

# BALWANT GARGI: IN THE DARK COURTYARDS

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Bindu Batra

Born in a dusty village near Bhatinda, Balwant Gargi grew up in an atmosphere that was far from intellectual. His mother, a temperamental peasant woman, was totally illiterate. His father, gentler by disposition, had only enough schooling to keep him in the position of a lower division clerk.

"We did not have a single book in our house, the only person who spoke to me about anything other than mundane household affairs was my teacher at the village school."

This handicap notwithstanding, Balwant matriculated at a fairly young age and joined the Forman Christian College in Lahore. Within a few months of his arrival at the college he learnt to savour the best that the city had to offer. "There was not a single music performance, film show, play or art exhibition that I did not attend, nor a single day when I did not play either tennis or bridge."

How he still managed to find time for his studies is a mystery even to him. But he did find it and apart from reading English Literature, Political Science and Psychology, which were the subjects he had opted for at University, he also "devoured books on history, philosophy and everything else that would by the finest standards of education be considered a part of the humanities".

His preoccupation with the work of western philosophers, of whom Nietzsche and Schopenhauer impressed him the most at the time, led him to become a member of a Suicide Club. "To pander to, or rather conjure up a sense of futility and nihilism appeared to be the most intellectual activity in which we could indulge until one of our members actually committed suicide. That cured us and resulted in the dissolution of the club."

Having abandoned the idea of ending his life, Balwant started thinking about what he should do to make it a constructive one. His passion for music and his natural affinity with sounds led him to dream of a career that was, in those days of self-conscious propriety, unacceptable to his family. He consequently turned to writing and attempted to forget what he calls his first love. "I have always regretted my decision but one's talents flow into other fields. My aptitude for music found expression in the use of language as theatre. It was like taking a mistress instead of a wife!"

His discovery of the "mistress" was, however, merely a matter of chance. In 1943, two years after he had done his M.A. at the Punjab University, Balwant was asked by a group of amateur actors to put a story of their choice into the form of a dialogue. "They did not want a playwright, all they needed was a sort of Munshi to do the chores that they were incapable of handling on their own." The fact that he did not operate as a mere Munshi but changed the content of the story to give it dramatic shape is a measure, not only of his serious attitude to work but also of his avid interest in the theatre as an art.

His first play was followed in 1944 by *Lohakutt (The Blacksmith)* and a series of one-act socio-historical comedies until in 1954 he wrote his well-known *Kanak di Balli (The Mango Tree)*. "During these ten years I was, like many of my contemporaries, influenced by the Freedom Struggle on the one hand and the Communist Movement on the other." The result was a series of plays on the peasant struggle which symbolised a quest for freedom that was more of a personal than a political search.

Dissatisfied with his way of life, Balwant eventually turned away from India and embarked upon a tour of Europe for over two years. He travelled to Russia, England, France, Germany and without any definite plans in mind, "soaked up western culture to assuage an indefinable spiritual thirst". In the process, he inevitably landed at the Berliner Ensemble where he was so dazzled by Brecht that he stayed on for over three months.

Observing the work of this Ensemble was an education that Balwant feels surpassed every other experience he had had in Europe. "But the effect of Brecht's productions in 1955 was sometimes entirely contrary to the theories he had propounded in 1928." The concept of "Verfremdung" did not in practice consist of an objective portrayal by the actor of the rôle that he was doing, nor did it in any way prevent the audience from identifying itself with the characters. As an example he cites "Mother Courage" with whom he, at least, got so involved that "alienation" was absolutely out of the question. "She was like my own mother and it would be silly to pretend that I watched her as an outsider merely because I had read the theories of Brecht." What he does, however, concede is that immediately after depicting emotion on the stage, some technique of "Verfremdung" was employed to bring the audience down to earth. "It was like creating something grand and then hitting it hard to prevent it from taking charge of the play."

Having got to what he calls "the core of Brech's genius", Balwant ended his sojourn in Berlin and went back to the wandering life that had become almost second nature to him. In 1927 he returned to India and spent the next seven years writing, reading and travelling, without however, turning out a single significant play. During this period he made a short trip to Moscow to watch productions of his *Kesro* and *Sohni Mahiwal* at the Gypsy Theatre and brought out a book called *Indian Theatre* which was followed two years later by another on the folk traditions of Indian dramatic art. In 1964 he retraced his steps to the West, going this time to the United States where he taught Indian theatre in Seattle for almost three years.

1967 saw the end of his long flirtation with the culture that holds a curious charm for many people to this day. "I was sick. I was wasting my life and I realised that performances of my plays abroad held no meaning for me. I wanted to be in India, to write in India and to let India be the judge of my work." He consequently returned to this country, "not like a conqueror who has mastered the coveted secrets of western civilisation but in all humility, like a prodigal son, with the will to finally try and prove my real worth".

In the past four years Balwant has, apart from teaching theatre at the University in Chandigarh, written three major plays entitled *Dhooni di Agg* (The Dark Lantern), *Sultan Razia* and *Saukan* (The Visiting Sister). Although the subject of the first play is urban, the second historical and the third rural, there is a consistency of approach that bears testimony to a change in his attitude towards theatre. Gone is the pre-occupation with social themes that characterised his *Biswedat* (The Landlord) and *Mogha* (The Sluice). And gone too is the didacticism that afflicts so many of our authors to this day.

"The habit of hurling political and social ideologies at the people was acquired at the time of the National Movement and resulted in a theatre so full of melodrama, sentiment and at times bombast that it was an insult to dramatic art."

His aversion to plays with a "message" and what he angrily describes as "topical preachifying" has led him to explore the human being at a more "elemental level". His new work consequently portrays a "study of violence—sexual violence, repression, incest, jealousy". It makes a bid to discover what is happening in the dark courtyards of the villages and behind the drawingroom platitudes of city life. And in doing so it depicts the reality that neither the bloodiest of revolutions nor the finest of ideologies has ever been able to sweep away.

A strange and, to my mind, less fortunate development in Balwant's writing has been the rejection of his mother tongue in some of his recent plays. He admits that Punjabi is the only language in which he can use words creatively but insists that its limitations oblige him to employ Urdu or English for urban themes. "A language gives you ideas because it brings with it not only a certain form of expression but a whole culture that makes its presence felt."

His complaints against Punjabi are that it has evolved no stage diction, that it is given to pastoral humour and that it is not conducive to any serious theatre of ideas. If this is the view of one who is counted among the foremost playwrights of the Punjab, it is not surprising that the language has remained unsophisticated all these years. For the failure of Punjabi is due not, as Balwant implies, to a weakness inherent in the language itself but to the inability of its writers to lift it to a higher plane.

# PLEA FOR A LIVING THEATRE

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Adya Rangacharya

I would like to deal here with one specific question which, to me, is as important as urgent. By a lucky coincidence we find theatre activities increasing all over India. Secondly, though the efforts behind this came from Amateur groups, we find not a few of these groups working on a sounder basis, with a definite plan and a determined policy of finding better plays and modern techniques of production. The Ministry of Education has accepted a plan of giving subsistence grants to some such groups; a growing tendency to get good plays translated from the different Indian languages can be seen among some of the groups in different regions. But, in spite of all these efforts, aided and voluntary, we are nowhere near establishing a living Indian Theatre. There is not a regular season even in capital cities when a citizen can any day walk into a theatre and see a play. There are no theatre-houses in which plays could be performed all the year round. Nor is there any variety like an opera or a ballet or a straight play or a musical comedy from which a theatre-goer could make his choice.

It is high time something is done to organize Indian Theatre. The longer it is delayed, the greater is the danger of the present efforts themselves fading into frustration.

How could this be done? I have some suggestions. But being a writer, I am afraid, I would be straightaway considered impractical. I only hope that for the many who would laugh at my suggestions, at least a few would, may be out of pique, give them careful consideration.

The National School of Drama has been training a dozen or two youngsters every year. I do not know what happens to the majority of them. But I do know that a handful of them have organised themselves into a group called Dishantar and, within just four years, have produced, along with original Hindi plays, plays from Bengali, Kannada and Marathi, in Hindi. They have given their performances not only in Delhi but

almost in all the capital towns. And, more important, till now they have not received help financially either from governments or institutions. In my own region, a skeleton six-week's training course in dramatics over the last 8-9 years, has brought into existence 2-3 Amateur groups who work, irrespective of financial losses, with persistence and dedication. These examples make me bold to say that more than the training itself, organised efforts to put the learning into practice is necessary. Till now, both governments and institutions have confined themselves to encouraging only training by giving grants and scholarships. If post-training activities are not encouraged then most of the money spent could be considered as wasted.

Let us take another example. An Amateur group desires to produce a play. It draws up a plan of giving performances repeatedly and also in a number of places. Everyone knows that in the present circumstances it would be just a dream. No Amateur group has resources for such an undertaking. There is no Professional Theatre now in India and even where a few commercial groups are surviving their vision is blank, their standard low and their one object to make profit by any means. It would be better to let them die if they have no survival value.

At the same time, a substitute theatre will have to be found if Indian Theatre is to live. The one way, according to me, out of this imbroglio is to encourage deserving and dedicated Amateur troupes to reach at least a semi-professional status. That is why when we come across a group with a production plan as above we must help it. There is no point in trying to do this on an ad hoc basis; that would only end, whether the "hoc" is fulfilled or not, by the "ad" being forgotten. The one way would be for the Governments and/or the academies to establish a Drama Finance Corporation. If such a corporation could be established for an industry like the film which could profit by making even bad films, it is all the more necessary for a living art which is better expressive of the life, aspirations and culture of a people. It is surprising that in spite of all the talk about culture and progress, nothing is being done to establish a national theatre in a nation which, as early as more than a thousand years ago, was well advanced in the science and execution of Theatre Arts.

There is another point to remember if we are looking up only to the Amateur groups to bring into existence modern Indian Theatre. As we all know, an Amateur group is like flowing water. For obvious reasons, its membership is never constant. Many a time, in spite of talent and dedication, an Amateur group just ceases to exist because the artist members are transferred or get married or some such thing. Till now no way has been found to meet such contingencies. It is here that the academies and training centres could play an important part. One who completes his training could get registered with the State/Central Academy. Details of his training, his special talent, rôles to which he is suited, etc., must be entered into the register. All that a Producing Amateur group should do is to approach the Academy and select the type of artist required for its production. This is likely to lead to two good results: one, the trained artists will have more and more scope for post-training practical

work, and two, as the theatre gets established it would attract a number of artists to devote themselves to the theatre as a profession.

The fact that I have been referring to trained artists presumes that training in Dramatic Arts would be provided to more and more students. It is true that at present, apart from the National School of Drama at Delhi, training is given in some universities like the Ravindra Bharati in Calcutta or the Baroda University and so on. In addition some regional centres of the Natya Sangh are supposed to run training courses. The enthusiasm of young amateurs for training seems to have tempted some private institutions, even ad hoc institutions, to conduct short-term courses. This way neither efficient teaching nor an uniform standard can be assured. But more pertinent are two peculiarities of theatre. It is an integrated art and also it is one where language is an essential component. In India with its fourteen recognised languages the National School at Delhi, cannot adequately meet the situation. As an integrated art, music and dance also have a place in the learning. To run and maintain a well-equipped institute manned by qualified tutors is an expensive job. Neither grants by themselves nor the resources of any private institution could ensure even the bare requirements.

The only way in which this difficulty could be solved is in inducing the universities which are regional by their constitution to start a Fine Arts Faculty in which Drama, Music and Dance are introduced both as degree and diploma courses. There is an additional advantage in this. As is recently proposed in the Bangalore University, a job-oriented syllabus also can be alternately provided. It is hoped that the Bangalore University would soon bring into effect the scheme submitted to it by a committee of experts (Drama). The working of the scheme could give an idea of its usefulness and shortcomings, if any. If the universities actively respond to their responsibility in establishing a National Theatre, its realisation is sure to come much earlier. As in many other advanced countries, our theatre also would be manned, in all its departments, only by men and women trained for their jobs.

I know my ideas would be dismissed as day-dreaming for one particular reason, if not for many others. That reason is the utter absence of play-houses in our country. Even in capital cities we do not have regular play-houses. Even the one or two built by Governments rarely meet the special requirements of a drama performance. Sometimes a theatre has a huge seating capacity ignoring the fact that drama is an intimate art in which nearer the distance from which one can see and hear the better for appreciation. Hearing the voices through a speaker and seeing an actor through an opera glass is unfair even to the actor himself. As a rule our play-houses are hardly equipped even with basic requirements. No play-house in our country seems to have its own guides. Facilities for actors, rooms for rehearsals, etc., are unknown to our P.W.D. Engineers and their tribes of contractors. It is not necessary to speak of the situation in mofussil places.

This want of theatre need not make us pessimistic; on the other hand, it should cheer us to do things in the right way.

One suggestion, however, I should like to make in this context (I have made it in other places even at the risk of un-popularity). That suggestion is that every town having a municipality must have a play-house owned by the municipality. A man would be healthy not merely when his surroundings are healthy; even in his heart and thoughts and feelings he should have to be healthy. The municipality must hold itself responsible for providing conditions for the inner health of its citizen. One which does not do so is not worth the name. Government, preferably citizens too, must insist on this duty of a municipal authority. Even if every municipal town has a theatre, it would be a great advance. Only one word of caution. In a country which built architecturally beautiful temples and palaces, today we are completely indifferent to such a consideration. Even in Bharata's *Natyashastra*, written more than a thousand years ago, a play-house was to be built in a quiet area and had to please the people by its beauty both outside and inside the walls. A play-house should be a temple of art (and in ancient days temples housed theatres). There is no point in growing into a rich industrial nation, if the comparatively better off citizens do not know how to enjoy their leisure or do not have places in which to enjoy it in the company of others.