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Collective Theatre and the Indian Scene

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Since the time immemorial the theatre has been a collective art form.

Thespis was not alone; there must be a few others with him and much thought must have gone into choosing the chorus and its physical and artistic space in the performance that he was to stage. Once he set the ball rolling, the others followed suit. The theatre festival became a regular and unique feature of the Greek civilization and Nietzsche later aptly called the actors and the audiences, 'Dionysian revelers.'

It was marked then and there only that theatre by default is collective.

Cut to the 16th century, the Commedia dell'arte, wherein average company consisted of 12 to 15 members and outstanding members carried considerable weight in matters concerning the choice of scenario and methods of staging.

Mr. John Russell Brown in his book *The Rutledge Companion to Actors' Shakespeare* cites ample examples of Shakespearean actors who frequently made suggestions to directors and co-actors that were conceded after due discussion.

The electric lights were installed on the London stage in 1881. Now the stage turned to be a three dimensional space and the whole theatre world saw the emergence of director, who was to take centre stage in the years to come.

The emergence of director was a boon, in that there has to be someone to steer the ship towards the destination. They say too many cooks spoil the broth and everybody's business is nobody's business. But then there are instances where wilful directors ruined the production for the reasons best known to them.

On this background, it's noteworthy what Ariane Mnouchkine, the director of Theatre du Soleil has said. She says, "Remember that the theatre director has already achieved the greatest degree of power he has ever had in history. And our aim is to move beyond that situation by creating a form of theatre where it will be possible for everyone to collaborate without there being directors, technicians and so on in the old sense..."

Here again Ariane Mnouchkine is not alone; Peter Brook and also Judith Malina and Julian Beck of Living theatre sought to do theatre collectively, in that everybody involved could have his/her say. Margaret Croyden, in her splendid book, 'Lunatics, Lovers and Poets' has narrated the whole story of Peter Brook's experiments in theatre. She quotes Albert Hunt who was a part of the process of production of the play US in Peter Brook's group. Albert Hunt says, "It was a collective search by a group of people who wanted to say something true and honest and useful about a subject, we all felt was very important – the Vietnam war."

For the collective theatre to exist, it's rather imperative that the members of the group share a common socio-political ideology. In the quotation cited above, the words, "We all felt" are very significant.

The democratic spirit, the scientific attitude and liberalism that are deeply rooted in Western society and more importantly the Communes where the whole group drank in theatre day in and day out, have laid the solid foundation of the Collective theatre.

The scenario in India, in the pre independence era was more or less the same. The continual invasions from the North-West of the country in the 10th century AD brought the curtain down on the Sanskrit theatre- the classical Indian theatre that the country was and still is proud of. However the Sanskrit theatre was confined to the courts of the kings and princes and catered to the elite.

It was only after the closure of the Sanskrit theatre, that the regional folk theatres emerged in India. Regional folk theatres of India happened to be the best specimen of collective and/or collaborative theatre. For the illiterate villagers theatre was a celebration, in that it was essentially a group activity wherein every member has had his/her creative space.

The villagers would fetch the raw material profusely from the Indian mythology, and by using the trial and error method, which we call improvisation, would evolve a play that addressed the then socio-political issues. In the process, actors would put gags and would not mince words in

commenting on the local politics and the politicians. They would not hesitate to mock at gods and goddesses, of which there is no dearth in Indian mythology. Having innate sense of humour, the actors would send audiences into gales of laughter and still draw the point at home. . However, everybody took all that in the right spirit. Such innate wisdom lent charm to this collective theatre.

The large scale industrialization in the post independence India saw the end of this indigenous collective theatre, a mélange of drama, dance and music. The end of the era was the beginning of the fragmentation of society which was to endanger the very existence of collective theatre in the post ninety India.

The free market policy as initiated and implemented by the government of India in 1991 marked a radical transformation of socio-economic and cultural scenario of the country. The multinationals swarmed in and cast their net wide across the country. With the entry of the foreign investors in the market, and the then existing rigid rules and regulations waved off, industrial development gathered momentum, resulting in a boom in information technology sector in particular. A job in the IT industry implied handsome salary, perks and possibility of business tours to the United States in future. Thousands of aspiring youth fell for the Promised Land and found themselves glued to computer in call centre day in and day out; consequently, they knew no other world than their family and the call centers where they worked. Now money was flowing. The horrifying pace of the development forced retailers to give way to dazzling malls. The fancy malls gave one the thrill of riding on a giant wheel on the one hand, and reduced man to a commodity on the other. The awesome socio-economic and cultural transformation reminded one of Irving Washington's Rip Van Winkle, who awoke one fine morning from deep slumber only to find that the world had undergone a sea change; the world he had known didn't exist any longer.

Considering that India is a developing country, what happened was in a way inevitable. Margaret Croyden tells us in her book that Peter Schumann, of the Bread and Puppet theatre would begin his show by handing over a loaf of bread to one in the audience. You take off a piece and hand the loaf over to the next person. Apart from making it a recognizable religious ritual, it was also to remind you that bread has been used over the centuries as a symbol of man's basic needs.

Whatever, it's true that the theatre people, who belonged mainly to the middle class, were greatly lured by the market economy and gradually went away from the theatre. It was the price they paid for the financial stability and security they sought.

India, the largest democracy in the world, is internationally hailed over the centuries for its cultural, communal, religious and lingual diversity. Tourists get just enthralled by the 'Colourful India' and carry with them the image of 'Mysterious India', and justifiably so. However, the diversity the tourists marvel at has caused a great rupture in the Indian democracy. Under the pretext of retaining their respective communal, religious regional and lingual identity people have borne hostility towards one another over a period of time.

Article 19 (A) of the Indian constitution grants Freedom of Expression to the citizens. However it has become increasingly difficult to exercise it in modern India, thanks first to the politicians who with a solid vote bank in mind never ceased to pit communities against one another. In democratic India, intolerance has become a word of the day. The identity politics has polarized the Indian society as never before in the annals of history.

In this precarious situation, the theatre is only at the receiving end. Despite obtaining due license from the Censor Board to perform your play, the bigots are likely to violently force you to withdraw the play for having hurt their feelings.

It might be relevant to refer to a couple of events that happened in the Maharashtra State, on the West coast of India, that this writer comes from.

Gandhi was assassinated by one Nathuram Godse in 1948. The country unequivocally condemned the brutal act. Three decades after the most tragic event, a playwright sought to make out a case for the assassin Nathuram Godse, and he wrote a play called 'I am Nathuram Godse Speaking' and got it duly censored. However atrocious and heart rending Gandhi's murder was, people wanted to know the other side of the case, and therefore thronged to see the play. But then, those who shared the assassin's political ideology, not only strongly agitated outside the theatre but also set the theatre company's bus ablaze.

Despite the Censor Board's permission to perform the play, neither the government nor the so called progressive theatre people – quite a few of them shared the assassin's political ideology - stood by the theatre company.

Vijay Tendulkar, the eminent playwright from Maharashtra, who has made his mark at the International theatre scene, wrote a historical play back in 1972 called Ghashiram Kotwal. The play speaks about politicians who use their power to unscrupulously satiate their lust for sex. The protagonist of the play holds the position next to that of the Prime Minister and is lecherous. He is a Brahmin, the upper most position in the caste system. The Brahmin community kicked up a row and argued that the playwright had distorted historical facts in the first place and also tarnished the image of the Brahmin community. The Brahmins threatened both the playwright and the performers of dire consequences despite the fact that the Censor Board had given a green signal to the play.

There is yet another anecdote. The play was written in a vernacular language. Its title was 'The Buddha is defeated'. The playwright thereby meant that the Buddha found himself at his wit's end, thanks to the warmongers. It was overtly an anti war play, that actually underlined the Buddha's philosophy of non violence and love. However, the Dalits, the lowest of the castes and which worships the Buddha as its idol, vehemently opposed the play on the ground that the Buddha could never be defeated. It's obvious that the Dalits took the word 'defeated' literally and, therefore, wanted the theatre group to change the title of the play. This play also was cleared by the Censor Board.

Mr. Habib Tanwir, one of the greatest directors in the modern Indian theatre, staged a play, called Ponga Pundit, wherein a character revolts against the religious taboo and enters into the temple with footwear. The religious fanatics attacked the theatre group for violating the sanctity of the temple. According to them one must take off shoes before entering into the temple. How come could one enter with footwear? But then character in question asks, "Does God live only in temples? Is he not every where?" -The play deals with the issues of untouchability, casteism and communal harmony.

And here are a couple of instances from the recent past:

Girish Karnad, one of the greatest of the playwrights in the Modern Indian theatre, is known for his insight into the Indian mythology and the history. He wrote a play called, 'Dreams of Tipu Sultan' at the behest of the BBC Radio, in 1997. Tipu Sultan, a Muslim, happened to be the king of Mysore, in South India in the late eighteenth century. Karnad, in his play considers Tipu Sultan a political visionary, innovative administrator, a reformist and the very emblem of 'Never say die' spirit against the British. However, Karnad's tribute to the Muslim

king landed him into great trouble in the year 2015. His statement at the public function that an airport in the vicinity of Mysore should be renamed after Tipu Sultan, enraged Hindus so much so that they threatened to kill him.

The Mahabharata and the Ramayana, the two Indian epics are considered India's gift to the world. In the Ramayana, the protagonist Ram attains the status of the God in his life time. His faithful disciple, a monkey called Maruti is also one more god for the Indians. Naturally Indian parents name their sons after Maruti. And there is the rub. A play, Maruti and Champagne created great commotion among the Hindus who objected to associating the God Maruti with Champagne. In fact Maruti is a middle class man in the play. But the fanatic Hindus won't take it and eventually they forced the playwright and the theatre group to change the title of the play. Now ironically the new title was, 'The Monkey and Champagne. To top it all, the playwright himself and the most of the actors in the play came from the same caste that those opinionated people belonged to.

Here one is reminded of what Tiberius said long ago. He said, "If the Gods are insulted, let them see to it themselves."

The complex interplay of social forces, ideological biases and
political choices have inhibited the freedom of expression in India.

It would be interesting to juxtapose these events with Gandhi's views on censorship, as narrated by Ramchandra Guha in his book, 'Democrats and dissenters'

While he was in Africa, Gandhi wrote a book 'Hind Swaraj' (Freedom of India) in 1910. The British objected to the book and would not allow its publication. Gandhi wrote a letter to the British official, in which he said, "Everyman has a right to hold any opinion he chooses and give effect to it also, so long as in doing so he does not use or advocate physical violence against anybody."

Ramchandra Guha refers to yet another incident concerning Gandhi. The American writer Joseph Lelyveld wrote a book that speculated Gandhi had been in homosexual relationship in South Africa. Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister of India today, happened to be the Chief Minister of Gujarat State, when the book was published. Mr. Modi banned the book. However, Gandhi's two grandsons –Rajmohan Gandhi and Gopalkrushna Gandhi allowed the book to circulate, arguing that the ban would be contrary to spirit of Gandhi. It would also call into

question India's democratic credentials. If you cannot honestly discuss the lives and legacies of real historical figures, it does not bode well for the health of democracy.

The situation has become still worse since the Central government in Delhi put Nationalism at the top of its agenda. This has made explicitly clear that creative artists could have freedom of expression only within the limits that the rulers would set. It's noteworthy that a cartoonist immediately came out with a cartoon which shows a poorly clad youth preparing a poster which says, "Freedom of expression, (conditions apply)." This hardly needs any comment.

Today's India has to live mainly with Neo liberalism, identity politics, and imposed nationalism. The question, "what's your politics?" would sound totally irrelevant today as the whole country seems to live in moments only. And the paradox of the collective theatre is that its survival depends on the generosity of the same bourgeois society that it finds to be ideologically bankrupt.

The French philosopher Derride's well known remark on democracy must be mentioned here. -- "The experience of modern democracy is based on the realization that there is no point of equilibrium where final harmony could be attained. It is only in this precarious 'in-between' that we can experience pluralism, that is to say, that this democracy will always be 'to come'.

However, democracy will come and the collective theatre as well. There are always people- a few though- who live up to values and are non conformist and rebellious. They also might have urge and time and energy to do theatre collectively. The question is to mobilize like minded people.

Peter Brook in introduction to 'Tell Me Lies' says, "We are now before a long period of perpetual revolution, in which we must search, attempt to build, pull down and search again."