

MARATHI AVANT-GARDE AT THE CROSSROADS

By Dhyaneshwar Nadkarni

After a fairly impressive flowering, it seems to me that the contemporary Marathi avant-garde theatre has reached a somewhat critical point. Such a development is perhaps inevitable and may ultimately produce a lot of good, but the point is that those who are responsible for pursuing the avant-garde cult are hardly aware of this development. Such historical processes as the forming of coteries have also contributed to tilting the hitherto balanced forces in the realm of the avant-garde theatre.

When we try to establish a historical perspective for the record of the avant-garde, we must inevitably try to begin with the work of P. L. Deshpande whom the rabidly avant-garde surely consider as very much a leader of the Establishment. Deshpande's contribution is two-fold: firstly, with the high literary quality of his dramatic writing he has done his bit to chasten the professional theatre and secondly, with an intensely personal exploration of form in the theatre he has brought new life to it in at least as large a measure as the efforts of leading avant-gardist writers such as Vijay Tendulkar and C. T. Khanolkar.

It was Deshpande's satirical play, *Tuze Aahe Tujapashi*, staged nearly 15 years ago, which—critics agree—marks a turning point in the progress of the professional Marathi theatre. When one saw it 15 years ago, the most predominant aspect of it which struck one as revolutionary was its contemporaneity. This quality had long ago vanished in the Marathi theatre which was then still making steady efforts to regain its feet after a long professional decline approximating the war years. In the good old days, one saw this quality in Warekar's social reformist plays and the satirical comedies of Atre. But it is no exaggeration to

say that, as a piece of craftsmanship, Deshpande's play created an independent standing for itself.

Deshpande's play stands against the background of a merged princely State—coincidentally and broadly, also the background of two other plays of his which are adaptations. The central character of *Tuze Aahe Tujapashi*, Kakaji, is an ageing epicure who is very much a creature of the easy-going conditions of pre-Independence life in our States. The crux of the play is formed when this dominant character is pitted against an austere and irascible Gandhian *acharya* for whom the playwright has only ambiguous sympathies. An entire set of personal and social values characteristic of the first days of independence is held at stake by whatever happens in the play while this battle between the two opposites goes on.

The play created a sensation when first produced, and one can imagine its impact under Deshpande's own direction when there were anyway extremely few serious playwrights around. Although it does not profess to make any experiments in form—I am sure it would have been unwise to do so for a dramatic vehicle meant for the large masses—it has attained its place in the history of Marathi dramatic literature.

Vijay Tendulkar was then already being noticed as a promising playwright. He, too, brought much freshness to the stale atmosphere that surrounded the Marathi theatre in the fifties. Those who are witness to Tendulkar's growing reputation today are hardly aware of his immense and early achievements in the field of the one-act play. Indeed, if he is to be put in the vanguard of the avant-garde, it is this aspect of his work which the historian must consider before assessing his full-length plays.

Influenced to a certain extent by Western models, Tendulkar wrote one-act play after one-act play which was not only refreshing in its content but also wholeheartedly experimental in form. In his full-length plays—at least those which stabilised him in the eyes of Marathi audiences—Tendulkar portrays the travails of the "little man" in varying circumstantial contexts. For his one-act plays he throws a somewhat wider net which fits the experimental scope of his dramatic form. While in one-act plays like *Maadi*, he has tried to chart the painful emotional showdown between a pair of lovers, in *Thief Police* he has comically exploited the situation in a train, leaving his actors to simulate their peculiar environment. On the one hand, some of his one-act plays are so neatly constructed that they cannot escape a slight tinge of melodrama (and these in turn have cast a shadow on budding playwrights such as Ratnakar Matkari; on the other, he can sport an effortless gaiety by staging one of his satirical spoofs in a modern art gallery.

At one time Tendulkar, with whom prolixity is a virtue, was turning out one-act plays and full-length plays in a steady stream. It was then an educative experience to compare his literary personality as it was projected in both. Most of his full-length plays were failures in semi-professional productions. This was because of a welcome com-

promise to play to the gallery and make things easy for the average audience. *Mee Jinkalo! Mee Haralo!* was probably his first play which made a minor impression as a professional proposition. In this tragic story of the compromising career of an actor, it was Shriram Lagu (this year's Sangeet-Natak Akademi award winner and one of the most creative actor-producers of the Marathi stage) who played the central role.

One had to wait quite a few years before the success of Tendulkar's best-known play, *Shantata! Court Chalu Aahe* and the deservedly stunning impact of his *Gidhade*. During this time the Marathi professional theatre had found a firm economic foothold but this had hardly made matters easy for the avant-garde. The single organisation which steadily produced avant-garde plays and one-act plays for its members was Rangayan, led by Vijaya Mehta who was then in her truest form. Indeed, the Vijaya Mehta—Vijay Tendulkar combination identified itself with the aspirations of the avant-garde in those years. Unlike the situation today, no other organisation touched Tendulkar in those days. The avant-garde was a growing stream at the time and the whole movement, howsoever limited its strength, was yet to be beset with the internal ironies and contradictions which have now clearly grown within the movement.

It is true that *Shantata* owes its professional success to the impact made on the public mind by Tendulkar's winning the Kamladevi Chatopadhyaya award of the Bharatiya Natya Sangh for it.

The organic scheme of the play is, indeed, the simplest conceivable. A stage troupe goes through a rehearsal of its programme of a mock trial in the public hall of a mofussil town. In the process, a member of the troupe, Miss Benare, a school teacher, is so cornered by the rest of the troupe as to reveal her unfortunate love affair with a married member of the troupe (who is absent on that day). In the course of this concerted hounding of a basically innocent woman, the members of the troupe typify the ghastly and inhuman intolerance which lies hidden in the psyche of almost every modern human being. The play courses through many humorous moments and yet does not surrender its ethical guts. It develops into an intense tragic statement projecting Miss Benare's isolation—her crucifixion, one may say—although I must say that the school teacher's final monologue is a piece of over-dramatisation.

With all such minor flaws, *Shantata* is a crisp, human document deftly combining satire and pathos. It stands out from Tendulkar's earlier plays because its content, I think, comes nearest to the experimental character of his one-act plays. This is so because what happens on the stage is real and unreal at the same time, it being Miss Benare's cruel inquisition masquerading as a routine rehearsal. The whole set of characters who form members of the troupe are inhuman and comic at the same time, with the exception of the awkward intruder Samant who is drawn into the inexorable process of the rehearsed trial and forced to bear witness against Miss Benare.

With *Gidhade* Tendulkar takes a new leap forward. It must be

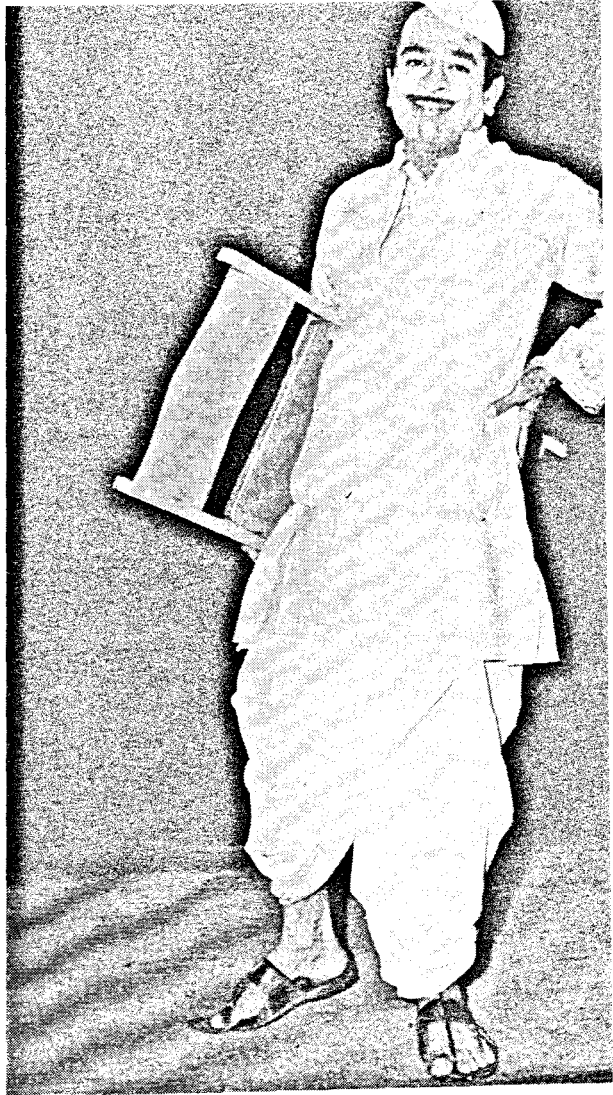
pointed out that the play was originally written nearly 14 years ago. Indeed, historians of drama may formulate an interesting conundrum bearing on any relative progress made by Tendulkar *after* he turned out *Gidhade*. They will then confront the strange truth that, qualitatively speaking, *Gidhade* clearly seems to be a much later work than it actually is! More than *Shantata* it is experimental in its theme and technique. It portrays the harrowing decline of a family whose members are at such odds with one another that they are ready to jump at one another's throats in their selfish and inhuman pursuits. There is no satirical angle for relief, and they are steeped in evil. Brother is pitted against brother; the two together against a scheming sister, and the three against their father. Two characters whom the playwright projects with sympathy set this horrible family in relief.

Tendulkar's *Gidhade* owes much to the stern but purposeful trimming of the play undertaken by Shriram Lagu who directed the Theatre Unit production and played a key character in it. Not only was the immense length of the original piece made more manageable, but this itself improved the total formal structure of the play. Unfortunately, whether because it has run into censorship trouble (the initial reason why it could not be staged all these years) or because of some other difficulties of production, it has not had as many shows as it could have during the past few months. Its impact on Marathi audiences has been tremendous despite this drawback.

During all these years, the genius of P. L. Deshpande was projecting itself in an altogether different direction which I at least also consider the direction of the avant-garde. In a way I must confess to a preference for Deshpande not because he is a very much bigger professional success than the other experimentalists but because he has consistently managed to pack much more indigenous content in his experiments than do the Western-oriented representatives of the avant-garde.

Deshpande has presented Marathi audiences with no less than three one-man shows and two revues. I consider his one-man shows a distinct contribution to the avant-garde for the simple reason that depending on the simplest of techniques, they have succeeded in making the Marathi theatre distinctly, literature-oriented. These one-man shows, which have their share of comic acting, are based on Deshpande's brilliant satirical writings. *Bataatyaachi Chaal*, for example, gives us a hilarious view of Bombay's chawl life in a manner in which only Deshpande's observant eye can manage it. Here is a world of "little men" thoroughly distinct from Tendulkar's (whose plays, incidentally, do not lack their touch of

Illustrations: P. 57 Above, P. L. Deshpande in "Wat Wat Wat Wat", a satire on Contemporary life. See also Tendulkar's article. Below: A scene from Theatre Unit's production of "Asadh Ka Ek Din". P. 58 Above: Dr. Shriram Lagoo, and Shanta Jog in "Natsamrat". Below: Sulabha Deshpande in the dock in Tendulkar's "Shantata! Court Chalu Aahe."





humour) and one which appears to be an epitome of the world community's problems. Deshpande, in his narrative, flits from character to character and incident to incident, relying only on his own prowess as a comedian-cum-raconteur.

His other one-man shows, of which *Asaa Mee Asaa Mee* shares the brilliance of *Bataatyaachi Chaal*, take us in another satirical direction, making fun of current social fads and gently laughing at the woes of another brand of "little men".

It is in his two revues, *Vaaryaavarchi Varat* and *Watwat Watwat*, that Deshpande reaches the heights of satirical brilliance. Both these shows are made up of a series of skits ending with a longer dramatic satire and involve a number of bizarre characters. It is typical of Deshpande that these characters come from a variety of backgrounds and from various social and psychological layers. The overall effect is one of extremely rich comic entertainment combined with the formal innovation involved in the revue form.

It may also be mentioned in this context that Sai Paranjpye, one of our most inventive Delhi-based artiste-cum-writers, has contributed, in *Nanda Soukhybhare*, a dazzling revue to the Marathi theatre.

It should be pertinent to point out that, as a literary satirist, Deshpande has found the avant-garde theatre itself an enticing subject for his ridicule. Despite this, he himself remains very much at the centre of the avant-garde, if at all we are prepared to consider the latter in broad and liberal terms.

The one playwright who has intrigued everybody, and who has to be judged with caution, is Chintamani Tryambak Khanolkar. He is gifted with a brilliant imaginative faculty and his mastery of poetic language is not to be denied. In fact, Khanolkar began as a poet and then graduated to become a short story-writer and a novelist. While his faculties are undeniable, to me his achievement in the field of drama to date seems to be uneven. I am fully aware that I am liable to raise a hornet's nest by making this statement among coteries (which apparently extend beyond the frontiers of the Marathi-speaking world) which lap up every dramatic effort of Khanolkar's with awe. And yet I must make an honest attempt to place this playwright of unfulfilled promise in his proper perspective.

Khanolkar's most celebrated play, *Ek Shoonya Bajirao*, is typical of the technical crassness which generally affects his bad plays. This is the story of a drama troupe which tours the mofussil but the social status of the actress in the troupe is not conveyed with realism. The central character has a touch of the Pierrot but its point is defeated by the waywardness of construction. One may be accused of being old-fashioned if one points out that the plot construction of *Bajirao* is extremely shaky but one may further safely criticise the play for the utter ordinariness of the play-within-the-play.

Even at the height of experimental zeal, Tendulkar is never so crass and undisciplined as Khanolkar. On the other hand, those who have read some of Khanolkar's less distinctive novels will realise that he has

a habit of presenting the mere raw materials of his theme without shaping it in a subtle manner. Another play of his which grossly suffers from this defect, and which is much worse than *Bajirao*, is his recent *Avadhya*. A shorter play, this is a kind of monologue being projected by a writer who is in a distinctly schizophrenic posture. Not only is what follows undisciplined but it lacks the outer flesh of dramatic incident without which even an experimental play cannot make an impression.

For quite an extraneous reason *Avadhya* has currently created a sensation on the Marathi stage. Its writer-hero, at the end of his tether (psychologically speaking), is housed in a mofussil hotel. Through an aperture in his room he can see a young couple in the most intimate postures in the neighbouring room. Actually, a few prying neighbours visit him and intrude on his patience in order to "enjoy" this peep-hole show. For the first time on the Marathi stage, director-actor Amol Palekhar has simulated the intimate physical romancing of the young couple with extreme realism. While *Avadhya* exasperates the audience with its lack of significant action and its pseudo-literary tricks, this candid exposure of physical passion seems to tickle it. With the result, at the moment of writing, *Avadhya*, a totally inferior play, is running to full houses!

Which, then, are Khanolkar's better, but much less fashionable, plays? They comprise *Sagesoyare* and *Shrimant Patichi Raani*, neither of which flaunts a self-conscious and irksome technique like the pseudo-avant-garde plays discussed above. Both of them deal with the joys and sorrows of ordinary human beings; but, in dealing with their mundane lives, the playwright invests the latter with a unique (and, one must say, characteristic) touch of fantasy. Unfortunately, neither of these has appealed to the common audiences. Worse still, Khanolkar's fashionable fans do not seem to be ready to consider them as anything unique—while they are far more sound thematically and technically within their conventional constructional frame.

The one playwright who has made a consistent impact in the realm of the avant-garde during the past two years is young Mahesh Elkunchwar. From him has come a steady stream of one-act plays whose experimental stance is as genuine as their content is disturbing. Elkunchwar projects a somewhat morbid psyche, a faculty which lends at least consistency to his efforts. I find him groping in a very minor proportion as compared to Khanolkar, although as poet, fiction-writer and playwright, the latter's potentialities have been far more strongly revealed.

What characterises Elkunchwar's one-act plays is his deep perception about abnormal human psyche. Whether it is a group of hostel students as in *Holi* or a female endowed with a warped and vengeful mentality as in *Yatanaghar*, this budding playwright manages to probe several subtleties of human abnormality in his one-act plays. His writing of dialogue, moreover, is as expressive as it is to the point. On the average, his one-act plays are neatly constructed and free of melodrama.

In the field of one-act plays, one must also grant some recognition

to the undeniable talent of Vasudha Patil. She can be easily bracketed with Tendulkar, the senior of our one-act playwrights, and Elkunchwar, the junior. Like them, she, too, explores a variety of human situations, projects her characters in depth and has a sound sense of construction. She has not made more of an impact than she has hitherto done because her work has not been consistently produced, except by negligible amateurs, and has lain between the covers of avant-garde, literary magazines with their restricted readership.

When one tries to assess the day-to-day progress of the Marathi theatre, one must necessarily grant a liberal connotation to the term "avant-garde". There is all the more reason for this when the work of playwrights like Khanolkar proclaims serious stylistic defects. From this point of view, a few other established playwrights, such as S. N. Pendse and V. V. Shirwadkar, easily enter the scope of this discussion. Pendse, one of our front-rank novelists, has not only turned a few of his long and short novels into highly effective plays but has also some viable independent plays to his credit. It is true that he works within a more or less conventional formal ambit but he explores the lives of his Konkani characters in depth. *Garambicha Bapu*, the most successful of his plays, which explores the metamorphic relationship between a wild country youth and the more refined woman whom he woos and marries, has happily caught the fancy of the public and become an astounding box-office success.

Even more stable on the theatre scene than Pendse is Shirwadkar. It is a pity that little is known about these two playwrights outside the Marathi-speaking world. Shirwadkar, who is also a poet, has during the past few years written a chain of plays endowed with a high literary quality. *Yayati Ani Devayani*, *Veej Mhanaali Dharatila* and *Natasamraat* only accidentally happen to be respectively mythological, historical and "social". The second is a truly experimental play, being a poetic reconstruction of the last fighting days of the intrepid Rani of Jhansi. Imbued with the thrilling spirit of the 1857 revolt, the play not only projects the Rani as a martyr but achieves a poetic counterpoint through the fictitious character of a maid. Shirwadkar's romanticism so wonderfully fits the possibilities of the biographical theme that what emerges is tragedy in its truest, classical sense.

While Shirwadkar's *Yayati Ani Devayani* cannot compare with Karnad's more austere and classical play, one should not underestimate the poetry of its philosophically-oriented dialogue. The character of a Vidushaka, the King's jester in the Sanskrit tradition, is a memorable creation and an apt vehicle of this dialogue. In *Natasamraat*, he unfolds the tale of an ageing actor neglected by his well-placed children with an approximation of the *King Lear* theme. In the process not only does he create a towering character but endows the thespian with many poetic soliloquies which form the backbone of key sequences.

In brief, to shut a genius like Shirwadkar outside the confines of the avant-garde would be a distinct surrender to short-sightedness and to the fickleness of esoteric fashion.

Why do I maintain that the contemporary Marathi avant-garde is

at the cross-roads? One reason for this is precisely that its more ostensibly experimental section has failed to give due recognition to "centrist" playwrights like Deshpande, Pendse and Shirwadkar. But a far more serious reason is that the avant-garde on the whole has failed to explore consistently indigenous forms in the Marathi theatre such as the musical play and the *tamasha*. (I have written about both these subjects earlier in the Sangeet-Natak Akademi's journal and my views have to be read in that context.) The Marathi theatre's musical section was a totally indigenous historical development. After having been the mainstay of the professional theatre during several decades in which an experimental or amateur theatre was not even conceived of, it fell into comparative disuse. The cotemporary avant-garde, I must maintain, because of its prejudice against the Establishment, has underestimated—and even sneered at—the very few meaningful efforts towards a revival of the musical drama. To date, the core of the avant-garde has turned its back on this most crucial legacy of the indigenous Marathi theatre. Writing and producing musical plays is not an easy task; also, it is true that by its very nature the form is mass-oriented. And yet, is it wrong to say that the contemporary avant-garde is adopting a negative attitude towards the mainstream of Marathi tradition by counting out musical plays?

As for the *tamasha*, Tendulkar and Khanolkar did make attempts to work in that form but the result was a bad failure. Today, the *tamasha* has already freed itself from its rustic shell and become more sophisticated. Happily, there seems to be—on the professional level—a new-found communion between the two sectors of the *tamasha* world, the rural and the urban. And yet, very few playwrights of the avant-garde have turned to the *tamasha*. A recent effort by S. N. Navare (a prolix experimental playwright whom we shall soon have to consider as a major avant-gardist) once again tends to show the risks of the genre. On the other hand, in his recent revue *Watwat Watwat*, the inimitable P. L. Deshpande has made hilarious and extensive use of the *tamasha* form. In short, in the realm of the *tamasha* too, the aspiring avant-gardist is on difficult ground; but the point to be urgently considered is that it is a highly indigenous form and that its intelligent revival is worth undertaking.

The last reason why I think our avant-garde theatre is at the cross-roads has an organisational slant. To state briefly, Rangayan, the single most dominating troupe in the sphere (one considers such groups as Kamalakar Sontakke's Amrit Natya Bharati as still amateurish and somewhat on the fringe), has recently confronted a serious split. The ideological implications of this development, from my point of view, are likely to create unprecedented problems for the avant-garde movement as a whole. Avishkar, the group formed by those who walked out of Rangayan, presented a production of Karnad's *Tughlaq*, which seemed to stand on two stools, technically speaking. Meanwhile, Rangayan distinctly lacks its first thrust in the heyday of Vijaya Mehta who is now a very busy professional actress.

The avant-garde scene thus remains a mixture of promises and complications. One wonders who will steer it towards steadiness.