

THE TEMPERAMENT OF MARATHI DRAMA

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Does Marathi drama have a temperament? Does the drama of any language, for that matter, have some mysterious and distinctive quality which governs its formal development? An instinctive response to certain genres of drama has taught me to believe that such indeed is the case, with the proviso that Marathi is bound to share these characteristics with most Indian languages.

It is a truism to say that the very tenor of dramatic writing derives from the socio-economic conditions of a country and the way the character of the people—their temperament—is broadly moulded by this environment. The Greeks had one kind of tragedy passed on to them by the hypnotic dictates of their myths which they could not distinguish from the day-to-day march of history. The English and the French, the Norwegians and the Swedes developed their own brands of tragedy, not independently of the ancients but modulating, according to their own fundamental humours, the texture of the drama passed on to them.

It is also well recognised that the characteristics of the theatre in which these plays were staged influenced their structure and shaped the subtle aspects of form and content within them. Yet, the imponderable that had an equally great influence was the taste of the times. In the English theatre, with its vast canvas, we see the changing socio-political fashions of century after century overhauling a lapsing form of drama and yet some of the basic strains continue and re-emerge in new shapes. (Prof. Clifford Leech had drawn an interesting comparison

between the literary points of view that were maintained by Wordsworth and Coleridge on the one hand and their parallel transmutations in the plays of Wesker and Pinter more than one-and-a-half centuries later.) If anything is responsible for this palpable element of continuity which indirectly sustains the growth of a country's theatre, it is the hard core of national character.

I am consciously broaching the national aspect of what, in this article, will be restricted to Marathi drama because I think that theatre in this country can be used as an instrument of "emotional integration" on the basis of the following thesis.

Since its inception Marathi drama has had recourse to songs. The reason, to my mind, is obvious. After the golden age of Sanskrit drama, there was an immense break, encompassing several centuries during which other forms of literature, more specifically the mystic poetry of the poet saints, had ruled the imagination of the people. Not only had the languages come into their own—and the reinstitution of the indigenous language, Prakrit, as against the aristocratic Sanskrit was a mission with the Marathi poet saints of the 13th-17th centuries—but, towards the end of the 19th century the people had to be introduced to drama all over again. It was a way of coaxing them to take them over territory already familiar to them. This meant associating the first attempts at staging plays with the forms of mass communication already obtaining in Maharashtra at the time.

Thus the drama of Vishnudas Bhave, the founder of the modern Marathi theatre, both naturally and logically incorporated elements familiar to audiences through *keertans*, *dasavatars* (spontaneous enactments projecting grandiose versions of mythical stories and using a lot of colour and "sound and fury") and such other contemporary forms deep-rooted in the social fabric of Maharashtrians. Some form of music, something as distinct from prose dialogue, was essential if the first audiences were to be drawn into the net of the new experience.

Prof. D. K. Bedekar, an eminent Marathi critic, when discussing the verbosity of the pioneering Marathi novelist, Hari Narayan Apte, had remarked that over-writing was natural in an age when the reader had to be introduced to a new form—the novel. Marathi novelists today also tend to over-write; and this defect arises because they are afraid that otherwise they will not be able to communicate with their readers. They do not pause to judge the extent of the communication

required and the laxity permissible in the social discipline of the narrative.

I shall later develop the parallel between the Marathi drama and novel as we find them at the two opposite ends of their development. Meanwhile, it is worth remembering that the early Marathi dramatists did not introduce songs into the main body of the text with an uneasy conscience. In fact, one wonders whether, in the last century, prior to the age of Kirloskar, a playwright was at all aware of his handiwork as distinct from a stage production, something to be published. The point is that like Shakespeare and his predecessors, they could not have been in two minds over the stageworthiness of their work and its importance to posterity as part of literature.

Even to this day, the *keertan* and the *tamasha* are basically meant for the audience: they are in large measure impromptu and not designed to be published. (The Maharashtra State has, however, in recent years instituted a censor board which demands of every *tamasha* producer six copies of the script. Woe to the gifted but often semi-literate tribe of *tamasha* players!) Similarly, drama has been habitually looked upon by Maharashtrian audiences as an experience to be lived in the theatre. It is only the inevitable sophistication brought about by the socio-economic changes that followed in the wake of British rule that slightly tilted this view of the theatre, without necessarily making it more rational.

After the pioneering attempts of Bhave, beginning in 1843, we reach the glorious era of Kirloskar, Deval and their contemporaries. The mythological plays of the first, of which *Soubhadra* alone is adequate to substantiate my thesis, and a play like *Sharada* of Deval's, represent the most desirable expression of the temperament of Marathi drama. In essence, Marathi drama has not deviated from the norms set by these two epoch-making plays. *Soubhadra* although it is based on the tale of Subhadra's love for Arjuna and Lord Krishna's efforts to distantly assist the romantic pair, is—as Prof. Gangadhar Gadgil has again stressed in a thought-provoking re-assessment—a portrait of Maharashtrian family life at the turn of the century. This is the very base of that communication which this song-studded play achieves with the audience. But the rapport is decidedly heightened by the content of the songs as well as the appropriate *ragas* to which they are tuned. A prose “version” of *Soubhadra* is unthinkable; and it is this play which has had a phenomenal life in the Marathi theatre despite the deteriorating quality of successive productions.

Sharada, on the other hand, depicts the social conditions at the turn of the century without the benefit of a mythological disguise. But while tackling—I must say, rather half-heartedly—the problem of an uneven match between an innocent teen-ager and a covetous old widower, an ostensibly contemporary theme, it has endeared itself to audiences forever because of the abiding sympathies evoked by the girl in question.

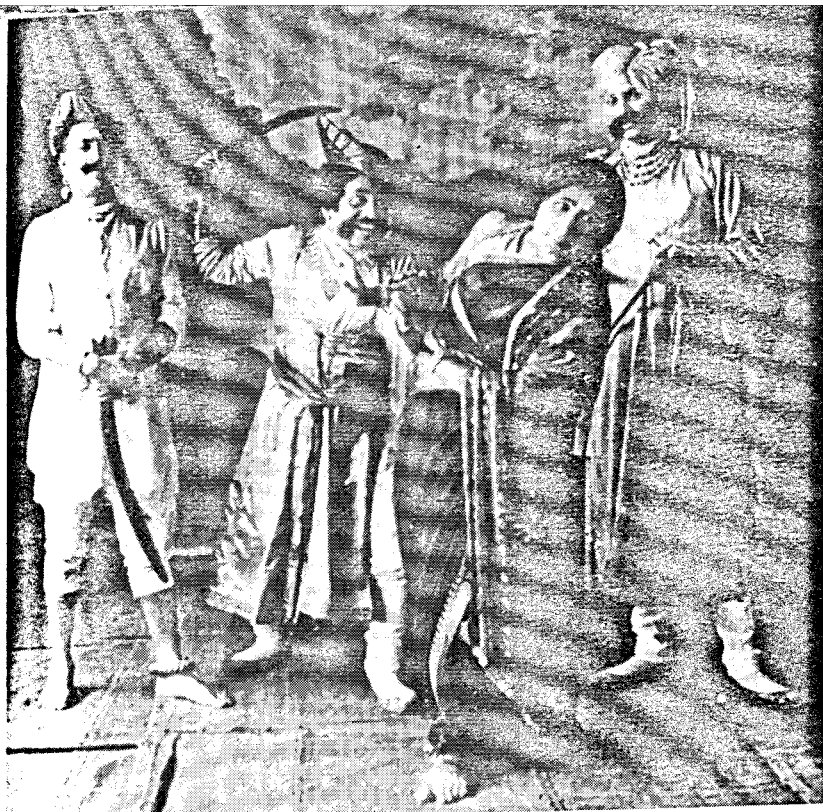
While the songs in both the plays are inextricably woven into the narrative and emotive flow of the dialogue, successive actor-singers have tended to enlarge the proper confines of the musical performance and thus alienated critics and commentators if not audiences. This article is, in fact, an attempt to find a *via media* between the approaches of these two guardians of the theatre.

First, it must be understood that the theatre is essentially made up of conventions suited to its nature and guided by the truth of the requirement of “a willing suspension of disbelief”. Hence the soliloquy in Shakespeare, or rather the very concept of dialogue in metrical verse. Hence the songs in Marathi plays. It is only the manner of their theatrical projection which may be contested, not their existence—or their propriety if they can be justified from the point of view of dramatic inevitability. In Marathi drama, their *raga* content—which is closely interlinked with the projection of a particular mood and which, moreover, sustains the broad emotional flow of the dramatic experience—makes a further difference. It is no blemish that much of the musical drama of Maharashtra has a broad sense of emotions, natural in a genre influenced by the ancient *rasa* theory. It is worth remembering that no major Marathi dramatist of the 20th century entirely dispensed with songs; and the so-called prose drama could thrive because of an essentially extraneous appeal: patriotic, hortatory, much like an enlarged *powada*—historical ballad. This latter is clearly an exception to the rule and proves that the musical drama is a more lasting expression of Maharashtra’s temperament.

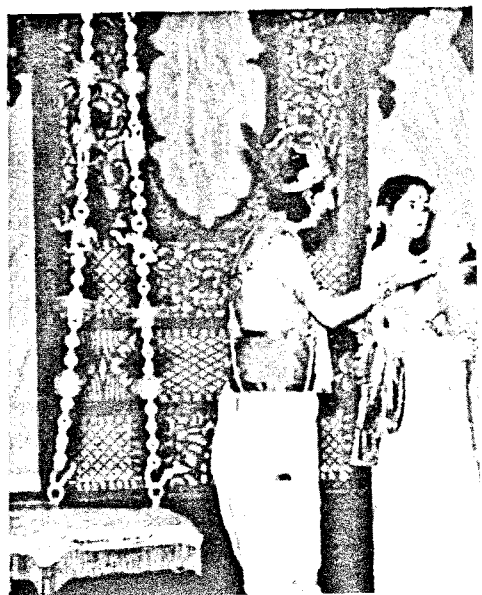
Photographs: P67 “*Mrichikatika*” by Deval, Ganpatrao Bodas as Shakaar and Bal-gandharva as Vasantsena. 2, “*Vidyaharn*” by Khadilkar Bal-gandharva as Devayani, Pethe as Shukracharya and Tembe as Kach.

P68 1. Anant Damle as Narada. 2. Ram Marathe as Krishna

P69 “*Saubhadra*” by Kirloskar, two productions: 1. “*Manapman*” by Khadilkar, Balgandharva as Bhamini and Nanasaheb Joglekar as Dhaiyadhar 2. “*Swayamwar*” by Khadilkar, Bodas as Krishna and Bal-gandharva as Rukmini.—From the collection of K. T. Deshmukh.









Once the inevitability of the musical content is appreciated as a distinctive feature of Marathi drama, it becomes easy to realise in which directions it was, and can be developed. J. B. Priestley, in his lectures to the students of the actors' school run by the Old Vic, had pointed out the ambivalence of dramatic experience. He was right when he said that we never totally identify ourselves with the characters we see on the stage and that a part of our mind is all the while aware that we are witnessing a particular actor performing in a particular role. This duality of experience of the theatre is at the root of the method associated with Bal-gandharva and wrongly blamed for the decline of Marathi drama.

Bal-gandharva made the musical accompanists part of the stage production. One may find fault with his histrionics—and a writer like myself who has to base himself only on documentary evidence in this matter can vouch only for his phenomenal voice and innate understanding of classical music—but one cannot take issue with the principle of moulding the theatrical experience into one composite whole and utilising the alchemy of his own personality in order to achieve this miracle.

Actually, where the accompanists sit is a minor point considering that the very nature of drama does not call for a cinematic illusion. The Marathi word for the spirit that guides the composite alchemy within a theatre, *rangat*, is closely connected with the word *rangabhoomi* which is familiar to all Indians and needs no elaboration. Dramatists such as Vidyadhar Gokhale who have succeeded brilliantly in reviving the musical play in recent years have instinctively realised the special features of this genre : for example, the *weight* of the prose part must balance the musical content; hence, the light-fantastic, the witty, the colourful is more suited to a musical treatment than themes which prose playwrights invariably pattern after the frame provided by Western drama.

On this latter point, there was a discussion among the writer of this article, K. Narayan Kale, well-known modernist of the Marathi theatre and Prof. W. L. Kulkarni, a veteran critic.¹ The discussion was provoked by a thesis provided by Prof. Kulkarni maintaining that it is the *tamasha* which is really indigenous to the Marathi theatre as against the prose play which directly derives from Western models. The debate had then proved inconclusive; but, a few years later, Vijay

¹ Published as three articles in "Sameeksha", Popular Prakasan, Bombay.

Tendulkar's play, *Sari Ga Sari*, moulded in the *tamasha* form failed to emerge as a satisfactory experiment. The fact is that the *tamasha*, with all its flexibility, is difficult to adapt to a theme typical of the Maharashtrian middle classes who are at the source of most Marathi plays. Just as the *Ramlila* projects a folk version of the *Ramayana*, the *tamasha* can project a mythological or historical theme. The *Ramlila* cannot be used, for instance, to project the message of family planning although Dashratha, and Rama in his turn, did plan their families.

In other words, a dramatic form cannot be dissociated from its environment proper. Obscenity, rib-tickling obscenity, directed at a male audience by convention—although projected by a mixed cast—is as much a distinctive feature of the *tamasha* as intelligent ribaldry is of the British music-hall. On the other hand, Deval's *Sharada*, placed alongside Kirloskars's *Soubhadra* (which again, presents a contemporary social situation in a mythological context and thus accentuates the make-believe nature of the dramatic experience which Prof. Kulkarni himself longs for) shows that the musical play has a wider range from the point of view of content, literary potential as well as audience adaptability.

Prof. Kulkarni does not err in stressing the derivative character of modern prose plays, but then during British rule, our very life and its modes had become derivative. To take recourse to the *tamasha*-form is no solution, although for satirical themes the *tamasha* is as good an instrument of mass provocation as the Western farce or burlesque. There is little fundamental difference between the musical play and the *tamasha* in Maharashtra except that of *class*. Since the heritage of our classical music is one of the most effective aspects of our culture that binds us Indians together, it is worth developing the musical drama on a national scale. As a theatrical experience it will cross language barriers easily; since the musical content of a Marathi play features more prominently in it than, say Tagore's songs do in his plays, those who know their classical music are bound to be drawn into the vortex of a dramatic experience which churns up prose and verse into one dynamic flux.

It is true that the musical is not produced in ideal conditions in the Marathi theatre. But this is true of plays without music. It is for the present generation to accept in theory the validity of musical drama as the single most characteristic expression of the Maharashtrian—and I dare say, the Indian—temperament. How the form is to be rationalised and liberated from commercial cross is a challenge

meant for playwrights and producers alike. It is the principle that has to be accepted first, and in specific contrast to the spate of plays adapted from the West, which have little relation to the reality around us and masquerade feebly as experiment. Fortunately there are signs—though few—that experimental groups in Maharashtra have realised the necessity of examining the roots of Marathi drama and nourishing them so that we learn to utilise the immense theatrical potential of these valid manifestations of dramatic experience. In passing, I shall only mention Sangeet Natak Akademi award-winner Daji Bhatawdekar's novel staging of *Soubhadra* some years ago. I do not think that such attempts, which symbolise new directions in the Marathi theatre and revive one's faith in the availability of musical talent, the major handicap for some producers, should be given up.

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