

IN SEARCH OF INDIAN THEATRE

A national theatre is a representative, specific, and unique image of a community's ethos, and is created through the living idiom, the distinctive tone, and the particular form that a community evolves in its process of living. Whatever is dead, irrelevant or alien cannot be an attribute of a living national theatre. A vigorous theatre is always rooted in patterns of public behaviour. The moment an experience is severed from these patterns of public conduct, at that moment we knock out the dramatic tensions, and the generative action which define the quality of a theatre. The theatre, as an art, emerges out of vital social contexts and miraculously images a community's awareness, its identity, its potentials, and its particularity. If a theatre does not draw its nourishment from the detailed facts of life it remains a toneless and anaemic exercise.

Considered in this perspective, the theatre in India today would appear to be a lively, though confused enthusiasm of diverse ideas and values: Classical, Folk, Western, even an amorphous mixture of these three. In a way, this enthusiasm is valuable. It can break through the apathy of the middle-classes to theatre art; it can stimulate the awareness of the relevance of the theatre in the life of a nation. And it must be admitted that this enthusiasm has brought about a horizon-

tal, though uneven, expansion of theatre activities in the country. In almost all parts of India, there are innumerable talented young men and women struggling to establish a theatre which would be a source of entertainment as well as an expression of the Indian modes of life. Artists like Sombhu Mitra, Utpal Dutta, E. Alkazi, Adi Marzban, Sheila Bhatia, Habib Tanvir, T. K. Sharmugam, S. V. Shasranamam, apart from a large number of theatre men such as Ahindra Chowdhury, Mama Warkerkar, C. C. Mehta, Prithviraj Kapur, Jaishankar Sundari, Rangnekar, Adya Rangachari, and many others, are busy with the fascinating task of creating a theatre. In fact the expansion of theatre activity during the past few years has even led to the establishment of various training schools. But behind this enthusiasm there does not seem to be any compulsive direction. Our values are vague, our standards uncertain, and our purposes without precise definitions. Despite the abundant theatre activity that makes some people feel that we are in the midst of a renaissance, and even despite the reviewers saluting half a dozen plays each year as "the great Indian play," our theatre today survives only in countless "cultural villages," very diverse, often provincial and parochial, with little or no reference to a possible Indian experience. Each "cultural village" revolves round its *deity*, private or state sponsored, pursues its limited, self-determined and self-sufficing ideas. The particular whims or idiosyncracies are stubborn enough or insular enough to resist any attempt at drawing them into a melting pot out of which, through the process of amalgamation or synthesis, a distinctive theatre might emerge. Naturally our theatre activities are limited in meaning, and cannot express "taste" in the usual sense of the term. I am not deriding these "cultural villages" or the *deities* that organise them. In fact they have succeeded in providing quite a lot of experimental data for critical analysis and a possible vision of an Indian Theatre. In trying to understand our search for standards in our theatre, we must think over their aims and their experiences, their successes and their failures.

There is, first of all, the heroic experiment of reviving the classical theatre, often in modern language translations and, very rarely, in the original Sanskrit. Whether contemporary playwrights and producers have very much to learn from the

traditional Sanskrit drama I do not know; but the areas of experience and the contexts of living have expanded so much as to make the Sanskrit dramatic tradition rather remote if not exactly irrelevant. As a vehicle of an over-rationalised Brahmanical society, it was content with spiritual rather than social, ethical or intellectual themes. The whole purpose was to exploit the theatre as an instrument for stimulating a state of awareness of the Cosmic Harmony, a contemplative mood of serenity, stillness and reconciliation, a condition of enlightenment in which one could declare the final unity within the universe and thus refute the dissimilarities of men and things. That was the specific attitude, and the specific attitudes of communities create adequate forms of expression. In the emphasis was on the soul in repose rather than in action, if the image of the Sanskrit drama is the seated "Buddha, not the javeline-throwing Zeus, or at least the god Siva dancing within the circle of his own sovereignty, not the charioteer urging his horses through tempestuous waves," it was because the community was not interested in the ostensible form of things.

They might have recognised the riotous splendour of the world of things, but they did not pursue its concrete and particular beauty capable of creating conflicts and tensions. Life was quickly converted into a continuous process of expansion towards a Harmony in which things were involved as if in a sacred ritual, with no identity of their own. The Sanskrit drama is, therefore, a form of revelation rather than the mode of articulation of a dramatic tension or a generative action, which, while preserving the subtle equilibrium between protagonist, antagonist, and agon, produces the potentials of what is known as "dramatic quality." It seeks an emotional unity which aspires beyond itself and, like poetry, necessarily does not recognise the categories of time and space: such categories are necessary for clarity and form in a drama as well as for making the visible acts representative, specific and unique. The Sanskrit drama, except *Marrichakatika* (The Little Clay Cart) attributed to King Sudraka, is a drama of moods alienated from concrete patterns of public behaviour and lends itself to expression by lyric or narrative prose but not through drama. Is that why our treatises on dramaturgy like Bharata's *Natya Sastra* do not consider the

drama as a separate art but only as an extension of poetry? He nowhere defines, as Aristotle does, the precise nature of drama. Of course the formal elements of the dramatic art are detailed with marvellous accuracy and skill, but Bharata accepts that the theatre is an extension of the art of poetry and that, like poetry, it dissolves everything into a symbolic fluidity to evoke a state of awareness: religious, metaphysical or sacred.

The Sanskrit drama thrived on the magic of words and the emphases were not on plot and character but on fluid poetic symbols or on the formal elements of movement and gesticulation, even on external devices of music and dance. The linguistic structures were lyric rather than dramatic, deliberately designed to stimulate a *rasa* or "mood." The various tonalities or levels of speech were imagined almost like the movements in a musical composition. The sources of our traditional drama lie in lyrical and epigrammatic poetry, admirably suited to present a pageant of holiness, an imitation of mental action, not an historical or a social action. From Bhasa's *Vision of Vasavadatta* to Bhavabhuti's *Uttararamachrita* (Rama's Later History), our Sanskrit drama (with the exception of Sudraka's *The Little Clay Cart* and Visakhadatta's *Mudrarakshasa*) has no desire to create distinctive individual figures, no keenness to image dramatic action capable of defining human persons. The characters are recognizable types that can easily melt into their symbolic value. They do not live in History where conflicts and tensions occur. They live almost at the dissolving edge of History, building the sensational qualities of a baroque opera or a Gothic romance. When the poetry they breathe evaporates, they never solidify into relevant dramatic virtues. They only leave a sense of esoteric reality, a state of sensibility emancipated from human behaviour in the concrete details of life.

Since our classical theatre was a theatrical version of poetry, its revival without its poetry would remain an inert and schematic collection of episodes, overlong and rambling. This was made amply evident by the Hindustani Theatre experiment with Begum Zaidi's *Shakuntala* produced in 1957. Of course, Tagore succeeded in reviving the classical form in *The Red Oleander*, but his theatre was based on the remarkable discovery that in a theatre poetry and drama, lyric and dramatic image, can melt one

into the other to evoke the desired magical effect. Tagore theatre was essentially a drama of incantatory lyric, which, even when it repudiated the relevant dramatic virtues, evoked a sense of esoteric reality. The Hindustani Theatre *Shakuntala* without the eloquence of poetry was left with a few archaisms of costume, the glamour of eccentric invention and oratorical dialogue. The gap between the speech patterns of the classical theatre and the contemporary idiom and patterns of behaviour cannot be negotiated unless a new language of the theatre can be evolved. Every age creates its own poetics of the theatre, evolves its new vision in an idiom that has the *feel* and sensitiveness of its modes of living. That is why it always demands a reinterpretation of the past, a reassessment that keeps the past alive and vital. By itself the classical theatre will remain an awe-inspiring weight and its revival in modern idiom no more than an eye-filling spectacle, dull and monotonous as theatre. If the essential poetry of plays like *The Little Clay Cart* is to be distilled, it will have to be in the language of the age, the poetics of the theatre the age is looking for. After all, that is what Europe did to the Greek classics. One can suggest many reasons for the dominance of the Greek fables or drama in human imagination but their value was unquestioned either as *exempla* of morality or as the fate of legendary personages. And each age interpreted them in terms of its own form and pressures: Racine transformed them into his peculiar Roman-French atmosphere; Goethe's *Iphigenie* exploits the immense emotional possibilities of the fable; and when the twentieth century French playwrights Sartre, Cocteau, Camus, and Anouilh turned to them they found in Oedipus, Electra, Orestes a validity that had a direct relation to the present century. So they re-articulated the old bones, discovered a new field for the exercise of wit, the perception of similarities or dissimilarities, and an endless store of over-and-undertones of irony. Through a contemporary idiom, they invite their audience to find meaning, which is usually a synthesis of factors, traditional and contemporary, set in opposition. The comparison between the two ages provides a critical edge, a distancing of the perspective, a curious amalgam of two approaches of life, perceived alternately in opposition or synthesis. I know there are disadvantages in this method. The dramatist must remain close enough to the original

to allow the audience to perceive similitudes and dissimilitudes; and he must imagine a sophisticated audience. But the dramatist is not merely reviving an old skeleton. He is lending a new vitality to it to make contemporary dramatic statement. The past is a ready-made device for universalizing its significance. We in India, however, are making no attempt to re-articulate the Sanskrit dramatists. They have never been subjected to a wide variety of interpretation by the creative minds in relation to the compulsions of their times. Till we learn to do that, the classical theatre will remain a burden (*sacred*, I must think) on our back.

Besides the classical drama is the Indian Folk Theatre: the *Yakshagana* of Karnatak, the *Tamasha* and *Dashavatra* of Maharashtra, the *Bhavai* of Gujrat, the *Raslila*, *Ramlila*, and the *Nautanki* of Uttar Pradesh and North India, the *Yatra* of Bengal, the *Kuchipudi*, the *Burrakatha*, and the *Veedbinatakam* of Andhra, and *Terukoothu* and the *Pagal Vesham* of Madras. Apart from the differences in details of each folk form, they are essentially operatic in nature, suggestive in presentation, and scrupulous in avoiding external scenic aids. Since the folk theatre does not employ a drop curtain, it has the advantage of unlimited space with time reduced to an irrelevant dimension. This freedom from space and time makes it epically expansive, an expansiveness which is re-enforced by the ever-present chorus, relating a variety of episodes, moods and characters. Perhaps, the folk theatre in India is the most elastic form of theatre expression, incorporating pageantry, dance, mime, song, caricature, lampoon, ritual, ceremonial; decorative arts and crafts; in fact everything that has become a way of life of the people. Its ultimate aim is to reaffirm or demonstrate folk beliefs. To achieve this aim, the folk theatre employs local dialect, a rhetorical style, broad and sweeping movements, uncommitted and stylised gestures, simple and informal exits and entries, and above all "type" characters that remain eternally fixed. The emphasis naturally falls on poetic recitation reminiscent of ballad of folk poetry, and the accompanying music. Sometimes the music is so powerful as to drive the drama almost to the margin. Despite its own distinctive idiom, even despite its elastic devices of the chorus evoking a sense of the distant past continuous with the immediate present, the folk theatre remains primarily recitative and rhetorical. It

does not create a dramatic image through developing characters. To the sophisticated it would appear roaring drama, punctuated by a medley of musical instruments. Its vitality, however, lies in the close relationship between the actor and the audience, and the extraordinary use of the narrator who controls the tempo, sets the pace and through his comments maintains the unity of the plot.

Since the poetics of the folk theatre are essentially operatic rather than dramatic I do not think they can be the basis of modern theatre. The adaptation of a few external devices like the chorus, narrator, or music, to underline the meaning, or even multiple stages need not make us romantic obscurantists in believing that the folk art can be a model. The folk theatre is not an unadulterated art, and it certainly is not drama. Whenever it has been accepted as such (*Amarpali*, *Nayya Mori* [My Boat]), the results have been dramatically disastrous. We have had song, dance, music, a series of episodes, tremendous mobility on the stage, but no dramatic quality, no vitality of characters involved in the process of living, no sensuous and palpable image of the playwright's experience. A series of episodes presented in the technics of the folk theatre does not make a relevant theatre.

But the folk theatre certainly offers us a lot of raw material for the creation of operas. Apart from the folk melodies, their warmth and colour, and the singing chorus, the folk theatre has a rich repertoire of extremely well cultivated voices distinctively different from the concert-hall voices of the traditional Indian modes. This rich store house of operatic material, when critically exploited, will create a distinctive Indian opera. A few experiments have been made in this direction beginning with *Meena Gurjari* (1952, Ahmedabad) and *Heer Ranjha* (1956, New Delhi), and *Prithvi Raj Chauhan* (1962, New Delhi). I have deliberately not mentioned a recent production of *Sohni Mahiwal* (1963, New Delhi) because it was not conceived as an opera. It was a sort of a play, a singing play perhaps, in which the dialogue is sung and the actors do not give themselves over to proper acting. The earlier experiments properly define the extent to which the folk theatre could be exploited to create significant operatic form. Behind the amateurish technique of production

and articulation of voices, one could discern a definable direction; a particular form in which the Indian Theatre could develop its own distinctive idiom, its own concrete particularity. In *Meena Gurjari* Jaswant Thaker and Dina Gandhi tried to integrate folk melodies, mime, and dance into the story and employed the vital elements of the *Bhavai* form. *Heer Ranjha* and *Prithvi Raj Chauhan* exploited the folk music of the Punjab and Rajasthan respectively with such imaginative skill as to create through music and words the haunting magic of an opera. But Sheila Bhatia (the writer and the producer) cramped both into a European form. The stage was cluttered with heavy, realistic props and the unlimited space that these operas needed for an epic expansion was sacrificed for an irrelevant spectacle. Had she emancipated herself from the realistic stage or adopted the mobile stage of *Nautanki* or *Tamasha*, her lines and half-lines would have woven a texture of music that lives beyond the moment on the stage. As it was, the chorus songs lost their incantation; the members were not spread out to weave small friezes of music that the words demanded. The realistic stage strangled the voice of the opera, and at times tempted the actors to behave as if they were acting in a singing play. However, Sheila Bhatia's two operas have opened up new ways in the operatic field. If the results of her experiments can be critically adapted to new themes and contemporary patterns of living, we might succeed in creating a vital and unique opera tradition.

This brings me to the dynamic experiments (dynamic because related to the living contexts) with the poetics of western theatre. I do not consider these experiments as an unfortunate tendency, nor do I complain that the western tradition has cramped our freedom to create our own distinctive idiom in the theatre. After all, all art forms are rooted in the evolving patterns of society; and since we have absorbed so much of the western ways of economics and politics, of education and empirical approach, I do not know why we should feel distressed at the influence of the western poetics of the theatre. Social revolutions create new idioms, and when social revolutions are *planned* on western models, what is the harm in learning about the theatre from the west? Just as we find it difficult to revert to an agrarian economy and its consequent politics, just as we

find it difficult to revive our philosophy or our scientific attitude, however admirable it might have been to the needs of society then, we would also find it difficult to revert to art forms so alien to us today. The European tradition, whatever be our value judgments about it, has certainly created new patterns, new modes of living (at least in the articulate section of society), new attitudes. How, then, is it possible, as it is often suggested by our obscurantist drama critics and scholars or by a handful of Europeans looking for the exotic, to discard a mode that has permeated our life? Civilisations and art survive only when we recognise the law of change amidst order and order amidst change. The specific quality of environments occasions specific modes. And each environment is changing either through the interaction of social units or through contact with other civilisations, modifying the social patterns by modifying the ideas occasioned by them. Thus have societies grown and responded to new sets of habits, demanding new adjustments. It is in this context that the experiment with western drama is both dynamic and salutary. Either directly or through adaptations or translations, the western plays have made us feel that drama is not to be confused with any other literary form, e. g. a poem, or with useful raw material for the actor or producer. Of course a play shares with other literary forms the quality of communicating an imaginative experience. Like a poem or a novel, the play also seeks appropriate linguistic structures. But unlike the other literary forms, the play subsists not only in its form. A poem or a novel does. In a novel or a poem the organisation of material is identified with form. It is never so in drama. A play has to be performed, and it is on the boards of a theatre that it seeks its full consummation. The literary form of the drama always aspires to a life beyond itself, and it is discovered in the theatre. Therein lies the distinctive quality of a play, its uniqueness as a mode of communication, and paradoxically its limitation. A play lives in two worlds, complementary to each other: the world of aesthetic experience and the world of theatre art where production technique, historical influences, conventions and cultural conditions converge to make it the thing *it is*. These two worlds are organically related to each other and it is in the fusion of these worlds that we have *the play*, and the uniqueness of the drama.

In Search of Indian Theatre

Of these two worlds the first carries the "potentials," the generative pressure (which is imitated in the movement of the action) towards the fulfilment of the play's form and gives to the acts, gestures, articulation and attitudes the peculiar intensity known as *dramatic quality*. Everything else is determined by it and is coordinated towards its illumination. Anything can be dramatic if it can be related to it.

Moreover, the western models have revealed to us that a relevant drama is a mode of communication through intelligible, concrete, and palpable images: character in precise contexts rather than at the dissolving edge of history, a well-defined action arising out of the vitality of characters and adequate speech-structures. The plays of Ibsen and Shaw, of Strindberg and Brecht, of Chekhov and Arthur Miller (to name only a few apart from the classics) have brought in a new sense of values and theatre experience. And when some of their plays get adequately translated into Indian languages, they do present wholesome models of dramatic art relevant to our changing patterns of behaviour. We do feel, howsoever nebulously, that drama in order to be vital must be rooted in our contexts. Is this realisation not valuable for the growth of contemporary theatre in India? Or should we reject it to sustain our romantic nostalgia for the *Indian* tradition? Of course, we have to be ourselves but our being ourselves in the theatre is linked up with the complex problems of our national life.

As it is, our urban theatre has its origin in the impact of the western theatre but somehow there is still a confusion persisting in the minds of most of our playwrights; a confusion between a series of episodes on the stage and a dramatic action that seeks its potential form on the boards of a theatre. I do not know why our playwrights seldom realise (despite the models that they normally watch or read about) that a drama is not a literary exercise, not an essay for illustration, not even a vehicle for social, moral or political debate. It is a sensuous equivalent of the complexity of thought. It must have a concrete, well-defined, clearly articulated action in which the elements of plot, agency, speech and gestures continuously exhibit the changing minutiae of relationships in the structure of thought. The sensuous image (what Aristotle called action, perhaps) gives validity

and relevance to characters, determines the meaning, defines the verbal medium and anticipates the form whose fulfilment lies ahead. When the sensuous image is nebulous or disintegrated, the play becomes arbitrary, the drama gets coerced into the margins; the emphases shift to the externals. That is the trouble with most Indian plays like Romesh Mehta's *Zamana* (1956), R. G. Anand's *Dilli Jali* (1958) Chandra Gupta Vidyalkar's *Nyya Ki Rat* (1959) and many other plays in the other Indian languages.

Another difficulty with our theatre today arises from our failure to discriminate between literary language and dramatic, spoken structures. I am not quite certain but I do sometimes feel that a significant play cannot live on the boards of a theatre if the linguistic structures are abstracted from the speech structures. Too literary a language, a commendable quality in itself, produces emotional barriers, a sort of impregnable Chinese wall, and however ingenious the actors and the producer at devising subterfuges, they will face deplorable failures. I may be wrong but I think that no playwright can in his diction and rhythm afford to disregard the spoken norm. It is by thinking and living in the language of the people that a drama affects imaginative responses. Divest language of its living vitality and you produce irritating apathy in the audience. What a pity that our playwrights rarely realise the necessity of creating significances from the language that has the vitality of our spoken speech. Of all forms of literature, the drama is the only one that breathes the richer the more the structures of language are rooted in the language spoken round the corner of my street. Only the playwright can reveal to me the nuances I never comprehended before. Literariness of linguistic structures can destroy the immediacy of impact as it does in J. C. Mathur's *Konarka* (1959) or Dharam Vir Bharati's *Andha Yug* (The Dark Epoch, 1963). Perhaps, my point would get clearer if I were to compare Shakespeare's *Macbeth* with a Hindi translation of it by Hari-vansh Rai Bacchan (1958-59). Apart from the fact that a literal translation strangled the poetic potentials of the original, the translator never seems to have realised the speech structures of Shakespeare. It never occurred to him that Shakespeare builds his characters through speech structures and sound patterns and a

subtle sense of metaphor controlled by the dramatic situation of the characters. Failure to appreciate and grasp Shakespeare's subtleties of speech in verse, creating meaning and character, made the translation often sink into barbarous cacophony and no amount of jugglery could redeem it for dramatic utterance. In the Hindi *Macbeth*, speech rhythms were chopped and sound patterns artificially imposed. There was, thus, a chaos between dramatic action and the emotions stirred by the situation. The medium became irrelevant and the play awkward, feeble and ineffective. A strange confusion about the aesthetic principles governing the language of the theatre persists in our mind. Is it a hangover from the literary classical drama?

A similar confusion persists about epic material. Undoubtedly, epic material has always been a challenge to a playwright, but a playwright has always to remember that, though single episodes can be the natural material of drama, he cannot squeeze, except at a severe sacrifice, material already treated on an extensive scale. It is quite a different matter to use saga or mythical material for either dramatic perspective or for ironic contrasts and parallelism as Yeats and Anouilh do, but to present material already treated at epic length in a compressed form is to do the unsatisfying. The whole significance is removed from the palpable immediacy and what lives as a great panorama of the multiplicity of life shrivels into insignificance.

Apparently our attitudes and aesthetic criteria are in a flux. There is so much of unresolved confusion that, despite the emergence of excellent theatre men like Sombhu Mitra, E. Alkazi, Utpal Dutta and Sheila Bhatia, we have not, as yet, discovered our definable shape. A multiplicity of forces pulls us in various directions and the absence of responsible critical opinion makes the confusion worse confounded. We do not discriminate between a theatre that is vital, relevant and creative and a theatre that is spuriously traditional. Moreover, very few of our playwrights conceive their material as "Drama" imaging the complexity of our living. And when some of them do so, they do not use dramatic structures that breathe the vitality of the spoken language. Perhaps, our trouble is the paucity of good *plays*. Only when we have plays that can live on the boards of a theatre will we be able to seek our compulsive direction, our definitive idiom.