

KHADILKAR : A PLEA FOR PERSPECTIVE

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In the long tradition of Marathi theatre Krishnaji Prabhakar Khadilkar (1872-1948) is universally acknowledged to be the greatest dramatist. His name easily recalls history created by *Keechakwadh*, a kind of political allegory based on a mythological episode from the *Mahabharata*. It was staged in 1907. Within two years, when Sir Curzonwylie was killed at London and Jackson was shot dead in a theatre at Nasik, the seditious potentialities of *Keechakwadh* were held responsible for the revival of terrorist activities. Sir Valentine Chirol analysed the allegorical implications in *Keechakwadh* in every possible detail, driving the point home that Keechak is not just an insolent and lecherous character from mythology. He is a ruler with a philosophy : the philosophy of Lord Curzon. As a result the play was banned and the text was proscribed.

This event brought Khadilkar dazzling glory among the writers in India and he was hailed as the Bankimchandra of Maharashtra. For some years his name ranked second only to Tilak. This initial success might appear to be enviable, but in retrospect it seems that Khadilkar had to pay dearly for this gain. His success conditioned the minds of his audience and critics. They assured themselves that an allegory on some contemporary event is what one should look for in a new play by Khadilkar. No one paused to think that in the final analysis allegorical pieces turn out to be a disguised form of discursive writing and their claim to literature gets weakened. To draw an analogy from the west, Arthur Miller's *Crucible* presents the witch-hunting in the eighteenth century and also provides the framework for an allegorical condemnation of Senator McCarthy's Communist-hunt. Today *Crucible* has only a marginal value. It is his other plays which have earned him a place in the history of literature and theatre. That is because an allegorical work subsists on two levels and when one of them lags behind in

the past, the other cannot survive. Since Khadilkar's plays have sustained the loss of political reference, it should now be acceptable that the genre of his plays is not allegorical.

A retrospective survey of interpretations, foisted on Khadilkar, however, is necessary to understand the breadth of its application. Ramshastri in *Bhaubandki* (1909) was viewed as a prototype of Tilak. The similarity of garments between the two (which none could avoid but for the head-gear) was held as a conclusive proof of this representation. The thin and hazy lines of parallel were accentuated so much that the play was virtually thrown out of focus. *Premdhwaja* (1910), based on *Talisman* by Scott, was thought to have been devoted to the cause of Hindu-Muslim unity. *Vidyaharan* (1913) was no longer a tragic story of Kacha-Devayani romance. The depiction of picketing and club life of the pseudo-reformers was believed to have been a theme of real significance in it. *Swayamwar* (1916), which presented the story of Krishna-Rukmini romance in vivid detail, was linked to the disruption of the Congress at Surat. It was not even considered that by 1916 the Congress was fully in the grip of Tilak and that, therefore, reviving the memories of 1907 had no topical charm. The fun of it is that the mighty shadow of Tilak disappeared from interpretations pretty soon. In the twenties Khadilkar became an ardent supporter of Gandhi and was no sympathizer of the Swaraj party which opposed non-co-operation. Against this back-drop, when *Menaka* was staged in 1926, N.C. Kelkar purposefully took Vitthalbhai Patel, Speaker of the Central Assembly, to witness the scene of Indrasabha in it. Probably both of them agreed that it was an attempt at ridiculing the Council Entry Movement! Kelkar's review of *Menaka* dwells entirely on the political implication. Thereafter, *Baikanche Band* (1935), a romantic comedy based on the fanciful encounter between Arjun and Pramila, was characterized as a depiction of the Suffragette Movement. Is it not amusing to find the movement led by Emmeline Pankhurst (1858-1928) linked to a play inspired by Tennyson's *Princess*? Indeed, this allegorical witch-hunt in criticism on Khadilkar is an excellent example of *reductio ad absurdum*.

It is somewhat intriguing that our critics preferred to err in this manner for nearly seventy years. Apart from the allegorical slant given by *Keechak-wadh*, Khadilkar's pre-eminence as a journalist might also have titled the critics in a peculiar manner. They were convinced that theatre was only another medium through which Khadilkar, the editor, was addressing his audience. Perhaps it is fun and intellectual entertainment to trace the marks of contemporary events in mythological plays. These critics, (there is hardly an exception among them), should have pondered that writing of an allegory begs for the temperament of a Bunyan to which the frank and forthright nature of Khadilkar was alien. It was his frontal attacks on the British Government which brought about the prosecution of Tiliak. How could such a writer have any interest in the contrapuntal technique of allegory

which approaches the audience in a remote and passionless manner? This lack of perspective must have hurt Khadilkar and turned him indifferent to critics. His advice to Kamatnurkar, a minor playwright of a younger generation, was "Never care for the opinions of critics. To tell you the truth, I generally forget to read reviews of my plays..."

Our critics failed Khadilkar in one more respect. In his first play, written immediately after his college days and while he was still under the spell of Shakespeare, he tried to throw Hamlet and Iago together in a dramatic piece and watch the result. In those days Marathi renderings of *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *Taming of the Shrew* were drawing packed houses. This could have been another reason behind Khadilkar's queer experiment. It might be conceded that the courage implicit in such an experiment was admirable. However, the unfortunate part of the story is that comparing Khadilkar with Shakespeare has since become another pastime of our critics. This comparison, as can be well imagined, affected him adversely: any dramatist would be belittled when Shakespeare is brought into the evaluation. Confronting Hamlet and Iago has resulted in a dramatic curiosity and Khadilkar soon learnt that the form of the Shakespearean play rather than its poetic content or characterization would be more suitable for the Indian theatre. (Although this form was developed by his precursors, we have chosen to call it "Shakespearean" because Khadilkar learnt of it from Shakespeare.) Earlier Marathi plays used to have—keeping closer to the Sanskrit tradition of '*prakaran*'—if not ten, as many as seven acts. *Shakuntalam* used to take two consecutive nights to complete a single performance. Limitations of the stage did not control the length of any play; pruning and trimming of the text was an accepted practice. Khadilkar, however, had such a keen sense of stage-craft that he never wrote a redundant scene. The printed text of his plays generally fights shy of entering into three figures. It was Khadilkar who established the practice of presenting a compact play. It comprised of five acts; sub-divided by scenes, with alternate arrangement of the serious and the comic. He also followed the technique of using the not-so-serious sub-plot to support and accentuate the main theme. For about forty years Khadilkar's format was accepted as the most suitable by Marathi dramatists. Gadkari, Khareashastri, Kelkar, Gurjar, Vamanrao Joshi, S.A. Shikla, V.D. Savarkar, Shirwadkar—almost all of them down to the year 1940—followed this format. Thereafter it was followed by an Ibsenic format. It is refreshing to note that Khadilkar was no blind follower of any technique. He was, in fact, so alive to dramatic exigency that the first act of *Manapaman* (1911) has only one scene.

The study of Shakespearean tragedy, tempered by the taboo on bloodshed in Bharata's *Natya Shastra*, enabled Khadilkar to create a new genre of tragedy which has a kinship with the Indian tradition. Earlier, in *Kanchangarhchi Mohana* (1898) and in *Sawai Madhavarao* (1906) he had wrought violent deaths in imitation of Shakespeare. This experiment made Khadil-

kar aware of the pitfalls in emulating Shakespeare and also convinced him of the alien character of western tragedy. That resulted in the writing of *Vidyaharan* (1913). It is a tragedy which shatters the audience at the utter disillusionment of Kacha, Devayani, Shukracharya and Vrishaparva. If the western tragedy had a psycho-physical bearing; Khadilkarian tragedy has a purely psychological thrust. Khadilkar was the first dramatist to realize that Bharata's theories did not come in way of a tragic vision on the Indian stage. Another difference is that Khadilkar did not end his plays on the most violent encounter. He adds a scene or two so that, after the storm is over, the audience experiences the peace of a quiet finale. To use the terminology of Abhinava, he concludes on the note of *shanta*.

If one has to search for a single passion that possessed Khadilkar throughout his dramatic career, it is hero-worship which includes the sublime grandeur in the voluntary suffering of a martyr. As a colleague and close confidante of Tilak he worshipped the image of indefatigable courage in Tilak and modelled his own life in imitation. That made his life a saga of courageous encounters: as a revolutionary in early life, as a political worker under Tilak and Gandhi, as an editor and as a dramatist he rose to the occasion like a hero. Varied experiences in life broadened his concept of courage and he loved to emphasise that courage is not always a martial quality. Women and children have an equal claim to the attributes of manhood. Taramati, Kauslya, Draupadi, Anandibai and Mohana do not lose their nerve even when hemmed in by calamities. They are not subdued by misfortunes; nor do they become a burden to men by cathartic outpourings. In courage they are more manly than men. In one of his mythological plays Rohidas, the son of Harishchandra, discards the bread doled to him out of pity and tells his mother, "Ma, I have thrown away my hunger." If Khadilkar had any message to give, it was to brave the assaults of fate with courage and dignity.

Fortunately, this predilection for courage has not robbed his heroines of feminine charm. Romantic scenes in such comedies as *Manapaman* (1911) are a source, of constant delight. When a crisis in life is not challenging them, his heroines appear to be naturally charming, sprightly and winsome so that one may exclaim, 'elle est la femme!' Khadilkar could blend these two apparently contrary traits in his heroines probably because he meditated on the role of women in society taking *Mahabharat* as a base. His women cling to men like creepers in times of ease but when misfortune overtakes they stand out bold and erect. In his latter plays women have become superior partners in the life of man. They inspire him for great acts, sustain him in adversity and are a solace to him in the event of defeat. Considering her age and the delicate situation she was placed in, his Rukmini displays remarkable maturity in saying, "A bad daughter shall never be a good wife and a bad wife shall never be a good mother. If Krishna knows that I have disobeyed my parents in eloping with him, what will he

think of me? Would I, and my family, not lose his respect?..” In the twenties when women—or rather some men on behalf of women—were striving for equality, Khadilkar endowed his women with a far greater status and maturity. Womanhood was to him a manifestation of *Adi-shakti*, capable of propping the structure of society.

Before the advent of Khadilkar women on the Marathi stage had been comely domestic beings, with some feminine charms but none of human dignity. Khadilkar endowed them with dignity which women still might emulate, but in the process he had to make some sacrifices. For instance, the sharp bite of the language from the kitchen, of which Deval (1855-1916) was a master, was lost on the stage for ever. Earlier, the prose of women used to be distinctive from that of men and it was full of native, down to earth charm. In the seventies we might moan the loss, but Khadilkar, with his grand concept of heroines, could not possibly help it. One wonders whether to call this loss a disservice to the language. With the changing times women were perhaps destined to adopt the language and style of men. There is no doubt that Khadilkar hastened the process.

The lasting contribution of Khadilkar to Marathi stage has been the creation of romantic musical comedy which still holds an audience in fealty. Kirloskar (1843-1885) and Deval (1855-1916), the earlier masters of successful musical comedies, depended mostly on such easy rhythms as in *Saki*, *Dindi*, *Stree-Geet* and *Laoni*. Naturally the music used to be of a short duration and was used as a part of the dialogue. Kolhatkar (1871-1934) brought a wind of change by introducing the tunes from Karnatak and the Parsi-urdu theatre. With Khadilkar, musical comedy became a grand concert. He introduced Hindustani music with all its nuances of *astai* and *antara*. The choice of *ragas* was confined to *Yaman*, *Bihag*, *Bhoop*, *Bhim-palasi*, *Bagishree*, *Tilak-kamod* and some others which are not intricate in composition; but the style of presentation was true to the tradition of Ustad Faiz Mohammad Khan of Baroda. Bhaskarbuwa Bakhale, the greatest disciples of Khan Sahib, was the music director of some of his musical comedies. Govindrao Tembe and Master Krishnarao were invited to set some other pieces to music. Leading stars on the stage were celebrated for their talent in singing and one of them, Bal Gandharva, has become a legend. With such material at hand it is no wonder that Khadilkar could present a memorable concert, which, as irony would have it, was visited by spectators not for the play but for the music. It was a usual practice in those days to vacate the seats as soon as dialogue in prose began.

And there lies the hitch. Khadilkar invited virulent criticism, not without justification, in that he allowed music to usurp the stage which rightfully belonged to drama. It is true that he had cast his comedy so as to accomodate music in *Hori* or *Thumri* easily; and was also careful in using it at the end of the scene to accentuate a particular mood. But the fact

remains that in practice the play itself, however elegant and forceful in its appeal, became redundant. Musical comedies presented on the stage in the last fifteen years have tried to restore the balance. However, they adhere to the mould cast by Khadilkar.

When a nation comes to celebrate a centenary of a dramatist, he is generally a back number for drama is a fast changing and ever evolving medium. But Khadilkar continues to be a living force. It would be a pity if we continue to accept the misleading perspective bequeathed to us by the contemporary critics of Khadilkar. The centenary is an occasion for reassessing his contribution and adjusting ourselves to a correct perspective.

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