

A Hundred Years of Gujarati Drama and Theatre

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The story of the theatre movement in Gujarat is spread a little over a hundred years. Only recently, to be correct, in the year 1952, the centenary of the Gujarati theatre was celebrated at various places. The country was hardly at peace before 1800. The Marathas and the Mohammedans, followed by foreign tribes, marauded the country at different intervals. Though there were few religious feuds, political objectives were in plenty, mainly due to the richness of the soil. People could hardly get time to settle down and assemble to devote to cultural occupations. Even preserving and protecting some of the most artistic structures, coming down as most valuable heritage from olden days, had become difficult. Life was insecure and people were restless; yet they had always a liking for mirth and merriment. The recreations were forthcoming, but they were mostly short-lived and served piecemeal. There were fairs, perhaps, in plenty in which at times the Natputli dance proved to be a major attraction. This was more or less a crude form of puppet show, the scale being small and the canvas limited. However, it was ingenious in many respects, mainly in exhibiting dress and depicting mimicry.

The Bhavaiaas, the touring parties, performed Bhavaais which, according to some, is a remnant of an old form of dance-drama. They were caricatures of social life of middle class and lower middle class folk. Their renderings were at times mighty good, but mostly tended to be vulgar and crude, base and overdrawn. The Bhavaai parties moved from place to place with their miserable belongings, and performed scenes which were usually considered to be popular.*

However, these Bhavaais occupied an important place in the life of the people. They provided fun, recreation and entertainment. They had their own code and courses for training, which were generally considered hard and laborious. Recruits were enlisted from a particular sect when they were pretty young to derive the best advantage from the suppleness of the muscles and the limbs. They were taught elements of music, a bit of dance, and quite a lot of acting.

But they were far from the drama and the theatre. The *Natyashastra* of Bharata had fallen into decay and degeneration. The text was forgotten or badly remembered, and consequently had undergone many changes. Libraries were locked up, rare books closeted and unavailable for the people because of the insecure times.

The first part of the nineteenth century brought a good many new features in various direc-

* Ramanlal Desai: Presidential Speech at Rangbhoomi Parishad in 1938.

tions, many in education and in social behaviour. Educational societies were established and the outstanding results of the new education came to be easily visible. In the middle of the nineteenth century, touring companies of actors from England ventured to put up shows in big cities of the land, particularly in Bombay. Some of them were enterprising enough to build theatres. Apart from the English, even a few Russian and French artists visited the country. Operas and revues were introduced and new forms were forthcoming. Shakespeare's plays had already caught the mind of the newly educated. When staged, they also caught the eye. Here was something new: a balanced style, and a well-woven plot. There were situations, full-blooded and dramatic, which allured the audiences. There was something striking about the dresses, peculiar, colourful combination of costumes. There was something at once heroic, at times tragic, highly relieved by fun and frolic. The swords and the helmets provided the picturesque, the kings and the fools provided grandeur. In between, there were frailties of women, full of delicacy and tenderness with exceptions of jealousy and hatred. Love, mutual and ennobling, ruled supreme. The language was poetic, fluid and lucid, phrases flowing and flowery. This certainly was something, the magic of the stage to conjure the masses, to touch their hearts and rouse their emotions. It seemed that something had come to stay to infuse enthusiasm, to revive the old forms, to create new shapes, to explore many angles.

The bulk of the credit for the new revival goes to the Parsis, a tiny race, hardly about a lakh today, who were always ready for big adventures. Migrating from Iran owing to bad days, they landed in Gujarat, and settled down peacefully to undertake and execute pioneering works. In Bombay, they found a newly-developed town where their talents had the utmost scope. The race proved resourceful and tactful and had imagination and patience. They had to struggle for existence and had hardly any taboos. Their contact with the British was easily accomplished with natural gains in many directions. The first newspaper in Gujarati was brought out by them. They liked clubs and associations and formed many with various objectives, some of them being of philanthropic nature.

The clubs provided the proper ground and atmosphere for discussions and exchange of ideas. They attracted talent along with the elite. The formation of these clubs was quite rapid and some of them were quite cosmopolitan. A few clubs with a definite object to promote the cause of drama were also organized. Here they could rehearse at length and meet to discuss details. Records of such clubs in Surat and Bombay are available, and some of them were labelled as dramatic *mandalis*. The Amateur Dramatic Club, the Parsi Stage Players, the Gentlemen Amateurs, The Oriental Natak Mandali, the Persian Zoroastrian, the Baronet, the Talbert, The Shakespeare, The Volunteers, The Victoria, The Hindi, The Original, The Victoria Opera are only a few interesting names out of the many clubs, organized to produce plays. This was sometime around 1850 and before. It is interesting to note that with one of the important *mandalis*, eminent persons like Dadabhai Nauroji and Sir Dinsha Wacha, then of course young, were associated. Dr. Bhau Daji, the renowned scholar, was also one of the founder members*

* Dr Dhanjibhai Patel: *Parsi Natakni Tavarikh*.

Between 1850 and 1860, a number of regular dramas were presented, mostly by the Parsis, both in Surat and Bombay. They were either satires or farces, their main object being to entertain. But before 1850, the South Maharashtra Natak Mandali was formed, which produced plays on themes based on Hindu mythology. A troupe had ventured to visit Bombay, and even to travel northwards, producing plays in some of the native States of Kathiawar, now Saurashtra, with Ahmedabad as its centre. By 1860, the drama had come to stay; the stage had asserted itself. The frequency of incoming touring companies from England was increasing. They provided variety and impetus, and also served as a healthy challenge. Books were available in plenty, translations and adaptations were thriving, and literary media were without any burden of religious preferences.

The new writing was thus becoming a force. A prolific writer like Kaikshru Kabraji was now shaping the destiny of the Gujarati Stage. He was a versatile personality, a great social reformer and an adventurous educationist. He wrote a number of plays, produced many, at times acted in some, edited a paper, learnt and patronized music, launched a theatrical company, and encouraged artists and their movements. He gave a number of public lectures on classical Indian music and worked hard to rescue it and bring it to a respectable status.

Kabraji was a keen student of Persian literature. Many of the Parsi writers had dramatized some of the anecdotes from the Persian lore, particularly from the *Shahnama*. Rustom and Sohrab, the mighty warriors, were usually the most favoured heroes of the stage. Kabraji turned out a good play, *Bejan Manieh* (1869), from the same epic and *Fare-dun* was another. Apart from the *Shahnama*, he borrowed themes from Sheridan and his contemporaries. He even managed to handle the episode of Lava and Kusha from the Ramayana. He had an open mind ready to learn, and never missed an opportunity to explore unknown postures.

Naturally, the Gujarati language was getting richer and colourful. This was an initial and experimental stage. Kabraji was doing a useful work in Bombay, when another personality, Ranchhodbhai Udayaram, happened to visit the city in the year 1864 and stayed on for twenty years. He was born in Khera District in 1837, just a couple of years earlier than Kabraji, but came to Bombay just when Kabraji had started his spade work. Ranchhodbhai was a scholar of Sanskrit, and had already mastered the *Natyashastra*. He had seen Bhavaais in Gujarat and was sick of them. * He knew the Vedas, poetics, grammar, economics, history and most of the available European literature. A stage came when Kabraji felt that the theatre movement required orientation and must have its roots in the soil. What was going on was mainly form without soul, theme which had no life. It was most fortunate that Kabraji and Ranchhodbhai became friends and at once started work in the right direction. Zeal and enthusiasm were there in plenty, and people were ready to receive Ranchhodbhai, who with his facile pen set to work and produced plays. He had drunk deep in the classics, and had known the pulse of the people. He brought forth plays which at once became popular. His

* Ranchhodbhai: *Rangbhumi*, 1923.

Lalita Dukhdarshak, a tragic work depicting the miseries of a wise young wife married to a profligate brute, was a sensational hit. The characters were drawn from life, from the middle class society and were, therefore, living and could touch the hearts of the people. His *Harishchandra*, based on a Tamil script, was another popular play and had more than a thousand performances between 1875 and 1885. The Parsis staged it in their own way later on, and got it translated and recast in Hindustani. Added to it were the great Munshi Aga Hashra's touches of poetry and it was staged in all the big cities of India and outside.

The thirst for knowledge was yet not completely satisfied. Along with the English impact and output, interest to revive the old Sanskrit plays was also gaining ground. Not only translations of the Sanskrit masterpieces like *Shakuntala* and *Uttararamcharitam* were available, but even a translation of the *Natyashastra* in Gujarati was attempted. The outstanding one was Kavi Nathuram's in simple verses and mainly faithful. *Natyaprakash* by Ranchhodhbhai was another good work. Narmad and Nagindas had published their plays *Krishna Balvijaya* and *Gulab* inspired by Sanskrit classics (1862-63). The old tradition was not completely lost and forgotten. A few glimpses were definitely forthcoming.

Shankarlal Maheshwar in Saurashtra and Mulshanker Yagnik at Baroda published about a dozen plays in Sanskrit keeping in tune with the old traditions, yet exploring new subjects, viz., of Samyukta, Pratap and Shivaji. Their works are hailed 'as possessing melody of diction, grace of expression, choice of scenes'. In spite of the foreign onslaught and Iranian touches, the main structure of the Gujarati plays were more or less based on the Sanskrit pattern.

The new writing, particularly the plays, required new theatres. The play must be performed, and it was demanding a comfortable and convenient stage. The Parsis were enterprising and inventive experimenters. The demand for theatre was ever increasing. The old halls were out of use and out of date. A number of theatres were coming up, chiefly in Bombay, and were getting quick engagements. The main producers were Balliwala and Khatau, followed by Dadiba Thoothi, Apu and Khambatta. Madan, one of their colleagues, later on made history by owning a chain of theatres all over India. The construction was mostly stereotyped. The structures which were raised in Ahmedabad, Baroda and Surat were mere copies of Bombay models and some of them were poorly done, having a tin roof, a positive disadvantage in monsoons. Acoustics was then an entirely unknown science.

However, the Parsi companies had achieved a lot in the field of production. All imaginable contrivances were used to create illusions, stunts, scene transfers, sudden break-ups, and quick changes. An elaborate mechanism was set up and guarded as a secret. Fires, introduction of heavenly bodies, burning of live persons were arranged with all possible ingenuity. There was a period when the competitive spirit between various companies ran amuck in designing 'trick scenes' and all attention was centered round this so-called 'business' at the cost of the essentials.

We shall summarize a few highlights or interesting ventures of the Parsi performers. They claim to have staged the first Urdu play in Bombay. It was in the year 1871. A Gujarati

play based on the story of Kamavati, *Sonana Mulni Khurshed*, written by Edelji Kheri, was translated by Beramji Marzban into Hindustani and was staged by Victoria Mandali in the Victoria Theatre. The experiment proved a great success, and was followed up by many munshis fully exploring Shakespear, and was staged by the Parsi, the Hindu and the Muslim actors together. At times, there was a curious combination of two Shakespearian plays into one. Balliwala and Cowasji Khatau had started well but fell out, and had their ups and downs. They ran a race to introduce a woman to act the delicate role and they succeeded in securing the services of an European lady, Mary Fanton, who featured even in Gujarati roles. Dadabhai Patel was the first graduate, an M.A., to appear as Hatam in *Hatamtai*, a known Urdu play. In 1875, Jahangir Khambhata, anxious to visit England to see the English stage, accidentally happened to undertake a voyage by the *Excelsior* and anchored at Rangoon, Singapore and Java and saw some performances there. That an actor had to perform is a simple law which was carried to its extreme in the case of Ratanshah Davar of the Alfred Company. One evening, his father died but he decided to act his role for the night and then attend the funeral. Balliwala and his team toured India, visited Burma and were guests of the Burmese king who was so much impressed by the performances that he chartered a steamer for the company and dispatched them to London to produce their plays with a running commentary in English. Some of the Urdu plays were staged even at the Windsor Castle before the Royalty. This happened in 1885, when Kabraji and Ranchhodhbhai were comrades-in-arms. A play entitled *Nala Damayanti* was staged in a sketchy theatre put up in front of the Crawford Market in Bombay. There was always a great rush for the show, so much so that Hindu ladies would go out with their young ducklings. To ensure that the children may not disturb the performance, the management had provided a number of small cradles and beds where they deposited their young ones to be looked after by the door-keepers.

A number of Gujarati companies were functioning between 1865 and 1875. Ranchhodhbhai was mainly responsible in putting them on proper footing. His activities were parallel to the Parsi efforts and from 1865 onwards his plays, *Banasur*, *Nala Damayanti*, *Madalasa*, *Harishchandra* and *Lalita Dhukdarshak* were getting good support.

The first venture was launched by a group of ordinary Gujarati teachers with Ranchhodhbhai as their director. This effort was blessed by Sir Mangaldas and Diwan Manibhai Jashbhai. Ranchhodhbhai was also responsible for starting the Gujarati Natak Mandali in 1878, which later turned into Mumbai Gujarati.

While dealing with Bombay, we cannot afford to neglect the legitimate claims of Saurashtra and Gujarat. It is gathered that Vaghjibhai with the help of his brother Muljibhai started the Arya Subodh, later on Morbi Arya Subodh, before 1878.* Simultaneously, one Narbheram seems to have collected a sizeable group at Halwad, of which Vaghji and Mulji were associates. These brothers were followed by Trambak Trivedi and Trambak Raval.

* Ramnik S. Desai: *Gujarati Natya*, Dec. 1953

They secured some State aid and started their units. The Vankaner, Morbi and the Arya Subodh had a flourishing time. This was a signal for any number of mushrooming companies to start. Here was a chance for some of the expert Bhavaiaas who with their talent and training could easily secure enlistment and livelihood. Even the Parsi pioneers had to run down to North Gujarat to secure services of young boys. Amrit, Keshav, Master Mohan, and Jayashankar, the Guru of Bal Gandharva, are a few outstanding instances. A certain community in north Gujarat had natural gifts,* and they trained their youngsters to advantage. The Nayaks, Bhojaks and Mirs were the best of the lot. At the end of the century, the dramatic movement was at its best and dozens of companies were thriving. There was always some reshuffle or an offshoot from the main, owing to jealousies and quarrels; some of them were always on the move, but all of them managed to exist and exist well.

The most outstanding figure as a playwright and a producer was Dayabhai Dholshaji (1867-1902), author of twenty plays. Unfortunately, he died at the age of thirty-five after an eventful life. Himself a scholar and a poet with knowledge of the classics and gifted in many ways, he had his roots in the soil. He knew his people in almost every detail and picked up types from common folks—cobblers and tailors, goldsmiths and gardeners, thugs and sadhus. He, too, began by borrowing from Shakespeare, met success in *Ahrumati* and built his first theatre in Ahmedabad in 1894. Luckily he got the services of one Ghulam Ali, a Surati Bohra who was an ardent musician and an expert mechanic, a rare combination. Both set to work to contrive complicated mechanism in the theatre-craft and produced some spectacular effects. Dayabhai survived an attempted murder, donated more than a lakh of rupees towards famine and plague relief funds, and died young. But most of his writings bear the stamp of Sanskrit literature. In 1890, he owned the Deshi Natak Samaj, started earlier. By the start of the century, the company had already achieved successes with its varied repertoire of plays. It seems that a right note was struck. The Deshi's contribution was solid, constructive and lasting.**

Dayabhai was followed by Mulani, Nathuram, Vibhakar, Phoolchand, Prabhulal, Brahma Bhatt and Jaman. Vibhakar gave political bias in his scripts, a welcome change, but was short-lived. Jaman remaining within the fold, tried to restrict the time and reform the production but failed. The Parsis had declared their innings with the result that Ratanshah Sinor and Sarabji Katrak, both neat and decent actors, along with a few others were a part and parcel of purely Gujarati companies. In 1907, Vibhakar was already asserting that the stage was on the decline.*** By 1920, more than three hundred Natak Mandalis must have flourished in one form or another, many of them but short-lived. After 1925, a rot set in and most of them suffered heavy blows, and by 1950, hardly half a dozen of them could survive.

The causes of their decay were many. On the one hand, the young amateurs were asserting themselves with new experiments, fresh outlook and shorter realistic themes. Writers

* Autobiography of Bal Gandharva

** Jayanti Dalal.

*** Vibhakar: Speech at Sahitya Parishad, Natak Vibhag, 1909.

unfortunately were few, but they were in constant search for problems offering fresh solutions with reforms in plenty, revolt at times. They were certainly breaking new grounds and discarding all the old hackneyed artificialities. They were direct and natural in their productions. The sets were simplified, light effects were improved upon, make-up was radically changed and voices were modulated. On the other hand, the traditionals refused to change; perhaps it was difficult for them to do so. The males who acted female roles were being replaced by newcomers and scripts were easily available. The values were changing and changing fast. More of Ibsen and Moliere was being introduced; Tagore, in songs and style if not in theme, was consciously pronounced. Those who condemned the regulars certainly achieved a great deal in many directions but their efforts, being sketchy and spasmodic, lost in neatness and exactness. They lacked the advantage of having a permanent theatre and hence the regular training.

The question of scripts is a sad chapter in the history of Gujarati stage. Almost all the Natak Mandalis were owned and run by someone who was merely a businessman, hardly a playwright or a producer. There were exceptions, but only a few. It is a pity that the copyright of the script never rested with the author and the scripts under performance were not printed. Even today, after a lapse of half a century and many of the mandalis having gone into extinction, full texts of hundreds of plays are not available, so much so that some of them must have been either lost or destroyed. It is true that some of the plays, in their final shape, were the product of more than one person, songs being mostly composed by somebody whose name was usually a guarded secret. All these things lend a bad colour to the problem and revive bitter memories.

Since we are dealing with texts, let us broadly examine the themes of these plays. The epics, the *Shahnama*, the Mahabharat and the Ramayan were fully explored along with Puranic stories. The canvas was wide and varied. Along with the epics, Shakespeare was the main source of inspiration and earnings. Bhakti-rasa ruled supreme; *shringar* followed and flowed; history was well represented; social problems were amply discussed, but political themes were comparatively few. The British contacts had certainly offered many gifts towards the development of the theatre movement, but the Theatre Act of 1876 totally hampered the patriotic sentiments and the growth of a national theatre.*

During the peak period, Lord Krishna was the darling of the stage. Themes full of his exploits and worship attracted the masses. Songs woven round him were highly popular. Scenes presenting the village well and the pipal tree pleased the audiences. Krishna motifs inspired group dancing and group singing. Here, the life of Gujarat found its proper representation and actors achieved high water-mark in depiction.

It is interesting to note that, in spite of manifold foreign borrowings, the structure of the Gujarati drama has always remained mainly Sanskritic. In spite of Shakespearean and Sheridanian influence, out of more than two thousand plays staged during a hundred years,

* Dr Hariprasad Desai's Resolution in Rangabhoomi Parishad—Ahmedabad, 1938.

barely half a dozen plays had a tragic ending. Separate farces were introduced, and later on these got mixed up with the main plot but throughout the building of the play, the basis was that of Bharata. Shakespeare, at his best or worst, was shaped into oriental mould, and the bearing of the Sanskrit drama can always be traced. The Brahmins and the educated gave a lead and the others followed.

It is a pity that in spite of the Gujarati performances making a good and sizable account in the box-office, Gujarati stage never had proper facilities of comfortable theatres. It had a good patronage of princes, in the beginning earned impressive figures, donated for charities in plenty while the going was good, but alas, the surpluses succumbed to speculations. The glamorous cinema-house was always ahead of the industry, but the dramatic art had not the same luck. On the other hand, cinema pounced upon a few remnant houses left for the drama. The new movement during the last three decades had to rely mostly on clumsy halls and obviously the drama suffered. And the scene is becoming worse. We are now asked to direct our attention to the so-called open-air, but no theatre. These are to be used for short sessions and to be neglected for major part of the year. This cannot satisfy the demand of a living theatre.

The State Government is organizing annual drama competitions, a laudable effort but unfortunately without the facilities of proper theatres. Again, the organizations suffer from rigid and heavy official control. The State should aid but the organizations must be left to develop independently. The primary need is many small workable theatres where training facilities should be available.

The Entertainment Tax is another handicap and a hindrance; censorship also should be relative and relaxed. Because of these controls and want of proper facilities, the playwrights supply either propaganda scripts or straight one-set texts. Of late, a vicious tendency to import and adapt popular hits of lighter stuff from Picadilly is on the increase. Some of them provide a good entertainment but are mostly short-lived and harmful. Shakespeare in good old days was not a danger, but the modern mediocres of foreign origin, when brought in too often, may prove injurious to a well-established classical structure. The revival should not hamper the survival of the Indian ethics, particularly when study of Sanskrit classics is on the decline.

The Gujarati drama is a fusion of many elements. It absorbed a lot and produced a variety of results. It has its highlights and pitfalls. Some of the old masters were alive and aware, had wisdom and foresight, and even without proper facilities of theatres, they presented an ingenious and impressive stagecraft, perhaps unique in many ways, which is a real asset and bound to prove useful to sincere young students eager to march towards a new theatre. The theatre movement must find its proper place in our educational system, to chasten our taste and chisel our wits. The new theatre must be an open forum representing all thoughts and shades so that the society can widen its vision and be more tolerant.*

* The discussion on Gujarati and Marathi theatre was taken up together and follows, therefore, the paper on the Marathi theatre.—Ed.