

## BOOK REVIEWS

---

### **The Play is the Thing :**

**Sri Ram Memorial  
Lecture, X**

**Vijay Tendulkar**

**Sri Ram Centre for Performing Arts,  
Delhi, 1997**

**36 pages (paperback)  
price not mentioned**

Vijay Tendulkar has seldom spoken about his work. He is, by his own admission, an inveterate observer of human beings. He is also, by general consent, an observer who wears a permanent, almost built-in guard against being observed.

Unlike other major playwrights of the Marathi stage who have written long prefaces to their published plays, elucidating their social and aesthetic concerns, and the processes by which those works were written, Tendulkar allows his plays to be published largely without comment.

Also noteworthy is the fact that he is the only playwright who has not been (perhaps refused to be) interviewed for Sangeet Natak Akademi's publication *Contemporary Indian Theatre*, which otherwise carried interviews with all the playwrights and directors whose works were staged in the Nehru Shatabdi Natya Samaroh held in Delhi in 1989.

It is against this background that one welcomes the publication of the tenth Sri Ram Memorial Lecture delivered in two parts by Vijay Tendulkar under the title *The Play is the Thing*. The booklet will fill a much regretted lacuna in the theatre student's library. Being in English, it will also have the countrywide reach

that Tendulkar's works have enjoyed since the 1970s.

The lecture is marked by Tendulkar's simple, direct and lucid style of speaking and writing. He makes it quite clear at the outset that he is not about to hold forth on how plays should be written but on how he has written his. In the process, he hopes the audience will get "an inside view of the medium with its peculiar intricacies". His observation of himself as a practitioner of the craft is empirical, unaided by either a universally accepted or individually evolved theory. He holds no discourse with other practitioners either within the country or outside.

Tendulkar's directness helps one tailor one's expectations to his declared scope, which is his own practice and, within that, his own perception of what a playwright is. "As per my definition", he says, "a playwright is one who is willing to devote his prime years to learn and internalise this demanding art and use it to unravel the mysteries of human mind and human existence." By inference, his idea of a play is a dramatic work which probes and opens up these twin mysteries to make the audience more aware of itself.

If this sounds like a generalization, one need only lay the definition over all of Tendulkar's works to see how well it covers them, as also to see how completely it excludes the works of playwrights like Badal Sircar, Girish Karnad and Kavalam Panikkar. It is a hold-all definition for realistic playwrights which boasts Ibsen and



Chekhov at one end and, at the other, those scores of playwrights all over the world who have, under pretext of exploring the human mind and human existence, written drama that has merely exploited the self-obsession of the middle-class to provide a sickly catharsis for its various complexes.

Tendulkar has not touched either end quite completely in any of his works though he has come near to doing so. But history and circumstances combined with his own special skills have made him the pioneer of realism in Marathi theatre. Emerging on the scene at the beginning of the latter half of the 1950s in a 'new theatre' movement propelled by the patronage offered to young theatre enthusiasts by the Mumbai Marathi Sahitya Sangh and the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mumbai, he learned his craft on the job, so to say.

This much and the unfolding of his career later are facts recorded in the history of contemporary Marathi theatre. What is not generally known, however, are the antecedents leading up to his emergence on the theatre scene. He describes these vividly in his first lecture, devoted to a discussion of characterization and structure in his plays.

Tracing his interest in theatre to his boyhood days, he talks about the rehearsals and performances of amateur productions which he got to see because his father and older brother were involved in them. Those were the days when males still played female roles. During rehearsals, lit then by kerosene lanterns, he saw the actors as males with moustaches who adopted a feminine gait and mannerisms. On the day of the performance, the same actors, costumed and made up, would be transformed into strangers.

"After the performance", he continues, "I would sneak backstage to watch the actors who played the females smoke bidis and change into their male clothes. The false breasts would come off and a hairy chest would be exposed without any inhibition... I always feel that this first and repeated experience of the mystique of theatre has something to do with my being drawn to the theatre."

Tendulkar has been credited with changing the language of Marathi drama from its erstwhile literary/melodramatic cadences to realistic speech patterns. He himself attributes the range and texture of his language to his talent for picking up and retaining the speech patterns of people he encounters in his daily life. Once recorded, retrieval comes automatically with need.

While Tendulkar's observations on characterization do not rise above the axiomatic—characters (in a realistic play) must not be puppets but flesh-and-blood people—his discussion of structure yields some points of interest. More or less admitting that his earlier plays are marred by structural deficiencies, he reveals the measures he has taken to understand structure and how it works.

He undertook two exercises—one practical and one experiential. He would see bad plays, identify their structural defects, and rewrite them mentally to amend them. This gave him an immediate understanding of what worked and what didn't. In the longer term, he opened himself to experiencing other art forms to make himself aware of how they were structured. He has been an avid listener of Hindustani music, a regular visitor to art galleries and, in the sixties, loved to watch wrestling bouts. He asserts that these experiences have given him a grip on dramatic structure.

The concluding part of the second lecture brings Tendulkar to the tricky issue of the relations between the playwright and director and the play and its audience. The statement "The play is the thing" now produces the sub-question "The play is exactly what thing?"

Like most realistic playwrights, Tendulkar is possessive of the meaning of his plays. This 'meaning' is largely conveyed through verbal language. What is said and how it is said is what matters. He is therefore distrustful of directors who 'interpret' his plays. A playwright can prevent his play becoming an "invisible ghost" that drags "its feet on the stage without being seen or felt" by making it taut.

However, what the playwright cannot guard against are the unexpected interpretations the

audience foists on his work. In the ultimate analysis, then, the playwright is forced to admit that the play is that thing which the audience makes of it!

SHANTA GOKHALE

### **Patrons & Philistines:**

**Arts and the State  
in British India**

Pushpa Sundar

Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1995

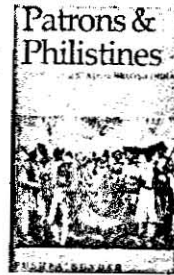
294 pages (hardback), Rs 495

Pushpa Sundar has produced a good study (which can also be used as a reference-work) aimed at assessing the effects of government policies and patronage on Indian arts during British rule. As arts and culture are inherently related, the range of the theme becomes relevant. Today, in spite of repeated professions of modernity, democratic values, and an increasing focus on the Common Man, we seem to behave and believe in the Mahabharata dictum '*raja kalasya karanam*' (i.e., the monarch is the cause of the character of the times)! Looking up to government and government agencies for support (patronage is a bad word!) comes to us naturally. Therefore the study of government policies and actions should attract more attention than it does—especially in the sphere of culture and arts where so many aspects are intangible. In this respect, the British period of Indian history is especially instructive. In social-cultural matters, it is the recent past which is likely to be more relevant than the distant (Curzon is more relevant than Chārvāka!) Our yesterdays can be of great help in dealing with the present and the future. The vogue of establishing associations, academies, corporations and autonomous bodies to work in arts and culture is on the increase as also schemes and strategies of funding them and distributing privileges. Therefore it is essential to examine patronage, and the policies responsible for shaping the sensibilities of contemporary patrons. The author has worked

for the Ford Foundation, an institution which has functioned as a major funding agency for many projects and activities in India, a fact which adds a dimension to her perspective.

The book has twelve chapters devoted to various aspects of the theme. To provide a foundation for a more detailed enumeration of the cultural aspects the author discusses the interrelationship between culture and arts, the background against which the British appeared on the Indian scene, as also the renaissance announced by the new learning in India. This is followed by a consideration of British views and actions in the fields of archaeology and preservation, museums and libraries, fine arts and crafts, the arts and nationalism, the creation of new monuments, and on the performing arts. Even though the author has admittedly relied mainly on sources in English, the writing is largely unbiased.

The British authorities were obviously serious, thoughtful and informed about arts and culture. The book is full of references which bring out the comprehensive British concern for culture and arts in India. A warrior-governor (Elphinstone); an ambitious ruler (Warren Hastings); an intelligent, prejudiced, but action-oriented administrator (Curzon); or individuals connected more directly with the arts and crafts (Birdwood and Havell); directors of the East India Company; British members of parliament—all were intensely engaged in discussing policies, plans, laws, actions, as well as appointments having a bearing on education, arts and culture in India. Indologists and British artists and thinkers were also keen participants in the debates. This is the reason why the British period creates a response even in contemporary minds. Of course the book also brings to notice the biases of British travellers, missionaries, Company officials and, later, government administrators or academicians. But it must be granted that indifference could hardly have bred prejudices!



Repeatedly, and in varying contexts, Pushpa Sundar is at pains to point to one British characteristic: the British authorities carried out their policies and programmes in culture and the arts mainly because, both politically and administratively, it was expedient to do so. The political superiority they enjoyed needed the support of a cultural victory, and it was to this end that they used the weapon of culture- and arts-related policies. As will be pointed out later, this is a rather simplified interpretation of a more complex situation. However, some examples the author has presented are noteworthy. The British authorities were keen to collect samples of arts and crafts from various regions, prepare monographs on them, and arrange exhibitions of numerous artifacts in London. But the reason was the anxiety they felt about the declining standards of British craftsmanship, and the motive was to provide British manufacturers with new designs leading to cheap mass-produced articles. This was expectably to be followed by throwing open to British manufacturers the vast and unprotected Indian market. It was decided to introduce modern education in the arts and architecture by creating new institutions, but the aim was to ensure an easy supply of subordinate labour to build monuments fit to symbolize the status of the rulers! An entire network of educational bodies was sought to be established at all levels, education was to be thrown open—but the intention was to put into position docile flocks of clerical personnel essential to rule over the vast, multilingual, multiracial, multireligious, and largely illiterate country! Many other instances are noted and documented—but the conclusion is the same. Questions about the nature, necessity, and value of arts or culture (and the thinking about how to impart training in them, to whom, when and why) were raised and answered by the British authorities who were power-conscious, politically motivated and administratively inspired! The evidence gathered by the author is 'factual', and it also supports similar views held by many others. It is certainly thought-provoking.

The writer is convinced that the British did

not succeed in carrying out their tasks of philanthropic potentialities in spite of an efficient government machinery, methodical administration, a viewpoint inspired by the new education, liberal policies, and impressive statements and promises. She notes some interesting reasons for the non-performance. Firstly, the British were mainly motivated to act by policies and ideals accepted and current in England. Secondly, those laying down the policies and those actually executing them were opposed to each other. A telling example is of the institutes set up to impart art-education and the Public Works Department which was expected to provide employment to those trained in these schools. Yet another was the contradiction of holding exhibitions to encourage Indian artists and craftsmen and following this up with the open-market, free-trade policies which killed them. Thirdly, the entire thinking was typically middle-class! Decisions about what is beautiful or obscene or moral were taken according to the thinking current in England. The most important reason was of course the superiority complex the British suffered from. 'Everything Indian is inferior and we can undoubtedly improve it' was the basic premise for the rulers' policies and actions. Where values are to be appreciated and assessed, such easy and sweeping generalizations can hardly help as a guideline.

Firm, and yet without uncalled-for aggressiveness—such is the tenor of the writing. All of us today are products of the British heritage, and it is not easy to be categorical when referring to a heritage. Fortunately, the author is aware of the dangers of cultural shortsightedness reflected in a for-or-against kind of presentation. It is not true to say that looking back is wasteful, especially when the Indian nation has completed fifty years—a duration insignificant in the life-span of a nation.

And yet it must be stated that the author fails to do full justice to the culturally complex phenomenon of the Indo-British traffic of influences viewed in totality. The period needs examination from many different angles. It is not enough to examine the motives of the

'givers' alone, as the 'takers' are equally responsible in cultural juxtapositions.

It is interesting to note that various regions and communities in India were influenced by the British according to their own cultural dynamics. The Parsis, for instance, responded to the new patronage differently than Hindus or Muslims. Further, while evaluating effects, it is imperative in India to attend to writings in regional languages. Writings in regional languages during the nineteenth century (for instance in Marathi and Bengali) were often critical of the government's interest in culture. They showed awareness of the possible harm that may come to the arts and advocated strategic use of British patronage instead of submissive or blind acceptance. Most importantly (especially in the context of Sundar's focus on culture), it is necessary to note that performing arts, and within the triad music, elicited a different kind of response from the British. As I have argued elsewhere, even though the initial British response to Indian music was 'orientalist', it soon gave way to an indologist (and a welcome) deviant viewpoint which, in turn, applied another self-correction to clear the decks for an ethnomusicological angle

to perceive the performing reality.

The point is that, during the process of extending support, the 'givers' underwent changes. No analysis of the essentially relational act of patronage can be complete unless such happenings 'along the road' are accounted for. Perhaps it may also be added that, truly speaking, only the Portuguese and the British were the 'real' foreign powers. These two need to be compared and not the Mughals and the British—because in the final, cultural, analysis the Mughals can hardly be described as aliens! If Sundar could have probed deeper into the evolutionary stages of rulers' support to arts and culture in India, she would have realized that the British support system failed mainly because it meant a negation of the *dāna* model developed in India over centuries. The British rulers sought to replace the model with a systematic cultural barter.

To conclude, the writer can be credited with having reopened a debate which needs to be continued—especially when the idea of cultural sponsorship is in the ascendancy!

ASHOK D. RANADE