

TRENDS OF INDIAN DRAMA TO - DAY

By Sachin Sengupta

DRAMA in India today has come to the forefront due to a country-wide movement for its resurgence. The number of dramatic performances have become almost phenomenal in every State of the Republic. Producers and directors have appeared who display histrionic abilities. Acting artists, educated and devoted to the cause, work with an enthusiasm that promises a better future. Plays are available not by dozens but by scores and hundreds. Signs of a renaissance are evident everywhere. And yet there persists a cry that contemporary India has no drama worth the name.

This cry does not, of course, come from those millions who rush for seats in places, closed in or open, where dramatic performances are held every night throughout the country. These millions do enjoy them, get inspirations from them, and take them as expressions of their own feelings and emotions and their own ideas about men and matters. It is not known what else might reasonably be expected of a drama.

Theoreticians and Critics

But the shouters claim that they know it as precisely as they know their arithmetic. They maintain, when two and two make four, principles and laws of Aristotle and Bharat are bound to yield perfect drama. They conveniently forget that world famous Greek tragedies were written long before Aristotle was born and Bharat classified the types of dramas he found as precious legacies. The theoreticians and critics do not write dramas themselves. Nor do they take part in their performances. They do not care to know the people's desires, their trials and tribulations, and the hopes they cherish though distressed and depressed. They, of course, devotedly turn over pages of books loaded with all kinds of theories, presumptions, and observations noted down by mostly foreign authors with a view to finding out art values of Indian drama and literature. It does not occur

to them that dead lines in cold prints do not old any live art.

Arts are not made by the forms of art alone. Forms are vehicles which artists choose for expressing their inner urge. Artists have been found in every field of art to turn aside old forms and to take recourse to new ones. Adherence to any particular form is no criterion of a live art. On the contrary, too much attention to formalism have been found to be taking away from an art, its compelling qualities which make it irresistible to its spectators and auditors.

Vital Force

To adjudge the values of an art we will have to find out whether it has any vital force that enables it to make an immediate contact with its patrons. If listeners of a song and an audience of a dramatic performance or spectators of a film-show fail to catch immediately what is being depicted they will never foster any love for them. And an art that fails to win the favour of its beloveds withers away as disappointed lovers do. That is why Indian drama has millions of lovers who find its charms so alluring and attractive that they most passionately respond to its advances. As long as it retains this spell in it, nobody would have any reasonable ground to say that India's venture in drama and dramatic literature are absolutely worthless. What a nation's drama should be like, mostly depends on what the majority of the people of that particular nation love it to be. No directive from any of the Thespian gods would ever evolve an Indian National Drama.

I do not deny that Indian drama, as we find it today, is a hybrid growth. But what I do maintain is that it preserves in it as much Indian traits and characteristics as other expressions of Indian literature do. Indian nation today alike Indian arts and letters is made of many non-Indian elements that have

been found helpful to its development although much of them were not known to our ancients or not by them even if they were not unknown.

Drama Borrowed From West

The present form of Indian drama was borrowed from the West although there existed exquisite indigenous forms and types of it. The latter were kept living by the rural people, while English educated section not only neglected them but sneered at them as rustic expressions of low-bred ideas crudely represented by vulgar performances. But powerful playwrights had the wisdom to amalgamate the borrowed and the ignored forms in view of the necessity for the evolution of a form that would be found capable of conveying the contents in a way to suit the intelligence of the illiterate masses as well as the educated classes. At the same time they kept the cost of production at the lowest possible limit considering the slender purse of the people. This voluntary restraint compelled dramatists to cut their coats according to the cloth available. They depended more on vocal effect which is one of the alleged drawbacks for which Indian drama stands condemned. But right from its very start, in the sixties of the nineteenth century, up to the time of the Independence the Indian drama in every region not only fulfilled its obligations to its patrons by honestly and ably depicting their sad plight due to social, economic and political bondages but also exhorted them for redemption. No serious students of Indian drama may have any ground to contradict it. Secondly, dramatists in the period, I have referred to while borrowed from the West, did never bury the treasures they had inherited from their forebearers. Puranic themes and patriotic struggles from Indian history and contemporary social injustice were so powerfully reflected through Indian drama and its performances that a tremendous enthusiasm swayed both the educated and the illiterates, the classes and the masses. Those dramatists did never impose their own thoughts and ideas on their audiences but watched and studied their feelings, and reactions to different pressures put on them by political, social and economic orders existing then and contrived to reflect them through a language they could understand. Never did those dramatists neglect national traits that had made India a distinctive cultural unit. For over eighty years Indian drama worked successfully to build a bridge over the gulf that had separated the newly grown city

dwellers from the rural populace to make India a national entity despite inevitable incursions of foreign elements.

Two Trends

But two other trends had also been working during the latter half of the nineteenth century. One of them worked for a revival of arts that India had developed before she had come in touch with any art expressions of the Western world. And the other sought for a fulfilment through a total adaptation of the Western methods. The former made a good headway and succeeded to revive forms of typical Indian dances, classical songs and more particularly the Indian art of paintings. Dramatists like Tagore thought of and worked for Indianising poetry and drama not by excluding all the gifts of the West but by building them up on the foundation of the fundamentals of a culture that was known as typically Indian. But the modern Bengali literary language itself, unlike Indian music and dance and painting, did virtually get its embellishments, words and phrases and ways of expressions, from sources not all of which were Indian. A closer touch with some of the advanced literature of the West made it almost impossible for the Bengali literary workers to avoid the Western form altogether. The more the inevitability of such a fusion became evident, the more were the emphases laid on the Indian angle of vision. This is what Tagore did. Foreigners could discover from his writings what India stood for. But the bulk of his own people could hardly understand him. The highbrows thought they understood Tagore's dramas without an understanding of the culture that Tagore wanted to inspire his people with. For a long while Tagore's dramas were not seriously accepted as genuine dramas. When they got translated into several European and Asian languages and were performed abroad, intellectuals directed their attention to them. But they cared very little for the Indian aspects of them. The present generation has no urge in it for an appraisal of it. It is one of the reasons why many foreign critics say that Bengali literature has not appreciably advanced since Tagore. The synthesis Tagore had succeeded to attain needs absorption by generations to give it a national character.

Greater Synthesis Envisaged

But the world today moves, meanwhile, extremely rapidly to bring the nations together.

A greater synthesis of the cultural trends of all the peoples is envisaged. And an impatient yearning for absorption of all the cultures has created almost a feverish thirst for culture flowing outside the geographical bounds of individual countries. That is the reason why the present generation of writers and workers in the field of drama are found to be deeply interested in foreign plays and techniques. And that is why Indian writers to-day feel that they should be more intimate to Asian culture, and the Asian writers feel that they must know African culture, and the Afro-Asian writers feel that they have got to make a contact with the cultures of Latin American people, and World Peace Council as well as the UNESCO devote themselves to bring together cultural workers just to know if mankind may possibly discover a culture that would help the florescence of all the peoples of all the countries irrespective of their political, social and economic systems and orders.

Adaptation of Foreign Plays

This world-trend has its impact on the young artists of the present generation. Never before as to-day had our artists engaged themselves so feverishly translating or adapting foreign plays and to their representations through techniques more or less foreign to us. It is by no means what is known as aping. It is natural response to the current world-trends of getting together through arts. Is this enthusiasm a futility bound to be fruitless? Well, it is rather impossible to predict it. Everything depends on the attitude of the persons who take resort to adaptations. If they feel it necessary to imbue the people of this country with ideas that do not react favourably to their minds, these adaptations will probably be washed away. But if they intend to utilise the human elements contained in them to the benefit of our people and to engage the techniques with a view to making them understandable to our audiences, then, of course, Indian drama will attain a standard comparable to the Western one. Here again comes the snag.

Absence of Theatre Houses

India has five and a half lakhs of villages. Very few of them have theatre houses electricity microphones and other amenities of modern life. Their inhabitants are mostly illiterates. Can we imagine that each of them will have a theatre house equipped with appliances necessary for producing a play in a modern

way or can we really believe that contents of foreign plays could be effectively and usefully conveyed to the village dwellers? Of course, India has grown cities and townships. They have come to stay and multiply. They are dwelled by persons intimate with world affairs. They may be benefited by adaptations and translations of foreign plays. But what is the proportion of those elites compared with the general population? It is hardly ten per cent. Do we take it for granted that this ten per cent has the right to represent the rest or to reflect the latter's emotions and social and economic conditions and aspirations? I do not believe that many of us are prepared to accept this claim. And secondly, how many cities and towns of India have theatre houses? They are conspicuous by their absence rather than by existence. We have less than half a dozen of such cities and towns in this, the second biggest Republic of Asia.

Guardians of our culture do declare that they are ashamed of contemporary dramas, but strangely enough we find them too thick skinned not to blush at what may be called a total absence of theatre houses of the regular type in a modern welfare State. And yet they talk tall whenever they find any chance to show their profundity. But it does not concern us. We do not write plays for them. We write for the people who do not hate us but warmly welcome our plays and acclaim them as expressions of their own feelings and emotions.

Kinds of Plays

It is for us to think and decide the kind of plays we should, at this stage of our national reconstruction, write and produce. It does not matter if we translate or adapt foreign plays. Neither it matters much if we keep them off our programme. To do or not to do it is a personal question. We need not worry over it. Every artist has the freedom to choose his own medium of expressions.

The nation is no more in bondage. Feudalism has been safely buried. Socialism has been accepted as the objective to be attained. A world-comity of nations for the good of the common man all the world over is forging ahead.

What I can say is that I find drama today is inclined towards cinematic treatment of drama, careerism, propagation of utter helplessness of the people, stimulation of a kind

of class conflict, adaptations without any deep thought in regard to their suitability and a total disregard for stage-traditions.

Cinematic Treatment

Cinematic treatment of stage-plays should never, I believe, be taken as modern method of writing stage-plays, or an improvement on the old method. Less talks and more of pictorial effects with hastily built-up situations punctuated by thrills and suspense make most of the commercial films. They are meant for universal consumption. Hence most of them are made to exploit common human frailties. Seldom are they found to give cognisance to the needs of individual nations and to their cultures and traditions. While I say this, I do not condemn every film ever made. I am aware of the tremendous power the films do wield and the profound possibilities good films bear in them.

What I wish to convey to my readers is that neither the medium nor the objective of the film and the stage-drama are the same. Drama has no material pictures to help it. It must take recourse to language to create images by stimulating the imagination of its auditors. Drama must be national first. As it happens to be one of the oldest forms of art, it must tune itself to the old traditions and at the same time create traditions. If it does neither of the two, it would work as a dead load on the minds of its auditors. Language has a tremendous strength, only next to dance and song, to move man. Drama cannot afford to ignore its importance. Neither the elimination of songs and dances is any proof of the modernization of drama. They may be so placed as to work more effectively than scenery and display of coloured lights. Drama must not only reflect society but must also inspire man to look for redemption. I believe most of the workers in the field of drama are aware of them. But because they find the films to be more remunerative, they closely follow them hoping for a better economic status.

Careerism

This brings one to careerism. We cannot eradicate it. Arts must suffer, as it has always suffered, from its allurements. No sermon may restrain artists from looking for a better prospect and security. They may be held back if theatres ever succeed to pay them as much as the films do. But nobody knows if such a time

would ever come. The only other alternative that has a restraining power is a robust idealism. But idealism gives rise to ideologies.

Propagation of Helplessness

One of these ideologies is the belief that people are utterly helpless which they themselves do not realize. If they might be made to realize their helplessness by means of dramatic performances, they would revolt against the prevailing order.

Well, this is after all a political proposition as the inevitability of class-conflict is a similar one. I do not hold the view that political and economic conditions that shape the destiny of the people must not be presented through the contents of drama. I do rather believe that the present age demands that the people should be rapidly raised to a level of understanding so that they might realize the social significance of man and his duties to materialise it through social and political institutions. This cannot possibly brook delay. Because it has a direct bearing on the much needed resurgence of an enthusiasm for building up socialism while there is yet time to do it. The time left at our disposal may not be as wide as we would wish it to be. Nobody knows when the prevailing cold war would release an atomic war. A people suffering from frustration has no redemption. Neither its sufferings are, indeed, a reality. They indicate the existence of causes deep into the social order. Drama should direct the attention of its auditors to that and should not merely picture their miseries. The latter would freeze their zeal and wither their hearts and would lead them nowhere.

Long Tradition

From direct experience I have come to know that audiences resent impositions. They like idealism but are sceptic to ideologies if they find any attempt is made to trap them. They are mostly illiterate but are intelligent enough to refuse to be hoodwinked. They like to choose for themselves the way they would lead. Indian drama knew how to enthuse them. Indian drama also found its strength from their enthusiasm. It is not lessons but light that they need. Modern drama must lit the light. It must not scare the people away from it. There must be a real communion. The audiences must feel while they witness the performance of a drama that it is their own, born of them, and not inflicted as a lesson to be learnt. Indian drama

has a long tradition to tell you what the people of India expect of it. It is for you to find out how much of that tradition will suit your purpose.

I conclude my article by bringing to your recollection certain lines written by Charles Dickens as a prologue to his masterpiece 'A Tale of Two Cities'. It reads: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was

the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair."

It was written in 1859. And to-day exactly one hundred years later that we find the times similarly as confusing as he imagined the times during the French Revolution. Man has survived those times. And man will survive this one too. Drama has the solemn duty to keep this flame of faith ablaze.