

Discussion with experts on Gujarati Theatre

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Excerpts from additional discussion on Gujarati Theatre

Participants: Prabodh Joshi, Tarak Mehta and Ashok Ranade

Ashok Ranade: Over the years you have changed the character of your work. Are you satisfied with what you are doing now?

Tarak Mehta: Satisfied as a writer! My first love was writing. Then actor and director. I took it up as a medium. Over the years I developed it. Then came a phase when I thought that I am becoming stagnant. Partly because theatre was commercialised, it was getting more and more difficult. Commercial because cost of production went on increasing and people were sort of discouraged from experimenting. I continued as a writer, retired as a director-actor for the simple reason that it demanded a lot of physical energy also. I thought that my writing was suffering. As a writer I feel I am satisfied though not very!

Ashok Ranade: If you are writing for theatre the quality of the word which you write is different. The quality of the word which you write now in journalism is different. Do you feel that this change has been a come down for you or this is also equally legitimate?

Tarak Mehta: I would not actually compare them. Writing for theatre is almost like sculpture. You can't afford to miss a single word you have to carve from! If you are writing a story you may write ten to fifteen pages. You can go on adding, like a painter. In sculpture if you add one extra stroke the whole sculpture is lost. In theatre every word is precious that way. Whatever work I am doing now is not theatre but for that concerned medium I am happy. When I write a play I am a different writer.

Ashok Ranade: You have mentioned Shaw and Wilde, the quality of humour which they write and you write as well as quality of perception of their audiences and your audiences... Would you like to comment?

Tarak Mehta: The level of their audiences allowed Shaw and Wilde the use of subtlety. For two sentences of theirs our audiences need ten. Otherwise you have to make it very loud in performances as well as writing. Instead of suggestion you need here underlining! Punches, emphasis ... You have to make it 'comic' as they say in Gujarati.

Prabodhbhai, I want to ask you a straight question. How would you identify Gujarati theatre?

Prabodh Joshi: I would identify as the performed theatre. I must say one thing. Let us accept the fact that beyond Bombay there is no Gujarati theatre.

Ashok Ranade: Would you like to comment a little on 'Parsi-Gujarati theatre'?... The quality and everything it had...

Prabodh Joshi: Gujarati theatre itself started, it is said, in 1852. The Parsi-Gujarati theatre that came into being in the 19th century was a sheer xerox copy of the Elizabethan theatre. You see two plots running simultaneously, music and comedy. Music because of different reasons. So in the beginning, Gujarati theatre done by Parsis - they brought in all the English plays adapted into Urdu and transformed into Gujarati. There was a time in Parsi Theatre, it is said, Khatau Alfred was running 39 companies at a time! So they got the form from Elizabethan theatre which was picked up by the total theatre. All major pioneers were Parsis and this continued till Adi Marzban. Then we see a different approach. Later on, I.N.T. had a Parsi wing, Kala kendra too had a Parsi wing. You have to have some 2 or 3 Parsis and then you call it Parsi play but see Rusi Karanjia's group in Surat, which is still surviving, doing the typical Parsi plays. Dr Jehangir Wadia was the pioneer of the Parsi plays, *Hamlet No Omelet* and such plays. They were absolutely crude. To be very frank Adi Marzban should be given credit for one thing. Gujarati Theatre learnt pace, tempo and perfection. He did *An Inspector Calls* as *Ghungatpat*. He did 3 acts in close-up, mid-shot and long-shot.

Tarak Mehta: Nature of performance... Adi Marzban inherited the humour of Parsi generations, Adi modernised it in every aspect. Comedians before his days used to do lot of shouting and all that as in the Desi Natak Samaj. Adi was the person who made it natural. He brought in timing and pacing.

Ashok Ranade: Did this humour influence the sense of humour you have?

Tarak Mehta: Yes, I learnt at his feet, no doubt about it. To state a basic fact. Actors from Ahmedabad etc. believed that drama is to be recited but if you mug up the lines then you lose your spontaneity, naturalness. We believed in adlibs. Adi Marzban used to say: "First you know your lines, otherwise there is no need for you to come to the rehearsal!" Then I started learning how you can play with words. In the beginning while adlibbing you can't control your voice. Either you will 'shout' it out or you will drop the voice and you are not audible. When you have mugged up your lines, you can ride on your lines like a rider on a horse. This I learnt from Adi and practically everybody on modern stage from Pravin Joshi to Kanti Madia and Chandravadan Bhatt.

Ashok Ranade: Would you feel that inspiration of this theatric reform lay outside India or did it come from India?

Tarak Mehta: As far as Adi was concerned it came from Broadway.

Prabodh Joshi: I don't agree with you. You see he was a very voracious reader and an observer. He had a very good sense of blending things. Inspiration of theatre also came from the West but to put it differently.

Ashok Ranade: One of the modern trends in bringing about modernity to Indian theatre has been to go back to our own folk traditions. It seems you have never tried it.

Tarak Mehta: This goes on but has never worked.

Ashok Ranade: What is your opinion about it?

Tarak Mehta: Traditional theatre such as Marathi tamasha, Bengali jatra continued. But not so the bhavai, partly because of the Gujarati audience which I will say is more interested in eating batata-wada-s in the interval! At the same time the mentality of the Gujaratis is such that they do not have any pride. They never say, "We must encourage our folk form." If there is no entertainment they call it rubbish. They have no interest in their history. In Bengal or Maharashtra they have pride in their theatre.

Prabodh Joshi: Problem has boiled down to the neo-rich people among the Gujarati theatre audience. Going back I may be wrong but before the recorded theatre as we know, there are two legends - *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* transformed and carried on by folk arts, folk singers-players. Today if you see in Hindi film - Amitabh would be hitting ten persons at a time! We would not like it, true, but village audiences approve

of them because they have heard that Krishna using his sudarshan can kill 100 persons or Arjun can do this! These basic old traditions are within the people ... inherent ... If the folk is properly placed then it might click. For example, *Mena Gurjari* ... it is not a play at all according to me. It is only a small garba. But adding Pransukh Nayak's character describing bhavai and all these forms.. then Dinaben.

Tarak Mehta: But this was not revived! That is what I am trying to say!
