

The Theatre of Kinu Kahar

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I shall tell you today the story of Kinu Kahar and his theatre. Kinu, I must warn you, was not a theatrical genius: no unknown avant-garde playwright yet to receive recognition, with power to have given our stage a new direction; nor a versatile stage artiste of great promise who might have made a significant contribution to our theatre today. He was just a plain entertainer practising his art in the obscurity of his village, with common village folk for his audience. This is just a personal record of a man I knew and saw at work in a small world of his own, some thirty-five years ago. I have not tried to invest him with any quality or ideas he never possessed. If, therefore, you sense any innuendo—any reflection on our theatre today—the responsibility is of course mine, and not poor Kinu Kahar's.

Unlettered, poor as only our poor can be, Kinu belonged to the lowliest of our social order. He lived in a mud hut close to the village garbage dump, at a safe enough clinical distance from the habitations of the village gentry. He tended by day his herd of swine, his only means of subsistence, and on hot summer noons would spear an occasional turtle among the clumps of harvested paddy fields. The day's work over, he would, late evenings, sing his repertoire of Palagans—ballad-like verse narratives on traditional themes—to the accompaniment of his Dhol, and often stage plays, usually of indifferent dramatic merit, in a style all his own. These performances were not just recreation; they were also a matter of necessity, for each performance would generally fetch him two whole rupees and sometimes even three, in hard cash.

You might perhaps imagine from what I have said that Kinu's performances were in the traditional Jatra form, with a raised platform in the centre for the players, the audience sitting around in a semi-circle. But basically and structurally it was theatre as we understand it.

Stretched between two high wooden poles would be a wide screen, embellished with Kinu's own paintings of gods and goddesses, kings and princes. (Kinu could paint with the easy grace of an

unschooled artist and could also turn out fine clay dolls with his sensitive fingers.) Right in front of the screen would be an area marked out as stage. In front of the stage would be a row of lights—bamboo stumps some four feet high struck into the earth, their hollows filled with cheap castor oil, thick tufts of jute fibre stuck in to act as wicks: these lamps could brave the weather and shine on the painted faces of the players as they trooped out from behind the screen, at Kinu's drum signal, to sing and dance and act out their roles in joyous abandon. The form, you would agree, was neither Alkap of Murshidabad, nor Gambhira of Malda. If you must give a name to it, you might call it 'one-wall theatre', but theatre it decidedly was.

The performances were held in the open, near the market-place, on Mela grounds and near the neighbouring dwellings of fishing-folk, potters, Chamars, scavengers, and similar low-caste people, from where, incidentally, Kinu recruited his happy bunch of young players.

In the tradition of the illustrious Girish Chandra Ghosh, Kinu was actor, playwright, director ('motion master' in those days) all rolled into one. He was also the make-up man of his troupe. He was the author of all the plays he staged—prodigious in number and variety of themes, considering Kinu's total divorce from the world of letters. Kinu dictated his plays to someone who knew his alphabets, but just about. I have seen a few of his well-thumbed manuscripts; they were written not in dramatic form but as long narratives of events, uninhibited by any rules of spelling or syntax—shapeless compositions with a mad mixture high-sounding chaste words and slang. Add to all this the atrocious pronunciation and unbearably loud declamatory speeches of the actors. A mad medley of tragedy and comedy, song and dance and clowning—that was Kinu's theatre.

Comic relief in Kinu's theatre was provided by Biru, a Muslim lad who gave magic performances. He would swallow live fish one after the other, and disgorge them alive a little later. He would tear the throat of a cock and, blood dripping from his lips, eat it up feathers and all. The lone actress in Kinu's theatre was Jagadamba—his fat, termagant, middle-aged wife. A woman appearing on the public stage was unthinkable in those days, and gentlefolk would not tolerate it; but then, Kinu and his kind were outside the pale of gentle society. It was not exactly the lure of the footlights that had attracted Jagadamba to the stage, but the opportunities it gave her to collect all the petty sums she could collect from the audience during intermissions.

All this would sound as if I were ridiculing the dramatic efforts of Kinu Kahar, whereas my aim is to give you an honest and correct account of his theatre—his meagre intellectual, human and material resources, and the gleams of wit and humour and unmistakable sense of drama one could always get from his performances. Here is a scene from Kinu's *Raja Srivatsa*.

(Reduced to destitution at goddess Lakshmi's wrath, Raja Srivatsa [Kinu] wanders about, accompanied by Queen Chinta [Jagadamba], who tearfully consoles the king.)

CHINTA: Don't grieve so, dear King of my Heart! What if you have lost your kingdom? I still have my jewellery! Take it all, go to the grocery and buy everything we need. And don't forget to buy a good piece of live Shole, for I'll cook you a nice dish of Koi-in-oil.*

SRIVATSA: But, dearest, how could you possibly cook Koi-in-oil without a Koi? With a mere Shole?

CHINTA: By all the gods in heaven above, if I am a chaste woman, I can and certainly will cook Koi-in-oil with Shole!

(With becoming reluctance, the king proceeds with stripping the queen of her ornaments until he reaches for the nose-ring when suddenly she turns into a raging Fury.)

CHINTA: Stop it now, I tell you! Don't you dare touch the nose-ring—it is my own! (A struggle ensues) Keep your foul hands off the nose-ring. I tell you! It is my own—none of your cheap theatre trash. Pure silver it is—a gift from my poor dead father! (Giving up the unequal struggle and despoiled of all her ornaments, the queen sits down in the dust, howling in grief and rage.)

The scene is greeted with the lusty cheers of a vastly amused audience. The make-believe world of Raja Srivatsa and Queen Chinta has melted away, yielding place to the all-too-real everyday world of Kinu Kahar and Jagadamba.

This transformation was achieved, it is to be noted, not by a piece of impromptu acting from Jagadamba but by a dramatic device artfully introduced in the play by our unlettered dramatist who could never have heard of Bertold Brecht. In many of his plays, I have watched Kinu moving effortlessly between the two worlds of the make-believe and the real, with memorable dramatic effect. The technique was his own, born of his native genius—this device we have now learnt to call alienation. To take another instance—Kinu's theatrical presentation of the traditional theme of *Behula-Lakhinder*.

*Koi is a species of freshwater fish highly prized in Bengal for its tender, delicious meat—rather expensive. Shole is an inferior and cheaper variety, well within reach of the poor—*Translator*.

As a punishment to Behula's father for having defied the serpent-goddess Manasha, Behula's husband Lakhinder has to die of snake-bite on his wedding night. A defiant Behula refuses to accept the unjust punishment and with Lakhinder's dead body on a raft, she moves from place to place supplicating the higher gods to undo the cruel punishment and restore her innocent husband to life. In Kinu's play, Behula walks across the stage into the audience with a begging bowl and appeals to each spectator: "For mercy's sake, kind brother, spare a paisa for an unfortunate sister! how else can I pay for the medical treatment of my dear husband!" I can recall how deeply moved I was watching the scene. It really seemed as though Lakhinder's treatment would stop if we didn't pay up.

We modern playgoers discuss, with understanding and admiration, the many achievements of the contemporary theatre of the West. We are knowledgeable about the dramatic genius of Stanislavsky and of Brecht who gave the Western stage a new direction, a validity and relevance to our times. The most significant dramatic device adapted and developed by Brecht was alienation, by which he sought to turn the spectator from being just a passive member of the audience into a detached observer with critical judgement, reacting in a positive manner to the view of the world being presented, urged to appropriate social action. The new theatre has received almost universal acceptance, and our own playwrights and producers, inspired by the new wave, have also been staging plays on that model with varying degrees of acceptance and success.

But have we, let us ask ourselves, cared to make any sort of research into our own theatre history, especially that of our folk theatre and folk entertainment in their various forms? The Alkap of Murshidabad, Gambhira of Malda, Krishna-Kirtan, Momenshahi Comic Opera? If only we had, we would have found, just waiting to be discovered, much of the stuff that made for the new dramatic expression of the West. This is not a learned dissertation on drama and I'll not dwell on the content, style and dramatic values of these forms of entertainment. What I propose to ask ourselves is whether alienation is after all as novel an idea as we have taught ourselves to believe? Wasn't the idea at work in the plays of Kinu just mentioned? In many of our folk theatres, the actor is at the same time the commentator. In Bhavai of Gujarat and Tamasha of Maharashtra, the comic characters detach themselves from the action of the play and hurl sharp comments and undisguised abuses on the events and the dramatic characters they are playing. The device is unobtrusively woven into the very texture of our folk theatre and perhaps folk theatre of all lands, and does not need the contrivances we

notice in modern theatre. If, therefore, we had only cared to give our own theatre a close look we need not have waited for Brecht to teach us alienation.

In passing, I will tell you about an experience which vindicates the opinion I have just expressed. I was watching a performance of *Antigone*, produced by the notable German producer Heime on the grounds of Calcutta's Cathedral Church a few years ago. From time to time, the characters would leave the stage and ask individual members of the audience, not exactly in a stage whisper, to stand up and have their say: "Join us and speak out all you have to say" we were urged, in near-authoritarian tone. The result, for me at least, was disastrous: far from identifying with the actor, I felt the distance between us increase. There is no effort of this variety in our folk theatre. Our Jagadamba was no great actress; when she begged as in *Behula-Lakhinder*, she just begged, but in a manner which created instant rapport. We almost felt Lakhinder would die if we did not give our mite.

Kinu is no longer with us—his merry bunch of actors either! We need not shed tears over his passing, because we never wanted Kinu Kahar and his likes—we sophisticated city-bred theatre workers. Those of us who became torch-bearers of the post-Independence Nava Natya Andolan (New Theatre Movement) and Group Theatre Movement strove scrupulously, in our elitist zeal, to remove from the theatre all trace of the 'provincial'. Consequently our work became an echo of Western models. Before Independence we were Swadeshi-minded; gaining Independence we pushed the country aside. And pushing it aside, we lost the soil underfoot. We lost our audience. Yet we never stop complaining why millions don't flock to our shows. Our condition is that of the child who throws dust in his own eyes, then howls he is blinded.

Now, I must not be misunderstood. I am not patriotic enough to abhor anything foreign. Economic compulsions may restrict free flow of consumer goods into the country; but the mind is a different territory and must be left open to the free flow of ideas, whatever the place of origin. The point I am trying to make is that in our obsession with the West we have neglected a very important task. We have not attempted a discovery of indigenous theatre forms, nor worked for their conservation and revival. We haven't learnt the lessons they offer and thus failed to infuse new life and vigour into our theatre.

This is not so in other parts of the country. Conscious efforts to conserve and revive Nautanki in north India, Bhavai in Gujarat, Tamasha in Maharashtra and Kudiattam in Kerala provide evidence

of a new awareness of the value of indigenous forms. And we, theatre workers of Calcutta, watch all this and toy with the idea of adapting Bhavai or Tamasha for our theatre. As though we had no local idiom of our own!

But I have talked long enough—much longer, I fear, than you had prepared yourselves to suffer. So I must close now. Before that, I must get back to Kinu Kahar and finish his story.

Kinu died. Jagadamba took over charge of tending Kinu's herd of swine. Biru, our magician, left the village and came over to Calcutta; he has been seen in his baggy trousers, shabby black coat and famous multi-hued sola topee, practising his art in the city's lanes and bye-lanes. □

Translated from the Bengali by P.N. Chatterjee