

Theatre Criticism in Kannada

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I

Modern Kannada drama has developed into a very important literary genre, and consequently writing on drama is also an important part of criticism in Kannada. A.R. Krishna Shastry's book on Sanskrit drama, Dr. S.V. Ranganna's book on the Greek tragedies, and Prof. A. N. Moorthy Rao's book on Shakespeare reveal a profound critical insight and sound scholarship. Drama, for the Kannada critics, is the most complete of literary forms; and it seems that captivated by the poetic significance of drama, the critics have lost sight of theatre.

There is very little theatre criticism in Kannada, and whatever is available by that name is purely historical. Historical criticism, whether literary or theatrical, inevitably becomes a record of either the achievements or the frustrations of artistic endeavours. Some attempts have been made recently to trace the origin and development of theatre in Karnataka and the result is a bit disappointing. Two specimens of theatre criticism in Kannada which clearly reflect the confusion of facts and values are discussed in the following paragraphs.

The celebrated Kirloskar Sangeetha Natak Mandali of Maharashtra visited Dharwad in 1893 and enacted several plays like *Sangeeta Shapa Sambhrama*, *Rama Rajya Viyogu* and *Soubhadra*. Around the year 1895 some young railway employees of the place brought together several amateurs, formed an association called 'The Hindu Union Club' and staged a Marathi play, *Tratika* . . . Kannadigas were hurt that educated persons of North Karnataka who were one hundred per cent Kannadigas, offered such encouragement to plays in another language and themselves staged them. What, but decline awaited Kannada plays which simultaneously suffered the invasion of Marathi plays performed by our own men? Dimmed and battered, the art of drama in Karnataka withered . . .

The historical facts reported in this passage are true and the impact of these facts cannot be gainsaid. But it is also true that the facts could be misleading. The railway employees who staged a Marathi play belonged to an isolated group of Marathi people which wanted to entertain itself by staging a Marathi play. They did not, in all probability, want to hurt the feelings of the Kannada people by asserting their cultural superiority. The "celebrated Kirloskar Natak Mandali" was founded by Annarao Kirloskar from Karnataka who had been inspired by Churamari's Kannada version of Kalidasa's *Shakuntalam*, which was published in Bombay in 1867! The interpretation of the facts is erroneous because of the prejudice against the Marathi language and its culture born out of the brotherly hostility between Karnataka and Maharashtra which is the root cause of many political issues.

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Dr. H.K. Ranganath, whose book on Karnataka theatre is an important source book, has the following passage dealing with the historical importance of the Kritapura Natak Mandali founded by Salchhari Balacharya (Shantakavi) who led the theatre movement with missionary zeal:

The performances of the Kritapura Mandali may be said to have followed the Yakshagana of the sea-coast in technique. But Shantakavi completely overhauled the stage presentation and devised stage property suited to the play and costume appropriate to character. His shows thus combined folk theatre with elite.

The performance of the plays put up by Kritapura Natak Mandali followed the technique of Dodddata or Moodalapaya which is totally different from that of Yakshagana of the sea-coast. One wonders whether Shantakavi, who worked as a primary school teacher in Gadag and the surrounding villages, ever had any opportunity of seeing a single performance of Yakshagana. Again the claim that the plays of Shantakavi combined the elements of folk theatre with those of elite theatre seems to be dubious since there was no elite theatre in Karnataka from which he could borrow the techniques of performance. What Shantakavi did with the folk theatre was to make it conscious of its own resources and allow it to evolve in its own way to become a full-fledged theatre of the elite. This evolution is clearly discernible in the writing of his own plays. At least for a very brief period the theatre in Karnataka started to devise and explore its own techniques to fulfil its growing needs. Unfortunately, Shantakavi did not succeed in his effort because of his untimely death in 1921.

What is evident from these two passages is the fact that theatre criticism in Kannada is only arbitrary and the critics have failed to evolve a critical idiom capable of examining the problems of the theatre which acquired a new and different form at the beginning of this century. The Parsi theatre which was founded in the middle of the 19th century was both popular and elite and also commercial, a status which was unheard of in the history of Indian theatre. In ancient times plays were performed, during religious festivals, in a theatre which was erected for the purpose and demolished after the performance. The actor who was trained to act and sing was a part of the performance, but did not have a separate identity of his own, separate from the theatre. His identity was concealed behind mask and elaborate costume for the sake of the efficacy of theatre communication. The Parsi theatre, on the other hand, being commercial, performed throughout the year and gave the actor a status independent of the performance. Some of the gifted actors who became stars could lend their services to any company, charging fabulous fees.

The theatre critics who were eye-witnesses to this change in theatre did not try to explore the dramatic and technical aspects of the change. The professional theatre with a proscenium, dazzling sets and highly paid actors established the norms of dramatic criticism. A theatre magazine called *Rangabhoomi* which was started by one D.K. Bharadwaj lasted for about three years. Unfortunately, only a few back numbers are available now. But the ones which are available reveal the critical attitude of the 1930s. The magazine introduced an actor every month and published a short play. This was a period of glory for the professional theatre in Karnataka. The professional companies

toured the neighbouring regions like Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra. Actors like Gubbi Veeranna, T. Raghava, Handiganoor Siddharamappa and many others came to limelight and the success of the performances depended mainly on the personality and the fame of the actor. A Kannada social play called *Sansar Nouka*, which in its book form is thoroughly unreadable now, was a great success on the stage because of actors like Mohammed Peer and Dikki Madhavrao. What emerged out of this situation was the separation between drama and theatre. Recently, the Karnataka Nataka Akademi published a volume containing three of the most successful plays from the company of Varadacharya, who was a legendary figure of the professional theatre of Mysore. The plays, which are mediocre in print, were very successful on the stage. What it all boils down to is that the norms for the evaluation of theatrical performance were not the same as those meant for the evaluation of a dramatic work.

The rift between the professional drama and the literary drama staged by amateur groups kept on widening. There are many factors which contributed to this rift. The professional theatre ignored the literary qualities of the dramatic text or, to be more precise, the professional theatre encouraged pseudo-literature on the stage. The second factor was the ignorance of our playwrights about the technicalities of the theatre. Writers who did have a close acquaintance with the theatre were caught up by the idealistic fervour of the time and hated the actualities of the theatre. Now it seems that the rift, in fact, was between the educated and the uneducated. Uneducated artists, like the folk theatre practitioners, are ignorant of any dramaturgy, especially the philosophy of theatre. The educated writers viewed the professional stage in the light of Western theories which they had studied.

Kailasam, Adya Rangacharya and Shivaram Karanth, the three major playwrights belonging to the early phase of modern Kannada drama, wrote three short plays ridiculing the excesses of the professional theatre. The literary drama which was staged by the amateur groups was meant for aesthetic experience. Even the plays by Kailasam and Adya Rangacharya were staged once or twice and then forgotten. Drama flourished only as an important form of literature. The critics spent all their energy in trying to find suitable Kannada equivalents to terms like tragedy and comedy and went on discussing whether to use ordinary speech or rhetoric in drama. Even now theatre is considered a crude medium for dramatic expression. The dramatic text is something which is sacrosanct and the merit of the theatrical performance depends on how far the theatrical performance is faithful to the text. As far as criticism is concerned there is no difference between a work of translation and a theatrical performance. The original text is the most important thing, a source as well as a criterion.

It is really surprising that the critics ignored the institution of theatre in a country where a variety of theatrical forms co-exist. For example Tala-maddale, a form of theatre belonging to the North and South Canara districts of Karnataka, which continues to be popular, is performed without a dramatic text and by actors in everyday dress. Only *vachika abhinaya*, among the four categories of acting described in Bharata's *Natyashastra*, is employed and nothing else. The performance of Tala-maddale can last

throughout the night depending upon the versatility and the eloquence of the actors who literally sit and talk. There is no attempt on the part of the actors at verisimilitude or at creating an illusion of reality. What is important is the creative use of speech which is as powerful as dramatic action. In this respect this theatre is quite the opposite of the professional theatre in which no effort is spared to create an illusion of reality. The supernatural and the mythical, both in Yakshagana and Tala-maddale, remain symbolic and suggestive because these elements are translated into the language of gestures, symbols and music. But in the professional theatre the supernatural is turned into ordinary visual reality.

What I want to suggest by this is that there is no interaction between the existing theatre and the kind of criticism that is being written.

II

In spite of this dearth of critical writing on Kannada theatre, there are two works which deserve to be mentioned here. The first is a book called *Theatre Movement in Karnataka*, with special reference to the Gubbi Company, by S. Anantmurthy and the second is a long essay called *Natak Ranga Prayogu* by B.G. Kerur. The work by Anantmurthy was his doctoral thesis, originally written in Kannada and then translated into English. It deals with the history of the very important dramatic company founded by Gubbi Veeranna and is a close study of the professional theatre in Karnataka. The book by Kerur studies the amateur theatre; the author himself was closely associated with the Vasudev Vinodini Natya Sabha of Bagalkot. Unlike the book by Anantmurthy Kerur's book reads like a handbook for actors who want to take part in amateur theatrical activities. It is also an attempt to discover the new (?) theatre which is taken to be the opposite of the professional theatre.

Anantmurthy's study is based on his conviction that the history of the Gubbi Company, which started its career in tent-auditoriums, clearly reflects all the phases of the theatre movement in Karnataka. This is a sound conviction because Gubbi Veeranna, apart from being a great actor, was also a man of great imagination, quick in responding to the developing taste of his audience. The relation between the theatre and the audience was no longer arbitrary and was now based on money. The theatre was committed to give something in return for the money the audience paid and the audience received what they paid for. In this situation the theatre developed its technology. In the beginning the Gubbi Company used to perform in the light of kerosene lamps and at the end electric lamps created a magic world on the stage. But does this also mean that there was an improvement in the quality of the plays performed? It seems that Anantmurthy's work avoids an answer to this question. In fact, what happened to the Indian cinema, another very important art form in our country, also happened to the commercial theatre. A theatre which develops solely in accordance with the fluctuating demands of the people can never acquire its identity. The power which creates art should also create the taste. *Kurukshetra*, a play which according to Anantmurthy was a milestone in the history of the Gubbi

Company, received a lot of public acclaim. This is what Anantmurthy has to write about the play:

Many factors contributed to the immense popularity of the play — bright dialogue, the playwright's success in condensing and imposing a pattern on the epic struggle in Kurukshetra, the passionate rendering of the roles by the cast and finally the glamorous and spectacular stage-setting. Until then, the Krishna of the stage [who] had been an amorous, pleasure-seeking youth, now appeared as a Great Yogi, and a wise statesman. The preaching of the Geetha is one of the major scenes of the play. The play gave little importance to music; and the dialogues were important.

It is true that *Kurukshetra* was a box-office hit and its popularity was mainly due to the sets and the awe-striking transfer-scenes. But *Kurukshetra* as theatre failed because the music, spectacle and acting could not merge into the language of the text and create a whole complex of meaning. What one remembered after the play was the gorgeous scenery and the live horses and rabbits on the stage.

Anantmurthy's book provides valuable information about the theatre movement in general, and about the Gubbi Company in particular. In the last chapter he pleads for the union of the professional and amateur theatres which, one feels, is only wishful thinking. His knowledge of the professional theatre is intimate and lively, but is not profound enough to examine the new dimensions of the stagecraft and suggest the possibilities of a new theatre.

B.G. Kerur's book *Nataka Ranga Prayoga* is, as already mentioned, a handbook of modern theatre. It derives its theoretical background from Western theories about acting and stage presentation. Kerur's concept of theatre not only excludes the folk theatres, but it also denies the validity of the professional theatre. Unfortunately, the Indian professional theatre is nothing but practical and is incapable of offering any theories. The actor of the professional theatre, who mainly depends upon his personality and voice, is not trained at all. Taking advantage of this situation, Kerur unconsciously accepts the amateur theatre as the quintessence of theatre and proceeds to expound his theories.

Kerur's observations regarding the rules of acting are based on Stanislavsky's theories. The actor who is the main instrument of the theatre, according to Kerur, should be a thinker and an intellectual. He should know the whole history of the character that he is going to impersonate and, for the time being, should merge his personality with that of the character. But he should also take care to retain his personal consciousness, lest he lose himself or be carried away by excessive emotion. Kerur's ideas of theatre do sound profound in the anarchical context of our theatre. A few principles of stage behaviour to be followed by the actor, like rules of ethics, are always welcome.

But the problem with Kerur's book is that his observations are derived from other books and not out of the varied experience of a live theatre. Theories, which escape the limitations of a real theatre, are bound to be idealistic and dreamy. For example, a dictum like 'An actor should act in a realistic and natural way' does not mean anything even when it is followed by an actor, because it doesn't explain the significance of what is called natural acting, a phrase which is the end-product of a whole history of thinking. This is the fate of all our modern ideas of art in general because we have borrowed them and

lifted them out of their ideological context. Kerur's work, of course, is richly informative and therefore is very useful for beginners. But as far as the philosophy of theatre is concerned, it is derivative.

The selection of these two books for discussion in this article has a purpose behind it. Anantmurthy discusses the origin and development of the professional theatre and Kerur has always the amateur theatre in mind while dealing with the problems of theatre. The modern theatre in India has accepted two dominant modes of theatre and they are the magical and realistic. The Parsi theatre borrowed the mode of magic from 19th-century European theatre, a mode which has come to stay in the professional theatre and also in our cinema. The professional theatre is interested in creating all sorts of illusions on the stage as if by magic. According to Anantmurthy, the production of *Kurukshetra* and *Dashavatara* symbolizes the excellence of the professional theatre. The success of these two plays solely depends upon theatre-magic.

Realism on the stage was accepted by the amateur theatre and Kerur's book is committed to celebrate this mode in his book. It is obvious that the ancient Indian theatre rejected realism: for the ancient dramatists theatre was not at all an imitation of reality. Realism was something new to us and the Indian dramatists were enamoured of this new concept of rendering reality on the stage. The first important playwright in Kannada, Kailasam, called drama the art of photography.

But these two modes of theatre, which we borrowed from the West, ought to be developed so that we can have a meaningful theatre. For example, the mode of magic, which at present is a crude gimmick, must be developed to produce a genuine religious theatre. Our folk theatres are religious in both theme and the way in which the plays are produced. But this is not enough. It is not enough to present the miracle-ridden tales of Bhakti on the stage. The theatre can become religious if the very act of impersonation can give religious and spiritual experience. In the same way the mode of realism has several theatrical possibilities. Exploration of reality is an endless affair. The Indian theatre will become truly realistic if it can create a stage-reality which is totally different either from Ibsen or Chekov.

This is, in short, the history of theatre criticism in Kannada. The new NSD-type theatre, which was introduced to Karnataka in 1970, is becoming fashionable, though not popular. It has not yet inspired criticism, but there is some hope, because present-day playwrights like Girish Karnad and Chandrashekhar Kambar write their plays with a sense of theatre. It is difficult to discuss their plays as one discusses literary works. Girish Karnad's articles on Mustafiz's *Kakanakote* and Adya Rangacharya's *Harijanvara*, Prasanna's book on the relationship between the dramatic text and its presentation on the stage raise a lot of hope from the point of view of theatre criticism. But one feels that whatever is written in the name of theatre criticism in Kannada is experimental and at its best suggests a search for a new theatre. □