

Hindi Theatre & Drama in Modern Times

By J. C. Mathur

One reason why inspite of the undoubted talent of the playwrights and actors in Bengal and Maharashtra and the steady growth of the stage in these two regions during the last 100 years, the Indian theatre has not come into its own, is that a commercially successful theatre can develop in India only if its medium is Hindi. The Indian cinema industry is the second biggest in the world because it serves a large clientele. The theatre in India can also, therefore, develop as a broad-based and strongly rooted institution only if the Hindi stage could be galvanised into activity and Hindi playwrights and actors could join hands with the leaders of the theatre in Bengal and Maharashtra and invite them to produce as powerful and composite an institution as the Indian cinema is. Neither the national language nor the national theatre can emerge without Hindi being the core thereof and without contribution and even leadership being provided by culturally more developed regions of India. Just as in the film world provincial and regional considerations and interests are all united and the Hindi medium is ungrudgingly and enthusiastically used by distinguished men and women from all over the country, so also the national theatre must develop around the Hindi stage as a result of the efforts and unstinted co-operation and even leadership of men and women from non-Hindi speaking regions of India.

Hindi drama has, however, not been altogether barren as the above observations might suggest. In fact, in some ways, it has had a richer and more varied tradition than several other dramatic literatures of India. But, unfortunately, that tradition was almost forgotten in recent times. From the 15th to the 19th centuries there was a flourishing court theatre based upon the Vaishnava movement and patronised by the ruling dynasties of Mithila, Nepal, Bundelkhand and Assam. As many as 106 plays were written by over 35 dramatists during these three or four centuries and thus a drama which owed its poetic beauty to Sanskrit heritage, its inspiration to the devotional songs of Vidyapati and Chandidas and its flexible form to the folk festivals, continued as a living institution in a large portion of the Hindi speaking regions.

When Bharatendu Harishchandra, the great architect of modern Hindi literature, began writing in 1867, this Vaishnava drama had been reduced to an attenuated form and became an almost forgotten

institution and it is doubtful if Bharatendu had any direct knowledge of it. However, certain features of the Vaishnava drama surviving through the Bengali folk stage, the Jatra Parties—are perceptible in his 'Vidyasundar' (1868) of which the story is similar to a play 'Vidya-Vilap' written in 1720. Bharatendu's best known play 'Satya Harishchandra' has a theme on which, in 1651, the Maithili play 'Harishchandra Natyam' had been based. The importance which Bharatendu gave to songs composed in well-known Ragas and Raginis and interspersed in between scenes and acts is a distinct influence of the Vaishnava drama. It is a pity that in the recent Hindi drama this pleasant practice of introducing lyrics is discarded in the name of naturalism, for its disappearance removed one of the points of contact between the literary and folk play.

During his relatively brief literary career of 18 years (1867-1885), Bharatendu rehabilitated drama as a literary form in Hindi, harmonised diverse dramatic styles and laid foundations of the amateur stage. Though Bharatendu picked up several of his plots from contemporary life and chose for translation plays into which he could import references to the social and political problems of his age, the form that he chose for his dramatic writing was basically in the Sanskrit tradition. Even 'Bharat Durdasha' which seems to be almost a modern problem play, follows the pattern of the Sanskrit classic 'Prabodh Chandrodaya.' Still, his modern approach is all-pervasive and unmistakable: his incomplete play "Prem Jogini" is a precursor of the realistic drama; in 'Bharat Janani' and a few other plays he gave a glimpse of that nascent nationalism which became the principal inspiration of subsequent playwrights.

As stated earlier, Bharatendu was much more of a theatre man than just a playwright. Under his leadership and influence was formed a theatre-group members of which used to stage Hindi plays and also shared with Bharatendu the distinction of writing for the stage a number of the earliest popular Hindi plays of the 19th century. To this Bharatendu school of playwrights belonged Devakinandan Tripathi, author of 'Sita Haran,' Shivrindran Sahai who wrote 'Krishna-Sudama,' Ayodhya Singh Upadhyaya who wrote 'Rukmini-Parinaya,' Radha Charan Goswami author of 'Sudama' and 'Amar Singh Rathour,' Balkrishna Bhatta, author of 'Damayanti Swayambar' and 'Veni-Sanghar,' Lala

Shrinivas Das who wrote 'Randhir-Prem-Mohini,' Radha Krishna Das who wrote 'Dukhini Bala' and 'Maharana Pratap', Kishori Lal Goswami who wrote 'Mayanka-Manjari' and 'Natya Sambhav,' etc., etc. Hardly, anyone of these playwrights had Bharatendu's genius. They, however, endeavoured further to develop the nationalistic outlook and the reformist zeal of their master, though in a play like 'Randhir Prem-Mohini,' the love theme has received tender and memorable treatment. It was, however, a matter of surprise and disappointment that sometime after Bharatendu's death this group of disciples gradually turned away from drama and most of its members took over to poetry or novel. Perhaps, this was partly the result of the strong attraction which the new language of poetry (Khari-Boli) and the new form of story writing (novel) exercised over talented and promising writers. It is also true that these people ceased to have a direct contact with the theatre, but those among them who were able to retain this contact did not fly from its spell.

The amateur stage for which disciples of Bharatendu continued to write was one of the lasting contributions of Bharatendu, it arose out of a reaction against the commercial Parsi theatre. This Parsi theatre was in a sense a continuation of the courtly experiment of Avadh,—'Indra-Sabha' of which the script was written by Amanat and which was staged under the personal direction and patronage of the last Nawab of Avadh. Though superficially the production of 'Indra-Sabha' carried the impress of the Urdu romantic lyric, structurally as well as in environmental effects, it followed the 19th century European Opera of the undistinguished variety. The Parsi theatre, in which romantic lyricism debased into meaningless verse-recitation, tried to ape the spectacular form of the early 19th century Western theatre, without in any way approaching the broad human plane of the contemporary western drama. Round about 1870; Pestonji Framji started the 'Original Theatrical Company'; in 1877 Khurshidjee Balliwala opened the 'Victoria Theatrical Company' in Delhi and even took out his troupe once to Britain. A contemporary enterprise was the 'Alfred Theatrical Company' of Kavasji Khatau which for a long time held the field. These early ventures were followed by such commercial successes as 'New Alfred Company,' 'Old Parsi Theatrical Company,' 'Alexandria Company,' 'Corinthian Company,' etc., which held their sway in Calcutta, Bombay and the principal cities of North India right up to 1930 and of which one of the few survivors is the 'Minerva Theatrical Company' of Calcutta. Perhaps, the phenomenal success of this superficially impressive but dreadfully soulless theatre can be attributed to the fact that its influence extended to regions where for centuries people had not known the theatre and where these troupes reawakened a subdued but essentially irrepressible passion for the stage. This view is confirmed by the fact that the Parsi theatre made hardly any headway in Mithila, Orissa and Assam where there

was more or less a continuous tradition of the Vaishnava theatre till lately.

Bharatendu was struck by the enormous thirst of the people for drama and he tried to satisfy it through a more aesthetically adequate medium in the form of the amateur stage. No amateur stage can ordinarily compete against a commercial stage. Had Bharatendu been able to get financial backing for this type of theatre at that time, the history of Hindi stage would probably have been very much different. As it was, he had to fall back upon the amateur pattern of which the significance lay in its being a kind of laboratory for the better type of drama. It is these laboratories that have enabled the Hindi drama to survive and to make a new beginning in recent times. After Bharatendu, one of the first theatre groups was started in Kanpur in 1888. This was followed by the establishment in 1898 of Shree Ramlila Natak Mandali and in 1908 of the 'Hindi Natya Samiti' in Allahabad both the results of the enthusiasm of Pandit Madhava Shukla and his friends. Some important plays 'Siya Swayambar,' 'Maharana Pratap' and 'Mahabharat Purvardha' were for the first time presented by these amateur troupes. In Banaras, two theatre groups known as 'Bharatendu Natak Mandal' and 'Kashi Nagrik Natak Mandali' were started in 1909 at the initiative of Brijchand of Bharatendu's family and other people, and they put up several plays not only of Bharatendu but of subsequent writers also. Pandit Madhava Shukla was responsible for another noteworthy institution—the Hindi Natya Parishad of Calcutta which continued to be a lonesome citadel of taste in the midst of the commercialised entertainment of the Parsi Theatrical Companies of Calcutta. Practically all these amateur groups were inspired by the example and followed the tradition of Bharatendu. Stage decorations and curtain could not escape the influence of the bizarre colour fantasy of the Parsi theatre but in these plays the emphasis was not so much on putting up spectacular scenes full of miracles but on chaste expression, poetically satisfying songs and noble though somewhat sentimental idealism. The cast often used to include important men of high society. Somehow, the character of this amateur stage began to be transformed round about 1925. Grown-ups ceased to take part in the performances and by this time the amateur stage began to be regarded as an activity meant for students. This was a pity for it led to drama being considered as an activity of not much social significance. However, it also meant that under the influence of Universities and colleges the amateur stage turned more and more towards experimentation and the intellectual approach.

Between 1900 and 1925, when both the Parsi theatre and the amateur theatre were co-existent, two types of playwrights dominated the Hindi drama. Aga Hashr Kashmiri, Pandit Radhe Shyam Pathak, Narayan Prasad 'Betab,' Tulsi Dutt 'Shaida' and Hari Krishna 'Jauhar' were some of the names that every theatre-goer of those days knew. Writing not so much for publication but mainly at the behest of the proprietors of the Parsi Theatres these men used

the commonly understood Hindustani language and tried to enliven the slow pace of the plot by throwing in a liberal sprinkle of couplets, passionate dialogue, miraculous scenes and a parallel, though unrelated, comic, bristling with tomfooleries. Of the numerous plays thrown up by this group very few have survived the test of time and probably the most noteworthy among them was 'Veer Abhimanyu' of Radhe Shyam Pathak having some remote though clearly perceptible echoes of the genuine idealism of Bharatendu. The other stream of writers in this period kept to the Bharatendu tradition. Badrinath Bhatt who wrote, 'Kuru-Vana-Dahan' and 'Chungiki-Umedwari' was the best known among these playwrights. Pandit Madhava Shukla was the real leader of the group although he wrote only 'Siya-Swamyambar' and 'Mahabharat Purvardha.' Of the others, mention may be made of Anand Prasad Khatri, Jamuna Prasad Mehra, Durga Prasad Gupta, Haridas Manik and Pandit Makhanlal Chaturvedi. The last one wrote 'Krishna-Arjun Yuddha' which can perhaps be regarded as the best single play of this period.

Against this rather faint and latterly unimpressive historical background, Jaya Shankar Prasad appeared as a meteor, brilliant, but seemingly short lived. Did he at all belong to the tradition, howsoever attenuated, of the Hindi stage and drama? That he ignored his contemporary stage is clear enough. Nor did he find the dramatic technique of the playwrights of the Bharatendu period to be acceptable. The sharp departure will be clear on a comparison of Prasad's 'Chandragupta' and Bharatendu's 'Mudra-Rakshas.' But beneath this unlikeness is a deeper affinity. Prasad seized upon three noble conceptions inherited from the generation of Bharatendu,—patriotism, love of ideals and faith in the ultimate worthwhileness of existence. These concepts expressed in a rather plain and obvious form by Bharatendu and his followers were endowed with a finer and subtle expression by Prasad. This suggestive expression was an outstanding feature of what is known as the 'Chhayavadi' trend of Hindi poetry, and in Prasad's plays this technique was responsible for traditionally comprehended emotions and ideals blossoming forth with a new fragrance and a new rhythm. Nevertheless, a sharp departure from tradition is the dominant quality of Prasad's writings and at the root of that boldness and freedom lies the attitude of indifference towards the stage. First, he uses an idiom and a phrase so elevated and shrouded with such virtuosity and seriousness as to make Harischandra's Hindi appear pedestrian. Secondly, his characters show that awareness of inner conflict which was unknown to the one-sided heroes or villains of the earlier drama. Thirdly, quite often, his characters, while in the midst of an immediate situation, drift into an analysis of certain ultimate principles of human life and this pass on irresistibly from momentary anxieties of profound thought; this doubtlessly was a new experience for Hindi drama. As a result of these three novel experiments, Prasad became the founder of a new technique de-

pending primarily upon the building up of an all-enveloping atmosphere. One might almost perceive, in this attempt to build up a strong, vigorous and dynamic atmosphere, the endeavour to make up for the absence of a suitable stage. Perhaps, Prasad imagined that where the playwright can stimulate the readers' imagination to the creation of palpable environment, the absence of the stage would not be felt.

Between 1920 and 1933, Prasad wrote pactly most of his outstanding plays like 'Ajatsatru' (1922), 'Skanda Gupta' (1928), 'Chandra Gupta' (1931), 'Dhruvaswami' (1933). Did these plays influence subsequent dramatic writing to any extent? Contemporary writers and even those who immediately followed Jayashankar Prasad show less pronounced influence than playwrights of 1943 onwards. Strangely enough, even a realist like Lakshmi Narayan Mishra who led a reaction against Prasad's technique during his life-time has, in his 'Vatsraj' published 2 years ago, turned to Prasad's environmental technique and love of ancient times. Harikrishna 'Premi', Jagannath Prasad 'Milinda', Govinda Vallabh Pant wrote several plays indirectly influenced by Jayashankar Prasad though no less by the great Bengali writer Dwijendra Lal Roy. In Udaya Shankar Bhatt's 'Vidrohini-Amba', 'Sagar-Vijaya', 'Matsya-Gandha' and 'Vishwamitra' the atmosphere of the mythological age has been effectively recreated; in 'Adim-Yuga' he has been attracted by certain fundamental problems of mankind. Hari Krishna 'Premi' has, in his plays 'Swapna-Bhanga', 'Raksha-Bandhan', 'Shiva-Sadhana', etc., given idealistic and emotional glimpses into India's mediaeval history. Though Govinda Vallabh Pant's 'Var-Mala' and 'Raj-Mukut' lack the profundity of the other three playwrights, his writings have been more successful on the stage for he transmutes the inspiration received from Prasad into tangible stage-form through the agency of his first-hand experience of the footlights and the green-room. Since 1942-43, however, there has been a sudden harking back to Prasad's idealism of humanitarian environmental technique. To this stream of revival belong Ram Kumar Verma's 'Charu-Mitra', 'Dhruv-Tarika' and Benipuri's 'Ambapali', and 'Netra-Dan', Prithivinath Sharma's 'Urmila', Dr. Kailash Bhatnagar's 'Chandra Gupta' and 'Umade', Kanchanlata Sabbarwal's 'Amiyan' and 'Aditya Sen Gupta', Sitaram Chaturvedi's 'Senapati-Pushymitra' and several historical plays of Sadguru Saran Awasthi. Apart from these, several younger writers have almost uncritically turned to this technique. This rehabilitation of Prasad is not clearly understandable. Perhaps, one reason is that in most Universities the only dramas prescribed for the Hindi courses are those of Jayashankar Prasad with the result that his is the technique and approach with which the average newcomer to Hindi play-writing is well acquainted.

However, as stated earlier, the reaction against Prasad had begun even before his 'school' had struck roots. This reaction was the call of the age and the situation. Prasad made no effort to build up a stage;

the struggling lights of the Parsi theatre succumbed at the mere sight of the dazzling silver screen and thus the commercial theatre of Hindi collapsed almost at the touch of modernism. But a salutary result of its collapse was that the earlier films of the New Theatre and the Bombay Talkies proved the suitability of realistic scenes culled from day to day social life, for the stage. The amateur stage that had continued its halting existence since Bharatendu could not but learn the lesson from this experiment. The theatre groups of colleges came to realise that realistic presentation of life, naturalistic conversation and the doings of day-to-day experiences, all could be brought within the ambit of the theatre. One other circumstance drove playwrights towards this realisation. After the first wave of 'Chhayavad,' young writers turned from the poetry of English romantic literature to the writings of Ibsen, Shaw, Chekhov and even to contemporary dramatic literature. Thirdly, near about this time Indian nationalism became more and more analytical of social and economic problems, a tendency which in subsequent literature reappeared in the form of the progressive movement under the inspiration of communist doctrines. Fourthly, Freud's psychoanalysis and the modern outlook on sex transformed fundamentally the love theme in drama. Fifthly, like the short story in the field of fiction, the one-act play came to be in demand. The one-act technique is not unknown in the Sanskrit drama and in Hindi too Bharatendu himself is credited with having written the first one-act play. But the present-day one-act play in Hindi is a straight derivation from Western literature. The amateur stage welcomed the one-act play with open arms because it called for fewer equipments and stage machinery.

As a result of these formative circumstances and tendencies, a new kind of plays came into vogue round about 1930. Of these, the salient features were the naturalistic presentation of life, an analysis of the individual's inner difficulties lying at the root of social problems and contempt for superficial idealism. Perhaps, the first play in this stream was Kripinath Mishra's 'Mani-Goswami' published as early as 1929. This was followed by the challenging series of Lakshmi Narayan Mishra's plays 'Sindoor-ki-Holi,' 'Rakshas-ka-Mandir,' and 'Mukti-ka-Rahasya.' There is nothing wrong in an artist giving a challenge to tradition. But this spirit of challenge seems to have also meant in his case an indifference to the needs of the stage. It was left to Ramkumar Verma and to Upendranath Ashk (the latter both in the one-act plays as well as in longer plays like 'Qaid-Aur-Uran,' 'Chattha-Beta' and 'Adi-marg') to have attempted and achieved a fair measure of synthesis between the realistic and thoughtful drama on the one hand and the dynamic pace and emotional appeal of the stage on the other. Ashk follows a technique which is clearly well-thought out and planned and yet like a slice out of life and like the fleeting moment of deep experience it is more suggestive than one would suspect. Before society and the individual he holds a mirror that is without

a blemish and yet having a depth much greater than its surface. In Seth Govinda Das' problem plays there is a naive indifference to technical perfection as also to the stage; there is also a danger that some of his characters are becoming types. Vrindavan Lal Verma who has a distinguished record as a writer of historical romances has been somewhat indiscriminately prolific in his dramatic literature; it is, however, significant that the majority of his plays deal with contemporary themes and problems. Of the more recent playwrights in this stream, mention may be made of Shambhu Dayal Saxena and Vimala Raina both of whom have turned out to be surprisingly refreshing in their outlook and delightfully spontaneous in their technique. There is more action in their plays than in those of some of the better known playwrights. It is an encouraging sign that story-writers of such eminence as Yashpal and Vishnu Prabhakar have turned to drama; their first attempts have been widely hailed by the Hindi readers.

In 1934, when the problem play was coming into its own in Hindi, Shri Sumitranandan Pant came out with his fantasy 'Jyotsna.' It was an extra-ordinary experiment which cannot be placed under any definite category and of which the significance lies in its impressive and bold harmony of such diverse elements as a lyrical drama-core (which can be traced back to Bharatendu and the early Vaishnava drama), a symbolic technique (of which the first example in Sanskrit was 'Prabodh Chandrodaya') and the intellectual modern outlook motivated by a strong desire to go into the roots of cultural experiences.

After 1935, the Hindi stage developed in two directions. On the one hand, the amateur stage originally initiated by Bharatendu established a successful and, let us hope, lasting connection with the literary drama through the medium of the one-act play. On the other hand, Prithviraj managed, in spite of serious difficulties and financial loss, to establish a new type of commercial theatre, out with a mission to elevate taste and rehabilitate the theatre. The emergence of the one-act play has a historical significance because it came to be written as a direct result of demand from the stage in transition and in the rebuilding of the stage it has played a formative role. The mission of Prithviraj is a challenge to the Hindi playwrights who can transform this mission into a great movement. Prithviraj in 'Pathan,' 'Ahuti' and 'Kalakar' has set forth a bold example which has, however, to be followed with caution since a rather gushing sentimentalism brings most of his plays dangerously near melo-drama.

The radio-play is a new literary form which has directly helped the theatre by stimulating several Hindi writers towards play-writing. Some features of the old Sanskrit drama are reappearing in a different form under the stress of the radio technique; the Vachak and Vachika seem to bear a close resemblance to Sutradhar. Again, the lyricism and music

(Continued on page 30)

of the Vaishnava theatre seem to have re-appeared in the radio play and thus there is an indication that we might go back in some respects to the Sanskrit and Vaishnava drama.

It is clear that the future cannot be forged by ignoring history and tradition altogether. Perhaps, out of the tradition of the poetic drama and the folk theatre may arise a new drama which more than anything else may be symbolic of the Indian theatre. Nevertheless, in a vast and varied country like ours, it is unnecessary and undesirable to expect a single pattern of the theatre or the drama. In another sense, however, unity is appearing under the stimulus of freedom and single and undivided inspiration for the revival of the Indian theatre is making itself felt all over the country, and as stated earlier the Hindi theatre can be the most convenient vehicle of this inspiration.