

The Poetical and Political Tradition of Musical Plays in India

Mrityunjay Kumar Prabhakar
Assistant Professor, Drama & Theatre Art
Dept. of Rabindra Sangeet, Dance & Drama,
Visva-Bharati University
Shantiniketan, W.B
Email: mrityunjay.prabhakar@gmail.com

Abstract

Indian performing traditions comprising Theatre, Music and Dance have something common in its nature. This article reveals that fact that how they have strengthened each-other during their origin and development through the history. This article cites examples from various periods of our history and show a very deep and eternal relationship between Music and Theatre in Indian and its subcontinent.

Keywords – Performing Arts, Music, Theatre, Musical-Theatre, Traditional Theatre

Although music and drama, both are distinguish art fields with their own different characteristics but still there is a common element in both. Both of them come into performing art tradition. Besides their own specialities and differences they have several common factors which relate them in a very adequate manner. One of the very important factors is their need of an audience. Although, there are several vocalists who says that they sing for themselves but as a whole musical tradition also needs audience to pass on the ambience created by their performances. Theatre is bound to be for spectators. Their thirst for audience is one of the common features they both have but even except this there are several reasons which bound them so well with each other.

Before talking much about these two art categories, I would like to say something about emergence of art, so that we can search their root etimologically. Human beings in the phase of their reincarnation from monkey to man came to know about sound. By the time they became able to use those sounds in such a pattern so that they could communicate something to the fellow mankind, physical gestures were added to those, to make their communications more viable. These two basic elements are still the main ingredients of 'Musical Dramas'. When we talk about music, very simply we can say that musical rendition is the various explorations of sound patterns. Drama uses both sound patterns as well as physical gestures.

The very first text available about Music and Drama is 'Natyashastra', known as a compiled work, deals with both along with dance. This text is useful for all the three ventures of performing arts, music, dance and drama. People use them as guide book till now. Its implications are significant. This also shows that in Indian tradition these three have such cohesive relationship that it is hard to think and talk about them separately. Always they cross each other boundaries naturally. One very significant thing in the text is that all the elements of Natya taken from vedas, already existing. We also know that music was also taken from Veda. This shows the very intimate relation of music and drama from the very beginning. Except from this, Bharata, talking about 'Vriti's' talks about theatre forms exists in South India including Ang Bang, Kaling and others which are full of dance and music. 'Bharata' didn't like those performances so he didnot described much about them like how they were played, what was the performing style and other things. But if we see the development of performing arts later in these regions, we find some performing styles, which were full of music and dance. Before jumping down to these performances, I want to make another important point from Bharata's 'Natyashastra'. He describes in 'Natyashastra' three types of performances 'Nritya', 'Nrit' and 'Natya'. Here 'Nritya' and 'Natya' are obvious but there is some confusion about the term 'Nrit'. Various people have described that term in different manner. But in my view, 'Nrit' means a type of performance which incorporates dance, music and movements in a

free way which is the qualities of 'Sangitikas'. It is a fact that there was a huge upsurge in these kinds of performances in middle ages.

In middle ages after the upsurge of Bhakti movement a huge change happened in the field of performing arts. Most of the known Bhakti saints were poets, composers and signers as well. They have composed thousands of songs to express themselves. They have gone and performed for the people so that people could understand their vision. Music and drama played a vital role in their communications. Jaidev's 'Geet Govinda' was the biggest example of the same. Jaidev was a vaisnav bhakti saint and to worship his deity 'Krishna', he had written a performing script in verse which had several plots. So, we can say that this is the first well known example of 'Sangitikas'. It is said that 'Geet-Govinda' was staged in the life time of Jaidev and acquired a huge success, as it had all the performing elements, music, dance and drama. Its popularity goes far beyond the area of kalinga and with the inspiration of this script, king Kulshekhar Verman of Kerala made his own play, which later developed as a form, today well known as 'Kuttiattam' which later paved the way for performing art forms like 'RamNattam', 'Krishnattam' and 'Mohiniattam'. Bhakti movement had touched almost all the parts of the country and with its influence a performing style based on music and drama spread all over the country. 'Nautanki', 'Swang', 'Prahlad Natya', 'Tamasha', 'Bharud', 'Dashavatar', 'Yatra' and several other forms were developed at that time. Here music and musical notations were presented in such a manner that it would help in running of the play. In some of these forms even dialogues were written in verse forms which used to be sung.

But before moving forward we must put a question. Why music was so important in the plays performed during middle ages? Why they were practiced in such a vast number all over the country? It is said that India is a country of fertility and festivity. Here everything is celebrated from birth to death. As music and dance were the most important elements of celebration, it is quite natural that it came into the performing art cultures of this country. But, even in European countries forms like 'Comedia-el-arte' and 'Hans'

were developed at that point of time along with some Asian countries like China, Japan, Korea and others which have performing art traditions full of music and dance. It means that beside the arguments above given arguments there is something else behind it. In my perception, there are two things responsible for the same. First is stylization of these art forms. Any kind of art is a destruction of the normal nature. Art was not a natural behavior, its heightened reality of natural instincts. So, it has to take a stylized shape.

The second challenge was produced by the flat stage before the performers. Whether angular, rectangular or circular, the stage was a solid structure, which didn't have the force of mobility. It was a hard stagnant surface; which was not mobile (now a days several experiments were practiced which tried to make mobile stage) at all. Change in scenery was the only option before them but technology was not developed enough in those days. The performers needed to be mobile, to charge the flat space and for this they need big gestures, moving steps and several other techniques's of jugglery and acrobatics and you cannot do that without music and songs. So, it is a hard fact that when the regional plays were started to perform, it has dialouges but in later phases we can see that a huge amount of songs were added to describes the dialogue and situations and later even the dialouges were written in verse form. Actors used to sing their dialogues rather to speak. The other point related to it was the huge audiences who used to come for these kinds of performances. To increase the visibility and audibility of the performances these kinds of performances were developed as musical dramas were able to draw much attention of the people. The number of Ragas and their variables with several other folk/tribal tunes were utilized in those performances which were popular at that point of time.

Although, the term 'Sangitaka' was in use from very beginning but its practice was a later development as theatre critic and playwright J.C. Mathur in his book 'Pramparasheel Natya' mentioned that the word 'Sangitaka' finds mention earliest in Varasuchi (500 A.D.) text but it get its proper definition in the book 'Sangit Damodara' by Shubhankara only in 1500 A.D. He had also mentioned that all these 'Sangitakas' go with the local/regional

traditions. This term has been later developed into 'Sangit Natak' which was first used by Rai Ramanand, prince of Rajmahendri. In his work 'Jagannathvallabha' he first coined the term 'Sangit Natka'. His family comes in the Bhakti tradition of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu.

'Bharud' of Maharashtra and 'Jatra' of Bengal were two other developments in the middle ages which need to deal with care care and respect. Maharashtrian saint poet Eknath had established this new form which has all the elements of performing arts. It became very popular in those days and till now the tradition of Bharud is there. Here to music and drama came together to serve the purpose of saint poet. This has been also happened with Jatra of Bengal. Anyone, who is known to Jatra, can easily trace the importance of music, dance and drama in a Jatra performance. It is still one of the major entertainers in rural areas of Bengal. Several new experiments were also done in the 20th century with Jatra. Great Theatre practitioner like Shanti Gopal and Utpal Dutta used the form and incorporated new themes into it.

Establishment of modern drama goes back to 1840-50 in India. It is a fact that the earlier plays performed during that period were 'Rahas' produced by Wajid Ali Shah in his court. 'Quissa Kanhai ka' was one of the earliest plays produced by Wajid Ali Shah. Then Vishnu Bhave's production of 'Sita Swayamvara' in Heramba Mahal of the Raja of Sangli in early second half of the 19th century was one the earliest recorded performance. Production of Amanat Lucknawi's 'Inder-Shabha' was also one of the earliest examples of the same. The most common feature feature in all these performances was their attachment to the earlier performing traditions of the country. They took their shape from the traditions developed during Bhakti movement.

By the efforts of Britishers new theatre halls were made and several drama clubs were established during 1850-1870. Drama was also used as a common feature in college level activities. The college going youths from Parsi community started their own professional theatre groups which used to perform first in Gujrati then after started performing in Urdu and Hindi. By 1860, Parsi theatre companies got huge popularity. People use to come and

enjoy the performances. They used to play mostly known stories, Shakespeare's adopted plays and historical-religious-mythical plays. But they were highly musical in nature. Sher-Gazals are the main sources of the dialogues. Several songs were incorporated necessarily or unnecessarily just to give entertainment to the audiences. They have made dance several religious/historical persons only because of their professional need. Most of the writers of Parsi theatre groups had used this technique and got huge popularity. Agha Hashr Kashmiri, Narayan Pratap Betab, RadheShyam Kathavachak, Ebran Lucknow's and several others used this technique. 'Khooon-e-nahak', 'Safed Khooon', 'Gulbakli', 'Yahudi ki Ladki' were among the plays which got huge popularity because of their music.

In the same period, Marathi theatre, which had emerged very powerful, also used the same technique for its dramas. Music played a wonderful role in Marathi drama productions. Later it goes on so heavy that in the beginning they use to play music and vocal songs for nearly two hours. 'Sita Swayambar'. 'Sangeet Shakuntal' and 'Thork Madhavrao peshve Yanche Natak' were the most famous play.

Many scholars think that only by adopting the themes related to new concerns means a new horizon for nationalist movement. But this was not a fact. The implementation and utilization of Indian idioms in performing genres and visual art forms also had a say and helped a lot in creating a whole pan-Indian movement. The resurgence of Indian idioms in art fields against the colonial culture often forcibly implemented on the basis of European renaissance was also a challenge from our side to the colonial masters. We find a lot such connotations of Indian idioms in art practices in the later period of 19th century.

Bhartendu Harishchandra was a legendary figure not only in Hindi literary movement but also in the genre of performing arts. Despite his short life span (1850-1886) he has done remarkable job by giving new life to both the streams. He has revived the dramatical tradition of Sanskrit literature in Hindi but in a total different format. In his plays he has adopted the idioms

of people's oriented Sangeet Natak tradition, with mythical historical reconstruction in a new progressive outlook. Despite of his very good relationship with colonial rulers, he had always hit hard upon them in his plays; either it is 'Bharat Durdasha', 'Bharat Janani', 'Raja Harishchandra' or 'Andher Nagari'. He had always challenged the colonial rule and their destroying effect upon Indian culture. He had used songs/poems as a weapon to make useful comments upon the colonial rulers.

As for example;

*'Aavahu mili royu bharat bhai
Ha!ha! bharat durdasha dekhi na jai'*

*'आवहू मिली रोक भारत भाई
हा! हा! भारत दुर्दशा देखी न जाई' (Hindi Version)*

The beautiful lines from his play 'Bharat Durdasha' show us the same feeling. The same is true for the following lines written by him in his famous play 'Andher Nagari':

*'Jaise Vilsan Mandir Ke Bheetariye
Hum Waise ANdher Nagari Ke'*

*'जैसे विल्सन मंदिर के भितरिए'
हम वैसे अंधेर नगरी के' (Hindi Version)*

This was the direct comment upon the British colonial rulers, who were ruling from the Wilson House from Calcutta at that point of time.

The same thing was happening in the Maharashtrian and Bengali theatre of India. After the implementation of Dramatic Performance Act in 1876 by the British authorities, the script had to certify by the local administration before the performance but songs were not asked to certify. Taking the advantage of the same the performers use to incorporate the songs/poems of nationalists themes, showing the British Govt. misrule and its regular disrespectful behaviour towards the Indians. Khadikar's 'Kitchak Vadh', 'Menaka', 'Manapamana' and Mama Warerkar's, 'Golden Spire' are the best

suited examples from Maharashtra. In Bengal this tradition is established from the play 'Neel Darpan' written by Dinabandhu mitra. 'Sadabar Ekadasi' and 'Meghnathvadh' by Michael Madhusudan dutta also follows the same suit. Later great actor-director-playwright and manager Girish Chandra Ghosh done remarkable job in this direction with his highly nationalistic flavoured plays like 'Sirrajudualla', 'Mir Kasim', 'Shivaji', 'Hirak Churna' and others. In the play 'Hirak Churna' there was a song sequence in the middle, which was banned in 1911 which he later used in other productions. D.L. Roy was another significant name from Bengal who has done a great job in historical reconstruction of Indian heroes through his musical dramas.

All these ample amount of example's show us clearly that how a great role is played by musical dramas (Sangeet Natak) in constructing-reconstructing an ethno-symbolic-historical means against the colonial power. Sangeet Natak tradition has not only a glorious poetical and political past but it has also helped in reconstruction of pan-Indian theatre even after the post independence drama through the works of legendry theatre directors like Habib Tanvir, Shanta Gandhi, B.V. Karanth and many others.

Acknowledgement

I extand my thanks to Prof. Bishnupriya Dutta from Department of Theatre and Performance Studies, School of Arts & Aesthetics, JNU, who helped me while writing this paper.

References

1. Geet Govind, Jaidev, Prabhat Prakashan, Delhi.
2. The Parsi Theatre: Its Origins and Development, Somnath Gupt, (trns.) Kathryn Hansen, Segull Theatre, Kolkata, 2005.
3. Bharat Durdasha, Bhartendu Harishchandra, Parag Prakashan, New Delhi, 2011.
4. Andher Nagari, Bhartendu Harishchandra, Vani Prakashan, New Delhi, 2009.
5. <http://web.iiit.ac.in/~sarvesh.ranadeug08/project/Marathi%20Theatre.html>
6. The Bengali Theatre: Its Origin and Development, P. Guha-Thakurata, Psychology Press, 2000.