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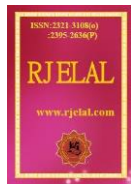
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RETURNING TO THE ROOTS: A STUDY OF GIRISH KARNAD'S *HAYAVADANA* AND  
VIJAY TENDULKAR'S *GHASIRAM KOTWAL*

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Abstract

During the past few decades, the importance and vitality of Indian folk forms has been greatly recognized by the Indian theatre artists. The status of the regional theatres has been enhanced by an intellectual reappraisal which views them as the surviving fragments of the ancient Sanskrit dramatic tradition on the basis of common features such as preliminary rituals, stylized acting and gestures, stock characters like the stage director (sutradhara) and clown (vidushaka), and abundant song and dance. The present paper focuses on the efforts of the two well-known figures of contemporary Indian theatre, Girish Karnad and Vijay Tendulkar, who have experimented with folk forms in their plays. The study is based on Karnad's *Hayavadana* and Tendulkar's *Ghasiram Kotwal*.

**Keywords:** Dramatic tradition, folk theatre, folk forms, urban theatre, contemporary Indian theatre.

In the last two decades or so, a new interest in regional cultural expressions and folklore has developed in India, leading to the rediscovery and reevaluation of indigenous forms of literature and the performing arts. Nowhere is this more visible than in theatre. The traditional theatres such as Yakshagana, Tamasha, Ras Lilla, Nautanki, Bhavai, and Jatra have gone through a remarkable revival since Independence.

If we look at the origin and evolution of folk theatre, we find that this theatrical tradition is interlinked with human civilization itself. In the Vedic period, people had developed potential artistic qualities like singing, dancing and many religious rituals to express their emotions, hope and aspirations. Bharat Muni, the first dramaturgist codified the art of dramaturgy in his famous

treatise called 'Natyasastra'. Many folk forms have been developed mainly out of celebrating religious and social ceremonies. Songs and dances are integral parts of these folk forms. Each folk form had its particular community, language, area and way of life. The royal patronage by Kings and Zamindars gave moral boosting and incentive to folk artists to develop folk theatre troupes, but after abolition of Kings and Zamindars, these professional folk theatre troupes started languishing and some of them are at the verge of extinction. Many talented artists deserted troupes and migrated to cities for some other employments. But for about the last two decades it has been accepted by scholars in performing art that there is great relevance in studying, knowing and preserving this treasure of our Indian folk theatres. And, therefore, considered

decadent and largely forgotten during colonial days, these regional theatres have recently received attention and also a certain amount of governmental support from the national and state Sangeet Natak Akademis. Their status has been enhanced by an intellectual reappraisal which views them as the surviving fragments of the ancient Sanskrit dramatic tradition, have on the basis of common features such as preliminary rituals, stylized acting and gestures, stock characters like the stage director (sutradhara) and clown (vidushaka), and abundant song and dance. Through annual festivals held in the capital, folk theatre groups from all over India performed for urban audiences, and Western scholars have also been attracted to study the traditions. As a result, greater familiarity with folk theatre forms has developed in the cities, and the urban attitude has shifted from scorn to curiosity and respect.

Intellectual interest in folk theatre started in the late fifties and early sixties in India. The studies of Balwant Gargi and Jagdish Chandra Mathur were basically descriptive, documenting aspects of stagecraft in the different regions and comparing them in a general way (Gargi 1966; Mathur 1964). The vitality of rural theatre was widely acknowledged, as by Nissim Ezekiel in the April 1962 issue of *Seminar* focusing on theatre (*Seminar* 32). But although many contributors to this issue spoke of the need for synthesis with urban theatre, none gave examples of specific attempts. At this time, the urban and rural streams still flowed separately. The rediscovery of folk theatre had in fact heightened the sense of a rural-urban cultural dichotomy among the educated elite. Urban theatre was perceived more and more as imitative of the West and non-Indian, while the term rural was acquiring the prestigious connotation of "indigenous." Badal Sircar, the noted Bengali playwright, expressed this clearly:

Theatre is one of the fields where this [rural-urban] dichotomy is manifested most. The city theatre today is not a natural development of the traditional or folk theatre in the urban setting as it should have been. It is rather a new theatre having its base on Western theatre . . . , whereas the traditional

village theatre has retained most of its indigenous characteristics (Sircar 2009: 1-2).

As a result, some dramatists began to reject Western influence and urge a return to village culture and traditions. The Urdu playwright Habib Tanvir stated:

.....preserved even to this day. It is these rural drama groups that require real encouragement. It is not until the city youth is fully exposed to the influence of folk traditions in theatre that a truly Indian theatre, modern and universal in appeal and indigenous in form, can really be evolved (Tanvir 1977: 6).

By the early seventies, playwrights and directors had begun to incorporate folk conventions and ideas into their productions. Heightened awareness of rural forms was feeding back into the creative process, providing new resources for self-expression. In the Round Table on the Contemporary Relevance of Traditional Theatre, organized by the Sangeet Natak Akademi in 1971, complex questions were posed, such as the relation of rural forms to modern values, the role of the urban author vis-a-vis an unfamiliar regional genre, and the reaction of the urban audience. But the conference's basic assumption was unchallenged, namely that "as creative artistes we have to confront the traditional, especially in our case where tradition is a continuous living vital force" (Awasthi 1971: 7). These discussions made it clear that the manner in which traditional and urban theatres were to be integrated depended very much upon the sensibility of the individual playwright or director.

To illustrate some of the examples, let me briefly cite the efforts of two well-known figures who have experimented with folk forms, Girish Karnad and Vijay Tendulkar. Girish Karnad, a Gyanapitha award winner and a celebrated actor dramatist, has made experiment with folk elements in some of his plays. *Hayavadan* is one of them. It has become a popular play among the people. Girish Karnad is a dramatist whose career, in fact, germinated in the soil of India's cultural tradition. His inadvertent reading of the Mahabharata during his journey to England provided him with the first

creative impulse to write. Richly imbued in the spirit of Indian indigenous arts and culture, most of his plays reflect the urge of re-defining the national identity by returning to the roots.

In his plays Karnad has always gone back to the rich stream of inspiration ever flowing in the form of myths and folklore. For his stories he has often drawn from the epics and mythologies, colouring them with his imagination and giving a contemporary twist to an ancient tale. Not only his themes but also techniques which Karnad employs in his plays are adopted from the rich tradition of Indian classical theatre and folk theatre. The extensive use of the indigenous themes and techniques gives a glimpse of the inherent national identity emerging and evolving out of a colonial consciousness into an independent and free environ.

In the play *Hayavadana* (1971) Karnad has sourced the story from a mythical tale in *Vetala Panchavimsati* in Sanskrit, which forms a part of Somadeva's *Kathasaritsagara* and Kshemendra's *Brihat Katha Manjari*. Karnad has adopted the story from Thomas Mann's translation of the story in English entitled *The Transposed Heads*. Re-interpreting the story from the point where it ends in the original version, Karnad gives a modern twist to the tale giving a voice to the new emergent national identity. Based on the tale of transposed heads from the *Kathasaritsagara*, *Hayavadana* is a symbolic drama employing several conventions of Yakshagana, such as the half-curtain which is carried onstage to introduce new characters, and the Bhagavata or narrator, who introduces the story and comments on the action throughout the play. The structure of the play as a whole, however, is not derived from any particular regional tradition, and its philosophical exploration of the problems of wholeness and identity has a decidedly modern orientation. Different productions have brought out more or less of the folk flavor.

Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* or the talking horse is an incorporation of motifs from traditional theatre like- *Yakshagana*, a play within a play, dolls, masks, the irreverent inversion of mock-heroic mores. India's colonial heritage is portrayed in the

play. It offers a mixture of western and Indian theatrical traditions. Interwoven into the main plot is the story of Hayavadana, a horse headed man whose quest for wholeness underscores the play's exploration of identity and reality.

Hayavadana meaning 'the one with the horse's head, is named after a horse headed man, who wants to shed the horse's head and become human. Karnad provides the outer panel as- in a mural within which the tale of the two friends is framed. He builds on the performance tradition in *Hayavadana*. Throughout the play he employs numerous folk theatre devices such as entry curtains, songs, puppets, masks, story-within a story plot and a story teller character, the *Bhagavata*. He acts as a narrator and sings for and about the characters in the first and third person. He often reveals their thoughts and produces the dances and prose exchanges of the performers. He is in effects a stage manager who appears on stage and directs the action of the play by providing narration. He uses the technique of mask-swapping to signify the switching of Kapila and Devadatta's head.

Masks play a pivotal role in Indian culture. Used variously to depict varied characters they enable the dramatists to represent good and evil characters. Masks are employed in various art forms like Yakshagana, Kathakali, Chau etc. In *Hayavadana*, Karnad used the masks to illustrate divinity, human and non-human or sub-human characters. Lord Ganesha, Hayavadana, Devadutta and Kapila, all are represented through the help of masks. In case of Devadutta and Kapila the masks are especially useful to depict the transposition of their heads.

Dolls are another device used in the play. An embodiment of human qualities, dolls often form a part of many rituals and religious practices. In the play Karnad uses the dolls to reveal the psychological workings of the characters, giving an insight to their mind. They reveal the true emotions of Padmini and her desire for Kapila:

Doll II: She wants new dolls.

Doll I: The whore.

Doll II: The bitch. (*Hayavadana* II, P. 163)

The dolls in the play in fact are playing the role of society when they express dissent at the behavior and desire of Padmini.

The use of music and dance in the play can be traced to the influence of the folk theatre. An integral part of the Indian life, music forms the core of the Indian life, be it a moment of mourning or revelry. Music knows no bounds and it truly represents another interconnecting link that binds the whole country together across the regions. The presence of the Chorus does the function of providing the background to the play often diverging with the little details and comments in the tale and about the characters.

Vijay Tendulkar, another well-known dramatist wrote several famous Marathi plays. When his play *Ghasiram Kotwal* was staged, it charmed the audience, as proper blending of Marathi folk music, satire and chorus songs. The thematic contents of the play gave rich entertainment to the audience with a dramatic message. This play was translated into Hindi and a repertory troupe travelled 'with this play to Europe to stage this play in European cities-like Berlin and London. This play could enthral the European audiences. 'Guardian', the widely circulated journal, praised that this Indian play could satisfy the twin parameters of good play-which is aesthetic pleasure with a forceful message. 'Guardian' the prestigious journal of England remarked that in comparing with the modern Indian play, the European play looks like a broken mirror. This high appraisal of success prompted other playwrights of India to make such experiments of blending folk element skillfully with modern themes. Tendulkar takes elements of Tamasha along with other Maharashtrian folk idioms and integrates them into a fun rumbustuous script about a serious historical subject. Tamasha, the folklore of Maharashtra is known for its humour and erotic singing and dancing. The Tamasha dance is vivid, temperamental, primeval and filled with zest for living. The women and men, performing in Tamasha, dance to the wavering sounds of tuntuna, dholaki and manjeera. It begins with a ceremony called *avahan* (invoking the gods), followed by *Gana* (Lord Ganesha), *Gavlan*, *Vag* (the main play), followed by *Rang Bazi*, a hilarious farce,

which humours the audience. The play *Ghasiram Kotwal* also begins in folk theatre style with twelve men performing an introductory invocation to Ganesh:

Ganapati dances the Ganapati dance.

We the Poona Brahmans bow and prance.  
(Ghasiram Kotwal)

Tendulkar uses this ensemble again at the end of the show, reminding us that the cycle of events that we have witnessed comes around continuously; the terrifying force of communal power that drives the story is still with us.

Dance is used throughout the play to great dramatic effect, for example:

The mob shouts. the drums beat loud and fast. Ghasiram begins to move in a sort of dance as if dying to the beat of the drum. Falls, gets up, falls, growls like an animal. Crawls. Jerks in spasms. Falls and falls again while trying to rise. Death dance. The crowd's shouting continues. Finally Ghasiram lies motionless. (GK)

Here, is a dance of death while earlier was staged a solo war dance for Ghasiram from the auditorium where he has been banished by the Poona community. When Nana chases Ghasiram's daughter, Gauri, through the Poona gardens, they become Radha and Krishna dancing in the gardens of Mathura. The structure is episodic, creating the same sense of freedom and eclecticism as the *Dholaki Phat*, with exaggerated contrast between intimate dialogues and big ensemble scenes. The language is often rough vulgar street slang contrasting with high-caste refinements. Also, emulating the *Dholaki Phat* format, some of the individual roles only speak (like Maushi), while the main body of the company dances and sings. The songs are traditional, familiar to a Marathi audience. *Lavani* are sung throughout the show, associated with the decadent erotic world of Nana and the prostitute, Gulabi. Religious and devotional song is perverted in this world, so that the *kirtan* mode is used in sacrilegious juxtaposition to describe the Brahmans going to the whore house.

*Sutradhar (to the beat of the dholki drum):*

Night comes.

Poona Brahmans go

To Bavannakhani.

They go

To Bavannakhani. (GK)

*Ghasiram Kotwal* is important historically because it fused two moulds of Maratha theatre at one go-the traditional sangeet- natak mould and the modern realistic theatre mould and demonstrated how folk-theatre elements could be integrated, to achieve contemporary significance. The decay of the Sangeet Natak has been caused by the dissociation of song from the narrative flow of the play. In *Ghasiram Kotwal* songs were reintegrated into the narrative, unique as *Ghasiram Kotwal* was in form and verbal idiom both in the history of the Marathi stage and in Tendulkar's own. But *Ghasiram* was not the declaration of a new aesthetic-According to Tendulkar the combination of Marathi folk form which he used came in answer to his search for a way to tell the story he wanted to tell. Tendulkar was particularly interested in capturing the feeling of spontaneity of Tamasha, and he discovered that the urban actors he used lacked the informality and improvisational skills of traditional actors. This problem highlighted for him one of the major differences between urban and rural theatre: the urban play depends upon the playwright, while in folk theatre, the actor is all-important.

Now when the aggressive consumerism has mesmerized the people's mind due to advent of electronic media, and cinema and TV are giving enough entertainment to the people, one may ask the question of utility and relevance of reviving the traditional multiple streams of folk plays. The folk drama has got twin purposes of both entertainment and education. Folk theatre has contributed immensely for creating social consciousness. As for example in Orissa the 'Geetnatya' of Baisnaba Pani played greater role spreading patriotic fervour among the people during freedom-movement of India. Similarly other folk dramas like Prahallad

natak, Danda, Palas have also enriched people's mind with religious virtues.

The vulgarization of films, TV serials with overdose of sex and violence are polluting people's mind with main objective of giving sensuous pleasure, and this new trend in the field of entertainment industry causes immense sociological hazards. In the words of Martin Esslin- "In an age where, the world is flooded by a deluge of cheap commercially motivated material on television, the live theatre, the guardian of traditions and individuality of cultures, threatened by this avalanche of homogenized triviality has become more vital to the continued richness and variety of human culture than ever before in the history of mankind" (Published in the 'Canplay': a magazine of Canadian playwrights associations Vol-6, No.2, April 1989). Kapila Vatsyayan a great authority on performing art has analyzed various forms of Indian folk plays in her book 'Traditional Indian theatre: Multiple streams'. She has opined that there is great importance in reviving Indian folk plays as these plays have contemporary relevance. In her said book 'Traditional Indian theatre', she observed "The Yatra forms are an important branch of the parent tree of Indian literatures, languages and theatre forms. Its survivals appear to have thrown seeds, which have given modern Bengali theatre a new direction. Like the Bhavai and the Tamasha it has provided an Indian format to avant-garde theatre, possibly this renowned interest in Yatra was conditioned by the advent of a new form of epic theatre from Europe. Be as it may, the European influence generated an interest in national traditions and this has been a return educational journey home-ward for the modern theatre of India" (Traditional Indian theatre-page 146, published by NBT, New Delhi, 1st edition 1980). So, it is to be admitted that folk plays of India, have played a great role in shaping avant garde plays.

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