

BOOK REVIEWS

The Puppet Theatre of Asia by Prof. J. Tilakarasiri, Ceylon University, Ceylon. Published by The Department of Cultural Affairs and printed by The Department of Government Printing, Ceylon—pp. 166 including index and Bibliography.

The author, a professor of Sanskrit at the Ceylon University, has spent almost two decades studying, writing and producing puppet plays in his country. Aided by the Rockefeller Foundation of America he has made a study of Puppetry in Asian countries, visiting India, Burma, Thailand, Malaya, Java, Bali and Japan in 1960-61. His previous knowledge and contact with the modern Puppet Theatre in the West together with a background of Sanskrit gives him a better understanding and assessment of the Asian Puppet Theatre, where the influence of Sanskrit Drama is so predominantly evident.

Prof. Tilakarasiri having discussed the usual controversial aspect of the origin of Puppetry—China or India? India or China? —explains why India should be considered the birthplace of Puppetry. He goes back to prehistoric times to the origin of artistic activity which catered to religious and secular needs of the different communities tracing the ancient shadow and string puppets to the Sanskrit Theatre and how it inspired and influenced Burma, Siam, Malaya, Indonesia and Ceylon. So that today the Epics of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are integral parts of almost all traditional Asian Theatre and that Puppetry was the earliest form of Drama, the human actors very often imitating and learning their actions from the Puppets as in Burma, Thailand and Indonesia as is still seen. Similarly the influence of the *Bunraku-za* on the *Kabuki* in Japan.

The shadow and the string puppets co-existed and developed together in India and China. He describes in detail how the Indian influence travelled far east to Java and all around, while Chinese influence came down to Thailand and through China went to the Middle East.

These influences travelled far and wide due to the nomadic and gypsy life of the wandering puppet players, who were often taken as mendicants and plunderers said to beguile the poor and simple folk with their entertainments, same as their counterparts in Western countries.

Dealing with India and Ceylon : India he explains is important for all the various types of puppets found but lags far behind in development compared to Java and Japan—while the decline in the Art is definite in Burma, Ceylon and Thailand.

Then the author stresses on the points of similarity that travelled and contributed towards the Puppet Theatre such as the comic and clownish characters that afford relief to long plays and are used to announce intermission. Besides the entry on stage of the good characters from the right side of screen and the evil or bad from the left side is a predominant trait throughout the Asian Theatre while the *Sutradhar* or *Bhagavatar*, the *Dalang* or the *Joruri* conductors of the plays are the vital assets of puppet plays.

In Burma the Puppet Theatre flourished in the 18th Century before the human theatre and he shows how the human actors imitated the puppet movements, like the *Thai Khon* Dancers who too took their sideways dance movements from that of the Thai shadow puppets.

The book describes interestingly the construction, techniques and all aspects of the puppets and puppet presentations of the various Asian countries, the types that existed and still exist. He explains how new developments have been inspired and Government aid given to revive and bring the Art to the fore in certain countries but such efforts have been like drops in an ocean, and yet in some places like Java, Bali, the Art is taught widely and has reached a highly stylised and developed stage. The Puppet Theatre is a vital part of the life of these people and performed with due rituals and dignity as nowhere else today. Even Japan has highly developed the modern side, besides the old traditional ever popular *Bunraku-za*. Osaka has an established Puppet Theatre the *Bunraku-za* situated very near the place Nishinomiya historically the birthplace of the Japanese puppets. Surprisingly even in war-ridden Thailand, Cambodia and Viet Nam the water puppets still thrive and even perform new themes to boost the morale of the people.

The book as a whole gives a wonderful picture of the rich Asian

Puppet Theatre, and covers its history of prestige, decline and the efforts made towards modern developments in these countries—with beautiful photographs in colour and black-and-white. The author with his wide study observes that all the rich material lies with us in India, Burma, Ceylon and Thailand and the only way to develop is to explore the puppet potentialities of teaching in schools, in Training Colleges and to develop a taste for this theatre in the youth as is done in Japan, Java and Bali.

On the whole the Asian Puppet Theatre picture is not very encouraging and cannot remain content with the revival of the Traditional art but all efforts should be made towards a new and creative puppet theatre to bring back the adult and sophisticated audience of today so that Puppetry may thrive as of old.

—Meher R. Contractor

Kolhatkar Ani Hirabai by Prof. M. L. Varadpande; Sahitya Sahakar Sangh, Bombay, pp. 186. Price Rs. 10/-.

The traditional Marathi theatre flourished during the early years of the twentieth century, thanks to the appearance on the scene of such creative geniuses as playwrights Kirloskar, Deval, Khadilkar and Gadkari, actors like Narayanrao Rajhans, popularly known as 'Bal-gandharva', Ganpatrao Joshi, Keshavrao Bhosale, Pendharkar; and musicians of the stature of Bakhale, Tembe, Vaze and Phulambriker. Each in his own way contributed to the efflorescence of theatre-activity in Maharashtra and the result was the production of such immortal plays as *Swayamwar*, *Mritchhakatik*, *Sharada*, *Manapaman*, *Ekach Pyala*, *Punyaprabhav* etc. Even today these plays continue to draw packed houses throughout Maharashtra, the rapid strides of the experimental theatre notwithstanding.

For some unknown reasons time has, as it were, refused to smile on the memory of that mighty personality in contemporary Maharashtra—Sripad Krishna Kolhatkar. Kolhatkar was, indeed, a rare genius. He wrote plays, essays and novels and between 1896 and 1911 dominated the Marathi literary scene. On theatrical front he produced such masterpieces as *Viratanaya*, *Mukanayak*, *Mativikar* and *Premshodhan* to name only a few. Kolhatkar's plays were as trail-blazing as his essays on wide-ranging subjects like music and astrology were penetrating. His wide range of interest was no mere accident but a deliberate attempt to overcome certain limitations forced upon him by a cruel fate. The story of his misfortune as related by Kolhatkar in his autobiography

makes sorrowful reading. He has narrated how two severe strokes of facial paralysis he had in his early youth resulted in the permanent disfigurement of his body. But such misfortunes could not deter him. Far from smarting under a feeling of inferiority, he took up the study of literature, music and astrology and devoted more and more to reading and thinking with a view to gaining mentally what he had lost physically. Here lies the origin of his humourous writings and his humour came to have a distinct style emulated later by his disciples like Gadkari, Varerkar, Atre. Kolhatkar was truly an institution by himself—an institution which for well over four decades from 1890 to 1930 contributed much to the enrichment and shaping of the Marathi literature.

The contemporary Marathi stage like the contemporary Urdu-Parsi stage, was influenced by Sanskrit and the English stage and although a passing influence of Urdu-Parsi Theatre is evident in Kolhatkar's writings, his primary source of influence was English and Sanskrit plays of Shakespeare and Banabhatta. Kolhatkar brought about revolutionary changes in script-writing, music and technique. The audience, which hitherto was used to mythological as well as translated plays, was longing for some change and Kolhatkar's genius gave them this much-needed change by drawing on the time-bound social themes and putting them across in his characteristic humourous style. Khadilkar and Gadkari later made use of the same technique and produced some of their popular plays. Thus the emergence of Khadilkar and Gadkari appeared to have eclipsed the genius of Kolhatkar. But, in effect, the plays produced by both of them were nothing but the manifestation of the more developed and progressive forms of Kolhatkar's technique.

Simultaneously, with the rise of Kolhatkar as a playwright was shining on the horizon of the Marathi theatre another brilliant star who later became his foremost disciple and produced not only a couple of good plays but also to some extent was responsible for moulding the genius of Kolhatkar. To Hirabai Pednekar goes the distinction of being the first Maharashtrian woman playwright and stage actress. Hirabai was born of a concubine in a distant Konkan town of Savant-wadi. Even as a student in Bombay, where she migrated as an orphan after the death of her mother, she proved her brilliance by composing poems and demonstrating a talent for acting during the school programmes. In keeping with her family tradition, Hirabai was taught music. But what was studied as a requirement of the profession, indeed, stood her in good stead in becoming a theatre personality in the best

sense of the term. That was the time when the reputation of the Kirloskar Natak Mandali was at its zenith, with a galaxy of actors like Nanasaheb Joglekar, Bhaurao Kolhatkar and Balkoba Natekar in its repertory. It was her companionship with Joglekar that opened before Hirabai a new vista of Marathi theatre and Hirabai wrote her first play *Jayadrath Vidamban* in 1907. But it failed to click. Her next play was *Damini*. Keshavrao Bhosale's *Lalitaladarsha* staged it for the first time in 1911 after the Kirloskars' refusal to accept it since it was written by a concubine. In *Damini* the authoress has brought home the need for the education of women. 'Sex cannot be a bar in the pursuit of knowledge' is the theme Hirabai successfully tackled in her play 60 years ago—rare courage, indeed, to be advocating the need for women's education at a time when so much of a social taboo was attached to it. Beside being a dramatist, Hirabai was good musician too and was responsible for some of the melodious tunes in Gadkari's *Punyaprabhav*.

A controversy raged in the Marathi theatre circles in the first decade of the century over the 'closer companionship' between these two eminent personalities of the Marathi theatre.

Kolhatkar, no doubt, came closer to Hirabai, particularly after Joglekar's death. But as Prof. Varadpande has convincingly explained in his book, this was nothing unusual. For Kolhatkar loved whatever was new and beautiful, whether a poem or a scene or an idea. At the same time, he valued intellectual excellence more than the moral perfection. In Hirabai he found such an idol which he worshipped. She was a gifted writer, a talented musician and above all a charming woman. Kolhatkar made no bones about his contact with Hirabai. In fact, in his autobiography he has made a candid reference to his closeness to Hirabai and the influence wielded by her on his life as well as on his dramas. Kolhatkar's intellectual honesty lies in mentioning this episode in his autobiography when the general tendency among the writers of autobiographies was to suppress all references to unpleasant events in their personal lives.

Prof. Varadpande deserves to be complimented for two reasons : for throwing new light on the contribution of these now—almost—forgotten gems of the Marathi theatre and secondly for putting relations between them in a proper perspective. What has added to the informative value of the book is the longish but scholarly preface by G. T. Madkholkar as well as inclusion in it of the facsimiles of some of the original letters written by Kolhatkar, Hirabai and their contemporaries.

—S. D. Wagh