

THEATRES IN INDIA: AN OVERVIEW

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Drama, as we know, is quite different from a novel or a poem. We usually read a novel or a poem when we are alone. But drama is something more than words on the page-it is meant to be performed or enacted. The audience is an active participant in the theatrical presentation. So we respond to a play not alone but along with the other members of the audience. It is quite another matter that different people will respond differently. But then there are some plays which we do not see performed but read them as literature. How will he/she approach such plays? One must remember that playwrights usually expect their plays to be performed. It is for this reason that they present their themes through dialogue, action, music, song and dance so that the play is visually captivating. So when reading a play one should make full use of our imaginative powers. We must try to see the action -and scenes as well as hear the voices of the characters. It is only then that one will be able to experience the play in its different dimensions: as 'literature' as well as 'theatre'.

Modern Indian drama is influenced not only by classical Sanskrit drama or local folk forms but also by Western theatre following the establishment of British rule in India. Sanskrit drama flourished in ancient India and produced Bharata's *Natayshastra*, the great treatise on all aspects of drama. It is comparable in range and scope to Aristotle's *Poetics*. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle prioritizes tragedy as a higher art form as opposed to comedy. But in classical Sanskrit drama there cannot be a tragic end. This is because of the Hindu worldview which considers the world a 'maya' or an 'illusion' and death not a final end, but a release of the soul into higher forms of being-an event to be celebrated rather than lamented. So there are no tragedies in Sanskrit drama.

People in the West first heard of Kalidasa's *Shakuntala* (circa 5th century) when Sir William Jones translated it into English in 1789. His excellent translation brought Sanskrit drama to the attention of the Western world. Goethe (1749-1832), the German writer was so impressed that he borrowed the convention of the Prologue from *Shakuntala* and used it in his own play *Faust*. Kalidasa, however, was not the only playwright that ancient India produced. In the Hindu period of the first nine centuries, we have three kings Shudraka, Harsha and Visakadatta who wrote plays that now form part of our great cultured heritage. Shudraka (circa 4 A.D.) wrote the famous *Mrichkattaktn* or *The Little Clay Cart* which features regularly in contemporary drama festivals as *Mitti Ki Gadi*. The *Little Clay Cart* is a social play. Vasantsena the beautiful courtesan loves Charudatta a noble Brahmin who is already married. Sansthanaka, the brother-in-law of the king tries to make overtures to the courtesan who repulses him. His wicked schemes to

implicate Charudatta in Vasantsena's alleged murder come to nought as Aryaka a shepherd rebel overthrows the king and sets both Charudatta and Vasantsena free to marry and live a happy life.

Visakadatta wrote the powerful play Mudrarasaka (Raksasa captured through the Signet Ring). The play deals with two rival ministers- Chanakya and Raksasa. Chanakya represents intelligence and intrigue whereas Raksasa is a man of noble ideals and integrity. The play gives us an insight into the minds of power-hungry politicians. Bhasa wrote 134 plays comprising monologues, one-act plays, and six-act dramas. His masterpiece is Swapana Vasavadatta (Vasavadatta Seen in a Dream). The story is about King Udayana who is torn between his love for his wife Vasavadatta and the political necessity of marrying Padrnnavati, the daughter of a neighbouring king. Harsha's (7th century) best-known play is Ratnavali. Ratnavali is somewhat similar in plot to SwapanaVasavadatta.

Sanskrit drama was eclipsed with the advent of the Mohammedans in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Moreover, it has many rules and regulations such as there could be no tragic end, no violent or repulsive act could be depicted on stage, the hero and heroine had both to be charming and noble, the jester had to be greedy and fat. As opposed to this, folk theatre with its flexible and free form has changed, developed and adjusted itself to the changing social conditions reflecting the lives of the people. There are some of the basic principles of drama as laid out in the Natyashastra.

In the West, Aristotle's (4th century B.C.) *Poetics* is taken as a basic classic that states the principles of poetry in general, and gives a more detailed account of the epic and tragedy. In India Bharata Muni's Naryashastra (*circa 200 BC to AD 200*) is regarded as a comprehensive book that discusses all aspects of dramaturgy. Not only does it touch upon production and direction, but it also deals with make-up, costumes, jewellery, movements of the eyes, neck, as well as body postures. This exhaustive study is directed at the playwright, director and actor because these three were considered inseparable in drama. Sanskrit plays began with a ritual of music and dance performed on stage. The Sutradhara or stage manager dressed in white came in with two assistants and offered homage to the presiding deity at the centre of the stage by scattering flowers and sprinkling water. This was not only an appeal to the deity for the success of the performance but also helped to create an atmosphere of austerity. Then the-Sutra&am called the leading actress and opened the play with a prologue that announced the time and place of the action. For example, Balwant Gargi in his book *TBeab-e* in India (1962) tells us how Shakuntala begins :

Sutradhar : Our audience is very discriminatirig, and we are to offer them a new play, called Shakuntalla, written by the farnous Kalidasa. Every member of the cast must be on his mettle. The Sutradhar not only introduced the play but took one of the chief roles as well. In fact, we shall see the Sutradhar assuniing different roles in Ghashiram *Kotwal*. The Sutradhar provides a link between the different episodes in the play. Another stock character in Sanskrit drama is the clown or Vidushaka. Both the Sutradhar and the Vidushaka are found in folk theatre.

Four kinds of representation

In Sanskrit drama, an actor expresses himself through four kinds of abhinaya

Angika : Representation of action physically by moving hands, fingers, lips, neck and feet.

vacika : Expression through speech, song, intonation to evoke various sentiments in the audience.

anharya : Use of specific costumes and make-up.

sattvika :This is the most important of the four representations. The actor must feel the role and the emotion that he is to convey. This emotion is the bhava which has to be expressed in such a way so as to convey the rasa (taste or flavour) to the spectator.

Rasa literally means 'taste' or 'flavour' and is an important concept in Hindi drama.

Some characters are sublime like the epic heroes Rama and Krishna. Others are impetuous like demons and fierce characters. Soldiers and kings usually fall under the category of gay and cheerful characters while subdued characters are the ministers and merchants. The Sutradhar not only introduced the play but took one of the chief roles as well. The clown, a stock character, was called the Vidushaka. This comic figure spoke in Prakrit (the local dialect) while the other characters spoke in Sanskrit. The Sutradhar's wife, the Nati, helped her husband in looking after the production and also acted. Actresses were not regarded highly in society.

There are 10 types of drama categorised but the two important ones are Nataka and Prakarna. The themes of nataka or heroic drama are taken from history or mythology and feature gods, kings or heroes. Prakarna or social drama deals with the common man. The Little Clay Cart that deals with a courtesan and a Brahmin belong to this category. But whatever the type of play, there are no tragedies in ancient drama. The hero *cannot* die or be defeated. This is quite different from the Western view where great tragedies were considered a more elevated genre than comedy.

The time of the performance was determined by the theme of the play. If virtue was the theme, the play was performed in the morning, while a story of strength and energy was usually enacted in the afternoon. Plays of erotic sentiments were performed in the first part of the night whereas one of pathos in the fourth part of the night. Performances usually lasted four or five hours.

Many great dramas have been produced in ancient India covering a wide range of subjects. According to Kalidasa 'Drama provides satisfaction in one place to a group of people whose taste may differ a great deal,' Folk theatre is usually based on mythological tales of Rama, Sita, Radha, Krishna and other popular tales from the great Hindu epics-Ramayana and Mahabharata. The performances usually take place in the open air and the specific feature of folk drama is improvisation. Improvised stage, improvised dialogues often referring to something of topical interest. There is extensive use of song, dance and music including a great deal of *siap-tickh* humour. The emphasis is on audience participation and interaction with the performers and the performance is conducted in an informal manner.

Let us look at some of the popular regional forms of folk theatre. Nautika is an operatic drama popular in Rajasthan and even Gujarat and Maharashtra. The hero is usually a character from history, a lover or warrior, and the story is based on old ballads. The language used is the local dialect-music is folk melodies. The stock character is the buffoon and there is usually a stage manager, the Bug. This is a very informal kind of performance and there is a free intermingling of the actors with the audience.

Intim is peculiar to Bengal and this again is operatic in form. Initially, Jatra dealt with incidents in the life of Krishna but gradually, as improvisations began to take place, it became more secular and took on comment on contemporary life. The action is stylised and vivid and the chorus which is an integral part of it interrupts the action and sings.

Bhavai is popular throughout Gujarat and parts of Western India. It is a series of playlets which deal with medieval tales of chivalry. Bhavai actors must be experts in dance, music and mime. The make-up is exaggerated making use of soot, red and white pigments in oil. Bhavai usually starts late in the evening and lasts all night.

Tamasha is similar to bhavai in many ways. It is popular in Maharashtra and you will see elements of it in *Ghashh Kohval*. These plays are based on love stories and tales of chivalry presented through dance and music. These are basically musical plays but prose dialogues are also used to make social and political comment. These are performed by roving troupes—men and women—and the sound of their drum attracts large crowds to the venue of the performance. It is interesting to note that while women do act in a 'tamasha', they are not usually allowed to witness it because of the abusive language that is used freely.

Terukoothu is a street drama popular in Tamil Nadu. Peasants and their women perform it in the fields and village streets after the harvest is over. Usually mythological plays are performed. Song, dance and prose are all mixed together. The costumes are splendid and the make-up is of sandal and rice paste with colours extracted from herbs and leaves.

Yakshagana from Karnataka is also performed in the open air. These performances with songs and prose-dialogues are by men only. The Bhagavathar or the singer introduces the characters as they come dancing into the stage. These are usually based on mythological tales.

Kuchipudi is a dance drama from Andhra. These dance dramas are usually based on episodes from the life of Krishna. The performances usually take place at night in an open-air stage. Speech, dances, songs, mime and music all form part of this performance.

Ramlila, popular in Uttar Pradesh and all over India, is a pageant play based on the life of Rama; it takes 14 days to stage. The songs linking the various events in the plot are rich in narration and description. The actors wear splendid costumes and lavish make-up. The stage is arranged for multiple setting. The Kathakar sings of coming events helping the movement of the plot and heightening the emotional impact. Masks, effigies and fireworks are often incorporated in the play.

Krishnalila : The stories of Radha and Krishna are popular all over India and performed across the length and breadth of the country, even though the real home of Krishnalila is Vrindaban and Mathura in U.P. The role of Krishna is played by a young boy before his voice breaks. The boy is raised in a religious atmosphere and made to believe that he is Krishna himself. This creates the necessary conditions for the boy to act out his role with sincerity and conviction, moving the audience to tears and ecstasy. The audience begin to chant the hymns with the chorus and audience participation is a specific feature of these religious dramas.

Folk theatre still has a base in religious-mythology but has moved towards a more secular orientation. It represents the cultural life of the community - its songs, dances, beliefs, customs and dresses. The bare stage makes for innovation and improvisation and contributes to the vitality of the form. It also leads to directness of action and therefore a close actor-audience participation. The production of Mohan Rakesh's "Aashad ka ek Din" by the Anamika Mandali gave a new direction to Hindi drama. Even though Dharamvir Bharati's "Andha Yug", an important landmark in Hindi theatre, was published in 1955, yet it was produced much later. And the establishment of the National School of Drama in New Delhi gave an added impetus to the development of theatre in India. The Shri Ram Cultural Centre, New Delhi, organises National Drama Festivals which feature plays in Urdu, Sanskrit, Kannada, Marathi and Bangla. National

and state level awards for drama also provide the necessary encouragement and patronage for the art. Rajendra Paul's *Enact* and Nemichandra Jain's *Natrang* are journals that have provided the forum for the most recent and up-to-date information on theatre. *Enact* however, is no longer printed.

Translation of plays from English, German, Sanskrit, French, Russian and regional languages into Hindi have also enriched the field of Indian theatre. The theatre goer can see the plays of Moliere, Brecht, Ibsen, Shakespeare, Kalidasa, to name a few, in the language that they understand. Similarly Indian plays have been translated into various foreign languages. For example Peter Brooks presented the *Mahabharata* in French in the South of France with an international cast.

There are various trends in modern Indian theatre. There is the theatre in English which caters to a select audience and produces adaptations of the Western masters Brecht, Beckett, Shaw, Ibsen, to name a few. The theatre in English also takes up light comedies or musicals that have been successfully produced in the West. Another trend is to revive classical Sanskrit plays, not as adaptations but by reconstructing medieval stage sets and trying to approximate to the spirit of the original. The use of folk forms for providing a commentary on the current social and political situation is also popular.

While Rakesh uses historical character to highlight the problems of real life, Badal Sircar chooses contemporary situations to create a new society by giving a 'real way' in which man does not have to live by exploiting man. Everyone works according to his or her own wishes. Badal Sircar is one of the major playwrights of modern India, one of the makers of Indian theatre." *Third Gaze; The theatre of Badal Sircar*", was once described by Rustom Bharucha "as the most rigorously non commercial political theatre in India". (Rustom Bharucha:127) Badal Sircar depicts the existential attitude of modern man in the present times. Tendulkar focuses on middle class life in India and show the isolated individual's confrontation with adverse circumstances and hostile surroundings. He strongly believes that ideas are firmly entrenched in our psyche at an early age and 'our attitude has a lot to do with what we internalize in our early formative years' (Shoma Choudhary: 65)

Tendulkar plays like 'Sakharam binder', 'Ghashiram Kotwal', 'silence! The court', focus on love, sex, marriage and moral values prevalent in Indian society. He makes ample use of irony, satire, pathos and mock element. Vijay Tendulkar has received many prestigious awards like Kamladevi, Chattopadhyaya award, Sangeet Natak Akademi award, and Kalidas samman award. He abolished the traditional form of drama of three acts of plays and created new models to bridge the gap between modern and traditional theatre. There is now an awareness that the traditional form need to be utilized to revitalize Indian English Theatre. As Girish Kumar Karnad rightly points out,

"The past is never totally lost; it coexists with the present as a flow. A rich variety of theatre form still exists, with a continuous history stretching over centuries" (Girish Karnad:11)

This new phase of Indian theatrical development happily coincides with the personal development of Girish Karnad as a dramatist. His contribution goes beyond theatre: he has directed feature films, documentaries, and television serials. He represented India in foreign lands as an emissary of art & culture. He has experimented with the fusion of the traditional and modern dramatic forms and content. The purpose of using traditional forms is to achieve a rare

insight into the contemporary reality because Karnad believes that complexities of post colonialism are inherited from that the colonial and precolonial times. Precolonial, colonial and post colonial experiences in literature can not be compartmentalised in true sense. They are not divorced from each other. His play 'Tughlaq' was a reflection of the changing times- the narrowing of the great divide between the rulers and ruled. Karnad reminds us of T.P. Kailasam and Rangacharya who go back to myths and legends to show absurdity of modern life with all its elemental passions and man's eternal struggle. There are various trends in modern Indian theatre. There is the theatre in English which caters to a select audience and produces adaptations of the Western masters Brecht, Becket. Shaw, Ibsen, to name a few.

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