

# Political Theatre: Performance

Ashok Da Ranade

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Political is that, which is related to politics. Politics is the branch of knowledge or action dealing with politicians, political actions/affairs of the government of a State. This common-sense understanding suggests that theatre described as political, would refer to politics as its theme.

Reference works on theatre do not seem to pay special attention to the term. It is obvious that mere thematic importance cannot create lexical space for a theatric expression. A terminological entry necessarily indicates conceptual importance. Does this mean that as a concept political theatre is not significant?

Of late, the term has in fact gained some currency. What could be the reason?

One of the reasons is obvious. It seems that the state, the government and the various organs of the latter have enveloped human life on account of the reigning philosophies, popular isms and schools of thought. Whether due to liberal outlook and programmes of social welfare, or because of benevolent activities of dictatorial rulers, there is hardly any area of life which has retained its private or personal character. Even though it is true that the legacy of 1984 has been rejected, it is equally true that human life has become more governed than it was ever before! Consequently, there has been a considerable loss of voluntary action on the part of individuals. It is on this background that actions or inactions of the State, successes or failures of the governmental measures, deeds or misdeeds of politicians, controls exercised by political parties and all such features acquire their political hue. When these come on the centre-stage the resulting theatre would be described as 'political'.

However even if the thematic content and its specially-comprehensive quality in the modern context is accepted, the expression would have to acquire some distinctive performing qualities if it is to pass muster as theatre. For example, the State, the government, different political parties and their ideologies would have to 'speak' to the spectators through characters. Characters would have to be made alive by actors. The actors in their turn would need to be placed in a cohesive pattern by the director.

And the director would need a script which allows him interpretation and comment through performance. Thus stated, it becomes difficult to differentiate political theatre from a theatre which is not so. In other words, performance seems to level out thematic angularities and subject-oriented distinctions. Irrespective of the theme or the subject, performance searches for content.

To ensure performing validity, themes are processed by the directorial vision and actors' capability to interpret as well execute. In many ways non-verbal aspects of the theatric expression also contribute to the emerging dramatic expression. At this level themes begin enjoying a sort of equality.

However, there is another contention put forward to afford a special status to political theatre, especially in the contemporary context. It is argued that theatre becomes political because ideas are accorded a place of importance. In addition, ideas are selected for their relevance to the society and hence politics, understood in the larger sense is considered more relevant. Ideas as forces create a dialectic of their own and that constitutes the dramatic core in political theatre. Though it is necessary to have agents to actualise the ideas, it may be advisable to keep the performing machinery at a low pitch in this kind of political theatre. For example, a text produced by a playwright is to be eliminated. The director is to become a recorder as well as a mouthpiece of ideas. Characters are to be nameless human beings functioning as interchangeable units. They are to function as masks to present the drift of the content by replacing the actor. Finally, the spectators have to reject the concept of drama, as enjoying a special artistic status. The spectators are to treat presentations as a part of reality alienated from art. (Spectators are in fact, part of the entire presentation and therefore there are really speaking no spectators!) Apparently, the format thus visualised comes nearest to what is known as street theatre.

And yet one shortcoming of street theatre, as it is obtained today, is the lack of statement of ideas. Ideas are illustrated and presented in an intense fashion, though in the process they lose sophisticated impact. The nuances are lost.

The paradox of political theatre in the present state of political and dramatic awareness in our society is obvious. Political theatre to succeed as theatre, needs a convincing performance. On the other hand, the content of this kind of theatre needs discussions bordering on discourses to present the complex ideas it deals with. It is symptomatic that the shrewdest statement of political doctrines in the contemporary theatre is accompanied by violence, torture, assassination and such other eye-catching,

melodramatic overt actions. Conversely, well-modulated dramatic presentation of political ideas seems less political than intended.

Perhaps it needs to be remembered that the nature of the concept underwent a total transformation after Independence. Before Independence and during the days of British Rule, political consciousness was equated with the feeling of Nationalism. It was easy to have a politically oriented theatre by depicting a generalised anti-British feeling, either directly or through allegory, common analogy, satire etc. It is symptomatic that even during the British period the banning of theatric activity on purely political grounds was rare. For example, *Neeldarpan* (1860) was banned by the British chiefly because it showed a native rebelling against the British authority who was economic exploitation incarnate. The beginning of censorship of theatre in Bengal has been often traced to the Bengali theatric lampooning of the British rulers on cultural grounds. In Maharashtra, the other major region exhibiting political consciousness, the story was not different. Here too it was a broad nationalist expression and not a sophisticated, complex treatment of equally intricate web of political ideas that found expression in theatre. Evidences from Parsi, Gujarati or Hindi theatre traditions are not different. It will be accurate to say that the rise of nationalism is not an adequate reflection of political maturity. It is only after further processing of the nationalist attitude that the political aspect gains in stature. After the Independence, Nationalism was naturally relegated to the background. The ground has been thus prepared for a battle of subtler forces displayed by political understanding of the people. To concretize the understanding in theatric terms however, requires a theatre-culture armed with a powerful prose capable of expressing nuances, acting style responsive to speech subtleties, directorial vision interested in remaining at the background to project ideas, and finally an audience interested in comprehending ideas as forces. Till this phase is reached political theatre in India is bound to be a curious mixture of intellectual debates interspersed with obvious, melodramatic and 'final' actions consisting of physicalities.

*Mudra Rakshas* and *Julius Caesar!* can these be described as political plays? Is there a distinction to be made between diplomatic processes that govern the behaviour of State and the political affairs that denote Government? Can it be said that political affairs are related to diplomatic processes as lower criticism is to higher criticism? The former is necessary but is clearly a preparation for the latter.