

Marathi Sangeetnatak - A Trail Blazer to the Success of Professional Urban Modern Marathi Theatre

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Abstract

The Marathi Theatre has a very rich and prosperous heritage of over 160 plus years now. Spurt as a means of entertainment to the royal courtiers and officials in the form of dramatic poetry of Vishnuprasad Bhawe, it magnified in terms of form and content through innumerable stages of modifications and experimentation subject to the changing social, political and religious conditions and taste of its Marathi audience. Hand-in-hand, it also adopted immensely from a vast variety of theatrical forms of the day to achieve desired excellence from time to time.

The present paper aims at undertaking critical evaluation of the development of drama as a literary genre with special focus on the role of music and songs in the Sangeetnatak – a specific dramatic form which enjoyed its hey-days for several decades of Nineteenth century. The development of this dramatic form has been taken up for discussion in simultaneity to the changing circumstances and the taste of the middle-class Marathi theatre-goers. Further, it is attempted to evaluate the contribution of various notable playwrights, whose inherent caliber and dramatic skills, helped in establishing Marathi drama as a remarkable literary genre of Maharashtra. The journey of Sangeetnatak in terms of how it ushered, developed, underwent modifications, attained excellence and withered against the onslaught of cinema has been delineated with interesting details.

Key Words

Sangeetnatak, Marathi Drama, Dramatic Poems.

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“No art form ‘begins’ at a particular point of time. No art form is born in a vacuum. It is always the result of a combination of socio-political-economic circumstances and contemporary cultural practices, within and because of which particular individuals at those point of time find they can make creative contribution which fits in with the prevailing climate. Without being conscious of where history will place them, they use their skills and imagination in ways which have never been tried before. Later they are declared the fathers of a movement or an art form.” (Gokhle 1)

It is a universally acknowledged fact that every art form has its own interesting and appealing story of emergence and development and drama is not an exception to that. The socio-political conditions of Maharashtra after 1825 were conducive for birth of some suitable art form that can propagate the cultural expressions of the region. It was that tumultuous time when people having been weary of the tyrannical rule of the Maratha, especially the rule under last Peshwa and last Shinde, preferred and welcomed the benevolent competence of the East India Company. It was such a spell of time when the political control was fully seized by the Britishers and also was the most suitable time for the people of Maharashtra to turn to cultural pursuits.

“The fact that drama is born within twenty-five years of the fall of the Peshwa regime, clearly suggests one thing – that the people who had lost political power had now turned to art...it was an attempt by the aristocratic class which had brought about its own political downfall, to seek its identity in a new field of activity, and closely re-examine its own face.” (Deshpande 7-8)

According to Mahesh Elkunchwar, it is a proven and well-accepted fact that the Marathi theatre was largely influenced by Sanskrit and folk theater, farce, musical comedies and encounters with the British theatre. (20)

India is one the few nations in the world having the rich legacy of the ancient civilization. The *Natyashastra* is considered as the fifth Veda alongside the four world-popular great Indian Vedas – Rigveda, Samveda, Arthavaveda, and Yajurveda. It is regarded as a Natya Veda which is an authentic classical treatise on the prominent aspects of ancient Indian civilization and the age-old legacy of the performing arts. It provided the Sanskrit and the subsequent Prakrit theatres in India with insightful theatrical techniques and strategies.

India, being a nation with a number of regional languages, cultures and sub-cultures, religions, sects, castes and sub castes, and ideologies, there developed a number of modes and methods of expressions resulting into various traditional folk theatres in the respective regions viz. Tamasha in Maharashtra, Bhavai in Gujarat etc. Modern Indian theatre came into existence in India as a result of its long encounter with British colonial rule. In consonance with the Bengali and Kannad theatres, the Marathi theatre came into being into the mid-nineteenth century.

The king of Sangali – Chintamanrao Patwardhan – was a great connoisseur of arts who recognized the distinct qualities in his dependant Vishnu Amrit Bhawe (better known as Vishnuprasad Bhawe), son of Amrit Vitthal, an officer in the state army. Impressed by the dramatic performances of Bhagwat Mela troupe that visited Sangali in 1842, the King anticipated it as the most suitable form of entertainment for his officers and royal courtiers and asked his storyteller poet Vishnuprasad Bhawe to bring out a replica of Bhagwat Mela performances. This resulted into *Sita Swayamvar* – the first stage play of Marathi language – which was presented on 5th November, 1843. However, dramatic forms like *Tamasha* and *Dashavatar* were already in existence but, due to their lacunas of dancing women with suggestive gestures and meagre aesthetic appeal respectively were not at all suitable for the elite class of royal court.

To accomplish the order of his master and being well-aware of his nature and temperament, Bhawe produced plays with sophisticated music and minimum of crude dance and battle scenes. Further, Bhawe and his troupe travelled at length and presented their dramatic creations in Princely states like Indore and Gwalior and also at several locations in Maharashtra including Pune and Mumbai. This resulted in great popularity of dramatic poems (*natyakavita*) in entire Maharashtra. Natyakavita was characterized by some distinct features: Sutradhar and his accompanists chanted the slokas and sang songs, the actors wore masks and enacted according to the contents of the songs.

Since drama is essentially for the public performance and is a composite art form, effective staging of drama requires many physical properties like written script, the stage, efficient characters, make-up, music, scenery, and, of course, the spectators. Bhawe was a skillful composer and a born craftsman. He was adept in fusion of classical and popular forms of verse and music which made his dramatic poems fascinating. He wrote the scripts, collected the actors, arranged for their make-up, and also directed the entire course of action. This is why the organized professional Marathi Theater entirely owes its birth to Vishnudas Bhawe. In his subsequent dramatic creations like *Raja Gopichand* and others, Bhawe borrowed his plots from Valmiki's *Ramayana* and other mythologies – which greatly

appealed to him and also to his audience. Not only that, he also wrote lyrics on his own and set appropriate music since his dramatic poems contained more of music than dialogues. It is claimed that Kirloskar, the father of *Sangeetnatak*, derived the inspiration from Bhav's dramatic poems.

It is very important to take note of three important factors that influenced the whole scene of dramatic creations and presentations which influenced the playwrights to adopt certain variations viz. choice of subject matter, form of presentation and treatment of subject for the former while preference for the aesthetic form for the latter. Further, the establishment of Bombay University in 1857, English education and introduction of printing press brought in 'bookish plays'. These forces gave an impetus to large number of translations from Sanskrit and English plays, specifically the Shakespearean plays which marked beginning of the Western influence.

As a result, special liking was developed among the university-educated youth as well as playwrights for Sanskrit plays of Kalidasa, Bhasa, Shudraka, Bhavbhuti as well as for Shakespearean dramas as subject-matter of the plays instead of mythologies. Subsequently, Vinayak Janardan Kirtane's *Thorle Madhavrao Peshwe* (The Elder Madhavrao Peshwa), written in 1857, proved to be a milestone of Marathi drama as it marked beginning of Prose plays. In terms of structure and dramatic conventions, it drew form Sanskrit as well as Shakespearean drama. In addition to its being a prose play, it also was the first play based on history instead of mythology which charted out a novel trend of prose plays with altogether a different subject-matter. All these changes caused far-reaching impact on the Bhav style dramatic poems. This play, however, kick-started a new trend of prose plays that ran parallel to *Sangeetnatak*, it could not win much adulation of music-loving Marathi theater-goers as they were more turned to music. The attraction of music for both - the playwrights and the public - was so irresistible that even the best prose writers of this period like K.P.Khadilkar and others had to resort to music in their plays for the simple reason that their prose plays could not stand the taste of the time. G. B Deval's case is a classic example of how dramatic laws are dictated by its patrons. His wonderful rendering of Shakespeare's *Othello* in Marathi *Zunzarao* (1890) and adaptation of Murphy's *All in the Wrong* as the fabulous *Falgunrao*, could raise no applause from the drama lovers. Whereas the musical version of *Falgunrao* presented as *Sangeet Sanshaykallol* became one of the all-time hits of Marathi theatre history.

The 40 years of Marathi theatre from 1880 to 1920 were the celebrated years of Sangeet Rangbhoomi. Annasaheb Kirloskar in 1880 inaugurated the era of much appreciated, popular Sangeetnatak with the productions of plays like *Sangeet Shankuntal*,

and *Sangeet Saubhadra*. Since 'music' was the cardinal and common element of Marathi Sangeetnatak and Parsi theatre, it would be worthwhile to make a special mention of it. Parsi theatre influenced Marathi theatre immensely and the evidence of this fact is *Shakuntalam* of Balwant Pandurang Kirloskar, an adaptation of Kalidasa's *Abhigyanam Shakuntalam*. The play is remarkable since it caused multi-dimensional effects - in form it claimed to be the first Sangeetnatak; in look it was modeled on theatrical practices of Parsi plays; it marked break from Bhav-style plays to bring in the era of 'bookish' plays; introduced the idea of 'Character' to replace the Sutradhar tradition of Bhav and last but not the least it provided the Marathi spectators with the new form of musical plays. *Shakuntalam* proved to be a unique Sangeetnatak in which Kirloskar turned the prose slokas of the original source into songs and for the tunes of the songs, he borrowed from a vast variety. The inclusion of 209 songs in its seven acts weaved with great artistry, made the play coherent and disjointed.

The last two decades of nineteenth century witnessed great upheavals in Maharashtra wherein the outrage of people against the British Government was rising due to their economic and political measures. On social front, the issues like marriage customs, status of widow, women's education and cast injustice were thrown open for debate. Kirloskar's successor and another great playwright was Govind Ballal Deval. Deval's *Sangeet Sharda* critiqued the problem of marriage between a young bride and an old age bridegroom. It is beautifully displayed through this play as to how efficiently music, if used with sensitivity and skill, can contribute to the dramatic narrative. His play *Sangeet Sanshaykallol* based on Murphy's play *All in the Wrong* is one of the all times plays on the Marathi theatre. The plays of later playwrights like Kolhatkar and Khadilkar touched various social issues prevalent in contemporary society. K.P.Khadilkar, influenced by the political agitation of Lokmanya Tilak, used the theatre as an anti-colonial weapon for spreading socio-political awareness among the people. The British government banned the theatre production of his play *Keechakvadh* for its supposedly anti-government content. Khadilkar, though produced many impressive prose plays, could not resist the temptation of the Sangeet Rangbhoomi partly due to the applause it received from the audience and partly due to his admiration for the legendary singer actor Balgandharv. Khadilkar was the chief playwright for Gandharv Natak Mandali and produced plays like *Manapman*. Khadilkar was a supreme artist in the introduction of human conflict and the development of dramatic situation which, in the main, displayed the heroic element in human nature.

Ram Ganesh Gadkari is probably the most influential poet-playwright of the second decade of the twentieth century though he wrote very few plays. He took a job as a teacher with Kirloskar Natak Mandli and also began writing dramas for the stage. Gadkari wrote with a deep social sense which was rooted in intellectual and critical observation of social events.

Gadkari's *Premasanyasa* was a social tragedy based on the social and religious ban on widow remarriage, which was then in vogue amongst the so called enlightened classes. Gadkari enriched Marathi Theatre with poetic language. His second play *Punya Prabhav* was a powerful play in which the situations and the dialogue completely overshadowed the comparatively simple tunes that were employed for the songs. *Bhavbandan* is a social comedy by Gadkari. The most important play that relates Gadkari, the Playwright, even to the 21st Century Marathi reader is his social tragedy *Ekach Pyala*. Bhargavram Vitthal Warekar (popularly known as Warekarmama) also contributed to Sangeetnatak through his play *Kunjvihar*. For Warekar, theatre was not only a means of entertainment but also a very powerful tool fight against injustice. His dramatic works are focused on various social issues of the time.

Sangeetnatak remained faithful to its adjective 'Sangeet' (music). It was a period when music ruled supreme and it often smothered the content of the play. Music was the soul of these plays. The essential elements of the Natak or play proper like well written script, delineation of the development of characters, the moods of the characters, the development of the story, the acting on the part of the actors were ransacked for the sheer love of music on part of both the playwright and the spectators. The playwrights provided what the spectators demanded. The actors on the stage had to be the first rate singers. The acting was secondary, singing primary. The viewers went to the theatre not to watch the dramatic performance but to listen to the musical concert. The success of the plays heavily depended on the singing actors.

The years of glory started waning by 1920. The unfortunate death of Gadkari (1919), Keshavrao Bhosale (1921) the great actor of Lalitkaladarsh, and the advent of Cinema talkies in 1920s and 30s added significantly to the downfall of Marathi theatre. The writers like W. W. Khare, N.C. Kelkar, Vir Vamanrao Joshi, V.D. Savarkar and V.C. Bedekar were producing plays on the historical and mythological background, but were unable to catch the pulse of the audience. However the playwright B.V. Warerkar was producing good, popular theatre during this period. But the lost glory of the Sangeet Natak seemed beyond recovery. The theatre companies could not compete with the growing popularity of the cinema. The great actors including the legendary Balgandharva closed down the Natak companies and joined hands with the Prabhat Film Company of Poona. Thus the professional Marathi theatre was shaken to its foundation and its very existence was threatened with extinction. Even the leading theatre companies began to find it difficult to run the profession. Apart from the competition of the cinema, the Marathi theatre found it difficult to cope with the changing tastes of the enlightened public. The playgoers had little patience for the age old plays and their stereotype production. The spectators eagerly wished for some change in

the type of entertainment that they paid for. The time tolled for a drastic change in Marathi theatre.

The growing importance of music in Sangeetnatak, which, of course, was due to the demand of the spectators, caused irreparable damage to the structure of Sangeetnatak. The pioneering theatre group 'Kirloskar Natak Mandali' brought the music accompanists to the orchestra pit from the wings which shows how the dramatic purpose of songs and complementary role of Sangeet (music) and Natak (drama) collapsed resulting into decline of Sangeetnatak.

To sum up, it can be fairly claimed that Sangeetnatak evolved at such turbulent times when the Maharashtrian society was in dire need of some cultural form of expression. Amidst too many odds, Sangeetnatak emerged, developed, reached the acme of excellence and with changing times and circumstances finally came to extinction. It is sure, as many would agree, that Sangeetnatak as a dramatic form in Marathi plays caused a lot many experimentations which have undoubtedly contributed immensely in the progress voyage of Modern Marathi drama.

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