

Amateur Theatre in India

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Let us start by, first of all, deciding upon some definition of what is meant by an amateur group. Generally speaking, we all believe that only a group, which does not perform for money, is amateur. Such amateur groups every now and then spring up under some sudden inspiration in every locality or office and exhaust themselves completely by the time they have somehow raised subscription and staged some old play for the entertainment of the people of the locality or the office concerned. In such an activity, neither any organization grows up nor is there any real discussion about art. Their theatre activity is more or less like going out on a picnic during some holidays, where it does not matter whether the cooking was good or not. The main thing is to have fun, to make merry. In fact, it would appear that greater the confusion, more frequent the mistakes, the greater would be the fun, the longer would it be possible to laugh over the whole thing.

I definitely believe that just now we are not discussing such amateur groups at all. In our country, the professional stage has not been able to fulfil its mission satisfactorily. Firstly, we do not have enough good professional theatres all over our country. Whatever exists is only in Calcutta. There is very little of it elsewhere, and at most of the places there is nothing at all. In order, therefore, to establish a good theatre tradition in our country, it would be necessary to create conditions in which the amateur theatre movement may survive, may grow.

Now a study of the activity of such amateur groups in various parts of our country reveals that these groups do take money for their performances, i.e., they sell tickets, only whether these are on the basis of payment to individual artists or not remains to be seen.

We all know very well that theatre is a collective art, a stage production presupposes conditions between many individuals and things. Take, for example, the stage which has to be hired, the costumes which have to be paid for, the musicians who would not come for background music for the love of it. You have to pay to the light-man, to the painter, to the make-up man. Often the playwright also has to be paid the royalty, and in our country of purdah and strict social conventions, quite often a lot of money has to be spent to collect actresses for the play (unless, of course, she be the producer's own wife). Then there is inevitably the Entertainment Tax. Incidentally, I may mention here a curious fact about Bengal which all of you may not know. In Calcutta, there are four professional theatres and they stage regular shows every week. But none of them has to pay any Entertainment Tax, the Government have very kindly exempted them from it. But all the others, known as amateur groups, have to pay the tax on their performances.

Thus it will be seen that in an amateur performance, a number of people receive payments

including the Government. But whereas all the others do give something in return to the theatre, the Government does not. However, it may be argued that this system is 'amateur' because everybody does not get paid. But it may equally be argued that if a producer does not pay any other member of his company except one or two important actors or actresses, would it mean that the group is amateur?

I myself was associated with one or two professional theatres of Calcutta towards the beginning of the Second World War. There were in those companies many like me who never received any payment, or at least did not get it regularly every month. In fact, whatever they got during the whole year was not enough to pay for the conveyance to and fro the theatre house everyday. Still, it would be really irrelevant to regard these theatres as amateur.

However, some difference is still there. In a professional theatre, there is always at least a commitment to pay salaries to the actors employed there. In amateur theatre, barring a very few exceptions, there is never any such commitment. This is obviously an important difference. Hence the burden of the theatre movement seems to rest on the shoulders of a few actors and actresses.

Thus, it is revealed that behind the country-wide renaissance for theatre, the main driving force is that of a few actors and actresses who are crazy about the theatre. Their madness for theatre is so intense and deep-rooted that on the one hand the nerve shattering race for earning a livelihood and on the other hand the irresistible desire to stage good plays and the unending blind meaningless obstacles in the fulfilment of that desire continuously try to batter them down but never completely succeed. Let us hope that on the basis of the discussions in this Drama Seminar, it would be possible to formulate such a plan as would help these poor crazy people. Because in them lies the future of the Indian drama.

One thing I may clarify here. To consider the actors and actresses to be responsible for the theatre renaissance is not, in any way, to belittle the role of the playwrights; for quite often the dramatist gets no money out of an amateur performance of his play, he does not expect it either. And I know one or two such groups also, where the main inspiration and the real backbone of the group is the playwright himself. But the dramatist is essentially a writer, usually it is possible for him to write a short story in place of a play. He may even write a play and get it published somehow. That at least is possible in Bengal. I have even known cases in Calcutta where a complete full-length play was published before it was staged and within a brief period of its publication, the entire edition was sold out.

What I intend to draw your attention to is the fact that a dramatist does have yet another, however, narrow means of self-expression apart from the theatre. Not so with the actors and actresses. They have, therefore, either to sell their talent in the professional market and act in the way as the nabobs of the market want them to or else they have to organize a group of their own and, by concentrating the diverse minds of their members on a common point, stage the plays they like in a manner they like. This is mainly the reason why almost always the main inspiration behind the new theatre-renaissance is that of those who act. They have no other means of self-expression.

It is always extremely difficult to give definition to any living thing. Usually, we regard acting without expectation of any monetary gain as the main characteristic of an amateur group. But essentially it is a very superficial characteristic. There is also a philosophic side to the question. In every age, new artists are born so that the decayed and worn out is weeded out from the garden of art, so that the half-truth or the falsehood under the mask of truth may completely be smashed and destroyed. They alone are the harbingers of new movements. In the fields of literature and painting, these movements have sprung from the bands of bubbling young people. In the beginning, they are merely ridiculed by the controlling gods of the contemporary market, but gradually jealousy takes the place of this attitude of ridicule.

Thus, in every age new movements spring up in order to establish and determine new values and new standards. In the field of theatre, this movement emerges among the groups of amateurs. The great Girish Chandra Ghosh, the father of modern Bengali stage, was himself an amateur first; even that extraordinary actor, Shishir Kumar Bhaduri, who has brought a new age to the Bengali Theatre, gave the first introduction of his talent in an amateur group. And this is not only true of our own country, it is much the same everywhere. The well-known Russian drama producer, Stanislavsky also had in the beginning started as the leader of an amateur group. Thus, it is only legitimate to say that the amateur theatre and the new dramatic movement mean more or less the same thing.

It is, therefore, necessary to consider ways and means by which amateur groups can gradually grow into professional groups, so that their new ideas, new style in acting, new production outlook may become one with the general artistic outlook of the common people of the country. Then alone a strong tradition of theatre could be built up in the country. Later on, when they are exhausted, when in the dynamic life of the country their acting becomes stale and ineffective, when after losing the truth of their youth they are clutching upon merely the mask of the truth, then another new amateur group will emerge on the scene, and will in its turn become a thing of ridicule and ultimately of jealousy. Only it is necessary that in the national cultural life this opportunity must remain that the old and the decadent don't continue to exercise unlimited right of putting obstacles in the path of those who are young and are marching forward.

However, this question comes later. First of all, we have to decide to recognize and respect the amateur groups as amateur groups. And this decision can be real only if we try to understand with open mind the problems and difficulties of amateur groups. I am not talking of artistic problems, for they can never be solved from outside. In fact, all new movements bring forth their own new solutions every time and this is the real source of strength of these movements. What has to be considered are the concrete difficulties facing those who can do something or are already doing and the possibility and desirability of removing some of these difficulties. I will place before you a few of the most outstanding ones.

Firstly, there is no stage for the amateurs. It should be a stage with reasonable space and reasonably sufficient lighting equipment, dimmers etc., so that a new producer may

experiment; it should have a little better acoustics so that at the time of intense emotional climax the actors are not forced to shout at the top of their voices. The auditoriums should be well planned so that it may be possible to see the complete stage from every seat (i.e., the composition on the stage may not be distorted from different positions in the auditorium), and should have a seating capacity of about 700-800 people so that there is no difficulty in raising enough money in every show. Last but not the least is the possibility to get the stage at reasonable rates, something which, at present, can only be dreamt of. As far as I know, in none of the three important cities of Calcutta, Delhi and Bombay, a stage with the above facilities is available. Only in Calcutta, there are a few better stages but they are all in the hands of professional theatre companies and their rents are fixed at extremely exorbitant rates with a view that no amateur group may be able to stand in competition with the professional companies. Yet, without healthy competition art cannot develop. Thus, the first demand of the amateur groups is for a good stage available at reasonable rates.

In other countries, there are municipal theatres in every town. I have not heard of any such building in any of the big cities in our country. Whoever may do it—Municipality, State Government, Central Government or Sangeet Natak Akademi or all these together—but it is absolutely necessary to build at least one stage in every big town of the country. I do not understand the intricacies of a budget nor can I grasp, even with utmost earnestness, the ultra serious ways of the official red-tape—these are certainly my own shortcomings. But I know that only if the authorities decide and call the local amateur groups for a little consultation then it would not be difficult to raise in every city a few lakhs of rupees for the purpose of building a good stage. Calcutta, Delhi, Bombay and Madras can most easily start the work within almost a month of their decision to do so. This is really the first point.

Secondly, the amateur groups have got to be exempted from the Entertainment Tax. I consider any extensive discussion on the question as utterly unnecessary because the whole thing appears to me as very stupid and unprincipled.

Thirdly, it is absolutely necessary to encourage the amateur groups and the dramatists in every region. There is a great dearth of good dramatists in our country. As it is impossible to think of a developed art of acting without good dramatic literature, similarly without a chance to witness good acting it is not possible to write good dramas. Both these things are so completely interdependent. Therefore, there should be plans to encourage both. For example, in every region a festival could be organized every year, or at least every two years, in which the writer of the best script staged and the best acting group are awarded a cash prize as well as a certificate. I am sure the publicity and honour thus achieved will encourage a number of playwrights and groups. Any State Government could easily contribute half of the cash prize, the other half to be provided from the sale proceeds of the festival. I should think that if these cash prizes are fixed at Rs 1000 for the best playwright and Rs 2000 for the best group, it would be quite satisfactory to begin with.

In this connection, it would also be useful to appoint a small panel of most eminent and important writers who would read all the scripts and on the basis of their literary judgement

would select plays to be honoured at the festival. This judgement would not depend upon production, because quite often due to excellence or otherwise of the production, the spectators find it difficult to properly evaluate the play.

Similarly, there would be yet another panel to see which group has the best team work. This would very much encourage our sense of collective work and it would gradually instil into the minds of both the spectators and the actor the realization that in a drama all the characters and the events are welded together in a single harmonious whole and there is no scope in it for any thing extraneous. This would also help the actors to be less egocentric.

Fourthly, the amateur group should also be helped in their organizational work. For example, it is necessary that all the groups are registered, their accounts are audited properly, and that they find it possible to maintain a library of their own. Besides, they should not be forced to hire somebody for some important role, because this invariably destroys the distinctive character of the production and the group. In fact, if any of the artists has to be paid, the first claim is that of the dramatist.

Fifthly, after every two-three years, an all-India drama festival should also be organized where no distinction should be made between amateur and professional groups. All should contribute to it according to their capacity. From this, a truly all India character of the Indian theatre would emerge. Of course, the responsibility for organizing this festival should be entirely on the Sangeet Natak Akademi and should not be delegated to any other organization. It is also necessary that all the participants in this festival get an opportunity to see the work of other groups and to learn from them, otherwise we would never be able to come out of our regional narrowness, would never be able to become real Indian artists.

These are some of my humble suggestions for the consideration of this assembly. I have ventured to put them forward because my deep love and devotion to theatre has given me some courage to do so. I hope that from the discussion here I will learn and understand many more new things and will discover many new truths.