Towards a Revival of the *Bhana*

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The creative ferment in today's theatre is leading to the presentation of traditionally well-known themes in totally different styles, the revival of less-known regional forms and their adaptation for wider communication and new themes. Yakshagana has been presented in Hindi; Kathakali has presented new themes like the tragic and heroic story of the Rani of Jhansi. The story of the *Mahabharata* has been dramatized in Greek as well as Kabuki styles. Forms like Nautanki, Bhavai and Tamasha have been revived. But one form with possibilities for creative adaptation seems to have been overlooked. This is the *bhana*.

The *bhana* is a play with only one actor. Though this imposes serious limitations on dramatic possibilities, it is a category that goes back to ancient days and has continued, though not as a very ample current, till fairly recent times. As in the case of the plays of Bhasa, the manuscripts of the earliest *bhanas* were discovered in the deep South. The *Chaturbhani*, a collection of four *bhanas*, was published in Trichur, Kerala, in 1922, from a manuscript in the possession of Narayanan Namputiri of the town. As with most of our old literature, their date is uncertain. In the manuscript, one of these plays, the *Padamaprabhritakam*, is attributed to Sudraka who is the author of the *Mrichhakatika* (The Toy Clay Cart), well known to the West too through Ryder's brilliant translation. If the ascription is genuine, the play goes back to Kushan times, the second century. In any case, stylistically and on other evidence, the four plays belong to the classical period while a play like Sankara'a *Saradatilaka* belongs to a much later epoch though it is not precisely datable. The *Chaturbhani* plays, though discovered in the South, need not necessarily be southern compositions. But from the *Vitanidra* of the 14th century onwards, we have plays from Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, and the *Sringarasekhara* was written by the author, Sundaresa Sharma, for the spring festival at the Tanjore temple and published by him in 1938. Since the Sanskritic heritage inspired the literary evolution in the modern Indian languages, *bhanas* continued to be written in the latter too and the late K.M. Panikkar, historian and statesman, has also one among his rather prolific output in Malayalam.

In defining the category, Bharata as well as later authorities like Dhananjaya (tenth century) and Visvanatha (14th century) emphasize the simplicity of the plot; it does not have to traverse the five stages (*sandhi*) prescribed for the full-fledged classical drama, through which an episodic situation develops to crisis and through the denouement moves on to the resolution and conclusion; it need only have an opening (*mukha*) and a conclusion (*nirvahana*). In later *bhanas*, this lightness disintegrates into a total laxity in construction. Thus, in the *Saradatilaka*, the Vita or Dilettante, who is invariably the character-narrator-actor in the *bhanas*, has no special task and his leisurely promenade in the city of Kolahalapura is an end in itself. He narrates-enacts four separate stories, each complete in itself, the only link being the identity of the character and of course his continuing presence as the actor on the stage. One could add that the dilettante eroticism of all four stories loosely links them together and the fact remains that this sensuality is the basic temper of the *bhana*, classical or post-classical.

But Dhananjaya in his *Dasarupaka* and Visvanatha in his *Sahityadarpana* state that the *bhanas* should express the heroic and erotic sentiments. But of the plays that have come down to us, I know of none that has the heroic sentiment as the dominant *rasa*. Bharata states that the characters of *bhanas* should be rogues and rakes. Obviously it was a low-comedy form. And the sexuality always latent in the Indian tradition gravitated to a very low level in this tradition. It is time we frankly recognized this strain in our cultural heredity. Erotic symbolism and imagery in religious experience, in other traditions, in St. John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila, in the Sufis, have never developed to such extremes as they have in ours. T.S. Eliot admitted that "the subtleties of Indian philosophers make most of the great European thinkers look like schoolboys"; and in poetics what Anandavardhana and Abhinavagupta have written about *dhvani* make what Mallarmé and other theorists of French symbolism said about suggestion read like undergraduate thesis-writing. But the fact remains that many poems cited to illustrate suggestion in the *Dhvanyaloka* are veiled invitations for adulterous rendezvous. In the *Harivamsa*, when Dwaraka was built, priority was given to the provision of a prime facility for the citizens: apartments for the courtesans. Vatsyayana made expertise in erotics indispensable to elitistic sophistication and patrician elegance and the courtesan was essential here. The *bhana* was a low-comedy form and we find mention that several of them were written for fairs and festivals; the narration becomes uninhibited, in fact far more uninhibited than in some of the plays of Ben Jonson and the tales of Chaucer. The jokes and puns always gravitate towards sex as in the stag parties of our tougher citizens

today. If these types have the additional facility of blue films. *bhanas* like the *Saradatilaka* manage splendidly with verbal description.

The gross sexuality of the *bhanas* was stressed here because in any experimental exploration in reviving and adapting the form, this feature will have to be totally shed, not because of our prudishness but because of its utter tiresomeness. The dilettante's propositioning of the courtesans as he walks leisurely through the Place Pigalle of Kolahalapuri and his specifying which particular gymnastic of the erotic texts he is keen on ultimately become very alienating and cease to have even episodic interest because of the monotony. On occasions we get some episodic substance not so steeped in sex though stemming from it. Thus, in one of the four episodes of the *Saradatilaka*, an ascetic who should be spare in his diet has a rich meal, gets ideas, wipes off the markings in ash and saffron from his body, casts off his garland of cowrie-shells, and enters a bordello. But before things could get to the point which would have satisfied him, a favoured patron who is also a royal official drops in and the courtesan, who had not known that he was an ascetic, dabs him with ash and saffron, gives him several cowrie-shell garlands, asks him to stand in a corner, places an oil lamp on his head, tells her curious patron that it is a statue-cum-lampstand. But the oil from the burning wick drops on the tip of the nose of the 'statue' which puts out a tongue to lick it off. Discovered thus, the ascetic runs out into the street in the night and frightens passers-by because he looks like a goblin. In Syamilaka's *Padataditaka*, one of the *Chaturbhani* plays, an assembly of rakes meets to consider the question of expiation and purification referred to them by Vishnunaga for the indignity he has suffered by allowing an intoxicated courtesan to kick him, playfully, on such a sacred spot as his head. Some worthies think that it is not Vishnunaga but the girl who should undergo a purification ceremony for setting her foot on such a beast.

With a short duration and a single actor, the *bhana* is a form which can be adopted and adapted in the curriculum of drama schools for training in script-writing and acting. It does not need to have a tight episodic construction; but it cannot return to a rampant sexuality nor be content with too flippant crisis and denouement of the kind we have in the *Padataditaka* where in the end it is agreed on the proposal of the presiding rake that the girl should put more sense into her lover by setting her foot on the president's own head in the sight of Vishnunaga. Luckily, in one of the *Chaturbhani* plays, *Ubhayabhisarika*, attributed to Vararuchi, we have an episode which is very light but delightful and satisfying. By his tactlessly unrestrained praise of an opera singer, Kuberadatta offends his girlfriend who leaves him in a huff; he appeals to the Vita to go and mollify the girl and the Vita sets out for the girl's house. But the beauty of the spring

evening makes the lover also set out; the girl, moping under an Asoka tree in a garden, with the moon shining bright in a clear sky, the bees humming all around and the fragrant breeze soothing her, also sets out and they get reconciled by themselves. But they tell the Vita that they owe the reunion to his good wishes and concern in their happiness; he says no, it is the spell of the spring season; then he contradicts himself and says that it is because they really love each other that they could not bear the separation for long. Having no tangled knot for an adroit denouement can be a serious weakness in a play. But here the weakness is given a rationale that turns it to heart-warming sentiment. Here is a cue for modern rehandling of this feather-weight form.

In the high classical tradition also we get some rare moments when the full-fledged drama temporarily gravitates to the form of the one-actor play. In Kalidasa's *Vikramorvasiya*, there is the scene where Urvasi disappears and the nearly demented lover wanders through the forest, demanding of the peacock, the cuckoo, the flamingo, the bee what had become of his beloved. He deems her transformed into the stream, whose waves are the movements of her eyebrows, while the rows of water-birds on its surface are her girdle. With only one character on the stage, this scene must have created some problems in presentation. It is full of Prakrit verses. Their authenticity has been questioned, but has also been vigorously defended; and it is undeniable that they sustain the lyrical mood of the scene which needs the evocation of that mood for conviction. Further, the fact that in the north Indian recension the play is called a *trotaka* suggests that the verses were meant to be sung. The *bhanas* are full of verses; if some of them are conventional and conceit-ridden there are quite a few, especially those describing the beauty of the season, that are lyrical. Were these sung? In Isvaradatta's *Dhurta Vita Samvada*, one of the *Chaturbhani* plays, there is very little episode. The Vita feels bored, confined at home by the rainy season, and since he is too broke to do any more dicing, drinking or whoring, goes to the house of a roguish couple and they pass the time discussing some intricate problems in erotics. But we get fine poetic touches like this:

> The lotuses with petals half-closed look like the eyelids of sweethearts drooping at the parting of lovers. The lingering shadows of evening enveloping the housetops seem chasing the fleeing rays of the sun. The orb of day descends in the west after blessing the heads of trees with his slanting beams. The dove's red eyes bespeak their robbing the sun of his last red glow.

Why could or would not have this been sung in a brief melody, or even hummed as in the Humming Chorus in Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*?

Anyway, irrespective of whether such verses were sung or not in the past, can't we experiment with a very light infusion of song?

A similar question could arise about balletizing the movement. Without some such stylization, the demented lover in Kalidasa's play moving about on the stage all by himself and addressing peacock and flamingo, cuckoo and bee with queries that are apt to sound silly if the mood is prose, would have made the audience shout for the return of the ticket money. Were balletic or dance movements used in the *bhana*? Bharata says that the *bhana* includes many movements. But this need only mean mimicry of the actions of the characters of the episodes, not balletically stylized movement. The *lasya* is an adagio dance as contrasted with the allegro *tandava*. Both Dhananjaya and Visvanatha clearly affirm that the *bhana* incorporated all the ten types of the *lasya*. The late Dr V. Raghavan claimed that the relevant reference in Bharata merely means that, being a solo performance, *bhana* was like *lasya*, not that the *bhana's* movement style was balletic. Acceptance of Raghavan's contention would involve assuming that Dhananjaya got Bharata all wrong and Visvanatha followed Dhananjaya. Were they then writing dramaturgy only on the basis of a text already several centuries old? *Bhana* must certainly have existed in their times too since the tradition has continued right up to the 20th century. Whatever Bharata said, could not the form have assimilated balletic elements in its evolution which in the case of no literary form has followed the prescriptions and proscriptions of theorists? In fact, Bharata himself has said that *lasya* elements can be found in the full-fledged dramatic forms too. Genetic recombinations have been taking place all the time, in both living species and artistic forms. And in any case, even if Dhananjaya and Visvanatha got it all wrong, there is nothing to prevent us today in experimenting with blends. The basic style need not be balletic; but dance can be used occasionally, and both for lyrical and caricatural purposes.

This leads us to the role of mime. All three authorities state that the presentational medium (*vritti*) of the *bhana* should be the verbal (*bharati*). As the single actor has to narrate the exploits and vicissitudes of himself (as a dramatis persona and character) and of others and as these latter never appear on the stage, he has to accost, speak and reply, as if he were addressing or describing people actually present (*akashabhashita*). The verbal mode, thus, is admittedly basic to the *bhana*. And the descriptions do develop the graphic quality required to make up for the absence of visual presentation. Here is the description of the snake-charmer from the *Saradatilaka* who makes his show more exciting with a fight between the snake and his trained monkey:

Upon his head he wears a scanty plume of peacock's feathers, round one of his arms winds the tendril of a vine, and a bracelet of shell decorates the other. His braided locks project from above his forehead while, beneath them, from ear to ear extends across his brow the single streak of ashes. Repeating the Mantra of Garuda, he cautiously opens his basket and draws forth the slowly excited reptile. While he is shaking his knee with one hand and playing upon his pipe with the other, the snake slowly raises its head and expands its hood. The monkey then darts upon the snake and tries to grip it with its teeth, but recedes from its fury.

Bharata states that the actor in the *bhana* uses *bahucheshta*, many movements, and descriptions like this of the snake-charmer and his roadside show cry out for mime. Occasionally, we find pen-pictures which call for reticent, sensitive mimicry. We have this in *Sringaratilaka*, a *bhana* by Ramachandra Dikshita of the 17th century:

She looks back at the peacock with her pretty face half-turned, with her eyes startled, her ear-drop dangling on her cheek and her nose-drop of pearl touching her shoulder and enhancing its beauty.

Modern mime is capable of very fluid transitions of mood. Eberhard Kube, the mime from East Germany who visited Delhi, had a lovely sequence as a ferryman. Most of the time the act is funny with him trying to balance himself precariously in the wake of passing tugs and motor boats. But his boat moves into a quiet nook of the harbour, the call of the gulls is heard, and he pauses in his rowing to watch the flight of the white wings till they are lost to view, his standing figure rising and falling to the rhythm of a gentle swell. There are similar magical moments in the old *bhanas* too. For instance, the call of a cuckoo reminds the Vita of a romance of his own and he proceeds to narrate-enact it. Incidentally, there is strictly no unity of place and time in the *bhana* as has been claimed, for the narration meanders over different locales and through past times as in the Vita's recall. Modern rehandling can attempt far greater sophistication in these fluid transitions in space and time, besides in moods, by using mime as one of the devices.

We can only speculate about the degree of sophistication in histrionics. The Vita is supposed to run into somebody who becomes a narrator-actor at second remove when he tells a story which too has characters who speak and act. There is room for very mobile and adroit histrionics here. For instance, the second narrator can talk about a person whom he regards as pompous. The Vita, in that role, will have to act out unselfcritical pomposity. But at times he will have to change briefly into the role of the second narrator to show his amusement at the pomposity. But the latter too is a dramatis persona and the Vita may regard him too, in his turn, to be comic. So he will have to step farther back to indicate his own appraisal of

the narrator. In *Duel*, Astad Deboo presented the conflict of Good and Evil and since he had to play both roles, he moved swiftly through the heavy shadows between spotlit areas for the transitions. The rehandled *bhana* could use this technique too, though perhaps it had better confine itself mostly to light satire. Thullal of Kerala manages extremely subtle and rapid role-changes for a thoroughly cleansing catharsis through hilarious yet psychologically deep-thrusting laughter, as I have analyzed elsewhere (*A History of Malayalam Literature*, p.115, Orient Longman, 1971). Multi-level irony has become, for various historic reasons, a basic psychological trait of the modern temperament and our social ambience provides rich material for sophisticated treatment.

These possibilities will in any case have to be explored if, in reviving and adapting the *bhana*, we are to rescue it from its preoccupation with loose living and make it relevant for serious living. The ridiculed types in the old *bhanas* are mostly pedants or old rakes whose spirit is willing about adultery but whose flesh is not, though occasionally the target is the anti-social type that dupes people in the garb of a holy man. We have a very large spectrum of anti-social types; in fact, it is a moot point whether we have any other type left. Here another structural feature of the *bhana* can be developed. In some of the *bhanas*, in the prologue, the Sutradhara appears and addresses the actors; and there has been some controversy about whether the Sutradhara and the Vita are two persons or the same person. The probability is of the latter addressing the actors—there aren't any—being the extension of the make-believe basic to *bhana*. The Sutradhara asks or pretends to ask the public what play they want; but once the play starts, the Vita has no direct rapport with the public. However, other forms of comedy have maintained the rapport in remarkable ways. In *The Clouds* of Aristophanes, there is a debate between two characters; one of them argues that dishonesty is the best way to success; when the other is not satisfied, he points to the audience and asks him: "Now look about you! which class among our friends here seems the most numerous?" The other gravely studies the audience and admits: "The blackguards have it by a large majority". Kunchan Nambiar of 18th-century Kerala, a far greater satirist than Aristophanes, manages far more daring and socially weightier thrusts. In his Thullals (forms with a single narrator-dancer-actor) he adopted the vigorous folk forms which elitist culture had ignored. One of these was a form used by the Pariah, lowest of the lowest. In the play *Pulindimoksham*, when the raconteur-actor (who is supposed to be a Pariah) makes his appearance, angry shouts are (supposed to be) heard from the audience:

> Who the hell are you, beef-eating Pariah
> To dish out lofty thoughts?

But he stands his ground and answers that there is absolutely no difference between the Brahmin and the Pariah as the indwelling spirit in both is Brahman (God). Nambiar's plays are rich in social criticism on every plane, from anti-social manners to corruption at the highest levels.

And that should be a cue as to how we can rehandle the *bhana*. □