

The Kannada Stage—Then and Now

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The play is called *Keechaka Vadha*; it depicts a famous episode from the epic *Mahabharata*. The hero of the play, Pandava Bheemsena, is living *incognito*, as a cook, in King Virata's palace. When he first appears on the stage, he is supposed to sit alone, bemoaning his fate. Today the curtain rolls up, but the stage is empty. A child of eight or nine is squatting on a carpet which has more dust on it than the ground on which it is spread. He is in the first 'row'. He is impatient, besieged by curiosity, and moves nearer to the platform. He is craning his neck to peep into the wing on his right. There is Bheemsena with his mace on his shoulder and he is in simple clothes, the garb of a cook. Why doesn't he come on the stage? The harmonium suggests the notes of a song; still he does not come! On the other hand, he is gesticulating angrily, gnashing his teeth in silence. The hurried movements of his lips are conveying something to the people in the opposite wing. In a minute or two, a stage-hand enters with a stool two feet high; he places it in the centre of the stage and slips out. Now the pace of the harmonium is brisker; and in walks Bheemsena. He sits on the stool, clears his throat, and picks up the strain of the song from the harmonium. The play begins. The eight-year old watching the scene is happy and so are hundreds of men and women, sitting all round the platform on the uncarpeted ground. That was the first play I saw in my village sixty years ago. Why did a cook carry a mace? Why did he insist on a stool being placed for him to sit on? Why did he sing? Nobody asked any questions; nobody bothered. Even today, re-living the atmosphere of the time, I am more amused than critical.

This was a play which we witnessed with a degree of awe and respect because it brought us something of 'urban culture', namely drop-curtains. Even before that I had seen a play called an *Aata* to distinguish it from *Keechaka Vadha*, a *Nataka*. It, too, had a mythological theme. But what an eyeful! Both kings and gods had crowns on their heads, arm-plates on both arms (from shoulder to elbow), all glittering in various colours (of paper), and a basketful of necklaces and golden ornaments (mostly genuine and lent by the leading families of the village). The actors strutted bare-foot on the stage. The audience sat in the moonlight, while the characters on the stage remained bathed in the soft, yet adequate light of oil-lamps and torches. When a god or a demon appeared, *raal* powder was freely sprinkled on the torches and for a second there was a flare of dazzling brilliance. Nobody entered from the wings; the stage was open on all three sides. The *deus ex machina* entered at the fag end of the play in a torch-light procession, starting from a place almost a furlong away; he passed through the rows of spectators and with a high jump climbed up the platform. For all practical purposes, the audience would make a 180° turn, make way for a character, comment on the procession and criticise or praise the high jump and its record-breaking aspect, comparing it to earlier performances. While this was taking place, the characters on the stage would all remain silent; they would be busy witnessing the spectacle. This was the occasion when the children who had dropped off to sleep were rudely prodded to wakefulness.



Gubbi Veeranna.

During the span of these sixty years, I have retained my interest in the theatre and actively participated in theatre activities. I have been intimately associated with the stage both in and outside Karnatak. Whenever I remember those earlier experiences, I am filled with a deep admiration both for the stage and the audience of those days. Everything about them was honest and sincere. When all is said and done, the stage is make-believe. So why should one try and deceive oneself by saying that actual life is represented on the stage? Bheemasena (that is the actor) is comfortable singing a song only when he is seated. So he waits for the stool. We saw nothing wrong in that. It was his singing, his playing the part that seemed relevant to us and not whether he should or should not wait for a stool. When the Divine Arbiter, the *deus ex machina*, enters, it is the fact of his being the Superhuman and Final Arbiter that is sought to be impressed on the audience. So we forget that he is the village-carpenter; we make way for him, enabling him to leap on to the stage. And why do we go to see a play? Not to learn the lesson that God punishes the wicked and rewards the good. We have heard these stories from our grandmothers, from our teachers, and from our *Pauraanikas* and *Keertankars*. We go to the theatre to see and to enjoy the performance. And in those days the audience enjoyed all that could be enjoyed, turning a blind eye to everything else. Each of us picked up only what was relevant to his or her enjoyment. The children enjoyed the spectacle, the flash of the torches, the sound accompanying the procession, or the mace-fight between the cook Bheemasena and the villain Keechaka. How we roared with triumph when the villain fell down and 'died'! Our more knowledgeable elders enjoyed either the singing or the acting; the women, as a rule, worshipped with folded hands the 'gods' and cheerfully wept (though moved by sorrow) when the hero and heroine were persecuted by the villain. The tougher elements in the audience and the village urchins enjoyed the ribaldry in the show and the repartees with the *Sutradhara* (called *goddi* in my part of Karnataka). The women belonging to the village aristocracy watched with pride the glitter of the *saris* and the golden ornaments which they had lent to the performers. And, above all, it was an event which the village awaited with expectation for weeks on end and the villagers were determined not to be disappointed.

There is one thing, in particular, which I remember with relish even today. It is something which I have to check myself from carrying into effect. I mentioned earlier on that I was seated in the first 'row'. It would be wrong to believe that this was my seat for the performance. I was there only when the incident (of Bheemasena's stool) took place. As a matter of fact, not only we, the children, but even the grown-ups would, as a rule, freely change their 'seats' during a performance. I had my own 'family box' on the shoulders of my grandfather. He was a jovial old soul, and he kept on moving round the entire periphery of the 'auditorium'. I realized how such movement formed an essential part of our enjoyment of the play and particularly so later on when I shifted to Bijapur as a high school student or when I stayed in Poona during my college days. The very first time I entered an urban theatre I was thoroughly uncomfortable; I felt suffocated. Even today I prefer to move about in a theatre and I confess that I do so on the slightest pretext.

I gained yet another experience in Bijapur when I witnessed (in complete ignorance of the language) my first Marathi play. The play was

advertised as written by such and such author. Till now I had believed that a play was made up by the actors. I knew that the stories had emerged from mythologies and that no modern 'mister' had written them. The novelty, however, wore off when I gradually found that the same was true about Kannada plays.

In the years following the First World War more Marathi than Kannada plays used to be staged in my part of Karnatak. The only exceptions to this rule were half a dozen plays (perhaps not even as many) like *Shri Krishna Leela*, or *Lankaadahana* or *Shani Prabhava*. The authors of these plays were hardly known beyond the title page—and that too, only when the play was printed. On the other hand, the Marathi dramatists seemed to have been known, even independently of their plays. It was, therefore, not surprising that the Kannada plays were modelled upon, if not actually translated from Marathi plays like *Rakshasi Mahatwakaanksha*, *Veer Abhimanyu*, *Pantanchi Soona*, *Samshaya Kallol*. These were all rendered into Kannada.

One of the peculiarities of the Marathi plays (and, consequently, of most Kannada plays) of those days was the large number of songs in classical tunes that they contained. The audience used to attend a dramatic performance not merely to enjoy the play but also the music. In and out of context, a well-known actor would sing a song sometimes for ten or fifteen minutes and when he ended, the audience would applaud and shout 'once more', 'once more'. Then the actor would approach the orchestra and repeat the song. This time he would go on for thirty minutes. The strangest part of the performance was that the audience did not feel any break in continuity. Within a minute, it was prepared to laugh or gasp in tune with the mood of the sequence which followed. There used to be songs even in the village-plays which I had seen earlier on. But they were merely rhythmic recitations. But this was something different: it sounded like superb vocal acrobatics to someone like me who was ignorant of the science of music. If there were a couple of eminent singers in the cast, the success of the play was assured. This was the situation in the urban theatre. It seemed to me that the urban theatre lacked the simplicity of the village performance. In addition to drop curtains, the stage itself was more elaborate. Any stool would no longer do. A king had to have a throne. It was a stool though, but it was plastered with paper in dazzling colours. This audience was perhaps not credited with the powers of imagination which village audiences had. Here we had a 'road-curtain', a 'mahal-curtain' and a 'forest-curtain'. Of course, the audience never bothered about the curtain. They listened in rapt attention to the two characters speaking before a curtain, which depicted a road from Paris and projected with equal emphasis the name of the painter. The Kannada plays were, as a rule, either mythological or 'historical' (though hero kings were actually unknown to history). We did not have as many singers as the Marathi stage had and they were not as good either. So we had to have something else to attract an audience. In the twenties and thirties a distinctive feature of the Kannada stage was the introduction of the so-called 'transfer-scenes'. In a play called *Shani Prabhava*, we would be looking at King Vikrama's court with its pillars and its *mahal* drop. Then Shani would utter his famous curse. Before the last word of the curse was spoken there would be the sound of a gunshot; the lights would be dimmed and the pillars would be seen hanging as old trees and plants

and the backdrop would become a forest scene. We used to scan the hand-bills eagerly to find out how many transfer-scenes there were in a show. To that extent we were still the village audiences we had been before. For us drama was something which had to be seen and enjoyed. We did enjoy what we saw since it was new and offered to us in great quantity.

All the while, unknown to myself, I must have been qualifying myself to be a play-goer. My ignorance of music hastened the process. A Marathi troupe visited Bijapur and this was a troupe which performed plays that were entirely in prose. The first Marathi play I saw in Bijapur was a political play called *Narangi Nishana* by one Kolhatkar. It had for its background Gandhiji's non-cooperation movement. Earlier, when I was about nine years old, I had travelled to Sholapur from my village (in a bullock-cart) in the company of my father and his friends to see a play of Bal Gandharva's. I do not recollect the name of the play now. During the year of the First World War I saw *Manapman*, *Swayamvara* (Gandharva Company); *Rana Bhimdev* and *Sant Tukaram* (Ganpatrao Joshi's Shahu Nagravasi Company); and *Vichitra Leela* (Maharashtra Natak Company). They were all staged in Bijapur. In spite of my complete ignorance of the language, I was impressed by these Marathi plays and I also had the feeling that I understood them. This, I realized later, was the effect of the acting, and particularly the performance of one Ganpatrao Joshi. I saw both *Sant Tukaram* and *Rana Bhimdev* with Ganpatrao Joshi in the title role. These plays were of short duration, if we compare them with the standard performance of the time. They were followed by forty-five minutes of humorous skits. Joshi who had thrilled us as a hero in the full-length play would now make us roll in our seats because of his performance in the skit. I have rarely seen pure acting talent of that type. What I saw helped me when I watched Kannada plays, where, in spite of the inanity of the story and the language, in spite of the poor quality of the singing, I always felt the impact of the individual actors. They impressed me more than the sound and fury of the transfer scenes. This was a period which gave us great actors like Gubbi Veeranna, Mohamad Peer, Garud Sadashiva Rao and Vaman Rao Master. When the Kannada stage was in a near-stagnant state, these talented artists kept alive a patient who was already in a comatose condition.

During my college days in Poona, I watched more Marathi plays; the more I saw them, the less I liked our Kannada plays. I was far from being a linguistic traitor. The fault, according to me, lay in the Kannada plays themselves. They still retained the same old mythological base. Even the script was not different from the old text and when it was new, it was only a bad translation, more often than not an unacknowledged one, of a Marathi play. Now and then an attempt was made to appeal to our linguistic patriotism. If a Marathi play dramatised the heroic story of Shivaji, the Kannada play would substitute a Kannada hero. But quite often, the 'author' was not so well-read and our historical heroes were just second-rate *Palegars* (like Echamma Nayak).

I must mention yet another peculiarity of the Kannada plays which I saw during my student days. Every play had a 'comic' actor and some of these comedians were really talented. The main plot was interspersed with comic interludes. Only the first and the last few words in the scenes made a passing

reference to the main story. What intervened in the middle was blatantly irrelevant. But since, with an absolute disregard for the fault of anachronism, it touched on contemporary life, it was thoroughly enjoyed by the audience. (I enjoy it even today, despite my own theories of drama).

I still recall with sorrow that the Kannada stage severely suffered from one great handicap—the indifference of an enlightened audience. Our adults, who used to make it a point to see at least one performance of a visiting Marathi troupe, showed no enthusiasm at all for a Kannada play. The young were not encouraged to see Kannada plays performed. Sometimes the women of the house used to be allowed to see them, but behind that permission was the conviction that these plays ought perhaps to be seen by persons of a lower intellectual calibre. And the women folk, too, liked to see plays only for the sake of the 'gods' who appeared on the stage. I feel that this patronising attitude was responsible to a great extent for the stagnation of the Kannada theatre. Perhaps the poor quality of the performance, the anonymity of the author and the traditional prejudice against the moral norms of the actor's profession were all responsible for such an attitude. There were no newspapers, no social leaders who were prepared to commend the Kannada Theatre. The Kannada stage had to wait for two decades before it attained respectability. But it has still to attract a permanent and an enthusiastic audience. But let me not anticipate.

I remember a night in Bombay. The year was 1929. I was watching a Marathi play which had been popular for fifteen years. As a college student I had enjoyed a performance of the play on more than one occasion. But, on this particular night, in spite of the star musicians, a sense of boredom enveloped me. I reached a point when I said to myself, "This is no play at all". As soon as I realised what I meant, I was astounded. It was about eight months since I had returned from my three years' stay in England. During those three years I had seen a number of plays: plays in which there was music, plays in which there was dance, and plays in prose unembellished by either music or dance. In England I had seen musical comedies, I had seen the plays of Noel Coward, watched actors and actresses like Gerald du Maurier, Gladys Cooper, Tallulah Bankhead (in Ibsen's *The Doll's House*) and Sybil Thorndike (in Shaw's *Saint Joan*). I had also seen Shaw's *Man and Superman* (except the Dream Scene) and *Justice* and *The Silver Box* by John Galsworthy. And on that particular night in Bombay I felt that what I was watching was neither a prose play nor a musical and worst of all there was nothing in it that one could call 'dramatic'. I did not know whether, in the intervening period, the Marathi audience had changed in the way I had changed. I was not sure if the crowd came there just to enjoy the songs sung by the vocalists. I was also not sure if the three years' stay in England had turned me into a *Kaala* sahib. But such hesitations notwithstanding, my reactions were strong and firm.

When I settled in Dharwar, I had the occasion to see many Kannada plays. Veterans like Garud Sadashiv Rao and Vaman Rao Master were still active. They used to perform, if not the same plays, plays which were similar to the old ones. I was impressed by their acting as I had been earlier on. But the performance, as a whole, seemed to me childish artificial and unbelievably

irrelevant. One felt neither impressed nor entertained. And the saddest part of it was that the audience, too, seemed, by and large, to share my opinion. Was the Kannada Theatre disintegrating? Could it project nothing except poor plagiaristic efforts? People were saying that the cinema, and particularly the talkies, had sounded the death-knell of the Kannada Theatre. It is true that the famous Gubbi company roused great and universal enthusiasm; but that was mainly for the spectacular dumb show, the dumb settings and the live dumb animals. When I witnessed a performance of Mohamad Peer, I felt both heartened and saddened; heartened because of the great actor that Peer was, but saddened because he had to perform in such melodramatic and artificial plays. It was Veeranna and Peer who had an audience (as Hirannayya had later) but not the Theatre. And what about the Theatre that came after them? Soon a time came when professional troupes scrupulously bypassed cities during their tour and eagerly thronged to village *jatras*. The urban audience which helped to establish a Bengali Theatre and a Marathi Theatre simply failed to come into existence in Karnatak. And till that happened the theatre could attain neither stability nor respectability.

This is where I must bring to the notice of the readers a significant feature of the Kannada Theatre. During the early twenties certain literary personalities had applied their mind to the theatre. Balacharya Sakkari (Shanta Kavi) of Dharwar, Narayan Rao Huilgol of Gadag and Kerur Vasudevacharya of Bagalkot wrote plays. The influence of Marathi models was felt in their writings. In spite of that, these plays were entirely different from the other plays staged at that time. The writing was better, the themes and ideas were modern and, of course, they had music. But these plays, though they were performed once or twice with a fair degree of enthusiasm, never reached the wider sections of the Kannada public. There was no organized theatre to perform them on a commercial basis. In contrast to these plays, Kailasam from Bangalore had written one or two plays which, by all standards, were revolutionary, modern and stage-worthy. But they, too, found no place in the commercial theatre. They were dismissed as 'intellectual' and 'literary' and it was left to the youth to perform them. The plays served only one useful purpose. They brought into existence an amateur theatre.

My intention is not to trace the history of the Kannada Theatre, but to describe it as it was then and as it is now. I am one of the few who can claim to have seen the longest span of time between 'then' and 'now'. What the theatre was like then, sixty years ago, has already been described. What it is like now is much more difficult to say. Fortunately for us, the professional theatre has survived in spite of the death prophesied for it twenty years ago. It has recognised the changes of modern life but unfortunately it is not sufficiently equipped to meet the requirements of the present. The skeleton is the same, only some new flesh has been padded on. The result is often something that is hideous. Certain talented actors are doing their best to keep the professional stage alive but they have still to atone for the mistakes of their predecessors. Actor-proprietors like Balappa Enagi are breaking with the tradition of the professional theatre by introducing elements in it that are likely to attract an enlightened audience.

It is easier for me to write about the professional rather than the amateur theatre of Karnatak. I have been too intimately associated with the amateur stage. Even before 1930, and in addition to Shanta Kavi, Kerur, Huilgol and Kailasam, there were some writers who wrote plays out of a fervent desire to enrich modern Kannada literature. But some of these men were really great writers. For a few years dramatists like the late B. M. Srikantayya or Masti Iyengar or C. K. Venkatasamiah and a younger generation which included Shivram Karanth, Kuvempu or A. N. Krishna Rao wrote straight plays and even, in those early days, experimented with tragedies (of the Greek type) and plays in blank verse. Prof. B. M. Srikantayya's *Aswathaman* is in verse and modelled on Greek tragedy. K. V. Puttappa's verse play *Yamana Solu* and Shivram Karanth's operas (*Somiya Sanbhagya*) belong to this category. These plays were produced either by the college teachers and students or by the Amateur Drama Association of Bangalore, the oldest organization of its kind in Karnatak. Naturally enough, in those early days these plays were more admired as literary compositions rather than as scripts for the stage. Usually they were not so much produced, as delivered or recited well.

These dramatists inspired the amateur stage. And amateurs in their turn encouraged the emergence of new dramatic talent. They were only waiting for some one to write for them and keep them active on a regular plane. So it is not surprising that amateur groups came into existence around dramatists like Kailasam, Karanth, Sri Ranga (the present writer), Parvathavani and other playwrights. Many of those who had written plays in the earlier days turned to other literary forms. Among the earlier playwrights, Kailasam, Sri Ranga, Parvathavani and Ksheerasagara stuck to drama as their genre. Girish Karnad, P. Lankesh, Kambar and Chandrashekhar Patil of the younger generation, also chose this literary form and adhered to it. There are a number of other playwrights writing with the amateur theatre in view. There are a few who write for the professional theatre. Strangely enough, except senior writers like B. Puttuswamaiah and the late Bellave Narahara Shastri, there is hardly any dramatist of the professional theatre who is considered a respectable (that is a literary) writer.

The irony of the situation is that though we boast able dramatists, we have no amateur theatre worth mentioning. Except in Bangalore or Mysore or in the small town of Sagar (Shimoga) there is hardly any regular theatrical activity. The plays of Sri Ranga or Lankesh or Girish Karnad have seen more performances in Hindi and sometimes in Marathi than in Kannada itself. Consequently, more attention is paid to plays in their written form. Our dramatists, too, seem to have traversed a long distance. Sixty or seventy years ago, they were anonymous moral messiahs; in the thirties and forties they were patriotic protestants; today they are confessing catholics. If, in its early days, the Kannada Stage was the playground of gods, today it is the battle-ground of Satan.

If our Kannada dramatists have invaded other languages, it is also true that other languages have invaded the Kannada stage. When graduates from the National School of Drama, Delhi, were introduced (by the present

writer) for the first time to the Bangalore amateur stage, our young actors started to learn modern techniques of production, direction, composition, setting and lighting. This enthusiasm has still not worn off. Almost every second amateur production is advertised as an 'experiment'. That word has become as effective an advertising stunt as the word 'transfer scene' in the professional stage of the thirties. Our dramatists and directors and amateur groups try to ensure that the latest thing that 'happened' in the theatre of the West finds an echo here. Though this offers promise of a better future, it also confirms the traditional belief that southerners are only good beginners, and incapable of sustained effort.



Shambhu Maharaj