

# CONTEMPORARY INDIAN PLAYS

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You have only to look up the leading newspapers in various languages to know what is happening in the contemporary theatre. Within a broader definition every theatre activity in Indian Theatre today is part of the contemporary scene. This aspect of contemporaneity is all too familiar to us because it reaches rock bottom in our Hindi films and also in the majority of films in other Indian languages. This activity in theatre which is taking place (whether professionally or without the profit motive) needs to be analysed and the categories formulated. At this juncture, we will take the analysis for granted and only try to enumerate the categories.

We have, first, what is known as the formula play (like its film counterpart) with its fair share of variations. At its best this type of play tends to flatter the middle class values. In the hands of shrewd craftsmen this school tends first to threaten the middle class values but ends up by reestablishing them. This school of play-writing inherits the tradition of Sardou, Scribe and Pinero.

Within this category one could make further classifications but I suggest for the sake of simplification, only two. One of them, revolves around values related to sex. Whether it is a bedroom comedy or farce or a sombre love triangle, we find that, inevitably, the accepted, desired and wished for middle class values are allowed to win the day. The fact that love is one of the most cherished dreams of this class, is the reason you find it surmounting all difficulties to find a happy ending. The other type is obviously concerned with more important issues. The subject (in Indian conditions they are inevitably puritanical) of the plot is never weighed down by sexual problems or references to it. More basic values are questioned and then reinstated.

'*Ashru Chi Jhali Phule*' by Vasant Kanetkar is perhaps the most sophisticated example of this type of play-writing in India.

But sometimes it so happens that writers working in this tradition, because of the electric quality of their dramatic dialogue, their instinctive and deep understanding of certain human situations, their accidental recapturing of certain recurring dramatic patterns, their discovery of a pipe line to the rich deposits of nostalgia, manage to write plays which have more enduring dramatic values and a more long lasting appeal. The three best examples of this school of playwriting which come to my mind are "Tuze Ahe Tuze Pashi", 'Raigarhla Jevanh Jaag Yete' and "Nat Samrat". I would like to make it clear that counterparts of the 'middle class' plays can be found in both marxist and fascist set-ups. Plays which flatter the given values, duly approved by society and its mentors are qualitatively the same irrespective of the values they expose.

Another area of abundant theatre activity in our times can be seen in the realm of the folk theatre. Here again I will avoid the purist attitude to facilitate categorization. To my mind the activity in this area could be reduced to four basic categories.

First, Folk Theatre serves the purpose which it is supposed to serve i.e. it entertains that category of people who are termed 'folk' by the so-called "cultured" minority. Invariably it refers to the supposedly illiterate, untutored rural population.

Second, folk theatre forms cater to the new urbanites and to all those who get a kick out of the so-called artlessness of these folk forms. A strong sense of nostalgia can make the most rural of folk play very acceptable to town dwellers. Amongst the practioners of these forms one sometimes observes a very heightened sense of theatre and a concern about the rampant corruption in our social lives, which expresses itself in bitter sarcasm and caustic jokes and an abundance of comic ridicule. It we take the 'tamasha', two of the most interesting examples in this category to me are 'Vicha Mazi Puri Kara' and "Katha Aklechya Kandyachi"—the latter being the most brilliant and imaginative piece of theatre I have come across.

In quite a few parts of India the folk forms have been politicised and are committed to definite political philosophies. It is very ironical that in most cases the political use of these folk forms are made by various shades of marxists who, inspite of the moral and fashionable sanctions of our times for their view point, find it difficult to discuss their ideologies in the theatre. They seem to get caught by contradictions emerging within its fold because of international situations and the sophistry resulting from the emergence of many schools of marxist thought. They, therefore, find it safer to fall back on slogan-mongering and emotional rhetoric which is all too easy to accommodate in certain types of folk theatre. The 'Yatra' provides many examples of this type of political plays.

The fourth category demands a further sub-division. Firstly, the use of folk forms (sometimes called Brechtian because fashion demands it) to titillate the jaded sensibilities of the cultured minority (belonging inevitably to the decadent upper middle class) which has ceased to respond to the discipline of any form, which equates the pleasure derived from an artistic creation with a general feeling of well-being and an all round pleasantness. They do not have the mental, spiritual and moral stamina to squarely face and thereby to deeply apprehend the happiness or pain (ultimately the experience behind these words converge) which a genuine theatrical work offers. They rake up fossilized folk forms, add a lot of cuteness and sophistication which the modern theatrical contraptions make possible and provide sheer escapist fare. They, in fact, are as reactionary as the writers of formula plays. But the second sub-division consists of writers who in various ways have been occupied with exploring and expressing the human predicament in all its varied manifestations. They do not use the existing folk forms to escape from the disciplines of playwriting which they have been following. But certain areas of experience demand a different form of discipline and the genuine playwright has to go after it. If carefully examined the end product has in fact no resemblance to any existing folk form. But particular folk forms (sometimes a mixture of many) only provide the framework of conventions within which the playwright expresses a personal attitude. The most recent example of this school of playwrighting is Girish Karnad's 'Hayavadana'. But all major playwrights like Adya Rangacharya, Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar, Khanolkar have used elements of folkforms.

All these playwrights along with Mohan Rakesh and others, constitute what we should ideally call the contemporary theatre.

What these playwrights share in common is an honesty of approach, the desire to explain and explore the world around them with a measure of honesty which is, more often than not extremely painful. They do not wish to flatter the general audience or a particular section of it. They are committed (whether they realise it or not) to a questioning attitude and however much they may aspire to a condition of static bliss, they are tossed and tortured by the dynamics of change. They are the people who face the moral confusion squarely (at least in their writings) who wage a continuous war against the deadening of our senseibilities. They are committed to disturbing our complacency, making us aware of an 'anguish' which human existence cannot escape. Not that all our contemporary writers succeed in doing everything mentioned above. But they have their apportioned spheres of experiences from where they wage their own particular brand of guerilla warfare.

The writers who I find significant on the contemporary scene because of my personal acquaintance with their work (there may be many about whom I am not aware) work very much within the frame work of middle class values which they try to upset, challenge and examine. The characters which they throw up have a refreshing variety, the protagonists of change amongst them of course have a greater dynamism and a more heightened sense of perception. But because of

the limitations of historical and sociological circumstances they do not measure up to the characters of the Ibsen, Stindberg and Shavian Era. They may be found wanting even when compared to Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller. The only exception which immediately comes to one's mind is Girish Karnad's 'Tughlak'. This play, though very much connected with the mainstream of Indian playwriting, has in the character of Tughlak, something which is not found in the other contemporary plays of our times. To underline the difference I would suggest that whereas the good actors would find challenging roles in most modern plays, an actor of the calibre of Shombhu Mitra would find enough depth to explore only in Tughlak. This is one reason why "Tughlak" may come to be considered as one of our few masterpieces. This is not to belittle the other playwrights because they in a peculiar way are more directly committed to their situations than Girish Karnad. Karnad has yet to try a play in which he reflects our contemporary situation in a forthright manner and to bring to it a sense of urgency and immediacy.

The characters in the plays of contemporary playwrights find their realization not because of psychological depth but because they 'sound' credible. Their tone of voices sound real and we instinctively sense the character behind the words and tones. The closest analogy I can suggest is George Bernard Shaw in whose plays the characters become real more by the way they speak and sound. One should not be misled by the popular myth that all Shavian characters speak alike. No modern playwright with the exception of Chekhov has been able to provide the variety in the tone of characters to the extent Shaw has. It is because of this tonal-character creations that many of Rangacharya's type characters also acquire a unique individuality and get invested with flesh and blood on stage. It is for this reason that I normally dismiss any discussion on the character of Kalidasa in Rakesh's 'Ashad Ka Ek Din'. Rakesh has succeeded because he has succeeded in giving his Kalidas (along with the others) a very credible and individual tone of voice.

It is because most of our known contemporary writers subscribe to this attitude subconsciously that I feel compelled to coin the phrase 'verbal structures' for their plays. Their plays are nothing if not heightened creative verbal structures which reflect our reality in its varied tones. It is only because of this that the nostalgic forays into the areas of middle class experience becomes legitimate contemporary theatre in the hands of P. L. Deshpande.

My point of view is very personal and I do not claim to be objective. Objectivity, I do not aspire to, because an objective view point is always a dead loss in the world of art. I am trying to the best of my ability to project my personal insight (for whatever it is worth) towards the contemporary theatre. I am also aware that I have not tried to differentiate between theatre as performance and as a written piece.