

TRADITIONAL THEATRE

—*Practices and Conventions*

Suresh Awasthi

Indian traditional theatre, like its counterpart in any other country, is a very rich and important element of the traditional culture. It is a comprehensive sense of the term. It incorporates elements from poetry, music, dance, mime, graphic and plastic arts, religious and civil pageantry and various decorative arts and crafts. It reflects the people's beliefs and social ways.

Traditional theatre represents many conventions and practices of the Sanskrit theatre and it is also the inheritor of the medieval 'Variety' theatre. Thus, it provides valuable art material for reconstructing theatrical tradition. Apart from its value in supplying data for reconstructing the theatrical tradition, it is a living and vital theatre enjoying professional status and entertaining mass audiences.

The convention-based traditional theatre presents an interesting fusion of realistic, stylised, illusionistic and presentational elements. It enjoys freedom from the unities of time and place. Time and place are treated through a set of multiple conventions. Conventions also determine the nature of speech delivery and the entire scheme of stylisation.

Traditional drama adopts a loose and flexible structure. There is great elaboration and improvisation. The play during the course of its development deviates from the main action to indulge in elaboration by repeating the dialogues in a variety of delivery patterns and stating the same idea in both prose and verse dialogues. It is both segmented into small parts and has an organic unity within it. It is because of this characteristic that the traditional plays, specially Rama and Krishna cycle plays, are performed as serials and divided into several Drama-Days.

Music And Dance:

Traditional theatre of various types and of different regions is operatic in character; the acting is highly stylised and choreographic. Music and

dance are essential and integral elements of this theatre and important factors in building up its distinctive character. The play is really sung and danced rather than spoken and enacted.

Music is the very dynamics of the traditional theatre and it determines the pace, the rhythm and the movement of the drama. It has developed such a theatrical character that it has acquired its own independent identity though it borrows elements from multiple sources. It grows from within the drama and is organic. The drum is predominantly used in the traditional theatre and has great dramatic value. It accompanies the actor's entries and exits and helps in accentuating his gait.

Music is highly systematised and developed as in *Ankia Nat* (Assam); *Rasleela* (Uttar Pradesh) and *Yakshagan* (Mysore). Song-dialogues are set to various melodies prescribed for different situations and characters. Specific rhythms are prescribed for the entry and the exist of different types of characters. Orchestral pieces are often used for the entries and exists of the characters and as incidental music as in *Jatra* of West Bengal. The orchestra plays in union with the vocal line and repeats the melodic phrase giving the actor an opportunity to present choreographic patterns and enrich its gestures by an elaborate interpretation of the text, as in *Kathakali*.

With dance-like movements, striking poses and codified gestures the play builds up a spectacle of great choreographic beauty and pictorial charm. While in the temple-based drama like *Rasleela*, the dance content is rich and highly developed, in secular forms like *Khyal* of Rajasthan and *Terukoothu* of Tamil Nadu it is rather thin, but enough to maintain the choreographic character of the play. The musical and the choreographic structures of the performance are interdependent and fully integrated.

Conventions Of Speech:

The practice in traditional theatre is guided by a set of conventions and the nature of stylisation. These conventions and the scheme of stylisation are determined by the staging conditions and the dramatic values of traditional theatre. There is a whole set of conventions determining the nature and the delivery of dramatic speech. Repetition, super-imposition, simultaneous speaking and alternation of the speech between the character and the chorus are some of the devices of speech delivery. The alternation between the singing of the chorus and presentation of brief dance sequences by the actors is so worked out that the dramatic piece becomes virtually a conjunction of recitation, miming and dancing. *Rasleela* is the best example for these conventions of speech. The speech treated through many conventions and presented as chant, song and rhythmic prose extends the range and the impact of the dramatic word.

Alternations of prose and verse dialogues, sometimes in more than one language, are used in dramatic dialogues. There are impromptu prose dialogues as in *Yakshagan* having the nature of the secondary spoken word, elaborating the content of the song-dialogues. The dialogues are often

treated as comments. Apart from the stright dialogues there are soliloquies, semi-soliloquies, asides and monologues.

In the scheme of dramatic structure the use of the chorus is very important. There is a chorus in most of the forms of the traditional theatre, both in the secular forms like *Khyal* and *Terukoothu* and the religious forms, like *Rasleela* and *Ramaleela*. The chorus in Indian theatre has a different character from the Greek though it performs many similar functions. It is a group of singers attached to the play in a secondary capacity and less involved in the action of the play than the Greek chorus. It sings the narrative text and repeats or accompanies the actors in singing dramatic dialogues. It also sings the entry songs describing the costume, the qualities and dramatic functions of the characters.

Preliminaries:

One of the many features of the traditional theatre is the elaborate *purvarang*, preliminaries. There is musical prelude, an invocatory song, formal presentation of the characters of the play, the introduction of the theme and a discourse on some philosophical subject. The preliminaries in the traditional theatre are practised on the pattern of the Sanskrit theatre, in an adapted and simplified version.

A musical prelude is an important preliminary in some of the more developed forms of the traditional theatre. The musical prelude often forms an independent unit of the performance in plays like *Ankia Nat* (Assam), *Rasleela* and *Bhand-Jashna* (Kashmir). It creates the desired atmosphere and prepares the audience for an aesthetic experience.

Ritualistic observances are an essential part of the preliminaries in many forms of traditional theatre. The play begins with the worship of Lord Ganesha and an invocatory song sung by the chorus. In *Yakshagana*, ritualistic observances begin in the greenroom itself. After the actors have done their make-up, a prayer is sung and certain religious rites are performed. In *Rasleela* elaborate ceremonies are observed in which audiences are also involved.

In some of the secular forms such as *Maach* (Madhya Pradesh) the preparations for the presentation of the play are made part of the preliminaries; and the characters, such as, the messenger announcing the performance the Bhishti sprinkling the water and the attention spreading the carpet appear singing songs describing their function and portraying the action in mime.

Half-Curtain:

The use of a half-curtain for treating time and place non-realistically is an interesting practice of the traditional theatre. It is held by two stage hands and used several times during the course of the performance to manage and often 'dramatise' the entries and exits of the actors. On the bare and neutral 'stage', which is just a floor area or a platform-stage, the change of locale and time is most effectively this device.

In *Yakshagan*, in the beginning of the play, the main characters are presented with the help of this curtain in a group-entry. This makes

a powerful visual impact on the spectators. While the actor stands behind the curtain, the entry song is sung by the vocalist vividly describing his costume, the physical features and dramatic purpose. The actor vigorously stamping on the ground and taking leaps registers his entry by forcefully removing the curtain. He, would first stand with his back to the audience in a most theatrical and eloquent pose.

The entry of demons and ferocious characters by this device is made most theatrical and effective. The character stands behind the curtain and we hear heavy steps, occasional shrieks and cries to the accompaniment of drum music. After a while we get fleeting glimpses of the shining majestic head-gear. We find the character holding the top of the curtain firmly and shaking it softly and slowly, and then with increasing speed and tempo. The curtain is lowered down and lifted up intermittently, revealing the character in varying degrees and again hiding him. Having built up a very powerful drama within the drama the character finally throws away the curtain on one side and formally establishes his entry; meanwhile the audience have gone through an intense dramatic experience.

In the *Rasleela* plays, the half-curtain is utilised for creating tableaux which are most charming pictorial groupings of the characters and the play seems to move from one tableau to another. The Tableau is a dominant feature of all medieval arts, and it has greatly contributed to the evolution of traditional theatrical forms, specially those dealing with the Rama and Krishna legends.

Actor-Audience Relationship:

Intimacy between the actors and the audience is a factor which vitally determines the nature of the Indian traditional theatre making it a most participative theatre. Intimacy is achieved through many devices and conventions. Traditional theatre is predominantly an audience-conscious theatre. Just as the actors are conscious of the audience and present their art for their enjoyment, so also are the audiences conscious of the fact that they were sitting in a 'theatre' and had come to see and enjoy the art of their favourite actors—their powerful acting, their dance and music. This consciousness establishes a close bond between the actors and the audience.

Dramatic dialogue has the character of a monologue and is directly addressed to the audience. The audience is constantly kept informed and taken into confidence by the characters. The dialogue serves multiple functions. It is not only narrative, unfolding the story, but also descriptive, describing the locale and commenting on the characters and situations.

In the social and secular drama, a performance is a community activity and the audience are deeply involved in it. In temple-based ritualistic drama, the performance is a devotional offering to the deity and the audience is as much a participant in this act as the actors. During the course of the performance, there are many ritualistic observances in which the audiences participate as they do in life. In both types of plays

any trace of the theatres separation from life is negated, and any built-up illusion is destroyed, and theatre is totally integrated with the life-pattern.

The audience has always been considered an important and integral element of a theatrical performance in the Indian tradition. The aesthetic theory of *rasa* emphasising the role of the dominant sentiment in the evocation and realisation of aesthetic experience attaches great importance to the sensitivity and responsiveness of initiated spectators. The *Natya-Shastra* discusses the role of the spectator in theatrical performance in great detail. The Sanskrit theatre which had evolved a most sophisticated and refined gesture language and a whole set of conventions demanded an initiated audience. The *Kathakali* dance-drama of Kerala gives a deeper aesthetic pleasure to the audience familiar with the highly refined and complex gesture language of this theatre. Indian classical music and dance also demand an initiated audience, attentive and concentrated listening and seeing.

For achieving a closer relationship with the audience the actors often pass through them prolonging their entries and exits, or presenting short sequences of action in their midst. These devices are intended to extend the stage into the auditorium making the performance more theatrical and spectacular. In the *Jatra* plays, actors use a long corridor, running from the greenroom to the stage, for their entries and exits, and also for the enactment of short sequences. In *Ramaleela* plays, when Hanuman passes through the audience with his tail thrown sideways, he causes great fun.

The processional *Ramleela* in Ram Nagar (Varanasi) is the perfect example of an environmental theatre. In this style of *Ramleela* the episodes from the Rama story are enacted at different places in the town having permanent structures depicting various locales of the story. The audience is totally integrated with the performance and as the epic play lasting for some 30 days moves from one locale to another, from one Drama-Day to the other, the audiences also move with it. When Rama goes to the forest in exile with his wife Sita and younger brother Lakshman, the entire audience of more than 5,000 accompanies them sobbing with emotion.

In this style of presentation often several units of action are presented simultaneously. This simultaneity and multiplicity of action is also an interesting feature of the traditional theatre of this type. This is often achieved by using different levels. In the Rama story, when the battle between Ram and Ravan is enacted on the level ground, Sita is shown seated in Ravan's garden in his captivity, though in terms of time and place, there is no relationship between these two action units.

The actor-audience relationship becomes closer and more informal in the lighter social plays, often performed on the level ground, with the audience sitting in close proximity to the actors on the same level. Sometimes audiences sit in a circle and the plays are enacted in the centre. Also passage and corridors are created in the midst of the

audience which are used as secondary acting areas bringing actors very close to the audience.

Actor's Theatre:

Indian traditional theatre is an actor-based theatre and the actor is primarily a performer well-versed in all the arts of the theatre—acting, mime, dance, recitation, music and acrobatics. The actor stands on a bare stage disengaged from any kind of decor, creating the scenic illusion with his own dynamic presence. He keeps all the time intensely busy demonstrating skill in various arts, switching over from one art to another with greatest ease and facility. In *Yakshagan* and *Terukoothu*, the performance is set to a heightened pitch and the actors all the time move about in intensely dramatic gait to the accompaniment of drum music, even their sitting and standing poses are highly theatrical and eloquent. Intermittently they burst into song and join the chorus and when the chorus sings their dialogues they dance in a circle with great gusto.

The audiences are fully familiar with the stories of these plays drawn from the rich store of the two great epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, the *Puranas*, medieval legends and popular history. They also know their characters intimately. They are initiated in the arts of dance and music and have the critical ability to appreciate the skill of the actors in these arts. They can discern even a minor flaw in the execution of a gesture or a false note in the rendering of a song. Therefore, their concentrated interest is in the actor's performance and display of his acting and singing talents.

Traditional theatre, by adopting many practices and evolving many conventions, has strengthened the position of the actor and his art in many ways. The place of the actor in the traditional theatre and this theatre's attitude towards the actor's art is the foremost factor in determining its nature and its many practices.

The practice of role division, dividing dramatic characters into various types, based on their characteristics and qualities is intended to give greater scope for specialisation to the actors in portraying various types of characters. This makes it possible for the actors to achieve great precision in their gestures and movements and an all round perfection of their art. Characters are divided into three principle categories—*Satvika*, godly; *Rajasika*, wordly and *Tamasika*, evil characters. Other intermediary types have also been conceived in relation to the preponderance of one or other of these qualities. The idea of role division is further strengthened by the practice of the actor doing one role or one type of role during his entire acting career.

The tradition of female impersonation in the traditional theatre has its own theatrical values and fully fits in with the nature and the character of this theatre. Male actors doing female roles show great skill in portraying feminine attributes. Many actors in *Kathakali* and *Yakshagan* specialise in doing female roles. The dancer-actor, Vedantam Satyam,

has achieved great heights of histrionic art in the portrayal of Satyabhama, Krishna's consort, in the Kuchipudi dance-drama, *Bhama Kalapam*.

The entire scheme of stylised make-up and costume in the traditional theatre is also intended to strengthen and enrich the art of the actor and give it a greater range and variety. While in *Kathakali* highly stylised and masklike make-up is done, in *Krishnattam* some of the characters use masks. In *Yakshagan* and *Terukoothu* complex designs are made on the actor's face in dots, curved lines and semi-circles. Actors' faces are pointed in different colours depending on their nature. While green and blue colours are used for the epic and mythological heroes and the gods, red is usually used for demons and black for evil and ferocious characters.

In *Kathakali* the colour symbolism is followed more rigidly and is fully codified. Green symbolising heroic qualities and moral values is used for characters like Krishna and Arjun. Blazing red and deep black are used to represent vicious characters and power intoxicated persons. Colour symbolism helps the actor to establish his identity forcefully and theatrically. It is part of the whole scheme of the stylisation in the traditional theatre and greatly enhances its ritualistic quality and strengthens its non-realistic character. Colour symbolism was prevalent in Sanskrit classical theatre and with minor changes continues to be used in the traditional theatre.

The special treatment of the actor's entries and exits also greatly enhance the theatricality of his art. While the entries and exits are an easy and informal affair in lighter drama, these are highly formalised in serious and developed drama. Entries and exits are prolonged and made spectacular by passing through the audience and are 'dramatised' by the use of the half-curtain.

The actor in India tradition separates himself from the rule and action of the play achieving a certain degree of alienation. He stands apart from his role as a member of the audience strengthening rapport with them, and sometimes as a commentator on the action and the characters of the play. Actor having become independent of the dramatic character, establishes his autonomy as a performer. In the *Tamasha* form (Maharashtra) the actor temporarily leaves the cell of the character to make a comment or song on the complexities of a situation, the emotional conflicts of a character or moral and ethical values involved. Other actors present on the stage, the members of the chorus and also the 'retired' actors join the singing building up a great musical crescendo withholding the action of the play. After the song is over, the actor returns to his role and the action of the drama moves forward.

A Total Theatre:

The Indian theatre by tradition and by the virtue of its artistic concepts has always been a place of interception and intermingling of all the arts reflecting the values of the total theatre. The totality in Indian theatre is achieved and strengthened by many devices and conventions.

The dramatic verse is fully integrated with the music, and the choreographic structure integrated with the musical structure of the play. The accentuated costume and elaborate make-up symbolic colours and the use of makes and fantastic head-gears are elements integral to the total scheme of stylisation to which the basis is provided by a non-realistic delivery of speech treated with a whole set of conventions.