



থ্যেপিয়ান
THESPIAN
An International Refereed journal
ISSN 2321-4805

THESPIAN

MAGAZINE

An International Refereed Journal of Inter-disciplinary
Studies

Santiniketan, West Bengal, India

DAUL A Theatre Group©2013-15

Editor

Bivash Bishnu Chowdhury

Title: Theatre of Roots and its Subversions

Author(s): Mrityunjay Prabhakar

Published: 23 December 2015

Theatre of Roots and its Subversions © 2015 by Mrityunjay Prabhakar is licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Yr. 3, Issue 6, 2015

Autumn Edition
September-October



Theatre of Roots and its Subversions

---- Dr. Mrityunjay Prabhakar

Assistant Professor, Drama & Theatre Arts,
Sangit Bhavana, Visva-Bharati,
Santiniketan, West Bengal, India.

From 'Go to the Roots' to 'Theatre of Roots', the movement has changed many facets in a very short period. It has been started by choice and concern towards developing a theatre form of our own, assimilating the regional/folk/traditional forms of the country with a certain kind of consciousness. The concern of the first generation directors and theatre activists was to develop a form which would be deeply rooted into its own culture and has fragrance of the soil. They were searching for Indianness within Indian theatre practice which was missing in the so called urban realistic modern Indian theatre. Indian People's Theatre Association has played a major role as discussed in the earlier chapter. Underlining the Role of Peoples' associated with IPTA, Habib Tanvir has written way back in 1974 in his article 'Theatre in the Villages';

The trend itself is not a new phenomenon. It dates back to the Indian Peoples' Theatre Association during the late forties when producers like Balraj Sahni, Shombhu Mitra and Dina Pathak for the first time turned folk theatre forms to contemporary purposefulness. Today, how-ever, a concerted effort of greater significance has to be made in order to make a dent in the lop-sided development of our theatre.

Shortly, directors like Habib Tanvir, Sheila Bhatia and Shanta Gandhi also joined the same



style of developing a theatre production and together with the first generation North-West Indian theatre directors who started doing experimental works with the folk/traditional/regional theatre forms of their own region, surely in the influence of Indian People's Theatre Association. Habib Tanvir, Shanta Gandhi and Sheila Bhatia carried their work for a long period and thus they became able to develop their own genre of theatre for which they are known to the world. At the same time or even a little before K. Shivram Karanth and K.N. Panikker were the men in South India who have been deeply engaged in this sort of activities during their early age. K. Shivram Karanth was the man behind the reinvention of a traditional theatre form 'Yakshgana' for the modern world as he tried to reorient and modernize 'Yakshgana', the regional theatre form of Karnataka according to the need of the hour while K.N. Panniker tried the same with the Sanskrit theatre and reinvented the whole genre with the help of the available forms and cultural artefacts of Kerala. Although, it was just a beginning of the 'Theatre of Roots' in the early days of Indian Independence but still it has developed its own niche by the time in the history of Indian performing arts. Lauding their works Habib Tanvir has mentioned;

Nonetheless there are producers and theatre groups in Bombay, Calcutta, Delhi and elsewhere that are engaged in original work of a very valuable nature. They are mostly involved in experiments with Indian folk theatre forms. Though in a country of vast cultural resources like India, their number is deplorably low, they have already managed to break new ground and lay the foundation of a genuine Indian theatre.

In the influence of the wonderful works done by the first generation theatre directors like Habib Tanvir, Sheila Bhatia, Shanta Gandhi and K. Shivaram Karanth second generation



theatre directors like H. Kanhailal, B.V. Karanth, Rajinder Nath, K.V. Subbanna, Jabbar Patel, Utpal Dutt, Rudraprasad Sengupta and many others either started experimenting with the traditional theatre form of their own region or started carving a modern theatre by using the conventions, techniques and grammar of regional/traditional theatre of their region. Later, major playwrights of the time also joined the movement and started writing plays based on the conventions of folk/traditional/regional performing art forms. Habib Tanvir has mentioned this development in the same article;

And this is also beginning to get reflected in the works of some young and promising playwrights. For instance, Girish Karnad's interesting Kannada play 'Haya Vadana' (Half Horse), based upon an ancient Indian legend which also inspired Thomas Mann to write his novel 'Transposed Heads', draws richly from a Mysore folk theatre form known as the rakshagana. Similarly, the Bengali playwright- producer Utpal Dutt recently turned the Bengali folk theatre form of Jatra to great political advantage by using its technique in his recent play about Lenin 'Leniner Dak'; P L Deshpande of Bombay has done the same with his Marathi plays written and produced in a Marathi folk theatre style known as Tamasha'.

This second generation of theatre directors who took the by lane of 'Theatre of Roots', while being already known for their works in mainstream urban theatre, has contributed a lot to the movement which later became the mainstream theatre practice of the country. They have not only carry forward the work started by the first generation theatre directors but also given the movement a kind of strength and experimentation which helped the whole movement in carving a niche of its own. This new kind of experimentations started



by the first and second generation of the 'Theatre of Roots' movement has created a sort of new kind of aesthetic pleasure in watching the performances which has not only the fragrance but also the soul of the country. They finally broke the western conventions of stage and its technique of producing a play and evolved a production design of their own based on the Indian traditional theatre forms. They were also motivated by the urge of searching their own roots.

The third generation of 'Theatre of Roots' directors comprises those you have started practicing 'Theatre of Roots' model in and around the Sangeet Natak Akademi propagated scheme. All these directors were in their youth at that point of time and they were chosen by the Akademi to produce a play in their own folk/regional/traditional theatre or cultural forms. Many of them have proved their worth and produced some of the most sparkling theatre productions of modern Indian theatre history. Some of the productions which happened in zonal/National theatre festivals organized by Sangeet Natak Akademi are the best examples of the synthesis of modern Indian theatre with its roots but surprisingly a lot of them are of no value. Theatre directors like Ratan Thiyam, Bansi Kaul, B. Jayshree, Waman Kendre, M. K. Raina, Satish Anand, Urmil Kumar Thaptiyal, Chandradashan, Parvej Akhtar, Laique Hussain, Balwant Thakur, Alakhnandan, Bhanu Bharati, Neelam Man Singh, C.R. Jambe, Usha Ganguly, Probir Guha and many others are the glittering names of the Sangeet Natak Akademi supported 'Theatre of Roots' movement whose productions caught the attention of the Nation.

There are indeed a fourth generation theatre directors who have associated themselves with this genre of performances and they have done a great job even after the SNA scheme deserted the idea of 'Theatre of Roots'. Sanjay Upadhyay, Suresh Anakali, Gautam Halder,



Heisnam Tomba and many others have carried forward the tradition of 'Theatre of Roots' on their shoulder till the fifth generation joined it and carrying the task of giving a new outlook to the 'Theatre of Roots'. Although, it's hardly like a movement now a days but still a lot of directors still prefer to work with the folk/traditional/regional cultural theatre practices and resources of the country and trying to come up with productions which has a local and global appeal in the post modern society.

But, as I have said earlier, I don't see 'Theatre of Roots' movement as monolithic entity. Although, I do not want to categories them according to their age or decade because that would be too simplistic a way to judge them. I would like to categories it in four different types according the trends, attributes and nature of the movement and theatre productions it brought on ground. These are the most important subversions of 'Theatre of Roots' movement in my perception. These subversions in 'Theatre of Roots' movement was brought through the critical and conceptual engagement of the theatre directors with the practice of their own kind of theatre of roots. These subversions can be seen in the stylization, ornamentation, production style and the presentation of the play produced by the theatre directors while engaging with their own folk/traditional/regional theatre forms of the country. These subversions are not only stylistic and conceptual but also different at the level of poetics and politics of 'Theatre of Roots' movement. The one who was state oriented official stamp quality 'Ornamental' 'Theatre of Roots', which is quite emblematic and poster material, as it did happen due to the governmental support system without feeling any sensibility towards the form it was utilizing.

In my point of view the major portion of the young directors of the state oriented module of 'Theatre of Roots' comes into the 'ornamental' category. The young budding



directors of the country were going with the wind and they hardly took their task seriously enough as they found it an easy way to make name, fame and money at that point of time. Their non-seriousness was one of the major factors behind the debacle of the whole movement. This version of 'Theatre of Roots' movement can be classified as the ornamental utilization of these forms and age old traditions.

In this category most of the directors fit into as most of them came to the movement because of the funding provided by SNA and other government bodies and private agencies. They just used the traditional forms half heartedly and in haphazard way to ornament their own theatre productions. The kind of association which they need to develop with the forms was missing and in end result half waked productions came out of this process. In spite of this horrible gesture from the ornamental trend there are few who used these forms intelligently and took it to such a level that they marvelled the trend. Although, the utilization effect could be seen in them too but at least they make sense.

Although, there are directors who have done some significant work even within the limit of 'Ornamental' use of the folk/traditional/regional performance resources. These directors have been trying their hands on the folk/traditional/regional performing art forms with the view of modelling a modern theatre performance by acquiring the form, technique and convention and they used them intelligently for their own modern theatre productions. Some of the second and third generation theatre directors like Shyamanand Jalan, Rajinder Nath, Satish Anand, C.C. Mehta, Vaman Kendre, Parvej Akhtar, Laique Hussain and others have done a respectful job and their works could be adhered to the best of 'Ornamental' use of 'Theatre of Roots'.

The second trend which can be easily foreseen in the 'Theatre of Roots' movement is



the 'Revivalist' one. Some of the directors turned to the community-specific forms, rituals and age old traditions, classical and folk performances due to its historicity and sacred nature. This revivalist trend follows the glorification project of our age old traditions rather than seeing them in rational perspective. Some of very important figures of 'Theatre of Roots' movement directors, whether they turned to classical theatre forms or the traditional one, could be put into this category i.e. K.N. Pannikar, K. Shivram Karanth, Kumar Verma and Shanta Gandhi.

A section of any society always lives in past. For them the age old rituals, traditions and way of life are a matter of pride. They hail the ancient civilization practices on the name of traditions and glorious past of the society; however, they might not be as glorious as portrayed. These people always carry a puritan view about their social-cultural practices and try to revive them in the present so that they could show how developed and rational their social-cultural practices were even in the ancient times. Some of our theatre directors also did the same into the field of theatre and tried to either revive age old theatre forms or reorient and established them as one of the legendary practices of our country.

Some of our modern theatre practitioners tried to do the same in the field of theatre art before and after Independence. They turned to the age old traditional or classical forms and tried to create theatre performances based on them or the Sanskrit plays, which were supposed to be the authentic dramatic writings and forms of the country. They tried to recreate the magic of Sanskrit theatre or traditional theatre forms. They followed the forms and the text so rigid that it was difficult to churn anything new from the same exercise.

In search of the authentic theatre forms they simply not gone to the texts but also tried to look for the forms that have derived heavily from Sanskrit theatre practices. Instead of



trying to reorient the ancient Sanskrit theatre forms they simply inscribed those theatre or cultural forms which have elements of the same. They based their theatre practice not only on that but also tried to engage with them creatively instead of borrowing from these art forms blindly. In that sense although their search was with the purpose of reinstituting the old age forms of the country and henceforth 'Revivalist' but they came up with creative engagement with the same and that's why they had created a niche for themselves in modern Indian theatre practice.

The success achieved in these kinds of performances by the directors of this trend happened due to their actor's training methods and skill development programs. In an article on Indian theatre titled 'Theatre in India' Girish Karnad also mentioned these directors who have engaged themselves creatively with the Sanskrit theatre conventions and provided a rigorous training to their actors of specific forms they were working with. The success achieved in producing some fabulous plays by the directors of this trend shows the passion and brilliance of their actor training methods utilized for the same. Here Girish Karnad writes;

To do justice to a Sanskrit play, a producer needs a fully worked out style that is complex and subtle and a cast of actors who have been thoroughly trained in that style. One cannot cast any set of actors nurtured in company natak notions or in the realist school and make the plays work. Only in the last decade have two theatre directors? Kavalan Narayana Panikkar in Kerala and Ratan Thiyam in Manipur (notice the geographical spread)?staged Sanskrit plays with actors specifically trained for that purpose. The results have been



spectacular. They have shown that, when properly staged, there is nothing otherworldly or quaint about Sanskrit drama.

Many of the young and old directors of 'Theatre of Roots' movement had tried their hands on traditional and classical theatre art forms of this country and came up with some wonderful performances also. Theatre directors like K. Shivram Karanth, K.N. Panniker, Shanta Gandhi and Kumar Verma did wonderful job in this direction. Their works could be easily assigned to the 'Revivalist' trend of 'Theatre of Roots' movement. They have been successful in producing some very famous plays of the time and movement.

Third category of this trend is of the 'modernist' utilization of the folk/traditional forms where theatre director takes liberty from the original forms which he is using and try to develop something a new with the amalgamation of the modern techniques, movements, and musical patterns to create a new meaning out of it. Directors like B.V. Karnath, Jabbar Patel, K.V. Subanna, Probir Guha and Ratan Thiyam follows the suit. These celebrated theatre directors of our country are known for their modernist explorations of the folk/traditional/regional forms of the country. They have been utilizing them as raw materials to create a new product rather than celebrating the folk/traditional/regional theatre forms in their theatre productions.

The modernist trend of 'Theatre of Roots' was one of the major currents of the whole movement. Most of the major theatre directors, who were for the roots with the core of their heart with modern sensibility, turned to this trend and produced splendid works through their experiments. Experiments and explorations were core to their work and they achieved their own glory through their explorations of the folk/traditional/regional theatre and cultural forms with utmost modern sensibility. Rather than charming the audience they believed in



engaging with them through their modernist explorations.

They achieved it through the fine balance they created between the content and the form they were using for their explorations and experimentations. We all know that there was a large debate over importance of content and form in a theatre or art practice over the years. While some practitioners laid emphasis on content and declared it superior to anything else some others gone crazy for the form and accepted the form as a major entity in theatre/art practices. This debate has its own historicity and merit associated with it in which I don't want to go but it has influenced many a theatre/art practices of our country. Theatre directors who have opted for 'Ornamental' or 'Revivalist' trend of 'Theatre of Roots' movement as classified by me are more or less abide to the later category for whom the form has a major significance for their theatre practice.

While the theatre directors of the 'Modernist' Explorations are of the third kind. They have achieved a great balance between the content and form of their theatre practice. For them both go together without overlapping each other. They see hardly any duality between the two and connect both, as two loving hearts connects to each other without seeing any duality between two individuals. This is what makes them different from the directors of the other genres of 'Theatre of Roots'.

The fourth category which I have proposed in 'Theatre of Roots' is the 'representative' one, consisting of those who turned to their folk/traditional/regional forms and age old traditions totally out of interest. Neither, they were trying to utilize the folk/traditional/regional theatre/cultural forms, age old traditions and rituals to create a new kind of theatre, nor they were for the revival of the forms with whom they were working with. In fact, they were more or less pushing forward and moulding their traditional resources



so that it could suit to the new conditions of the world around and acquire a new language and meaning. These were the actual modernist masters of Indian theatre both in content and the form. Directors like H. Kanhailal and Habib Tanvir are the best examples of this category.

‘I was not after the form,’ as, Habib Tanvir revealed in several of his interviews, ‘but was searching a theatrical language through which I could relate to the age old traditions and at the same time appeal the current Indian audience who were far from the so called realistic modern/urban theatre.’ Their concern was much deeper than the utilization value of the cultural forms/traditions/rituals they were working with. They were strikingly different in their themes from the rest and the use of the form. They were not using the form but reorienting them to the present day situations and the needs.

The ‘Representative’ category which I am suggesting was due to the nature of the work of these two masters of modern Indian Theatre. If we see and analyze their theatre practice the productions they have done look like the continuation of the age old traditions/forms they were working with. They are not like the types which I have discussed under the ‘Ornamental’ category where the directors were using the actual strength of the forms in bits and pieces to decorate their theatre practice in a particular form. Neither was they working for the revival of the age old traditions and forms of their regions like the masters of the ‘Revivalist’ trend nor were they reinventing their own theatre language and forms as ‘Modernist’ masters have done by churning out the traditional cultural forms of their region.

The masters of ‘Representative’ category were minimalist, simple and true in approach to their respective forms with whom they were working with. The forms and actors



they were engaged with were always at the core of their theatre practice. They were not for just creative utilization of conventions and performance language of a particular form but for the optimum development of the same so that even the form can get a new life with their theatre practice.



Works Cited

Karnad, Girish. 'Theatre in India', *Daedalus*, Vol. 118, No. 4, Another India (Fall, 1989), pp. 330-352.

Tanvir, Habib. 'Theatre Is in the Villages', *Social Scientist*, Vol. 2, No. 10 (May, 1974), pp. 32-41.