

Locales or Mapping Indian Theatre

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To give you a brief outlay of the subjects we are talking about – Locales or Mapping Indian Theatre – we're trying to basically figure out how we can make sense of the bewildering variety that Indian Theatre displays. Considering various regions and languages in which theatre is practiced in India is already mind boggling – but where specifically does theatre happen? In what kind of locales does theatre-making, theatre-going become a need, a habit? Where does theatre matter? This session will focus on the macro situation, the dynamics of different kinds of theatre. The roles of amateur, commercial and professional theatre (if such a thing exists). It will also look at theatre in the specific setting of Maharashtra, in an effort to contextualise the particular situations and problems faced. Now I call upon Samikda to talk on why theatre has to be region specific and local.

Samik Bandyopadhyay: There was a time when we were thinking a lot about a single Indian theatre and how the different regional idioms could contribute to the Indian theatre. I think that agenda has been toppled over in the last few years, and fresh attempts are being made to reconstitute that old agenda – bring it back under a different guise, different pretensions. More and more, with performances travelling from one part of the country to another, performances travelling abroad, there seems to be a case that is slowly building up that India should have a single theatre that becomes more easily understandable. So if there is a certain pattern of theatre, a certain kind of theatre that will get audiences – the same kind of audience, the same class of audience, the same taste coming from the audiences in all the different cities of India and also abroad – that would be fine. In fact, our friend Sadanand has been reminding us again and again of the new situation where there is the National Knowledge Commission, and the National Knowledge Commission's proposal to bring in something called Creative Industries under Tourism rather than culture or performance. So, culture or performance has been thrust aside from the knowledge system, from the knowledge agenda, and instead we have Creative Industries, which comes under Tourism.

If we have to send things abroad, or bring people down to watch things, it should be easily understandable to an international clientele. A standardised clientele. Let them have something called 'Indian'.

Now more and more, as this pressure grows, it becomes important to take the stand that every region, however small it may be ... it's not a question of just Bengali or Marathi or Gujarati or Manipuri, but even within the Bengali, within the Marathi, within the Gujarati, within the Manipuri, there would be different performance cultures. I'm very deliberately not using the word 'idiom' because in the earlier scenario, 'idioms' added up to one single 'Indian' theatre language. I'm talking of performance cultures. And performance cultures are not necessarily growing out of the performance and its practice, but growing from a larger cultural field. A larger field of cultural experience and cultural protection. Particularly because ...

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... unity is what I called a historied body. Now, just to give instances ... we don't have time to do a kind of an encyclopaedic thing, and I don't believe in any single encyclopaedic venture into the entire Indian performative experience. It's too daunting and too daring and I would never dare it. I'll talk a little bit, at length, about the two experiences that I have known or studied closely enough – the Bengali experience and the Manipuri experience – just as instances.

Now think of the Bengali experience, where there has been a long tradition, at one level, of a strong radical political stand. During the nationalist movement there was a strong divide between the national mainstream politics – the national mainstream attitude to the national movement – and the trend, the direction that it took in Bengal. And Bengal could identify at the same time with Maharashtra. So there came a period when Bengal and Maharashtra could combine on the famous triad of Lal, Bal, Pal. Lala Lajpat Rai from Punjab, Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Bipin Pal. Which was a kind of a radical slant, a radical identification. Which becomes part of Bengal's take on national politics, staying away from the mainstream which is dominated by the North. And this is an *attitude*. It is not a question any longer of an anti-north stand as is happening in Maharashtra. But trying to take that radical difference – being different, standing apart – with whatever limitation, whatever problems ... and more problems are cropping up every day. The fact that for more than 30 years West Bengal has had a Left Government – that is a factor. That is a factor in the cultural body, in the thought body, of the community. That has to be taken into account.

Its only one layer maybe. At another layer – think of 1905. Before Delhi had become the capital of India, when Calcutta was still the capital of India. When the British Government took the decision of partitioning Bengal, there was a protest movement. But what was the form the protest movement takes? It's led by a popular poet who composes a song for the occasion. And people come down on the streets in a rally. It is a political rally. It is a political congregation protesting against the decision of the partition of the state, but singing a song composed for the occasion, where it talks about the unity of

Bengal, the unity of the various religious denominations of Bengal. The form is the song. Not shouting slogans, not any brickbats or anything, but choosing the rakhi, which Hindus put on the hands of the Muslims, the Muslims put on the hands of the Hindus. So it becomes a secular act of fraternisation. Fraternisation through the gesture of the colourful rakhis and the song. This has a strong political content and a political message. So when this form is assumed ... and this is not an exception. There have been other political movements also where these forms have come into play. Cultural forms, cultural manifestations.

In Bengal, again in terms of history, there has been the history of famine – a famine in 1876, a famine in 1943 – the Partition, the displacement ... these have also gone into the making of the cultural sensitivity of the people. And from there, a concern, often even a strong sense of helplessness, utter helplessness, from the enormity of the situation. So many thousands of people who have been victims of these situations. What can we do about that?

When all these things go into the cultural body of a community and that comes out in plays, plays come to have a strong concern for suffering people, very often verging on ... call it sentimentality, call it melodrama, call it somebody raising his hand, clenching his fist – these become theatrical gestures, but gestures that are not merely gestures, they came from the history of the body. They become part of the culture of the body

Now, an outsider who comes to watch this and measures all this experience in terms of some abstract universal, global model of theatre – ‘the good theatre’, ‘the best theatre’, ‘the ideal theatre’, would find this sloppy, sentimental, crude, nostalgic, melodramatic, and would reject it. So something that grows out of the sensitivity of the community, something that a community nurtures and supports, somebody from outside experience can come in and be judgemental and reject it. Now this becomes a problem, particularly in India.

I don't know of any authoritative encyclopaedia on European theatre. There are cheapie Readers' Companions, Readers' Guides kinds of things. Not a single encyclopaedia of European theatre as such. There's something very old by Gassner, something on World Drama which has long been rejected; I think it has even gone out of print, happily. But, we have an encyclopaedia of Indian theatre. Once we try even to do these exercises, without an awareness, without a close knowledge and interaction with these different regional cultures, we are bound to end up with disastrous models. And further institutionalising that monolithic look, that monolithic view of Indian theatre.

Think of Manipur. Just day before yesterday, in Kolkata, I was talking to Ratan Thiyam. And as we discussed his problems with theatre in Manipur, problems of survival, at one point I asked him, “well, how many people do you have to feed every day?” I meant ‘feed’ literally. He said “25 a day”. So twenty-five actors, who come down early in the morning and work till night. They have to be given three full nutritious meals. It's very hard work, rigorous exercise – the kind of work that these 25 actors do, they need good solid good. Thrice a day. And this, Ratan has to provide. I ask him, “what does the

amount come to?” He says, “between 2 and a half and 3 lakhs every year.” How does he raise the money? By performing abroad. And, at one point as we go on talking, he says, “that’s where I have to bring in, inspite of myself, the element of chamak. I have to sell the chamak so that I get the money to support my theatre. At the same time, in my last production I’ve used an actress who has been trained in the Maibi tradition – trained at several levels. Trained for 8 years at a stretch. Lived 2 years with a Maibi and trained. Then come to the Jawaharlal Nehru Dance Academy. Trained with a Maibi teacher, a practicing Maibi, who teaches at the school (I’ve attended one or two of her classes also). And after all that, she has had to work rigorously for 6 months from morning till night to do this particular role.” So there is traditional lore, traditional practice, traditional performance modes, and bringing them all into modern theatre under a different regimen, under a different discipline. All this is happening. But there are these other terms of reference which is part of the larger cultural field.

This is not how a director in Bengal would ever think. I wouldn’t ever ask him, “how many actors do you feed every day?” The question doesn’t arise, it’s a different system altogether. So it’s a Manipuri culture where, when a trainee goes to a guru, he has to be fed. He stays there, he lives there, and he trains under that system. That system is inbuilt in the method, in the practice of Ratan, who is a modern director. And this is not something that can just be supplanted by a grant or some different kind of system.

Even this sentiment of the guru who feeds his shishya ... Ratan, fairly regularly – because throughout the year they have several festive occasions and ceremonies – he cooks. He cooks in the huge bowl, by himself, some of the delicacies. And that becomes an act of the performance. It is a community taking part in the performance and nurturing the performance. It is not easy to leave all these considerations out and think of one universal model of theatre experience. It is not easy to watch and appreciate and respond to the Manipuri theatre experience, and to say that it is so colourful, it is so grand, it is so demonstrative, and be judgemental. I feel more and more the need to explore these cultural specificities in terms of the community’s body and the performer’s bodies and how they relate, and to watch theatre from these different vantage points, rather than from one singular master point of view, master perception of theatre. The inability to do that is more and more looming on us and becoming quite a threat.

I promised Pravin that I’d finish at my 20th minute. I’ve just come to my 19th minute. I’ll close with one instance of what happens when we try to bring in this kind of ‘master’ perception. I’m reading out from a review in Calcutta, of a play that came from Bombay to Calcutta, which I liked immensely: Theatre Arpana’s Cotton 56 Polyester 84. I believe a lot of you have seen this play. The play takes off from a documentation of the collapse of the textile mill industry in Bombay, and with that the crisis of the working class, which had played a historic role in the history of the Indian trade union movement – the Girni Kamgar movement of Maharashtra, which is legendary. It is also a play about the great shaheer singers, particularly Amar Sheikh – the story of the last day of Amar Sheikh’s life is mentioned right at the beginning of the play. It spells magic for people who are ‘melodramatic’, ‘sentimental’, ‘nostalgic’. So all those charges even worked on us when we watched it in Calcutta.

But here is a review from Calcutta:

“I had looked forward to Theatre Arpana’s ‘Cotton 56, Polyester 84’ as it had won 3 Mahindra Excellence in Theatre awards, but it failed to meet expectations. With plenty of good intentions, Ramu Ramanathan researched the story of Girangaon textile mills upto the recent decline due to the nexus between owners, politicians and the underworld revealing the of labour as the backbone of Bombay’s work ethic. Ramanathan connected this lost heritage ...”

The lost heritage of the working class – the working class has now become a lost heritage!

“Ramanathan connected this lost heritage with another extinct tradition, the Sangeet Natak, by showing his two out-of-work heroes as great fans and even singers of that form.”

Those of you who know the play would be shocked at this, because these singers were not singing Sangeet Natak. Anything but that. It is a completely different tradition. And very categorically, Amar Sheikh is mentioned right at the beginning. The play begins with that reference, the information is given to you.

“ ... Also their socialism is contrasted with capitalistic Mumbai today. Unhappily translated into Hindi and Marathi by Chetan Datar, the dialogue sounds more like a history lesson than an art work, while the songs consume precious time without furthering the action, exactly like Sangeet Natak. So acceptably retro, but only upto a point. Ramanathan’s cardinal error is to regress into a typical filmy subplot where the son of one worker joins a gang to survive, gets involved with a white safari suited Godfather’s sister and predictably meets his end in an encounter.”

Now look at this. Someone who doesn’t even care, in a country like India, to recognize a different history. He is quite insulted and irritated if he’s given a history lesson. He bloody well needs to take history lessons, the way he writes. And this review starts with the more pompous assertion – I hadn’t given you the beginning of the review:

“It appears the brains behind Odeon [who had organised this festival] either don’t read this newspaper or disregard constructive criticism. Last year we had lambasted them for bringing both outside productions from Mumbai, as if that city summed up national theatre. Continuing to labour under that delusion, Odeon again imported Mumbai plays to fill those two slots. With such a biased track record, by no means can it qualify as the esteemed theatre festival of the city.”

The most unfortunate thing about this, and I feel quite awkward and embarrassed to make that statement, is that this is signed Ananda Lal, who edited the Oxford Encyclopedia of Indian theatre! Thank You.