

DRAMA ON TELEVISION

Kirti Jain

Television as a medium, has now come to stay in India. It attracts the maximum attention as any emerging new media would. Having started as a medium purely for instruction and education, it has gradually had to make concessions to the growing demand for more entertainment. As its viewing has increased both in number and variety, the demands and expectations have become multidirectional. Television in India therefore is now faced with the challenge of sorting out these growing contradictions, asserting its significance and establishing a definite identity of its own.

The task, however, involves many complex problems. Firstly, the medium has to cater simultaneously to the tastes of people from varying cultural backgrounds, literacy levels and classes. Therefore in the planning of the programmes, T.V. while keeping the interests of its wide clientele in mind, has to be careful not to lose sight of its own objectives that may often be at cross-purposes with popular demand.

In setting up of the objectives, it might perhaps be useful to examine the dilemma that a medium of this nature is faced with. Television is a tremendously expensive medium and a country like Indian cannot afford to sustain it without the justification of it serving a definite social purpose *i.e.* removing illiteracy, increasing social awareness, inculcating familiarity with the varied regions and their cultures etc. But what do the masses demand? The urban middle class invest in purchasing a T.V. set, and having acquired an article that is a status symbol they then start imposing their demands on the medium; after a days tiring work they very justifiably demand entertainment. They are not prepared to have any sort of education or information thrust on them. The demand is for a kind of entertainment that would allow them to escape into a world of superficial reality—a world that is sentimental, romantic or full of violence. This explains the popularity of the commercial Hindi films. Television has to provide entertainment and yet fight against the demand for escapist entertainment. Television drama can therefore function at two levels—One, of putting across social messages through carefully planned story lines and the other, the more significant one, to make people aware of subtle

human relationships, problems and situations. It should be more directly related to real life, more sensitive and more human. It can take up any number of significant social and human issues and project them not necessarily in order to convey a moral or a message but just to increase some perception of human nature and problems. In other words, the drama has to lead to a more sensitive perception and acceptance of life, to the understanding of the environment in greater depth and to inculcation of finer values of life. This of course can only be a very slow process but one has to make a beginning and then it is a question of gradually attuning your audience to this process and to make them function on the same wave length.

What is T.V. Drama? For ages 'Drama' has been almost synonymous with 'theatre' but with the emergence of media like the films and television the connotation of 'drama' has changed and widened and now we have different manifestations of drama in all the three media. Each of these manifestations is conditioned by the essential and basic characteristics of the respective media. Therefore, it might be useful to study the general differences between them.

Demands of Drama

Theatre, caters to a large audience at a time and therefore communication at a personal level is difficult. But the very presence of live actors, moving and speaking in front of the audience evolving out of a specific experience—living it out as it were, all this makes theatre more direct an experience. Theatre, is a representation of reality and this representation, can be either realistic or stylized as the play or its interpretation would allow. The audience may find a formal stylization difficult to comprehend, but as they have chosen to come and see the play they make the effort to make the best of the occasion. In other words, the audience in a play performance is a captive audience and hence forced to be more attentive and more patient.

Film, too, has captive audiences. This, like theatre, caters to large audiences at a time but it cannot build any immediate contact with its viewers. What it has to its advantage is an immense freedom in its form. It does not have the physical limitation of the unity of 'Time' and 'Place' which a stage production has to adhere to. The action in a realistic play has to be limited to one locale or at the most two, due to practical difficulties arising from the fact that it has to be shown in continuation and cannot afford to have too many gaps. The film, on the other hand can be shot in bits, at the actual locales and with the maximum realistic details as there can be any time lag between the shooting of one sequence and the next. This very convenience makes a demand on the medium—that of extreme realism, which often also becomes a binding factor since it is possible to show all realistic and external details on film, the viewer expects and demands that it be shown that way. It is not prepared to make concessions that it would for a stage play, where a major

part of the action is normally confined to the interior and happenings outside are either reports or conveyed by other means. This freedom in the film—while it adds to the variety and impact becomes an inhibiting factor in terms of the budget and the time taken in its preparation. Everything in the film has to be on a wider scale to allow for enough physical action and sustain the interest.

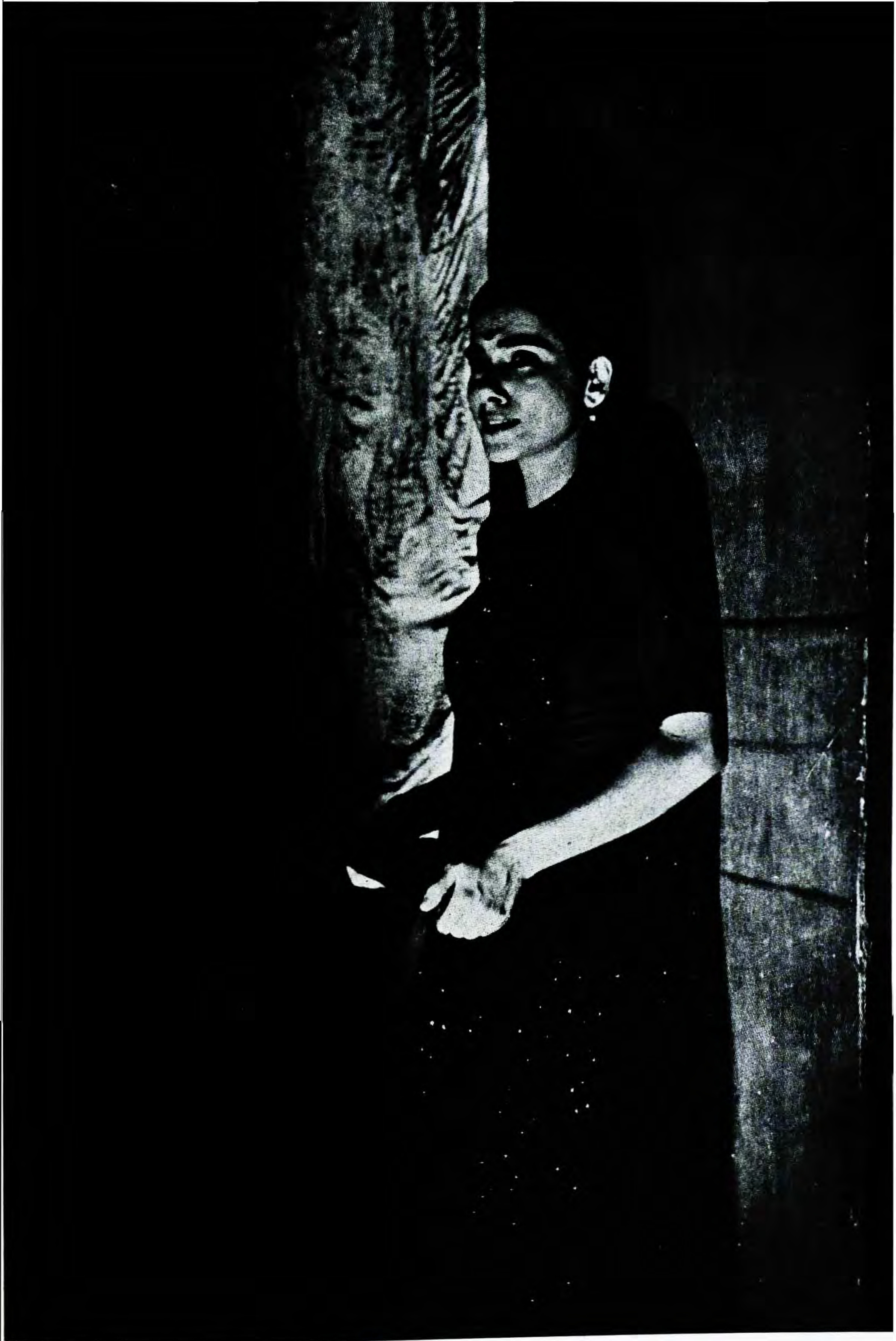
Television is different from both film and theatre in that it does not have a captive audience. Television is viewed casually and informally in the home and the viewer is free to walk in and out of the programme at his will; he can even eat, drink or talk as he is watching a T.V. programme. This allows the viewer to be more informal and at ease when he is seeing the programme but it raises a major challenge for the medium as such. Television programmes have to struggle to find out ways and means of capturing the interest and attention of viewers which theatre and film get automatically having the audience that has come of its own choice. Again, T.V. is owned by a large cross-section of people of varying backgrounds and interests who when they are seeing a particular programme can be in different moods and situations which would condition the impact of any programme on them. Capturing attention therefore being the basic aim of a T.V. programme thrillers and mystery stories have successfully established themselves in Television. But these are obviously not ideal solutions to programming.

What then should be done? What is the solution? To answer these questions one has to study the assets of T.V. drama over the film or the stage play.

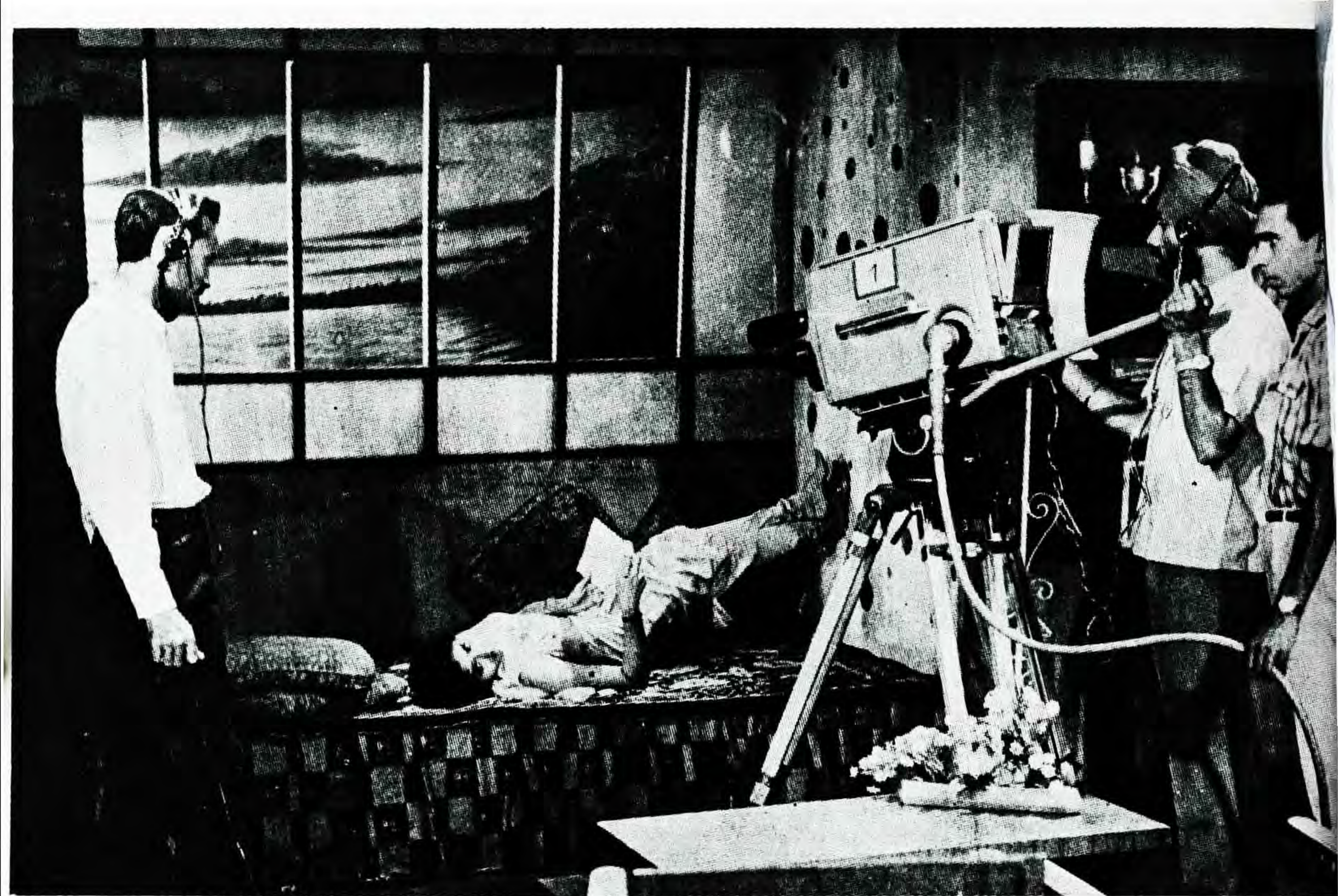
Assets of T.V.

T.V. having got its place in the homes of the people does undeniably have the advantage of closer contact and of being more personal. The T.V. play can create a more direct communication with the viewer so that the viewer feels that you are talking to him, dealing with his problems or confiding in him about yours. The interest has to be sustained by a strong story line establishing a more direct and intimate contact with the viewer and with greater intensity in situations and acting.

T.V. drama like the films has to have a more realistic, naturalistic portrayal of life and has the facility of shooting at different sets, locales and timings and is therefore not bound by unity of 'Time and Place'. While in theatre the interpretation of a story is often communicated through positions, compositions and movement of characters; in films and T.V. the interpretation differs through highlighting of certain visual imagery and symbols, juxtaposition of these images and shots which can communicate the desired meaning without many words. These, like the theatre, cannot use the straight narrative device of the story or the novel—but can convey the inner thoughts

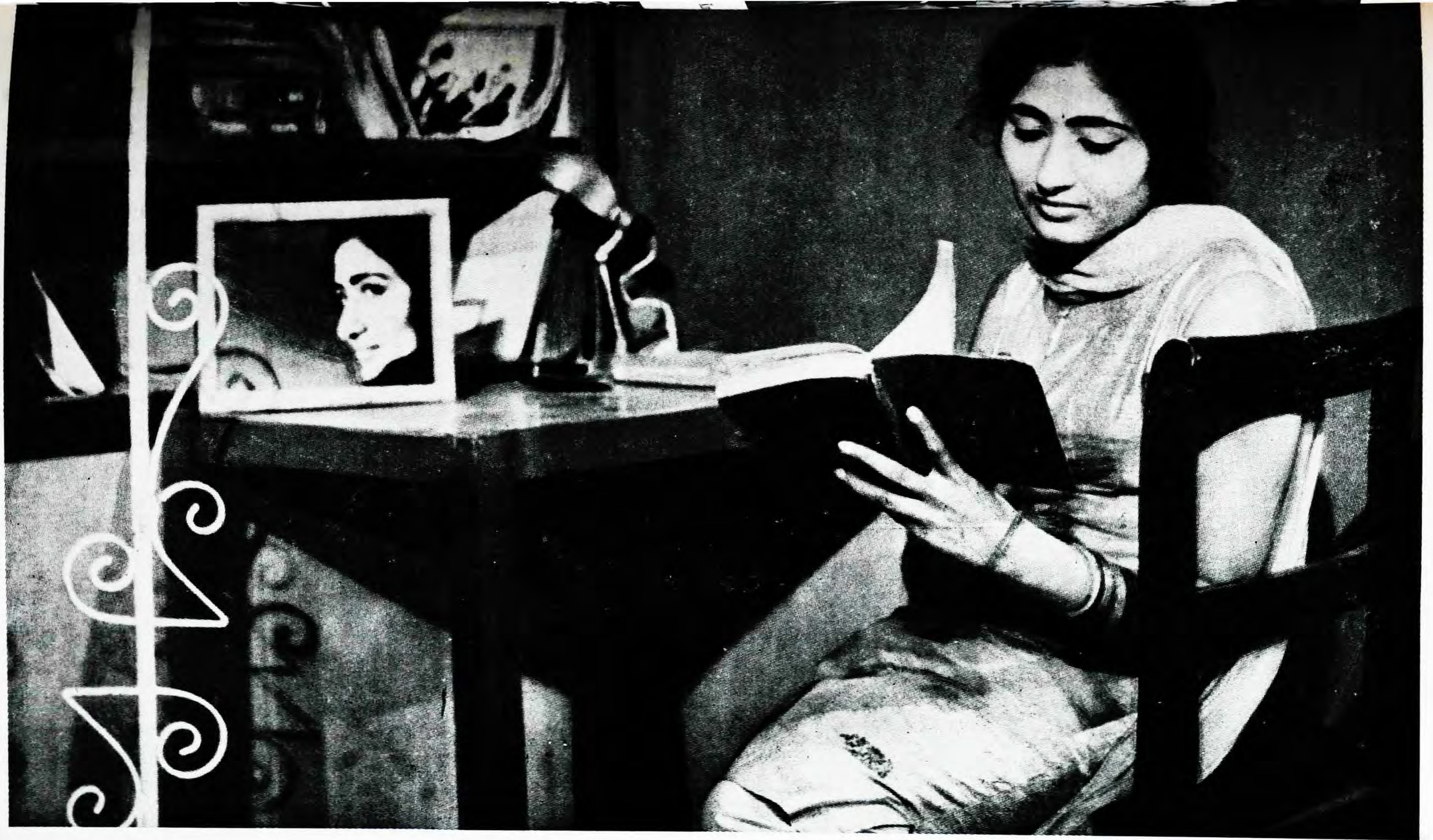


Meaningful use of lighting and effective close-ups to communicate with greater-force. "Adhe Adhure" directed by Amal Allana, produced by Kirti Jain (Photo: National School of Drama)

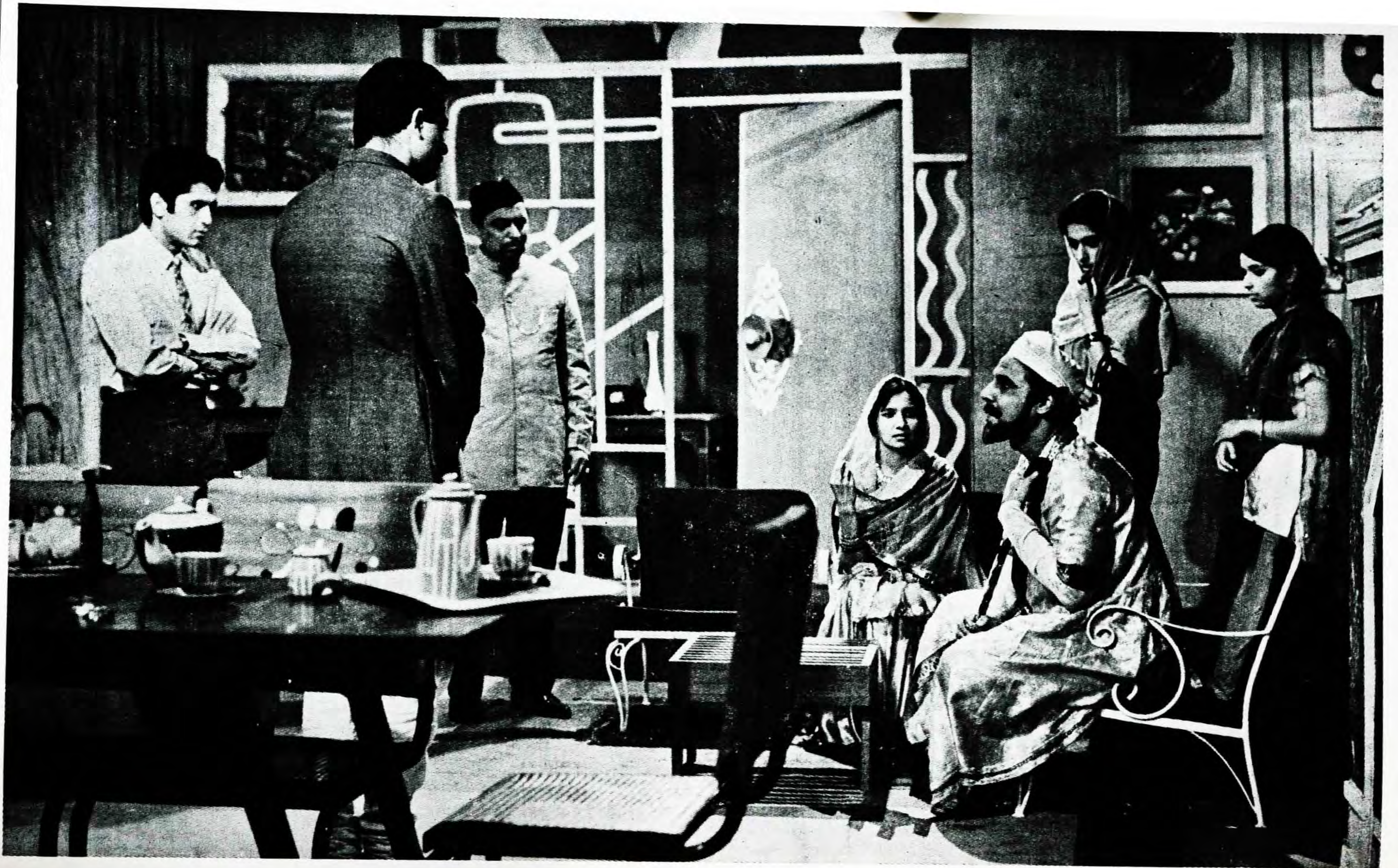


Effective use of painted backdrop to provide greater naturalism. "Sapne" producer P. Kumar.
Below: Naturalistic setting in "Sabun", producer A. Pratap.





Specific shot composition in a T.V. play provides visual variety, "Sapne".



An overcrowded set and composition, lacking depth, from "Ranjish", producer D. V.

Actors standing close together to provide an effective shot composition for dramatic impact.
"Ajube", producer P. Kumar.

