Hindi Drama

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Contrary to common belief, the Hindi dramatic tradition goes back to the 12th and the 13th centuries, and though the drama then written or staged did not continue to be a living heritage in subsequent centuries, except partially in certain folk forms, no account of the growth of Hindi drama should overlook these earlier works.

Hindi, like other modern regional languages, was in the 11th and 12th centuries branching off from its *apabhramsa* origins and getting crystalized. The language of much of the poetry as also of drama was, therefore, a mixture of *apabhramsa* and modern forms of Hindi. In the period from the 12th to the 15th centuries, these plays were being staged in the temples and by folk parties in the villages. The court as the principal patron of drama had disappeared and, therefore, only the shrine and the courtyard could offer a rather subdued sanctuary to the actor and the singer. The temple stage was confined to the Jain shrines in Rajasthan because the Indo-Gangetic Valley was then unsafe for that kind of activity. These plays, which were also called Ras, were a mixture of dialogue, ballet and opera and the best-known example of this style is *Bharateshwar-Bahubali* Ras by Shalbhadra Suri. It is a play with a moral and is centred around a king who is defeated by his brother, the victor eventually forsaking the reign for a devotional life. According to Dr Dashrath Ojha, there are 400 such Ras plays connected with the temple stage and some of them are religious, some historical, some mythological and spiritual, and some connected with social or family conduct. In all these dramas, music and songs lie scattered as the principal medium for the expression of the rasa.

Contemporaneous with this tradition was flourishing the folk Ras, the performers of which were called Bahurupias. There is a reference to the Bahurupias in *Sandeha-rasak*. It is difficult to guess accurately what the subject matter of these plays was, but while the Jain temple drama got attenuated with the spread of the Muslim influence, this earliest form of folk drama, which incidentally was the channel for a much older stream of heritage, survived all these centuries by adjusting itself to the changing requirements of the humble society it sought to amuse and entertain.

The temple drama, however, reappeared from the 15th century onward in another part of the country, i.e., in north-eastern India, and strangely enough it took a form not dissimilar to that of the Jain Ras. This was the Vaishnava Ankia Nat of Mithila having its ramifications in Mithila, Nepal, Assam, and even in Bundelkhand. The inspiration came from the devotional music and poetry of the Vaishnava movement of which the three great figures in north-eastern India were Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Shankar Dev and Jayadeva. Geographical isolation and temporary political security enabled a number of Hindu dynasties to arise

and prosper in Mithila and Assam during this period. These rulers could in a certain measure develop a pattern of culture seeking to revive some of the ancient glories, and they seized upon the ferment generated by this devotional movement and shaped it into an exquisite cultural expression. Thus, unlike the Jain Ras drama of the western India, there grew here a drama which was the synthesis of the refinement of the court and the devotional fervour of the temple. As many as 106 plays were written by over 35 dramatists during these three or four centuries and most of them were staged in the court, some in the temples and some later became part and parcel of the folk festivals and rituals and weddings that coloured the life of the ordinary people of Mithila and Assam. Umapati Upadhyaya's *Parijatharan* is one of the best known of these Maithili plays. Some plays were written as late as the early 19th century and the ancestors of the present Maharajadhiraj of Darbhanga continued to be the chief patron of this form of drama.

In some respects, however, this stream of Hindi drama had its life in the backwater of the main flow of culture during the medieval period. In the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, the main body of Hindi literature consisted of poetry, devotional to begin with, courtly in its later phase. But the court was not interested in drama, the temple was not in a position to patronize it and, therefore, the few Hindi plays that were written outside north-eastern India were drama only in form. The best known amongst them were *Samayasar* by Banarsi Das, *Prabodh-chandrodaya* by Maharaj Jaswant Singh, *Karunabharana* by Krishnajivan Lachhiram, and *Sabhasar* by Raghuram Nagar. In all these plays, devotional lyrics were presented in the string of a story which was very thin. It was, however, not till early 19th century that the plot was rehabilitated and prose dialogue made its full appearance. One of the earliest and most significant plays in this new style was *Ananda Raghunandan* by Maharaj Vishwanath Singh. This play was very probably written for the stage and exercised a strong influence upon the subsequent development of Hindi drama.

When Bharatendu Harishchandra, the great architect of modern Hindi literature, began writing in 1867, the Vaishnava drama had been reduced to an attenuated form and had become an almost forgotten institution, and it is doubtful if Bharatendu had any direct knowledge of it. However, certain features of the Vaishnava drama surviving through the Bengali folk stage, the Jatra parties, are perceptible in his *Vidyasundar* (1868), of which the story is similar to the play *Vidyavilap* written in 1720. Bharatendu's best-known play *Satya Harishchandra* has a theme on which, in 1651, the Maithili play *Harishchandra Natyam* had been based. The importance which Bharatendu gave to songs, composed on well-known ragas and raginis and interspersed in between scenes and acts, is a distinct influence of the Vaishnava drama. It is a pity that in the recent Hindi drama, this pleasant convention of introducing lyrics was discarded in the name of naturalism, for its disappearance removed one of the points of contact between the literary and the folk play.

During his relatively brief literary career of eighteen years (1867-1885), Bharatendu rehabilitated drama as a literary form in Hindi, harmonized diverse dramatic styles and laid the foundations of the amateur stage. Though Bharatendu picked up several of his plots from

contemporary life and chose for translation plays into which he could import references to the social and political problems of his age, the form that he chose for his dramatic writings was basically in the Sanskrit tradition. Even *Bharata Durdarsha,* which seems to be almost a modern problem play, follows the pattern of the Sanskrit classic *Prabodh-chandrodaya.* Still, his modern outlook is all-pervasive and unmistakable; his incomplete play *Prem Jogini* is a precursor of the realistic drama; in *Bharat Janani* and a few other plays he gave a glimpse of nascent nationalism which became the principal inspiration of subsequent playwrights.

Bharatendu was much more of a theatre man than just a playwright. Under his leadership and influence was formed a theatre group, members of which used to stage Hindi plays and also shared with Bharatendu this distinction of writing for the stage a number of the earliest popular Hindi plays of the 19th century. To this Bharatendu school of playwrights belonged Devakinandan Tripathi, author of *Sitaharan*, Shivnandan Sahai who wrote *Krishna Sudama*, Ayodhya Singh Upadhaya who wrote *Rukmini Parinaya*, Radha Charan Goswami, author of *Sudama* and *Amar Singh Rathor*, Balkrishna Bhatt, author of *Damayanti Swayamvar* and *Veni Sanhar*, Lala Shrinivas Das who wrote *Randhir Premmohini*, Radha Krishna Das who wrote *Dukhini Bala* and *Maharana Pratap*, Kishori Lal Goswami who wrote *Mayanka Manjari* and *Natya Sambhav.* Hardly any one of these playwrights had Bharatendu's genius. They, however, endeavoured further to develop the nationalistic outlook and the reformist zeal of their master, though in a play like *Randhir Premmohini*, the love theme has received tender and memorable treatment. It was, however, a matter of surprise and disappointment that some time after Bharatendu's death this group of disciples gradually turned away from drama and most of its members took to wiring poetry or novels. This was partly the result of the strong attraction which the new language of poetry (Khari Boli) and the new form of the story-writing (novel) exercised over talented and promising writers. It is also true that these people ceased to have a direct contact with the theatre. But those among them who were able to retain this contact did not fly from its spell.

The amateur stage, for which disciples of Bharatendu continued to write, was one of the lasting contributions of Bharatendu. It arose out of a reaction against the commercial Parsi theatre. This Parsi theatre was a sense a continuation of the courtly experiment of Oudh—*Inder Sabha*, the script of which was written by Amanat and which was staged under the personal direction and patronage of the last Nawab of Oudh. Though superficially the production of *Inder Sabha* carried the impress of the Urdu romantic lyric, structurally as well as in environmental efforts, it followed the 19th century European Opera of an undistinguished variety. The Parsi theatre, in which romantic lyricism debased into meaningless verse-recitation, tried to ape the spectacular from the early 19th century Western theatre, without in any way approaching the broad human plane of the contemporary Western drama. Round about 1870, Pestonji Framji started the Original Theatrical Company; in 1877 Khurshidjee Balliwala opened the Victoria Theatrical Company in Delhi and even took his troupe once to Britain. A contemporary enterprise was the Alfred Theatrical Company of

Kesavji Khatau, which for a long time held the field. These early ventures were followed by such commercial successes as New Alfred Company, Old Parsi Theatrical Company, Alexandra Company, Corinthian Company etc., which held their sway in Calcutta, Bombay and the principal cities of North India right upto 1930, and of which one of the few survivors is the Minerva Theatrical Company of Calcutta. Perhaps, the phenomenal success of this superficially impressive theatre can be attributed to the fact that its influence extended to regions where for centuries people had not known the theatre and where these troupes reawakened a subdued but essentially irrepressible passion for the stage. This view is confirmed by the fact that the Parsi theatre made hardly any headway in Mithila, Orissa and Assam, where there was more or less a continuous tradition of the Vaishnava theatre. However, it will not do to belittle the contribution made by the Parsi theatre to the development of the Hindi drama, for not all its glitter was tinsel. The easy naturalistic flow of its comic interludes has not been rivalled by any subsequent comedy in Hindi. Most of the songs of the Parsi theatre were based on classical raginis. Above all, it was the first really professional theatre of modern India and its disappearance as a result of the onslaught of the cinema cannot but cause regret to the lovers of the stage.

Bharatendu was struck by the enormous thirst of the people for drama, and he tried to satisfy it through a more aesthetically adequate medium in the form of the amateur stage. No amateur stage can ordinarily compete with the commercial stage. Had Bharatendu been able to get financial backing for this type of theatre at that time, the history of the Hindi stage would probably have been very different. As it was, he had to fall back upon the amateur pattern, of which the significance lay in its being a kind of laboratory for the better type of drama. It is these laboratories that have enabled the Hindi drama to survive and to make a new beginning in recent times. After Bharatendu, one of the first theatre groups was started in Kanpur in 1888. This was followed by the establishment in 1898 of Shri Ramlila Natak Mandali and in 1908 of the Hindi Natya Samiti in Allahabad, both results of the enthusiasm of Pandit Madhava Shukla and his friends. Some important plays, *Siya Swayamvar*, *Maharana Pratap*, and *Mahabharat Purvardha* were for the first time presented by these amateur troupes. In Banaras, two theatre groups, Bharatendu Natak Mandali and Kashi Nagri Natak Mandali, were started in 1909 at the initiative of Brijchand of Bharatendu's family and other people, and they put up several plays not only of Bharatendu but of subsequent writers also. Pandit Madhava Shukla was responsible for another noteworthy institution, the Hindi Natya Parishad of Calcutta, which continued to be a lonesome citadel of taste in the midst of the commercialized entertainment of the Parsi theatrical companies of Calcutta. Practically, all these amateur groups were inspired by the examples and followed the tradition of Bharatendu. Stage decorations and curtains could not escape the influence of the bizarre colour fantasy of the Parsi theatre, but in these plays the emphasis was not so much on putting up spectacular scenes full of miracles, but on chaste expression, poetically satisfying songs, and noble though somewhat sentimental idealism. The cast often used to include important men of high society. Somehow, the character of this amateur stage began

to be regarded as an activity meant for students. This was a pity, for it led to drama being considered as an activity of not much social significance. However, it also meant that under the influence of the universities and colleges, the amateur stage turned more and more towards experimentation and the intellectual approach.

Between 1900 and 1925, when both the Parsi theatre and the amateur theatre co-existed, two types of playwrights dominated the Hindi drama. Agha Hashra Kashmiri, Pandit Radhe Shyam Pathak, Narayan Prasad 'Betab', Tulsi Dutt 'Shaida' and Hari Krishna 'Jauhar' were some of the names that every theatregoer of those days knew. Writing not so much for publication but mainly at the behest of the proprietors of the Parsi theatres, these men used the commonly understood Hindustani language and tried to enliven the slow pace of the plot by throwing in a literal sprinkle of couplets, passionate dialogue, miraculous scenes and parallel though unrelated comic scenes bristling with tomfooleries. Of the numerous plays thrown up by this group, very few have survived the test of time and probably the most noteworthy among them was *Veer Abhimanyu* of Radhe Shyam Pathak, having some remote though clearly perceptible echoes of the genuine idealism of Bharatendu. The other stream of writers of this period kept to the Bharatendu tradition. Badrinath Bhatt, who wrote *Kuruvanadahan* and *Chungi ki Umedwari*, was the best known among these playwrights. Pandit Madhav Shukla was the real leader of the group although he wrote only *Siya Swayamvar* and *Mahabharat Purvardha*. Of the others, mention may be made of Anand Prasad Khatri, Jamuna Prasad Mehra, Durga Prasad Gupta, Haridas Namik and Pandit Makhanlal Chaturvedi. The last one wrote *Krishnaarjun Yuddha* which can perhaps be regarded as the best single play of this period.

Against this rather faint and unimpressive historical background, Jayashankar Prasad appeared as a meteor, brilliant but seemingly short-lived. Did he at all belong to the tradition, howsoever attenuated, of the Hindi stage and drama? That he ignored his contemporary stage is clear enough. Nor did he find the dramatic technique of the playwrights of the Bharatendu period acceptable. The sharp departure will be clear on the comparison of Prasad's *Chandragupta* and Bharatendu's *Mudrarakshas*. But beneath this unlikeness is a deeper affinity. Prasad seized upon three noble conceptions inherited from the generation of Bharatendu—patriotism, love of ideals and faith in the ultimate worthwhileness of existence. These concepts expressed in a rather plain and obvious form by Bharatendu and his followers were endowed with a finer and subtle expression by Prasad. This suggestive expression was an outstanding feature of what is known as the *chhayavadi* trend of Hindi poetry, and in Prasad's plays this technique was responsible for traditionally comprehended emotions and ideals blossoming with a new fragrance and a new rhythm. Nevertheless, a sharp departure from tradition is the dominant quality of Prasad's writings and at the root of that boldness and freedom lies the attitude and indifference towards the stage. Firstly, he uses an idiom and a phrase so elevated and shrouded with such virtuosity and seriousness as to make Harishchandra's Hindi appear pedestrian. Secondly, his characters show an awareness of inner conflict unknown to the one-sided heroes or villains of the earlier drama.

Thirdly, quite often his characters, while in the midst of an immediate situation, drift into an analysis of certain ultimate principles of human life and thus pass on irresistibly from momentary anxieties to profound thought; this doubtlessly was a new experience for Hindi drama. As a result of these three novel experiments, Prasad became the founder of a new technique depending primarily upon the building up of an all-enveloping atmosphere. One might almost perceive in this attempt to build up a strong, vigorous and dynamic atmosphere, the endeavour to make up for the absence of a suitable stage. Perhaps, Prasad imagined that where the playwright can stimulate the readers' imagination to the creation of a palpable environment, the absence of the stage would not be felt.

Between 1920 and 1933, Prasad wrote practically most of his outstanding plays like *Ajatashatru* (1922), *Skandagupta* (1928), *Chandragupta* (1931), *Dhruvaswamini* (1933). Did these plays influence subsequent dramatic writing to any extent? Contemporary writers and even those who immediately followed Jayashankar Prasad show less pronounced influence than playwrights of 1943 onwards. Strangely enough, even a realist like Lakshmi Narayan Mishra, who led a reaction against Prasad's technique during his life time, was in his *Vatsaraj*, published in 1954, turned to Prasad's environmental technique and love of ancient times. Harikrishna 'Premi', Jagannath Prasad 'Milinda' and Govinda Vallabh Pant wrote several plays indirectly influenced by Jayashankar Prasad, though no less by the great Bengali writer Dwijendra Lal Roy. In Udaya Shankar Bhatt's *Vidrohini Amba, Sagar Vijaya, Matsyagandha* and *Vishwamitra*, the atmosphere of the mythological age has been effectively recreated; in *Adim Yuga,* he has been attracted by certain fundamental problems of mankind. Harikrishna 'Premi' has, in his plays *Swapnabhanga, Raksha Bandan, Shiva Sadana,* given idealistic and emotional glimpses into India's mediaeval history. Though Govind Vallabh Pant's *Varmala* and *Rajmukut* lack the profoundity of the other three-playwrights, his writings have been more successful on the stage, for he transmutes the inspiration received from Prasad into tangible stage form through the agency of his first-hand experience of the footlights and the greenroom. Since 1942-43, however, there has been a sudden harking back to Prasad's idealism and his environmental technique. To this stream of revival belong Ram Kumar Verma's *Charumitra, Dhruvatarika* and Benipuri's *Ambapali* and *Netradan*, Prithvinath Sharma's *Urmila*, Dr Kailash Nath Bhatnagar's *Chanakya-pratigya*, Kanchanlata Sabbarwal's *Amiya* and *Adityasen Gupta*, Sitaram Chaturvedi's *Senapati Pushyamitra* and several historical plays of Sadguru Saran Awasthi. Apart from these, several young authors have almost uncritically turned to this technique. This rehabilitation of Prasad is not clearly understandable. Perhaps, one reason is that in most universities, the only drama prescribed for the Hindi course are those of Jayashankar Prasad with the result that his is the technique and approach with which the average newcomer to Hindi play-writing is well acquainted.

However, as stated earlier, the reaction against Prasad had begun even before his school had struck roots. This reaction was the call of the age and the situation. Prasad made no effort to build up a stage; the struggling lights of the Parsi theatre succumbed at the mere

sight of the dazzling silver screen and thus the commercial theatre of Hindi collapsed almost at the touch of modernism. But a salutary result of its collapse was that the earlier films of New Theatres and Bombay Talkies proved the suitability for the stage of realistic scenes culled from day to day life. The amateur stage that had continued its halting existence since Bharatendu could not but learn a lesson from this experiment. The theatre groups of colleges came to realize that realistic presentation of life, naturalistic conversation and day to day experiences all could be brought within the ambit of the theatre. One other circumstance drove playwrights towards this realization. After the first wave of *chhayavad*, young writers turned from the poetry of English romantic literature, to the writings of Ibsen, Shaw, Chekhov, and even to contemporary dramatic literature. Thirdly, near about this time Indian nationalism became more and more analytical of social and economic problems, a tendency which in subsequent literature reappeared in the form of the progressive movement under the inspiration of communist doctrines. Fourthly, Freud's psychoanalysis and the modern outlook on sex transformed fundamentally the love theme in drama. Fifthly, like the short story in the field of fiction, the one-act play came to be in demand. The one-act technique is not unknown in the Sanskrit drama and in Hindi too, Bharatendu himself is credited with having written the first one-act play. But the present-day one-act play in Hindi is a straight derivation from Western literature. The amateur stage welcomed the one-act play with open arms because it called for fewer equipment and stage machinery .

As a result of these formative circumstances and tendencies, a new kind of play came into vogue round about 1930. The salient features of these plays were a naturalistic presentation of life, an analysis of the individual's inner difficulties lying at the root of social problems, and a contempt for superficial idealism. Perhaps, the first play in this stream was Kripanath Mishra's *Mani Goswami* published as early as 1929. This was followed by the challenging series of Lakshmi Narayan Mishra's plays *Sindoor ki Holi, Rakshas ka Mandir, Mukti ka Rahasya* and *Sannyasi*. There is nothing wrong in an artist giving a challenge to tradition. But this spirit of challenge seems to have also meant in his case a defiance of the needs of the stage. It was left to Ramkumar Verma and to Upendranath Ashk (the latter both in his one-act plays as well as in longer plays like *Qaid aur Uran*, *Chhota Beta* and *Adi Marg*) to have attempted and achieved a fair measure of synthesis between the drama of thought on the one hand, and the dynamic pace and emotional appeal of the stage, on the other. Ashk follows a technique which is clear-cut and well-planned and yet like a slice out of life, and like the fleeting moment of deep experience it is more suggestive than what one would suspect. Before society and the individual he holds a mirror that is without a blemish and that reflects the depths of human experience. In Seth Govinda Das's problem plays, there is a naive indifference to technical perfection as also to the stage; there is also a danger that some of his characters are becoming types. Vrindavan Lal Verma, who has a distinguished record as a writer of historical romances, has been somewhat indiscriminately prolific in his dramatic literature; it is, however, significant that the majority of his plays deal with contemporary themes and problems. Of the more recent playwrights in this stream,

mention may be made of Shambhu Dayal Saksena and Vimala Raina, both of whom have turned out to be surprisingly refreshing in their outlook and delightfully spontaneous in their technique. There is more action in their plays than in those of some of the better-known playwrights. It is an encouraging sign that story-writers of such eminence as Yashpal and Vishnu Prabhakar have turned to drama; their first attempts have been widely hailed by the Hindi reader.

In 1934, when the problem play was coming into its own in Hindi, Shri Sumitra Nandan Pant came out with his fantasy *Jyotsna*. It was an extraordinary experiment which cannot be placed under any definite category and of which the significance lies in its impressive and bold harmony of such diverse elements as a lyrical dramatic core (which can be traced back to Bharatendu and the early Vaishnava drama), a symbolic technique (reminiscent of the allegorical Sanskrit play *Prabodhchandrodaya*) and the intellectual modern outlook motivated by a strong desire to go into the roots of cultural experiences.

After 1935, the Hindi stage grew in two directions. On the one hand, the amateur stage originally initiated by Bharatendu established a successful and, let us hope, lasting connection with the literary drama through the medium of the one-act play; on the other hand, Prithviraj managed, in spite of serious difficulties and financial loss, to establish a new type of commercial theatre with the mission to elevate taste and rehabilitate the theatre. The emergence of the one-act play was of historical significance because it came to be written as a direct result of the demands of the amateur stage and in the re-building of the stage it has played a formative role. The mission of Prithviraj is a challenge to the Hindi playwrights who can transform this mission into a great movement. Prithviraj in *Pathan*, *Ahuti* and *Kalakar* has set forth a bold example which has, however, to be followed with caution since a rather gushing sentimentalism brings most of his plays dangerously close to melodrama.

The radio play is a new literary form which has indirectly helped the theatre by attracting several Hindi writers towards play-writing. Some features of the old Sanskrit drama are reappearing in a different form under the stress of the radio technique; the *vachak* and *vachika* seem to bear a close resemblance to Sutradhar. Again, the lyricism and music of the Vaishnava theatre seem to have reappeared in the radio play and thus there is an indication that we might be back in some respects to the Sanskrit and Vaishnava drama.

It is clear that the future cannot be forged by ignoring history and tradition altogether. Perhaps, out of the tradition of the poetic drama and the folk theatre may arise a new drama which more than anything else may be symbolic of the Indian theatre. Nevertheless, in a vast and varied country like ours, it is unnecessary and undesirable to expect a single pattern of the theatre or the drama. In another sense, however, unity is appearing. Under the stimulus of freedom, a single and undivided inspiration for the revival of the Indian theatre is making itself felt all over the country, and it is obvious that the Hindi theatre can be the most convenient vehicle for this inspiration.

Some Contemporary Problems

The contemporary scene in Hindi drama is like many things in national life today, full of

contradictions and yet vibrant with hopeful tidings. Several seemingly irreconcilable trends are simultaneously calling for attention and one wonders which of them would shape the destiny of the new drama. Had there been an uninterrupted stream of playwriting and staging in recent literary and cultural history, these contradictory trends would have been the usual echoes and eddies that any transitional phase throws up. But in our present situation, these are indicative of a distinct urge to build afresh. Consciously we may not be working out a five-year plan for drama but underlying much of individual efforts is a widely shared feeling to have a carefully thought-out and systematically executed programme for the development of the stage and of dramatic writing.

The first and the most inescapable fact is the almost complete absence of a professional urban theatre in Hindi today, barring the solitary enterprise of Shri Prithviraj Kapur. From the middle of the 19th century to the beginning of the thirties of the 20th century, a Hindi professional stage flourished in Bombay, Calcutta and in the itinerant troupes that entertained packed houses in towns all over northern India. "The evil that men do liveth after them; the good is oft interred with their bones", so said Mark Antony of Caesar (in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*), and so have most of us thought of this professional Hindi theatre, commonly known as the Parsi theatre. Though what killed the Parsi theatre was the shift of financiers' interest from the stage to the studio and of the female stage-stars to the screen, the rift between the professional stage and the literary drama is delaying the reappearance of a powerful theatre that can successfully compete with the film. The rift plagued the progress of Hindi drama right from the days of Bharatendu Harishchandra. But while the literary drama till the twenties was severely critical of the cheap trappings and vulgar horseplay of the professional theatre, it made full use of the techniques of the theatre and knew its audience. Madhava Shukla's *Mahabharat*, Badrinath Bhatt's *Kuruvan-dahan*, Radhakrishna Das's *Maharana Pratap* and Makhanlal Chaturvedi's *Krishnarjun Yuddha* were plays that soared over the layers of higher literature and yet had their feet on the ground. To them the names of Agha Hashra Kashmiri, Radhe Shyam Pathak, Narayan Prasad 'Betab' did not evoke contempt even though the two belonged to different schools.

The real rift occurred as part of the general process of the drifting away of Hindi literature from the expression and tastes of the common people. Jayashankar Prasad was the leader of this intellectual aristocracy. The language turned away from the popular idiom and while drama acquired an inner quality of depth and conflicts, it gradually ceased to be a thing of the stage. Had literature continued its link with popular expression and idiom, drama would have survived the onslaught of the film, as actually did happen in the West. In India, the film came at a time when the divorce between literary drama and the professional theatre had been complete, when Jayashankar Prasad was at the height of his powers and when the young university playwright was enraptured by the spirit and form of European drama. From this rarefied atmosphere, the literary playwright looked with contempt upon the gross merchandise of the script-writers of the professional theatre. This attitude still continues even though the professional theatre has disappeared. In fact, the suspicion and even

contempt have not remained confined to the professional theatre; any theatre which makes its own demands and asks for pruning and adjustments on the part of the playwright is treated with similar feelings. Not being used to such demands, the literary playwright has ceased to be flexible and is unwilling to compromise.

On the other hand, the confident or the hesitant architect of the new professional theatre in Hindi is sometimes not even aware of the existence of the literary Hindi drama. Shri Prithviraj has perhaps never given a chance to any literary play in his repertoire; he is so very certain of the unsuitability of such drama for the theatre that he is reluctant even to give it a trial. Meanwhile, playwriting goes on, and drama for reading, for text books, for universities and colleges continues to be written. In fact, the main output of Hindi drama during recent years has been in the manner of Jayashankar Prasad. Lakshmi Narain Mishra's *Vatsaraj* and *Dashashwamedh*, Hari Krishna Premi's *Shapath* and *Bappa Rawal*, Udaya Shankar Bhatta's *Sagar Vijaya*, Benipuri's *Ambapati* and *Netradan*, Sita Ram Chaturvedi's *Senapati Pushyamitra* and several historical plays of Vrindaban Lal Verma, Ram Kumar Verma and others represent a strong trend in literature but ineffective influence upon the stage. All these playwrights need to be brought nearer the professional theatre.

This, then, is the first problem: bringing together of the playwright and the professional theatre and in this process, the building up of a new professional stage. The steps needed for building up a professional theatre will be the same all over the country and need not be gone into here. But the peculiar problem of the Hindi theatre is that it does not belong to Hindi-speaking people only. For its growth it must attract workers from non-Hindi-speaking communities. The Parsi theatre which was a truly professional theatre in Hindi, was financed by the Parsi community and was built up by Muslims, Bengalis, Gujaratis and people from Maharashtra. The same is true of the Hindi film. If a national drama is to be born it will have to be a Hindi drama built up by people who do not speak Hindi. Also, if a professional theatre on these lines is to be revived, care will have to be taken to ensure a proper and healthy contact between the literary playwright and the producer.

The second important feature that strikes a reviewer of contemporary Hindi drama is the special role of the amateur theatre. Universities, colleges and a few clubs in cities put up performances two or three times a year, and thus keep the spirit of experimenting alive. The amateur theatre of the universities and colleges was mainly responsible for the popularity of the one-act play. The one-act play and the amateur stage go hand in hand together and the one-act play in Hindi is one of the most significant and finished forms of literary expression. This is because unlike the full-length drama in the tradition of Jayashankar Prasad, the one-act play arose in direct response to the needs of the amateur stage. Thus, we come across a strange phenomenon in Hindi: the full-length play has no roots in the stage and has increasingly got cut off from the theatre. The one-act play, which in its present form is a very recent development, has directly arisen out of the requirements of the stage. The one-act play in some respects is the principal dramatic form in modern Hindi, though obviously this is not a situation of which one can be very proud.

Leading among the one-act playwrights are Ram Kumar Verma, Upendranath Ashk, Bhagwati Charan Verma, Vishnu Prabhakar and Radha Krishna. One of the responsibilities of the amateur theatre is to compel these writers to turn to the full-length play. Unless this is done, the one-act play will get stereotyped and its limited scope will leave a sense of inadequacy. It is, therefore, encouraging to note that, in Delhi, some clubs have tried their hand at long social plays and staged some plays even before they were published. It is, thus, that plays like *Hum Hindustani, Zamana, Hamara Gaon, Godan* and a number of children's plays have seen the footlights and made a deep impression. The impact of such pays on the general scheme of playwriting in Hindi is still to be felt. However, a few full-length plays suitable for the amateur stage have recently been written by Udaya Shankar Bhatt (*Krantikari*), Bhagwati Charan Verma (*Rupaya Tumhen Kha Gaya*) and a host of plays of Upendra Nath Ashk, the most recent being *Anjo Didi.*

The amateur theatre must from the beginning keep an eye on the professional theatre. Some of the more experienced and devoted amateur groups should, as a result, think of converting themselves into professionals. Until this is done, much of their efforts and the training which they impart to their members would be unfulfilled. As a first measure, some amateur groups could invite professional actors or producers and performances with a mixed amateur and professional cast could be put up on the stage. The amateur theatre is to be not only a laboratory for the Hindi playwright but also a training ground for the Hindi actor.

The third factor in contemporary drama is the radio. Indeed, radio has come as a formative influence at a time when the one-act playwrights had scarcely settled down to their job. Consequently, the stronger force of the radio has shaped much of their writings even before their contribution to the stage could be assessed. The radio drama having passed through its tentative phase has now emerged as a harbinger of the revival of certain forgotten techniques of the Indian theatre. It may be hazardous to predict, but one can foresee the gradual replacement of the picture-frame stage by the open-air stage as a result of the freedom experienced by dramatists who have written for the radio. Again, it is perhaps partly under the influence of the radio that music is being rehabilitated in the Hindi drama, and what is more, the verse play is gaining popularity. Thus, after a relatively brief spell of the naturalistic style, of which the epitome were the plays of Upendra Nath Ashk, we seem to be going back to the poetic manner of the Sanskrit drama. This is a tendency which should not be looked upon with disdain. True greatness in drama can be secured only when the "lambent flame of the poetic imagination is allowed to caress and sear and in searing to transmute the forms of the actual."*

The fourth, and to my mind a challenging factor, is the absence of a healthy contact between folk drama and the professional and literary dramas. Never before in the history of Hindi drama was there such a clear divorce between the folk forms and the urban and

* Allardyce Nicoll: *World Drama*

literary forms. I shall not go into the details of the types of folk drama that has still survived in the countryside. The Jatra of East Bihar and Bidesia of West Bihar, the Swang of Haryana, the Ras of Braj, the Nautanki of U.P. and Punjab, the Khayal of Rajasthan: these are some of the popular types of folk plays that are in great danger of being swamped by the cinema which is making incursions into the countryside. If these folk plays do not receive the attention of our writers and producers, it would be difficult to retain the vitality of Hindi drama as a whole. It was in Ireland during the 1890s that folk drama inspired some of the most talented playwrights of great Britain; Synge, Lady Gregory and Yeats drank deep of the invigorating springs of the soil and thus emerged one of the most fruitful movements of the British theatre. This is just the time when a similar movement could be launched if our playwrights and producers could turn to the soil.

What is the spirit and purpose that animate the drama now being written in Hindi? This is the fifth and in some respects the most important aspects of the contemporary scene. If drama rests only on plots and characters, it fails to achieve greatness; only when those elements are illuminated by what Nicoll calls an 'informing purpose', can the true heights be reached. The dominant theme of most of what are called social plays is either a conflict of the individual with the social order or criticism of certain evils in society, inequality, greed, poverty and antiquated social customs. Plays with a historical or mythological setting, of which the number is perhaps larger than that of social and political plays, seek to exalt the ideals of equality, the rights of the common people and the willingness of the hero to place the needs of the neglected sections of society above his own. We see, thus, that while the social play is preoccupied with the frustration of the individual and bitter criticism of society, the historical play emphasizes the inspiring principles of liberated and constructive India. The anomaly is explained by the complexity of the social and political scene in our country. Today, inequality, corruption and outworn social taboos do seem to stalk across the foreground while the birth of the new ideals embodied in our Constitution seem like a rosy but ungrasped streak on the eastern horizon. Plays that seek to mirror the actual experience of the urban middle class, from which most of our playwrights are drawn, find abundant material for conflict and action in the ugliness of some social and political trends and happenings. For exalting the ideals and building the society after his heart's desire, the playwright turns to the fundamental principles behind our Constitution and Republic, which being still distant of achievement, came handy for deepening the colours and animating the figures of ancient or mythological India.

In both these trends, one perceives the inability of the average contemporary playwright to attune himself to the fast-moving tempo of a society in the throes of a revolution, the like of which history has not witnessed. It is a painful process, and much mud and scum have come up on the surface. The ugliness is there but of a very different sort from that to which our frustrated middle class writer is used. The tyrannical zamindar, the heartless mahajan, the callous aristocrat—how long will these stock characters (and those that are different in form but identical in attitudes) continue to cloud the footlights? Villains there are and in

plenty: the prosperous cynic in sharkskin suit, who puffs away with his curly smoke all the mighty effort of the sweating millions, the upstart man of success who preaches and practises the philosophy of tact, the inveterate philanderer in high society, the professional office-bearer of village clubs and a host of others. They are symbols of the inevitable evil that a society in gruelling transition throws up and they—and not the worn-out villains of a bygone age—should be the dramatist's target.

But preoccupation with one kind of symptom is not enough; nor will a little venom here, a little bile there, bring those deeper stirrings and that sense of peaceful exhaustion, which are the reward of the playwright's painstaking workmanship. The imposition of the current ideals on historical themes, which many Hindi playwrights—including the author of this paper—have attempted is not enough. There is something juvenile in this simplified presentation of the ideals of equality, the dignity of common man and the identification of the hero with the populace in the setting of ancient Indian society. It is a kind of wishful thinking that was an effective stimulus during the period of our national struggle. Today it is unreal.

Today the Hindi playwright can be more plausible only if he ceases to be introvert. Much of the preoccupation with the worn-out villains on the one hand, and simplified ideals on the other, is the projection of the frustration and wishful thinking of the introvert personality. These fetters have to be discarded gradually in response to the call of a dynamic society, and excessive inwardness has to yield place to outward experience of a widening horizon. In other words, Hindi drama has to be the imaginative reflection of wider experience. The playwright must expose himself to the multiple experience of a society in its re-making. The high endeavour which even the worst cynic cannot deny as a dominant characteristic of our present-day national life is to be observed in its various aspects, in the factory and in the office, in the field and at the dams, in dance and music, in the failures and the successes of small and big organizations. Around this high endeavour should be seen both the halo and the darkness, but its buoyant rhythm, its unmistakable pace should not be missed.

Above all, drama must be conceived and executed as the imaginative reflection of experience. A factual and superficially authentic depiction of actuality will be reduced to a series of monotonous encomia. The more Hindi drama turns to the genuine experience of our dynamic life, the more it should use the technique of imaginative colouring and poetic expression.

DISCUSSION

Mulk Raj Anand: Shri J.C. Mathur has presented the whole history of Hindi drama and theatre and their problems with tremendous enthusiasm. And he has inspired me. It is not impossible for a country with 375 million people to support one travelling theatrical company. I do not know if, with the State taking interest in the matter, this cannot be done in the next

few months. I do not think either that the next Five Year Plan, brilliant as it is, can make much progress if the minds and hearts of the people are not cleansed by the drama of the impurities which are existing there for generations and for removing which no attempt was ever made. I would not like to give my opinion on the radio play. I do admit that radio play is a very important element with us today. As a writer having to earn a living by the pen, I have to think of the emoluments too. I have written thirty-one books. They are translated into many languages and yet I cannot have enough bread and butter to survive for one month in India. It is mainly from my books translated into Bengali language that I am enabled to make a living in this country. The radio has been a good patron of arts. It is a good medium for our dramas. It is good that the necessary sort of workshop, which Shri Mathur referred to, already exists. But my point is, why should not they pay the authors a little more? It is extraordinary that in London, they pay me Rs 75 and Rs 50 for their programmes—I have already got that amount twice over. And what I say is, why cannot the All India Radio pay the same writer—who is not after all as idiotic as some people imagine—Rs 75? In this context I may mention that a foreign writer is paid Rs 35 while an Indian is paid Rs 25. Why this distinction? And then, Shri Mathur has also put forward a suggestion for writing Hindi plays by non-Hindi writers. This way people would be diverting themselves from the realities of the situation. They will become people belonging to pantomimes. Such a thing does not exist in Europe because the plays there are highly and really realistic. Thirdly, I fail to understand why certain theatres which played Hindi and Urdu plays should be called Parsi theatre? There was nothing particularly Parsi about it.

J.C. Mathur: Parsi is only a nomenclature. Certain names have a tendency to cling without being accurate. I have myself said that they were only financed by the Parsis but were actually built by non-Parsis and that not all its culture was tinsel. The easy and naturalistic flow of its comic interludes has not been rivalled by any subsequent comedy in Hindi. Most of the songs of the Parsi theatre were based on classical raginis. And, above all, it was the first professional theatre of modern India, and its disappearance as a result of the onslaught of films cannot but cause regret to the lovers of the stage.

Mulk Raj Anand: I think there will be no controversy if instead of calling it Parsi theatre you call it commercial theatre.

J.C. Mathur: It does not matter the least what I call it. It is known all over India as Parsi theatre. And now I think I should clarify what I exactly meant by my suggestion about non-Hindi writers' contribution to the Hindi theatre. Perhaps I failed to make my point clear. I do not expect writers from other languages to write in Hindi. But I expect and in my mind I have no doubt that it is bound to happen—that the entire Hindi theatre will be built by the non-Hindi people. I say 'entirely' just as today the Hindi film has been built by the non-Hindi people—films which are not only known in this country but all over the world. These are not the films of the Hindi-speaking people. Mind you, we do not have, for various reasons, the necessary finances available here in this region. So people go to Bombay and Calcutta and they get the non-Hindi financiers to invest money into the trade. The same would be true of building up chains of Hindi theatres. Secondly, no woman comes forward in northern India to appear on the stage, except perhaps in Delhi and parts of Punjab. But there is no

such difficulty in other parts of the country. Therefore, for these two reasons only, namely the finance and the lack of acting talent, particularly female talent, I say that the Hindi stage can be built, and will be built, by the non-Hindi people. And now I come to the point raised by Dr Anand regarding emoluments for the writers of radio plays. Previously I was also writing for the radio, now I do not. When I had been writing I used to get the grand fee of Rs 25 only for each of my plays. I agree the emoluments paid to the radio writer is too little to make writers interested in it.

Mama Warerkar: I beg to bring to the notice of this Seminar that the Marathi professional companies were producing Hindi plays in the beginning of the twentieth century. The Swadeshi Natak Mandali, for instance, produced many a Hindi play. There was another company which was also producing them. At that time they were called Urdu plays. For years together, this company had been touring all over India. The plays they produced were, of course, the gifts of Hindi authors, but the actors and actresses were from Maharashtra. These plays were very popular in Bombay as long ago as the thirties. And as a Maharashtrian, I am proud to say that Maharashtra has done a lot for the Hindi stage.

V. Raghavan: I think we can wind up this discussion by recommending that by arranging competition and giving rewards, these companies should be encouraged. Subsidies to the professional troupes should be given with the object of encouraging the troupes to stage not only traditional plays but also plays which the speaker has mentioned—intellectual plays. If you make that suggestion, this discussion will be complete. About other points, such as, translations and certain other things, I think we cannot make any recommendations.

J.C. Mathur: What I would like to see is that professional theatres of whatever kind, located in different parts of India, produce plays in their own languages, and if they find it feasible, also produce them in Hindi.

Mulk Raj Anand: I would like to suggest that all classics of the Indian theatre be rendered into the Hindi language by the Sahitya Akademi or the National Book Trust.

Sachin Sengupta: The Sahitya Akademi, Dr Mulk Raj ought to know, has already started work in this direction. For the present, it has selected two dramas from each regional language for translation into all the Indian languages.

J.C. Mathur: I am also in a position to announce here that it has been decided that at present one play from each language is to be simultaneously translated into the various regional languages and simultaneously broadcast from all the radio stations in India on alternate Saturdays. This will be done in the National Programme of Drama. We are calling for the best plays. And I am going to write to friends to suggest which they consider to be the best plays.