

Violence, Social Pathology, and Theatre

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I am not really going to elaborate on the subject in terms of social sciences; instead I speak as a playwright. Second, I focus largely on Marathi theatre. Hopefully it will raise a few pertinent questions which are valid for theatre in India as a whole.

One can divide modern Marathi theatre into three distinct periods. I would like to begin with the second period, which started nearly a hundred years after the first phase was inaugurated by Mahatma Phule in the mid-nineteenth century. The second phase, known as the golden period of Marathi theatre, started around the 1950s, just when we were introduced to various elements of a modern, independent, capitalist, industrial society, along with the social pathologies and violence that often accompany it. The defining features of modern theatre were formulated in this period in India. One of the playwrights responsible for this, as we all know, was Vijay Tendulkar.

Apart from this middle class language based theatre there were other strands that developed approximately at the same time, e.g., theatre related to workers like that of Annabhau Sathe and Amar Sheikh, along with agit-prop theatre, Dalit theatre, street theatre and urban theatre using folk forms. But they have had a somewhat marginalized existence. Theatre as a whole still mainly remains a middle class activity. I will look at the norms of theatre and ‘theatricality’ that were set by this middle class theatre, and which seem to remain valid till today.

I

I will take Tendulkar as an exemplar as he is considered to be the father of modern – not only Marathi, but also Indian – theatre. Second, his was a socially conscious theatre which did not proclaim itself as being “apolitical,” as some others did and still do. Third, and most important, Tendulkar was intensely concerned about violence, both in creative as well as academic terms. Incidentally, his subject of study for the Nehru fellowship was violence.

I am sure that most readers are aware of the main examples of depiction of violence in European and American theatre as well as novels – Dostoyevsky, Sartre, Camus, Brecht, Tennessee Williams, Harold Pinter, to name a few. It would be instructive to juxtapose Tendulkar’s vision to these writers’ visions. The best example of this is *Gidhade (Vultures)*, where Tendulkar depicts a family totally consumed by lust and violence that is an inherent ingredient of capitalism. It can obviously be juxtaposed with Tennessee Williams’ *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. But Tendulkar does two important things differently. He “locates” his characters rather vaguely, in terms of history and class, and he does not trace the sociopolitical undercurrents.

In an interview I asked Tendulkar about his ideas regarding social violence. His answer revolved around a simple statement: Human beings are part of the animal world; they are as violent as other animals; the sociological factors related to violence are not as important as the biological factors. Even on gender-related violence which he has so vividly depicted in plays like *Sakharam Binder*, his comment was that it is (in his words) “specie” related, that every man wants to physically abuse his wife, that this has nothing to do with social conditioning and, most importantly, that “we cannot do anything about it.”

Clearly Tendulkar sees violence and the exploiter-exploited relationship as “natural” and “eternal” though he refrains from articulating a clear position. As a creative writer, this prevents him from further theoretical exploration of social and political institutions and ethical norms through which this violence actually takes place and gets perpetuated. This in itself is a position which is status quoist and glorifies what can be loosely termed as “anti-intellectualism.” This attitude of not wanting to intellectually analyze and understand society is a convenient middle class trait to which not only Tendulkar but nearly all the writers, including myself, belong.

There is no doubt that Tendulkar was a great playwright whose concern extended to all sections of society. Also, he was the first to shake the middle classes out of their convenient slumber and face the violence and morbidity in everyday life. In fact I choose to write about him, as he was arguably the best amongst us. What I am trying to explore is how we define theatre.

II

It may appear a truism that theatre is supposed to be “theatrical.” Arguably there is consensus on what constitutes this “theatricality” – that it should be focused, structured and have a unilinear progression ending in a crescendo. Theatre should be like a pointed sword. What is added to this definition in Indian conditions, barring a few exceptions, is that it should stay away from theoretical understanding and, be emotionally evocative even at the cost of not being thought-provoking. Both these definitional aspects create problems today.

Before looking at the third phase, let me first try and briefly list some changes I feel have occurred post-1985 as far as social pathologies are concerned. In short, in today’s globalized and globalizing world, isolation, fragmentation and a total loss of purpose and direction have become the breeding ground of all current social pathologies and the accompanying phenomena of virtually neurotic anxiety and violence. The social pathologies have become multipolar. I realize that today this position is both rather common on the one hand and severely criticized on the other. To further complicate the debate, I agree with both. I agree that things are not as unilinear as appeared in the past, but I also accept the need to take a clear position despite this. Let me try and illustrate my point by taking examples of three writers from three different eras who were placed in conditions potentially or actually violent. The differences between the violence they faced and which no doubt influenced their writing is self-evident.

The first example is of the great Oriya writer Fakir Mohan Senapati who was born in 1843. To start with he had a traditional Hindu name: Braja Mohan Senapati. As a child he had fallen very ill. His devout grandmother prayed to every possible Hindu God. She then turned to two Muslim saints, promising to give her ward up to their religious order if he recovered. Yet though he recovered, the dotting grandmother could not bear to give him up. So she struck a deal with the saints: she would change Braja Mohan’s name to Fakir Mohan and give him up “symbolically.” In addition, the young Fakir would, for eight days of the Moharram, dress up as a fakir and roam through the village mourning and begging from house to house. The money thus collected would be sent to the saints.

As the second example we can turn to Tendulkar’s encounters over his plays with the “traditionalists,” the “casteists,” and the “morality keepers.” This was in the 1950s, ’60s and ’70s. As compared with conditions throughout the mid-19th to the mid-20th century, the social

pathologies had changed; identity divisions had become more fierce. But the issues continued to be unilinear and bipolar in Tendulkar's time.

The third example is that of my favourite Turkish writer, Orhan Pamuk. Though not exactly a darling of the West to start with, post his stand on the Armenian question and being a leftwing, modernist liberal, he has simultaneously managed to evoke the wrath of such diverse groups as the despotic but secular army, the Islamic fundamentalists, the communists and the right-wing nationalists (while the West seems to love him now). In short, both the traditionalists and the modernists of all shades and persuasions have made him a target. This is qualitatively different from the relationship between antagonists in the previous eras. Another similar case is that of Tasleema Nasreen.

As mentioned earlier, one religion against the other, capital against labour, progressive against the traditionalist – these constituted the binary scenario before the '90s. Now it is capital against a particular faith, capital against racism, and so on. It seems that we do not share any common ground in today's fragmented world. Under these conditions which are far more complex and non-binary, I feel that theatre cannot stick to its older definitions of theatricality. It cannot be as unilinear and needs to tread in these grey areas without fear, without being anti-intellectual. In my opinion literature – especially the novel – seems able to come to terms with this challenge much better than theatre, even in Europe. The reasons are somewhat obvious, but this is not the place to deal with them in detail.

III

To come back to theatre. Let us take the example of two different plays, one from the US and the other from Europe. The video of the first one, from USA, was shown to some of us in Pune by the noted director Richard Schechner. The lead actor (and writer) of the play was HIV positive, and the audience was made aware of this fact. One of the others actor makes an incisions on his back with a scalpel. Towels soaked in this blood are hung on a wire and moved over the heads of the audience. In the next scene he then pokes himself with injection syringe needles – keeping them inside his body at hundreds of places – in his arm, in his closely shaven skull, and so on. The depiction is so violent that a couple of people fainted while watching this film.

The second example is from Europe. Here a Bulgarian actor-dancer (Ivo Dimchevmore), who is gay, has gone through the period after the collapse of the Soviet Union and unemployment, is facing ghettoization of the European kind, living abroad and trying to support himself by doing theatre. During the play he starts selling some of props and items from the stage. People realize the metaphor and laugh. He then draws some blood from his arm into a test tube and auctions it. The first test tube is received with a mild shock, but the audience is not too perturbed. As he continues doing that, the second and the third and the fourth test tube makes the metaphor progressively harsher, finally reaching a point where watching him virtually dying on stage becomes unbearable. This example is obviously more starkly political than the earlier one.

This is clearly a departure from the universal norms of theatricality. But is it theatre any more? What is the difference between art and real life? Where is the make belief? Can a real life event like a surgical procedure, or an accident where people actually get hurt, or a war where they get killed, be called theatre?

IV

In contrast what is happening on the Indian scene? There is an increasing emphasis on physical theatre in India too. In most cases it is coupled with folk forms and mythological texts like the *Mahabharata*. There is an increasing tendency to discard words altogether. I fully appreciate the strength of such kind of theatre and its multi-regional appeal. It also works well as a tool of protest under some exceptional local conditions, like the theatre in the North East (Ratan Thiyam, Kanhaiyalal, H. Savitri and others). But in my opinion it is not possible to address contemporary social conditions in any intellectual depth without 'ideas' and hence without 'words'. Perhaps it is to avoid these limitations that 'physical theatre' has gone to the extent it has in Europe. On the other hand, the use of ritualistic folk forms to secure the expression and understanding of contemporary social pathologies through characters like Kunti, Draupadi, Karna and Abhimanyu seems much too restrictive and full of internal contradictions, repetition and absurdities. It falls pray to anti-intellectualism, maybe for different reasons.

What about agit-prop theatre? With most peoples' movements facing crisis, such theatre too is in the same state. I am in favour of agit-prop theatre – even at times leaning towards propaganda. But I am afraid that the tendency to simplify issues, and need to see things in black and white is becoming counterproductive when issues tend to be more in the grey area. I find it absurd when street theatre competitions are held and winning becomes an important goal for the groups.

And finally, what is happening to the word-based middle class theatre? I can see three strands developing in Marathi theatre today. First, writers appear to be in harmony with the sensibilities of the older generation. Their lives have changed but their outlook has not.

The second set realizes that there is a sea change in the conditions. However, they do not want to deal with the whole picture, preferring to limit their horizon and perspective. Since they do enjoy some support from the audience, this often goes on to create a myth that experimental theatre is regaining its lost glory in Maharashtra.

Both these sets of people prefer dealing with any topic as a chunk of reality without locating it within historical perspective. They prefer to concentrate on human emotions like love, hate, jealousy, among others, as timeless and aesthetically interesting elements. If anything, anti-intellectualism has increased in Marathi theatre today. Worse, it is largely self-absorbed, so unlike Tendulkar.

The third category has also realized the change and are trying to face it head on, though their success in reaching the audience is questionable. They are struggling to develop new definitions of theatricality. This group, unlike the first two categories, is getting a fragmented response.

V

Whatever the form of violence, I see no way in which either the old idea of theatricality or physical theatre can encompass these pathologies. Something like a collage rather than a linear progression, which does not resemble a penetrating sword but comes across more like a loaded truck hitting the audience, may be required and accepted as theatricality. Instead of

emotional evocation, a stretched intellectual provocation which unrolls over a period of time will have to be accepted by the audience.

I do find a lot of novels going this way. There may be more than one way of achieving this, and I do see a few experiments and discussions being held like this one. To summarize, even though I do not often witness theatre which is coming to terms with today's social pathologies in an engaging manner, this effort makes me a bit hopeful.