

MARATHI THEATRE: AN EXPRESSION OF SOCIAL PROTEST

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Abstract

Theatre is an institution of social life that promotes artistic activity. Theatre, being a performing art directly seeks responses from the audience and hence is more closely connected with the society than any other art. This paper attempts to locate the growth and development of social awareness as reflected in Marathi Theatre and to trace the voice of protest.

Theatre practices in Maharashtra have a close association with culture and politics. Writers with social commitment have expressed themselves through the theatre of this kind as well as through folk theatre and street theatre. Maharashtra has been a pioneer in literary movement of Dalit literature so also in Dalit theatre expressing a voice of rebellion. Overall, a questioning of the existing systems, concern for the oppressed and thought-provoking writing about social issues is observed in the theatre.

Women constitute another neglected sector of society. Plays like Mulgijhali ho and Vhay mi Savitri was an expression of voice of women charting the stories of oppression, struggle and rebellion. Street theatre and folk theatre have performed their role of social theatre independently as well as in the Dalit theatre movement. It is interesting to take an overview of the representation of the known and the unknown voices through theatre.

Key words: Social theatre, Dalit theatre, Street theatre, rebellion, theatre practices.

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Theatre is an institution of social life that promotes artistic activity. Even the rise of the theatre practices is often an outcome of the socio-political background of a nation. Theatre, being a performing art directly seeks responses from the audience and hence is more closely connected with the society than any other art. Theatre can be a more potent form of protest than many art forms since the live contact of theatre makes for more intimate and intense communication. It can also arouse the audience to immediate action.

Theatre practices in Maharashtra have a close association with culture and politics. This paper attempts to locate the voice of social protest created through Marathi theatre with special reference to Dalit theatre and theatre addressing women's issues. Street theatre and folk theatre have performed their role as social theatre independently as well as in the Dalit theatre movement. It is interesting to take an overview of the representation of the known and the unknown voices through theatre.

Protest theatre may attempt to change the beliefs and opinions of the spectators, ultimately seeking political and social action based on these charges. Essence of protest theatre is that it is directed towards the power of an authority-political, religious or social.

There are varying opinions about the goals and aims of the theatre. The purpose of theatre ever since its recorded history has been a matter of serious debate. Perhaps this continuing debate explains to an extent the terms that have gained currency and which are now part of the theatre terminology like 'Theatre of the Oppressed', 'Theatre of Intervention', 'Poor Theatre', 'Environmental Theatre', etc. Theatre in India has always remained a marginal art form from the point of academics. In India, the period between 1840 to 1880 was characterized by a spirit of criticism, a selective glorification of the past and the thirst of English Education which would speed up the revival of Nationalism. Colonial rule forms an important chapter in the history of India, it has been significant in the literary history as well. The Indian People's Theatre Association was founded in 1942 by a group of progressive writers who recognized the potential of popular theatre as an effective weapon in the fight for national liberation from British imperialism and fascism and in the struggles of the oppressed elements. The IPTA challenged existing hegemonic structures, both- colonial and those intrinsic to Indian Society. In Kolkata, *Nabanna*, a play about Bengal famine was performed on a revolving stage to achieve the desired realistic effects of starving Bengali peasants. IPTA was branded as traitor for the anti-fascist ideology of its patron party, the Communist Party of India. After the war, as the nationalists rose to power, Indian groups turned to Western works as a way to avoid censorship by the nationalist government. Utpal Dutt's *Mahavidroha* (Great Rebellion of 1857)¹ is worth mentioning in the history of the protest plays in India which reflected the class and

caste struggle taking place in the 1970s as the *Naxalites* fought for the rights of the impoverished in Bengal. IPTA, no doubt, made political theatre available to those sectors of society which were till then deprived of. *BadalSircar* 's Third Theatre, was born out of the need to come out of the proscenium arch and set the audience to think. This led to a revival of Indian Theatre forms which had so far been subservient to a Eurocentric version of theatre.

After independence, events like partition of India, the *Telangan* issue, Ambedkar's movement of social awakening for the *Dalit* and embracing Buddhism, the *Samyukta Maharashtra* movement, Mill workers' strike in Mumbai were significant and had its impact on theatre along with other art forms. The rise of modern Marathi Theatre as we know today seems to be a cumulative effect of various socio-political factors. At the same time there was a concept of National Theatre emerging due to theatre activities and encouragement to translations of theatrical texts in various Indian languages. The new wave of 1960s created a new idiom of theatre. Hence one needs to acknowledge the influence of the multi lingual theatre of India.

Origin of Marathi drama is in the 13th century and that of written drama in early 17th century. *VishnudasBhave's "SeetaSwayamwar"*, written in 1843 is held to be the first performed Marathi Drama although the play *TritiyaRatna* by *JyotibaPhule* is hailed as the first written play.

Marathi Theatre tradition has reflected social consciousness through early plays like "*Sharada*" by G B Dewal, "*EkachPyala*" by Ram Ganesh Gadkari and so on. The new wave of sixties in theatre that struck the nation included dramatists like *BadalSircar, MohanRakesh, Vijay Tendulkar* and Mahesh Elkunchwar.

The rich tradition of Marathi drama started by Khadilkar, Gadkari, and Shirwadkar was carried forward by dramatists like Vijay Tendulkar, G.P.Deshpande, MaheshElkunchwar and so on. Khadilkar's *Keechakvadh*, was anti-imperial and hence political in the context of the times when it was written. G.P. Deshpande writes with a conscious political purpose as expressed through plays like *UdhwastaDharmashala*, *ChanakyaVishnugupta* etc. Matkari's *Lokakatha-78* deals with a real life story of atrocities on the *Dalit* in a realistic manner. In the more recent plays, one sees the plays like *Kirwant*, *Shobhayaatra*, *Chowk*, *Zhulwa* of PremanandGajwi, Shafaat Khan, MakarandSathe, ChetanDatar respectively dealing with the social, political issues.

Overall, a questioning of the existing systems, concern for the oppressed and thought-provoking writing about social issues is observed in the theatre, although on a small scale. JayantPawar's play *Adhantar* catches the devastating effect of strike on a mill-worker's family. In the more recent plays, one sees the plays like *Kirwant*, of PremanandGajwi, *Shobhayaatra* by Shafaat Khan, *Zhulwa* by ChetanDatar respectively dealing with the social and political issues. Mata Hidimba based on the story of *Ghatotkacha* from *Mahabharata* was produced by fusing the classical dance and music, resembling the genre of musical drama created in Marathi theatre with *GhashiramKotwal*, *GochiShakuntala*. The play brings out the injustice done to *Hidimba* and exploitation of *Ghatotkacha* in the power-game.

RatnakarMatkari narrated around the same time as Tendulkar's, his *Lokakatha*' 78 based on a factual news report about the atrocity committed to a Dalit family, a rebel who raised voice against it and his wife who carried on the struggle eventually facing failure due to the power politics. This play, translated and performed in several languages has freed itself totally from the earlier bonds of Urban Theatre and extended its reach into the remotest rural areas.

When the new theatre movement was at its peak, in 1978, Matkari's play arrived. *Lokakatha* evolved from a skeletal script with dialogues based on actor's improvisations which was possible because he worked with his own experimental group, Sutradhar. Though a response to a topical news report, the fact that it continued to be performed proves its relevance.²

Nineteen eighties saw the arrival of playwrights like PrashantDalwi, AjitDalwi and directors like WamanKendre who brought a freshness of themes and directorial approach. The newer generation of playwrights include PremanandGajwi, ChetanDatar, Rajeev Naik, MakarandSathe, Shafaat Khan and more recently SachinKundalkar and SambhajiBhagat. ChetanDatar's script of '*Zhulwa*' adapted from the novel by UttamBanduTupe directed by Wamankendre sets to tell a story of a young girl born to a devdasi who dreams of living a decent life hence tries to abandon the fate of being offered to Goddess *Yallamma* and thus be available to the village men. She is however pushed back into the same fate by the cruel forces of society. The final act by the central character is one of rebellion, that of discarding the very fate imposed by religion.

Shafaat Khan's plays are ironic; the structure is always episodic as seen in his early play *KisseBhoomiticha Farce* underlines human beings as Geometric types wearing masks. Khan has also dealt with subtlety the issues like communal disharmony in plays like *MumbaicheKawle* and *Shobhayatra* dealing with today's confused and despairing people.

MakarandSathe's *Surya Pahilela Manus, Chowk* make a social commentary and more recently SachinKundalkar's *ChhotyashyaSuttit* gives an altogether different experience with its treatment to the gay relationship and live-in-relationship. PremanandGajwi deals with many social issues in his plays. Among these writers Gajwi needs a specific mention in the light of theatre of social protest with special reference to Dalit theatre.

Dalit Theatre- A Voice of Protest: DattaBhagat, a conscious writer and critic himself, has called Mahatma Phule's *TritiyaRatna* as the first play not only in Dalit Theatre, but in the entire history of Marathi drama. His argument has been that of the presence of the element of modernity in the play.

Dalit theatre was a voice of protest of the neglected sector of society. Since 1965, Dalit literature has emerged and developed as a movement in literature out of the political bearings. The movement in literature is fallout of the political happenings under the leadership of DrBabasahebAmbedkar. It helped to define who is 'oppressed'. Since the times of JyotibaPhule, there has been an attempt to define the oppressed and then unify them. The Dalit Literary Movement has made it a meaningful exercise to look at literature as a movement. In Dalit theatre, a sense of commitment is quite vocal. Although the poetry and autobiography seem to

be the most sought after forms, the potential of theatre seems to have been realized by the Dalit writers in the recent times.

Considering the fact that Dalit literature is a literature of revolution, historically, the saint poetry could be called the first voice of revolution. The saint poetry which was a manifestation of Bhakti movement was fighting against *Brahminism*. Saint Eknath challenged the dominance of Sanskrit by putting the case of Prakrit; also he contributed to the folk-tradition like *Gondhal*, *Bharud* etc. *Tukaram* challenged monopoly of Brahmins to seek knowledge.

The word '*Dalit*' itself means one who is exploited, deprived of the privileges. Influenced by the philosophy of Budhha and Mahatma Phule and mainly inspired by the teachings of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, Dalit theatre has emerged as an expression of the sufferings of the community suppressed for centuries. It was a theatre of revolt to begin with.

Indian society has always been a divided society. The literary tradition predominantly cultivated by Brahmins and upper castes has resulted in limited expression, vocabulary, emotions etc. Hence we see a revolt against these established norms in *Dalit* literature. At this point a mention is deserved for the literature written by non-*Dalit* about the neglected segments of society in the past, by writers like S.M.Mate.³

Dalit Theatre does not talk of a past glory /history but relates it to the present and looks for creating a future. All the dramatists associated with Dalit theatre believe in a sense of social commitment. Often a parallel is drawn between Dalit theatre and Black theatre. Black Theatre aimed at raising a voice against the exploitation by the Whites. The established theatre of Broadway had scorned at the Black Theatre, but it was challenged by the same, by creating a theatre by and for the Negroes. For the first time the blacks were presented as human beings as against the portrayal of their ignorance, violence and their crude life by the whites.

Initial reactionary nature of Black Theatre changed towards making it a platform for revolution.

Dalit theatre, on the other hand, has been looked at as a weapon in the class struggle for human liberation.

Premanand Gajwi is a writer making a difference to the Marathi Theatre. He proclaims that he is more concerned about the problems around him than merely concentrating on the aesthetic aspect. He also considers it his duty to make people aware of the existing social problems. (Gokhale, p.337)⁴ All his plays seem to manifest this commitment. He mentioned *WataPalwata* and *ThambaRamrajya Yet Aahe* as remarkable plays of the time.

His *GhotbharPaani*, a one-act play presented in 1977 created a record with over five hundred performances. The one-act play poignantly showed the struggle for getting a sip of water, a basic necessity of human beings by the *Dalit* community in villages. The play was written on the background of the movement by Baba Adhav called *EkGavekPanavtha*, the

movement by Jayprakash Narayan proclaiming total revolution, the scattered Dalit leadership etc. It received the award by Maharashtra State in 1980/81.

Eye-brows were raised when he wrote *Kirwant*, about a sub-sect of Brahmins with almost an outcaste status. The focus in his plays is the relations between people and the outside world, as he himself has stated. Hence one sees the themes in his plays ranging from the *Kirwant* Brahmins, *Devnavri* based on *Devdasi* custom, **Tanmajori** about the bonded labour, *Gandhi Ani Ambedkar* about the two stalwart leaders and *Jay Jay Raghuvir Samartha* exposing the hollowness of the so-called spiritual sect etc.

Gajwi states:

I had never thought of myself as a Dalit writer. I don't belong to the group of playwrights who see themselves as contributing to the Dalit movement by writing about the scheduled castes. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar said society must be in a constant state of progression." (Gajwi, p. 5) 5

Leaving aside the debate about the terminology of 'Dalit' it is in the line with the plays by Gajwi giving a social message. His 'Devnavri' spoke about the problem of *Devdasis*, 'Keervant' gave a disturbing experience of a particular caste of Brahmins who perform the last rites after death and are a social outcast. His 'Gandhi and Ambedkar' is a series of discussions centering on points of ideological discussions.

Expression of the Feminine-*VhayMiSavitri* and *Mulgijhali Ho*: Though not in the line of mainstream theatre or in exactly the experimental theatre, attempts like *Mulgijhali Ho* (A Girl Is Born) written by Jyoti Mhapsekar of the *Stri Mukti Sanghatana* making a statement about the women's position and a solo performance *VyayMiSavitri* (I am Savitri) by Sushama Deshpande based on the life of Savitri Phule, the first woman teacher of India, need a special mention for the social cause with which the plays were written and performed and the massive appeal they received from the audience. This was achieved in spite of lack of any theatrical devices, including trained actors. Both the performances have had an appeal throughout India and abroad.

VhayMiSavitri written, directed and staged by Sushama Deshpande, fulfilled her need to engage in "theatre with commitment". A freelance journalist from Pune, Sushma discovered Savitribai Phule, India's first woman teacher at a time when women were denied education.

The play is based on the episodes from the life of Savitribai Phule, wife of Jyotiba Phule. It documents the well-researched graphs of life of Savitri from a young girl to becoming the life partner of Jyotiba and join him in the mission of social reform at the cost of the social ridicule-verbal and physical. Savitri's life opens the spaces that she negotiated in a confining social system. It narrates the struggle against the caste system by Jyotiba Phule, including a home for widows. Jyotiba himself adopted a baby boy born to a Brahmin widow in the similar situation. His son was not allowed to perform the last rites for Jyotiba by the people of his community; then *Savitri* performed it much contrary to the prevailing custom.

While narrating incidences from nineteenth century, SushmaDeshpande breaks her narration and relates to the present day situation of girls and their education. With minimal stage devices, costumes, lights etc. Sushma manages to create the saga of this lady, who much against the popular belief, does not remain a shadow of Jyotiba but becomes empowered herself. Also the socio political history of the period comes alive illuminating on women's status and other related issues. More than 2500 performances of this play have taken place so far, including both- in Hindi and Marathi languages. Sushama has performed in auditoriums, temples, village chowks and all sorts of places thus making it absolutely flexible.

Sushma wrote the play in 1987 and took the play as a performance in 1989. For past 17 years she has been performing mainly in rural Maharashtra, Gujarat, M.P. in partnership with the N.G.O.s, politicians and also in countries like Ireland, Canada, UK, China and the U.S.A..Sushma has talked about her experiences wherein women would weep while watching the performance and also make resolutions to educate their daughters. The play would perform the function of social education better than any ideology would propagate as is evident from VhayMiSavitri (Yes I am Savitri).

MulgiZhali Ho was performed in 1983 bringing in a major breakthrough. The play, written by JyotiMhapsekar, combined elements from street theatre, Proscenium theatre and Folk theatre to evolve an altogether different, elastic form. The actors were the volunteers of StriMuktiSanghatana who belonged to different professions. The play had a phenomenal success with its performances in Hindi and English besides Marathi and later on in Gujarati, Kannada and Telgu. Thus the message of the play could reach crossing the barriers of class and caste, religion and sex, city, and village. The play was performed in cities, villages and also abroad. Thus the play carried out the function of reaching out to the masses and 'instructing' them through 'entertaining'.

The free play was written against the background of the manifesto of StriMuktiSanghatna announced in 1978. It stressed the secondary status of women on economics, social, political and cultural fronts. This status is not inborn but is created the society. To acquire equality the struggle will have to be fought on the individual as well as collective level, against the patriarchal values and also against the caste system, class and so on.

The volunteers of *StriMuktiSanghatana* included the young working women. While speaking about the Women's movement in the Indian context, it is important to understand the history of women's liberation movement --the meaning of women's oppression, the institutions responsible for it, the attempts to challenge it, the feminist movement in the West, its gains and limitations etc.

Maharashtra has a rich tradition of the social reformists. *MulgiZhali* Ho presents in a lucid way thoughts about women's liberation of Phule, Karve, Gandhi, Ambedkar and PanditaRamabai, thus making the concept of Women's Liberation local and hence more acceptable.

The rhythmic simple songs, the form of the play which was a result of amalgamation of different elements and the dedication of volunteers performing the play resulted in an excellent performance which could deliver the message of gender equality in a simple way. When *MulgiZhali Ho* was staged, there was a tension between traditional middle class and the new middle class. However, the difference was minimal in the position of women in these two sections. Also the oral tradition carried forward by women has been used in a very effective manner in the play. Especially the traditional Maharashtrian folk-songs are used here as was done by Shahir Amar Shaikh, AnnabhauSathe and so on in the earlier times.

The play, with its translations in many languages and the ideas of *StriMuktiSanghatana* made an impact in different States in India. People responded with their personal problems after the performances hence the Sanghatana decided to start Grievance Cells. The play reached International level with its performances at International conferences in Australia and Beijing.

MulgiZhaliHo was certainly not created as a perfect theatrical product. It was written with a mission to create awareness among women. The play vividly unfolds the canvas of a woman's life-the discrimination she has to face ever since the birth which continues during her education, her social life, while getting married and thereafter. Thereby it makes the spectators introspect the incidences from his/her personal lives. During each performance, besides delivering the thought, the play also gave inspiration to several men and women to work with the organization

A few members of the *StriMuktiSanghatana* raise questions about the association of the play with the organization and how long should both be connected. However the play has not yet reached the tribal and remote rural areas. Even few pockets in cities have remained neglected. Secondly, till one sees a significant transformation in the conditions of women, the play has to be used as an effective weapon by the *Sanghatana*. As SharadaSathe of *StriMuktiSanghatana* stated:

The real success of the play would be when it would become outdated. It is not art for art's sake; it is a weapon to achieve the target. (Sathe, P. 3)⁶

Thus the theatre in Marathi has performed a significant role in raising a voice of protest as is evident from the overview of the Marathi Theatre and the plays discussed in detail. In India, though it is a democratic country, the issues of corruption, terrorism, the environmental problems, women's issues in addition to the oft voiced problems of caste and class, are gaining attention and hence would form a part of the theatre albeit on a small scale.

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Notes

1. In Bengali, UtpalDutt has consciously used the concept of preaching the masses through the use of the epic theatre aiming for overthrowing the system, not just exposing the system. His plays include *Kallol*, *Angar*, *Lenin Kothay* among others.

2. Sadly, though, what is evoked in one's memories is the recent news about the Khairlanji case about the brutality to the *Dalit*.
3. S M Mate wrote *UpekshitancheAntaranga* talking about the neglected sector.
4. Gokhale, Shanta. Playwright At The Centre, Seagull Publications, Calcutta, 2000.
5. Gajwi as told to Shanta Gokhale
6. Sharada Sathe, introduction, *Mulgi Jhali Ho*:

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