

## Some Trends and Experiences in Punjabi Drama and Theatre

SNEHLATA SANYAL, SHEILA BHATIA

The scope of this sketch is to give a broad outline of a movement which has passed its infancy and now reached adolescence. Drama and theatre together present a vast field. In a way, it is misleading to speak of 'Punjabi Theatre'. There is no such theatre around which some tradition or the other has crystalized. There are simply amateur dramatic groups in towns and the remnants of folk traditions in the villages. The Gaiety Theatre in Shimla has undoubtedly been used very much since the Partition but it maintains no company and has not given rise to any abiding tradition. To our knowledge, there is no professional theatre company with a repertoire of Punjabi plays.

Another peculiarity is that theatre in Punjab does not necessarily mean theatre in Punjabi. In fact, some of the best creative sons of Punjab do not express themselves in Punjabi. This is true of drama groups also. Only a few years ago, people could be found who denied the status of a language to Punjabi and only considered it a dialect. This point is touched here only to show the tremendous uphill task which faces a student of Punjabi theatre.

It is inevitable that in such a situation, a distinct dramatic tradition as expressed in theatre work does not crystallize and is inextricably bound with the literary and political climate of the times. Certain lines of development are nevertheless clearly discernible. We will give their broad characteristics before we proceed to particularize them. In doing so, we will keep the stage play at the centre of our vision.

There is first the clear thread of the growth of a modern type of play, visualized in accordance with the Western techniques of construction and presentation. The movement here is in a zig zag of more or less understanding the stagecraft. In the absence of a regular stage towards which all efforts are directed, this is not surprising.

A second development has been in the direction of the evolution of a theatrical form based on folk forms like Mela, Ras, Bhangra, Gida, Saang etc. The evolution has two fairly well-defined stages. In the first, a form called 'operetta' came into being (the word is a misnomer but has gained currency as 'Pareta' in the countryside). The second can be seen in the evolution of what is called by its authors 'song-play'. This development is in the direction of the Opera which should be the next step, provided the conditions for its growth are brought into being. We will talk about the problems facing this trend later.

A third very noticeable characteristic which is the unifying thing for these very different trends is the state of the language itself. It is not our purpose to enter into linguistic controversy but in as much as the living state of a language is of vital importance for its drama, we cannot avoid facing a few facts.

We do not think anybody will deny the status of a language to Punjabi today, and what is more, a language with a rich epic poetic tradition. Waris Shah and Kadir Yar belong to the class of Homer, Tulsi, Sur and others. These folk classics reveal a mature culture, with discernible features. The important among them are:

- i. These folk classics are still very much a part of people's lives.
- ii. The linguistic distance between the town and the countryside is not too great.
- iii. The urban intellectual in the era of imperialistic domination did not affect the living stream of linguistic culture to any appreciable extent. Of course, the situation in this matter is changing and shall change very rapidly.

The net result is that the Punjabi idiom still retains a broad, open, tense, direct character and this is reflected in almost all dramatic works in existence. No matter how subtle, symbolic, complex or contradictory the pattern may be in Balwant Gargi's head, for the language of the play, at least so far, he has gone back to his mother and his aunt and his village friends. Sheila Bhatia's folk-operetta has also drawn upon the same source. I.C. Nanda who may be called the father of modern Punjabi drama set the tone in this matter, and it continues to be found in any attempt at serious work so far. This also explains the preponderance of peasant characters in plays and to some extent also the folkish character of the operettas and song-plays.

The birth of this modern movement in drama is as near to us as the early nineteen-twenties. Its growth is characterized by spurts or waves—each wave being brought about by a certain combination of circumstances and leaving some fairly well defined trends in its wake. We will attempt to formulate these in order to understand which writer represent which aspect of the situation.

### *The Early Thirties*

Just before the Second World War, Prof P.E. Richards came to teach English in Dyal Singh College, Lahore. Norah Richards was his wife. They were a remarkable couple. He was a man very sensitive to all forward going things and had deep reverence for life. His wife Norah had been closely connected with the stage in England and was passion-incarnate for drama. They were altogether remarkably different from the usual run of English people our students came in touch with. They radiated a unique atmosphere to which their many students testify. Norah Richards immediately threw herself into the task of organizing a Dramatic Society. It did not take her long to realize that there was no real live drama movement in the colleges (or for that matter in Punjab). She realized that unless there were indigenous playwrights writing plays about life around them, there would be no real drama movement. So she set about the task of encouraging and directing the talents of various students and others towards this channel.

It was from these play-writings and staging competitions she organized that a band of young people arose who wrote the first Punjabi plays. Among them, I.C. Nanda was the most talented. The late S.S. Bhatnagar, the scientist, was also one of this group who wrote plays.

Norah Richards' views on drama have left a stamp on the direction Punjabi Drama has

taken. An entire monograph may be necessary to determine the nature of her influence over a period of more than forty years of active work, often against heavy odds. Only last summer, she organized a camp to give training in dramatic work for the Social Education Organizers of Community Projects, for whom she has written a manual entitled *The Village Play*. Suffice it to say that she is the product of the *avant garde* movement in the theatre which produced Ibsen, Galsworthy, Shaw and the Irish playwrights of the Abbey Theatre. She believes that Drama has a vital role to play in the life of a people and that it is the vehicle of social criticism. This she has passed on to those whom she nurtured and through them indirectly to the dramatic climate of the Punjabi language. It struck roots because it coincided with the needs of the times.

The twenties threw up I.C. Nanda, a pupil of Norah Richards whose plays *Dulhan* (1913), *Subhadra* and *Lila da Vyah* (1920), *Var Ghar* (1930), *Shamo-Shah*, *Ram Bhajni*, *Jun* and *Beiman* were staged in many colleges. Nanda set the standard for realistic plays, full of shades and nuances of social problems. He also gave a lead in the matter of language. The Punjabi he uses is refined, idiomatic, sensitive, bright and terse. He wrote little but what he wrote was good. He had been trained in an exacting school.

Before Nanda, there was in existence a literary tradition in which Kirpa Sagar's stories were written in dialogue form, for instance, Bhai Dit Singh's *Raja Prabodh*, Bhai Vir Singh's *Raja Lakh Data Singh*, Kirpa Sagar's *Ranjit Singh* and Ran Budh Singh's *Nar Naveli*. These were not, however, meant to be treated as plays.

We must remember that theatre in Punjab was not only the theatre in Punjabi and the theatre in Urdu had a quality all its own. Aga Hashar is a well known name in this field. After him the stage had, in the words of G.D. Sondhi, 'sunk to a depth of false sentiment and stark artificiality'. The work of Norah Richards and I.C. Nanda was directed against this very artificiality. Their historical contribution lies in breaking down of this old tradition of melo-drama.

The movement caught on in colleges and an inter-collegiate Saraswati Stage Society was formed. At this point, Prof. Richards died and Norah Richards' inspiring and guiding hand was removed from the Society. By the time she returned to India, the Society had ceased functioning.

She settled down in a village in Kangra and from her retreat has often sallied forth for the cause of theatre. Her main pre-occupation became the development of rural theatre. She holds camps, training young people from colleges in elements of dramatic work, argues with and tries to convince the authorities in the university and Government for a much more imaginative and understanding view of the role of drama in society. The moment the National Government was formed in 1947, she came down to Delhi with a magnificent scheme. We were not ready for her then.

Indeed she has become an integral part of the cultural climate of Punjab she loves. We must make it clear that she is very jealous of the artistic integrity of her medium. She has never countenanced propaganda plays. She saw that I.P.T.A. was doing valuable work but

she told some of them in Delhi that a drama movement which forgets that the best art is that which conceals art can never go very far. She even wrote a play on this frustrating visit to Delhi.

To go back to the twenties, not much original work was done during the period. We find two published plays, *Bhookh* and *Swarg*, by Dr Mohan Singh Diwana. They also strike a note of social criticism. We have not been able to find out whether they had ever been staged. An important point to note about this period is that it put an end to play-writing as a literary exercise. From now onwards, playwrights meant to write plays that may be staged sometime or the other. It is another thing that in the absence of a live stage, their inexperience of stage technique and dramatic construction finds no laboratory to test in. Women too had not come on the stage yet. That came later with the growth of co-education in colleges.

The late twenties and the early thirties are periods of the ebb of this wave. The uncertainties of the political climate of those times (the 1929 Congress was held in Lahore), the disturbances in university life at that stage of the national struggle could not have encouraged college drama. The film, on the other hand, had drawn talent away from the stage. Aga Hashar's talented pupils, Ahmed Shuja and Rafi Peer, joined the films.

#### *The Late Thirties*

Towards the late thirties, various influences and trends combined to bring about a second wave of dramatic activity. We will touch on them briefly.

Sardar Gurbux Singh started the periodical *Preet Lari* in Punjabi and established Preet-Nagar. These words more or less explain his broad humanistic intentions; Preet Nagar, a town which is a community of love and *Preet Lari*, a periodical which is a garland of love. This is a landmark in the growth of self-respect of the Punjabi language.

Sardar Gurbux Singh has written plays like *Preet Mukat* and *Rajkumari Latika*, but much more than his own plays is the importance of the fact that he brought into being a forum and an atmosphere for creative work in Punjabi. Many a Punjabi young man of letters of today has had his association with Preet Nagar where Dramatic work was also encouraged; Balwant Gargi is one of them.

In the Government College, Lahore, A.S. Bukhari encouraged its dramatic club and under G.D. Sondhi, it did some sensitive productions. Prof Sondhi also produced Nanda's *Subhadra* and *Lila da Vyah*. The greatest contribution of G.D. Sondhi to the theatre life of Punjab was the open-air theatre in Lahore which he constructed among idyllic surroundings. Prof Sondhi's passion was to direct the imagination of theatre lovers to this older and more vital form which he thought was in tune with the native genius and traditions of India. His dream was not immediately fulfilled but it helped in the evolution of a trend in the middle forties of which we will speak later.

The most important single event in this quickening of the creative life of Punjab in the thirties was the establishment of the Radio Station in Lahore. A.S. Bukhari joined the All India Radio and took his love of drama there. Ahmed Shuja and Rafi Peer had got disillusioned

sioned with films in the meanwhile and wrote for the radio. Rafi Peer is said to have written only one play called *Akhiyan* in Punjabi and it supposed to have been a great hit. A whole generation of playwrights have been bred by the Radio Station. Of course the radio play is a specialized kind of play and is, strictly speaking, not theatre. In some ways, the radio play has had an inhibitory influence on the growth of theatre, because a generation bred to the logic of sound and the mike alone found it difficult to re-orientate themselves to the composite audio-visual and communal reality that is theatre. The distinctive form of this medium at this time was the so-called feature, which was an episodic treatment of a theme strung on the threads of a commentary. Later on, in the revival of the stage undertaken by the I.P.T.A., this feature took on a visual garb and became the shadow-play. The theatre has had to struggle against this 'feature-mentality' for the growth of a vital and genuine drama movement. The talented playwright, Kartar Singh Duggal is a product of the radio and is primarily a radio dramatist. His talent, however, flowered not in the thirties but in the post-partition era.

The national movement in the meantime was concentrating on social reforms and constructive work. Gandhiji was much immersed in Harijan uplift. The note of social criticism sounded earlier by I.C. Nanda was merging into this mood of the times which enveloped everyone irrespective of party, creed or lack of it. This is the time when Joshna-fazal-din wrote his play *Pind de Veri* (Enemies of the Village). Another playwright of this period is Gurdial Singh Phool who writes about rural themes. We have not been able to find out what efforts were made to stage them.

Another thing was also happening at the same time. The radical wing of the national movement was feeling the need for an organization but it was not yet in opposition to the main trend. In the meantime, the thirties came to an end with a bang. The Second World War started. Though there had been no break in the slowly evolving drama movement, the War precipitated and catapulted into existence forces that radically changed the flavour of this period from the previous one.

#### *The Forties*

The radical forces of the national movement grew rapidly and took charge. By the middle forties, a revolutionary mood was in the air. Many a writer of the late thirties was caught between his own time and the new one. To some extent, the early plays of Harcharan Singh and Sant Singh Sekhon reflect this situation. Harcharan Singh has written many plays which he staged at the Sikh National College, Amritsar, and Y.M.C.A., Lahore. His play *An Jor* was staged many times in the early forties. After partition, G.S. Khosla staged some more of his one-act plays, notably *Man Diyan Man Vich*.

Prof Sant Singh Sekhon was successful with one-act plays which were staged at the Sikh National College, Amritsar and elsewhere. Two of them *Bhavi* and *Hartal* proved very popular. Some of his plays are *Aitvar*, *Mahatma*, *Putar* etc. He explores in his plays the implications of socialistic thinking.

It was the Bengal Famine which shook India from one corner to the other. The idea of Art

for Art's sake, which in any case was not much in evidence here, was thrown overboard almost overnight. Many an artist of sensibility was either explicitly or implicitly with this movement for bread and life. Artists painted posters, writers wrote stories and skits and poets wrote songs about the agony of Bengal. The Bengal Song and Dance Squad led by Harindranath Chattopadhyaya which toured the whole of Punjab along with a poster exhibition created a profound impression.

The Indian People's Theatre Association was formed in this background. Its call to turn to folk form to express the reality of people's life and struggles and thus create a vital and truly Indian theatre movement found an echo everywhere.

Till this time 'folk song' or 'folk form' was not a current word. Carrying forward the tradition of Uday Shanker, I.P.T.A.'s ballet *India Immortal* was the harbinger of a qualitatively new era on the Indian stage. The I.P.T.A. as such did not establish a regular drama or dance group in Punjab. Prof Eric Ciprian formed a little group which staged a few plays but it fizzled out. Two indigenous movements, however, grew in strength as a result of the success of the I.P.T.A.

One was the theatre group of the peasant, Lakha Singh Johar, who staged his plays under the auspices of the Kisan Sabha. No records are available of his activities or his scripts, unless these are in the Kisan Sabha Offices.

The other was a very unique thing—the Women's Drama League in Lahore. This League had grown out of some members of the All-Indian Women's Conference, who had worked actively for the ration and control movement during the War. We remember what intense days those were. Agitating for ration depots, gathering masses of women and then having won the depots, to maintain them, supervise them, while hundreds of women were milling outside to get a handful of flour or sugar. Sheila Bhatia started writing songs then. The success of the songs very soon led us to more ambitious things. In tune with the Punjabi folk tradition, we invented little skits in music, later we added movements. Our items were enormously successful and we grew bolder and bolder.

It is necessary to go briefly into the prevalent folk forms at this stage to see what was the basis of this movement. The Bhangra and its feminine variety, Gida which are folk dances with a large element of mime in them (not the militarized Bhangra which we have been seeing at the National Folk Dance Festivals) provided the pointer in synthesis.

The Saang is a form common to north India in which a story is acted out in a popular folk form. During marriage festivities, women also enact some Saangs. Jhankis are processions of various dramatic episodes from the epic and mythology in tableaux form taken through the streets. Community singing is very popular among women in Punjab during marriage, *mundan* or other ceremonies to this day. Mirasis and Bhands (male and female) were an integral part of the festivities of birth and marriage in pre-partition Punjab. These were itinerant groups who not only narrated and sang stories but enacted them as well—extemporaneously. A group of minstrels known as Dahdis go about the village chanting poems about heroes of the epics, gurus, folk heroes and legends. And finally there was the Ras,



the composite dramatic form of the whole of north India.

The Women's Drama League and its writer-cum-poet-composer Sheila Bhatia turned their attention towards all this rich folk heritage in music, mime and rhythm, and evolved a composite form in which facets of a theme were expressed in a string of songs with a simple basic rhythm and actions. Gradually the theme expanded to a tale (often historical) with all the parts of men done by women. The rhythm became less obtrusive, mime and acting more important and the music separated into group and part singing.

At this stage the young, enthusiastic theoretician of the group, Snehlata Sanyal, declared that they were on the road to the development of the Opera—in line with the genius of Punjabi folk-form. Now, opera was too big a word. After all it was only a very *chota* Opera. What shall we call it? We decided to call it, operetta. Our operettas became very famous. There was one about a 'Devil' which was very popular. Another about the Unionist Ministry and yet another about the movement in Kashmir. We were invited to the villages. It was a strange and an unusual sight when a band of serious, young, confident women performers went to a Kisan gathering. It was a great educative experience for them too. The peasants took to them and in their infinite wisdom transformed the word 'operetta' to Pareta and henceforth we will know this form by this truly indigenous name. The best Pareta of all was Sheila Bhatia's *Call of the Valley*, which was staged at the National Drama Festival a couple of years ago.

I would like to mention here the part played by the open-air theatre in the evolution of this form. The open-air theatre had not been used as an open-air theatre, except on some memorable occasions—once when Harindra Nath Chattopadhyay gave a performance there, once when G.D. Sondhi put up a Mela there, and once when Sir Ganga Ram School put up a show there. It was the Women's Drama League which fully exploited the shape of the theatre—its two trees, two staircases, the sky-line which produced admirable silhouette effects when the sun sank and a mode of presentation where actors carried their property with them, a necessity dictated by the absence of a curtain. Indeed, it was a truly open-air form.

In the meantime, Inder Lal Das had formed his Little Theatre Group in Lahore. They presented some well finished productions before the partition. They helped to intensify the dramatic atmosphere even though they did not produce plays in Punjabi. Balwant Gargi and his friends had produced some plays in Preet Nagar. A play of that period is *Moga*. The Women's drama League also performed in Preet Nagar.

Norah Richards continued to give help to any one who needed it or needed a retreat wherein to work creatively. She particularly helped the five Beneficent Departments of Punjab Government in their rural uplift movement by training cadres for rural drama. The Departments maintained some sort of a Dramatic Company which toured the villages.

And then came the partition.

#### *The Post-Partition Scene*

The partition scattered everybody—I.L. Das and the Little Theatre Group, Balwant Gargi

and some members of the old Women's Drama League came to Delhi. Sheila Bhatia was in Kashmir. Some were in Shimla. The post-partition scene shows new groupings and a great increase in dramatic activity. Periodicals have encouraged the publication of one-act plays. New names like Roshan Lal Ahuja, Balbir Singh, Amrik Singh, G.S. Khosla and Kartar Singh Duggal have appeared on the horizon.

Out of these, G.S. Khosla has grown in close contact with the stage. He joined the Little Theatre Group in Lahore. Then he broke away to form a group called Punjabi Theatre in Delhi which was very active in the late forties. This group staged plays by G.S. Khosla (*Bue Baithi dhi, Jutian-da-jora, Be-ghare*) and Balwant Gargi (*Do-anne, Pichal Parie*), Nanda (*Be-iman*) and Harcharan Singh (*Man Diyan Man Vich*). After G.S. Khosla's transfer from Delhi, this group is not much in evidence.

We have not been able to find out whether Roshan Lal Ahuja's many plays and Balbir Singh's one-act plays have been staged anywhere. Amrik Singh's play *Parchanvean-dipaker* is on the list of future productions by the Delhi Art Theatre.

The older playwrights, Phul, Harcharan Singh and Sekhon continue to write. We know of at least one post-partition play of Sekhon entitled *Suneha* which has often been played in Punjab. Phul's play *Bank* was staged in Khalsa College in 1954. The amateur theatre, however, flowered in Delhi and Shimla.

In Delhi, Balwant Gargi grew in stature as playwright, because of a close and living contact with theatre groups. I.P.T.A. staged Balwant Gargi's play *Biswedat* in 1949. It was a landmark both in the growth of the writer and the Punjabi stage. The play achieves a skilful weaving of the personal and the historical and indeed, sometimes, Gargi touches a depth of sensibility equal to Nanda's. Another sensitive production by I.P.T.A. was Gargi's adaptation of Lady Gregory's *Rising of the Moon*. These plays gave a turn to the Punjabi stage, at least in Delhi. Nothing that came after could ignore these. In 1954, the Little Theatre Group staged *Lohakut*, one of Gargi's earlier plays.

From the foregoing, it may be perceived that the time had come when playwright and productions must grow together in a process of action and reaction.

The Gaiety Theatre in Shimla—a lovely old-fashioned theatre which was originally built for British civilians and the only municipal theatre in the country (to our knowledge)—at last came into its own. It became the hub of the cultural life of the town. D.N. Zutshi, B.S. Bawa and Amrik Singh staged plays of Nanda, Balwant and Paritosh Gargi. Paritosh Gargi also wrote and staged two one-act plays (*Gadi-da-safar, Parona*) and one full length play (*Vagda-pani*) in Delhi. The last one was staged at the National Drama Festival.

What in the meantime had happened to the young Pareta movement? Before the partition and during the riots, Sheila Bhatia had written a string of nine songs—a lovely sad mosaic, sorrowing over the brutalities of the times but ending on a note of faith that the people would not allow themselves to be puppets in unseen hands. These were sung in mohallas and courtyards in Lahore and later in Delhi. In some places, they took a form very much like animated Jhankis. The partition had scattered its members and it existed no more



as a Women's group. The Delhi I.P.T.A. produced this mosaic of riot songs and one other Pareta. Sheila Bhatia herself was in Kashmir.

Dissatisfaction with the Pareta form, however, began to arise. The urge for a deeper and more truly dramatic approach began to be felt. It was no more satisfying to deal with generalities in what now appeared to be a rather naive fashion. Some of us argued that the 'general' must be viewed through the 'particular'. It was necessary to develop characters and construct their destiny along dramatic lines. Indeed, the need was felt for a serious musical play, with music expressing dramatic conflict and tension. The absence of an open-air theatre also prevented its development along the lines of a Pageant or Mela.

Our perception of the technical problems of music were, however, not very clear but we quite realised by this time that without an orchestra taking an integral and interpretative part in the unfolding of the play, our form could not be properly called Opera. But there was nothing to prevent us from calling our modest efforts 'Song-play'.

The first tentative steps in this direction were taken in a song-play entitled *Peace* by Prof Mohan Singh Mahir, the eminent Punjabi poet, in close collaboration with the Delhi branch of I.P.T.A. It was a powerful piece and was presented at the 1949 Theatre Festival organized by several local dramatic groups. It is a pity that Prof Mohan Singh confined his efforts in this field to only one play. He has all the talent, experience and maturity to write librettos and help the growth of the song-play.

Sheila Bhatia came down from Kashmir in 1950 and Delhi Art Theatre was formed in 1951. Its first production was *Call of the Valley* staged along with Balwant Gargi's adaptation of one of Lady Gregory's plays entitled *Rai da Pahar*. *Call of the Valley* bears all the marks of the painful growth of the Pareta into a song-play.

For the first time after this production, we came face to face with the problems, technical and dramatic, involved in a bid for depth. The problem of choral singing—combination of male and female voices, the problem of the recitative—the shifting 'Sa', the combination of rhythmic prose with music, of the music interpretative of mood and tension, struggle against melodic monotony, need for depth and volume intricately woven into the pattern of a human story. We realized that without a music director grounded in classical music but willing and elastic enough to experiment in an unorthodox manner, the song-play would not go forward.

The next attempt in this direction was *Dukhe Khet* (Barren Fields) by Sheila Bhatia staged in 1954, with music direction by Smt S. Khurana and M.B. Srinivasan. Balwant Gargi's play *Kesro* was produced by Delhi Art Theatre in 1953. Our experience by now led us to a firm conviction that the time has come for us to re-evaluate our classical and folk heritage for ourselves. It is in the same spirit that Sheila Bhatia worked on a libretto based on Waris Shah's classic *Heer* which is currently in production.

We must not refrain from mentioning a charming experiment by Balwant Gargi. He dramatized a folk tale in Punjabi called *Bandar-da-vyah* for children. It was produced in Delhi and was universally acclaimed. This is a fruitful and creative direction to which some

of our playwrights may give serious attention.

### *Some Observations*

The Punjabi Drama is searching for depth. The playwright is groping in his efforts to go beneath the apparent to the well-springs of human action. By and large, socialistic ideas have influenced the direction of this search. The effort to go beyond the slogan to the human reality has not been and is not an easy task.

A few, at this late hour, are turning to Freud. There is also a real danger of the growth of a fanciful type of play which is either a mere literary exercise or the expression of a philistinism encouraged by the currently fashionable respect for the idea of drama, though not the actuality of it. This is borne home forcibly when one looks through some of the periodicals and plays published in the last few years. The absence of a stage is preventing the frank facing of the problems of the theatre.

We have a lot to learn from the theatre in the West, but at moments of groping like these we must turn to our folk and classical heritage and re-evaluate them for ourselves. This will give us strength, depth and vision and prevent our culture from becoming faceless. It will also create an audience and build a bridge between the intellectual playwright and the people.

We can imagine what it may mean if a first-class theatre company toured Punjab with repertoire of plays based on its folk-classics. Punjab has absorbed many a marching culture. As a consequence, there is an elasticity in its traditions which have favoured a quick adjustment. The Punjab countryside is changing fast—much faster than ever before. Whole classes of people have disappeared. In this, the biggest casualty have been the Mirasis, without whom the cultural life of Punjab would have been unthinkable only a few years ago. Ras has virtually disappeared except in secluded corners like Kangra (now in Himachal Pradesh). The films (with resulting vulgarization) are filling the vacuum. The role of film needs careful evaluation in the disappearance and vulgarization of folk forms. It is a big theme and it is only possible to give some indications here.

A broad humour is characteristic of the Punjabi. It is easy to reduce it to burlesque and satire to farce. The lifting of forms from their context and pressing them into all sorts of service, abusing the breadth and openness of an idiom and making it degenerate into crudity for the sake of cheap effects—all this the Punjabi film has done. The artistic integrity which puts up a fight against vulgarization is not characteristic of commercial venture. On the other hand, the lavishness and easy accessibility of these ventures have made it very difficult for local forms to put up a competition wherever they have arrived. The focal point of the cultural life of Punjab used to be the Mela—a social rather than a religious forum. People who have seen Melas over a decade know that they are not what they used to be.

In such a situation, it becomes necessary to preserve whatever folk and classical heritage a region may possess. While doing so, it is very important to be sensitive to the process of vulgarization. There has been occasion before in Delhi to stress this point in connection with music. This applies to all folk forms. The very elasticity which favours synthesis in

more settled times can render a culture faceless in catastrophic times like ours. It seems strange to be speaking of this danger today when apparently the movement for folk art and folk culture is most talked about. What we need is not fashionable talk but creation of those physical conditions whereby the best in our tradition may be preserved and re-introduced into the living stream of culture today. A chain of theatres from the simplest possible to the more complex, linking the village with the town, is a vital necessity.

A reconsideration of the place of music, dance, drama and painting in our education system is essential. The preservation and recordings of folk culture must be undertaken by experts. Libraries of recordings of folk music must be established— film strips of dramatic and dance forms in their natural surroundings be made. Other countries are doing this, even about our forms. We should be able to do the same and the information about the work done may be given (perhaps in a bulletin).

The movement for song-drama in Punjab is struggling valiantly. Further growth in this form is possible only if:

1. An orchestra comes into being and is integrated in production.
2. Serious musicians turn their attention to this direction.
3. More poet-dramatists turn their attention to this medium.
4. The musician and the poet come together.

It is a direction with infinite possibilities. Of course, the financial problem involved is formidable. This Seminar, we hope, will discuss the economics of the theatre movement. Perhaps even more than playwriting, it is the biggest hurdle the theatre movement faces today.

## DISCUSSION

*Balraj Sahni:* Although I have not been much active in the field of Punjabi drama, I happen to be a Punjabi and to some extent I have made a study of the Punjabi literature. I have not taken any active part in Punjabi plays but I have been studying some of them. I think our previous speakers, although they have both been very very active, right in the thick of it and have been doing very active work in the field of Punjabi drama, they have not been able to present the case of the Punjabi theatre in an integral way. Because there are certain special circumstances which the Punjabi language faces, has been facing for the last so many years, which are distinct from Bengali, Marathi or Gujarati or other languages. For instance, Punjab is the only province where two of the major communities, the Muslims and the Hindus have been actively estranged from their mother tongue because of imperialistic intrigues, as you may call it; or you may say, communal reactions accounted for the situation in our province. But the fact remains that the vast majority of the Hindus, young or old, whoever they are, they are all indifferent to the Punjabi language. They do not agree to the learning of the Gurmukhi script. They do not accept it as Punjabi script. This is a very unfortunate state of affairs there. It is a most lamentable state of affairs, and unless a proper

evaluation is done and this matter is understood, we cannot possibly come to any correct evaluation of the dramatic work which is being done in that language. Of course, today, this sort of prejudice, this sort of ignorance is going away gradually. I will give you a good instance. For example, Mr Mathur said that he expected the other people, the non-Hindi speaking people, to build up the Hindi drama literature. Actually, Punjabis have been in the forefront of Hindi and Urdu literatures. The foremost literary figures in Hindi and Urdu have been, and are still today, the Punjabis.

It is only recently that the Hindu intellectuals of Punjab, especially after partition, after experiencing of so much suffering at the hands of the reactionary forces, have come to realize that if Bengalis can be proud of the Bengali language, where is the harm in being proud of one's own mother tongue in Punjab also? Still, somehow, I do find that the Punjabi speaking people are a little apologetic when they talk of their mother tongue as if our mother is not as beautiful as other mothers are. But all the same, it is a matter of great pride for us that there has never been a vacuum in dramatic works on the Punjabi stage from the beginning of this century. In the field of dramatic work, I know Bengal has had a lead on us, but from the beginning of the twentieth century, Punjab has produced significant works in the dramatic field. For example, I have, in my own college days, been a disciple of Nanda, who started writing plays as early as 1925-26. His plays are so beautifully constructed that I have rarely come across such things in Hindi, Urdu or Bengali, which I have studied. I have rarely come across plays better constructed than those by I.C. Nanda. They are beautiful plays, absolutely modern in concept and depict the middle class Punjabi life with great power, irony and satire, and really actable plays, not merely literary pieces. Then you have one-act plays, a very large number of one-act plays is being published by young authors in almost every periodical in Punjabi language today. Every month one or two really first rate one-act plays are published. They are all very actable and there is a lot of activity on that side. Mr Gargi himself has written very nice plays and he is a Hindu, he is not a Sikh. I.C. Nanda was a Hindu and not a Sikh, but by and large, the majority of the writers in the field of Punjabi drama have been Sikhs and they have produced really first class work. Then there are G.S. Khosla, Duggal, Ishwar Singh, Harcharan Singh—there are so many names—I forget them now, I cannot give you all the names—but please do not run away with the impression that we are merely experimenting and we have not had any achievements. There have been masterly achievements in this field, as great achievements as anywhere else, but I do accept the fact that because of the communal reactions our mother-tongue has not received the respect, the love, the sympathy, which was due to it. But I assure you that the time is coming, if it has not already come, when it will be difficult for any educated Punjabi not to be ashamed of himself if anything is said against the Punjabi language and would not act as anybody else would in similar circumstances.

*Mulk Raj Anand:* Chairman and friends, I really got up to emphasize some of the points made by my friend Balraj Sahni. What he has said here is very pertinent. I would like to draw your sympathy, the understanding of the public, to the Punjabi language—I mean the Punjabi, not with the sophisticated and upper class attitude as has been envisaged both in books in Punjab and from outside. I remember in 1938—when a Writers' Conference was organized in Calcutta, the President was an eminent writer and he is even now living—I

went and said, "I and my colleague together want to present a memorandum to this Conference on behalf of the Punjabi language." I may tell you, in the first instance, strange to say, the President of the Writers' Conference refused the permission for us to present the manifesto on behalf of the Punjabi language. There is a historical fact which must be recognized—that this discouragement of the Punjabi language has gone on through, if I may say so, the backwardness of Punjab, and in ordinary, educated circles is still going on. It is a fact of the other day as we have seen in the discussions, the political discussions of last month, that the so-called Hindu elements in Punjab refused to own the Punjabi as their mother tongue. They think their mother tongue is Hindi. I beg to suggest, since politics is not important for us in this Seminar, I repudiate it from this platform. Although people in West Punjab and East Pakistan may refuse to own the Punjabi language, it is the language of forty-five million people of India and is a very important language and, as Balraj has shown, with a literature of classical proportions right from the mediaeval period, say, the thirteenth or the fourteenth century downwards. Some say—the claim may be unjustified—that it is the mother of Hindi and Urdu. But I am not going to assert this claim.

*K. Narain Kale:* How does this point arise?

*Mulk Raj Anand:* I am sorry I have to go to the very fundamentals. As a Punjabi, born of the Punjabi language, I would like to resuscitate the point of view made by the previous speakers, unless of course, the Chairman rules that it will be out of order to do so. We are facing a peculiar situation in this hall. We are here, ushering in the birth of a new era of drama and theatre. We are just standing in readiness to renovate the theatre and drama. We have to go back to the very source and enquire into the faults and build up new sources. It is, therefore, an important fact to recognize that the Punjabi language is not recognized among ordinary circles as an accepted language. It is important to know, to get it recognized as the language of an important region, by all and sundry. It is recognized by the Sahitya Akademi as one of the fourteen languages which are important.

*Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay:* Also in the Constitution.

*Mulk Raj Anand:* Yes. It is a basic thing. But many people, for their own reasons, have a prejudice if one is born a Punjabi. They strive to have their own language fully recognized. But that is not the case with the Punjabi language, and the same is the case with the Punjabi theatre. I will not make any claims for the language more than is due to it. But as Balraj Sahni has already said, it is a historical fact that to the outsiders, the Punjabi language is considered not an important one. I am, of course, not an expert in my own language but I say, I am a humble reader. I am not entirely ignorant of the language, but I do know it in the way an ordinary citizen can read his mother-tongue. Now, I have seen the Punjabi theatre and followed the movement of the Punjabi drama in the three or four directions presented to you by Mrs Sanyal. I have not much to add to the paper but apart from the purpose which have been put before you, it is important that you should not get away with the idea as is common with the middle class people that the Punjabi is a vulgar person, who does not know how to speak. That is the common feeling. If that is so, the next few points that follow are very important. Due to the historical situation in Punjab, the theatre there has no doubt

been very much behind that of different other languages, particularly Bengali, in the sense that we have no professional theatre as you have, say, in Bengal. But the vitality of impulse, the purity of the impulse in the various forms show a compensatory quality in the Punjabi theatre and the Punjabi drama, which is not present in Hindi. Mr Mathur told you that drama must be written and acted in Hindi, non-Hindi speaking people must come and build the Hindi theatre. In the Punjabi production, both the drama tradition and theatrical activity subsist. They are both present and they have their vitality, but they are amateur. Now, the situation has to be corrected in the historical perspective. Unless we approximate to the reality, the historical appreciation, the development of the last few years, as Mrs Sanyal has presented to you, we will not be able to go forward. Undoubtedly, one of the most important things in the Punjabi theatre will be the contribution of Mr Nanda. Whether it was Mrs Norah Richards or Mr Nanda himself who wrote those plays I do not know. But I would say that if one studies the plays one gets to know about the influence of Mrs Norah Richards in the formation of the Punjabi theatre.

The second point brought out is this: the Punjabi opera is only one form of activity in the Punjabi theatre. The Punjabi drama is more mature. There are at least twenty plays in the Punjabi language, many of which are equal to any plays written anywhere else in the country. There is no room for self-complacency. There is room for a realization of the fact. Three things have become important in the case of provincial dramas. The case of Hindi, Marathi and Gujarati have already been presented to you. Those three things which I referred to, in my opinion, are these and they come down, perhaps, to every language but certainly apply with force to the Punjabi language. Please do not expect that the Punjabi theatre dies from frustration, economic frustration of writers who are unable to work, to make a living by writing for Punjabi drama. It is not so. I do not believe a journalist in Punjabi, a writer in the Punjabi language, whether for the radio or for the ordinary theatre, should be allowed to languish due to callousness. In this sense, it is true of other languages, in all parts of India.

Then I come to the theatres. Without the existence of theatres—actual buildings—where plays can be performed, what can be achieved? I know I am stating a truism, known to all people but I must come down to fundamentals over and over again in this Seminar to get results. Then we come to the next point—how will the Punjabi drama and the theatre be paid for? No doubt a writer writes for the love of his soul but not merely for that. Every one has a soul—I have one—otherwise I cannot write. It is all right to talk about these things, but a writer has to live. He has to keep his body and soul together. And here again, I say, the Punjabi theatre will be paid for in the same way, by the same methods, which Mr Mathur demands for the Hindi drama. In so far as the provincial theatre is concerned, there will be a place for the Punjabi writer and an important part for the Punjabi professional dramatist to play. But please, let us not be unrealistic in this Seminar and go on talking of theories of the theatre. We are going to put forward our recommendations to the Sahitya Akademi—I do not know—it may be the Sangeet Natak Akademi, or the Ministry of Education, Government of India. We expect them to implement these in a practical manner and provide the stage in our country with those things, those situations and facilities which exist in all other countries of the world, as in Europe, wherever there is theatrical activity. There must be theatrical building in each region. We should have stipends given to the writers of plays.



Those that have already written plays must be paid for. I would recommend that the Government of India recognizes this and, in all generosity, contributes for all the language groups and awards subsidies to any writer who has written plays of recognized merit, because that money will enable him to write a second one. That is exactly what happened in my case. Similarly, if we are able to give grant of a thousand rupees to Balwant Gargi, I will see that his next play is written this year. Then generosity is demanded from us all in regard to our young writers and theatrical enthusiasts, for them to convert themselves from amateurs into professionals. We may enlist the support of the Government for the conversion by grants to people who are writing plays and performing in the larger context of the Five Year Plan, to make the rest of the people become Plan conscious. I do not mean just propaganda or anything like that and without any political colour. They could, by subsidies and such generousities, keep writers in each language group contented. In Punjab in particular, the position is very bad. You cannot find publishers for a book today, except of course, for text books.

*Balraj Sahni:* No, no, there are several today. They are living on this business entirely.

*Mulk Raj Anand:* Here you have to distinguish between real good Punjabi writers and bogus writers, commercial knaves belonging to a cheap, vulgar class. I beg to withdraw my statement about publishers. I would like the Sangeet Natak Akademi to draw up a scheme for publishing plays in all the languages of India including Punjabi. Those plays may be printed by the Sangeet Natak Akademi.

*A Delegate:* Having lived in Delhi for nearly seven years now and having had to tour quite a lot in Punjab, it was very nice to hear the note of hope as to what is going to happen to the Punjabi drama. There are two points and these are to my mind very practical points as far as the Punjabi drama is concerned. And those points arose either as a result of my personal experiences when I discuss this question of having dramatic performances in the mofussil areas of Punjab, not near about Delhi, but in the heart of Punjab and the problems are these. That for any theatre to become a people's theatre and to exist on its own without any royal patronage, which must be necessary as Dr Anand has brought out in the beginning, it has got to become a people's theatre. In the interior areas of Punjab where you know the spending capacity of a villager or a farmer is comparatively much higher than the spending capacity of a similar person in any other part of India, and where one can see that once these people get to like the plays, once we create the urge in them, Punjabi drama will not only come to stay but it is going to become one of the most powerful dramatic movements in the whole of India. But there are certain practical difficulties, to which I am afraid, we have to give a rather serious thought. It is this. In a theatrical performance we must have ladies to take part and it is very difficult actually to get the right type and sufficient number of ladies. If we start searching for ladies we might with great difficulty get a few ladies to come and act. Suppose you staged a successful play with those ladies at one particular place and you tell them to go to another place to any other town which is only ten miles away, where we know we will be able to make a lot of money, they say 'No', and the reason for this 'No' is the crowds at other places are uncontrollable. That is one problem. The second thing is this question of theatre buildings, having theatre halls at every place. I think one or two years

ago, we were discussing this in one of our symposiums and I think it was Mrs Sanyal who brought out the suggestion—let us start a movement so that every civic body, every municipality in each town is made to provide a theatre for the place. It is the most essential thing along with parks, school buildings, hospitals, etc. We have got to find ways and means. Now, how are we going to make these civic bodies conscious of giving a theatre just as they like to give a garden to the people, or a play ground to the students. Just on the same basis somewhere there must be a theatre to the people. If we wait on the Government to build theatres at different places we might meet with results or we might not. But if we get the civic bodies to get into it, I think the work will be done quicker.

*Romesh Chander:* Mr Chairman, Sir, I shall take precisely three and a half minutes. In this discussion, we are gradually entering into smaller details which should not be discussed just now, for instance, this question of making a request to civic bodies and municipalities for providing theatre buildings etc. This point has been mentioned in Dr Anand's paper and Dr Marzban's paper, and there will be enough scope for us to discuss as to how we are going to have these theatres in brick and mortar.

Now about the paper read just now. Yesterday, Mr Mathur posed a question. What form plays are to take today? I think there will be, particularly after having read Dr Mulk Raj Anand's paper, enough chance to discuss this important question. I wish to draw only a pointer and that is this. Apart from whatever else the Punjabi theatre may have been doing, the Punjabi theatre today in this particular period in the operas or whatever word you may call it—you have seen *Badai Junj*, *Rukhe Kheta*, *Hir Ranjha*—these three operas have unfortunately not been published. And I support Dr Mulk Raj Anand, because the publishers are not taking up the work of publishing them. Those are pointers towards lyrical poetical drama which will be the answer to our present needs. And at this stage I need not say more.

*Chairman:* Thank you.

*Balraj Sahni:* I just want to take one minute. It is about Norah Richards and a wonderful tribute has been paid to her by Mrs Sanyal. I was a student in Rawalpindi and one day I heard that an English lady had come with a dramatic troupe, and that they are going to perform at the Railway Institute in Rawalpindi. There was great curiosity in me because the troupe consisted of college students who during holidays were going from place to place staging the plays which Norah Richards had written in English and got translated into Punjabi. When I went there, the Railway Institute was so crowded that there were about five to six thousand people trying to get in. The police had to be called to maintain order. The show was cancelled twice because the crowds were uncontrollable. I too got excited and I wanted to know what was peculiar about these. Any how at last the show was staged and I also went into the hall. Now there were no decorations, there were no settings of any kind. The first skit which I remember was of a village woman giving birth to a child and the dayah who mismanaged the whole thing—she was the only assistance available in the village—resulting in the woman's death and the relations all mourning and all that. There were no electric lighting or any powerful lights excepting a hurricane lamp. There were no powdered make up, but I tell you, the crowd of two or three thousands, who assembled there, were all

in tears. The impact was so powerful and from that very day the conviction had grown in my heart that no account of handicaps can stand in the way of people who want to stage a play. That was a long time ago. I was a second Year student in Rawalpindi. From this alone, the deep satisfaction I got, deep release of a powerful emotion I got, it made me really interested in drama and theatre and left on me an everlasting effect. I happened to remember this incident and I wanted to tell you that not that Norah Richards had written great plays but that she had inspired others like Dr Anand, Sheila Bhatia and Mrs Sanyal to write great plays.

*Chairman:* Well, a personal comment, Mr Balraj. I believe that now you will act at least in one Punjabi play. All these people are witnesses.

*Surjit Singh:* Mrs Sanyal has put in her paper, "Another peculiarity is that theatre in Punjab does not necessarily mean theatre in Punjabi." She used the words 'does not'. Unconsciously in the end of this para she pointed out, "This point is touched here only to show the tremendous uphill task which faced and faces the students or lovers of Punjabi Theatre." Does this mean that she still considers that the Punjabi theatre is not necessarily a Punjabi theatre in the Punjabi language? I must say that the theatre in Punjab is necessarily a Punjabi theatre. At the same time, I would like to point out here that the Punjabi theatre consists of the Punjabi language alone and that it does not consist of Hindi. They have grown side by side and we cannot separate them

*Members:* Agreed.

*Surjit Singh:* The second point is about the question of availability of women actors in the Punjabi language. I can assure you that there is no scarcity of women actors in Punjab. During the last seven or eight years, we have found plenty of ladies who are coming forward to take part in Punjabi plays. In Pepsu itself, we are producing not less than forty to fifty plays every year. In most of the plays, there are girls who are taking part and they are taking part with vigour and enthusiasm, and I assure you that there is so much talent both in villages and towns, if it is properly developed, any play can be staged with complete reliance on them.

*Sheila Bhatia:* The opera as Mrs. Sanyal has said has developed in the Punjabi language. I know of one musical stage lasting for about two years in the Punjabi language. It was based entirely on folk songs. Even in Pepsu, a few plays had been staged which have been based on the folk songs as such. For example, three years ago, in Nabha, an opera was played describing the rural life of the country. When we discuss the next paper on opera I will bring out the point. I would like to say that I am going back to the Punjabi experiences in the opera and I want to point out to the Seminar the difficulties which we are facing today and no amateur group on its own can face these difficulties. For example, musician is such an important part, is so important to the growth of a musical item that no amateur group can afford to pay Rs 200 to Rs 300 per night to give one performance. Our experience has been whenever we have staged these operas we have had to hire—I am sorry to use the word hire—musicians from Amritsar because there was no other source and it was impossible for us to continue our performance because we had to spend Rs 200 to 300 per night. If the

Seminar wishes that the growth of the opera should take place wherever attempts are being made whether it is in the north or the south—I am connected with this—I think, the Seminar should recommend to the Sangeet Natak Akademi that some steps should be taken to encourage these groups which are busy making experiments so that these difficulties can be solved.

On the last page, there are four points which have been made for the growth of this form and I do not want to go through those four points again but I want to add one more point very emphatically, and that is, with due apologies to those who are working in that area, and especially to Mr J.C. Mathur who is not here at the moment. In the A.I.R., which is going to be so helpful in the field of opera and in the development of opera, the artists voices are stifled.

*Romesh Chander:* Their voices are tuned to the necessity of the employer and what would probably mean the necessity of voice criterion.

*Sheila Bhatia:* As things exist today, if we are making an experiment in this field, we have to turn to the A.I.R. songsters and one finds that they sing sitting here and you cannot hear beyond the first two rows and in this way you cannot develop the opera. I am only thinking aloud after my experience.

*Romesh Chander:* A.I.R. is not to be blamed.

*The Lady:* I am not blaming and what I want is that this natural voice should be preserved as it is and not be stifled. (Hear! Hear!)

*A Delegate:* The only way in which the voice can be preserved is, if I am correct, not to allow them to go on the All India Radio and I cannot see any other way.

*Sheila Bhatia:* The radio is playing a very important part and secondly, training of musicians should be in a way in which the radio does not mar the quality of music. It is a fact which A.I.R. has got to take into account.

*Romesh Chander:* Whether it is the medium of the radio or of the stage, it has its own technical requirements. You cannot possibly say that A.I.R. is doing this to propagate this. It must develop its own essential requirements and, that is to say, the voice production as required by the microphone. We have to do that. Secondly, as far as the stage is concerned, it is undoubtedly a different medium and for that you have to cultivate your voice, specialise it and that is what I tried to put in a diplomatic way. I am putting it now bluntly and that is the cultivation of voice according to the requirements of the stage.

*A Delegate:* Certain musicians are not fit for the dramatic stage. Either they should be debarred or they should voluntarily sacrifice.

*Sheila Bhatia:* I am not fully aware of the techniques. It is a certain distance which we have to keep in mind.

*Chairman:* We shall take up this question when we discuss opera.