THE PRE-COLONIAL AND COLONIAL LEGACY OF MODERN INDIAN THEATRE

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Abstract

The present paper makes an attempt to identify different trends of theatrical activities that available in pre-colonial and colonial times. The existence of theatrical activities during pre-colonial times lead to the indigenous performance while the colonial time the theatrical performances derived partially from Indigenous performances. The form and content of such theatre remained a debatable question to all for long. The influence of English and Parsi theatre on regional theatre makes certain extent hybrid theatrical activities. The direction provided by Sudipto Chatterjee in The Colonial Staged may useful to understand hybridity and such theatre may consider modern Indian theatre in post independent (colonial) period.

Key Words: Indigenous performance, Form and Content of theatre, English and Parsi theatre, Hybridity, Modern Indian Theatre

Introduction

The theatre constructed in the colonial and post colonial period is loosely called ‘modern’ Indian Theatre because such kind of theatre is in a way partially departure of indigenous performances at temple, festival times and religious events. But the legacy of such theatre in the colonial and post-colonial (Independence) periods is primarily derived from English theatre which came for entertainment purpose, Parsi theatre which came for business purpose and indigenous performance practices at religious events and festival times during the British colonial period in India. Such theatre has taken several routes over a period of times to become modern Indian theatre and raised present socio-economic and political issues for transformation in society.
Theatre in the British Colonial Period

One way of looking at the construction of modern Indian theatre leads our attention to form-structure and, content- socio-economic and political conditions from the British colonial period to the present day. It can be observed in regional theatre for instance, in Marathi Theatre. As, Bhatia comments, the influence of Western and European models on local theatrical tradition can be considered an aspect that leads to the construction of modern Indian theatre (xv). For instance, in regional context- in Marathi theatre, Vinayak Janardan Kirtane wrote Thorle Madhavrao Peshwe (The Elder Madhavrao Peshwe) in 1857 (Gokhale 12). “It was the first dramatic work in Marathi to draw upon history, rather than mythology, for its narrative material” (12). “For structure and use of dramatic conventions, the play drew from both Sanskrit and Shakespearean drama” (13). Belgaum Samachar of 11 December 1865 noted, “The Sanglikar players gave a very fine performance of Thorle Madhavrao Peshwe, but many people did not like it because it was made up entirely of dialogues” (13) Further, “It depicted Madhavrao’s death on stage. This led to a debate about whether the play could then be considered the first tragedy to be written in Marathi” (13). So the influence of Western form-Tragedy can be observed at regional level. It provides a model for modern drama (13). So here we can find the tradition of Musical mythological performances which were popular during the initial stage of Marathi theatre and even popular in indigenous performance is breaking down and the influence of Western plays in the form of Shakespeare is already visible. Likewise, Michael Madhusudan Datta wrote Sarmistha (1858) and translated it into English (Das 184). His claim about the play was, “the first attempt in the Bengali language to produce a classical and regular drama” (qtd. in Das 184). This claim of Datta unjustified the rules of Sanskrit dramaturgy and complained against the ‘foreignness’ of the play (184). So the influence of Western model on regional level was made in the middle of the nineteenth-century. Further, the first public theatre in Bengali was the National Theatre, which came into existence in 1872, and inaugurated with Nildarpan (Das 192). During nineteenth century, “national theatre meant a critique of colonialism that ultimately relied on colonial models” (Bhatia xix). So in that sense colonial model is used for anti-British ideas. Moreover, the popularity of Shakespeare especially of some of his plays like The Merchant of Venice and The Comedy of Errors were translated in almost all Indian languages several times (187) for their exciting stories (qtd. in Das 188), intriguing situations and characters (Das 188). Therefore, the influence of Western mode in the form of construction as well in the form of translation and adaptation became popular in regional levels. It becomes a source for the development of modern Indian theatre.

At regional level along with English performance, Parsi performance also makes impression. The plot used in Parsi theatre derived mostly from mythology and legends (Das 183). The story centered round violent actions, the music was loud and the acting exaggerated and melodramatic (183). The Parsi theatre is remembered for its emphasis on the “spectacle” and its influence on the style of acting (183). Modern drama and theatre in Indian languages like Gujarati, Marathi and Hindi (qtd in Das 184) grew as a reaction against its crudity and superficiality (184). “The Marathi educated urban individual from the middle class did not find in it (Parsi theatre) anything that tied in with his cultural, social and political concerns” (Gokhale 14). So here we can think of the development of Gujarati, Marathi and Hindi language theatre as well future of regional theatre in contrast to Parsi theatre.

On the other side, there was strong protest at regional level against traditional mode of theatric manners. As, a theatre group ‘Natyamanvantar’ was founded in 1942 by K. N. Kale, G.Y Chitnis, Anant Kanekar and S. V. Vartak. K. N. Kale wrote about the group,
With the object of introducing the modern intellectual play of Europe to the Marathi Theatre there was an organized active protest against conventional style of acting, against theatricality, against declamation narrative soliloquies, against painted curtain cloths, exaggeration, indiscriminate usages of songs in the midst of the dialogues, against star systems, against plays written for this actor or that, against the atrocious practice of men playing women’s roles (Das 168).

So regional theatre such as Marathi theatre in that sense demanded newness and wanted to depart from a long tradition. The newness was not only internal but external aspects of theatricality as well. It can be observed during middle of the nineteenth century. As, according to A.V. Kulkarni,

With the performances of ‘bookish’ plays, a change began to come over production components like curtains, costumes and settings. The drop curtain in the old mythological plays used to bear crudely drawn, gaudily coloured representations of deities-Ganpati, Maruti or Shankar-Parvati. But when ‘bookish’ plays were performed, an attempt was made to convey to the audience the exact locations of the scenes, such as roads, temples, gardens, palaces, hills, jungles or rivers, by means of curtains depicting them as faithfully as possible. Since some of these plays dealt with contemporary subjects and since, meanwhile, education in the new English techniques of painting had become available, skills in curtain painting had become available, skills in curtain painting improved ... The greatest change was visible in the settings. Earlier a garden used to be represented by means of a few branches stuck on the stage; but now, in addition to the gardens painted on curtains, real trees, potted shrubs and plants would be placed on the stage to complete the illusion of the real (qtd. in Gokhale 16).

So theatre in the colonial period attempt to follow the model of Western or English theatre but the content was chiefly rooted socio-economic and political issues and attempt to make faithful representation. For instance Ram Ganesh Gadkari’s *Ekach Pyala* in Marathi attempt to portrait the effect of alcohol on family.

**Theatre in the Postcolonial (Independence) Period**

According to Dharwadkar, after Independence, the major new playwrights seem concerned principally with establishing and debating the relation of the new nation’s present to its remote past through the narratives of both myth and history (166). For instance, Dharamvir Bharti’s *Andha yug* (Blind Epoch, 1954) in Hindi and Girish Karnad’s *Tughlaq* (1964). In the words of Bhatia,

(In Independence period) wide-ranging concerns have been addressed in a number of creative ways including mythological dramas, folk forms and rituals, historical revivals, transformed versions of Euro-American plays, notably of Shakespeare and Brecht, and through avant-garde experimentation (Bhatia xiii).

So from the views which are expressed by Dharwadkar and Bhatia we conclude that forms have been revived. But they are not as they were but they received newness that can be observed through Girish Karnad’s *Hayavadana* and Ratan Thiyam’s *Chakravyuha*. Here the purpose seems in search of root-Indianness (in the form of Sanskrit) leaving Western influence aside. Here we need to understand Suresh Awasthi who has started theatre of roots movement and one of his articles namely, “In Defence of the ‘Theatre of Roots’” is important for search of an identity. According to Richard Schechner, Suresh Awasthi’s aim was to put modern artists in touch with their roots (Bhatia xxiii). Therefore, “the works of B. V. Karanth, Ratan Thiyam, Kavalam Pannikar, Mohan Agashe, and
others ‘are not conceivable without Awasthi’s vision’” (qtd. in Bhatia xxiii) so Awasthi’s claim for an identity of nation-Indianness in the form with present socio-economic and political conditions become a tradition for above mention playwrights.

Under the context of Suresh Awasthi’s view, we can observe the view expressed by Erin Mee, “the return to roots did represent a decolonizing gesture” (qtd. in Bhatia xxiv) so in a sense we are leaving a long tradition of theatrical activities which was nourished during the colonial time. In the words of Bhatia, decolonizing “through the rejection of colonial models and offered a critique of the social and political problems of the nation” (xxiv). It seems focus is moving from theatrical forms to socio-economic and political issues of the nation. But playwrights attempt to redefine modern by synchronizing. As, according to Bhatia, “playwrights... redefining the modern in ways that recognized the modern and the traditional, the urban and rural, and the classical and the folk as being mutually influencing and inseparable” (xxiv). It can be observed in Marathi playwright, Mahesh Elkunchwar’s *Old Stone Mansion* (Wada Chirebandi, 1985). Therefore we have synthesis of form and issues related to the life of people.

In the opinion of Dharwadkar, “... after the early 1960s the field of Indian theatre diversifies considerably with the arrival of realist, existentialist, absurdist, and left-wing political modes in urban literary drama...” (166). So as we have discussed above the form could be in a sense found in theatre of roots but the new generation of playwrights after independence seems unable to express effectively the present condition as they are following views of Suresh Awasthi as mentioned above so they move towards Western mode to represent the present socio-political conditions. Therefore, the plays of such playwrights like Vijay Tendulkar, Satish Alekar, Mahesh Elkunchwar, and Mahasweta Devi wrote in the direction noted by Aparna Bhargava Dharwadkar.

According to Dharwadkar,

> The post-Independence theatre is not an extension of colonial or pre-colonial traditions but a product of new theoretical, textual, material, institutional, and cultural condition created by the experience of political independence, cultural autonomy, and new nationhood (2).

We can also need to understand view expressed by Nandi Bhatia and it seems relevant and add to the view above expressed by Dharwadkar. As,

> The thematic range of modern theatre includes the politics of the British Raj, conditions prevalent on tea and indigo plantations, workers’ rights, famine, the 1947 Partition, psychosocial fragmentation, familiar problems and urban angst, concerns with women’s issues, dowry problems, and the rights of Dalits, among other issues (Bhatia xiii).

Here some of the issues of the colonial period carried forward into the Independence period. According to K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, in *Drama in Modern India*: “The social reform and anti-colonial movements of a whole century and the two World Wars shaped the themes of modern drama in the various languages of India” (xvii).

So theatre did not just discuss about past but the experience of modern nation and the problems faced by government and the condition of all class and caste of people becomes subject of post-colonial theatre. In relation to dramatic form, the key term for a future theatre is therefore “synthesis”-the middle ground between mere revivalism and imitative Westernization, which would reconcile pre-colonial traditions with the socio-cultural formations of a modern nation-state (Dharwadkar 43).
Conclusion

So we can say Indian theatre personalities were always oscillating between form and content and finally they followed the model of Western and European playwrights that suit best to show social and political evils whereas the revival of folk theatre traditions with certain modification in the form was to show emerging identity of nation in the post-colonial period to the world. So modern Indian theatre was neither Indian nor Western but interlinked in such a way that it could be considered hybrid theatre. Therefore we need to understand the view expressed in The Colonial Staged by Sudipto Chatterjee. In his words, hybrid is a complex process, “… it registers differences and sameness, mimesis and alterity at the same time. But … responds to specificities of a geo-temporal location, which makes generalized theorizing about hybridity and exacting project.” (11) This view leads to the construction of the post-colonial modern Indian theatre.

References


