

# Language-base and Valid Theatre

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Mr. C. C. Mehta, a veteran theatre-person of an enviable versatility appears in the Personality section of the present issue. He is 'heard' to take two fundamental and firm positions in a wide-ranging discussion of matters theatric in essence. Mehta avers that a vital (as opposed to imitative) theatre cannot exist in the absence of a well-formulated linguistic-literary base as well as a pedagogically motivated university. Expectably Marathi, Gujarati and Bengali traditions get his approving nod. With equal forcefulness he dismisses the possibility of theatre in Hindi because the language, as he puts it, is 'hotch-potch'! I would like to comment briefly on the rationale governing the relationship between language-base and valid theatre.

It must be admitted that for a country enjoying so perceivable a multiplicity of languages, India cannot claim to have a matching plurality of dramatic traditions (drama being equated today with the proscenium stage-play). The dramatic traditions of Indian languages (known as Prakrit) do not share development in equal measure even though most of them began their respective exciting careers at about the same period. This is so mainly because dynamics of dramatic development *prima facie* differs from that of linguistic/ literary development.

In my opinion the lesser degree of the linguistic/ literary development could only be *one* of the factors responsible for a weaker dramatic emergence. The importance of this factor can hardly be overlooked, yet some clarifications are in order.

Firstly, one should not mistake theatre for drama as the former is a wider concept inclusive of the latter. Further, drama in its turn is distinct and wider than a play, the latter being our heritage traceable to the British (and perhaps an early Portuguese) influence. India had theatre and drama over a period of centuries but it had to wait till the recent past to get a stage-play. Theatre and drama, in other words, are conditions necessary but not adequate for emergence of a 'play' (on stage). The genius of a people may opt for the play-format only after some more preconditions are fulfilled.

For example, there is a need for a well-developed secular prose as distinct from verse (employed as a mode of literary expression). The reason is not far to seek. Dialogue (which obviously is different from conversation between two individuals) cannot proceed unless it has a prose-mode available to it. Dialogue is a very basic

linguistic formulation employed to create, concretize and enhance possibilities of conflict, an essential ingredient of the play-sensibility. Verse, or better still a song, can on the other hand, clinch the issue, announce a conclusion or proclaim a decision, but it can hardly carry forward or depict a process of arriving at a decision. It is said, 'it is not enough that justice is done, it must also be seen to have been done!' Similarly, a dramatic moment is not realized unless it is also seen being realized! Consequently, the play-phase needs a developed prose. It is symptomatic that the Indian traditional Literary terminology defined prose invariably in terms of verse! Indian genius found verse and versification so agreeable that it did not care to develop prose till the British-imparted education threw up a class of people enthused with a new linguistic and literary awareness.

A question would be asked, "Are there identifiable clues to conclude that a developed prose has arrived on the scene?"

One important indication, not usually recognized is the discovery and vogue of punctuation marks. It is symptomatic that articles dwelling on the history, nature and usage of punctuation marks (*viramchinha* as they were called) used to appear in the vernacular press repeatedly during the nineteenth century. Coming under the sway of the new literates or the British Indologists, Marathi, Urdu, Persian and other languages were processed in order to facilitate introduction of punctuation marks. They were intended to make intelligible and meaningful the running prose which was appearing in profusion. Printing was another phenomenon related directly to development of prose, but that is another story.

Another important clue is offered by evolution of forms dependent on exploration of the prose mode. Short story, novel, essay etc. would easily come to mind. These forms prospered in Indian regions where the British-inspired educational influence was noticeable, and this can hardly be ascribed to coincidence. When a mode is used by a variety of forms its possibilities are extended to accommodate a comprehensive range of emotions and ideas. Vocabulary, imagery, idiomatic usages also acquire a richness and plentitude. Language thus becomes a pliable instrument inclined to invite and encourage a flexible use. Prose proves amenable (at least outwardly) in view of the demands made by characterization as understood in the play-phase. Language acquires a newly won alluring, seductive and almost contagious force. The fact is uniformly reflected in the nascent play-traditions of different Indian regions. The energy and enthusiasm of the prose-writers in the newspapers, periodicals and books etc. found a strong echo in works of the new playwrights (many of whom were later charged for their uncontrolled verbosity)!

Yet another clue is the evolution of reference-works such as dictionaries, grammars or manuals etc. It helps to recognize that dictionaries come into existence when people in large numbers want to use words and language purposefully and discriminately. Dictionaries serve as indicators of the user's sensitivity to nuances

characterizing words in developed literary traditions. (Dictionary-users are of course less than the total number of people using the concerned language. However, this itself is a cultural barometer!) Conscious exploration of language in prose mode is the first use dictionaries are normally put to. Dictionaries of rhyming words, quotations etc. when produced, suggest increasing number and variety of needs fulfilled by lexicographic activity in a particular society.

Grammatical works are crystallized when language-users cease to be a homogeneous entity. Nature of the language can no longer be taken for granted because people outside the main stream begin to join the users (in fact, as a culmination of a process of larger and cultural stratification). Grammars are also reminders of the linguistic flux existing in a particular society at a particular point of time. They are an indirect or an unconscious cultural admission of the confusion created by the existing linguistic structure leading to communicational difficulties. Finally, both grammars and dictionaries reflect the societal desire to have a normative model of language-behaviour. The occurrence of such works in India is once again directly related to the spread of British education. Reference works feed mostly on prose and cater to the users of prose. (This may in fact appear as a truism!) Logical connections between prose and play format in theatre is well-established through the tools employed to systematize or order a language, and reference works as a category play an admirable role.

The language-literature base which successfully allowed emergence of prose in the nineteenth century was to develop into a straight-jacket during the early decades of the twentieth century. Deliberate and vigorous efforts were to be made to make the prose more colloquial and less 'bookish'. However, the services rendered in the early period constituted an essential phase. One should be grateful to the early prose-writers!

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