

EXPERIMENTS IN FOLK DRAMA

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The challenge of producing folk theatre for a contemporary audience has absorbed me for some time and through a series of fortunate coincidences I recently had an opportunity of putting some of my ideas concerning the presentation of Bhavai of Gujarat and Nautanki of North India into practise.

Choice of Plays

There are about 61 Bhavai *vesha's* (playlets) on record, of which about 20 are still popular with traditional Bhavai players. Unlike Nautanki, the texts of Bhavai plays are not published. On the basis of a generally accepted outline of a given story, each Bhavai troupe presents its own version. While the relevant songs and verses are selected from traditional stock, dramatic dialogue in prose is improvised by the actors. Depending on the talent and the mood of an actor the performance of the same play may vary, not only from troupe to troupe but also from day to day, by the same troupe. This practice has made its form extremely flexible enabling a smooth transition from heaven to earth, from the sublime to the absurd. Actors can comment on a topical event while playing an historical role without appearing incongruous. If a village audience grows restless while watching a long serious scene, a comic episode is brought in without the slightest hesitation, although it may be quite irrelevant to the main story. Many of these scenes are saturated with frank obscenity. After regaining the attention of their audience the actors can glide back into the interrupted main story equally effortlessly. With mediocre players this flexibility can be disastrous to the structure of a play.

I had chosen the *vesha* of *Jasma Odan* primarily because the story has appealed to me since childhood. There is an undercurrent of the dignity of labour and of human values which has significant relevance to our times. It was an exciting challenge to project the universal aspect of the story in contemporary terms for an audience. (Brief resume of the original version given at the end of article in Notes on Text).

The only Gujarati-speaking cast available in Delhi being untrained amateurs, it became imperative that I write out the entire script, leaving scope for improvisation within a well-defined framework, so as to afford a sense of spontaneity which is one of the charming characteristics of this form. In doing so I relied on the inherent *rasa* orientation of its structure, however diffuse it may have become. (Brief note on structure of Classical Sanskrit Drama in Notes).

Bhavai has an organic link with the tradition of the ancient *uparupakas*, like *rasak*, *vilasika*, *bhanika* etc. Some elements of one act *rupakas* like *prahasana bhava* and *veethi* also seem to have survived in this form (See Note 2).

All performing art-forms developed in the ancient Indian theatre were *rasa* - oriented irrespective of their being classical or folk (See Note 3). When our classical tradition was broken around the 11th century under the impact of historical factors, folk traditions seem to have suffered less damage. As compared to the *rupakas* the *rasa* structure of *uparupakas* was simple. It became looser in the case of Bhavai where *Hasya rasa* (Humourous mood) dominates even in the *veshas* with serious intent like that of *Jasma Odan*.

In this *vesh* if the theme of *sati* is to be brought out as is done by the traditional Bhavai players, the *Pradhan rasa* (Prime mood) should have been *Karuna* (pathos). If dignity of labour were to be projected, as it is in my version of this play, then the *Pradhan rasa* should be *Karmaveera* (heroic, based on heroic deeds). *Hasya rasa* (humourous mood) usually weakens the impact of *Veer rasa*, (heroic mood). Noble enthusiasm cannot be evoked for something that is ridiculously incongruent. The undue stress on *Hasya rasa* in Bhavai is due partly to its struggle for existence. But the fact remains that the domination of *Hasya rasa* has become one of the essential features of this form and any attempt to re-instate Bhavai must recognise this.

I tried to overcome this problem by restraining the comic obscenities where it could be done without destroying the robust, earthy quality of Bhavai and by balancing it with greater reliance on good humoured digs and satire. After the marriage of Jasma the comic character of Ranga becomes a more direct participant and a commentator in my version.

This inherent ambiguity in the inter-relationship between the various *Gauna rasas* (Secondary) and the *Pradhan rasa* (Prime) of the play have tended to destroy the dramatic structure to such an extent that its impact is often affected. This may have been an additional factor that led to the prolonged indifference of the elite towards this form.

I made some effort to give structural compactness, in keeping with its basic flexibility by the juxtapositioning of contrasting moods and by re-arranging episodes in a more defined pattern so as to help a clearer emergence of the theme of human dignity and labour. Similarly, I altered the balance of different episodes and made a more sustained use of *Nayak* and *Rangla* as linking devices in the tradition of ancient *Arthopkshepakas*. (See Note 4)

Having chosen this play for its contemporary relevance, I re-interpreted some characters without changing their traditional image. Indra is portrayed as an intelligent sensitive man driven by the compulsions of his consuming ambition but who is also conscious of the limitations of a tortuous passion for power. In some of the traditional versions Indra is accompanied by his attendants Black God (Kala Dev) and Red God (Lal Dev). I replaced them by the God of Time and Rangdev, the God of Colour respectively. With these three characters I developed an introductory scene before Indra confronts Nala Rishi with his proposal that the sage should give up his *tapasya* (penance). This scene has helped to remove an obvious interpolation at the end of the play where a Fakir suddenly appears to bring Jasma back to life in the traditional versions. This organically irrelevant character must have crept in during the Muslim period in Gujarat.

Nala Rishi in my version when he is reborn as Rudio (Rupaji in the Hindi version) retains his power of concentration and creative faculty even though his physical appearance is ugly as a result of Kamkundala's curse. The character of Nala Rishi presents a special problem because his traditional image of a comic idiot is too deeply entrenched in the popular mind to make any drastic changes possible. I retained his comic aspect but tried to motivate it differently by making it the result of an excessively one-track mind. His unusual concentration on the subject of his specialisation and interest making him appear a funny, absent-minded oddity, to the common man. If an opportunity presents itself of producing this play with a professional cast, I should like to further reduce the inconsistencies which continue to cling to this character with the help of a capable actor playing this role. I feel that traditional performances have done him an injustice by leaving his rich potentialities unexplored and making him one dimensional.

Printed Texts

One is tempted to believe that if a firm tradition of printing the texts of the Bhavai *veshas* was established as in the case of Nautanki and a taste for reading this type of popular literature is cultivated among the newly educated rural population the structure of this form would improve. But the example of Nautanki soon makes you think twice.

In case of the Nautanki play, *Amar Singh Rathod*, I came across problems which were just as serious although they were of a different kind. There are flourishing publishing houses of Nautanki plays enjoying the loyalty of lakhs of readers. As a matter of fact the author-cum-publishers actively encourage the small groups of touring Nautanki singers to accept their printed versions of popular plays without charging any royalty, as a part of their promotional drive, recovering their investments through the increased sale of the books. Many people go to hear Nautanki rather than to see it. This has contributed towards the petrification of this form making its structure extremely rigid. This rigidity, with a tendency to dry up its dramatic potentialities, may come in the way of its further development. This structural peculiarity has influenced the production style of this play decisively.

Of the two styles of Nautanki performances, *Kanpuri* and *Hathrasi*, the latter has taken this process to its logical conclusion by almost eliminating the scope for improvising dialogues in prose. Its text is in verse, at times breaking into a song. Improvised dialogues in between the composed verses of the *Kanpuri* style sound stilted. Basic unit of this form consists of verses written in metres following each other in a definite order, i.e. *Chobola*, *Bahertabil* and *Daud* with variations provided by metres like *Chand*, *Lavani*, *Sortha* etc. This order seems to have become integrated in its texture.

Amar Singh Rathod (brief synopsis given in Note 5) is traditionally played on two subsequent nights of five-hour sessions each, to a village audience. This ten hour's duration had to be cut down to two hours, if it was to become a rewarding theatre experience for an urban audience as well. With a rigidly defined structure this became a difficult task. The production was planned with a cast selected from professional Nautanki singers following the *Hathrasi* style. Available resources in terms of finance as well as talent had to be kept in mind while re-orienting the script. Lack of adequate investment meant restriction on numbers as well as on the quality of singers to be employed. However, after cutting out repetitions and irrelevant paddings from the traditional text, a clearer pattern of *rasa*-structure did seem to emerge. The first part of this play centres around its hero i.e. it is *Nayak Pradhan* with *Veer rasa* as its *Pradhan rasa* (Prime Mood).

Its second part revolves round its heroine i.e. it is *Nayika Pradhan*, involving *Karun rasa* as its *Pradhan rasa*.

This dichotomy in its *rasa* - structure is unfortunate as it dilutes the unity of impact. In my re-oriented abridged version of the play *Veer rasa* with all its manifestation is the *Pradhan rasa*, strengthened by *Gauna rasas* like *Shrinagar*, *Vatsalya*, *Karuna* etc.

There seems to be no scope for introducing *Hasya rasa* in this particular play, except perhaps by treating villains like Salavat Khan and Arjan Gaud in a lighter vein. With drastic cutting and editing the theme of human dignity which was scattered and buried deep in the traditional versions emerged and added to the cogency of the plot.

While rearranging certain episodes, some verses interlinking them were rewritten to make the exposition of the theme in a specific direction more emphatic. Most of the verses said by Ranga were recast or freshly written to include relevant reflections on events.

In Nautanki, the traditional character of Ranga represents a detached observer of events, at times linking the episodes, very rarely commenting on them. I have made a cautious departure from this practise by increasing his role as a narrator-cum-commentator. Usually the actor playing this role does not play any other character. I had him play more than one role to introduce some flexibility within the rigid frame-work of this form.

Style of Production

With its emphasis on music, acting has been completely neglected by Nautanki players. There is no movement of characters who become listless as soon as their singing is over. Even while singing, the emotional rendering is generally sacrificed in an attempt to reach higher notes. Having to play to large open-air audiences of thousands, all the subtle nuances are wiped out. This is perhaps sought to be balanced by the vigour of the *Nakkara* (big drum) which is played at the end of each phrase in a song and also in-between the responses of conversing characters. Depending on the talent, skill and virtuosity of the *Nakkara* player, the drum dominates the production as a whole. In an attempt to create an aesthetically valid total impact the *Nakkara* had to be made to serve the dramatic purpose of the play, subordinating itself to the needs of the moment when necessary. This meant controlling the frequency as well as the duration of interventions by the *Nakkara* player. As a result the singers became more alive to the need of expressing requisite emotions through their own voices.

A new acting style had to be evolved which would be in harmony with the characteristic structure and at the same time be easily assimilated

by professionals accustomed to just standing around with expressionless faces when they were not singing. I made them freeze in relevant poses while the *Nakkara* was playing in an attempt to create a series of pictures in the Bundi style of Miniature Painting which was used as a reference in designing both the costumes and a simple transportable set for this play. With insistence on emotional rendering of the songs, inter-relationship of the characters expressed through sustained responses and with the statue-sque poses of the living frescoes, made significantly elaborate at vital points, a coherent style of acting did seem to emerge, to which mobility was given by Ranga in his different roles.

Required Restraint

In the case of the Bhavai play, *Jasma Odan* the problem had to be faced from exactly the opposite direction. Its over-flexibility had to be contained in a more defined frame-work so as to shape it effectively. This was done by introducing precisely structured choreography at specific junctures in the play, while leaving the characters free in the intervening period. In this form, there is a ritual element, realistic horse-play as well as stylised interludes. An attempt was made to integrate these elements through simple choreographic devices while clearly demarcating one from the other. Throughout the production it was the *Satvik Abhinaya* that controlled the other three i.e. *Angik*, *Vachik* and *Aharya*.

While Nautanki has a real potential of developing into a full-fledged Indian Opera, provided its structural rigidity is overcome, Bhavai can become an effective dramatic form of social comment if it can develop a more defined and polished structure.

As regards the other aspects of production such as costumes, sets, lighting, make up etc. the problems are common to both. The chaotic impact of urban influence has resulted in the use of nylons, cheap tinsels and plastic beads, adding visual vulgarity to the general aesthetic deterioration. Costumes of both these re-oriented productions were based on the historical period from which the stories are taken. In *Jasma Odan* the point of reference was the Jain paintings of the 11th and 12th century A.D. Over the centuries the costumes of rural folk have not shown any marked change so it was comparatively easy to balance the claims of the popular image of folk characters and the demands of the chosen period. But, our people being fond of using the whole spectrum of primary colours, to bring out any coherent and meaningful colour schemes does indeed become difficult.

While looking for indigenous fabrics and motifs for the costumes of *Amar Singh Rathod* I was made aware of an unexpected fact that the preference in this respect is community-wise rather than region-wise. The characteristic motifs of different communities are to be found prevalent on the routes of their ancient migrations through centuries, overlapping

the provincial boundaries of contemporary political maps; perhaps another pointer towards the inherent unity of Indian culture.

Nautanki lovers insist on rich costumes. I had to overcome considerable resistance before persuading the singers to wear costumes made out of thick *dosuti* dyed, printed and suitably embellished with gold and silver brocades to create a rich effect. Some of these costumes can be further enriched without taking away from their indigenous character if greater funds are made available.

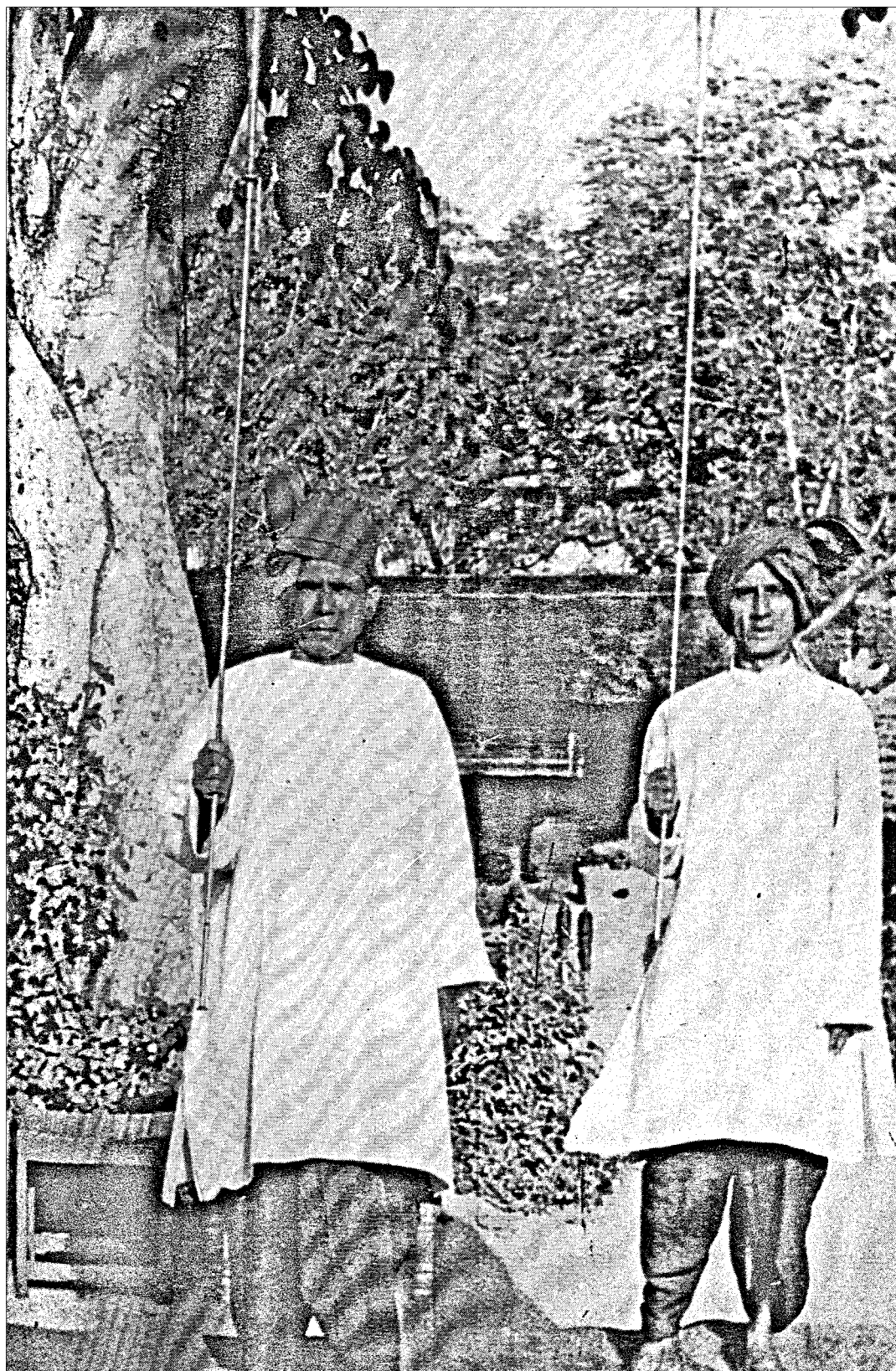
Both Nautanki and Bhavai are open-air forms. While traditional Bhavai has retained its informal character, Nautanki has been using the proscenium stage with gaudily painted roller curtains for decades, probably under the influence of the Parsee Theatre. For the re-oriented version I used six big boxes which could serve as a multi-level stage during the show and as packing cases for the musical instruments, costumes and set-pieces during travel. Besides this, two portable frames to serve as gates were made which can be used for any Nautanki play by fixing relevant cut-outs on them to demarcate two main locales in the play. This set can be put up anywhere on a regular stage, ordinary hall or on open ground. However, Nautanki, has a special problem because of its music-orientation. It must have a roof over the head of the singers which could serve as a resounding board for their voices. While playing in the open, some sort of a temporary *pandal* is inevitable.

Available electric lights were used in both cases to enhance the visibility as well as the changing moods of the play. In *Jasma*, characteristic lighting devices of wooden and cloth torches (*kadas*) were used by individual characters to spot-light significant moments. Electric light was made subservient to this lighting. Make-up in both cases was sparingly used. The rich variety in complexion of our Indian actors creates exciting contrasts.

Varying Backgrounds

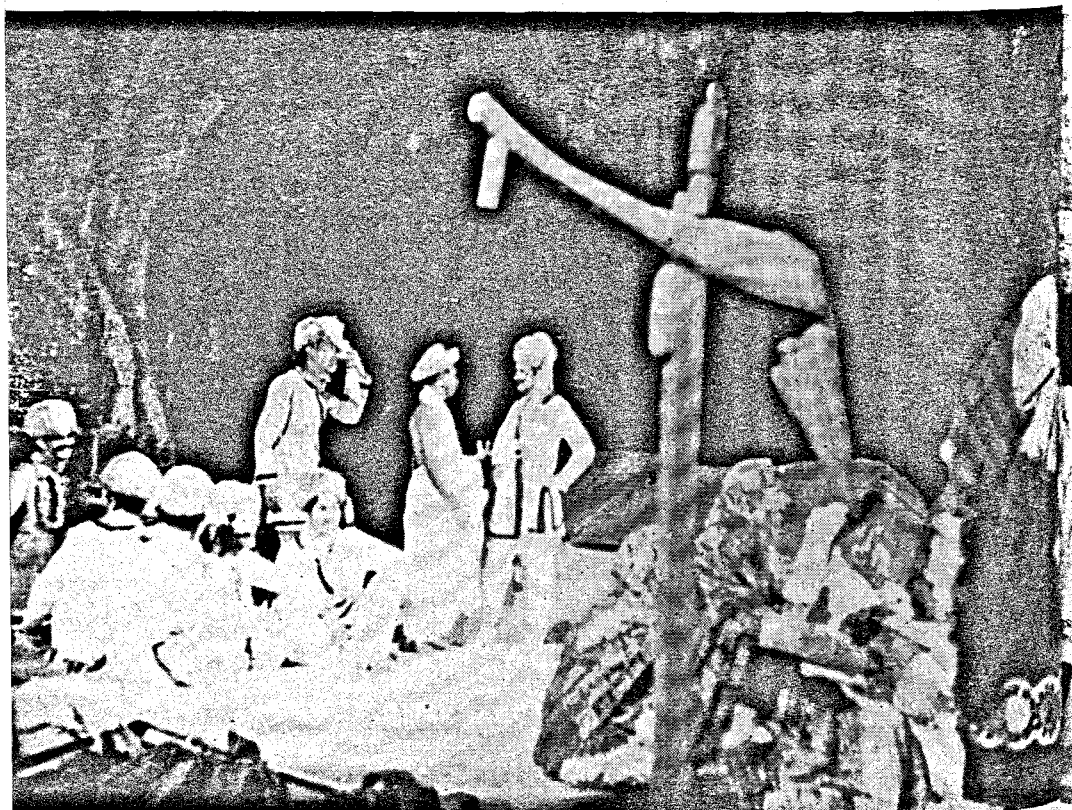
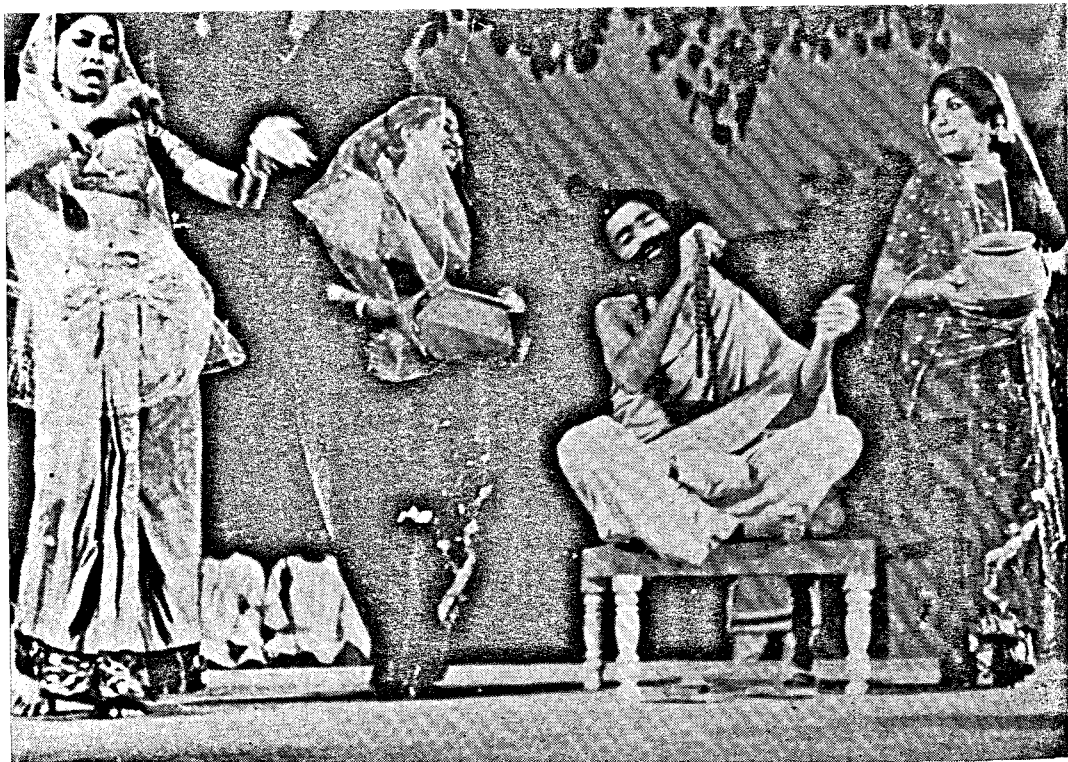
Apart from these technical pre-occupations, the most rewarding aspect of this experiment for me was the opportunity that I got of working with actors coming from entirely different backgrounds and playing to different types of audiences within a short span of three months. The Gujarati version of *Jasma* was played by untrained amateur Gujarati actors residing in Delhi. A majority of them had not seen a Bhavai play before but were familiar with the general milieu of the soil from which this form has

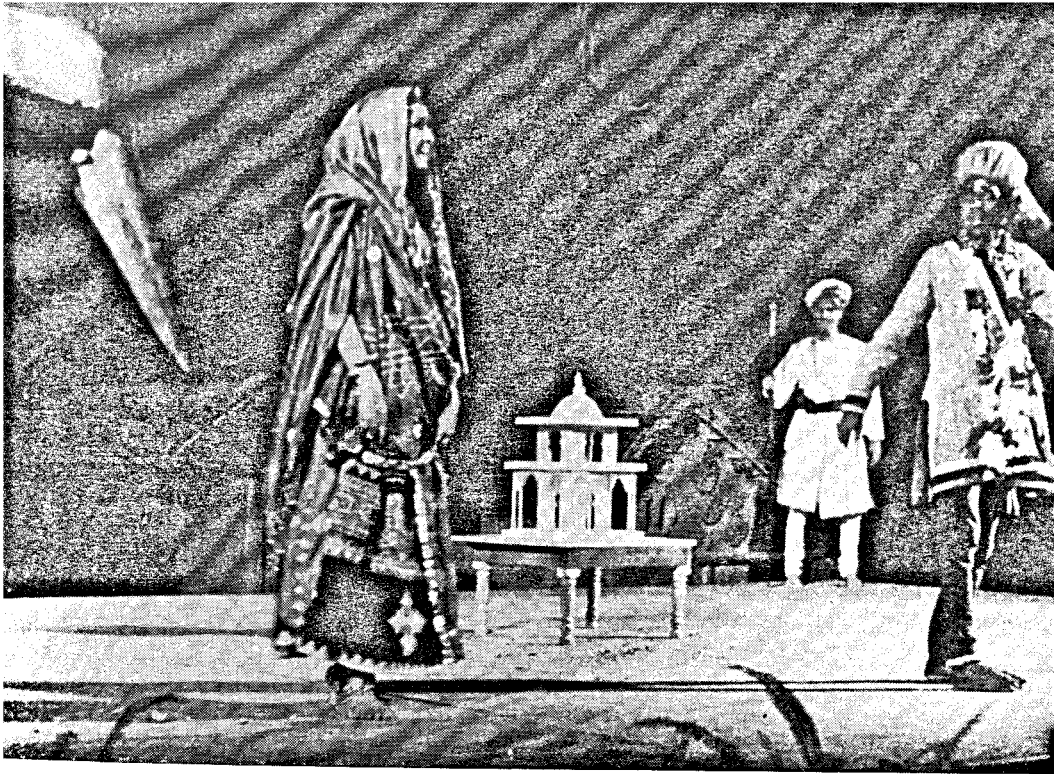
Illustrations: P. 59. Traditional Bhungal players. P. 60. Left: Lord Ganesh Puja, Right: The dancer enters with lighted torches. P. 61. Rangla (the clown) and Nayak (the narrator). National School of Drama, New Delhi.

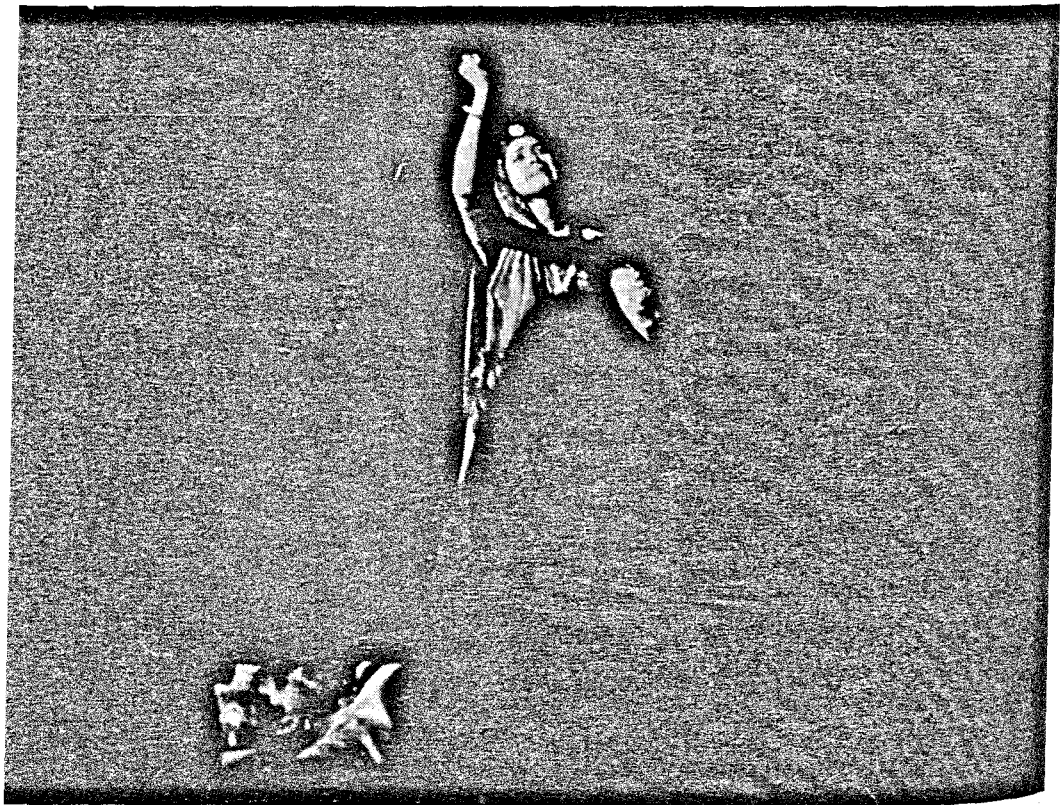












sprung. Its Hindi version was acted by students from different linguistic regions (Kashmir, Punjab, U.P., M.P., Maharashtra, Andhra, Tamilnad, Kerala, Bengal and only one student from Gujarat) under training at the National School of Drama. They were unfamiliar with the form as well as its social background but were better equipped to understand the technical aspects of this form.

For both these sets of actors the major problem was of voice projection. They lacked the specialised training essential for building up necessary peak points of emotional tension. But the uninhibited identification of the first and the neat disciplined acting of the second team of actors helped to convey the basic spirit of the play. Both groups were in enthusiastic agreement with the non-feudal turn given to the value system through this re-oriented version and they projected it with conviction, to the totally different types of audiences ranging from rural to urban, sophisticated elite to building workers and *jhuggi* dwellers. They played to purely Gujarati audiences as well as to non-Gujarati speaking people. They succeeded in evoking a spontaneous response in every case although there was significant difference in the degree of involvement and its expression. With the language barrier removed, identification of unsophisticated audiences was spontaneous and the response was overwhelming. The unfamiliarity of form did not prevent them from responding to the essence of the story. This is an interesting contrast to the fact that one community of dancers conditioned to certain types of drum-beats are not moved to join the dance of a neighbouring community, dancing to a slightly different variation of a given rhythmic pattern.

In the case of the professional Nautanki players the problem was more deeply rooted in the socio-economic milieu of India. Nautanki is played and patronised by people who continue to cling to the feudal values of life even in Independent India which professes to move towards modern scientific rationality. Traditional Nautanki plays continues to glorify feudal values. Through change of emphasis the re-oriented version has attempted to project socially liberal and rational values. It took considerable time to overcome the resistance of professional actors with a rural background to these changes. Their resistance was stronger in the case of new social values than in the case of politico-economic values. However they readily entered into the spirit of humanism via universally accepted human values, irrespective of the purposeful selectivity and juxtapositioning of these values. With the technical command over their voices the professional actors succeeded in projecting the values they themselves were

Illustrations: P. 62. Above : Nala Rishi succumbs to the temptations of Kamkundali (left) Below: The wedding scene. P. 63. Above: Jasma and her husband Rupaji — Below: The King is rebuffed by Jasma. P. 64. Jasma becomes 'Sati'.

not convinced of, with such powerful impact, that they evoked enthusiastic response from the sophisticated as well as unsophisticated urban audiences who were deeply moved.

In the process of the preparation for these productions all the teams were aware that they were under going a new experience. For each performance of *Jasma Odan* two players of the *bhungal*, (a long narrow trumpet-like instrument as indispensable to the orchestra accompanying Bhavai as the *Nakkara* is to Nautanki) had to be called from a village in Gujarat. In all, three different pairs came to Delhi for this purpose. They were visibly impressed by the choreographic element introduced in their traditional form. They expressed a desire to include it in their own performances.

The confrontation of artists with different social backgrounds did create a stimulating situation for all concerned. Such a cross-fertilisation promises to give interesting results both in aesthetic as well as social terms, if the human problems inherent in such a confrontation can be handled with sensitive care. Sustained effort in this desirable direction involves substantial investment of finance as well as the dedicated energy of talented artists.

NOTES ON TEXT

1. Jasma Odan

A popular legend of Gujarat associated with Jasma says that in her previous birth she was an *Apsara* (a divine dancer at Lord Indra's Court) named Kamkundala. At the command of her Lord she tried to seduce a sage named Nala Rishi whose successful penance had made Indra feel insecure about his throne. After attracting the sage, when she refused to live with him because of his ugly appearance, the sage cursed her saying that she should be reborn in the community of Od who earn their living by digging and carrying earth for construction works. Furthermore she would have to marry the ugliest man from that community. The proud *Apsara* was mortified but not brow-beaten. She promptly confronted him with a counter-curse that the sage who could be tempted, should himself be reborn in the same Od community as the ugly man who she would marry.

Thus our folk imagination explains the basis of the unusual love between Jasma and Rudaji (Nala Rishi) in terms of their philosophy which demands that each individual must square his account on this earth, taking as many births as necessary in order to atone for the wrongs he may have done to his fellow beings.

When Jasma goes with her husband to Patan, the capital of Gujarat to dig the famous Tank of the thousand Shivalings (Sahastraling Talav), the king becomes enamoured by her beauty and wants to marry her. Enraged by her refusal to comply with his wishes he orders a general massacre of all the Ods in which Rudaji also dies. Jasma commits suicide after cursing the king with the total destruction of his capital and the fearful disease of leprosy. Finally, a Muslim mendicant turns up who brings all of them back to life and builds a mosque on the site of the Raja's palace.

In the traditional Bhavai play based on this legend, Jasma refuses to leave her husband to marry the king because the greatest virtue of a Hindu woman is supposed to be her chastity and faithfulness to her husband. Traditional Bhavai players, even today emphasise this theme in their improvised dialogues, but the ballad forming the core of this play, which includes the duet in verse between the king and Jasma gives scope for emphasising

instead, the dignity of labour. After all, Jasma was a working-woman and the manner of her refusing the king's tempting offers of comfort that his wealth could provide, show her pride in her work and the independence of an incorruptible mind moulded by honest labour.

2. Sanskrit Drama

Ancient India had its classical as well as folk theatre developing side by side. The former evolved ten different types of plays with complex and compact dramatic structure and subtle sophistication, classified under the collective heading as *Rupakas* by our ancient dramaturgists. The ancient folk theatre, on the other hand evolved about 18–24 dramatic forms with looser dramatic structures and broader character, collectively known as *Urupakas*.

3. Rasa Theory

Unlike Greek drama, Sanskrit drama has been indifferent to the concept of the Three Unities of Time, Place and Action, but from its very inception it has insisted on the Unity of Impact. In spite of developing several different moods in the same play it achieved the unity of impact by choosing one of the moods as the dominant or prime mood (*Pradhan Rasa*) of a given play. All the other moods were subordinated to the development of this dominant mood, and were made instrumental in strengthening this process. The subordinate moods were called the *Gauna rasas* of the play.

4. Arthopkshepas:

Five types of Dramatic devices used by the ancient playwrights to inform the audience of the relevant events off-stage, which are not enacted but knowledge of which is essential to follow the story that is unfolding on the stage.

5. Amar Singh Rathod

Amar Singh Rathod is a popular tale of Rajasthan from its chivalrous medieval period. Amar Singh is Commander-in-Chief at the Court of Emperor Shahjahan, envied by the other courtiers, especially by Salavat Khan, the Emperor's brother-in-law. Amar Singh is recently married to a princess of Bundi, named Hadi Rani. He asks the Emperor's permission to go to Bundi to bring her back to his palace. The Emperor is reluctant to part with him but grants seven days' leave of absence on condition that he pays one lakh rupees per day for each additional day he remains away from the court.

On the way back from Bundi, while passing through a desert Amar Singh meets Narshahbaz Khan, a Pathan Officer in the Mughal Army, who is dying of thirst. Amar Singh saves his life by giving him water from his own scanty supply. The grateful Pathan swears to give his life for Amar Singh if such a necessity should arise. They become life-long friends.

Taking advantage of the fact that fifteen days after his return from Bundi, Amar Singh absorbed in his new-found happiness, forgets to report to the Court, Salavat Khan poisons the Emperor's mind against Amar Singh. Ram Singh, the son of Amar Singh's elder brother, is sent to Naumehala with the Imperial firman summoning Amar Singh to the Emperor's presence with the fine of rupees seven lakhs for his seven days of unauthorised absence. Enraged by the tone of this order, Amar Singh is rude to the Emperor who in turn confirms the fine which Salavat gleefully tries to collect. Amar Singh kills Salavat and challenges the might of the Mughal Armies. The Emperor announces a reward for the capture of the rebellious Amar Singh whom nobody dares to face on the battlefield. Finally, Arjun Gaud, a brother of Amar Singh's first wife, who is now dead, comes forward to defeat him.

After winning the confidence of Amar Singh and Hadi Rani, Arjun kills the hero on his way to the Agra Fort, through a sly trick. Shahjahan is enraged at the manner of his favourite Commander's death and punishes the traitor. He is worried about finding a worthy successor to Amar Singh's post. He decides to test the quality of the man before appointing him Commander-in-Chief. He declares that if the relatives of Amar Singh want his body, they must fight for it, else the Emperor would bury him in Agra instead of burning his body according to the Hindu custom.

Hadi Rani and Ram Singh try to mobilise support for this task but fail until Amar Singh's sworn friend, the Pathan Narshahbaz Khan comes to their rescue with his young son Nabi Rasool. The Pathan dies during one of the battles but the war is brought to a victorious conclusion by his son, side by side with Ram Singh. The Emperor is pleased with their valour and dignity. He makes Ram Singh his new Commander-in-Chief and appoints Nabi Rasul to his father's post. Hadi Rani performs *sati*.

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