Violence as Theme in Contemporary Indian Drama

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AFTER THE GREAT AGE of Sanskrit drama, there was a millennium of near-absence of dramatic literature in India in spite of very vigorous and imaginative theatrical activity in different regions and languages of the country. Our traditional theatre forms like Yakshagana, Terukuttu, Ankia Nat, Jatra, Tamasha, Bhavai, Rasleela, Khyal, Swang, etc. arose then and have flourished ever since. Though they certainly present a staggering variety of what is called total theatre, with different blends of poetry, music, dance, mime, movement and acting, they are—almost all—generally performed without any specific written script.

In the 19th century, after our contact with Western literature and theatre, dramatic writing started once again in all the modern Indian languages. But by and large it was an alien kind of drama, its aesthetic approach and staging methods quite different from what obtained here for centuries. For various socio-cultural reasons, it has not been possible to integrate or assimilate this new drama with either the classical or medieval traditions of dramatic writing and practice. As a result, for the next hundred years or more, our dramatic writing, with very few isolated exceptions, merely imitated Western models, and was confined to mythological and historical episodes or to very superficial didactic treatment of social questions, aiming primarily at entertainment or at best social reform.

The situation changed after independence when a tremendous release of new energy brought about a renaissance in our arts, leading to a fresh spurt of dramatic and theatrical activity all over the country. The last three decades—since the midfifties—have been not only very productive but also extremely significant for dramatic writing in a number of Indian languages. Some established poets and authors have turned their attention to drama and many new playwrights have appeared on the scene.

The plays by these authors have explored many layers of our social life and individual psyche. A number of them reveal a keen observation and concern for deeper social realities and vital issues of human existence. Some of the themes tackled include war and its impact on the moral and material life of man, the meaning and

purpose of life, struggle for political power, violence in social and personal behaviour, breakdown of the family and emerging patterns of man-woman relationship, conflict between classes and communities, economic and social exploitation, problems of political and individual corruption, etc.

This wide-ranging exploration of social and individual relationships has been carried out by means of sharp, evocated dramatic images and often inventive structures. It has also led to a search for authenticity and identity, for a distinct Indian dramatic form which would link this drama to our long and varied tradition, and would also enrich and develop it by rejecting all that is decadent and irrelevant, incorporating all that is forward looking and meaningful in both the Indian and Western traditions. An altogether new approach to evolve a flexible dramatic form, with an imaginative treatment of time and place, social characterization, use of music and dance, introduction of narrative elements, and use of Sutradhar or commentator/narrator is gradually emerging. Thus, as a vehicle of serious human concerns, drama is once again acquiring its proper place along with other literary forms in India.

It is significant that this new drama is gradually becoming one of the most reliable and authentic indices of the deeper mainsprings of dominant social and personal antagonisms of contradictions which often crystallize into or find expression in one or two strong impulses. Violence is one of them. As in social life, so in literature, particularly in drama—which by its very nature treats human experience in images of conflicting forces, systems, individuals or attitudes—violence in its various forms and manifestations has found widespread expression. There is hardly an important playwright who has not portrayed one or the other aspect of social or individual violence as a major or secondary theme in his work.

One of the most devastating and inhuman forms of violence is of course war, which has plagued humanity since times immemorial. In the later half of the present century particularly, with our deadly arsenals of atomic weapons constantly proliferating, the horror of violence in war has become a frightening nightmare. It is significant therefore that war, with all its brutal and senseless destruction of human life, of material objects and moral values, has engaged our playwrights ever since the beginning of the present dramatic upsurge.

As early as 1953, Dharmavir Bharati in his Hindi verse-play *Andha Yug* (The Blind Age) tried to show the futility of war as a means to solve social or political problems. The action of the play occurs against the aftermath of the great Mahabharata war—a

family feud for power exploding into an all-pervading holocaust. The mythic war divides society, family and individual vertically, leaving the country totally devastated in the end—the victors as brutalized, as morally bankrupt, as mentally tortured and maimed as the vanquished.

Ostensibly about the Kaurava-Pandava conflict, the play echoes in many ways the situation after the Second World War, the destruction caused by the atomic bomb included. It is not very difficult to identify the modern counterparts of the great warrior Ashwatthama, transformed by an unethical, unprincipled war into a sub-human savage. This happens because his father, the great warrior-teacher Dronacharya, is killed by the half-truth uttered knowingly by no less a person than Yudhisthir, also called Dharmaraj—Lord of Truth and Justice.

Equally ironical and poignant for contemporary society is Yuyutsu, a Kaurava prince who fights for the Pandavas because he believes their cause to be just. But after the victory, which he is hated and spurned by his own Kaurava kinsmen, he is callously ridiculed, bullied and tortured by the Pandavas themselves. The disillusionment eventually leads him to end his life. Violence only begets violence, hatred and moral decay.

In spite of the somewhat sentimental and simplistic world-view and solutions implied in the play its strong anti-war tone, its word-pictures of the physical, spiritual and moral devastation brought about by war and violence, and its moments of dramatic intensity have kept it alive and relevant today. It has been staged repeatedly in Hindi by a number of eminent directors, and also translated and produced in some other Indian languages and English.

In the sixties Badal Sircar, the best known Bengali playwright, treated the questions of war and violence in a contemporary context in two of his plays. In *Tringsha Shatabdi* (The Thirtieth Century), which is a kind of futuristic documentary, he brings under searching scrutiny the positions and responses of various persons involved in the Hiroshima bombing towards the end of the Second World War. Marshalling his facts in the form of a courtroom cross-examination in a nightmare and creating a perspective of the thirtieth century, Badal Sircar underlines the moral responsibility of every one of us for such an inhuman act to happen and for preventing any future repetition. It is an anguished indictment of a social system which perpetrates such violence, as also of intellectuals, artists, scientists and common poeple who passively, helplessly, or for reasons of personal security, fail to intervene at the right time.

In his well-known play *Baki Itihas* (The Other History), the Hiroshima destruction has been placed in a different perspective. Violence has dogged humanity from ancient times, as seen in the atrocities of ruling classes down the ages: the torture of slaves in ancient Egypt and Rome; the bloody conquests of Alexander, Chenghiz Khan and Napolean; the barbaric killing of defenceless men and women by colonial British rulers in Jalianwala Bagh in India; the incredible torture chambers of Hitler, and so on.

But in this play there is an unconscious feeling of guilt tormenting an ordinary young university lecturer that he cannot or does not do anything to curb violence. In the last act of the play a searching introspection, through the device of a ghost, has been attempted which suggests that man is free and powerful enough to commit any atrocity or violence but when it comes to putting an end to it, he always pleads helplessness. This juxtaposition of the two human responses at once highlights the inner dichotomy which paralyzes active intervention against violence.

Badal Sircar has also exemplified this violence in two different settings in two other plays: Spartacus, based on the slave revolt in ancient Rome, and *Michhil* (The Procession) in India of today. This latter, particularly, brings in a delicate but very moving nuance. A child has been shot dead but nobody is prepared to own up. In fact, the policeman on duty keeps on repeating like a refrain: Nobody has been murdered, there is complete peace and order! The play suggests that the child—that is, the future of mankind—is murdered again and again, and those entrusted with its safety are callous about it, if not themselves actively involved in the dastardly act.

The play has a very inventive, spontaneous structure in which the conspiracy of various forces constituting the existing system which seeks to control or violently do away with the future is brought out in a very imaginative and effective manner. The play ends on a somewhat optimistic note. The human procession which is at last forming will and must foil the game of the conspirators and protect the child.

An altogether different dimension of social violence and its repercussions is seen in Marathi playwright Vijay Tendulkar's semi-historical play *Ghasiram Kotwal*, set in 18th century Poona. The pleasure-seeking, decadent, depraved ruling Brahman élite and its hangers-on amuse themselves by baiting and humiliating Ghasiram, a poor Brahman from the North, a newcomer to the city. This becomes so blatant and relentless that the victim's worst instincts are aroused. In a bid to avenge himself upon all who have tortured him, he takes the most unusual step of offering his beautiful daughter to the corrupt, lecherous, powerful and astute chief minister, Nana, as

a price for the post of the city's police chief.

After Ghasiram succeeds in securing this post all hell is let loose on the degenerate élite of the city, until he overshoots his mark and nemesis is reached. He is sentenced to a most violent death by Nana himself. His end, thus, is merely the removal of a nuisance for Nana who exploits the event to further enhance his power. The play implies that unbridled personal violence may succeed as vendetta, but is no match for the organized violence of a ruthless ruling class. This was underlined in one of the productions of the play by showing Nana emerging at the end collossus-like, in the image of a fascist dictator, invincible and unchallengeable.

In spite of the controversy which the play has raised and some other structural problems, as a presentation of depravity and decadence generating inhuman, almost pathological, violence in society, it provides a shattering experience.

Yet another instance of pathological violence of people in power is found in Hindi playwright D.P. Sinha's *Katha ek Kans ki* (Story of A Kans). This attempts to show how a soft-spoken, artloving, shy lad is brutalized by the environment to emerge in the end as a ruthless autocratic ruler who does not hesitate to liquidate anyone who dares to appose, resist or differ, including his own father, close friends and even his sweetheart.

A very perceptive example of such a split personality has been created by the Kannada playwright Girish Karnad in his widely acclaimed powerful play *Tughlaq*. The 14th-century ruler, known popularly as the mad Sultan, comes out as a frightening mix of an imaginative well-meaning visionary and, when thwarted in his plans, a cold-blooded maniac who can be totally indifferent to all human considerations. Here violence is a kind of counter point to dreams which can be deadly when they turn sour.

The play is very imginatively structured, with repeated juxtapositions of two contradictory elements in Tughlaq's volatile personality—his dreamy introspection and his extremely violent behaviour. Yet another level of this contrast is created in the characters of Aziz and Azam, two gangsters who indulge in murder and looting almost with the same arguments as those of Tughlaq, which becomes a very scathing comment on impractical visionaries.

The play has many more threads, but the violence here has an awesome quality. Even the noblest of ideas, if not rooted firmly in earthly reality, if not constantly adjusted to actual ground-level conditions and requirements, if not handled with compassion and human consideration, can become most destructive.

There are a number of other plays which are in one way or the

other concerned with power and violence—violence for attaining power or retaining it, or for maintaining the status quo. Hindi playwright Bhishma Sahni's *Hanush* is about a Czech ironsmith who invented the clock. It shows how new scientific discoveries threaten the vested interests of men who would go to any length either to destroy the achievement or to make it an instrument of their own power and greed. Hanush is honoured for the distinction and prosperity that his invention brings to the town. At the same time, he is blinded so that he does not make any more clocks for rivals or impart his knowledge to others. It is evident that even the most creative or innocuous-looking activities produce resistance if they clash with the objectives of the ruling classes. It would seem that violence is inbuilt in any social system with its establishment and vested interests.

A significant play showing violence by the establishment of whatever kind or period is *Guinea-pig* by the Bengali author Mohit Chattopadhyaya. Here quite a few of our social, economic and political institutions—family, university, factory, laboratory, press and, of course party—are treated as different facets of the same establishment showing the same faces, whatever the masks. Even the slightest resistance to the dictates of authority leads to violence, varying in ferocity and extent according to the threat posed. *Guinea-pig*, written in an experimental absurdist idiom and with a somewhat nebulous end has however an incisiveness and edge which cuts and sets you thinking.

Violence against the lower castes in our society has also attracted the attention of several playwrights. Bhishma Sahni's *Kabira Khada Bazar Mein* (Kabir in the Marketplace) is woven around the life of the 15th-century poet Kabir who was a strong critic of religious bigotry and social hypocrisy. In Mannu Bhandari's Hindi play *Mahabhoj* (The Great Feast), a fearless young leader of the lower castes in a village is murdered by the gangsters of the local leaders of the party in power. The incident is eventually exploited by both the ruling party as well as the opposition for their election compaigns.

The play shows developing anger and resistance among the downtrodden, not expressed in any blind counter-violence but in greater awareness of the forces that are at work.

In Bengali playwright Manoj Mitra's *Chakbhanga Modhu* (A Broken Honeycomb), about an extremely poor semi-tribal couple, the pattern of violence is much more complex and inward. The husband is a village Ojha with the occult power of curing snakebite. He is faced with the dilemma of whether or not to use his powers to cure the village moneylender-landlord, a lecherous tyrant, lying

unconscious from a deadly snake-bite. Much against the wishes of village folk he cures the hated man because he is under oath to his guru not to refuse anyone a cure. But as soon as the moneylender recovers he resumes his old ways with greater vindictiveness. He tries to molest the Ojha's wife who had pleaded with her husband not to break his oath and cure the man. She is now so indignant and angry that she kills the tyrant. Thus the play juxtaposes violence and counterviolence with a skilful interplay of motivation and has tremendous irony as well as deep human sympathy and warmth.

On the other hand Kavalam Narayana Panikkar, a poet playwright-director from Kerala in his play *Karim Kutty* has presented the employer-employee struggle in the form of a fantasy. A sorcerer tyrranizes the spirits he controls, of whom Karim Kutty is the leader, until they revolt against his arbitrary, autocratic ways and his exploitative plans. The play has a fascinating form and its main idea is communicated with great scope for the performers' skill and virtuosity, requiring use of music, dance and mime.

This exploration of the nature and forms of violence expressed in Indian dramatic writing would not be complete without a look at the treatment of violence against women which is so common and widespread in our society. This has found repeated expression in many recent plays in various Indian languages but the most important work has been that of the noted Marathi dramatist Vijay Tendulkar. His plays like *Shantata, Court Chalu Ahe* (Silence, the Court is in Session), *Giddha* (The Vultures), *Sakharam Binder, Baby, Kamala* have all been about violence against women in a man-dominated world.

In *Shantata, Court Chalu Ahe,* a vivacious young teacher becomes the victim of the pent-up frustrations and viciousness of her lower-middle-class colleagues in a drama troupe engaged in voluntary social service. Her desire and effort to seek fulfilment and happiness in her own way come into conflict with her colleagues' petty vanities and hypocritical concern for social and personal morality. The ferocity with which they pounce upon her to destroy her emotionally and socially is unmatched in Indian drama, as is the fine and sensitive orchestration of the motivations of the different characters. There is no obvious physical violence in the play, but it ends with a pretended mock-serious pronouncement that the child in the girl's womb should be destroyed in order to preserve the moral well-being of society. *Shantata, Court Chalu Ahe* is one of the most powerful and well written plays in any Indian language.

Among Tendulkar's plays *Giddha* underlines violence against women in the family, *Baby* presents a woman living under the three-pronged torture of her half-deranged brother, her gangster

lover and a film man. In *Kamala* a journalist buys a woman from a flesh market in a tribal area and brings her to the capital, not so much for her emancipation as for enhancing his professional prospects by an unusual scoop.

Sakharam Binder is still more violent. An oversexed bookbinder brings forsaken women to his house only to discard them on some pretext after cruel exploitation so that he is free to find a fresh victim. He constantly boasts of his insatiable sexual desire and manliness and treats the women he brings home worse than cattle until he chances upon a woman who proves to be more than his match. The play ends with all his swagger punctured but in desperation he strangles the woman to death.

The play, presenting the selfish tyrant male at his exploiting worst in extreme terms, is undoubtedly a strong indictment of all that is callous and brutal in our attitude to women. But it has a touching undercurrent of pathos which is often missed in the bang of its loud, explosive quality.

There are many other plays portraying various aspects of the constant violence on women. Among them can be mentioned *Kirat* (name of an aboriginal tribe) by Malayalam playwright G Sankara Pillai. This is about a Kirat woman who is raped by forest contractors in league with the local law-and-order guardians. It portrays both her agony and the resistance and anger the event generates.

In an altogether different key is the poignant play *Hājār Churashir Maan* (Mother of No.1084) by Bengali author Mahashweta Devi. It shows a woman of an upper-class family whose son, a Naxalite activist, is killed by the police and his dead body, No. 1084, is kept in the police morgue. The play reveals a community of interest and response between the son and the mother who feels equally choked in the artificial atmosphere of her family and therefore justifies her son's rebellion even if she is heartbroken at his death.

Thus contemporary dramatic writing in India has gradually grown responsive to some of the most disturbing but vital strains of contemporary life. The responses undoubtedly vary with the social and artistic background as well as the living experience of the playwrights. The nature and quality of violence they project in their plays, therefore, have great divergence of tone, intensity and depth of perception.

Drama is at the crossroads in India. After centuries of indifference and imitative effort, it now stands poised to acquire identity and authenticity, to find its roots so that it can rise to the challenge of articulating and sharing with the community to which it belongs a creative vision of the complex human situation today. □