The Elitist, the Commercial, and the Popular in Indian Theatre: A Voice from the Margins

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The author of this paper will find it difficult to contribute to the mainstream discourse on forms and genres in Indian theatre, or the networks of relationships in various theatre efforts in contemporary India. Lack of exposure to the diversities of regional performance, and lack of familiarity with the underlying social structures and ideological concerns of theatre practitioners in different regions, come in the way of an objective view of the totality of theatre in this country. The diversities of Indian theatre are so overwhelming that any opinion based on the prevalent homogenizing aesthetic, and the current hierarchical classification of forms and practices, would be of little value.

The classification of theatre practices and forms referred to above is the creation of the official hierarchy and the culture of the ruling classes (Bharucha, 1993), and represents their construction of the values and ideals of national culture. To look into the nature of this representation, and to connect it with the nation-forming exercises of the post-colonial period, would be too ambitious a project for the writer of this paper. Here, we can only make some surmises and raise certain issues in order to understand contemporary theatre practices in the country better. This too would be a view from the periphery, distanced from the official culture of the state.

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New experiments in cultural expression in different metropolises during the post-independence period have perhaps been offshoots of the modernity project initiated by the Indian bourgeoisie. Responses to colonialism were manifest in various forms of intellectual and spiritual debate and movements since the early 19th century. Renaissance thinkers like Vivekananda, Tagore and Aurobindo, traditional nationalists like Savarkar, spiritual individualists like Krishnamurti, classicists like Coomaraswamy, futurists like M.N. Roy, re-constructivists like Iqbal, and leaders like Gandhi, Nehru, Azad and Ambedkar were all people who produced a great deal of social, political, and intellectual ferment within the modernity project (Fred Dallmayr and G.N. Devy, 1998). In this setting, the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) seemed to have released new forces of modernization in theatre and other arts, breaking the boundaries of self-enclosed forms. But together with the suppression of the international proletarian movement in the 1950s, and the new opportunities that became available after independence, the modernity project fell into the hands of the Indian bourgeoisie. The Nehruvian critical modernism helped empower artists and intellectuals who flourished in the new-found freedom, and struggle was no longer felt to be necessary. The nascent idea of nationhood prompted them to restructure their arts and ideas, and anti-colonial or post-colonial counter-discourses were felt to be unnecessary. Rather, artists and

writers of the post-colonial period profiting from the Nehruvian largesse did not suffer so much as a tinge of anguish or engage in the self-criticism practised by their predecessors within the colonial framework. Artists in independent India were more pro-Western than their elders. In terms of vision, outlook and depth of experience, the elders seem to be superior to their post-colonial successors.

Under the new dispensation, artists associated with the modernity project asserted their new-found capabilities of cultural expression, positioning themselves as equals, if not superior, to modernists in Euro-American settings after the Second World War. Terms and philosophical ideas like existentialism, surrealism and expressionism, which swept the intellectual geography of Europe and America, influenced the patterns of thought and articulation of the new Indian middle class. To this burgeoning middle class belonged some extremely talented artists, who were aware of cultural movements worldwide, and adopted in their works styles and imagery influenced by Western models, though the works were content-wise grounded in contemporary reality as perceived by the new Indian bourgeoisie.

This project was supported by the custodians of the official culture. Men and women in the top echelons of the bureaucracy were all for this cosmopolitan, universal outlook in art, literature and theatre — asserting the intellectual and artistic identity of independent India. Some of the finest playwriting experiments by Mohan Rakesh, Dharamvir Bharati, Indira Parthasarthi, Badal Sircar (his early period), Mahesh Elkunchwar, Khanolkar, and the theatre of E. Alkazi and Sombhu Mitra strengthened this trend on the Indian stage.

Alkazi and Mitra represented the generation of creative Indian artists who utilized the rational modes of Western philosophy in performative contexts in modern India, while Shivarama Karanth's work represented the first self-conscious effort to utilize the traditional resources of India's performance culture. Shivarama Karanth and Dina Gandhi were the pioneers of the new 'roots' movement, which surpassed anything in contemporary theatrical expression. This movement led to the search for regional identities, and the regional theatre became an integral part of the alternative Indian theatre. What should be emphasized here is that while IPTA was a movement of socially committed theatre workers, theatre practitioners belonging to the post-1960s roots movement (after Shivarama Karanth) were creative people without a corresponding social vision. They were products of a new economic situation where capitalist commodity exchange had ushered in new technologies, industrial infrastructures, market values, and tremendous opportunities in commerce and industry.

What is stressed here is that the new roots movement was fostered by deliberate patronage (e.g., by Suresh Awasthi of Sangeet Natak Akademi, Delhi), and that directors like B.V. Karanth, Kavalam Panikkar, Ratan Thiyam, M. Ramaswamy, etc., were people free from any pursuit of a larger vision of life and values which inspired the likes of Alkazi, Sombhu Mitra or Shivarama Karanth. They were (and are) creative artists who simply pursued their craft on lines approved by ideologues and policy managers in the world of arts. This created a new kind of theatre activity where the use of sophisticated techniques and devices, and conscious exploitation of regional artistic resources, became the norm. The resultant works of theatre art gained an identity separate from their creators, possessed of an exchange value as distinct from use value. Various institutions created festival platforms which were patronage sites for these works. The official policy-makers supported this activity, and the new

practitioners never needed to develop a personal philosophy. Though some of them have been men of personal dignity, like Girish Karnad or Sankara Pillai, many of the roots leaders were devoid of any social philosophy. This enterprise prospered in the climate of the new capitalism in India, and fitted in with the development programmes promoted by the Indian ruling class; art was no longer a creative enterprise of human beings in doubt or turmoil. Many Indian directors began to delve into the performative traditions of various regions, producing new works of kaleidoscopic variety. Festivals, workshops and internationally sponsored programmes arranged by consummate impresarios provided them the necessary exposure. Integration of the resources of technology, media, and market helped to build up the identity of the contemporary theatre.

The emergence of this new national aesthetic can perhaps be traced to concerns of nationhood, state and sovereignty in the overall atmosphere of global capitalism. The demands of art patrons in different international fora for varied responses to the universal predicaments of mankind, the desire to see and interact with the diversities of the world, necessitated a rethink on culture and its significatory potential in the West. Official patrons in bureaucracies and arts institutions, and managers of cultural festivals who had taken over the intellectual leadership in the modernity project, were quick to take the cue and seek to establish this new theatre as a uniquely Indian commodity. The affirmation of the post-modern value of difference worldwide helped Indian patrons to articulate an ideology in defence of the exposure of India's cultural forms in international events.

From the 1980s, the Festivals of India prompted many innovative practitioners of theatre to look into their regional roots, carrying forward the pan-Indian cultural project. This added a new dimension to the world of Indian high art. The ideological foundations of the post-1980s theatre — what it was meant to be — were clear to all critical onlookers. It presented a pan-Indian outlook in a globalizing world through an assemblage of visuals and movements which incorporated the best techniques of institutional learning (NSD) — nearly Western in use of technology, yet a theatre representing Indian traditions. The urge to exhibit traditional cultural resources in a new garb and a universalist 'modern' temper defined the theatrical innovations of this period. The Natakavedi movement of Kerala, the new work based on the folk heritage of Karnataka, the parallel theatre movement in Maharashtra, the Naveena Natakam of Tamil Nadu, the folk and tribal identities exhibited in the theatre of Manipur, etc., helped redefine the new 'national' Indian theatre (*Rasa*, ed. Ananda Lal, 1995).

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Under the new dispensation, Girish Karnad became the centre of the mainstream aesthetic. B.V. Karanth of Karnataka, Kavalam Panikkar of Kerala, and Ratan Thiyam of Manipur became apostles of the same aesthetic, representing regional diversity. Traditional resources, adapted for modern needs, came to be regarded as the ultimate theatrical experimentation. This answered the demands of interculturalism, a necessity in the context of global capitalism.

There have been, however, objections to this new trend from various articulate sections in the world of arts. Prettification and commodification of culture in expanding networks of cultural transactions have been criticized in various quarters. "Folk forms in modern urban theatre became a fashion for foreigners to take up and a fashion to impress foreigners with.

Folk is good because it helps sell India to the outside world", wrote C.C. Mehta. Amitava Roy said that by playing the folk card, theatre enthusiasts were trying to get whatever advantages they could at international festivals and at home (1995). Modern, city-based experiments without folk trappings were no less Indian than the work of the roots movement. Yet the work of new playwrights from Maharastra (Rajiv Naik, Makarand Sathe, etc.) were regarded as 'cerebral'.

Theatre in India is actually too diverse and multifaceted to be brought under one homogeneous umbrella. It is the interplay of the arts world with the political economy of post-colonial India which has given the label of 'Indian theatre' to this varied phenomenon. Equally obvious is the role of high art in constructing the hegemonic consensus necessary to legitimize global capitalism (Barbara Jenkins, 1999).

Edward Said argues that when a text or work of art wins approval, we must ask what enables its acceptance by either a small or a large group of people. The political nature of acceptance of works of art is blurred by the "cult of expertise" which creates small professional fiefdoms that draw boundaries around themselves, propagating a doctrine of non-intervention between various fields and preventing a systematic examination of any links that exist between the cultural and the social and the political spheres. The result is a de-politicization of culture.

The social and political indifference of the proponents of the roots movement, and their links with self-perpetuating managers and patrons of arts, have created a hegemonic ambience within the realm of modern Indian theatre. The purveyors of this kind of theatre are extremely reluctant to articulate their fundamental social, political and intellectual positions. They would rather bank on their critics' or patrons' articulation of their own 'ideology'. Without managerial support and help from government or corporate bodies, they feel vulnerable. In fact, the roots theatre is simply commodification of art for the pleasure of the ruling classes. Its practitioners circulate within the corridors of power; they have no separate existence.

Their practices are opposed by theatre activists who work for change. The Safdar Hashmi legacy disturbs and opposes the official discourse, but such theatre, like other left-oriented cultural expression, exists only on the margins. The Indian bourgeoisie is extremely intelligent and capable of recognizing the worth of the opponent: it appropriates the opponent's project of social emancipation. This bourgeoisie professes as its goal an egalitarian society, and the elitist theatre also shares this 'commitment', yet finds no fault with the existing social and economic structure. Representation and reality do not coalesce in the functioning of the elite theatre in India.

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The commercial theatre, however, need not bother with these dichotomies. Its ideology, again, belongs to a system where capital and exchange value reign supreme, where investments are weighed against profits. What is true of commercial cinema is also true of the commercial theatre, only it is an operation on a much smaller scale. This writer recalls what Chidananda Dasgupta (1995) wrote of commerical films: "They represent a massive institution, a monument to the country's self-sufficiency in the sphere of mass entertainment, so firmly based in indigenous psychology as to be capable of meeting all challenges from outside." This could

well be a description of the commercial theatre in India.

The bulk of popular theatrical productions (e.g., Babban Khan) are essentially a non-cerebral two-hour journey into oblivion, catering to sections of the petit-bourgeois audience. Advertisements and hoardings showing film stars like Dilip Kumar guffawing at performances, claiming runs of more than two thousand shows in two years, indicate the workings of the commercial theatre. The success parameters are relief from drudgery and monotony, moments of joy and pleasure, and a temporary laying aside of the tensions of life. The baser instincts of the lumpen have run riot in this arena, titillating the urban and rural clientele. Like their counterparts in low-grade movies, most of the functionaries (producers, financiers, distributors, etc.) spend hours discussing 'effect', choice of glamorous women for the main roles, fight sequences, and all sorts of gimmicks to entertain the audience.

The ruling classes tolerate such cultural practices since these are a means of keeping citizens in a state of amnesia. The masses can sink into oblivion while the masters strengthen their hold on society. Likewise, popular Hindi movies delight audiences all over the country, but in reality they help check opposition to national unity and familiarize diverse citizens with a mainstream hegemonic language.

Yet many of these plays and films exhibit radical, progressive gestures. Youth rebellion, defiance of conservative authority and tradition, rejection of feudalism and orthodoxy, mingle with teenage romance narratives. However, they retain a familiar aesthetic and contain an all-too-predictable conclusion: all's well that ends well. None of the purveyors of these arts participate in movements for radical change. For it is the prevailing social and economic system which enables this class to thrive. The integrity of the artist and his or her representation on the stage or screen are two different things altogether.

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Perhaps the left movement in Europe — France, Germany and Russia — is to be credited with ushering in a pro-poor theatre with a distinct emancipatory agenda: the *théatre populaire*. Romain Rolland is regarded as one of the pioneers of this theatre movement. Nowadays, however, the term 'people's theatre' represents the theatre committed to social action, while 'popular theatre' is associated with entertainment. In the Euro-American context a new kind of theatre has emerged where music, pop art, and other forms have been mixed and served up with technical expertise in some post-modern experiments. A recent Canadian experiment by director Robert Lapage, *Seven Streams of River Otta*, sensuously mixes the technique of mirrors (*Enter the Dragon*-style), video projections, imagery of real rain and storm on the stage (combined with a subtle use of nudity and sex and an extremely stimulating exploitation of ethnic fable — a Chinese folk tale with life-size puppets), all in an easy narrative structure, to tell the story of the female protagonist moving from the deprivation of war to a self-deluding surrender to market forces, and finally to the spiritual compromise inherent in the human condition today. This play was hailed as one of the best post-modern theatrical productions of recent years.

With the expansion of central institutions like the National School of Drama and Sangeet Natak Akademi, and the latter institution's system of awards, subsidies and grants, there came about substantial changes in the ideological bent of struggling artists. The quest for recognition and affluence replaced any real struggle as our artists became upwardly mobile. Resistant theatre groups like Jana Natya Manch, in spite of their commitment and idealism, have been limited by their performance geography. Samudaya of Karnataka, however dynamic it may have been during people's struggles of the 1970s and '80s, was finally caught in the traps of the bourgeoisie. The 'third theatre' of Badal Sircar did not become a pan-Indian poor theatre movement, perhaps because of the inhibitions of the leader himself. Some States like Kerala, where left parties have been in power, have a vital theatre, but a genuine all-India movement, which was a distinct possibility in independent India, has been subverted by the ruling classes in the post-colonial environment.

In analyzing artistic expressions in the newly emerging state of India, it seems we have not attended to one historical fact, namely, the left insurrection (1948–49) which attempted to overthrow the bourgeois government of Nehru, and the impact of its suppression on leftist arts movements all over India. The establishment of bourgeois dominance deprived the country of a powerful artistic revolution, which could have given true meaning to Indian life in the post-colonial era. The energies of cultural workers in Nehru's India were instead absorbed in the fast-expanding film industry. With the loss of any sense of direction, the struggle of artists remained confined to regional pockets of resurgence — and individuals — for example, Utpal Dutt in West Bengal. The national unity drive gradually eased leftist art out of the central space in the country's imagination.

Poverty, ignorance, exploitation, corruption and violence, which are contemporary realities, became themes which Indian bourgeois artists manipulated for their own ends. The ruling class appropriates these concerns, rewards artists for their 'humanist' endeavours, and the system remains intact. Radical themes are commodified to perpetuate its hegemony.

People's theatre movements are thus marginalized — their issues are proxied and hijacked by the ruling classes. The latter have eased out committed and politically aware practitioners to the periphery of India's artistic mainstream. There is a strange, subtle relationship of distance, mutual alienation, yet artificial camaraderie within the social networks of the two different streams of cultural thought and practice in post-colonial Indian theatre.

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In a geographically distant and politically marginalized State like Manipur, strange ideological patterns and responses to the mainstream dynamic have established themselves. Ratan Thiyam's pro-hegemonic theatre has official support and a powerful presence in the arts establishment. His pan-Indian, universal themes, served up with 'ethnic' embellishment, support the idea of unity in diversity. However, Thiyam's theatre practice raises a lot of questions — chiefly, what is the validity of a regional theatre which subscribes to this 'Indian' ideology? What, too, is the meaning of national integration? In this context, the case of Manipur is extremely significant, though other peripheral cultural areas like Jammu and Kashmir may also have experienced a similar dialectic.

A significant feature of mainstream theatre in the country is the inter-regional circulation,

adaptation, and production of plays. For example, plays written by Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar, Chandrasekhar Kambar, Satish Alekar, Manoj Mitra, etc., have been translated into Hindi and other languages and presented in various cities and international festivals. What makes these plays work with the present-day Indian and international audience is that they reflect Indian spiritual values as well as the modern, universal Indian temperament. In a sense, the 'national' concept is not undermined, but rather enhanced by these regional plays in various idioms and styles.

How about the plays of Ratan Thiyam and Kanhailal? Could *Chakravyuha* and *Pebet* be translated into other regional languages and idioms? Will they have the same presence as the work of the other playwrights? Why has this not been tried? Here lies a deep cultural contradiction which this writer would like to probe further.

Plays from other regions in India, be they big cities or semi-urban/rural locations, have a distinct pan-Indian universalness which any Indian can accept. Karnad's *Tughlaq* or *Nagamandala* can be presented in a manner which is acceptable to North Indian or even foreign audiences. But even though the tensions in these plays belong to the realm of universal human emotions, the expression, patterns of behaviour, and other cultural inputs in the plays would make them absolutely alien to the audience at Imphal. A study of audience reactions to Sanakhya Ebotombi's many Indian plays presented in Manipuri translation would help us analyze this issue further. Though many of these Indian plays had some features which left the Manipuri audience in awe, identification with the issues, characters, and problems was extremely difficult. One could appreciate the form, the idiom, production values, and even the content of these plays, but true emotional, psychological, and perceptual identification was difficult. Modern Indian theatre productions are too media-dependent and alien to the realities of Manipuri society. They are no different from consumer products from mainstream India, which are not really needed but made necessary by market forces and official culture. Problems of uneven development result in varying responses to products of art and culture as well.

Ratan Thiyam's plays elicit the same response as Manipuri products do in the Indian market. Manipuri handloom products are in demand here, because they are finely crafted, exotic, strange and mysterious to Indian eyes. Manipuri handlooms can therefore decorate the drawing rooms of the Indian middle class, a burgeoning demographic presence in urban India. Nevertheless, Manipuri handlooms are still a world apart from Conjeevaram saris or South Indian *dosa* or *idli*, which have become common features of modern Indian couture and cuisine. This cannot be said about Manipuri products or art efforts 'consumed' in mainstream India. Here lies the essential contradiction of the Manipuri presence in India.

What the author is trying to establish is that the attempt by directors like Ratan Thiyam and Kanhailal to integrate with the mainstream Indian cultural consciousness through work in regional idioms is bound to fail as their work cannot spontaneously match mainstream practices and behaviour. Manipuri plays simply cannot be transplanted on Indian soil and merge into the landscape. This cannot happen naturally — only with a certain deliberateness. A played-up artfulness and coy artificiality thus characterize the engagement of Manipuri contemporary theatre with pan-Indian culture.

One is tempted to cite two instances from the contemporary politics of culture, where two

Manipuri stalwarts of mainstream integration, Ratan Thiyam and Shyam Sharma, suffered at the hands of the perpetuators of Indian cultural development. These instances relate to the period when Ratan Thiyam was Director of the National School of Drama and Shyam Sharma was head of the jury of the National Film Festival.

High-voltage intrigue, and the politics of so-called 'discrimination', led to Ratan Thiyam being dubbed as a tribal king. The tirade against the decision of Shyam Sharma on a film by Gulzar revealed deep fissures in the integration process to which these two Manipuris are desperately committed. Both these stalwarts have sailed the same boat — accepting the commodity value of their art — and have tried to steer through the murky waters of the market economy to reach the shores of recognition, success and profit. However, the marks of uneven development which they carry in their behaviour, and their inborn attitudes and communication modes, alienate them from the very world which they thought was in their grasp. People from underdeveloped areas who, with great effort, struggle to absorb the culture of commodity production commonly meet with such experience. It puts great stress on their personalities and world-view. However, they have chosen this path as their destiny. For them, as Ernest Fisher had said, "Man is nothing, success is all".

Theatre as a *commodity* would thus suffer in places where uneven development has arrested production and deprived the economy of a natural flow of goods and services. The tensions in the economy produce unusual stresses and strains, whereby perceptions and value systems undergo flux and change. However, according to the law of uneven development, art can flourish in an economically inferior society as it cannot in a society which enjoys the benefits of a more developed economy. In no pre-capitalist society was material production in principle hostile to art, not even in primitive societies. Hostility of material production to art is to be found only under capitalism (Adolfo Sanchez Vasquez, 1965).

Acceptance of the capitalistic principle which regards artistic production as a means of exchange leads to tensions and complications in human behaviour. These are compounded when a society, semi-feudal and suffering the stresses of modernization, releases forces which dehumanize people and subvert their natural behaviour. Ratan Thiyam's and Kanhailal's works, and the lives they lead, are vivid examples of this contradiction, in spite of their good productions on the stage.

Kanhailal, whose early anti-hegemonic theatre brought him into national limelight, now fluctuates with a subtle tension from pressures of sheer economic survival within a system he had earlier defied. This rupture of thought, values and concerns, and the gradual recession of one's inner convictions from pressures of the establishment, is now clouding his artistic vision. The voice of the oppressed he once projected so beautifully and strongly is lost in his recent works (e.g., *Draupadi 2000*), mainly because of the slow but overwhelming influence of the ruling powers at the centre he hopes to appease.

His approach to the post-colonial writer Mahasweta Devi is marked by a fundamental lack of grasp of the contemporary dynamics of insurgency; this has led him to romanticize the Mahasweta heroine who is a metaphor for anti-colonial struggle. Kanhailal, obsessed with the nude scene at the end of the story, has used the anti-colonial theme to exhibit his wife's newly found capability for 'gender achievement'. Savitri has left nothing to the imagination in the nude scene. Instead of using the scene politically, Kanhailal has resorted to a sentimental

self-deception which has marred its meaning so badly that it actually gave wrong signals to the audience in Manipur. (This was very different from New Delhi's feminist reception of the play.) A local wit quipped, "Under the Indian dispensation, the army will rape Manipuri women, and before the managers of Indian art, our female artists will parade nude".

This kind of progressive denudation of ideas, inability to understand the cultural transformation that has taken place through a system of patronage which enslaves minds, has created oppositional structures which Lokendra Arambam's theatre of resistance seeks to represent. His *Child of the North-East* (1998) rejects elitist assumptions of Manipuri aesthetics and attempts to use the théatre populaire conception of a fundamentally ethno-political drama; it is an antithesis to false notions of growth and development. The attempt to discover a new dynamic of change, however, is not easy. The flux and fluidity of the situation only indicate possibilities for a left-wing movement in the theatre of the State.

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The classification of Indian post-colonial theatre into elitist, commercial and popular categories therefore has very little relevance in certain regions where the cultural implications of dominance are felt. No doubt in Manipur too there are many proscenium groups whose ideological affiliations are unclear, and which try to pursue the path of profit within the prevalent system. A kind of psuedo-elitism marks their work. Other groups, staging rank melodramas, flourish, with weekly shows for a lumpen audience. Travelling groups with borrowed imagery from Hindi films provide sustenance to playwrights, directors, and artists. The pro-elitist positions of some select groups are, however, not going to be easy to sustain. Only professional groups in the official circuit have chances of continuity and success. The political economy of theatre, after all, plays a vital role in determining the viability of theatre, in Manipur as elsewhere in the country.

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