

The Professional Theatre in the Western Region

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The professional theatre of the western region of India has for long been a matter of pride and prestige for its people. It has, by now, become more or less a matter of history, but the nostalgic memories of its glorious past still linger in the minds of its audiences, and some vestiges of its achievements can still be witnessed in the drama festivals of today. Despite all this, however, the sad fact remains that in Bombay or, for that matter, in the whole of western region, there is not a single permanent play-house where a dramatic performance could be given in the professional style.

The first permanent theatre in this region was built in Bombay in the year 1770. European amateurs performed English plays there, generally provided fare consisting of musical comedies, farces and occasional productions of Shakespearean and other serious plays. It was not, however, until the year 1842 that a private theatre, 'available for European and Indian productions at a fixed daily rent' was built in Bombay by one of its distinguished citizens, Jagannath Shankar Shet. This theatre was known as the Badshahi or the Grant Road Theatre. It was in this theatre that Shri Vishnu Pant Bhawe, the accredited founder of the Marathi Theatre, gave performances of his plays while on tour to Bombay in the year 1853.

The Parsis who are very adept in imitating Western models were inspired by the example of Shri Bhawe and they began to hire or build theatres, and organize companies for producing plays on commercial lines. The Parsis are the true pioneers of the Bombay theatrical productions, but in their enthusiasm for the spectacular and the popular, they often disregarded all the canons of art and indulged in gross anachronisms.

The Gujarati theatre proper arose of the discontent with the Parsi high-handedness in the management of the new theatre. It was in 1878 that the first Gujarati Company was founded as a business concern and it was soon followed by the Bombay Gujarati of Daya Shankar, the Marvi of Vaghji Oza and the Deshi Company of Dahyabhai Dholsha. The Gujaratis are essentially a commercial community and they automatically followed the example of the Parsis in their methods of production and choice of plays for attracting crowds to their performances.

The Kannada theatre had not the peculiar advantage of securing the patronage of an intelligent mercantile community, as was the case with the Parsi or the Gujarati theatre, or to have amongst it pioneers English-educated people of social eminence, as was the case with the Parsi and the Marathi Theatres. The Kannada theatre has not been able to keep pace with other theatres of western India in its development or in its popularity with the intellec-

tual section of the public. Popularity of mythological themes, spectacular scenic representations and a plethora of songs were the predominant features of the Kannada professional theatre throughout its existence.

All these theatres of western India are mainly inspired and influenced by the example of the British theatre of the Victorian era, but in some respects they have also a claim to have their roots in indigenous traditions of some sort or the other. The modern Kannada professional theatre, for example, has its origin in the Bhagvatam-Yakshagana play, which are the most ancient folk plays of southern India, while the Marathi theatre has the background of Lalita, the most popular type of mediaeval play of that region. The Lalita performances were given in the temple halls or pandals and the Brahmin community generally performed those plays. The Tamasha of Maharashtra and the Bhavai plays of Gujarat were, however, enacted by the lower classes of the society and were immensely popular with the general public.

They used to be extempore and occasional in their story material and dialogues. Besides the standard themes from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Puranas, these folk plays gradually developed a secular element based on realistic farce and contemporary satire. These performances were given in open spaces, in streets and such other public places like the courtyards of temples. No stage was required and no scenery. Either a curtain of some sort or a few torches and a chorus of two or three men with crude musical instrument were all the paraphernalia required for these performances. The performers toured from village to village and were patronized by the masses. The performances did not represent an integrated plot or story but consisted of a series of unconnected episodes with one, two or three characters in each scene. The treatment generally used to be coarse and obscene but the quality of acting superbly realistic, especially in contemporary satires. The early pioneers of Gujarati and Marathi theatres like Shri Bhawe and Mahipatram Neelkanth tried to raise the level of these popular performances, but the modern professional theatre and these mediaeval forms of entertainment soon parted company and began catering independently to their own different classes of audiences.

This parting of ways, however, was not brought about by the volition of the pioneers of the professional theatre but by the influence of the experiments and efforts of the non-professional lovers of drama, who made their acquaintance with the richest dramatic literature of the West during their college education, and had the opportunity of witnessing the performances of English plays by English actors. Inspired by the true spirit of renaissance, they studied Shakespeare's plays and translated them in their own regional languages. These translations, and sometimes even the original plays, were enacted by them in their colleges. There were also others, who had a more patriotic bend of mind and they studied and translated plays from classical Sanskrit and some of them were even performed in the colleges. The European professors of those days took keen interest in such activities of their pupils and encouraged and guided them in every way they could. The Kalidasa Elphinstone Society of Bombay staged the English version of *Shakuntala* in Bombay,

while *Julius Caesar* was performed in Poona by the university students. The students of Deccan College, Poona, gave a performance of *Venisamhar* of Bhatta Narayan in Sanskrit, in which Shri Vishnu Shastri Chiplunkar, the father of the modern Marathi literature, is reported to have played the role of Yudhishthir with his father sitting in the audience.

The first Marathi writer of an original historical and also a romantic play is Shri V.J. Keertane. His *Thorle Madhavrao* was published in 1861, and his *Jaypal* in 1865. *Manorama*, the first social play in Marathi was written in 1871 by Shri M.B. Chitale and apart from its vulgarity, the play can still be considered a very successful attempt for its construction of the plot, raciness of dialogue and treatment of the theme.

A number of Shakespearean plays like *Othello*, *Julius Caesar*, *The Tempest*, *A Comedy of Errors*, *Cymbeline*, *Taming of the Shrew*, *Hamlet*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *The Winter's Tale*, *All's Well that Ends Well* and *King Lear* were translated in Marathi between 1860 and 1880, and most of them were performed on the stage by professional or amateur players. As these plays had no songs in them, their performances were styled 'bookish' by their audiences to distinguish them from the more popular sangeet-plays of the day. These translations and their performances helped refine the taste of the audiences and ultimately ushered in a new era in the history of professional theatre of Maharashtra.

The same thing happened in Gujarat. Ranchhodhbhai Udayram, the pioneer dramatist of Gujarat, disgusted with the low farcical and vulgar devices of the Bhavai plays, translated some Sanskrit classics for the stage and wrote his most popular mythological play, *Harishchandra*.

The Parsis of Bombay, although originally inspired by Shri Bhawe's Marathi plays in the city, did not confine themselves to his style and method of production. Dadabhai Toothi, K. Khatan, K. Kabraji, K. Baliwala were among the most outstanding pioneers of the Bombay Theatre. Most of them were well educated in English and some of the actors had even visited England to study the theatrical conditions there.

As regards the Kannada theatre, its mediaeval entertainment of the Yakshagana underwent a rapid change after the visit of the Marathi players. Translations of Sanskrit classics and Shakespearean adaptations were staged with success. The Rajah of Mysore himself was deeply interested in the new dramatic movement and encouraged it actively. The Shakespearean tragedy called *Rudranatak* enjoyed greater popularity on the Kannada stage than comedies and romances.

The period of forty years between 1880 and 1920 is the brightest epoch in the history of the professional theatre of the western region of India. In Maharashtra, it can be said to have begun with the birth of the Kirloskar Natak Mandali. Shri Anna Sahib Kirloskar is the pioneer of the sangeet-play on the Marathi stage. He translated *Shakuntala* from Sanskrit and wrote *Soubhadra* and *Ramarajyaviyog* for his company. He completely broke away from the style of Shri Bhawe and introduced an altogether new style of singing and a totally different form of play on the Marathi stage. This form was an admixture of the Sanskrit drama and the Shakespearean theatre. Shri G.B. Deval, who professed to be a disciple of

Shri Anna Sahib Kirloskar, adapted *Mrichchhakatikam* of Shudrak and *Kadambri* of Banabhatta under the title *Shapa-sam-bharama*, and wrote his one and only social play, *Sharada*, for this Company. *Sharada* is a literary masterpiece in Marathi and its popularity with the audiences of Maharashtra has suffered no change even to this day. The most outstanding personality from this company, after Kirloskar and Deval, was Bhanrao Kolhatkar. His memory both as an actor of note and a singer of exceptional ability is still cherished most affectionately and appreciatively by the lovers of theatre in Maharashtra.

The sangeet-theatre of Maharashtra has passed through several vicissitudes of styles and schools but, on the whole, it has generally maintained a constantly high standard of Indian classical music, unspoiled by spurious European imitations. The greatest blemish of its production, however, is the excessive love of songs and their constant repetitions. In the midst of a serious scene, the action suddenly stops and the other characters lose all interest in the performance while the favourites keep on charming the audiences as in a musical hall. With the result that some of these favourite song birds, with mediocre or indifferent talents of acting, have come to be recorded as the great exponents of the thespian art and the composers of tunes and the accompanists on the musical instruments have gained more importance than actors and authors of plays.

The tradition of plays in prose is a characteristic peculiar to the Marathi theatre. From 1882-83 till his death in 1922, Shri Ganpatrao Joshi was the greatest Shakespearean actor in India. He interpreted *Hamlet* as a 'tragedy of thought'. An English I.C.S. had said that, "to him it was a revelation that the drama art of India has attained such a high pitch as that displayed by the Shahu Company. Ganpatrao's rendering of the great characters of Shakespeare is beyond all praise. He is a finished actor of the highest quality and of marvellous talent." Many other Europeans have expressed similar views about Ganpatrao and his partner Balabhan Jog. Ganpatrao was superb as *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth* and *Petruchio* in the *Taming of the Shrew*, while Balwantrao was par excellence in his role of Lady Macbeth, Iago, and Katherine in the *Taming of the Shrew*.

The Maharashtra Natak Mandali, established in the year 1904-5, is another important institution which has rendered signal service in raising the standard of production of Marathi plays, and secured a place of respect in the society for the actor. The Maharashtra Natak Mandali had for its motto Lowell's famous line, 'Not failure but low aim is crime', and the institution remained true to its implications throughout its life. Shri Ganpatrao Bhagwat was the most dominant personality of this company and he is the only other actor from the Marathi stage, whose name could be mentioned in the same breath with that of Ganpatrao Joshi.

The highest achievement of the Maharashtra Natak Mandali was its discovery of Shri K.P. Khadilkar as a dramatist. His first play *Kanchan Gadchi Mohana* was staged by the Sahu Nagarwasi Natak Mandali but was an utter failure. The Maharashtra Natak Mandali, however, revived it with a thumping success and Shri Khadilkar's reputation as a dramatist of the first order was firmly established. He wrote about half a dozen plays for the Maharashtra

Natak Mandali and each proved more powerful and popular than its predecessor. His play *Keechakavadha*, which was supposed to satirise Lord Curzon and his Government, was proscribed by the British Government for a number of years. Shri Ganpatrao Bhagwat played Keechaka with such success that his interpretation of the character has given him a place of honour amongst the immortals of the Marathi stage.

Rama Ganesh Gadkari and Wasudeo Shastri Khave were the two other dramatists who have written social and historical plays for the Maharashtra Natak Mandali and a number of others have followed their example.

In addition to the tragedies and comedies of Shakespeare, several other plays of European and English dramatists have been staged on the Marathi stage. Victor Hugo's *Herhani*, Schiller's *Robbers*, Sheridan's *Pizzaro* and *The Rivals*, Bulwar Lytton's *Rebecca*, Molier's *Tartuffe*, the *Mock Doctor*, *Citizen Turned Gentleman*, the *Miser*, the *Forced Marriage* and Addison's *Cato* are some of them. Most of these were presented by the Shahu Nagarwasi or the Maharashtra Natak Mandali along with several other original ones written on their models.

Unlike the other theatres of the western region, the Marathi theatre has always treated its dramatists with proper respect and realized the dignity of plays as literature. No liberty was ever taken with their texts and no extra commercial stuff or farcical songs were thrust in, in the manner of Urdu companies. The national movement received tremendous help from the Marathi theatre for creating awareness among the play-goers and the cause of social reform also derived similar benefits, though not to the same extent. The Marathi theatre has never maintained that drama was merely a thing of thrills and laughter and its dramatists have endeavoured to aim at appealing both to spectators in the theatre and the reading public outside it.

The highly popular Gujarati-Urdu stage, however, has always had an altogether different attitude towards its playwrights and their plays and the same is also true of the Kannada theatre. These theatres scrupulously guarded their manuscripts and they never allowed them to be published for readers. The proprietors of the theatrical companies engaged kavis (poets) to write plays to order. The kavi had to add, alter or cut scenes and compose songs to suit given situations. Both the kavi and the proprietor kept a constant watch on the changing fashions and suited their fare to those changes.

Adaptations of Shakespearean tragedies and comedies as well as those of several other European and English plays were as popular on the Gujarati-Urdu stage as they were on the Marathi stage. The Urdu kavi, however, often went to the absurd length of confining roaring farce to certain scenes of an adaptation, reserving the pathetic extravagance to others, and frequently violating the decencies of the stage without any compunction. Many a times, they were converted into operatic version on account of the traditional love of music and songs.

Even more than songs, the use of gorgeous scenery and clever manipulation of machinery appealed to the Urdu play-goers. The interest of an adaptation often centred more on brilliant spectacles, on striking revue effects, on pageantry and costumes than on the play

itself. The greatest emphasis was usually laid on the sentimental side of the altered version, while intellectuality was generally neglected and the stock trick of the trade like horror, suspense, surprise, disguise and mistaken identity were exploited to their utmost. The chief fault of the Gujarati-Urdu stage was the artificially sharp division between the comic and tragic scenes and figures, both being endowed with certain stock qualities. Virtue or vice was so grossly exaggerated that the characters became mere puppets. Vulgarly and obscenity were the besetting sins of the farcical interlude in serious plays.

The Urdu stage of Bombay was the creation of the Parsis and to them also belongs the credit of introducing women on the Bombay stage; Gohar and Munnibai were the two most celebrated actresses of their day. As early as 1885, the Parsi actor-playwright K.M. Baliwala visited England with his company for the Indian and Colonial Exhibition. He had the honour of playing before Queen Victoria and Edward VII.

The Parsi companies of Bombay employed the medium of Hindi-Urdu and were therefore able to travel to all parts of the country. Some of the Marathi companies, like the Kirloskar, the Natya Kala Pravartak and the Balwant also tried to imitate their example but their attempt does not seem to have met with success. The Parsis have a talent for histrionic and are very resourceful in stagecraft. What they lacked in the literary qualities of the play, they made good by providing varied action and rapid movement along with marvellous scenic effects.

The earlier European companies in India devoted more attention to the inferior species of drama such as musical comedies and pantomimes for purpose of pure enjoyment than to high operas or great tragedies. The Parsis having a passion for the imitation of Western models, most of the elements of the musical comedy and the pantomime got a firm hold of the Parsi-Gujarati theatre and crushed out the very essence of higher drama by the rigmale of transformation scenes, dazzling costumes and superabundance of songs, dances and ballets, which dominated the minds of the play-goers and producers alike.

The Kannada theatre of this period was mostly influenced by Urdu, Marathi and Telugu theatres. It followed the kavi system of the Parsi-Urdu stage for concocting the material to be presented on the stage. It was mainly Puranic legends and adaptations of Shakespearean plays. Some of the Marathi plays also were translated in Kannada, the most notable earliest example being that of *Sharada* by Shri Deval, which was presented by Waman Rao Master's Company under the title *Indira*. In 1889, Shri Anand Rao translated *Romeo and Juliet* under the title *Ramavarma and Leelavati* and six years later Asthana Vidwan Bassappa Shastri and Shri Subba Rao published their translation of *Othello* under the name *Shursencharita*. Shri Chama Rajendra Dramatic Company used to present *Ramavarma and Leelavati* as well as *Shursencharita* on the stage.

The adaptations of Shakespeare and the classical Sanskrit plays were followed by original Kannada plays such as *Nirupama* by Shri Vardachar Echchamma Nayak, *Visham Vivah* by Shri Garud Sadashiv Rao and *Sathi Samyukta* by Shri Bhimrao. These plays were very popular on the Kannada stage, and Waman Rao Master's Vyankob Company, Shri Gubbi Veeranna's Gubbi Natak Mandali, Shri Garud Sadashiv Rao's Konnur Company,

Shri Vardachar's Ratnavati Natak Mandali were some of the most influential and popular professional companies of the Kannada theatre. Some of the actors that are reverentially remembered by the Kannada audiences are Mr Pir, Giriraj, Wasudeo Rao, H.L.N. Sinha, Nagendra Rao and Kothirappa. Mr Pir and Sinha's roles of Shajahan and Dara in Shri B. Puttuswamayya's translation of the Bengali play *Shajahan* by Shri Dwijendra Lal Roy are considered as the most ideal on the Kannada stage. Until very recently, men were playing the roles of women on the Kannada stage. Shri Nagendra Rao and Shri Sthanam Narasimh Rao were considered very talented in their interpretations of women's characters. Women, however, have now appeared on the Kannada stage and Shrimati Inati Sundaramma and Shrimati M.V. Rajama may be cited as the finest examples.

The theatre of western India reached the peak of its professional glory by about 1920. So far it had no rival in the field of entertainment business. The advent of cinema, however, challenged this monopoly and made the nabobs of the theatre restless in their minds. Many of them fondly hoped that the craze of their audiences for the new fangled entertainment of cinema would, in due course, die a natural death and their own profession would once again be restored to its former popularity. In their own period of popularity, they had, however, never cared to pay any attention to the growing discontent of their audiences with the ways and means of running their business and managing their productions. Ignorance and obstinacy had made them incapable of appreciating the nature of changes that were taking place around them and to remedy their own drawbacks in time.

The playwrights of the theatre were, however, more alive to the spirit of the changing times and an altogether fresh and modern note was heard in Shri Mama Warerkar's *Sanyashacha Sansar* in Marathi and Shri Vibhakar's *Gautam Budha* in Gujarati. In spite of this beginning, they were not able to achieve their cherished end. Many modern problems, though seriously intended, were confused with melodramatic devices or were smothered by songs sung for hours on end. Shri Warerkar who is essentially a man of the theatre had a passion for the reform of the stagnant Gujarati and Marathi theatres and he tried every means within his power to that end. His sincerity and zeal can very well be realized from the fact that he used to take the actors of his company to witness the productions of the English companies visiting Bombay and to seek the help of English producers to correct some of the weaknesses of the Indian theatre. The prejudice against all his modern methods was, however, so strong amongst other producers that he never received the attention he rightfully deserved from them, and consequently could achieve no conspicuous success in directing the Marathi stage along new lines.

At this juncture, a well organized and ambitious attempt to revolutionize the professional Marathi stage was launched by a youthful band of energetic intellectuals of Bombay in cooperation with some of the veterans of the Maharashtra Natak Mandali. Shri S.V. Vartak, the author of *Andhalyachishala*, was the central figure of this group. All these men had the advantage of university education and were the severest critics of the conditions prevailing on the Marathi stage. Inspired by the conviction that example was better than precept, they

formed a limited liability company called Natya Manwantar for introducing modern intellectual drama of Europe to the Marathi theatre. This attempt was an active protest against the customary manner of acting, against theatricality, against declamation, against habitual scenery, against over-emphasis, against the use of songs in the midst of dialogues, against the star-system, against plays written for the benefit of this or that actor, and against the practice of men playing women's roles. The very first performance of their new play, *Andhalyachishala*, thoroughly warranted their claims, and the audiences were besides themselves with joy at the decor of the play and the superb interpretation of the character of Bimla and Susheela by Jyotsna Bhole and Padma Vartak respectively. Although financially successful, the experiment did not unfortunately last long owing to conflict of interests and ideological differences within the troupe. It has, however, created a new standard on the Marathi stage and given it the values of aesthetic appreciation of plays. Even in its short span of life, it has blazed a trail which everyone coming after it has necessarily to follow.

Shri P.K. Atre also came to the rescue of the Marathi stage with his modern plays of wit and social satire. His plays have high literary merit and are very popular with the audiences, but this popularity is not due to their professional productions but because of the spicy dialogues of his comedies and the pathos and melodrama of the more serious plays. In spite of all the best attempts of the reformers of the Marathi stage to brighten the prospects of the theatre, the cinema became more and more popular with the audience and one play-house after another was converted into a cinema hall, and even those few dramatic companies which had weathered the storm of adverse circumstances so long were skittled like the proverbial nine pins by the forceful impact of the new and powerful medium of the talkies.

This total extinction of the professional theatre of the western region of India is not a visitation of fate, as some would like to make out. The cause that led to its down-fall were inherent in the system. "The fault, dear Brutus", says Caesar, "is not in our stars by in ourselves, that we are such underlings." And this is no less true of institutions than of individuals, and hence the necessity of self-criticism. The Indian theatre could not grow naturally on its own lines because a full-fledged foreign theatre came to a subject nation and overawed it completely, with the obvious result that many efforts were made simultaneously for a commercial success without allowing the necessary time and free atmosphere for the growth of several types of theatre to their fullness, beauty and strength. In addition to the spirit of spurious imitation due to political inferiority, the inherent Hindu religious and philosophical attitude towards art and artists in general and towards the art of the theatre and the actors in particular have handicapped the progress of the Indian theatre to a considerable extent. It had no respect and dignity among the higher classes of society. No respectable woman was available to play parts of women on the stage and men and boys had to take their place. Children from the age of eight or nine were employed by the professional companies for their gift of singing voice, handsome features and charming personality. The boy-actors had to cast in their lot from childhood with the adults. They were generally overworked and ill-treated by the managers. They had no opportunity for educa-

tion or knowledge of outside life and thought. It is true that some precocious boys did draw handsome salaries and that such persons as the gifted Gujarati actor Sundari and Balgandharva of Maharashtra have risen from their ranks. But barring a few such stars, the actors were generally very poorly paid and could not afford to marry or have families. They usually stayed in the company's lodgings and took their meals in the common mess run by the company. They had to learn their art and profession while they earned their pittance. The profession never made any arrangement for their training, nor was any attempt made to awaken social consciousness in them.

Most of the managers, who were either sole proprietors or partners in the companies, managed their business entirely on commercial basis. They seldom cared to spend any money on any progressive experiment or innovation so long as they succeeded in attracting large crowds to their latest venture in their oldest style. Plays were selected not for their literary merit, social significance or aesthetic values but for the opportunities they afforded for scenic display, for songs and dance sequences. The policy behind their choice was not of providing to the audience what they ought to get but what they would easily relish and readily pay for. That such a decadent profession should perish at its own hand was a foregone conclusion and there would be very few who would sincerely mourn the loss. The most important thing we have to remember in this connection is that it is not the spirit of the theatre of the western region of India that is dead, but only the commercial superstructure that had embodied it. It irreparably collapsed on account of its inherent faults and due to the changed circumstances with which it could not cope for its lack of vision. The true spirit of the theatre has, however, taken full possession of the hearts of the people of the western region and what has become 'of the people' has no fear of death or decay.

The greatest service which the British theatre did to India was to recreate a genuine love of amateur acting in the minds of its people. Before any of the professional companies came into existence in any part of the western region, amateurs were staging adaptations of Shakespeare and classical Sanskrit plays in their respective regional languages. Eminent professors and high officials were seen in several roles on the stage. It was because of this, the theatre of the western region acquired a dignity and status which could not have been achieved otherwise; and consequently, the extinction of the commercial theatre is not going to affect its true spirit. This amateur interest in the art of acting has been alive and vigilant all through the history of the theatre in the western region. It has made itself felt and even taken positive initiative at every stage at which the progress of the theatre appeared to be arrested. It is worthwhile noting in this connection that the Kirloskar, the Maharashtra and the Natya Manwantar have sprung out of the amateur activities of their founders. The Parsis, the Gujaratis and the Kannadigas also had their groups of amateurs and they have made valuable contribution to the progress of their theatres and brought new outlook to them. Experiments in the writing of plays, in their histrionic interpretation and in their production have been carried out by the amateurs without any inhibitions, without any consideration for the box-office, without hankering after publicity or fame. The Kannada

amateur dramatists have developed a new form of tragedy on the lines of the Greek tragedies, while Gujarat has produced a fresh form of verse play out of the story material and rhythmic patterns of the indigenous Bhavai plays which were once looked down upon as vulgar and disgusting. The Mumbai Marathi Sahitya Sangha has been continuously and consistently organizing drama festivals on a very large scale for the last ten years or more. The number of people who have helped, and are still actively helping, the amateur activity in the theatre is legion and the contribution is rich in variety and of fundamental importance. It is not within the scope of this paper to dilate upon its nature and extent, and hence it is enough to state here that the love of the people of the western region of India for amateur acting as an art is the real hope and foundation of the future theatre of India.

With all due deference to the amateur theatrical activity, it must, however, be admitted that it has its own drawbacks and limitations. It is not possible for the amateurs to build up a tradition of theatre. That requires consistent and concerted efforts on the part of its exponents. It is, therefore, inevitable that there must be a class of people who will be wholly and solely devoted to the cause of theatre for ensuring its progress and maintaining its prestige. All the energy, time and talents of this class must be exclusively available to the cause of theatre, and in return the theatre must provide them with their livelihood and comforts. The creation of such a class of devoted and dedicated professionals is the crying need of the Indian theatre today. What we had in the past was professional theatre, whereas what we need to develop in future is the profession of the theatre. This is, indeed, a difference with distinction. For, with the former the theatre was only a commercial activity while with the latter it will be the means of creative expression. The objective of the professional theatre was to amuse and entertain its patrons, while the objective of the new profession of theatre will be to disseminate culture and informal education amongst the people in an entertaining way. This is the essential difference between the two approaches towards the art of theatre and that is the crux of the problem that we have to face today.

The most important point that we have to remember while trying to reorganize our profession of theatre, therefore, is that our new theatre must be thoroughly national and popular in character. In our attempts to build up this national theatre, we must make the maximum use of indigenous material, and its foundations must be firmly laid in our national traditions. It must be a theatre of a free and independent people freely expressing its culture and aspirations.

In this connection, it will not be enough for us to evolve only a classical art theatre but one which will really and truly be the national theatre—comprehensively answering the needs of all classes of people and stages of civilization. For this, we shall have to develop several theatrical forms that will adequately satisfy the demands of the rural, suburban, urban and metropolitan population of our country and mirror their life and aspirations. This is a consummation which cannot be accomplished without a proper plan, and no plan can be worked out efficiently in practice without an organized and properly trained group of professionals.

Theatre is a people's activity, and as such it is but natural that it should be managed by the people for the people. Government could help it with grants-in-aid and supervise its financial administration, but in matters of policy and conduct of activity it must be completely free and independent. In the present state of affairs, however, the government will have to give subsidies and loans at low rates of interest for constructing open-air theatres, play-houses, halls and portable pandals in cities, towns and villages all over the country. The theatre must become the theatre of all the cultural activities of that village, town or city, and it should be controlled by a body of elders of that place. This board of elders should be responsible for its policy and financial budget estimates, while its day-to-day administration should be entrusted to one or more trained professional executives. The institution of proprietary repertory companies and touring theatrical troupes is sure to be incongruous with this new set-up in the theatre, and any attempt to revive it is thoroughly futile, and must, therefore, be discouraged both by the people and the government.

A great hue and cry is at present raised against Entertainment Tax on theatrical performances by the champions of the theatrical profession. The demand for the total abolition of such taxes is neither reasonable nor tenable. The rate of these taxes in western India is, however, exorbitant and deserves to be considerably reduced. Under no circumstances should it exceed 6¼ per cent of the gross taking of a performance, if the government expects the artists and the cultural activities in the country to survive and progress.

The most important provision that the government has to make in the interest of the theatre is the establishment of institutions for the study of the theory and practice of the art and the profession of theatre. Such institutions are conspicuous by their absence in India and it is the duty of the government to take initiative in this vital matter. In addition to these institutions, the government should also introduce courses in dramatics in educational institutions at all stages, from the primary to the university level, with proper emphasis on its educational and cultural values and its creative and social functions. No national theatre can gain strength without the firm foundation of properly educated taste and carefully trained sensibilities of the younger generation of its people.

Along with our efforts to develop our own theatre, in our own way, it is also necessary to keep in touch with the developments in the field of theatre in other countries of the world. This is a responsibility which should be shouldered by the universities and Government. The best plays must encourage and help their enterprise and experiments in this direction. The best plays from all languages of the world should be translated in Indian regional languages, and performed in their original form and spirit, without vulgarizing them by adapting them to our manners, customs and ways of life.

We are now a free nation and have accepted the socialistic pattern of society as our ultimate objective. The theatre has a very important role to play in realizing this goal by serving the nation as the medium of creative activity, aesthetic expression and informal education.

DISCUSSION

K. Narain Kale: This seminar has already considered the valuable paper written by Shri Ahindra Choudhuri, an eminent artist of Bengal, on the professional theatre in the eastern zone of India. I was entrusted to give you an account of the same in the western zone. In my endeavour to do so, I have in my paper given the entire history of the growth and development of theatre in the western zone. I will not recapitulate what I have written. I will directly apply myself to the professional theatres in the western zone and the present day problems that have unhoused professional theatres.

C.K. Phookan: Are we to understand that you will speak on the thing that does not exist in your region?

K. Narain Kale: I do not say that there are no professional theatre there. I have only said that they have been unhoused. A house which accommodates a theatrical performance is not necessarily a theatre, and a theatre may exist without a house. We have several types of those theatres in every part of India. What I intended to tell you is that there exists not a single permanent play-house in Bombay and for that matter in the whole of the western region where a dramatic performance could be given, although we know the first theatre building was erected as far back as 1770.

B. Kanakalingeswara Rao: Who had built it?

K. Narain Kale: It was not an Indian venture. The Europeans had built it for the entertainment of their own community. The next one was an Indian enterprise built by Jagannath Shanker Shet and styled as Badshahi or the Grant Road Theatre, which was available for European and Indian productions at a daily fixed rent.

C.K. Phookan: It was only a house then and not a theatre as you had yourself distinguished one from the other a few minutes earlier.

K. Narain Kale: Yes, it was a play-house without any company of its own to put on plays on its behalf. I mention this particular building because it was used by the founder of the Marathi theatre, Shri Bishnu Pant Bhawe, to give performances of some of his plays. It is an important event because it succeeded in making Marathi-speaking people theatre-minded and conscious of modern theatres.

Mulk Raj Anand: We have come to know all these facts from your paper, you have very nicely stated them; will you now tell us why there is not a single theatre-building in Bombay today as you have told us?

K. Narain Kale: In spite of the best attempts of the reformers of the stage, as I have written in my paper, the popularity of cinema could not be checked and play-houses came to be rapidly converted into cinema-houses.

Mulk Raj Anand: There were similar impact on theatre in other regions as well, but not everywhere were all the play-houses converted into cinema houses. Take the instance of Calcutta, most of the play-houses built there to give dramatic performances continue to

keep their flags flying, may be in half mast, as Shri Ahindra Choudhuri has told us.

C.K. Phookan: And so in Assam, there are exclusive houses for dramatic performances.

K.C. Panigrahi: In Orissa, two new houses have been built where regular performances of dramas are held in spite of the impact of cinema and its growing popularity.

K. Narain Kale: I have stated the fact we face in Bombay.

Mulk Raj Anand: Exactly. But your statement of facts acts like a leading question. And that is this: why did not some houses refuse to accommodate cinema as did most of the play-houses, say, in Bengal and Assam?

Ahindra Choudhuri: Because no play-house was a theatre by itself. The owners of these houses wanted to make money. They would have converted their houses into department-stores, if anybody had agreed to pay higher rents than what the cinema exhibitors did offer. It means that professional theatre as such failed to find its roots in the soil. There were professional groups, but there was no professional theatre to hold its own against the aggression of cinema.

K. Narain Kale: If you mean to say that because there is not a single house exclusively used for dramatic performances, the spirit of theatre has not grown, I would protest and declare most emphatically that the true spirit of the theatre has taken full possession of the hearts of the people of the western region, and what has become 'of the people' has no fear of death or decay. The Marathi drama and theatre are in no way inferior to those of any other region nor are the Gujarati and the Kannada dramas and theatres.

C.K. Phookan: I believe we were discussing the professional theatre in western region.

K. Narain Kale: And I have been repeatedly telling you that a theatre is not a play-house, and theatres, professional theatres too, may exist without a house of their own.

C.K. Phookan: If they exist, they exist as groups, and not as theatres. A modern theatre must have a stage and an auditorium. There are kinds of traditional theatres in all parts of India which do not require them. But we are just now talking about professional theatres of the modern type. They undoubtedly need houses. When Prof Kale says they exist although they have no house, we can come to the conclusion that they exist so weak and withered that not a single one of them has the strength to keep in its possession one single house or to build one.

K. Narain Kale: You don't know how irresistible the Bombay capitalists are.

C.K. Phookan: None of us is supposed to know about theatres in Bombay or in the western region more than what have been said in the papers written by participants to this Seminar. None of us has the foolishness to say that the region is backward in plays and playmaking. You said that there was not a single play-house owned by any professional theatre. We wondered why it was so, and reached this logical conclusion that they were weak and withered. Now you say that the capitalists being irresistible, professional theatre had to surrender their houses to them. But didn't you say in your paper that the Parsis

being wealthy became the pioneers of theatre in Bombay? And, further, didn't you say in your paper that the Gujaratis being essentially a commercial community succeeded to found several dramatic companies? Your own observations establish that the wealthier section, the capitalists, came forward to found theatres and now you say that they are after killing the theatres they themselves had founded. Don't you feel you are not being quite logical?

K. Narain Kale: No, Sir, I don't. When they found that the theatres were profitable propositions they hastened to invest money in the theatre business. Now they have discovered that films are more profitable than theatres. They have now, on that very account, taken up the business of films. Capitalists all over the world do like that, they always look for fresh fields and pastures new. Because Bombay and Gujarat are far ahead of other parts in the field of business and commercial enterprises, cultural institutions which are found to have profit potentialities are captured and used by the capitalists.

Mulk Raj Anand: What Prof Kale says now is fairly plausible. But it does not nullify Shri Phookan's statement that professional theatres in this region are really weak and withered. The weakness is due to no paucity of dramatic talent but due to the fact that these professional theatres were founded by the capitalists and the speculators. If they were founded by artists, they could have possibly acquired a strength to resist the aggression of the films.

K.C. Panigrahi: But what about new play-houses? This particular region is the wealthiest part of the country. Its inhabitants are active, art minded, and gifted with talents. Why they could not gather together, say, a dozen of rich patrons to build at least one play-house? Or why could not they build one such house by forming a limited company? Orissa, as you know, is proverbially poor, but in Orissa we have built two play-houses by our own efforts. Why cannot Bombay build one? There must be some other reasons than what Prof Kale has put forward.

Mulk Raj Anand: I feel, as the Chairman, I should intervene. The discussion is drifting from point to point bringing certain implications. Prof Kale has given us certain facts. Each of us may draw a conclusion as our reasoning may lead us to. Prof Kale cannot give each of us complete satisfaction. He may not himself know what are exactly the reasons for this unhappy state of affairs. Let us take the fact as he has given us, i.e., Bombay has no play-house exclusively used for the regular performances of dramas. Now I ask the Professor, does he really believe that the professional theatre or an amateur one may develop within a house?

K. Narain Kale: Certainly they cannot, particularly the kind of theatre we are talking about. I want not one or two houses but houses in every town and village.

Ahindra Choudhuri: Cannot the theatre-minded people of Bombay build them by themselves, say, by floating limited companies or by organizing artists' cooperatives?

K. Narain Kale: Possibly not. The Government should look to it that once we get boards to put the plays on, we will be able to give you really good plays and performances.

Mulk Raj Anand: Have you any other observation to make?

K. Narain Kale: Only one. And that is with regard to the Entertainment Tax. I believe that the demand for the total abolition of Entertainment Tax is neither reasonable nor tenable.

Audience: Why not?

C.C. Mehta: My age prohibits me to be vehement. Therefore, mildly do I request the veteran professor to tell us why does he say so?

K. Narain Kale: When a company makes a profit out of the shows it gives, why will it not pay a tax to the Government?

C.C. Mehta: Are they exempted from Income Tax?

K. Narain Kale: I don't think they are. But they do not pay Entertainment Tax from their own coffers. They realize it from those who enjoy the entertainment.

C.C. Mehta: But amateur groups are to deposit a certain amount in advance with the city collectors who have been given the power to stop a performance unless such an advance is made. The poor amateurs have to advance Rs 500 before a single ticket is sold.

K. Narain Kale: They are entitled to a refund if the accounts show that they had a deficit. Some of them also enjoy total exemptions.

C.C. Mehta: This is the worst part of it. Discrimination is a weapon to demoralise these groups. The Ministers exempt only those who are found to be agreeable to play the tunes they call. When certain groups get exemptions by pleasing this or that Minister, other groups also get tempted to win a Minister's favour. Free theatre, thus, becomes an impossibility. Prof Kale has told us that the Bombay capitalists are irresistible. I agree with him. And I further say that not only are they irresistible, they are ubiquitous profit-hunters. They put their fingers in every pie that smells profit. I hope my colleagues from the western region will bear me out that the capitalists have already started to make money by organizing shows wherein legs and limbs of cinema girls might be exhibited. And you will be surprised to know that these shows are always exempted from the Entertainment Tax. Ministers and men in authority feel inspired and hastily sign permits of tax-free shows. Thus, you see, discretionary power given to irresponsible but designing persons work to suppress genuine art but encourages vulgar shows which undermines not only the art of drama but also the society. This is why I feel that discretion is worse than the imposition of the tax itself. I shall mention an uglier practice than the imposition of the tax. In places like Surat and Baroda, you have to allot twenty to thirty free-passes to the police officers so that their wives and daughters and maid-servants and relatives may get free entertainment and may report if the plays were really good for the country or harmful to it.

H.V. Gupta: I can give you a surprise, if not a real shock, by telling you that the Bombay Government taxes plays by looking at the names of the authors and not by going through the contents.

Mulk Raj Anand: Now, Prof Kale, do you still hold that the Entertainment Tax should be tolerated because now and then groups get exemptions?

K. Narain Kale: I still feel that the tax is not altogether unreasonable and uncalled for. But as this house is not prepared to look at the matter from my point of view, I would not further elaborate on this.

C.C. Mehta: We shall not thank you dear friend, until you join us to proclaim that the Entertainment Tax should go lock, stock and barrel if you want drama and theatre to flourish.

Mulk Raj Anand: This house has over and over again expressed in unambiguous terms that in its opinion the Entertainment Tax, the Dramatic Performance Act of 1876, and the pre-censorship of play-scripts by the police should be given safe burials to clear the atmosphere from their polluting stench and stink. I would request my colleagues not to waste any more time of this Seminar by referring to them. Now friends, I would like to know your comments on certain points which the two eminent leaders of the drama movement, one from the eastern zone of India and the other from the western, have put before the house. The first is that professional theatre may only be rescued if amateur groups are provided with play-houses of their own or some houses where they can prove their worth. Please tell me, do you agree?

Delegates: All ! All !

Mulk Raj Anand: I thank you friends. The second point is: Prof Kale believes that it is not possible for the amateurs to build up the tradition of theatre and there must emerge bands of devotees and dedicated professionals to deliver goods. Although he has not said it anywhere in his paper, I hope, he will not oppose if I say that when amateurs will have homes they will make those homes not their rest homes but nothing less than first class professional theatres.

K. Narain Kale: I would be the first man to stand by them.

Mulk Raj Anand: I again thank you dear friend. Shri Ahindra Choudhuri has told us that was exactly what he envisaged. A man of wisdom as he is, he has seen the writings on the wall. From amateurs he has drawn our attention to yet another set of artists known as semi-professionals. All of us are aware of their existence and their contribution, in close cooperation with the amateurs, to the cause of drama. Shri Ahindra Choudhuri hopes that combined efforts of the semi-professionals and the amateurs may bring into existence cooperative theatres. Yet a third opinion has emanated out of the discussion on the paper written by Shri Choudhuri with which many of us agreed. It is that cooperative theatres are no practical propositions at this stage and that it is not the job of the playwrights and artists to found them. The Government must give the people the theatres, not only professional ones but theatres of every pattern the people need. This has been expounded by no less a person than the Director of this Seminar, Shri Sachin Sengupta, in his personal capacity of course. What I want to hear from you now is, if you believe that by a combined drive of the amateurs and the semi-professionals you can build up cooperative professional theatres and revitalize the withered ones?

Dina Pathak: The question of strengthening the organizations of the semi-professional type bristles with many a baffling problem of the first rate. I will relate to you some of them

I had to face while conducting our own troupe.

Suresh Awasthi: Before Mrs Pathak proceeds further will some body care to tell us what is exactly meant by this semi-professional staff?

Ahindra Choudhuri: When the term is used in relation to the person, it conveys an idea that this particular individual does not belong to any professional theatre but plays for the amateur groups where they receive remunerations from those groups. They are mostly freelancers. They may or may not have any ideological affiliation with those for whom they play. And when the term is used in the context of a theatre, it implies that the theatre does not maintain a regular paid staff but employs persons for particular shows on a salary basis or an honorarium.

Dina Pathak: I hope I will be allowed to proceed now that Shri Choudhuri has given a clarification. We had ourselves started a semi-professional troupe just five years ago. We felt that continuity of production was the very breath of a drama organization, be it a professional body or an amateur one. We found that it was almost impossible for a semi-professional troupe to maintain this continuity, because these professionals could not be brought to a discipline or to any reason. Whenever they feel that they are indispensable, they start giving you troubles. Our *Meena Gurjari*, as you all know, has been a very successful production. It is demanded by people far and near. But we cannot carry it to them for diverse difficulties. And the most difficult among them is to secure the services of these professionals, who will invariably put their personal interest above the interest of the troupe which pays them, keeping others starved. When you have renowned professionals in your troupe, you cannot go out in the district and to the countryside leaving them behind, because the people there would not care to come to see your performances minus those professionals. And if you go out with them by agreeing to pay the exorbitant fees they usually charge, you are sure to come back with a heavy loss. I hope you will agree if I say that you cannot keep up the continuity of productions with a budget that you cannot balance. The amateurs, who are the very life and soul of a troupe like ours, also become depressed and, not unoften demoralized, to find that some professionals were being fattened at their expense. Once they start to view matters from this angle, life goes out of your troupe. And you fail to make any progress whatsoever.

Mulk Raj Anand: Do you think that the amateurs and the professionals do not match well, and do you consider this semi-professional business to be an un-workable proposition?

Dina Pathak: My experience is like that; either the theatre should be a missionary venture or they should be absolutely professional concerns. Even missionary ventures do need money. Who is going to give them that? And taking into consideration the mental outlook of our artists, I hesitate to say that they will engage themselves, at least at this juncture, to the task of building up cooperative theatres. One or two such theatres may be founded if the stalwarts in the field make any serious attempt. But that will not meet the country's demands in respect of a network of theatres of all denominations.

Surjit Singh: May I draw your attention, Madam, to the fact that we in Pepsu have only

recently formed a cooperative society of drama. It has now been registered officially, and the Government has given it all the facilities which the Cooperative Department generally gives to other cooperative societies. I feel what we have done is possible in other states as well. The veteran actor from Bengal, Shri Ahindra Choudhuri, has told how the Government of the State he comes from has already planned to set up a cooperative theatre provided the artists themselves contribute half the amount of the capital expenditure.

C.C. Mehta: We have heard very attentively and very respectfully what Shri Choudhuri has said. But to get convinced we would like to see what happens to the registration of a cooperative society and to the plan which Shri Choudhuri has made us acquainted with. We know we have no money to purchase shares of limited companies, nor to invest in cooperatives. And we are certainly not thinking of one or two theatres in this or that state. We want a plan for the whole country in the context of a socialist pattern of society in which the theatre will be given a right to exist. No pittance to favourites will give the theatre the dignity it deserves and the strength it needs to revitalize the people.

Adi Marzban: I want to draw the attention of the House that in Bombay where there is not a single professional theatre, I have come to be associated with a cooperative body which works semi-professionally. We guide and control the activities of this body by the adoption of a very simple system. All of us who work in this concern share profits we make, and losses we suffer. So far we have not sought government help for the simple reason that there are so many strings attached to such help that we find it profitable to lose money than to get throttled by agreeing to put those strings around our necks. We were prepared for perpetual loss. But you will be glad to learn that we make profits as well. What we earn as profits, we distribute equally amongst our workers. The foot-light man, the man in charge of the screens, the musicians, the director, the author, the dancer and the topmost star, each and every one is happy to share equally.

E. Alkazi: Commercializing theatre is nothing less than killing the art in theatre. We face it but at the same time we bewail the downward drift of the professional theatre, we are anxious to find it established on a sound footing, we call out for a close cooperation of the semi-professional and amateurs to set up cooperative theatres which must be obviously commercial concern. Would all these give drama and theatre that dignity and quality which are essential for their fulfilment? We have experiences of France and Broadway. Amateurs in France cannot make a living because they do not get houses where they may give performances. Broadway houses charge exorbitant rents to frighten away the amateurs. The same process of keeping away the amateurs from the theatres is found to be working here also. Middlemen have already captured the trade of theatre. Unless the State takes a wise decision, a catastrophe is imminent. The few art-minded theatres which have somehow managed to keep themselves kicking should at once be helped by the State both morally and materially without being miserly and suspicious.

Sachin Sengupta: The discussion has been very helpful. It has given us an idea of how the noted participants have been actually working hard to put the theatre to its proper place in the framework of the pattern of the society we envisage. Shri Adi Marzban tells us that he

has a record of a very successful cooperative venture, Shri Alkazi has been working not without success with a group of artists; Shrimati Dina Pathak, Shrimati Sheila Bhatia, Shri Balraj Sahni, Shri Sombhu Mitra, Shri Balwant Gargi, Col H.V. Gupte, Shri Shanmugam, Shri B. Kanaklingeswara Rao, Shri Inder Dass, Shri Nataraj Ramakrishna, Shri C.K. Phookan, Shri Samar Chatterjee and several others—each of them represent a group. We know of their several achievements. All of them have raised the standard of art of drama. From their presence here and from their papers and speeches and comments, we find they are not *complacent, nor do they feel happy. If they were, they would not have cared to come here.* They feel that they are just knocking their heads against a dead wall in spite of the successes they have to their credit. Why do they feel so? They themselves do tell us that they need a social condition for their free growth and for their fullest expression. *They feel they need free theatres which they may use to improve their arts and also to earn money to keep themselves free from interruptions and safe from circumstantial degradations.* Whatever they themselves have been able to do by their own efforts does not give them any inclination *to rest on their desk. They are willing to work harder yet.* But they cannot move further on unless the pre-requisite conditions are fulfilled. These conditions are: (1) freedom from taxes and permits and pre-censorships and (2) foundation of theatre buildings and auditoriums of all the patterns we know.