

27. My Drama Reminiscences

A characteristic feature of the modern times is wild rush and hurry and consequently excitement. Living as we do in the midst of it, we may not realise it in full; but a

little detached view of what is happening around and a comparison of the same with the conditions that obtained about half a century ago will clearly show that a tremendous change has come about in the conditions of our life during these fifty years. Things are moving fast and we want them to move faster still. About 50 years ago, in my youth, people generally walked from place to place, then a bullock bandy was a luxury, horse carriage was used only by the aristocratic few; motor cars were not heard of except perhaps in cities. Those were spacious times, life moved gently and smoothly and people generally lived contented lives I am not sure whether people of those times were not more happy than we with all the so-called modern "conveniences and gadgets". What changes have come about in our lives! When I think of those days and the present time, I have a nostalgic yearning to relive those days. But that is evidently not possible now. In every walk of life and in every human activity this tremendous change from simplicity and grace to complexity and excitement is noticeable.

Being in a reminiscent mood I wish to call back to my mind memories of my early association with dramatic activity. When I first appeared on the stage as Shakuntala in 1906, in the drama "Shakuntalam" put on boards by the Young Men's India Association of Lalgudi in Tiruchi District, we had very little stage equipment, very few make-up requisites and practically no lighting facilities. We generally chose a school hall for the play with a stage improvised at one end with a number of tables. We used to borrow one or two curtains and a few side screens from some professional company or some people who used to hire out such things. Lighting was provided by some powerful kerosene lamps—these were replaced by gas lights later—hung in front of the stage. As for make-up we were blissfully ignorant of any ready-made things or paint sticks or eye-brow pencil or spirit gum. Cropped heads were rare in those

days and so for lady characters we were using what was called "half-tope", just some hair or chowri designed to cover the shaved portion—generally 3 to 4 inches broad—of the forehead; and for male characters there was little need even for such a simple contrivance. For powdering the face we used the yellow powder (a compound of sulphur) then used by professionals (called "Aritharam" in Tamil); some black smear supplied the moustache and hair near the temples. Our homes supplied most of our dresses and jewels. In those days almost all of us (males and ladies) used to have our ear-holes bored for ear ornament, so there was not much difficulty in wearing an ear ring. Of course lady characters were represented by men on the stage—a lady acting on the stage along with men was unthinkable. There was one snag however in regard to the royal robes of kings and princes. It was the custom (or fashion) then for royalties to wear what was called "jimki-suit", velvet suit embroidered with glittering pieces of tiny glass tubes. This tinsel will shine and glitter in the light and dazzle the on-lookers. Naturally such a dress will be heavy to wear, but we did not mind—why, in fact we did not mind many other things as well.

Orchestra was provided generally by a harmonist who will himself sing and a drummer, both placed on one side of the stage, behind the side screen and hence invisible to the audience. Later on, it became the fashion to have the harmonist on the stage itself at one end so that he was in full view of the audience all the time. What I am saying here about the amateur theatricals is more or less applicable to the professional stage of those days as well. Orchestra in the pit in front of the stage, foot-lights and such other improvements came in later. From what I have said our amateur theatre might appear rather crude; well, whatever deficiency there might have been was made up by the enthusiasm and whole-heartedness of our members. Within a few

years we effected great improvement in our equipments. Some of our members got into touch with some amateur organisation at Madras and others with some of the professionals in the art. We introduced wigs (half and full), grease paints, eye-brow pencil, nose paste, spirit gum, crepe hair, etc. We also improved our stage arrangements but the harmonist still continued to sit on the stage in full view of the audience.

As for music, we had plenty of it, the professional stage was more or less our standard and music was used in plenty, in and out of season. There used to be what were then called the 'entrance song' and 'exit song' for almost every important character, and on the professional stage of those times, singing characters, whatever be their proper position on the stage used to go near the harmonist whenever they had to sing. Some characters like Narada used to indulge even in swaras and other musical acrobatics on the professional stage. Even in recent times, in one of our talkies we had Narada and Krishna taking turns in singing swaras for a classical composition. But we tried to steer clear of several of these defects; still we used to have plenty of music.

It was in connection with the work of composing songs for the various characters that I first discovered my own ability—though quite rudimentary at the time—to compose music. Practically I had to compose the songs for all the characters.

In those days we used to act Indian plays in English (Sir William Jones's *Shakuntalam*, Vasudeva Rao's *Chandrasahas* and so on) and also occasionally Tamil plays. By that time, thanks to P. Sambanda Mudaliar, Suryanarayana Sastri and other pioneers, we had a number of plays written in Tamil for the stage. The pioneering work of P. Sambanda Mudaliar in this direction can never be over-estimated.

When I went to Travancore early in 1910 I was naturally on the look-out for amateur organisations interested in Tamil plays. There were one or two organisations occasionally putting on the boards some Malayalam plays. Though many Tamil professional troupes visited Trivandrum and were much patronised by the public and Royalty and though there were local organisations consisting mainly of Tamil speaking people, there was not one society interested in Tamil dramas. One of these associations of mainly Tamilians used to enact one play in English every year at the time of the Maharajah's birthday. Generally it was an Indian play written in English. This was their only dramatic activity for the year. I found however that they had plenty of talent which could be harnessed for sustained high class dramatic activity. When I suggested to them the idea of acting Indian dramas in Tamil periodically they were simply thunderstruck. "What? An amateur to act in a Tamil play! Unthinkable. No decent educated man will "stoop" to act in Tamil, that is only for the professional people; we can never dream of appearing on the stage and speaking in Tamil". That is what I was told. I explained to them that in other parts of South India there were societies of "decent educated" people who were doing it and were being encouraged and patronised by the "educated" public also. I told them also about my own activities in that line. But no! they would not countenance the idea. It was not that they personally disapproved of the idea but they were afraid that the public would not approve of it and would look down upon the actors if they acted in Tamil. Then I gave them a short account of the activities of the Lalgudi Y.M.I.A.—it may be incidentally stated that this Y.M.I.A. was started 8 years before the Madras Y.M.I.A. was started by Dr. Annie Besant. One of the prominent members of the Trivandrum organisation then suggested, "If perhaps some amateur organisation from outside Travancore consisting of 'decent educated' persons come here and enact

plays in Tamil, it is quite possible that this prejudice on the part of the public could be removed and then the way will be open for us amateurs to act Tamil plays". I offered to bring the Lalgudi Y.M.I.A. troupe to Trivandrum and have a series of plays enacted. Accordingly I arranged for the Lalgudi troupe to visit Trivandrum next year and act three plays. We had vakils, doctors, professors, headmasters and such "decent, educated" people among our troupe. I was able to get the patronage of H.H. Sri Mulam Tirunal Maharaja. The Dewan, Sir P. Rajagopalachari, greatly helped me too. Also we had good dignified and intellectual audiences. The venture was a great success. When the people saw professors, judges, doctors and advocates acting Tamil plays the old prejudice died instant death and they began to ask for Tamil plays. Thus was initiated in Trivandrum amateur Tamil dramatic activity. I shall pass over the early stages. I even now remember what a great surprise it was to the friends there when I introduced "improved ways" of make-up in the shape of paint sticks, spirit gum, full wigs and so on.

The audience see the drama on the stage in front of the curtain but for us the real drama is behind the curtain, on the stage and in the green room. Compared to this drama "behind the scenes" the drama witnessed in front of the curtain fades into dull insignificance. I can recall a number of such dramatic happenings behind. I have already referred to the "jimki suit" decorated with tinsel glass tubes. One of our members who was dressed for a prince's part (naturally in such a suit) was accustomed to using snuff and after drawing in a pinch of snuff it was his habit to wipe off the scattered particles of the snuff by just rubbing the left forearm across the nose. When he was about to enter the stage he had his pinch of snuff—perhaps to put him in the proper mood—and by sheer force of habit he ran his left arm across his nose. Unfortunately the tips of

some of the glass tubes of his dress came into rather violent contact with the nose and tore away some flesh from it and blood began to spurt out in plenty. One can easily imagine the subsequent commotion, some of us in perhaps lighter vein positively enjoyed the discomfiture of the "prince". His nose was duly attended to and we could not avoid some delay.

On another occasion a friend was acting the part of Siva; our green room Director was saying that snake ear ornament was a necessary requisite for that part. But that actor, strangely enough, had no holes in his ear-lobes. The Director however assured him that the matter could be managed somehow with some spring arrangement. So the actor got dressed up and there was nothing more to be done except putting on the snake ear ring. Our green room Director was a sport; he had the snake ornament ready and under the pretext of fixing it up with a spring he actually pierced the ear lobe with a thin wire sharpened at end for that very purpose. The actor's reaction may easily be visualised he gave a wild shriek and jumped. But we all laughed, the green room expert had whispered a hint to us as to what he had in his mind. The actor was infuriated, but what to do? He could not undo what had been done, and he could not appear on the stage with the ornament only on one ear; so he had to submit himself to the other ear-lobe also being pierced. Thus his ear-boring ceremony was performed that day.

I remember vividly another occasion of a distinctly dramatic character. We were enacting Chandrasahsa, and in the last scene Madana, son of Dushtabuddhi, is killed by mistake; and round his corpse spooks and ghosts gather and dance with joy as they had a human corpse to feast themselves upon. Now, our stage was put up with a number of school room tables. Though carefully chosen and arranged these tables had small interspaces between them. The friend

who acted Madana's part fell down as a corpse. Unfortunately a bit of flesh of his thigh got caught up in one of these interspaces; he was a corpse and so could not move. In the meantime the ghosts and spooks started dancing around, when they danced the tables began to move to and fro alongside with the result that the strip of flesh caught between the tables was subjected to sideways pressure and got squeezed between the tables. The friend however was true to his part and with remarkable patience endured all that agony till the curtain fell. Then he had his revenge and gave a good chiding to the ghosts. We had a hearty laugh in which he also joined.

Such incidents were the spice of our amateur dramatic activity.