

# A SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

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In Delhi we are passing through an exciting phase in theatre that reflects a search for identity.

Delhi in its tradition of a benevolent and kind host to cultures indigenous and not so indigenous extends a warm welcome to theatre from all parts of the country. No other city offers such a kaleidoscopic view of theatre and in so many languages. During the season a number of visiting groups from different parts of the country are sponsored by the ever-increasing Information Centres to perform in the Capital. Of necessity their repertoire is limited and often the selection is for reasons other than professional competence. The audience at these performances is mostly from the linguistic regions of the visiting groups. It is doubtful if theatre as such means much to this type of an audience. Then again we have a large number of indifferent plays presented on festive occasions of different linguistic communities; and of course the annual festival of folk theatre presented by the Sangeet Natak Akademi. All these festivals draw large audiences; but they have hardly any relevance to the theatre movement in Delhi. If these productions were to be anything more than the annual ritual they would lose viability even of their audience.

So to look for the identity or personality of Delhi's theatre one must see the work being done by the groups or institutions that belong to the soil, as it were. There are many such groups — like mushrooms they seem to sprout overnight — but only a few of them can be taken seriously. The general standard of production of some of the dedicated groups would compare favourably with (if not better than) the best in any part of the country.

The turning point in theatre coincides with the arrival of Mr. E. Alkazi in Delhi as the Director of the National School of Drama. With a production of *Ashad Ka Ek Din* we saw for the first time how the change that scientific training in costuming, lighting, set design and acting could affect the theatre arts. NSD's presentation of *Andha Yug*, *Suno Janme Jaya*, *Hori*, *Jasma Odan*, *Yerma*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, *The Three-Penny Opera* and *Tughlaq*, to name only a few, introduced new dimensions in the theatre world and opened new horizons. *Hori* brought the theatre into the open and the

production caught the atmosphere of a U.P. village in the early parts of the century. The actors really got under the skin of the characters to synthesise sophisticated training with interpretation of rural characters. It again goes to the School's credit for introducing Brecht, in a serious way, both to those on the stage and in the audience. This introduction of Brecht by two eminent guest producers was a tremendous education in itself and showed what could be done in theatre. It was after seeing these two plays that one appreciated that "Brecht is more than just a question of stylistics — it is an attitude to life"; and that realism means, "not how actual things are but how things actually are".

Whereas the School's production of the *Three-Penny Opera* opened new vistas it has at the same time given rise to a terrible indignation among those Directors who fail to appreciate that the Brecht medicine to be effective must be accompanied by intensive mental and physical exercise.

It would not be wrong if I were to say that the theatre consciousness that has emerged in Delhi in the last 7-8 years owes a great deal to the National School of Drama and particularly to Mr. Alkazi.

Abhiyan and Dishantar, the two best theatre groups in town, are the products of this new consciousness. Leaving aside NSD's productions, before these two groups came into being the theatre in Delhi mostly consisted of light plays loaded with the so called element of entertainment. Dishantar and Abhiyan broke away from this type of theatre and adopted serious plays as their main plank; not as an experiment but more as *mool svar* of theatre. Both these groups are always on the look out for new plays and are more or less committed to present plays written in Indian languages.

Abhiyan presents modern contemporary plays mostly from Indian languages other than Hindi. It has so far done only one original Hindi play. "Even if there had been a sufficient number of Hindi plays available, our effort would have been to go beyond the language and do translations because, after all, if the theatre is to become national in character Hindi has to be the conveyor belt", says Rajinder Nath, one of our most sensitive Directors and a pillar of strength for Abhiyan. He is not far wrong in as much that it is through Hindi translations that Vijay Tendulkar, G. T. Khanolkar, Girish Karnad, Adya Rangacharya, Badal Sircar, Madhu Rye and others have got known in other parts of the country.

Dishantar founded in 1968 consists mostly of old students of NSD. It has so far presented 19 plays including the 3 revivals that have been earlier produced either for the School or Yatrik. According to actor-director Om Shivpuri, one of the luminaries of NSD, *Tughlaq* was the first play to attract audiences other than the usual meagre theatre-goers in Delhi at that time. Personally I feel that it was Om Shivpuri's production of *Adhey Adhure* for Dishantar that really introduced a new audience to the serious theatre in the Capital. As opposed to Aibhyan, Dishantar does not believe that Hindi theatre is absolutely devoid of playwrights and has introduced new promising writers like B.M. Shah and Surender Verma.

Amongst some of Dishantar's outstanding presentations has been *Hiroshima*, an exciting experiment in the documentary form adapted by Ram Gopal Bajaj from Badal Sircar's original Bengali play, *Trinsa Shatabdi*. The social relevance of the play was powerfully projected through the guest-producer Alkazi's overall design and direction of the play. With the dramatic use of slides, sophisticated music and atmospheric effects combined

with sensitive lighting he was able to establish a rapport that was both nerve-shaking and sensitive. *Hiroshima* helped in creating an attitude of questioning issues of social relevance and pointed to new directions that theatre might take.

In Dishantar's *Billi Chali Pahen Ke Jutta* (1971) presented in collaboration with Max Mueller Bhavan, the director Wolfram Mehring tried to develop an interesting form "which offers a new concept of perception where the spectator has to take an active and critical part in the whole performance." The production laid stress on the visual rather than the spoken element and combined in itself ballet, mime, pantomime, slide projection and active participation of the audience. The production highlighted the use of the actor's body in space and brought home to us the conspicuous short-comings in our actor-training. *Billi Chali Pahen Ke Jutta* has opened possibilities of better use of the actor's body. But to explore this comparative new field — though *Nritta*, *Natya* [*Abhinaya*] and *Nritya* are not unknown in Indian theatre — one must study not only the philosophy behind Mehring's *Billi* but also train the body for it. Will someone take up the challenge?

Habib Tanvir's Naya Theatre has all along been concerned with some social aspect or the other of our contemporary life. According to Habib the theme of all its plays "is a vehicle of expression of present-day life. Though *Agra Bazar* is set in earlier nineteenth century, its characters have traits which are contemporary and represent phenomena of today". Another new dimension that Naya Theatre has opened up is the relevance of traditional theatre to the contemporary stage. Habib has used some elements of traditional forms for modern purposes in his earlier plays like *Mitti Ki Gaddi* and *Mirza Shohrat*; but I think the circle was completed by the revival of *Agra Bazar* in 1970 in which Habib used Chhatisgarhi folk artists at a more sophisticated level than in his earlier production of 1951. Its popularity everywhere it played enabled Naya Theatre to become a semiprofessional company.

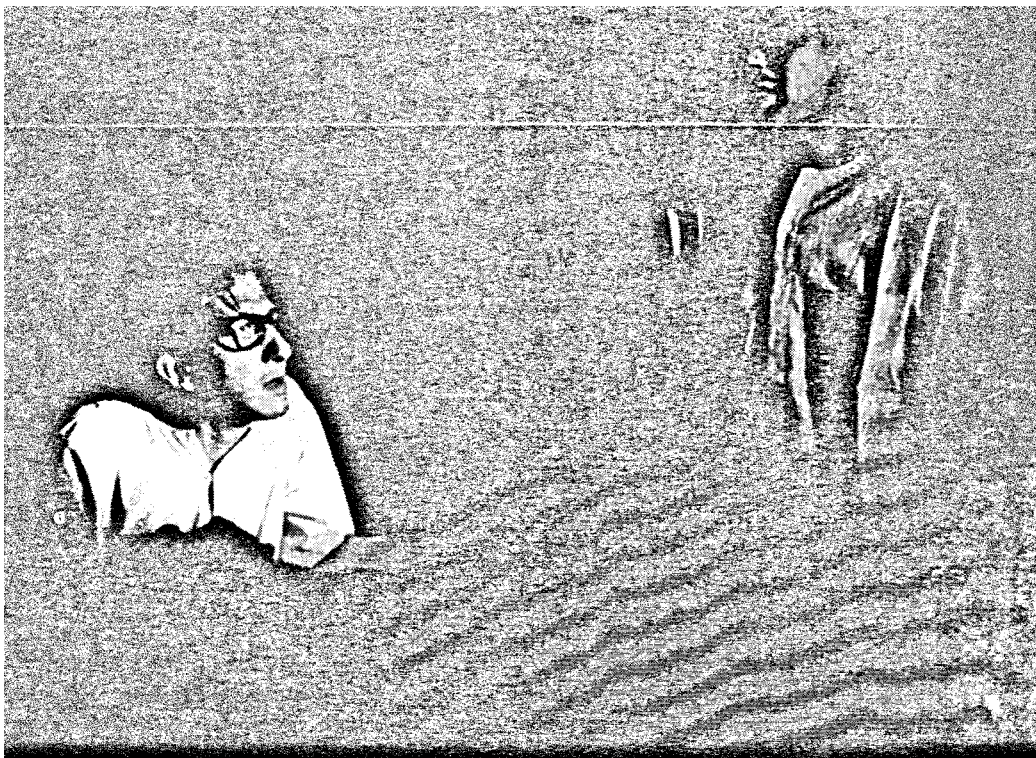
Aesthetically speaking Naya Theatre at present is going through a transitional phase. Its *Jamadarian* and *Kushtia Ka Chaprasi* are improvised social satires from the village repertoire collectively evolved by the rural players of Chhatisgarh. Reminiscent of *Comedie de l'Arte* both these comedies are gems of rural theatre in which trousers are worn as jackets and buckets are used as shaving mugs. This experiment has been a new experience for the theatregoer in Delhi. But in the precincts of the Fine Arts Theatre its viability over a period is doubtful.

In *Indra Lok Sabha* Naya Theatre launched yet another bold and altogether unprecedented experiment. Acting in an authentic folk style on a truck which was both their means of transport and their stage, Habib used folk dialect and modern political folk songs to communicate his message to mass audiences. The truck-theatre, as it came to be known, presented 32 shows in 32 different localities in 40 days playing to more than 50,000 persons as audience.

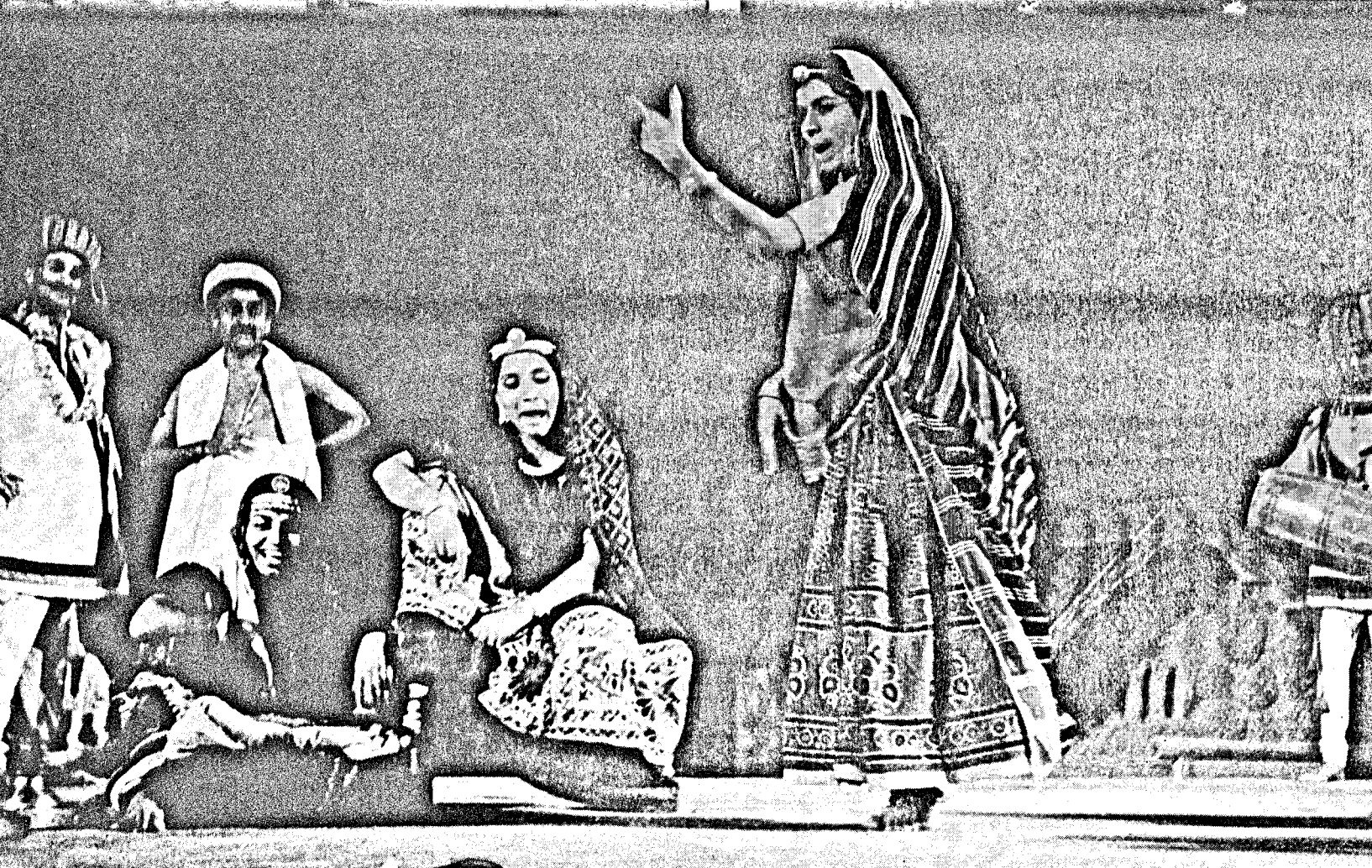
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*Illustrations: P. 47 "Asadh Ka Ek Din" by Mohan Rakesh produced by National School of Drama. P. 48. Above: "Baki Itihas" by Badal Sircar, produced by Abhiyan. T. P. Jain as Sharad, confronting Sitanath, played by Kulbhushan Kharbanda. Below: "Hori" based on Premchand's novel "Godan", produced by N.S.D.*











*Indra Lok Sabha* and the earlier improvisations are a turning point in Naya Theatre; but it is a transitional phase — transitional because the expression has not yet arisen to a mature level both in terms of new topical themes and a viable theatrical form.

While talking of contemporary relevance of traditional theatre I am once again reminded of Shanta Gandhi's production of *Jasma Odan* for NSD (1968) to which I referred earlier. The production while retaining the traditional style of a *Bhavai* gave a significance to the play by highlighting the dignity of labour and respect for the creative artist instead of the usual glorification of the *sati* theme in the different versions usually played in the villages. *Jama Odan* to my mind is a land-mark in our theatre in as much that it not only brought out in an aesthetic way the relevance of traditional theatre but also pointed to the developing personality of the Indian Theatre.

A regular professional theatre is still a far cry in Delhi. Gopal Sharman has tried twice to provide a night-after-night live theatre — first with the Ashoka Chamber Theatre in 1971 and now with Akshara. It is unfortunate that Ashoka Theatre closed down after a couple of months and the new venture, Akshara, also does not seem to be making much headway. By now Gopal should have realised that one cannot run theatre just on enthusiasm and individual talent however brilliant. More than anything else it requires team-work and above all a good play. Somehow these two essential ingredients seem to have evaded the Gopal-Jalabala ventures.

There have been others dreaming of a full time professional company too. If Naya Theatre can survive its financial crisis it has good chances of developing into a professional repertory playing at least half the year round. Yatrik till last year kept its promise of theatre every week-end for seven months in a year, with a new play each month. Sixty productions in 8 years is quite an achievement. Only those with an inside knowledge of theatre will know what it means to mount a show a month, to perform every week-end.

Yatrik plays both in English and Hindi and pays its actors on the basis of the number of performances. With the help of a small grant from the Sangeet Natak Akademi it has been able to retain some actors on a regular basis for the entire season. A little over two years ago, "with the hope of achieving its ultimate objective — to have a full time professional company it merged with Indian National Theatre", as Joy Michael, Yatrik's Director once said to me. The merger also realised Yatrik's other dream: promotion of educational theatre in schools. But the honeymoon did not last for long and the couple are now divorced with Yatrik, the more sensitive of the partners, badly mauled and without a roof over its head.

Yatrik's contribution in introducing regular theatre in the Capital is significant. They have quite an appreciable audience for English plays, but have yet to build an audience for their Hindi plays. As I have often said the fault lies in their choice of plays and perhaps directors. Yatrik has yet to get into the mainstream of theatre in India.

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*Illustrations:* P. 49, "*Jasma Odan*", a *Bhavai* folk play done by National School of Drama in the School Open Air Theatre.

P. 50, "*Billi Chali Pahan Ke Jute*", based on the fairy-tale "*Puss In Boots*", produced by Dishantar and directed by W. Mehring.



Delhi perhaps is the only place where some serious attempts have been made in Opera. Delhi Art Theatre with its writer-producer-composer Sheila Bhatia, is the pioneer in this field. Starting with a string of songs linked together to depict a theme or a situation with some movement thrown in as for instance in *Call of the Valley* (1951) or *Rukha Khet* (1953) it gradually developed an Operatic form in *Heer Ranjha* in 1956 followed by *Prithvi Raj Chauhan* a few years later. Perhaps their best experiment so far has been a musical — *Chann Badlan Da* in which the song itself is the hero rather than the individual. Their latest production *Hawwa Se Hippi Tak* presented in the first week of May is a comment on the position of woman behind the silk curtain. Unfortunately, it fell below expectation in structure, production and theme.

Opera is a highly specialised form with its requirements of trained singers and musicians. DAT has tried to get together a team that has more-or less stuck together for almost 15 years. This is perhaps the only amateur opera group that has played for nearly 20 years. If the development has been slow, it is because the powers-that-be have not thought of putting opera on a more solid footing. Because of heavy expenditure involved opera inspite of good houses can seldom be totally self-supporting. I feel DAT has reached a stage of development where unless something is done to put it on a more permanent basis, it would be frittering away its energies.

There was time when the Little Theatre Group, Indraprastha Theatre and the Punjabi Theatre were very active in the Capital. But those were the days when perhaps the audience was not so discriminating. Their contribution to the mainstream of theatre today is almost negligible. However, Little Theatre group has just been given an opportunity to revitalise itself in the form of a generous grant by the Ministry of Education, for a year. L.T.G. has recruited a repertory group, mainly from past graduates of NSD. Let us hope for a substantial contribution from them.

The Three Arts Club's productions may not be the intellectual's cup of tea. And as a leading writer and an intellectual of the theatre said the other day: "while talking of literature you cannot discuss comics". On the other hand Romesh Mehta, the company's writer-director feels that the target of the Three Arts Club is "the average intelligent middle-class people who go to the theatre for the sake of theatre and not as intellectual exercise". There is something in what Mr. Mehta says.

True, every play of the Three Arts Club runs for more than 50 nights, Yatrik and DAT have built up their own audiences, Dishantar can draw audiences for 4-6 shows of their plays and have booked Triveni from September through November 1972, and Abhiyan hopes to keep its plays alive throughout the season by repeat performances every fortnight; yet all this activity has not added up to a recognisable theatre movement in Delhi.

Lack of playwrights or perhaps over-playing of a few major playwrights is to an extent responsible for the present situation. It is about time that some of our more serious groups, including NSD, went in search of new writers. Then again, viable theatre cannot exist without theatre halls being available at reasonable rates in different parts of the city. What we need are small but adequately equipped halls in different parts of the city instead of the concentration in the fashionable Rabindra Bhavan Circle. Neighbourhood theatres will go far in paving the way for a professional theatre in Delhi.