

# **Simha = Lion + Avalokana = Looking Back**

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The literal meaning of the word *simhavalokana* would not have been too flattering! But the tradition has it that lion continues to move forward while looking back! This is what makes it an apt application while writing about the Theatre Development Centre today. The Centre completes the first functional phase on March 31, 1989 to begin a new two-year run with a generous support of the Ford Foundation (India).

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the project meant making new beginnings in matters of both strategy and details. For example, researches in performing arts have often suffered from a tendency to rely on and look for verbalization and written evidence. It also becomes weak because it adopts a literature-bound approach. An important decision was therefore taken to give to the entire activity a marked performance-orientation. Almost as a corollary the focus is being kept on the modern, if not the strictly contemporary theatre. Of equal importance is the strategy employed to study, examine and document performances by going backwards from 1980 to 1950s and not to begin from the hoary past! Perhaps one more (rather administrative) facet of the overall performance-orientation has been the recruitment of a staff which maintains strong connections with the performing tradition! In sum, the unwritten motto has been to embark on researches that lead to performance and on performances that enlighten research. Most of the activities of the Theatre Development Centre therefore do not appear 'bookish'. They evince more familiarity with footlights than with the proverbial midnight oil!

Documentation, a major concern in the project, eschews exclusive reliance on the printed/written word. Data is therefore collected through varied modalities e.g. audio, printed, photographic and the like. Further it is grouped under four headings: personalities, institutions, productions and themes. Some special series are instituted to allow a better organization of the data. For example persons whose contribution spans over many areas of theatre are generally covered in a series called 'My Life in Theatre'. In another series actors are video-recorded through renderings of soliloquies. This served two purposes. Firstly, solo performances allowed a glimpse of the actor's

individual talent. Secondly it meant documenting a theatre-practice fast-losing its dramatic clientele, as also preserving varied speech-patterns. Another well-mourned weakness of documentation-activities is the lack of attention paid to technical processes such as make-up, light, set and costume design. In an effort to remedy the situation makeup procedures, making of '*pugrees*' (a special type of headgear prevailing in Maharashtra) have been video-recorded under a series entitled Documentation of Technical Processes. With a similar interest models of set-designs for ten landmark productions in Marathi drama are being prepared. The models are to be supported by drawings, interviews etc. Playwrights, who lay the foundation of all dramatic activity, also find their due place in the scheme. They have been invited to record their own (and favourite) play in their own voice with prefatory remarks. In fact, in a large number of cases playwrights have been interviewed, in respect of the selected play and about their views on other matters pertaining to theatre.

Playwrights were brought into picture in some other ways too. Knowing that all good play-scripts do not get published (and vice versa!) unpublished scripts are being collected. Synopses of some of them are published in *Facts & News* with information as to their stageability. A scheme of commissioning translations was also instituted in response to the generally felt need of good scripts. The idea was to add one new script in one of the Indian languages. The venture did not succeed as expected, though three translations were completed and one was audio-produced. Dahake's translation of *Marat Sade* was recorded with suitable voices and copies of the audio-production were donated to six major theatre institutes. It is felt that all activities related to writing of plays will have to reach the phase of performance if they have to make significant contribution. It is not without reason that theatre-lovers have long since advocated play-readings, visual enactments and the like.

If performance is the culmination of dramatic experience as a totality, dissemination is the aim of collecting and archiving information or knowledge. *Facts & News*, periodically brought out by the Theatre Development Centre, appears to have answered a real need in this regard. It adheres to a factual coverage of productions, institutions and personalities. The publication attempts to include rare and relevant photographic/visual material. It does not take sides and relies on informants for the correctness of the information. In fact, apart from (slightly polemical) editorials, the numbers are non-committal! The periodical makes special efforts to publish information on back-stage workers. Additionally the function of providing an 'English' window on to the dramatic activities of the regional languages is also carried out. The service provided by the *Facts & News* may appear very useful in the light of the oft-airied

complaint that well-documented information on the dramatic activity in Indian regional languages is very scarce. However the coverage is confined to Marathi, Gujarati, Hindi and English performing traditions prevailing in the Western zone. With the present resources it is difficult to extend the activities further. It must be noted that the need to reach the moffusil areas and theatre-workers chiefly acquainted with Marathi is well-appreciated and one major number of *Facts & News* would soon be brought out in Marathi.

A feature which characterizes the information gathered (either received or collected) is its systematization. The standard library procedures are rigorously followed. Cross-referencing of information on personalities, productions and institutions is encouraged, so also a linking-up between the multiple modes of storing information, viz audio, video, printed and photographic. Depth-classification and computerisation are still on the horizon but a fair amount of method is evident. Formats evolved to collect information enable researchers to open initial files which are to be continuously updated. The systematic approach has created a favourable impact on artists and theatre-aficionados. A number of them have come forward on their own to donate archival material. For example Shahir Sable, Mrs Rangacharya, Smt Vijaya Mehta, Smt Silla Marzban, Suresh Khare, Shridhar Kshirsagar, Pratap Sharma and others have enriched the Theatre Development Centre archives. Many others have made promises to take a keener interest in strengthening the activity.

The Theatre Development Centre came out strongly in favour of short-term intensive workshops which once again highlighted the urge to attend to the usually neglected technical aspect. The five aspects explored in the workshops afforded a good opportunity to participants to use technical facilities otherwise not available easily. Carrying forward the philosophy of performance-orientation was natural and hence follow-up workshops were arranged. In the follow-ups, selected trainees from the workshops were brought together to produce two one act plays (in Hindi and Marathi) and a full-length play in Marathi, specially adapted for the project by Shri P. L. Deshpande, the well-known playwright and humourist in Marathi. All the productions have been too serious to be commercially viable and yet the full-length play is already 25 shows old!

The first phase has taught us many things! Eternal alertness, attention to details, necessity of adopting a cultural (as opposed to the aesthetic) perspective, cautious approach to publicity and appreciation of the real evanescence of performance as a phenomenon! All and such other truths have newly dawned on us. These will naturally influence the future course of action. Documentation of fuller performances,

rigorous working towards a comprehensive database, reaching the people in the interior, training with an accent on performance, encouraging writers on the technical aspect of theatre... are some of the lines that might open up in the next phase. It is hoped that performers, researchers and theatre-lovers will continue and improve on their co-operation!

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