vesa harping upon the purity of Indian women. Kābi, a tribal woman’s instinct to avenge her husband’s death, reflects her loyalty to her husband. If virtuous women are worshipped, the plight of women trapped in odd marriage is also dramatized in Bhavāi playlets. The Vesa of Kayodo dramatizes the dissatisfaction of the young woman tied in marriage to a child by the family members against her will. Similarly, the Vesa of Zandā-Zulan dramatizes the issues related to mismatch—an old uncouth husband and a young, sensitive wife. Against the ideas of woman as a submissive creature and as subordinate to man in some communities of Gujarat, several Bhavāi playlets emphasize the importance of women in running family and contributing to society. The dramatization of the Vesa of Ardhnārishvar aims at establishing the synthesis of male-female energies in the system of the universe. One of the most important Vesas in the series of Bhavāi is that of Darji (Tailor) who banishes his wife from the house, and on realizing his professional failure without assistance from his wife, requests her to return to him. His wife returns on condition that she will be treated respectfully by her husband. The Vesa of Rāmdev emphasizes the importance of conjugal bliss in the Samsāra. Traditionally, this is the last Vesa in the series of Bhavāi playlets and the ultimate aim of the Vesa is that men and women must go home realizing their complementary character in the design of family and society at large.

Bhavāi, broadly considered in relation to Indian Folk Theatre, falls in the category of the Theatre of Entertainment as it aims at entertaining the common people by dramatizing playlets full of music and dance, mythology and history. The dramatization of the playlets like Juthan, Zandā-Zulan, Darji and Vanzārā fascinates the rural audience of Gujarat. Juthan’s pranks, Zandā’s dance, Premji’s self-glorification and pangs of separation of Vanzārā men and women, expressed through songs by Bhavāi players, entertain the people of Gujarat. Asāit Thākar
himself was a religious priest by profession and a devotee to Goddess Ambā by religious temperament. It is important to note that Bhavāi, to certain extent, falls in the category of the Theatre of Rituals as the initiatory Vesas on Ganapati, Kāli and Brāhmin involve the Hindu rituals in performance. The acting arena is called Chāchar, the holy place purified with the religious ceremonies. Lamp is lighted in the honour of Āmba, the presiding deity of Bhavāi, the torch is kept burning throughout Bhavāi performance, prayers and Bhajans are sung with the musical instruments to please the deity. Bhavāi appears to be a form of Shakti Pujā in Gujarāt. In ‘Māntāni Bhavāi’, the families whose wishes are fulfilled by Ambā, sponsor Bhavāi and express their sense of gratitude towards the Goddess. The association of Bhavāi with Chaulkriyā and removal of problems and diseases also makes it a theatre form of rituals. So far as its rituals are concerned, Bhavāi shares with Mudiyettu of Kerala, Terukuttu of Tamil Nadu, Yakshagana of Karnataka and Raam Leelā and Raas Leelā of Gujarāt, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. Bhavāi, as an entertaining folk theatre, shares with Swang of Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, Tamasha of Maharashtra, Khyal of Rajasthan, Naqual of Punjab and Maach of Madhya Pradesh. Bhavāi, therefore, enjoys a wider scope for dramatization, and although considered to be a type of Indian folk theatre form of ‘Entertainment’, strongly incorporates the Hindu ritualistic elements.

The Chinese Peking Opera, the German Epic Theatre developed by Brecht and Gujarati Bhavāi share the estrangement effect in common. Dissatisfied with the western theatrical performances of his time which heavily relied on emotional manipulation to bring about willing suspension of disbelief for the spectators, Brecht appreciated the traditional Chinese theatre which admits the assumptive nature of performance and abolishes the illusion of life, while the western theatre deliberately produces it. Acting is the most important principle in the Chinese theatre; other aspects like scenery and lighting are considered to be insignificant. Similarly, Bhavāi players seem to be constantly aware that they are being looked at; they do not create an illusion, but tend to break it through estrangement effects. They detach themselves from the characters they play; for they live in ‘here and now’ even if they act in the playlets of the medieval era and play the roles of the medieval personages. During their performance, often they would advise a mother in the audience to quieten her crying baby or declare their need
for a biri or a matchbox among the spectators. This reflects their technique of detaching themselves from the characters they are playing. When their part is over for some time, they would sit among the spectators obliterating the gap between the performers and the spectators between Chāchar—the acting arena and space for spectators. They would even share a biri or a betel leaf with the spectators, would talk about rains and crops making the spectators realize that they are not Ganapati or Kāli or Siddharāj or Patāi, but they are simply players playing their assigned roles. Like Chinese Peking Opera, in Bhavāi performance, players do not lose themselves in the characters they play, and therefore, re-start their performance while the interruption would be over. Sometimes self-generated interruptions like fatigue and weakness pose a problem to Bhavāi players as they constantly travel in remote rural places for performance. If a player is tired, after staying for a long in Chāchar and delivering his speeches, another player would speak dialogue and sing songs, or abruptly, dances would be introduced in order to provide relief to the tired player. In Bhavāi, often the players would bring in anachronism; for example, they would insert English words in the playlet reflecting the medieval era. This anachronistic inclusion emerges to be a technique to abolish the illusion of life for the spectators. This freedom which players of Bhavāi theatre, and broadly those of Indian folk theatre enjoy, constantly works in abolishing the illusion of life for the spectators. Symbolic and stylized gestures matter in the Chinese theatre, and in Bhavāi also, symbolic and stylized gestures matter and lots of things including property and setting are created through playing in Chāchar. In the playlet of Sarānio, the player playing Sarānio, the knife-sharpener, would suggest the action of sharpening knives without actual sharpening machine and knife. Siddharāj’s assault on Junāgadh and war between Patāi and Mahmmed Beghdā would be suggested through acting. Elephant-riding, Horse-riding, fights and other similar things are suggested through acting. Gardens, battle-fields, streets, ponds and rivers in Bhavāi are created through the acting power of the players. This indeed invites the spectators’ imagination to fill the gap and to perceive the absent by dint of the player’s acting. In the Chinese theatre, certain principles predominate. ‘Shuoxi’ (explaining of a play by the teacher to the pupil) and ‘Xili’ (logic of a play) emerge to be important principles in the Chinese theatre. Likewise in Bhavāi, a senior Bhavāi player introduces the playlets to the young player and defines the
logic of every playlet. In Bhavāi, every playlet has its logic; it is intended either for entertainment or for political satire or for social awakening. If the Vesa of Kumbhār (Potter) emerges to be piece of entertainment, those of Juthan and Zandā appear to be pieces aiming at social awakening. The constituent elements of the Chinese theatre include self-introduction of character, the aside and ‘bangchang’ or choral singing and the similar elements form Bhavāi theatre. Brecht’s famous plays which incorporate the doctrines of the Chinese theatre include ‘Life of Galileo’ (1938), ‘Mother Courage and Her Children’ (1939) and ‘The Caucasian Chalk Circle’ (1944). In Brecht’s Epic Theatre, the narrator narrates events, and in Bhavāi, ‘Vyās’ style, the style of elaborate narration, matters as its exponent Asāit himself was a religious priest. Nāyak narrates the events through prose pieces and songs in Bhavāi and escapes from dramatizing action and episodes that pose a technical challenge. Actors address directly to the spectators in Brechtian theatre, and in Bhavāi also, the players address directly to the spectators; for they talk to the spectators, ask questions, riddles and opinions about one-another in Bhavāi. Often, the players would comment on the particular spectator and would speak out of their characters during a Bhavāi performance. In the Brechtian theatre, costume presents the type as a farmer’s costume presents the typical farmer, and likewise in Bhavāi, costume presents the community types—Brāhmin, Baniyā, Vanzārā, Sarān, Sipoy, Kumbhār and so on. As soon as a character enters Chāchar, the spectators immediately make out the community which he/she belongs to and gets an idea of the general characteristics of that particular community. In Brechtian theatre, costume reflects the character’s role in the society, and similarly in Bhavāi, costume reflects what a character stands for and contributes to the society. Lighting is not hidden in Brechtian theatre, and in Bhavāi tradition also, lighting is made visible which helps the spectators abolish the illusion of life and realize that they are witnessing a performance of players. Facial expressions, body movements and dances create a spectacular performance in the light of lamps and torches and the spectators enjoy the performance, analyse and explore its meaning. Structural similarities between Brecht’s theatre and Bhavāi appear to be remarkable. Brecht called scenes of his plays episodes and wrote his plays without acts, and similarly, Gujarati playlets are independent episodes serving thematic varieties and linked together in Bhavāi theatre. ‘Historification’ emerges to be a Brechtian technique of setting the action
in the past to draw parallels with the contemporary events. In Bhavāi tradition, old Bhavāi playlets are dramatized to draw parallels with the modern events. Jasmā, a medieval playlet, is performed today. Jasmā stands for every woman of today who struggles to live respectfully in the society amidst hostile political set up. The spectators find the old playlet on Mismatch still relevant as the tradition of odd marriage is prevalent in certain communities in the modern Gujarat. Brecht wanted the audience to actively participate in theatre activity; he wanted to induce a critical attitude in the audience. The spectator would stand outside and study the performance learning, assessing, examining and investigating, relying on his intellect. Due to the aesthetic distance created by Bhavāi performers, the spectators investigate into Bhavāi playlets and try to interpret them and to learn from them. They find the medieval playlets still relevant; they strengthen their faith in Ganapati and Kāli in the age of technology; they draw lessons of women empowerment from the playlets of Jasmā and Darji (Tailor), they cherish the ideals of communal harmony from the playlet on Juthan and draw lessons of spirituality from that of on Zandā.

On the whole, the importance of Bhavāi could be summarized in the following manner:

(a) **Ritualistic Significance**: Considered to be a ritualistic act to Ambā, Bhavāi includes Vandanā of Ganapati, Kāli, Bahucharā, Vāman, Shankar and Pārvati. As a form of worship, in Bhavāi, the male players play the female roles. Bhavāi is also associated with Navrātri, Chaulkriyā, harvest and predictions of the New Year.

(b) **Historical Value**: Bhavāi reflects the Solanki Period, the Vaghelā Period, the Sultanate Period and the Modern Period of Gujarat; it also mirrors the situation of the various political centres like Pātan, Siddhapur and Ahmedabad in different political periods.

(c) **Linguistic Importance**: Bhavāi includes North Gujarati dialects, Mārwāri dialects, Hindi-Urdu expressions, folklores, folk-songs, idioms, sayings and riddles.

(d) **Stylistic Significance**: Bhavāi incorporates humour, wit, satire, irony and other devices to add to its performance and aims at alienation effect.
(e) **Social Importance:** Bhavāi reflects the social customs, beliefs, worship of Nature, superstitions and merits and de-merits of different communities of Gujarat. Bhavāi dramatizes the lives of folk deities like Rāmdev, Jasmā, Rānakdevi and Toral.

(f) **Importance as Folk Entertainment Form:** Bhavāi, being a folk theatre, heavily relies on dance and music and incorporates mythology, History, folklores, folk-songs, riddles, acrobatics and magic-tricks as entertaining theatre.

(g) **Importance as Folk Education Form:** Bhavāi awakens people against social evils like mismatch, dowry and corruption, aims at lessening communal tension and establishing communal harmony, equality and unity. In Health Sector, the modern Bhavāi awakens the common people of Gujarat for cleanliness and against the dangers of tobacco and liquor, Malaria, AIDS and cancer.

(h) **As Women’s Theatre:** Bhavāi may be called, to a great extent, to be a women’s theatre as this theatre itself is considered to be a ritualistic act towards Ambā, and therefore, the female roles are played by the male players. A number of Bhavāi playlets centre around the female protagonists and voice for the women’s freedom, equality and justice and establish the chaste women like Jasmā, Rānakdevi and Toral as the folk deities.

Attempts at survival of Bhavāi players and Bhavāi theatre itself and at revival of the latter, in the areas where it has ceased to be performed, must be made today in order to secure its bright tomorrow. Indeed Bhavāi has potentials to promote Cultural Tourism, Handicrafts and Handlooms of Gujarat, to bring awareness in Health Sector, to reform Gujarati society and to address the global issues like Global Warming, Natural Disasters, Violation of Human Rights, Water Scarcity and Pollution. But this great folk theatre form needs support today. The present status of Bhavāi appears to be very complex; for it is ignored in the urban centres, but enjoyed in the rural parts of Gujarat, Saurashtra and Kutch. It is not dead, but it is losing its charm, dying at least in the urban centres of Gujarat in the age of technology. Once, Bhavāi enjoyed its status as the greatest source of entertainment and enlightenment and today it is ignored by the modern Gujarati
generation located especially in the urban areas. It could be said that Bhavāi theatre is witnessing its fall today as its practice and spread are limited only to the rural areas of Gujarat. Poor financial condition of Bhavāi players, lack of sponsorship, lack of training new players in a professional manner, lack of Bhavāi knowledge in the urban areas, dominance of the main-stream Gujarati literature, lack of Bhavāi as a research problem in the colleges and universities, lack of willingness of cultural centres and literary organizations to provide platform to Bhavāi, increasing popularity of the Commercial Theatre, the craze for Bollywood Cinema and the Internet are the major factors affecting Bhavāi today. If these issues are addressed by the Government of Gujarat, cultural and academic organizations and Bhavāi troupes, then the Golden Age of Bhavāi can begin anew in the Global era. On the other hand, Alexander Street Press, an electronic database publisher, in its Academic Video Store is marketing Bhavāi and earning from this Gujarati folk theatre form. Why can’t Bhavāi troupes run their own Academic Bhavāi Video Store and spend the income for the welfare of their community? In Video Catalog (Vcat) of University of Pennsylvania, availability of a Bhavāi video is restricted to the current faculty and students. Stanford Universities’ ‘Search Works Catalog’ also includes Bhavāi. The libraries of Indian Universities must collect the videos of folk theatre forms and provide the facility of streaming to the researchers and learners. However, it is worth-noticing that several lovers of Bhavāi have uploaded videos on YouTube and have endeavoured to take it to the international level. If systematic efforts are made by the Government of Gujarat, literary and cultural organizations, academic centres and Bhavāi troupes, then Bhavāi would be able to survive in the coming times. Bhavāi theatre enjoyed its brilliant past and is battling for its existence in the current scenario; its future would depend on the collective efforts of today made by the Gujarat Government, cultural and literary organizations, academic centres and Bhavāi troupes. It is hoped that the findings of this research would be taken into consideration and action would be taken in the coming times to save Bhavāi, a seven hundred year old folk theatre tradition of Gujarat.