

9. TRADITIONAL THEATRE

Living traditions occupy a prominent place in the Indian social system. Any living tradition has a natural flow. There can be no doubt about the fact that traditional art forms reflect the ideals of the society, its determination to survive, its ethos, emotions, fellow-feelings, and so on. Drama in itself is a complete form of arts. It includes in its framework acting, dialogue, poetry, music, etc.



In community living, the art of singing has its own importance. In all the traditional theatre-forms, songs and the art of singing have an important role to play. Traditional music of the theatre is an expression of the feelings of the community.

Traditionally the language of ordinary people has an element of creativity, though not based on classical or grammatical roots. This kind of creativity is spontaneous, emerging from the circumstances. When there is intensity of emotions, there is a natural kind of rhythm in the expressions. It is this natural rhythm from which emerges the traditional theatre-form. In this art form, sorrow, joy, frustration, hatred and love have their role and place.

In different regions of India, there are religious festivals, fairs, gatherings, ritual offerings, prayers, almost throughout the year. During these occasions, traditional theatre forms are presented. They reflect the common man's social attitudes and perceptions. In this social portrayal, there is also the individual's role which is given due importance.

Traditional theatre forms incorporate not only the common man's interests but there is also a classical element in them. This classical facet, however, takes on regional, local and folk coloring. It is possible, that those associated with the classical world of Sanskrit drama, went to the neighbouring regions after its decline and intermingled with the local theatre forms. This kind of synthesis, give-and-take must have taken place on various levels such as written, verbal, classical, contemporary, national and local.

In traditional theatre forms there are special styles of dance portraying the entry on to the stage or platform, narrative and descriptive roles. The best example of descriptive acting is the Bidapat naach. In this traditional theatre form, emphasis is not on beauty but on acting itself and narrative and descriptive skills. Dance as a narrative art is the

base of theatre form which can be seen in the traditional theatre form of Bhavai of Gujarat. In this form, quick or slow foot movement is a means of narration. The art of making the entry by dancing has been perfected in the traditional Kashmiri theatre form, Bhand Jashn. The way each character walks and enters the platform, identifies him. In Koodiyaattam and Ankia Naat, the entry by dancing itself is complicated and artistic. In the forms, the tempo and basic posture and gesture identifies the role of the character.

In traditional theatre, age-old forms, customs and the desire to improvise are intermingled. It is usually when the significant themes are enacted, that the acting restricts itself to traditional norms, not deviating from it. But, every time the theme inches towards the contemporary, the actors improvise as far as dialogue delivery is concerned.

In traditional theatre forms there are certain conventions of presentations depending upon and changing according to the form and size of the stage or the platform and other available situations. There is no formal setup governing the entry or exit of the actors. Depending on the situation or context, the actors enter into the stage and enact their role without being formally introduced. After a particular event or incident is over, all the artists make an exit, or all of them sit down on the sides of the stage or near the backdrop, conveying the change of a scene



In traditional theatre forms, there is no such thing as episodes. There is always continuity in its theme, structure and presentation. There is also a scope for improvisation and incorporation of new references leading to subtle extension in the story-line. There is direct and intimate communication between the actors and the audience.

Traditional theatre forms have definitely been influenced by industrial civilization, industrialization, and urbanization. The socio-cultural aspects of these influences should be carefully studied. There was a time when Kanpur became the centre of the traditional theatre Nautanki. Artists, dancers and singers produced plays based on local heroes, their popularity and traditional love stories. Thus, a local theatre form acquired significance in the field of entertainment.

Traditional theatre forms have a common distinguishing feature that is the element of simplicity. What is the underlying force of traditional theatre forms that has enabled it to survive and maintain its simplicity? The fact remains, that it is the immediate, direct, realistic and rhythmic relationship that the spectators are able to develop with the artists of traditional theatre forms which is generally not experienced in other art forms. It is reflected in the applaud by the spectators by means of clapping their hands.

Secondly the development of traditional theatre forms is based on such local and regional peculiarities which are not bound and restricted by social and economic divisions, limitations, etc. Traditional art forms have influenced classical art forms and vice-versa. It is an eternal journey in the sphere of 'culture'.

In traditional theatre forms, characters keep changing their place on the stage to be more impressive and to give the situation a greater significance. This technique also reduces the chance of boredom through repetition and stillness. Dialogues delivery is usually carried out in a high pitch. This helps the actors in reaching out to a larger audience. The artists always add something or the other to the original dialogue on their own. The changes brought through improvisations, make the spectators ecstatic. Also, it establishes a direct relationship between the artists and the spectators. The clown also plays a similar role. While being humorous, he also touches upon the socio-economic, political issues and situations with lot of satire. There are different methods too, in the way the clown makes his appearance. If the king, in traditional theatre forms, decides on a step not beneficial for the people at large, the clown appears and takes the side of the common man. He makes the audience laugh and at the same time discloses the anti-people attitude of the king.

DIFFERENT FORMS OF TRADITIONAL THEATRE

Bhand Pather, the traditional theatre form of Kashmir, is a unique combination of dance, music and acting. Satire, wit and parody are preferred for inducing laughter. In this theatre form, music is provided with surnai, nagaara and dhol. Since the actors of Bhand Pather are mainly from the farming community, the impact of their way of living, ideals and sensitivity is discernible.



Originally the theatre form Swang, was mainly music-based. Gradually, prose too, played its role in the dialogues. The softness of emotions, accomplishment of rasa alongwith the development of character can be seen in this theatre form. The two important styles of Swang are from Rohtak and Haathras. In the style belonging to Rohtak, the language used is Haryanvi (Bangru) and in Haathras, it is Brajbhasha.

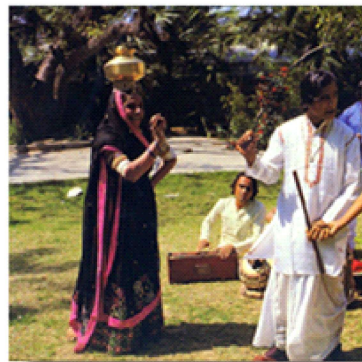
Nautanki is usually associated with Uttar Pradesh. The most popular centres of this traditional theatre form are Kanpur, Lucknow and Haathras. The meters used in the verses are: Doha, Chaubola, Chhappai, Behar-e-tabeel. There was a time when only men acted in Nautanki but nowadays, women have also started taking part in the performances. Among those remembered with reverence is Gulab Bai of Kanpur. She gave a new dimension to this old theatre form.



Raasleela is based exclusively on Lord Krishna legends; it is believed that Nand Das wrote the initial plays based on the life of Krishna. In this theatre form the dialogues in prose combined beautifully with songs and scenes from Krishna's pranks.



Bhavai is the traditional theatre form of Gujarat. The centers of this form are Kutch and Kathiawar. The instruments used in Bhavai are: bhungal, tabla, flute, pakhaawaj, rabaab, sarangi, manjeera, etc. In Bhavai, there is a rare synthesis of devotional and romantic sentiments.



Fairs in honour of gods, or religious rituals and ceremonies have within their framework musical plays are known as Jatra. This form was born and nurtured in Bengal. Krishna Jatra became popular due to Chaitanya's influence. Later, however, worldly love stories too, found a place in Jatra. The earlier form of Jatra has been musical. Dialogues were added at later stage. The actors themselves describe the change of scene, the place of action, etc.



Maach is the traditional theatre form of Madhya Pradesh. The term Maach is used for the stage itself as also for the play. In this theatre form songs are given prominence in between the dialogues. The term for dialogue in this form is bol and rhyme in narration is termed vanag. The tunes of this theatre form are known as rangat.



Bhaona is a presentation of the Ankia Naat of Assam. In Bhaona cultural glimpses of Assam, Bengal Orissa, Mathura and Brindavan can be seen. The Sutradhaar, or narrator begins the story, first in Sanskrit and then in either Brajboli or Assamese.



Tamaasha is a traditional folk theatre form of Maharashtra. It has evolved from the folk forms such as Gondhal, Jagran and Kirtan. Unlike other theatre forms, in Tamaasha the female actress is the chief exponent of dance movements in the play. She is known as Murki. Classical

music, footwork at lightning-speed, and vivid gestures make it possible to portray all the emotions through dance.



Dashavatar is the most developed theatre form of the Konkan and Goa regions. The performers personify the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu-the god of preservation and creativity. The ten incarnations are Matsya (fish), Kurma (tortoise), Varaha (boar), Narsimha (lion-man), Vaman (dwarf), Parashuram, Rama, Krishna (or Balram), Buddha and Kalki. Apart from stylized make-up, the Dashavatar performers wear masks of wood and papier mache.



Krishnattam, folk theatre of Kerala, came into existence in the middle of 17th century A.D. under the patronage of King Manavada of Calicut. Krishnattam is a cycle of eight plays performed for eight consecutive days. The plays are Avataram, Kaliyamandana, Rasa krida, kamasavadha, Swayamvaram, Bana Yudham, Vivida Vadham, and Swargarohana. The episodes are based on the theme of Lord Krishna - his birth, childhood pranks and various deeds depicting victory of good over evil.



Mudiyettu, traditional folk theatre form of Kerala is celebrated in the month of Vrischikam (November-December). It is usually performed only in the Kali temples of Kerala, as an oblation to the Goddess. It depicts the triumph of goddess Bhadrakali over the asura Darika. The seven characters in Mudiyettu-Shiva, Narada, Darika, Danavendra, Bhadrakali, Kooli and Koimbidar (Nandikeshvara) are all heavily made-up.



Theyyam is a traditional and extremely popular folk theatre form of Kerala. The word 'Theyyam' is derived from the Sanskrit word 'Daivam' meaning God. Hence it is called God's dance. The tradition of worshipping of spirits of ancestors, folk heroes, and deities of various diseases and ailments can be traced back to ancient times in South India. Theyyam is performed by various castes to appease and worship these spirits. One of the distinguishing features of Theyyam is the colourful costume and awe-inspiring headgears (mudi) nearly 5 to 6 feet high made of arecanut splices, bamboos, leaf sheaths of arecanut and wooden planks and dyed into different strong colours using turmeric, wax and arac.



Koodiyaattam, one of the oldest traditional theatre forms of Kerala, is based on Sanskrit theatre traditions. The characters of this theatre form are: Chakyaar or actor, Naambiyaar, the instrumentalists and Naangyaar, those taking on women's roles. The Sutradhar or narrator and the Vidushak or jesters are the protagonists. It is the Vidushak alone who delivers the dialogues. Emphasis on hand gestures and eye movements makes this dance and theatre form unique.



Yakshagana, traditional theatre form of Karnataka, is based on mythological stories and Puranas. The most popular episodes are from the Mahabharata i.e. Draupadi swayamvar, Subhadra vivah, Abhimanyu vadh, Karna-Arjun yuddh and from Ramayana i.e. Raajyaabhishek, Lav-kush Yuddh, Baali-Sugreeva yuddha and Panchavati.



Therukoothu, the most popular form of folk drama of Tamil Nadu, literally means "street play". It is mostly performed at the time of annual temple festivals of Mariamman (Rain goddess) to achieve rich harvest. At the core of the extensive repertoire of Therukoothu there is a cycle of eight plays based on the life of Draupadi. Kattiakaran, the Sutradhara of the Therukoothu performance, gives the gist of the play to the audience and Komali entertains the audience with his buffoonery.

