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'THEATRE OF ROOTS': A STUDY IN TWO APPROACHES

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Abstract
What has come to be called as the 'theatre of roots' is by critical consensus the most influential movement in Indian theatrical history of the past century. The sustained interest and incentivisation by newly formed government institutions post-independence, like the Sangeet Natak Akademi, propelled the creation of a theatre movement that emphasised the blending of the 'traditional' and the 'modern'. While the majority of dramatists in the 1970s and 80s were driven to this kind of theatre as a result of institutionalised interest, some others independently ventured into integrating traditional performance forms into their modern theatre. Prominent among these are Habib Tanvir, Chandrasekhar Kambar, Utpal Dutt and Girish Karnad, among others. This paper seeks to analyse the practical manifestations of the 'roots' ideology in post-independence theatre practice in India. For such an examination, select works of the aforementioned dramatists are studied with the intention that their work illustrates the range and variety that characterises the 'theatre of roots'. The study shows that the engagement of these dramatists with traditional performance forms in order to create a contemporarily relevant theatre, may be categorised under two broad approaches: the bottom-up approach and the top-down approach, based on the individual relationship of the dramatists with the folk.

Keywords: 'theatre of roots', traditional, modern, folk forms, contemporary

The venerated Sanskrit drama declined in the first century. When Western theatre, with its proscenium style, was first introduced in India in the middle of the nineteenth century, the regional performance forms that flourished between the first and the nineteenth century were effectively devalued and erased by theatre historians of the period. This was part of colonizing Indian culture. Ngugi wa Thiong'o writes in *Decolonising the Mind*:

> … [I]ts [colonialism's] most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonized, the control, through culture … To control a people's culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others … the destruction or the deliberate undervaluing of a people's culture, their art, dances, religions, history, geography, education, orature and literature… (16).

This devaluing was also because of the Western definition of theatre as dramatic literature which emphasized on text-driven, playwright initiated and plot-based plays. This "marginalized indigenous, performance-driven genres of theatre based on actor improvisation, composed of short

and unrelated pieces of entertainment and/or of a number of song-and-movement sequences and/or taking place over an entire night or a series of days and nights." (Mee 2) "Genres with these dramaturgical structures came to be thought of as 'theatrical' but not as 'theatre' per se", adds Erin B. Mee (2). Proscenium style English plays performed in closed playhouses radically changed performer-spectator relationship. A cultural divide between what came to be seen as high/ English/ urban/ modern/theatre and what was categorized as low/Indian/ rural/ traditional/ performance was created. Mee writes that the dichotomy between 'modern/ Western/ theatre' and 'traditional/ Indian/ performance' was neither clear-cut nor absolute, however the perception of this cultural dichotomy was very real and it influenced the ideological formation of the 'roots' movement which was crystallized against colonial theatrical aesthetics.

In 1942, the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) was formed with an aim to bridge the urban-rural gap and to unite the upper and the lower classes in common goals of attaining freedom. IPTA associates used popular entertainment forms as a way to legitimize indigenous forms of theatre that were disparaged by the English and the English-educated Indian elite. As the cultural mouthpiece of the Communist Party of India, IPTA weakened considerably under the Nehruvian government at the centre. With the advent of the post-independence era, the task of organizing cultural activity in the nation became a state concern. This was done by formulating policies that led to the creation of government institutions, the most relevant here being the Sangeet Natak Akademi which was established in 1953. "The indigenization of the term 'academy', coupled with the Sanskrit compound Sangeet Natak, bespoke the hybrid character of the institution" (Dalmia 169). As part of its mission, the SNA organized a series of seminars and conferences in 1956, 1971, 1972, 1984 and 1989 with regard to the theatre of roots movement. The 1956 seminar marks the point when folk performances began to function as true repositories of Indian culture. The emphasis, however, was on blending the 'traditional' with the 'modern'.

Ebrahim Alkazi asked "for a careful and sophisticated handling of folk forms for the modern stage, depending 'on the kind of creative individual. If he has the rootedness in traditional culture and if he has the modern sensibility which is creative and at the same time he is able to use it, you could get a combination; it would be very powerful, it would be very strong'" (Dalmia 187). This kind of rootedness is visible in two of the four dramatists under discussion, and thus their theatre may be said to be using a bottom-up approach with respect to the 'roots' movement. While both Tanvir and Kambar are entrenched in 'folk' consciousness vis-à-vis their theatrical practice, they seek to imbue their drama with a modern critical understanding to address issues of contemporary relevance. The present discussion focuses on Tanvir's *Charandas Chor* and Kambar's *Jokumaraswami,* plays that are the most well-known of the oeuvre of both the dramatists, and in a way best exemplify their theatre practice in the context of the 'roots' movement. Both have acquired canonical status in modern Indian theatre history, and by coincidence are also two of the three plays chosen as part of Ananda Lal's work, *Twist in the Folktale,* published by Seagull Books. The title of Lal's work rightly suggests the thread tying the plays together: the narratives of both plays originally form part of folklore, *twisted* by way of adaptation for a modern audience, by a modern sensibility.

Tanvir's play is an adaptation of a Rajasthani folktale put down in writing by the folklorist Vijaydan Detha, from whom Tanvir first heard the story. The story is about a thief who inadvertently takes four vows to get admission into a guru's camp. The situations of each of the four vows, which include marrying the queen and becoming the king, are considered practically impossible by the thief. It is the last vow, the vow to never tell a lie, however, that in an ironic turn of events results in the thief's death as the queen is incapable of appreciating his honest commitment to his vows. Tanvir dropped the original conclusion where the Guru wedded the Queen after Charandas' execution, and made the villagers deify Charandas as their spiritual guide. The entire play is spirited slapstick comedy. At the end of this, the dramatic impact of the death is powerful. In the thief's death, Tanvir is also making a political

comment as the queen is not simply a tyrant, but a politician. It is inevitable then that someone who dares to challenge and confront authority, must be eliminated, for the queen must save her face in front of the *praja.*

The play sets the common man against hypocrisy and the higher echelons of power. And the common man loses the battle. Tanvir also exposes, at other points, the hypocrisy of the so-called system of law and order. The Havaldar and Charandas are "pals" because the Havaldar can be bought by bribes. The minister is not to be bothered by the responsible position he holds, instead, inflated by a sense of flattery, blindly goes on cutting ribbons without caring to know what it is that he's inaugurating. The munim, having discovered the robbery of five mohurs, very cunningly takes advantage and pockets five more himself, assured that the blame could be shifted on the original thief. The play also sharply undercuts religious figures and practices, and in doing so it indulges in strong political commentary. The Guru's ashram is a den for drunkards, gamblers and smokers. The Guru himself is shown to be interested in his dakshina, and not so much in the well-being of his disciples. The priest in the temple is willing to accept stolen goods as offering as long as it benefits the temple. An explicit Socialist comment lays in the scenes when Charandas shares his *sattu* with the peasant, and later when he distributes the stolen grains from the landlord to the poor and transforms into a Robin Hood figure. He is a thief who only steals from the rich and the wealthy, and believes in the equitable distribution of resources. Thus, as Katyal notes, "For all its hilarity and slapstick tomfoolery, *Charandas Chor* makes some sharp political comments" (72). These comments, however, are not the complexities of a highly industrialized society, rather the day-to-day and simple, as it were, problems of ordinary people. The beauty of the play lies in the way it subtly addresses these political problems, while incorporating elements of indigenous Indian theatre.

Habib Tanvir worked with the 'folk' and created plays that appealed to both urban and rural audiences. His Naya Theatre group was formed with *Nacha* performers from rural Chhattisgarh. Much of his later work, as also his leftist ideology, was influenced by his early career experiences with IPTA. He received his training at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, and was exposed to Brechtian technique during his extensive European tour. He was surprised that the kind of open-endedness that Brechtian theatre had, was inherent in Indian traditional forms. With *Charandas Chor,* he considers he had developed his unique idiom, something he always aspired for.

Charandas Chor begins with "[a] group of *panthi* dancers singing and dancing vigorously" to a Satnami song praising truth (85). While most of the choruses are taken from the Satnami song collection and from other folk material, some phrases reflect a "complexity of articulation and consciousness", which Javed Mallick says "is obviously Tanvir's contribution" (170). Some songs possess ironic commentary, while others point to an important narrative development. The play is infused with live music and singing which

> add an aural texture to the performance just as the rituals add a visual richness, enhancing the overall dramatic and theatrical experience; they underline the inclusion of an oral tradition that is increasingly marginalized in contemporary performance. These features are to continue to remain unique to the productions of Habib and Naya Theatre (Katyal 71-2).

With the first scene of the *panthi* troupe, the temple scene of worship and the last scene of the deification of Charandas, the play inserts ritual as an important part of dramatic action.

The beauty of Tanvir's theatre also lies in the process of genesis of the play. Tanvir, having realized that he must not impose his Western dramatic education on his troupe, gave them freedom to improvise during rehearsals. It took him long to see that the folk performers, who were used to the spontaneity and liveliness of Nacha*,* could not stick to the proscenium discipline that Tanvir initially expected of them. Further, Tanvir makes clear that he was never after the folk form itself; he was only after the folk performer. With the folk performer came the folk form, as the performing being of the

artist embodied the essence of the Nacha form. This collaboration between a Western educated director with a modern sensibility and an illiterate, folk troupe finally resulted in a most meaningful and creatively enriched theatre.

Chandrasekhar Kambar's *Jokumaraswami* is a southern fertility drama based on the ritual of Jokumaraswami which is still practised in the villages of north Karnataka. As part of the ritual, barren women make phallus-shaped idols out of clay or snake-gourd, apply butter on the tip, place them in baskets and worship them. In some villages, they cook snake-gourd as an embodiment of Jokumaraswami and feed it to their husbands. It is believed that doing so will make the barren couple fertile. Being a fertility god, Jokumaraswami is also associated with rain. Kambar's play most explicitly transforms religious ritual into dramatic practice. The Prologue has the Jokumaraswami ritual performed onstage. The ritual is extended in the play and is integrated in the narrative. Briefly, the play follows Basanna, the reincarnation of Jokumaraswami, who makes Gowda's barren wife, Gowdathi, fertile. The play culminates in Basanna's death which acts as sacrifice in order to make both the woman and the barren land fertile. On the other hand, Gowda, a powerful landlord, prides in having 'possessed' all land in the village. As one knows, land equals woman, and woman equals land, it is easy to decipher that he speaks metaphorically. His possession of women is as proprietorial in nature as is his possession of land. In the exchanges between Basanna and Gowda, the political slant of the play cannot be missed. Basanna, a small farmer, is not to be fooled by Gowda's tactics into believing that his father was killed by a ghost, but knows that the 'ghost' is in fact Gowda's men. He is unafraid of confronting Gowda in the field in darkness, where he meets and impregnates Gowdathi, and finally meets his end at the hands of Gowda's men. But this is an inevitable end as Basanna must become the sacrificial scapegoat in order that the village may prosper. Lines like "Let a good government rule us" and "May he who sows own the field" articulate Kambar's political commentary. Through these scenes, Kambar addresses contemporary political issues and asserts the ideology that, in Basanna's words, "There is a law by which the field belongs to the one who ploughs it" (34). This political slant is organically woven into a ritualistic structure in the play. Ritual is not just the thematic core of the play, but also the form of the play as it begins with it, and carries it forward in the narrative. Kambar uses the elements of traditional theatre in beginning the play with an opening prayer, and using a Sutradhara to interact with the audience.

The opening exchange between the Sutradhara and Himmela is full of the robustness and energy that characterizes folk theatre. Ananda Lal writes, "As far as genre is concerned, he [Kambar] names his source clearly: *Jokumaraswami* 'preserved the essential elements of Bayalata', an umbrella term for all the outdoors traditional theatres of Karnataka" (xv). It is this sheer primal energy which Kambar transfers onto the proscenium stage. Kambar uses urban Kannada actors and writes in Kannada. He is, however, far from the contrasts that characterize "upper caste inheritance: time-eternity, *Janma-Moksha*…and so on." To him "the problem of being is more fundamental and universal", and this reflects in his theatre (Taranath 146).

Kambar, by his own admission, belongs "geographically to a village, and sociologically to what was considered to be an oppressed, uneducated class" (148). He writes, "I am, therefore, a folk person simply because I honestly cannot be anything else" (148). And he finds it necessary to stress his folk identity because he is aware of the kind of 'folksiness' that had become fashionable amongst urban directors at one point.

While there was a Tanvir and a Kambar, others like Girish Karnad and Utpal Dutt created theatre working closely with traditional folk forms, but their dramatic sensibilities were evidently shaped by their urban habitat. Thus, their theatre may be understood as using a top-down approach in relation to the 'roots' movement. Whereas Karnad works with *Yakshagana,* a folk form from Karnataka, Dutt works with *Jatra,* a folk form from Bengal. With *Hayavadana* and *The Great Rebellion* respectively, Karnad and Dutt carry out their dramatic plan of exploring the past for the needs of the present.

According to Erin B. Mee, Karnad's *Hayavadana* was "immediately taken up as a 'poster play' for the emerging roots movement", with Suresh Awasthi singling it out as "an example of what could be done with 'folk forms' in an urban setting" (141-2). It adapts a tale found in the *Kathasaritsagara,* a collection of Sanskrit stories dating from the eleventh century. Karnad also bases his play on Thomas Mann's *The Transposed Heads,* a German novella which is a fictional interpretation of the Sanskrit tale. While the Sanskrit tale deals with the dichotomy between head and body and Mann's novella deals with that between intellect and emotion, *Hayavadana* explores the conflict between the self and other in the postcolonial reality of post-independence India. It does so by combining the elements of Yakshagana with the proscenium tradition.

The play follows the story of Padmini who is married to the fair-skinned intellectual Brahmin, Devdutta, but is attracted to the well-built and dark man, Kapila, who is the son of a blacksmith. In a turn of events, both Devdutta and Kapila behead themselves. Padmini manages to restore them to life by pleading to the goddess Kali, but in a state of confusion puts Devdutta's head on Kapila's body, and vice-versa. This forms the background to explore the play's central question: who is Padmini's husband, the one with Devdutta's head and Kapila's body, or the other? The answer to the question from a Brahminical point of view which privileges the head over the other limbs of the body is that the man with Devdutta's head is actually Devdutta. But Karnad effectively disrupts this hierarchy by complicating the resolution in order to explore the cultural politics in a postcolonial India.

The structure of the play is formed by concentric circles as it follows the pattern of a story-within-a-story. The play begins with introducing Ganesha, a Hindu deity with an elephant's head and a human body. The head-body divide can be interpreted as a metaphor for cultural difference. Ganesha's presence then challenges the entire conceptual framework of the head-body divide, and by extension the cultural difference between colonial authority and Indian culture as also the dichotomy that privileges one over the other. The second concentric circle is formed by the story of the titular Hayavadana, a being with a horse's head and a man's body. This immediately presents a commentary by bringing in contemporary political situations. Hayavadana tells the Bhagvata that despite his repeated attempts to resolve his conflict by engaging in "Civics", "Politics", "Patriotism", "Nationalism", "Indianization" and "Socialist Pattern of Society", he fails to become "complete" (114). This failure despite of such high academic pursuits is evidence of the inadequacy of a nationalist imaginary based on the totalitarian discourses of nationalism.

A significant element of Yakshagana is the use of the half-curtain which introduces Hayavadana. It is modelled on the way characters make their entrances in Yakshagana, doing an introductory dance called *oddolaga*, as part of which they appear little by little from behind a curtain. While *oddolaga* focuses on the moral nature of epic characters already familiar to the audience, Karnad's use of it exposes Hayavadana's motivation of hiding from the public. The questions asked by the Bhagavata to Hayavadana are similar to the ones asked by the Bhagavata to major characters in Yakshagana: "Who are you? […] What happened? What's your grief?" (Mee 150) Thereafter the first scene between Padmini and Kapila is also adapted from the Tamasha repertoire. It might be important for the audience to be aware of this original context which Karnad uses, but subverts to establish Padmini's spunk and wit as against the Tamasha exchange where the woman is outwitted.

"Karnad argues that the 'energy of folk theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has the means of questioning [those] values'" (Mee 157). So, at the end, after both Devdutta and Kapila kill themselves, when Padmini performs sati, it might seem as though Karnad upholds the tradition. On the contrary, however, notes Mee, he adds an ironic twist as "Padmini's sati marks her devotion not to one man, but to *two*" (158). Her sati thus expresses the fulfilment of her desire and her disregard for societal conventions.

A significant use of a traditional element is the use of masks which attains central importance in the play. In *Hayavadana,* Karnad translates Yakshagana elements and other traditional performance elements in an idiom that appeals to the cognition of an urban audience, and does so while simultaneously educating them. He works with urban actors and explains, "I mean I am attracted by the Yakshagana form. I write a play…using the Yakshagana form, because I feel, in one particular play it helps me give a form to what I want to say" (Dalmia 176). Mee articulates:

> *Hayavadana* is neither a Yakshagana play adapted for the modern stage, nor a modern play written to be performed in Yakshagana style with Yakshagana performers. It is a play that combines elements of modern urban theatre with elements of Yakshagana to create a new genre of theatre (169).

This new genre of theatre can rightly be called a hybrid theatre that is emblematic of the new dramaturgy and the playwriting practices of the theatre of roots.

Utpal Dutt's *The Great Rebellion,* originally, *Mahavidroha,* is set in the battlefields of the First Indian War of Independence in 1857. Dutt's drama is a mix of history and fiction. Characters like Budhan Singh and his son, Bishen, are fictional characters that represent the multitude of poor, marginalized masses suffering at the hands of the British forces. Other characters like Mian Muhammad and Amin Panjakush are real figures from history. For his standpoint on the rebellion, Dutt chooses Karl Marx as opposed to, say, an Indian historian. Samik Bandhyopadhyay writes, "He 'dramatizes' the brilliant insights that surface in the articles written by Marx and Engels…between 1853 and 1859" (125). By showing the complicity of Indians in the domination of fellow Indians, Dutt elucidates the nature of the contemporary, post-independence suffering of Indians: the enemy now is not an identifiable alien, but elites, politicians, ministers and groups with vested interests that form the higher echelons of the same society. To perform his political task, Dutt uses the structure of the Jatra, a Bengali folk drama form, performed largely across rural Bengal.

Born and brought up in an urban scenario, Dutt received a cosmopolitan education. He went on to form his Little Theatre Group in 1949. Before immersing itself in radical and political theatre, the group performed Shakesperean and Brecht plays, in a period now called the "Epic theatre" period. His Jatra political plays were often performed on open-air stages and epitomized his commitment to communist ideology, and even today form his lasting legacy.

With its structure, Jatra provides Dutt an aesthetic, theatrical and collectivist mould for his exploration of issues of contemporary socio-political relevance. Dutt writes of his dramatic style, in which *The Great Rebellion* "represents a departure" (Bandyopadhyay 131):

> I wanted to create a myth in all its simple brevity, with the undertones of vast interconnections and interactions. I have tried mass crowd scenes in the idiotic belief that they may somehow lead me to transcendence of the individual to a dialectical connection between masses and men. I realized very late that a lone Faust is more representative of the German masses of this time than a thousand weavers in Hauptmann's play (131).

Thus, the framework of Jatra enabled Dutt to dramatize the pitiable situation of Heera Singh and his long-lost son, Lachman Singh, in order that identification with the suffering of these individuals may drive the masses to a grave political realization and finally to political agitation. Dutt says, "The Jatra has always been not just theatre or entertainment but a school, a court of justice and a political meeting—everything" (156). Traditionally, Jatra used mythology and presented characters that were already familiar to the audience and whom the audience nevertheless sat to witness. Gradually, though, with change in sociological conditions, Jatra evolved to use historical, rather than mythological, frameworks. But the pattern remained mythological for Dutt as he elaborates:

> Now, only the actors dressed differently. Instead of the 'good' Arjun, we had it embodied in the Bengali revolutionary holding a pistol. Instead of the *asur* painted in black, we had the British imperialists. So that although the play was supposed to be reflecting modern themes, the pattern was that of a myth with very disparate roles assigned to each character (156).

The Jatra is a living form and it must evolve with time and changes in the sociological realities of the masses it serves. It is significant to note that in the 1971 seminar on the 'Contemporary Relevance of Traditional Theatre', Dutt expresses his anxiety over the degradation of the Jatra owing to commercial forces and directors who simply 'appropriate' Jatra elements without a meaningful integration, resulting in 'folksy' theatre. With *The Great Rebellion,* he is successful in creating a new myth and in moving the "masswa" to political agitation. He is able to do so because the rural audience he caters to is still more or less cohesive and shares a collective consciousness. A last point regarding Dutt's drama is that it caters and appeals to the elite and the folk, the urban and the rural audiences alike. This is something he imbibed from his practice of Shakespeare, since this quality characterizes Shakespearean drama: it is simultaneously popular and elevating.

This study has attempted to show how diverse dramatic practice in the post-independence scenario, engaged with traditional classical and folk forms in what Ananda Lal calls a

> three-pronged quest: to realistically be more 'Indian' in the postpartum glow of Independence, to ideologically reject the Western model of theatre accepted unquestioningly by their predecessors, and to opportunistically capitalize on the newly-discovered spectacular appeal of uninhibited music, dance and colour in folk theatre (vii).

Tanvir and Kambar participated in the 'roots' ideology by working closely with the 'folk' and thus can be broadly categorized in the bottom-up approach. On the other hand, Karnad and Dutt did the same by organically integrating the 'folk' into their fundamentally modern, urban and cosmopolitan ideology, and thus are broadly grouped under the top-down approach. By pouring in new content of contemporary socio-political relevance, these dramatists also indirectly revitalize the traditional forms. So, there is a constant process of death and regeneration as far as genre, structure and form is concerned. The theatre of the 'roots' dramatists discussed here serve as apt examples of the kind of unity that existed in the diversity of the practical manifestation of the 'roots' ideology.

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