

# WINDS OF CHANGE

## *Thoughts on Marathi Theatre*

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The winds of change have begun to blow here. To what ultimate destination they will take us is as yet difficult to presage. New names now appear on our bill-boards. Those who had held sway earlier—Nanasaheb Phatak, Master Dattaram, Mama Pendse and many others—seem to have outlived their usefulness to producers. And when Keshavrao Datey died on the 14th of August, 1971 one realized with a pang that a bond with the past had snapped; one got the feeling that one period of our stage history was coming to an end.

The new names that blazon forth now are all associated in our consciousness with the productions of the amateur stage. Doctor Shriram Lagu, Datta Bhat, Vijaya Mehta, Madhukar Toradmal caught the imagination of the public as talented amateurs. The atmosphere of amateur groups such as the Progressive Dramatic Association or Rangayana clings to their names. These organizations were the training ground that nourished their talent. Even the most recent acquisitions of the professional stage-scene-stealers like Bhakti Barve or Raja Bapat or Shashikant Nikte have all been groomed on the boards of the amateur stage.

It is the same story with those technical men who are responsible for the designing of sets. Raghuvir Talashikar, Shyam Adarkar—their earliest field of operations was the amateur stage.

The maiden efforts of today's more successful directors, Purshottam Darvekar, Nandakumar Raote, Atmaram Bhende, Arvind Deshpande, link them with the world of amateurs.

This is even more emphatically true of our dramatists. Vasant Kanetkar, Purshottam Darvekar, Manohar Katdare, Suresh Khare all conceived their earliest plays for amateurs and their requirements.

Never has the Marathi theatre witnessed an influx on this scale of amateur talent into the professional vortex. Has the advent of this

"amateur" element made any difference at all to the commercial stage? These gifted persons perhaps add lustre to productions. But each of them seems to operate in the professional jungle as a loner, and to accept, perhaps with reluctance, the limitations imposed by the commercial stage. Besides, there is no theatre of experiment working as a driving force to bring home to them the possibility of an impoverishment of their own potential and the outdated quality of the entertainment they proffer. Without the presence in the background of a powerful amateur movement committed to clearly defined aims, this dispersed crew appears rudderless and wholly ineffective as a trend. The more's the pity. For their cumulative talent is now indispensable for the professional stage and, if they wanted to, they could become a force influencing directions on that front as well. Today even the most seasonal producers have a sort of hunch that innovation is what is demanded. They advertise "novelties". When they opt for a play, they make it a point to project the "boldness" of its theme or the "unusual" quality of its production technique. For example, in Suresh Khare's *Kachecha Chandra* even the suggestion of the theme of incest was what they thought would act as a draw. In his *Mala Uttara Hawaye* the notion of a girl from a respectable family wanting to work in a brothel was regarded as startling enough to ensure the audience's interest.

In the professional world producers are not at all sure what will sell. Business is bad. Only one play, Shirwadkar's *Nat-Samrat* is reported to be doing consistently well. The others are losing in one theatre and making good their losses in some other place. They somehow manage to break even. Plays are hurriedly rehearsed and occasionally taken off the boards in even greater haste. In these fluctuating conditions no one can assert with any confidence that he knows how to read the barometer of the playgoer's taste. And unfortunately for the theatre movement, this instability, this lack of perspective of clearly defined aims has landed like a cloud at a time when the young are showing more than ever a serious interest in the mechanics of staging a play.

The Study Group of the Progressive Dramatic Association (which meets twice a week), the Workshop organized by Rangayana (with its emphasis on improvisation), Prabhakar Gupte's dedicated efforts to train young actors, Mumbai Marathi Sahitya Sangha's Amrit Natya Bharati, the regular camps organized by the government, reflect the contemporary mood of enthusiasm among the young. In fact, the need to imbibe theatre techniques in a disciplined way is felt so acutely that even an actress of the calibre of Sulabha Deshpande (who played the lead in such excellent productions as *Pret*, *Band Darwaze*, *Evam Indrajeet*, *Baki Itihas* and *Shantata! Court Chalu Ahe*) can seriously contemplate joining such a group to get trained. This trend in favour of rigorous training in the theatre arts is also expressed in the move to start Diploma Courses at the University level. There is also the plan to sponsor a Natya Akademi aided by the State Government. This step is long-overdue. And if the scheme is implemented at once, it will go a long way to co-ordinate and stimulate the activities of promising writers and actors.

## Young Playwrights

Perhaps more important than this impulse to study the art of the theatre in a serious and disciplined manner is the desire that we encounter among young playwrights (like Mahesh Elkunchwar or Satish Alekar or Shrikant Sinkar) to define their own experience in their own terms. This is the area where the new will be forced to encounter opposition from various quarters. Their scripts will have to be certified by the Scrutiny Board, the same body which has been a stumbling block in the path of the unhindered performance of my *Gidhade*. For more than a year now a battle is being waged—over the swear words spoken by the dissolute characters in the play and the shock to the visual sensibilities of audiences who witness the effects of an abortion. This kind of Scrutiny Board which maintains its links with the Police Department can hardly be acceptable to dramatists or to supporters of the serious drama. The Board's terms of reference are outdated and it can have a place only within the set-up of the Government's Cultural Department. One can foresee in the near future a head-on collision between the more doctrinaire elements in the Board and our young playwrights. For Elkunchwar and his generation are not likely to be inhibited in their approach to sex. And though the work of these young men might appear uneven and even strange to those reared in a different theatre tradition, whatever there is in it of a fresh or spontaneous character can survive and develop only if it has the sympathy of established names in the theatre world. There is no theatre of experiment to back them. The split in the major amateur organization Rangayana has left a void which still remains to be filled.

And so when times seem opportune to press for a change, the amateur theatre appears to be in disarray. Fortunately for us there are exceptions.

The Progressive Dramatic Association is able to reap monetary rewards from an amateur production like *Ashi Pakhare Yeti*. This goes to prove that given the tenacity that Jabbar Patel and his team show—most of them are doctors and they can only put on shows on week-ends—a production run on an efficient basis by amateurs can hold its own and win popular support.

And finally there is the indefatigable drive shown by the Theatre Unit under Satyadev Dubey. His productions cut across the barriers of narrow unilingual loyalties. A part of the team acts in both the Hindi and Marathi versions of the same play; a new audience is created which learns to appreciate different approaches to the same play. Girish Karnad's *Yayati*, Mohan Rakesh's *Adhe Adhure* were staged both in Hindi and Marathi. And the intermingling has reached a point where Badal Sircar is wholly domesticated. The Theatre Unit presented his *Evam Indrajeet*, *Vallabhpurchi*, *Dantakatha* and *Pagla Ghoda*; Arvind Deshpande produced *Baki Itihas*. And now plans are afoot for the staging of *Saari Raat* translated for our amateurs by the eminent playwright P. L. Deshpande.

### Technical Influence

One ought to mention in this context the impact of Tapas Sen's fluid lighting effects. Our playgoers found an opportunity to see his work during the staging of the Marathi version of *Tughlaq* (produced by Arvind Deshpande). And one got the feeling that a time had come when playwrights might even conceive and structure their plays bearing in mind the potentialities of such lighting—which then would not just subserve a verbal pattern but become an active and equal partner of delivery, expression and movement.

Which brings us to the question of media. Shall we soon be watching the dissolution of those lines that mark out the areas of theatre and film? All these years Satyadev Dubey and his team have been devoting all their energies to the staging of plays. Now Dubey has completed the film version of *Shantata! Court Chalu Ahe*. In the old days, when film had just arrived here established stage people like Bapusaheb Pendharkar and Vishram Bedekar had shifted their interest to this new, and what they believed was likely to be more exciting medium. Perhaps the Theatre Unit hopes to extract the same satisfaction out of film-making that it got out of staging plays.

In our times every form is appropriated if it serves a purpose. On the Marathi stage the *tamasha* has always offered a dependable scaffolding. Performers found its episodic structure useful. They could inject into it some political comment and social criticism and give it a contemporary veneer. The most popular shows in this type of entertainment is Dada Kondke's *Ichcha Maji Puri Kara* and Dadu Indurikar's *Gadhvache Lagna*. P. L. Deshpande revived the form for an earlier production *Waryawarchi Varat*. And he follows the *tamasha* pattern even more closely in his recent production *Wat Wat, Wat Wat*. Every constituent is devised as a satirical comment on some aspect of contemporary life.

But folk forms have something more to offer than a formal organization for plays. They can provide a dramatist with those departures from realistic conventions which the complexity of his themes or their presentation entails. In C. T. Khanolkar's work the traditions and even the memories of a folk theatre are put to subtle and ingenious use. His methods imply a take-off from the conventions that have till now tethered us to social forces or "problem plays".