

Some Notes On the Use of Tradition in Theatre*

Nemi Chandra Jain

1. Thinking of this subject, I am reminded of a seminar on playwriting and play production organized by Bharatiya Natya Sangh about twenty-four years ago. When, in one of its sessions, it was suggested that modern Indian playwrights and directors had something to learn from what was then called folk theatre, a number of participants ridiculed the idea or were cold and sceptical. They indignantly asserted that folk theatre might be all right for the villages, but modern urban theatre originating from Western inspiration could grow only along Western lines. Naturally, the very few protagonists of traditional theatre present there were regarded as obscurantist intruders. Today, the wheel seems to have turned full circle.

2. After more than a century of almost barren attempts at playwriting and staging after Western models, our theatre seems at last ready to reject this imitative pursuit and to venture into its own distinctive, indigenous territory. A new idiom is on the anvil, affecting all aspects of theatrical activity—dramatic writing, acting, staging methods, designing, performer-audience relationship. What appeared to be a fad of some individuals has now in its sweep most of the theatrically active languages of the country and an overwhelming number of playwrights, directors, performers and groups.

3. Many factors are responsible for this development: impact of the widespread quest for an Indian identity in all aspects of life in our country, including the arts, particularly the theatre; a growing awareness of and dissatisfaction with the imitative nature of our past dramatic efforts and the desire to go to our own roots; increasing exposure to our own traditional theatre forms and their amazing vitality, aesthetic freshness and popularity with people; worldwide disillusionment with realistic theatre and the search for alternatives; influence of the plays and performances of Bertolt Brecht, and so

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on. Thus, more and more theatre people began to search for an appropriate approach, style, form of theatre which was nearer the consciousness of the people, consistent with our own cultural traditions, entertaining and yet aesthetically satisfying, imaginative and different from the cinema. It is important to emphasize that the main thrust of this search was not to revive tradition but to understand and assimilate it for a creative use, namely, to express the contemporary human situation and its varied manifestations.

4. This encounter with traditional theatre is neither an isolated nor unidimensional phenomenon. The spectrum is really very wide with many levels and forms, some of which deserve to be mentioned.

(a) Traditional plays with renovated structure staged with a modern approach and production methods, such as *Jasma Odan* in Bhavai style, *Amar Singh Rathor* in Nautanki, etc.

(b) New plays cast in any one of the traditional forms, such as the Bhavai-style plays *Mena Gurjari* by Rasiklal Parikh and *Hoholika* by C. C. Mehta, *Surya Shikar* by Utpal Dutt and many other Jatra plays, *Daku Nautanki* by Mudra Rakshas, *Saiyan Bhaye Kotwal* in Tamasha form, etc.

(c) New plays not cast in any specific form, but generally drawing upon the structural or staging techniques of one or more traditional form of one or more region. To name some outstanding plays of this kind, Girish Karnad's *Havavadan* and Chandrasekhar Kambar's *Jokumara Swamy* in Kannada; Vijay Tendulkar's *Ghashiram Kotwal* and Satish Alekar's *Mahanirwan* in Marathi; Habib Tanvir's *Charandas Chor* and *Bahadur Kalarin* in Chhatisgarhi; Sarveshwar Dayal Saksena's *Bakri* and *Rasgandarva* by Mani Madhukar in Hindi; K. N. Panikkar's *Karim Kutti* and G. Shankar Pillai's *Kirat* in Malayalam; Arun Mukherjee's *Mareech Sambad*, Manoj Mitra's *Rajdarshan* and Saonli Mitra's *Nathabati Anathabat* in Bengali; Bakul Tripathi's *Leela* in Gujarati; *Uchek Lengmei Dong* and *Chakravyuha* by Ratan Kumar Thiyam, *Leigi Machasinga* by H. Kanhailal, *Khuman Chakha Moireng Ngamba* by Lokendra Arambam in Manipuri, and so on. This list of new plays and playwrights speaks for itself. It not only includes some of the most significant recent dramatic writing in our country, but also a very large number of eminent and young playwrights.

(d) This entire process has been tremendously enriched by and has also led to the staging of Sanskrit and a number of foreign plays in the new idiom: *Mrichchhakatika* by Habib Tanvir, E. Alkazi and B. V. Karanth; *Madhyama Vyayoga* and *Mattavilasa* by Kavalam Narayan Panikkar, the latter play also by Kumar Verma; *Malavikagnimitram* by B. V. Karanth; *Urubhangam* by Ratan Kumar Thiyam

and Kavalam Narayan Panikkar, etc. All these productions based on elements, conventions, techniques and devices from more than one traditional theatre have come to be regarded as landmarks on our contemporary theatre scene. Similarly, the foreign plays staged, even if controversial, have opened up new vistas for Indian theatre. For example, the plays of Bertolt Brecht: *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* in Marathi by Vijaya Mehta, in Hindi by Fritz Benewitz, in Punjabi by M. K. Raina and Kavita Nagpal, *Three Penny Opera* in Marathi by Jabbar Patel, in Bengali by Ajitesh Banerjee; Ben Jonson's *Volpone* and Gogol's *Inspector General* by Bansi Kaul; and Shakespeare's *Macbeth* by B. V. Karanth.

5. Looking at this considerable body of work, it is not difficult to identify some of the new elements or their fresh innovative use in the encounter with traditional theatre.

In dramatic writing: A flexible dramatic structure linked by Sutradhar, narrator or commentator; freedom from the unities of time and place; use of myth, legend or folk tale facilitating mixture of the natural and the supernatural, the everyday and the fantastic, the human and the non-human—including animals, trees, etc; possibility of using social prototypes rather than individualized characters; use of song, verse or rhythmic speech, etc.

In staging: A great variety of movement from various sources, including dance, ritual, acrobatics, martial arts; miming of objects, properties, places, actions, including the use of specific Mudras or improvised gestures; use of music, singing, chanting and forms of stylisation in speech; minimal or suggestive set, neutral or bare stage. simultaneous action with conventions to communicate changes of time and place; use of masks, curtains or Patis carried by stage hands.

6. Thus the contours of a fresh, innovative and flexible dramatic form have gradually emerged, enabling the playwright to telescope different points in time and space, to bring in many levels of reality simultaneously, or to negotiate them freely in any order. The new form promises to restore the essential imaginative, poetic character of drama suitable for presenting complex human experience.

7. Similarly, a kind of total theatre incorporating music, dance, mime, poetry and even visual arts is crystallizing. It emphasizes simple, inexpensive, actor-based, highly theatrical production styles, with immense potential of deeper probings of reality without losing theatre's entertainment value or audience appeal. Here also the distinct, unique character of theatre as an art is brought back, which communicates not through verisimilitude but imaginative involvement of the spectators.

8. Another important result of this change is that this theatre idiom transcends regional or linguistic barriers without losing its rootedness and distinct local flavour. For the first time after almost a thousand years, an Indian theatrical form seems to be emerging.

9. Along with some spectacular successes, the work in the new idiom has also highlighted a number of problems inherent in such an effort. Our tradition is so long and varied, that without some social and artistic vision, without a minimum intellectual and aesthetic equipment, it is impossible to select from it what is living and aesthetically relevant, and to reject what is decadent and obscurantist. It cannot be asserted that the work done so far has always given evidence of such awareness.

10. Traditional theatre survives only in the countryside from which most of our West-oriented urban theatre people have remained cut off. There is a real danger, therefore, that like many Westerners they may also be attracted towards the 'exotic' in the traditional theatre forms, mostly for their novelty and appeal for the fashionable city crowds rather than for the artistic relevance of these forms.

11. Closely related with this is the danger of an obsessive pre-occupation of our theatre people with the form or the attractive or unusual formal elements in traditional theatre, leading to a display of formal virtuosity without any serious content, experience of life, or even concern for the text of a play.

12. The traditional theatre forms relate to earlier epochs, to their world-views, life styles, socio-economic organizations. In any attempt to draw upon them for expressing contemporary experience, there is the risk of either diluting the intensity and immediacy of the experience or of distorting the forms themselves, or possibly both.

13. Experience so far has revealed that the results are good only when the play is strong and well-constructed, or when the theme is based on myth, legend, folk tale or some ritualistic episode; and when the director and performers have had prolonged and deep association, experience and exposure to traditional theatre, specially its elements like music and dance.

14. This need has also led to the involvement of traditional players from villages in new urban productions. Undoubtedly, their participation brings new vitality and theatrical effectiveness, but it also creates a kind of unevenness and imbalance in performances by a mixed team. Besides, it raises an altogether different set of complicated and very controversial issues relating to the rehabilitation of rural performers in their original homes and revitalization

of the traditional arts in the countryside. In any case, this is no substitute for the reorientation of the training of urban theatre people in various aspects of traditional theatre.

15. Thus, experience with the new dramatic idiom has underlined the urgent need of two inputs in order to bring out the idiom's full potential: (a) performers and directors with skills in music, dance and mime, as well as close familiarity with traditional texts, poetry and literature (This requires a fresh and different approach and techniques for theatre training); (b) playwrights with a serious social vision who have understanding and insight into the aesthetics and methods of our traditional theatres.

16. Important as all these problems are, they are basically the hazards of any serious creative breakthrough. There is or can be no readymade, foolproof safety measure against them. In fact, it is these hazards that make the challenge worthwhile. I am sure our creative theatre people, in spite of all handicaps, will ultimately measure up to the requirements of this exciting phase of our theatre. □