

Contemporary Experience and Indian Theatre

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New forms or expressions are not born from a Zero. They retain something of the old form from which they came. The very nature of theatre demands this continuity. We have a very fertile tradition of 'Lok' — 'desi' dramatic performances, along with traditional classical Sanskrit theatre — 'Koodiyattam', the only surviving classical theatre along with *Chaturvidha-abhinaya* and modern theatre. Many theatre personalities have already discussed about Indian theatre in detail, including 'how national our theatre is', etc. Scholars are of the opinion that there is no single Indian theatre because contemporary Indian theatrical concerns are related to the life of the people of the land at many different levels. By now, we have twenty-nine states in India. The dramatic expressions of different regions, economic classes, social and cultural positions of the people, actually all comprise Indian concerns. Indian theatre may probably be defined by noting these different expressions and analysing the inter-connectedness of cultural expressions. As Amilcar Cabral said:

"Whatever may be the ideological or idealistic characteristics of cultural expression, culture is an essential element of the history of a people. Culture is, perhaps, the product of this history just as the flower is the product of a plant. Like history, or because it is history, culture has as its material base the level of the productive forces and the mode of production. Culture plunges its roots into the physical reality of the environmental humus in which it develops, and it reflects the organic nature of the society..."¹

I will now try to analyse the contemporary experiences of the people and the happenings in Indian theatre. We know that a different type of politics emerged for the first time in Indian theatre (admitting the importance of *Lokadharmi* and *Natyadharmi* traditions) towards the end of the colonial period — plays like *Neel Darpan*, *Nabanna* in Bengali theatre; and *Kottukrishi*, *Pattabakki*, *Ningalenne Communistakki* and plays of KPAC in Malayalam theatre featured the peasantry and its struggles, and marked a movement towards more left oriented politics in theatre. Actually, IPTA and Jana Natya Manch's series

of streetplays were acts of political theatre in India. This trend left a deep impact. It is to be noted that even now we are following the same 'Dramatic Performances Act', which was framed by the British in 1876 after the historic production of *Neel Darpan* in Bengal. It is the living example of cultural and political resistance of the people. But for the last few decades, politics in theatre has taken a different turn towards more down to earth positions and expressions. There have been innovations in the uses of language in theatre, Dalit and Adivasi theatre, women's theatre and mythological representation in theatre. These comprise some major significant expressions in contemporary Indian theatre.

We all know that early dramatic language was influenced by Elizabethan drama. But slowly it came very close to 'actual speech' in the plays of Rabindranath Tagore, Badal Sarkar, Utpal Dutta in Bengali; Vijay Tendulkar, Dutta Bhagat in Marathi; Mohan Rakesh, Habeeb Tanveer in Hindi; Adya Rangacharya and Girish Karnad in Kannada; Sreekandan Nair, G. Sankarapillai, Kavalam Narayana Panikar in Malayalam; etc. These theatre artistes/writers tried to acquire actual speech. It is a fact that economy of words was unknown to several theatrical traditions in India. What the new theatre movements did was to explore fully the concept of silence in theatre. By now, contemporary theatre has reserved a prime place for sound and silence. Classical Indian semantics speaks of 'shabda', the word, as 'nitya' (constant); and 'artha', the meaning, as 'anitya' (changing impermanent). We can see that contemporary Indian drama and theatre have demonstrated the impermanence of meaning. Badal Sarkar's *Ebang Indrajit*, *Pagla Ghoda* (Bengali), Vijay Tendulkar's *Ghasiram Kotwal*, *Sakharam Binder* (Marathi), Adya Rangacharya's *Sunojanamejay* and Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* (Kannada); Mohan Rakesh's *Aadhe Adhure*, *Dhwani Natak*, *Beej Natak* and Dharamvir Bharati *Andha Yug* (Hindi); G. Sankara Pillai's *Karuthadaivoathe Thedi* and Kavalam Narayana Panikar's *Puranadi*, K.J. Baby's *Nadugaddika* (Malayalam);

Shivkumar Joshi's *Kahat Kabira*, Shanta Gandhi's *Jasma Odan* (Gujrati); Manoranjan Das's *Aranya Fasal* (Oriya); etc. are some of the plays that display this tendency.

The whole structure of values associated with a given word or meaning was subverted in such plays. As a result, most theatre artistes and personalities began to think about 'the word in the play' — what were the cultural meanings that words necessarily carried? Consequently, new acting styles and new styles of speech emerged. In Ebrahim Alkazi's production of *Tughlaq*, actor Manohar Singh; in Dubey's production of *Andha Yug*, Amrish Puri; and Shriram Lagoo in *Gidhade* acted in a new style. Sombhu Mitra did the same for Rabindranath Tagore's texts and the great theatre director B.V. Karanth did it with Jaishankar Prasad's *Skandagupta*. Chandravadan Mehta in Gujarati, Rattan Theyyam and Kanhailal in Manipuri, Professor Ramanujan in Tamil and Malayalam, and Rajinder Nath, M.K. Raina in Hindi were experimenting with the same thing in their respective national theatres and languages. In their experiments, the word did not change its meaning but found itself in a new setting.

After some time, Bertolt Brecht was put to the rescue — to liberate us from normal theatre. But the sense of liberation was short lived. Brecht's political use of theatre was missed here altogether in favour of a return to folk traditions, in search of identity. That is why, in 1970s, most of our contemporary theatre artists began to think about the roots or identity of our theatre, which paved the way for a '*Niji Rangmanch*' or '*The Theatre of Roots*' movement. Playwrights like Habeeb Tanveer, Kavalam Narayana Panikar, Vasant Kanetkar, Madhukar, Arun Mukherjee, N. Prabhakaran, Sarveshwar Dayal Saxena, Girish Karnad, Chandrashekhara Kambara; and directors like B.V. Karanth, Satyadev Dubey, Ram Gopal Bajaj, Shanta Gandhi, Rattan Theyyam, etc. used different folk dramatic forms of their respective regions for meaningful, communicative and creative expression.

Even though we had Dalit folk songs, *Nritta* and *Nritya* in good numbers, the Dalits and Adivasis found their voice in Indian theatre between the 1960s and the 1970s in a new language and grammar with the *Ambedkari Jalsa* movement in Maharashtra (M.B. Chitnis' '*Yugyatra*'). Dalit theatre was formulating a different language and grammar for the expression of the downtrodden and it soon spread all over India. *Kirvant* by Premanand Gajvi, *Teesri Aankh* by Jyotiba Phule, *Wata Palwata* by Datta Bhagat, *Bamabvada* by Ramnath Chouhan (Marathi); *Rama Rajya*, *Mayanand Balidan*, *Shambuk* by Swami Achyutanand Harihar, *Antim Avarodh* by N.R. Sagar, *Antaheen Bediyan*, *Dharma Parivartan* by Mata Prasad, *Sach Kahnevala Shoodra Hai* by Sooraj Pal Chauhan, *Mandir Pravesha*, *Do Chera* by Om Prakash Valmiki, *Hello Comrade* by Mohandas Nemishray, *Nanga Satya* by Suśilā akabhaure, *Aaj ka*

Drawn by Sreekanth Vyas, *Court Martial* by Swadesh Deepak (Hindi); *Baba Bantu*, *Swami Ji* by Charan Dass Sidhu; *Jwar Bhatta* by Harbans Lal Vardhan, *Kaljug Rath Agni Ka* by Gurdial Singh Phull, *Sooki Kokh*, *Ik Ramayan hor* by Ajmer Singh Aulakh, *Dalit Daasata*, *Sach ki Low*, *Dalit Enkalab* by S.L. Viridi (Punjabi); *Madayan Sambook Maharshi Ka Maha Bhashan* by Kuvempu, *Harijana Vana* by Sriranga, C.K.S.'s BeeChi plays (Kannada); *Paleru* by Boyi Bhimanna, *Kulam Tolipatte* by G. Kalyan Rao, *Braksha Vai Su Pamam* by Pydi Teresh Babu, *Dalit Deputy Collector* by Roop Narayan Sonkar, *Rajya Griha Pravesam* by Patti Bandana Anand Rao (Telugu), *Baalaakalesam* by Pandit Karuppan, *Nadugaddika* by K.J. Baby, *Uratti* by Manoj Kanai (Malayalam); *Ambedkar* by K.A. Gunasekaran, *Molaga Podi* by Sreejith Sundaram (Tamil) are some of the productions in Indian theatre that addressed the problems of Dalits and Adivasis of contemporary India directly. Jyotiba Phule, Premanand Gajvi, Datta Bhagat, N.R. Sagar, Om Prakash Valmiki, Swadesh Deepak, Gurdial Singh, Guna Sekharam, Sreejith Sundaram, Perumal Murugan, K.J. Baby, Pandit K.P. Karuppan are the typical writers who have taken the initial anguish of Dalit-Adivasi life to greater level of introspection and recognition. Through their fascinating and meaningful expressions, they opened up the dark places where Indian politics happens. It is to be noted that in 1931, Pandit Karuppan introduced Kochal Pulayan — the first Dalit character in his play — '*Baalaakalesam*' in modern Malayalam theatre.

The plays of Sriranga in Karnataka not only spoke of the desire for social justice, but also gave due consideration to new political thought. His early play *Harijanavada* is the best example. The play was constructed in a plural structure. There were multiple narratives, each conflicting with each other. The play demonstrates the opening of temple doors to Harijans. Samudaya's two significant productions in Karnataka — '*Belchi*' and '*Patre Sangappa*' — became iconic representations of the socio-cultural movement. The implementation of the Karnataka *Land Reforms Act* in 1976 had turned villages into killing fields. The Dalits were harassed and brutally killed by the Zamindars. *Belchi*, a play by C.K.S, narrates the death of a Dalit in a remote village. Belchi is a village near Patna in Bihar. This play, when performed in Karnataka, received a very good response. The play became a weapon of protest in the hands of the oppressed and the Dalits to question the systems of power politics. The same energy was witnessed in Kerela when K.J. Baby's *Nadugaddika* was performed by the Adivasis. All the Adivasi artists were arrested by the state. The same spirit was evident in Andhra Pradesh, during the production of *Kulam-Bhoomi Bhagwata* and *Dalit Deputy Collector*. Even now, the creative artists and theatre practitioners from this

community are struggling and demanding for a new social order and social justice through their expressions and political understanding.

Ashvini Kumar Pankaj, Shyam Sunder Mehta, Mahadev Toppo from Jharkhand; Sukracharya Rabha from Assam; Arun Narayan and Sasikala from Bihar; Raju Das and Nandidass from Bengal; Ashutosh Pothander from Bengaluru, Sreejith Sundaram and Perumal from Tamil Nadu; Sambhaji Bhagat and Anil Sapkal from Maharashtra; Denchanala Srinivas from Hyderabad, are extending the spirit of togetherness and equality through contemporary Indian theatrical expressions. Productions like 'Ambedkar Aur Gandhi' and 'Court Marshal' by Arvind Gaur; 'Fevicol' by Jeetrai Hansda; 'Dharti Aaba' by Hrishikesh Sulabh; 'Uratti' by Manoj Kana are especially notable for their questioning of the established notions of theatre and their focus on the conflicts of life and power struggles.

Like Dalit-Adivasi theatre, women's theatre, too, is questioning established conventions of theatre, and therefore, naturally, facing some hostility from well-entrenched theatre establishment. It is also true that the language and grammar of women's theatre is still in the making. Not all of this theatre is fully accepted or understood by the audiences yet, which has also to do with viewing habits. But we have to admit that these are very exciting developments in theatre and promise to be enriching, intense and more participatory in nature. The world of women, lacking opportunity of expression in the outward arena, is full of dreams, memories and a very rich inner life. So, most of the productions are full of images that appear disconnected but actually have a deep connection in the overall context of the experience they are exploring – the expressions of female inner-voice. Women playwrights and directors, by defying the expected notions of logic or rationality, are allowing themselves to explore the same narrative at a different level. Even if they appear contradictory, women feel that contradictions allow full narratives to unfold their fuller lives.

Such a fertile women's theatre is unfolding in contemporary Indian/regional theatre. Vijaya Mehta (writer-director-actor), Sai Paranjpye (director), Sudha Karmarkar (children's theatre), Pratima Kulkarni (director), Jyoti Subhash (director) of Marathi theatre; Dina Pathak (IPTA), Mitra U. Dutta (Maina gurgari); Lo Bhava (Rangali) introduced new characters - Shanta Gandhi (actor-director-writer) - Jesma Ooden, Shakuntalam, Skantagupta, Mallika Sarabhai – Draupadi, Peter Book and Adith Desai of Gujrati theatre; Anuradha Kapur (director), Kirti Jain (director), Amal Allana (director), Tripurari Sharma (director), Anamika Haksar (director), Mala Hashmi (actor-director-writer), Sushila Takbhaure,

Sasikala (Bihar) Hindi; Usha Ganguly (director-actor), Namidas from (Bengala Theatre) are national level women theatre practitioners who are exploring women's identity in theatre in different ways. In the same way, in Kerala too, women theatre writers, directors and artists are deeply engaging in struggles for women's identity in theatre. Productions by Nireeksha theatre group of E. Rajarajeswari and C.V. Sudhi, like *Pravachaka*, *Aanungal Illatha Pennungal*; Sajitha Madathil's theatre group Abhinethri's production like *Beauty Parlour*; K.V. Sreeja's productions like *Prasava Muri*, *Kalamkariyude Katha*, *Oru Sthreepaksha Natakam* are some of the significant productions of Malayalam women's theatre.

Prasanna Ramaswamy's production based on C. S. Lakshmi's *Ambai* and *Karuppu Kuthirai Chadukkam* is notable. Prasanna called her play *Porukka Mattom...* *Porukka Mattom* (we shall not forgive,... we shall not forgive). The plot was based on an incident of police brutalisation of a young widow, Rosa, in Maharashtra, and was adapted to reflect public protests against the incident through the intervention of the media. The women's group *Paatini* and the theatre repertory of *Koothu-p-pattarai* collaborated to stage this play. The presentation was very different, in the sense, that it had several narrators with different ideologies who fought for the cause. The multiple narrators were collectively transforming themselves into dramatic personae. The play was performed in a police colony and was banned from being shown anywhere else in the city. The irony was that a woman police officer, Ms. Thilakavathi, wanted Prasanna to stage this play. But when it was performed, they found it very difficult to digest. It probably proves that even having women at the helm of affairs does not always help the cause of women. The significance of this play was that it was probably for the first time that such a bold play was performed ("Porukka Mattom... Porukka Mattom," *Indian Theatre*, May 2002, p.107)

Like this, mythological expressions in plays are also a net result of our contemporary experiences. Myths carry socio-cultural experiences and values and are not mere imaginative productions of societies or communities. Myths, both oral and written, express many dimensions, so they have to be understood rather as cultural and political statements; and at the same time as intellectual and creative interrogations of existing value systems. For example, we can take Dritharashtra and Gandhari of *Andha Yug* by Dharamveer Bharthi. In contemporary period, the text of the play has to be recognised as a creative negotiation with the past, for the past cannot be dissolved absolutely. The play announces its continued presence at various levels in present times. *Tughlaq* by Girish Karnad, *Ghashiram Kotwal* by Vijay Tendulkar, *Ashadh Ka Ek Din* by Mohan Rakesh, *Karuthadaivathe*

Thedi by G. Sankara Pillai, *PuraNadi* by K.N. Panikkar are some of the noted plays of this kind. Another play which I want to discuss here is *Shudra Tapasvi* (1944) by the great Kannada writer, Kuvempu, because it dealt with the fundamental issue of the caste system in the Indian society. The nature of the caste system, the role of nation/state/king and the value-traditions were discussed in the play. Kuvempu asserted that the Uttara Kanda of the *Ramayana* had many interpolations. The killing of Shambuka by Rama was wholly untenable. Kuvempu not only upheld the legitimacy of Shambuka Tapa, but also made the Brahmin, who lost the son and complained to Rama about the Shudra Tapaswi, gain knowledge of the self. Kuvempu not only attacked the caste-centric consciousness of the Brahmin, but also re-located the text and its protagonist. Kuvempu asserted that Bhavabhuti in his *Uttara Rama Charita* had already attacked the unjust punishment given to Shambuka. In Kuvempu's text, it was the Brahmin who had to undergo the process of purification from his caste prejudice and arrogance. Moreover, the arrows that Rama shot, fell at the feet of Shambuka and returned to pursue the Brahmin who now

pleaded for his life. Rama, as a Dharmik king, proved to the public that he had the wisdom and courage to establish the truth. No doubt, texts like this will enable us to find alternative ways of reading and understanding literature and to assert social and cultural values and political positions.

In short, in Dalit-Adivasi theatre, women's theatre and contemporary mythological expressions, we can see the changing social and cultural values of the Indian society and how creative artistes are addressing these problems in a very positive way. It is to be noted that with due exploration of world theatre, contemporary Indian theatre is also experimenting with word, space and style of productions, etc. and really attempting a synthesis of our traditions and contemporary experiences in order to create a new visual mother language and grammar of theatre.

Note

1. Amilcar Cabral –Janam. *People's Art in the Twentieth Century: Theory and Practice*, Delhi: Jana Natya Manch, 2000, p. 256.