

The Genesis of Modern Marathi Theatre

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ABSTRACT

The present paper traces historical development of various trends that are important for making Modern Marathi theatre that are initiated from mid 19th century. Basically, this theatre needs to understand with the influence of English and Parsi theatre activities on indigenous performance practices during the British Colonial period in India. During the Pre British-colonial and the British colonial period, Indigenous performances such as Lavani, Tamasha, Dashavatar and so on can be considered as a cultural representation and a source of entertainment in Maharashtra. Similarly, the arrival of English and Parsi theatre activities also leads to entertainment. The different elements of English and Parsi theatrical performances attracted attention of educated different classes of society. And they sought theatre that can deal with social aspects of the times. Therefore, this paper tries to critically highlight different elements of English as well as Parsi theatrical performances that can be considered important for making Modern Marathi Theatre.

1. INTRODUCTION

The present paper traces historical development of various trends that are important for making Modern Marathi theatre since 1850s. During mid-nineteenth century several theatre groups like Parsi theatre, Marathi theatre, and Gujarati theatre emerged as a source of entertainment in Maharashtra. These theatres co-existed with several other different Indigenous forms like *Tamasha*, *Lalit*, and *Dashavatar* which had been the source of ritual practices and entertainment for some decades. It is argued that the Parsi, Gujarati and Marathi theatre “imitated” the English theatre for internal as well as external aspects like commercialisation of theatre activities, stage techniques, modes of presentation, translation- adaptation of European plays, and so on to generate interest of the audiences. They incorporated such aspects like wings, footlights, colour curtain, make-up, green room, scene, setting, stage, orchestra and the word *once more* to indicate an *encore* (Deshpande 17). However, it is also to be noted that the new theatres in Bombay used some aspects like music and dance from the Indigenous forms like *Tamasha* and *Dashavatar*. To understand influence of Indigenous form, need to find reference of Vishnudas Bhavé's play *Sita Swaymvar Akhyan* with development of various dramatic genres.

2. DEVELOPMENT OF DRAMATIC GENRES

Sita Swaymvar Akhyan was performed on 5th November, 1843 (Gokhale, 2000, pp. 3-4). It was partly based on Kannada form of folk theatre called *Bhagvat Natak* but unlike the Kannada play Vishnudas Bhavé's play included only upper caste men. Moreover, he claimed that while writing this Marathi play he refined several aspects of the Kannada play (2000, p. 3) especially dance and battle scenes (2000, p. 6). Therefore, *Sita Swaymvar Akhyan* can be considered a step forward to the development of Modern Marathi Theatre. The success of Bhavé's company encouraged several other upper caste men to form their own drama companies. Thus, few other companies such as *Aaltekar*, *Ichlakarjekar* and *Kolhapur* companies came into existence within a few years of his successful tours to Bombay and Pune (Kulkarni 46). All of them also followed the dramatic genre established by him.

With the establishment of Mumbai University, an educated people began to grow steadily with British Education policies. They were not happy with the performances of the plays based on Mythology. They wanted to bring modifications in the various aspects of theatrical activities so they concentrated on Sanskrit and European plays. They paid their attention to translation and adaptation of Sanskrit and European plays to the Marathi stage. These plays were called Bookish or Prose plays (Bhole 19). In this direction writing of Vinayak Janardan Kirtane (1840-1891) can be found. His *Thorle Madhavrao Peshwe* (The Elder Madhavrao Peshwa, 1861) was considered the first Bookish or Prose play. “It was the first dramatic work in Marathi to draw upon history, rather than mythology, for

its narrative material” (Gokhale, 2000, p. 12). It was full of dialogues and perhaps constituted a new dramatic form that was known as “tragedy”. Further, it also began writing historical play instead of following folk forms with religious elements. During 1869, drama companies like *Sanglikar*, *Aaltekar*, *Ichlakarjekar* and *Kolhapur* which performed Mythological plays now paid attention towards Bookish plays. Moreover, need to look at translation and adaptation of Shakespearean plays.

According to Warkar, “The Marathi stage was more or less inundated with Shakespeare.” (Anon. n.d. 1) The first translation of a Shakespeare’s play was *Othello* by *Mahadevshastri Kolhatkar* and it was performed by *Aryaddharak Natak Mandali* (Walimbe, 1966, p. 9). Shakespeare’s other play *The Merchant of Venice* was translated as *Strinyachaturya* and published in 1869 (1966, p. 11). *Nilkanth Janardan Kirtane* translated *The Tempest* and published in 1875 (1966, p. 16). During 1867 to 1915, there were 65 versions or free adaptation of Shakespeare’s plays. There was also musical version of *A Winter’s Tales* and *Measure for Measure* by following the local tradition of Sangeet Natak. *Zunzarao* was an adaptation of *Othello* in 1890 by G. B. Deval and it was revived in 1950. Translation of Shakespeare’s plays dominated Marathi theatre entirely during later part of the 19th century.

The productions of *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *Othello* were very popular with the audiences. However, Shakespeare’s influence was not limited to the translations alone. As mentioned earlier, with the publication of *Thorale Madhavrao Peshve*, ‘tragedy’ as a new model became very popular. A significant example of how Shakespeare was influential to Marathi theatre can be seen with reference to a play on *Sawai Madhavrao* in which the writer *Khadilkar* modelled the hero’s character on Hamlet and also included a villain modelled on Iago in *Othello*. This play was written in 1906 and discussed how even a play based on a theme from the history of Maharashtra was inspired by the notion of tragic hero and villain in Shakespeare’s plays.¹

A similar trend seems to have continued. The idea of a hero with a tragic flaw, and a villain leading to tragedy became a model to be followed. In an article named *Gadkaryanche Durjan* (Gadkari’s Villians) written in 1927, the writer N S Phadke commented on this influence. From this article it seems that the Marathi tragedies were not exact imitations of Shakespeare’s tragedies but tried to use the above ideas for their plays. In his article, Phadke criticized Gadkari for two reasons: first Gadkari did not follow the idea of tragedy entirely and he suddenly changed the end of the play into a happy ending and second, none of his villains were convincing even though they were modelled on the idea of a Shakespearean villain (1927, p. 441). From more recent sources it seems that Gadkari was reading Bradley’s criticism of Shakespearean tragedy. Thus, it is possible to conclude that the model that he was following, though “unsuccessfully” as his critics point out (Manohar, 1989, p. 104).

However, it is also important to note that Shakespeare was never the model for exact imitation, even though very influential. Even with reference to Gadkari, it is necessary to note that his plays show more mixed influence in his attempt to create a Marathi model of tragedy. Thus, his well-known play *Ekach Pyala* shows a tragic hero, but unlike a Shakespeare’s hero, he is a middle class Marathi man. This change is noted by Dev, who calls two of Gadkari’s tragedies are neither Greek nor Shakespearean but Hindu tragedy (Manohar, 1989, p. 110). Here the word Hindu may indicate the regional touch to the play. Even more significantly, some critics point out that Gadkari’s tragedies show a mixture of Shakespearean and Ibsenian trends. For instance, Gokhale writes though Gadkari’s *Ekach Pyala* was modelled on Kirtoskar’s tradition of Sangeet Natak, it was not tragedy in Shakespeare’s sense. The hero is an ordinary middle-class person. Moreover, the play includes many rasas based on Sanskrit and folk drama models. But instead of five acts plays, Gadkari uses three acts structure and interweaves social problem of the times with the idea of a tragic hero (Gokhale, 2000, pp. 42-50). Thus, it is possible to say that Gadkari stands at a transitional point in the development of Marathi theatre.

A radical break in the tradition of prose writing was instituted by *Natyamanvantar* drama company in 1933 (Gokhale, 2000, p. 17). The prominent personalities like *Shridhar Vinayak Vatrak* (1885-1950), *Pasvanath Aaltekar*, *Aanat Kanekar* and *K. Narayan Kale* established it. The purpose of this company was to bring modern drama to the Marathi stage.

... A ‘modern’ play was expected to have a cohesive structure of three single-scene acts, a theme that reflected an engagement with the human condition, a credible plot and rounded characters, dialogue that would serve a dramatic purpose while sounding conversational, a real-seeming stage set, a natural acting style and, above all, women playing the roles of women (2000, p. 70).

¹ I am grateful to Jaaware and Bhirdikar for allowing me to read the manuscript of their article.

Aandhlayanchi Shala was the first play that was performed by Natyamanvantar drama company in 1st July 1933 (2000, p. 70). It seems it was B V Warkerkar who invoked the name of Henrik Ibsen as a better model for Marathi theatre. He criticized the current practice of five act plays and the general model of Shakespeare which was followed. Warkerkar writes in 1964, “Shakespeare is not good for our modern Marathi theatre. Our Modern age demands realism and Shakespeare cannot give us a realistic theatre” (Chaudhuri 6).

Thus, the seeds of Modern Marathi theatre can be found from the beginning of plays based on Mythology to the later part the performances of Shakespeare and Henrik Ibsen as model for Modern Marathi Theatre. The next section deals with modern playhouses, stage settings and make up for the Marathi theatre.

3. DEVELOPMENT OF MODERN PLAYHOUSES

In his book, *Parsi Theatre* Gupt mentions following details regarding the development of Modern playhouses in Bombay. Bombay seems the first place where Modern playhouses were built in a very short duration. The Grand Road Theatre was built and inaugurated in 1846 (2005, p. 15). The following detail provides internal scenery.

The interior part of The Bombay theatre was the imitation of the Drury Lane Theatre of London. Its dress box could accommodate seventy-two individuals, pit gave space for sixty-five spectators and gallery had two hundred seats²... (15). Acoustic were such that everyone could readily hear the dialogues and songs performed on stage³... (15). Scenery was minimal... (15) Painted curtain were used... (16). Gas light was used... (16). Actors usually were professionals... (19). Melodrama and drama were popular with the audience... (19). Only selected portion of the Shakespearean plays were performed... (20). In these scenes farce, music, and other entertainment fare were added... (20). At the initial stage audience consisted of sophisticated people but because of distance their attendance decreased and in that duration soldiers, traders and others also attended shows... (175). With the passage of time Parsis, Hindus and Iranis also began to entertain people by their plays in Grant Road Theatre... (173).

Observing such internal parts, Parsi, Gujarati and Marathi theatre companies soon began to make full use of facilities (design) in the new playhouses. Specifically the development of Marathi performances used such theatre for adding music. Since Mythological plays, there were wings in theatre. The tabala player and harmonium player sat in the left and right wing respectively so the singer did not need to come forward. The singer could sing from any corner of the stage. So there was a kind of realism appearing on the stage (Warkerkar, 1995, p. 14). But during Sangeet Natak in 1909-10, Kirloskar Mandali broke the age old system and instead of wings, tabala player and harmonium player sat by touching the curtain of the front part of the stage in the audience section. It was an imitation of the Urdu Natak Mandali (1995, p. 449).

The Bookish plays which were in prose, not only used the facilities in the play houses such as paint curtains, wings, space on the stage, furniture etc. but modified them to make their plays more realistic. According to A. V. Kulkarni,

With the performance 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 scenes, meanwhile, education in the new English techniques of 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 few branches stuck on the stage; but now, in addition to the gardens painted on the curtains, real trees, potted shrubs and plants would be placed on the stage to complete the illusion of the real” (qtd. in Gokhale 16).

Kolhapur Natak Mandali further improved the scenery by adding not only realistic sets but fantastic locations like the Parsi theatre (Banhatti, 1957, p. 217). *Kirloskar Natak Mandali* was praised for the scene of Shakuntala’s garden

² Mehta provides this information from *The Bombay Courier*, 10 May 1842, and *The Bombay Courier*, 8 May 1845.

³ Mehata provides this information from Vinayakrao Madhavrao Pitale, *Shrimant Namdar Jagannath Shankarset urf Nanashankerset Hyanche Charita* (Mumbai: Pitale, 1916), p. 316. [Mehta, p. 11, p. 145.]

and later for extremely expensive scenery for the play *Man Apman* (1911). By the mid 1915s, realistic sets using perspective painting became very important as trained painters were employed in *Lalit Kaladarsh Mandal*. They have to create proportionate set that looks like reality. For the performance of *Satteche Gulam* in 1922, Warkar focused on realistic stage design. The wings and flats were removed. Doors and windows were shown. The depth, length and width of rooms were shown as to look like real. These settings were called “box” sets. Warkar also mentioned that one road scene was copied from a photograph of Mumbai’s Princess Street. The realistic stage design was considered as highlighting the realistic plot and the embedded political message of socialism in the play (Gokhale, 2000, pp. 68-69).

From 1880 to 1930, several changes in the lighting and make-up were instituted. At the beginning, oil lamps were used for lighting stage area. Later, Gas lamps were used till 1895 in Mumbai. Gas lights were used in cities like Akola till 1928 (Motey, p. 59). Actors used local material from herbs and mud for makeup. However, soon “English” make-up items such as face powder and rouge found in their use. The actors of Maharashtra Natak Mandal used glycerine mixed colour for make-up after 1904 (p. 59). A female impersonator Vamanrao prepared a make-up kit in 1917. This make up kit was used by well known actors like Ganpatrao Joshi and Yashvantrao Tipnish (p. 59).

The ticket prices were not fixed at the initial stage during the performances of English plays in Bombay theatre. When Vishnudas Bhavne performed his Marathi/Hindi play *Raja Gopichand* in 1853 in the Grant Road Theatre, the ticket prices were as follows: Dress Box Rs 3, Stalls Rs 2, Gallery Rs 1-8 and Pit Rs 1 (Banhatti, 1957, p. 325). Parsi theatre, which also had began in the mid-nineteenth century, performed plays by selling tickets for the different classes. By the end of the 1860s, Parsi businessman looked at theatre as an investment opportunity. “With the establishment of the Victorian Theatrical Company in 1868, Parsi theatre entered in a period of capitalist reorganisation and professionalization” (Hansen, 2002, p. 170). “No performances were shown for free” (Gupt, 2005, p. 18). The passage of time the prices of tickets were reduced. This leads to attracting more audiences in theatrical performance activity.

Initially in Parsi theatre audiences comprised of British officials, the military officers and wealthy Parsi merchants. Gradually the growing class of educated professionals also joined with them. At the end of the nineteenth century, textile workers, artisans, and small traders came to see the theatrical activities (Hansen, 2002, pp. 164-165). At the time, ticket prices were lowered to attract and accommodating masses (2002, p. 165). The Parsi theatre invested in the recruitment and training of boys because they wanted economic viability. It was the fully commercial theatre with professional repertory.

The story of Marathi theatre is somewhat similar. There are however, some major differences. By and large, the ticket prices for Marathi performances followed a similar pattern as Parsi theatre. However, Marathi theatre companies also toured entire Marathi region beyond the Bombay Presidency. Some of the places in this region were not as economically rich as Bombay. Many places did not have good theatre buildings. So it seems that the range of ticket price of Marathi theatrical performances varied much more from place to place.

The viability of theatre seems to have decreased with the advent of talkie cinema in 1930s. Not only Marathi theatre but Parsi and Gujarati theatre also fell in crisis. Therefore theatre actors, producers, directors and other theatre practitioners entered into cinema to make their career (Gokhale, 2000, p. 80).

In his book *Marathi Natyasameeksha*⁴, R S Walimbe gives a history of the development of the trends of theatre and drama criticism. From its chapters it is clear that an intellectual interest in theatre was created from 1870s onwards. It is also clear that “natak” became a prestigious form of entertainment and was continuously separated from so called “low” art forms like *Tamasha*, *Dashavatar* and *Lalit*.

4. CONCLUSION

The discussion leads to claim that the influence of theatrical activities of English and Parsi theatre can be found on indigenous performances of Maharashtra and various trends such as plays based on Mythology, Sangeet Natak,

⁴ See Walimbe, R S., *Marātī hī nātyasamiksā: 1860-1930*. Pune: Pune University Publication, 1966

Development of Bookish Plays, Translation and adaptation of Shakespeare plays and, Henrik Ibsen as a model for tragedy lead to the birth of Modern Marathi theatre. Other aspects as discussed the construction of playhouses, stage settings, make-up also add variety and interest. These influence or imitation can be understood in the words Sudipto Chatterjee in *The Colonial Staged*. He argues that the nature of reception of various elements in the making of Modern Bengali theatre need to be understood not as a mechanical form of imitation but with reference to the concept of hybridity. Explaining the nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengali theatrical production as hybrid, Chatterjee writes, "The hybrid registers both sameness and difference in an apparently impossible but simultaneous synchronism" (40). According to Chatterjee, hybridity 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 generalised theorising about hybridity and exacting project" (11). Thus, these references can be applied to Marathi theatre to understand the birth of Modern Marathi theatre with the influence of English and Parsi theatrical practices along with parallel performances of Indigenous forms from mid 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century.

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