

## An Approach to Our Traditional Theatre

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Shanta Gandhi

Unlike in the fifties and sixties, it is no longer necessary today to talk about the relevance of our traditional theatre. Today, the mainstream of our contemporary theatre is already exploiting this inherited resource, especially the novelty it has 'discovered' in these ancient dramatic forms. It has now become the fashion to incorporate in one's productions some of the features of traditional theatre which the actors can learn without much strain.

At this stage of our development, the danger is likely to come from the opposite direction. With rare exceptions, these forms are used without an adequate understanding of their basic nature and without sensitive apprehension of the inherent relationship that exists between the forms and their content. So far, it is in the area of production styles, which also inevitably influence the style of acting to some extent, that major attempts have been made to draw upon our traditional forms. Unless this trend is more securely tied up with the writing of new plays reflecting the contemporary ethos, the current enthusiasm for 'going back to our roots' may fade out as most fashions do.

In this context, it would be relevant to pay some attention to the underlying philosophy that all our traditional forms share, irrespective of whether they are classical, semi-classical or folk. All of them have emerged from a tradition that was moulded by the perceptions and parameters set by the aesthetic theory known as *Rasa*. Unfortunately, we have not made even a serious beginning in the direction of evaluating the relevance of this aesthetic philosophy to our contemporary theatre. We have not yet made much effort to understand and face the inevitable implications of using traditional resources from the point of influencing the future development of our theatre.

This is so because here we are confronted with a peculiar dilemma. Those who are well versed in our aesthetic philosophy do not possess a modern sensibility. Some of them, who may be competent enough to translate it in a theatre idiom, or at least

contribute towards the evolution of such an idiom, do not necessarily share the values and concerns of the twentieth century. Those who do are either ignorant or indifferent to this aesthetic philosophy. Some writers and theatre workers are allergic to it because they do not think that its manner of resolving conflict is dramatic enough. They do not find the philosophy that promotes consensus rather than conflict exciting enough.

However, when mankind is faced with the prospect of extinction by nuclear holocaust, is it not worth our while to ask whether it is not better to resolve contradictions or conflicts as they arise rather than systematically accentuate them till they reach a point of no return? Should we not seriously reconsider with our modern sensibility the relevance of Rasa theory for our contemporary theatre?

Rasa theory does not bypass conflicts inherent in the human condition. But it has influenced the evolution of a dramatic structure which enables the resolution of contradictions as they arise, in a series of emerging situations, before they can merge into a conflict leading to a dramatic climax. Its approach inculcates hope and confidence in human destiny and does not preclude human endeavour. We should not reject this approach before seriously exploring its potential for the writing of new plays expressing our contemporary realities. Lack of suitable plays is the main weakness of the current trend in our theatre inspired or influenced by the traditional performing arts of the country. This hinders the process of consolidation and further development of an emerging idiom.

This does not mean that there are no new plays which can meet the demands of this trend, at least partially. But that would be a rare exception. *Ghashiram Kotwal* may not have been written keeping the Rasa orientation in mind but there is *Auchitya*, a proper balance and suitability between its form and content, that makes it a valid base from which to take off. There are, of course, a number of good plays reinterpreting a myth or a legendary character of the past and in that sense inspired by our tradition, but they do not come under the purview of this discussion because their dramatic structure is like any other conflict-oriented, well made play. Any attempt at imposing some feature or the other of a traditional form on them, during their production, results in folksy vulgarities and intolerable gimmicks.

The production of old Sanskrit plays is one area where availability of a suitable script is not a major problem, especially when they are produced in Sanskrit. Good translations, preferably by a sensitive poet, in different Indian languages are rare but all concerned are aware

of this problem and some efforts are being made to overcome it.

Attempts have been made and are still being made to rediscover the styles of production and acting that the ancient writers of these plays must have had in mind. It is a valid attempt to restore the broken links of our contemporary theatre with its past and to provide a meaningful point of reference to theatre workers who are, or would like to be, associated with the trend under discussion.

Although success achieved so far is rather uneven, varying from region to region, at least a promising beginning has been made. In Kerala and Manipur, where the ancient tradition is still alive, results have been more rewarding than in those regions where this tradition has not survived or only some faint traces of it are discernible in the regional folk forms. On the whole a saturation point has been reached in this line of experimentation and there is not much hope of raising the level of exploration unless we are able to build up a team of actors specially trained for the purpose. Even those producers who have more or less a clear idea about what needs to be done are not able to translate their conception in actual performance because the actors do not possess adequate skills of the type required for such an undertaking.

Considering the fact that the productions inspired by our ancient tradition are, and will be, only a very small part of our contemporary theatre, it is not easy to overcome this handicap in the near future. It is an expensive proposition, involving a sustained effort to evolve a specially designed course for a group of actors who are willing to devote themselves to the establishment of a theatre where our ancient plays are performed regularly.

This dream cannot be fulfilled, however desirable and necessary it may be for strengthening the foundations of our theatre, unless the promoters and guardians of our culture give the project sufficiently high priority. It should however be feasible for Sangeet Natak Akademi to organise at least a series of separate workshops with a suitable mix of participants and specifically identified objectives, where writers can explore our aesthetic philosophy, and theatre educators can pool their ideas and design a suitable acting course. □