

History	Paper 2: Cultures in the Indian Subcontinent	Unit	Lesson 1 : History of Theatrical Traditions in India
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1.1: Debates About Conceptual Categories

Outlining the history of Indian theatrical traditions is a daunting task because of the complex range of performance styles, languages, and a span of about 2500 years during which theatre has flourished in India. However, what makes it more challenging is that the very categories used in the chapter title – History, Indian, and Theatre have themselves been questioned as **'constructs'** and cannot be assumed to have a fixed, stable meaning that is commonly understood. This does not simply mean that these are obsolete or old-fashioned categories but that there is a whole line of thinking that is concerned with the question 'how do we know about our past?' Therefore an account of Indian Theatrical Traditions must deal with these methodological issues and **conceptual frameworks** before providing a chronological account of theatrical practices and the social, cultural contexts in which they arose. Let us discuss the problems that arise from using the categories 'Indian Literature', 'Indian Culture', and 'History'.

1.2: Defining 'Indianness' in Culture, Literature, and Theatre

There is a general consensus among scholars and theatre practitioners that categories such as 'Indian Literature', 'Indian Culture', and 'Indian Theatre' can be used for convenience in discussions. However, many critics have felt the need to interrogate them on several grounds. One of these grounds, for example, is that such categories tend to **homogenize** diverse kinds of experiences, practices, and aspirations in terms of certain dominant forms of cultural productions and impose an artificial unity. This, specially when India has historically had fluid boundaries, has consisted of a variety of races and kingdoms and has emerged as a consolidated nation state only recently. Hence, the argument goes, a unitary India and Indianness is only a **'narrativization'** and Indian Literature a 'contrived' category. The categories Indian Culture and Indian Literature may a part of common parlance but the classification of only certain practices, artifacts, and texts as Indian Culture and Literature is at best arbitrary.

Another objection to the use of these categories arises when Indian Literary traditions are conflated with only one dominant literature and culture. Some historians have claimed the dominance of one intellectual and aesthetic tradition, namely the Sanskrit tradition and identified it as the 'Indian Tradition', while relegating the 'other' literary and performative traditions as marginal, 'regional', and 'little traditions' (as opposed to the 'Great Tradition').

Did You Know

Little and Great Tradition: "A distinction between the elite or dominant records of cultural or religious tradition (including literature and art) and the local, informal, and often oral manifestations of those traditions by peasant groups. The distinction was first introduced into [anthropology](#) by Robert [Redfield](#) in *Peasant Society and Culture* (1956), to explain the interaction between mechanisms that formalize and institutionalize practices within a culture (usually in the service of an elite) and the constant reinterpretation and modification of those practices at the local level."

Source: <http://social.jrank.org/pages/2094/Great-Little-traditions.html> >Great and Little traditions - Peasant Society and Culture

Critics have highlighted a need to question this kind of **hierarchization** that legitimizes the Sanskrit and Brahmanical tradition as the **normative** one and reduces the others to mere 'regional'. This claim of superiority and high cultural value for the literature and culture of one group, in fact, privileges the elite and powerful groups and conceals the subordination of marginal groups. Such notions of 'high' culture and canonical literature that are assumed to be qualitatively superior to 'popular' culture, thus encode power relationships and should therefore be contested.

What The Critics Say

The difficulty in thinking of an 'Indian' literature... lies in the very premises that have often governed the narrativization of that history, which has (1) privileged High Textuality of a Brahmanical kind to posit the unification of this literary history; or (2) assembled the history of the main texts of particular languages (in a very uneven way) to obtain this unity through the aggregative principle; or (3) attempted to reconstruct the cross-fertilization of genres and themes in several languages, but with highly idealistic emphases and with the canonizing procedures of the 'great books' variety, with scant attempt to locate literary history within other sorts of histories in any consistent fashion.

Source: Ahmad, Aijaz, *In Theory : Classes, Nations, Literatures*, New Delhi : Oxford University Press, 1992, p.244-5.

In another controversial and problematic postulation, theorists like Irawati Karve interpret Indian culture as a sum total of many disparate forms. This view posits a "theoretical unity or coherence of an 'Indian' literature by assembling its history in terms of adjacent but discrete histories of India's major language-literatures" (Ahmad, 1992, p.243-4). Ahmad maintains that "a 'national' literature... has to be more than the sum of its regional constituent parts, if we are to speak of its unity theoretically" (p.244).

Despite the very conceptual categories of Indian Literature/Culture being interrogated in the above ways, several scholars have described the idea as a feasible proposition. Sujit Mukherjee, in one of the earliest theorizations on various models of Indian Literature, talks about the idea of a pan-Indian Literature. Professor S.K.Das, in his comprehensive history of Indian Literature expresses a need for a "framework that accommodates not only the diverse literary traditions existing in this country but also the complexities of its multilingualism." (Das, 1991, p.1). He calls for an idea of national literature which recognizes relationships between different language-literatures cutting across ethnic, religious, and linguistic boundaries. He cites examples from ancient and medieval writings to prove that the idea of India as a "unified cultural zone" existed and has withstood changes in political boundaries. What holds Indian Literature together is not the isolated literary expressions of various groups but their interdependence and interrelationship. Thus, he suggests that the framework of Comparative Literature would be more useful and wholesome to study Indian literary traditions.

Critic's View

"Like Indian music and painting and sculpture Indian literature is also a unified universe despite its various linguistic manifestations.... The unity of literary expressions despite their linguistic varieties can be further illustrated from the place written in Sanskrit where several languages have been employed. Kalidasa's famous play *Sakuntala*, for example, is a

linguistic mosaic where four languages – Sanskrit, Saurasheni, Maharashtri and Magadhi- have been used....One must not fail to see that such a literary text, as *Sakuntala* is, could be produced in a complex multilingual situation where different languages did not divide people into exclusive groups but could encourage people to interact with one another and to transcend linguistic barriers.... *Sakuntala* is as much a part of Sanskrit literature as of the Prakrit literatures."

Source: Das, Sisir Kumar, *A History of Indian Literature, Vol.8:1800-1910, Western Impact: Indian Response*, New Delhi: Sahitya Akademy,1991, p.5.

Aijaz Ahmad, in his essay, "Indian Literature: Notes Towards the Definition of a Category", suggests that it was infact "multilinguality and polyglot fluidity" that gave to Indian Literature its unification in the pre modern phase (p.248). Similarly Rakesh H. Soloman maintains that, "Throughout history India's political, regional, racial, linguistic, and social divisions have been overpowered by a fundamental cultural and civilizational oneness." (Soloman, 2009, p.7). Thus, the inadequacies of conceptual categories like Indian Literature and Culture should be kept in mind even while using them.

1.3: Some Questions Regarding the Category 'History'

1.3.1: History versus Story

Literary Histories plot a world that is assumed to be cohesive and chronological and that can be mapped in an ordered way by piecing information together. Histories are assumed to be 'objective' representation of facts as against stories that are considered to be works of fiction and imagination and therefore involve a 'point of view'. This supposed objectivity of history has long been questioned. Philosophers of history from Hayden White to Frank Ankersmit and Keith Jenkins Have pointed out that "history is first and foremost a literary narrative about the past, a literary composition of the data into a narrative where the historian creates meaning for the past" (Jenkins,1991,p.xii). So the past world of theatre cannot exactly correspond with its 'history' written in the present.

Any 'History of Theatrical Traditions' cannot be a discovery of 'facts' of the past but a reconstruction, a knowledge-producing process. "No account can re-cover the past as it was because the past was not an account but events, situations, etc. As the past has gone, no account can ever be checked against it but only against other accounts." (p.14).

Interesting Information

Vijay Tendulkar's play *Ghashiram Kotwal* (1973) reinterpreted the Maratha period that is regarded as a golden period in 18th century Indian history as a time of brahmanical dominance and oppression. The play ran into controversy about not being 'true' to historical facts, caused riots, and had to be performed under police protection. This archival newspaper report makes an interesting read :

Source: original

Much Ado About Something

By: Prabhakar Waingankar

BOMBAY: The outside world may be pardoned for gaining the impression that only one topic has been agitating the minds of the people of Maharashtra. So much is the publicity given to the controversy over the Marathi play, "GHASHIRAM KOTWAL", produced by the Theatre Academy, Pune, and currently being staged in West Germany, France, Holland and the U.K.

The exceptionally brilliant production of Vijay Tendulkar's play by Dr. Jabbar Patel, who has been exhibiting rare directorial talent both on stage and screen, was first enacted eight years ago.

Since then the play has been staged more than 200 times to full houses.

It will be legitimate to ask why a play should raise so much dust eight years after its birth.

The reason is that the central character of the play is Nana Phadnavis, the Chief Minister of the Peshwas in the 18th Century.

His sexual obsessions and his relationship with Ghashiram Kotwal, a Brahmin from north India, who had migrated to Poona, have been so juxtaposed in the play that Nana—the supreme

Nana shudders at the very thought.

"Kashya, ask for anything but this."

But Ghashiram knows that the old sex maniac can be blackmailed. And so Nana reluctantly agrees to make Ghashiram Kotwal of the Peshwa capital.

Having secured the 'keys' to the great city, Ghashiram Kotwal begins by whipping Brahmins into good behaviour, exposing their sexual adventures carried on behind a facade of social respectability.

When the poor Brahmins approach Nana for redress, he finds himself powerless to do anything. When things go too far Nana gives a written order to the Brahmins to punish Ghashiram.

At the end, Ghashiram realizes that he has gained nothing. He offered his teenage daughter to a man fit to be her grandfather, ruined her life and saw her being killed. Personally, too, he wielded unquestioned authority for a while, but Nana had no hesitation in allowing him to be liquidated when it suited him.

It was a double tragedy for a man whose eagerness to wreak vengeance got the better of his judgement.

imposes curfew, enforces permits for moving out. A man comes to seek such a permit because his daughter was expected to deliver a baby any time.

"No, this won't do," says the power-drunk Ghashiram.



In the above cartoon by Shyam Joshi in 'Maharashtra Times' Nana is shown saying "I forgot to state in my will that Ghashya should be sent to Berlin".

"State the exact time of delivery or you won't get a pass".

His police raid houses to uncover the night life of respectable classes. Brahmins were whipped for stealing paddy *dakshina*. Dead bodies rotted for want of permits.

Nana Phadnavis was then described as Navakot

Nana, who is now entering marital bliss for the seventh time.

Nana consoles him with words dripping with disgusting hypocrisy.

Ghashiram's innocent, and not-so-innocent victims seize this opportunity to take their revenge.

Punya nagari becomes Andher-Nagari. They list Ghashiram Kotwal's crimes: twenty-two Brahmins killed, some hanged for such minor offences as stealing fruit.

And the unscrupulous Nana signs the order for liquidating Ghashiram.

"You want an order to finish him. Is that all? Bring my pen, and paper. Submit him to all sorts of humiliation."

And Nana expresses satisfaction that the objective of getting rid of Ghashiram is being achieved vicariously.

Thus, Ghashiram dies trampled upon by an elephant.

Poona holds three-day long festivities to celebrate the occasion.

Dr. Mohan Agashe as the lecherous Nana Phadnavis, is superb. Apart from

Meaning, "Nana dances to Gauri's tune"

The recent controversy began with the objection that Government should not finance the trip abroad of a play like this and misuse the taxpayer's money. There were other plays which better deserved such patronage.

The second objection was to the portrayal of Nana Phadnavis, who is known as the "Artha Shahansha" (out of "Sade teen shahansha") (literally "half wise man" out of three and a half wise men). This was not said in the derogatory sense but because the other three Sakharum Bapu Bokil, Haripant Phedke and Vilhal Vinchurkar were warriors too, which Nana was not. Nana's forte was his brilliant diplomacy. As long as he was there, the British could not succeed in humbling the Swaraj.

The writer, Vijay Tendulkar, got over this objection by pointing out that it was not a historical play. That it was Nana allright—but he was not Nana Phadnavis. In his preface to the book, he has stated that it was merely depiction of certain human tendencies. If so, why should his "Nana" be identifiable with Nana Phadnavis?

One thing, however, can be said in defence of Shri

"Gauri Bolay, Nana Dolay..." "Gauri tu chalal raha, chafal raha" "Kashya, mujra karanyas visaroo nakos"

"You are shaitans inside and suuvars outside. I will set up a suuvar-ka-raj in Pune"—Ghashiram

Tendulkar's position is that it is NOT a historical play; that it is Nana all-right, but not Nana Phadnavis.

Sathe expressed the fear that similar dramas may be written about Shivaji, Gandhi and Nehru.

Dange said "Ghashiram Kotwal" will only provide fuel for reactionary circles, out to malign India

salesman of his times, who forged a confederacy of the Indian States to thwart the British designs—emerges as a debauch.

The plot is simple enough. Nana is attracted to a teenage girl and, as a wielder of supreme power, he is determined not to allow anything to stand in his way.

The girl turns out to be the daughter of Ghashiram who had earlier been insulted by the Poona Brahmins and who is now eager to take his revenge on the greedy Brahmins.

Ghashiram agrees to hand over his daughter, Lalita Gauri, to the old Nana but, at a price. He must be made the Kotwal (Police Commissioner) of Poona (Against the background of the Emergency, people need hardly be told what a powerful post it can be. A police commissioner can make or mix men at his will.)

At one place, Ghashiram says: "Spit on me, hit me with stones. I am a degenerate person who has traded his daughter's happiness and moral purity for personal gain."

Ghashiram had originally come to Poona to try his luck. "Nashib Nikalane Ko Poona Aya". But the local priests treated him as a rank outsider and falsely charged him with stealing somebody else's *dakshina*.

The Brahmins try their best to expel him from Punya nagari. He explodes:

"You are shaitans (satans) inside, and suuvars (pigs) outside. ...I will set up suuvar-ka-raj in Poona."

When Ghashiram takes over, the sootradhar (chorus) says: "Crime has gone down, misbehaviour has decreased".

Ghashiram's reign of terror knows no restraints. He

(nine crores) Nana, meaning a multi-millionaire.

Nana puts his own diamond necklace round Ghashiram's neck because he had agreed to make his beautiful daughter available to him.

The encounters between Nana and Ghashiram are a treat to the ear. Nana is fully aware of the diminution that he has suffered. So in a very, very mild tone he reminds "Ghashya" every time they meet:

"Mujra karanyas visaroo nakos". (Don't forget to do obeisance.)

After Nana has had his fun with the little Gauri, he does not care two hoots what happens to her. She is liquidated and buried.

The father in Ghashiram is mortally hurt. He wanders over the town in search of Gauri. Having failed to find her, he approaches

his slow and soft movements—as befit an aged man courting a little girl—his tone is honey-like:

"Gauri tu chalal raha, chafal raha, hare"

(Gauri Dear, Keep going, keep going) The intoned utterance rings in your ears interminably.

Even otherwise, the tone is mostly musical and even prose dialogues at several places, are delivered in sing-song fashion.

A remarkable feature of the play with a thin plot is its innovative use of folk forms of music like *lamasha, bhurud, gandha, dashavalar Kirtan, javani, khele* (from Goa).

The burden of the play is "Amhi punyache Brahman ..." and, in that connection, there are any number of references to Bava khani, the red-light district.

Another song says: "Gauri Bolay, Nana Dolay"

Tendulkar's stand. Many so-called historical truths which have become part of our historical culture, lack irrefutable evidence to support them. But that is no reason for fabricating more myths—and those too of the unsavoury kind.

The Union Minister for Information and Broadcasting Shri Vasant Sathe sided with the "reactionaries" and tried to stall the troupe's tour abroad for staging the controversial play.

His use of adjectives "derogatory, scandalous and perverted" was severe criticism indeed. Such portraiture of Nana was not in keeping with the self-respect of a nation, he added.

A local commentator lost no time in attributing Sri Sathe's reaction to his R.S.S. past. But Sathe expressed the well-founded fear that some other playwright might

(Please see page 15)

Source: [http://www.cscsarchive.org/8081/MediaArchive/liberty.nsf/2f00852ff71b6cee6525698doo257c06/ae5e599ccc8b9b6e652572ac000287388/\\$FILE/A0180040.pdf](http://www.cscsarchive.org/8081/MediaArchive/liberty.nsf/2f00852ff71b6cee6525698doo257c06/ae5e599ccc8b9b6e652572ac000287388/$FILE/A0180040.pdf)

The political meanings of the play are etched in public memory as this reading of *Ghashiram* in terms of the contemporary political scenario in Maharashtra, shows:

Interesting Information

Wednesday, March 04, 2009 at 12:15

The 'Ghashiram Kotwal' tale

Late author Vijay Tendulkar's play *Ghashiram Kotwal* many think is a masterpiece. It is the political version of the Frankenstein's monster story which we see unfolding repeatedly in various parts of the world. Whether it is the story of Khalistani militant leader Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, LTTE's Prabhakaran or Osama bin Laden, they are all versions of Tendulkar's *Ghashiram Kotwal*. The reason one is reminded of this story is because just on the eve of Parliament elections in Maharashtra, the drama *Ghashiram* is yet again being played in the political theatre and this time we really don't know if the end will be similar to Tendulkar's script or something completely different!

As Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) chief Sharad Pawar sits down to draw the blueprint of his party's campaign strategy for the elections, this time in Maharashtra he has to face two "Ghashiram Kotwals". The first one is a political party that the Congress itself encouraged and cultivated since the late 1960s to keep the leftists in Mumbai at bay, "Shiv Sena", and the second one is an organisation "Shiv Sangram" that has been recently floated by a former NCP member Vinayak Mete who was once close to Pawar!

Just the way Shiv Sena was groomed by the then chief minister Vasant Rao Naik in 1960s to challenge the growing clout of Leftists in Mumbai's textile mills, small politically-motivated groups like Shiv Sangram were cultivated by Sharad Pawar's NCP in Maharashtra to counter the BJP in the last few years. Now the leaders of these groups have become too big for NCP or Congress' comfort and have started politically challenging their very own mentors in a serious manner !

Source: <http://ibnlive.in.com/blogs/rohitchandavarkar/133153228/the-ghashiram-kotwal-tale.html>



Figure 1. A Performance of *Ghashiram Kotwal* in Progress

Source:

http://4.bp.blogspot.com/_r4RnOjAyP_c/R_H2IEJUs81/AAAAAAAAAC4/bFXE4VKGhDO/s1600_h/vijaytendulkar.gif

Just as historical events have been variously interpreted, evaluations of traditions and dramatic texts have also changed from time to time in relation to changing contexts of writing and reception. The history of Indian theatre is therefore a story of Indian theatre, dependent on who the narrator is. What is interesting is that the truth emerges from the many stories that are in **contestation** with each other. For example, Sylvain Levy, in his 1890 history of Indian theatre, *The Theatre of India*, describes Sanskrit drama as "Indian theatre *par excellence*" and dismisses non-Sanskrit theatre as unsophisticated and as having no literary qualities. Some histories written in independent India, for example, *The History of Indian Theatre* by M.L. Varadpande would evaluate the same non-Sanskrit traditional theatres as a vibrant and dynamic. Another interesting example that challenges 'fixity' of evaluations is the heroine's song in Marathi theatre in the early twentieth century. Considered 'low-brow' and a cheap form of entertainment, it acquired a respectable status when appropriated by the Sangit Natak tradition on the Marathi stage (Bhirdikar, 2009).

1.3.2: Histories of Performative Traditions

Histories of performative traditions are necessarily histories of aesthetics, languages, forms, and practices developed by different individuals, communities, races, classes, and genders in relations to their changing contexts. Therefore, there must always be a simultaneous presence of various traditions and not only those practiced by dominant groups. For the same reason, such histories cannot be sufficiently encoded through singular, formal, written texts. Interestingly, the reception of performative traditions is always mediated by directors/actors/singers/reciters even if there is a 'fixed' text available. Tracing oral traditions, therefore, is that much more complex and tentative.

Audio-visual Material

Watch Habib Tanvir's rendering of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* titled, "Kamdeo ka Apna, Basant Ritu ka Sapna" in Chattisgarhi dialect.

Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P98ZnxAYEhM>

1.3.3: Use of Periodization in Literary Histories

Performative and literary histories generally use periodization as a convenient tool to indicate social, cultural, and aesthetic developments in a particular 'age'. Thus, Indian theatre traditions are understood through a tripartite division: the 'classical' or Sanskrit theatre that can be traced as far back as 200 BC and that flourished upto about 10th century AD; the medieval period of folk and traditional theatres (10-18 century AD); the colonial influence and the modern age (18th century to present). Each period underwent different social, cultural, economic and political changes and developed its own distinct aesthetics. However, these periods must not be regarded as having hermetically sealed ends, when one kind of aesthetic activity ended and another began. Literary periods flow into one another; the aesthetic principles dominant in one literary period are appropriated, transformed and intermeshed with newer ones. In an abiding continuity, elements of Sanskrit and folk theatre have been reinvented and experimented with to suit modern needs. Therefore, the solidity of literary periods needs to be questioned.

1.4: The 'Theatricality' of Theatre

What the Specialists Say

[Theatre] is a synthesis of all arts: architecture, sculpture, painting, drama, dance, music, poetry, a dexterous blending of these making an irresistible appeal to the human mind and sense....

Source: Chattopadhyay, Kamaladevi, "Towards a National Theatre", in Bhatia, Nandi, ed., *Modern Indian Theatre: A Reader*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009, p.452.

The general idea of theatre is a performance that has elements of action, emotion, entertainment and employs languages that are not only verbal but gestural and suggestive as well. As compared with a written text that can be read in isolation, theatre participates more actively and directly in public and cultural life. Theatre historians have conjectured that dance, ritual enactment, and **impersonation** of spirits are the 'dramatic' elements that may have formed the seed of theatre. This 'theatricality' was enhanced by dancers

impersonating animals and deities through 'masks'. The use of music, costumes, masks, dance postures and imitation must have evolved into full-fledged theatre. The cave paintings at Bhimbetka that date back to the Mesolithic period are an evidence of artistic activity involving dance, ritual, impersonation, and community celebration.

On the Evolution of Theatre

"The traditional concepts of Indian Theatre can really be explained only in terms of the process of evolution of the actor from an official shaman to storyteller to performer and subsequently to character, and from the village bard to the sutradhara."

Source: Panikkar, K.N., "Federation in Culture", in Lal, Ananda, ed., *Rasa: The Indian Performing Arts in the Last Twenty Five Years, Vol.2: Theatre and Cinema*, Calcutta: Anamika, 1995.



Cave paintings at Bhimbetka near Bhopal.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Bhimbetka_Cave_Paintings.jpg



Figures 3&4: Cave paintings at Bhimbetka near Bhopal.

Source: <http://www.indianetzone.com/10/bhimbetka.htm>



Figure 5: An artist's impression of a Bhimbetka cave painting depicting community dancing. The dancers seem to be impersonating animals through the use of antlers/masks.

Source: http://web.me.com/kbolman/India-Prehistoric/3Bhimbetka_drawings.html

Some ancient cultic ceremonies that had high elements of dancing, singing, and community participation survive even now in different forms. For example, in the Baha Bonga of the Santhal community of Orissa; Gondhal(ghost worship) of the Bhils of Maharashtra; Teyyam in Kerala; Bhootaradhne in Karnataka; Nagamandala in the Tulunad area; Lai Haraoba(fertility ritual) in Manipur, one can see prototypes which evolved into various theatrical forms. Theatrical forms are thus dynamic and ever-changing and yet retain specific features of form and content.

Audio-visual Material

Video clips of Teyyam, Nagamandala ,and Lai Haraoba traditions

Source:

Teyyam: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AXuNB2ZsHMM>

Nagamandala: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tEhJEdfMbFg>

Lai Haraoba: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oUrQoFtLJUw>

Sometimes, what can come under the domain of 'theatre' also becomes a matter of debate. For example, many colonial records and Indian reformers dismissed certain traditional dramatic forms as 'untheatrical' and 'immoral', and therefore, unfit to be classified as 'theatre'. This also possibly happened because they disapproved of the participation of women in certain indigenous forms of theatre.

Another important aspect of theatre comes from the fact that it is a means of sharing cultural identities and world-views and constituting social relationships. Unlike written texts, certain forms of theatre can be accessed by the non-literate, non-elite, and the marginalized. Theatre can thus become an interesting space where oppositional voices can find an articulation against dominant, official world-views. This intersection of many voices competing for meaning makes theatre a very important political site. Of course, the same space can also be used to disseminate the ideas of the powerful groups as 'natural' and legitimate. This idea of tension between multiple voices in the theatrical space and the insufficiency of singular meanings ascribed to theatrical traditions needs to be highlighted.

A Theatre Personality's Statement on Theatre

Habib Tanvir: "I think all good theatre reflects life, and life is politics and social conditions."

Source: <http://habibtanvir.org/>

Interesting Details

Theatre has always been a politically active site. Dinabandhu Mitra's Bengali play, *Niladarpan*(1860), portraying colonial oppression of workers on indigo plantations in India was banned and led the British to pass censorship laws.

In the contemporary times, Habib Tanvir's theatre is known for hard-hitting satire against established systems. His production 'Zahareeli Hawa'(2002) gave voice to the sufferings of the common people who suffered during the Bhopal gas tragedy and were abandoned by the powers that be. 'Gadhe' is a humorous take on the educational system that kills creativity.

Source: habibtanvir.org

Of Further Interest

Clippings from a film on Habib Tanvir, "Gaon ke Naon Theatre, Mor Naon Habib" made by Sanjay Maharishi and Sudhanva Deshpande.

Source: <http://newsclick.in/culture/habib-tanvir-direction>

Habib Tanvir on his own life and theatre, "It Must Flow: A Life in Theatre".

Source: <http://www.seagullindia.com/habibtanvir.pdf>

Summary

- The assumed uniformity and coherence of Indian Literature/Culture needs to be problematized and its insufficiency highlighted on the following grounds: Indian Literature cannot be a sum total of discrete literatures in various languages. Their interdependence and engagement with each other needs to be emphasized.
- Indian theatrical traditions must not be equated with the Sanskrit tradition. Many elitist and popular, written and oral forms of theatre make the whole corpus of Indian theatre. Privileging one aesthetic tradition as the norm and regarding the others as minor variants introduces a hierarchy that encodes power relationships.
- Yet it is possible to use the categories of Indian Literature and Culture while critiquing them.
- Literary histories that describe aesthetic movements in a unilinear and factual manner erase the tensions and contestations through which meanings are constituted in a culture.
- Performative traditions are interpreted and evaluated anew from time to time. Certain forms that were regarded as 'low-brow' in a particular culture acquired respectability in a different context.
- Performative traditions are understood and mediated through directors, actors, and singers even if fixed texts are available. Therefore, history of Indian theatre cannot be traced only through written texts.
- The history of Indian theatre is generally classified into the Sanskrit tradition, medieval folk theatres, and modern theatre. One must remember that literary

periods and aesthetics associated with them flow into each other and are reinvented in different contexts.

- Theatre evolved in India from ancient cultic practices, singing, dancing, and the need to make meanings in a community. It serves as a mode of articulating aspirations and lived experiences of individuals and groups. This intersection of many voices makes theatre a dynamic and interesting space.

Exercises

Essay Type Questions

- On what grounds has the category 'Indian Literature' been critiqued?
- Explain the terms 'Great Tradition' and 'little traditions' in the context of theatrical traditions of India.
- How can readings of historical events vary from each other?
- What are the factors that should be kept in mind while tracing histories of performative traditions?

Objective Questions

1. State Whether True or False:

- a) All Indian theatrical traditions stem from the Sanskrit tradition.
- b) There can be a single correct reading of historical events based on facts.
- c) Politics and literature have no intersecting ground with each other.
- d) There is a clear distinction between theatrical traditions which can be considered a part of our 'culture' and those that have a popular appeal.
- e) Directors and actors play an active part in moulding and reinventing theatrical traditions.

Answers:

- a) False
- b) False
- c) False
- d) False
- e) True

2. Match the following:

a) Evolution of theatre	ancient tradition
b) <i>Ghashi Ram Kotwal</i>	normative
c) Theatrical traditions	reinterpretation of history
d) Sanskrit Theatre	singing and dancing
e) High culture	written and oral

Answers:

a)Evolution of theatre	singing and dancing
b)Ghashi Ram Kotwal	reinterpretation of history
c)Theatrical traditions	written and oral
d)Sanskrit Theatre	ancient tradition
e)High culture	normative

3. Choose the correct answer:

i) Literary periods are: a) exclusive; b)flow into each other; c) cannot be used for classification; d)are named after kings and queens.

ii)Oral traditions: a)can never be lost; b)can be traced very easily; c)can have a complex and tentative history; d)should not be regarded as part of culture at all.

iii)Written texts: a)are inadequate to trace histories of performative traditions; b)are the only reliable means of tracing performative traditions; c)cannot have flexible interpretations; d)are the only true theatrical traditions.

iv)Sanskrit and medieval folk traditions of theatre: a)are dated and cannot be used in present times; b)can be reinvented; c)have a fixed meaning; d)cannot be changed by actors and directors.

Answers:

i) b

ii) c

iii) a

iv) b

Glossary

Constructs: words brought together to make meaning and not having a naturally occurring meaning.

Conceptual framework: a structure of ideas.

Homogenize: assumption that all people or things being discussed are of the same kind.

Narrativization: only for telling stories; fictive.

Hierarchization: make a ranking system according to status or authority.

Normative: a standard or norm.

Contestation: process of disputing or arguing.

Impersonation: pretend to be another (person or object) for entertainment.

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