

Interview of Nanasaheb Shirgopikar

Ashok Da Ranade

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Excerpts from the video interview

Ranade: 'Anand Sangeet Mandali' is known to Maharashtra as a company of child-actors. You inherited the mantle worn by the company... what are the major influences on you?

My father established this institute in 1923 when I was three years old... I gathered impressions and influences from then onwards.

Ranade: Why did your father take to this profession?

He used to play harmonium in *Kolhapurkar Natak Mandali*. He thought that plays in the mode of 'staged' mela-s, would find favour with the public. Thus the idea of staging children's performances came to the fore... he therefore gathered together children of farmers in our village, Kavthe-Udand, near the well-known place of pilgrimage - Narsobachi Wadi. This was in 1923. He used to write his own scripts... knew drawing well and so painted the curtains himself. He had borrowed an amount of Rs 200 from a farmer, produced *Bal Krida* and *Raas Krida*, two plays on Krishna's life. Then took a tour to Pune via Kurundwad, Kolhapur. By 1927 he had produced *Simwhacha Chhava* by Sadashiv Anant Shukla. This play earned a name.

Ranade: Which was the first play you saw?

I have a faint memory of some scenes from *Shri Krishna Daan* by Phatak Shastri.

Ranade: Did your father face any difficulty because he ran a children's theatre?

He had a special motive behind the venture. He never allowed 'bright boys', those doing well in the school, to join the company. He concentrated on vagabonds!... The company was an ashram. The children would be 'reformed' soon in it. He also

managed to give them general education. He used to train them according to their aptitudes , taking care that it had some connection with theatre activity... for example he would train them as harmonium-players, wiremen, motor drivers, tailors and even as cooks. Once their voices ' broke' very few children could continue in theatre... So far nearly two hundred boys have been well-established on account of vocational training that my father gave them.

Ranade: Any actor who came out of your father's schooling?

I remember one Dhumale... but my father always insisted that one should not depend on theatre for livelihood.

Ranade: By 1931 other dramatic companies were on the decline. Did your children's theatre suffer the same fate?

Not to a great extent. Because my father knew the pulse of the audience. He always gave something new to them... trick scenes! e.g. Lord Ganpati using his trunk would offer a modak! (the well known sweets of Maharashtra). In *Shri Krishna Daan* the mere dropping of tulusi-leaf would weigh more than bricks of gold!

Ranade: What were the other companies doing trick scenes at that time?

Some Gujarati companies showed collapse of a bridge, transformation of an orchard into a sky or of the sky into heaven... but all these were really transfer-scenes. They were not 'miracles'... Though I liked drama from my childhood, my father discouraged us from joining theatre. We did plays with no female roles e.g. *Ashwa Haran* with only Ram Laxman, Lav and Kush. During the vacations however he showed us around the big cities like Bombay, Nagpur... I was good in my studies... never failed at least! He insisted on my completing graduation. That was regarded as a standard in those days.

Ranade: How was yow father different in management of the company?

As I said the company maintained an ashram-atmosphere. Everybody was regarded as an equal. All had their food together... He always preferred to recruit in two-s! Two brothers or two relations, so that they would help each other, look after each other. The parents were sure that their wards would be looked after well.

Ranade: What about remuneration?

10 to 15 rupees including clothes and food etc. The boys would be paid two rupees per month as pocket money. The rest of the amount would be sent to their

parents. I remember an interesting device used by my father. He had wooden chests made to store luggage, each with two compartments, one given to one boy. I asked him 'Why this way of allocating?' He used to say, 'that brings the boys together, automatically. Even during travel it is convenient for two to lift one package' He had an eye for details. He had a colour coding system. The electrician's material in a box of particular colour etc... The coding was department wise. This made identification easy... The plays were staged in theatres but from 1930 onwards, and especially after 1935 it became difficult to get theatres. So we had our own tent with an accommodation of about one thousand.

Ranade: What happened to the children's voices?

Children's voices have a longer reach than adult voices because of the high frequencies.

Ranade: In what patti (pitch) did the children sing?

Usually Black-5... one pedal harmonium and later one violin was included.

Ranade: Having once decided to take up theatre why did you not pursue children's theatre?

By that time the company had already been closed down.

Ranade: Why?

Audiences generally showed a preference for adult actors. Secondly, child-actors were banned from performing at nights - this must have been around 1940... So I decided to take up *Gokulcha Chor*, our well known children's play to be presented by adult actors.

Ranade: How would you define a trick-scene now?

Something which gives an experience of a miracle. Mere use of a clever device is never accepted as a trick scene. That is why a house-collapse is not a trick scene while a revolving sudarshan chakra is.

Ranade: Suppose there is an earthquake and a Krishna idol remains intact, would that be a trick scene?

No, not unless the Krishna idol does something miraculous, not possible for the common man. If a child in the earthquake scene is saved from a crushing stone by the idol's hands... then it becomes a trick scene.

Ranade: What was your model for doing the trick scene?

My father... I do not know who his model was.

Ranade: Please take an example of one of your trick scenes and explain its evolution.

Chiefly the branch of science involved is that of physics e.g. the principle of gravity is utilised very often.

One of my productions, *Bhav Tochi Dev*, had a scene in which leaves were hurled against a wall to form a patravali (a plate made of dry leaves). We had the patravali fixed already on the wall though covered with a curtain easily displaceable. Our eye is so constructed that anything flashed in front of the eye in 1/10th of a second is not seen at all.

In another scene the gravitational force was exploited. A garland of flowers alights from above around Dnyaneshwar's neck! Very often it used to get entangled in Dnyaneshwar's hair. We thought of pulling it from beneath but it had to come from the skies. Therefore it required a weight. So we made a garland with flowers and iron nuts strung alternatively... It used to slide down alright. I do not rely on electrical gadgets as power breakdown may occur at any time... I relied on manual operations.

Ranade: As a science graduate do you feel that you are specially equipped to handle trick scenes? How does a trick scene develop?

By trying out various ideas in various ways e.g. the elephant's trunk naturally needed a spring in operation. However a spring could not give the proper roundness to the trunk. So I used metal strips which however made it angular ... in addition the strips were heavy and could not be lifted easily. Finally I settled on aluminium.

Ranade: You refer to 'black art' apart from application of scientific principles. Would you explain?

'Black Art' is an important feature of magic. Anything black placed in front of black is not seen. This in short is the principle... invisibility at a distance of about twenty feet.

Ranade: Where have you used the 'black art'?

Gokulcha Chor... Krishna used to stand in front of a black curtain. Another black curtain will be rolled down and Krishna would disappear without the spectator

becoming aware of the movement of second black curtain... I would talk a little more about the development of a scene. In *Geeta Gati Dnyaneshwar*, Dnyaneshwar takes samadhi. Muktai comes to see him. In great grief she cries and implores Dnyaneshwar, 'please give me darshan!' The samadhi then becomes transparent and Dnyaneshwar is seen. Muktai then wants to garland him. Nivrutti says, 'place the garland on the samadhi and it will reach Dnyaneshwar'. She does so and the garland is seen around Dnyaneshwar's neck. In another scene Muktai says, 'Why have you shut your eyes? Open them and look at the world. Your glance would turn the trees into gold.' Dnyaneshwar opens his eyes and the trees turn golden. This too applied the 'black art'. The tree covers were removed and they appear golden. In the samadhi-scene Vitthal-Rakhumai, the deities themselves, come up gradually from behind the samadhi to bless Dnyaneshwar. Everybody bows down and Vitthal-Rakhumai raise their hands to bless... in one of our other plays titled *Sant Namdeo* household items such as pagdi, coat, tanpura and chiplya start sounding on their own to express their disapproval of Namdeo.

Ranade: What is the relationship between the text and trick scenes?

The selected story determines if the story must have an element of miracle. e.g. in *Sant Namdeo* the reference to the temple which executes an about-turn... because Namdeo expresses the wish. However he is not satisfied. He says, 'Where is God and then the pindi of Lord Shankara becomes transparent and in it is seen Lord Shankara himself! Later on Namdeo also invites the God to accompany him. This is brought about by the damaru sounding automatically... here the third act ends.

Ranade: You are well acquainted with the tradition of music-plays in Maharashtra. What do you regard important in your plays?

Both music and trick scene are part of the play. Nobody would come to see a bare trick scene. A trick scene alone would be like a magic show.

Ranade: Have you learnt magic?

As a hobby in childhood we had a teacher – Mr. Krishna.

Ranade: Did you ever feel like doing magic shows?

No.

Ranade: Why?

Because I am stage-struck. I am not after trick-scenes... I am after drama. My plays run as plays, not because they have trick scenes... in *Bhav Tochi Dev* there is a scene where a milk-maid's costume is changed 9 times, one change in about 30 seconds! In reality this scene was introduced after staging the play for nearly seventy performances! So the high-lighted trick scene of quick changes cannot be taken to be the attraction of the play.

Ranade: Has cinema technique influenced you?

No.

Shelke: Something more about your taking to the adult theatre...

In addition to the reason stated earlier, mythological plays were on the wane. Social plays and social problems were preferred. Such problems could hardly be articulated in children's theatre.

Shelke: What was your point in not doing a social play?

Every company has its own trend and also its own audience.

Datar: You had attempted Ekhadyache Nashib, a social play.

I had also staged *Sharada* which falls between social and mythological plays... Our trend was of mythology and trick scenes, which social plays could not accommodate. My experience has been that *Ekhadyache Nashib* which is my favourite, received poor response when billed with *Gokulcha Chor* and *Zanshichi Rani*... however *Sonyachi Dwarka*, one of my popular plays, did not have many trick scenes.

Shelke: Any distinction between rural and urban spectators?

I began producing plays on the literature of saints from 1964... people suppose that the rural spectator is a true believer (bhavik), but my experience tells me otherwise. *Bhav Tochi Dev* and such other plays ran well in cities. I feel that plays based on the literature of saints are for intellectuals.

Shelke: You made a distinction between samstha (institution) and a company doing theatre... any reasons?

In the early days there were only companies with about 60 to 70 people dining together every evening, such an institute is a company. These companies toured all

over. They performed very rarely at the places they were established in... Our company, based in Kolhapur used to touch the base, once in two to three years... A company would camp in one place at least for a month, giving three performances a week – on Mondays, Wednesdays and Saturdays... the rest of the time was for rehearsals and resting... These companies never advertised the names of the actors... all publicity was oral publicity... We did have handbills and posters on a cart... with a band to accompany them.

Shelke: To run a company would require detailed study of all departments...

Yes, 'stage-department' would mean knowledge of state-dimensions as also of the dimensions of transport-vehicles to carry the stage-items even the wood to be used for making them.

Shelke: You said that the performance-season is linked with rice cultivation.

I have studied Maharashtra, and to some extent India. I have found that people in rice-cultivating areas love drama... Konkan, Bengal, Tamil Nadu etc. I say jokingly that Bombay loves theatre because Bombay is in Konkan. In rice-areas it rains for four to five months. One cannot move out at all in the rainy season. The craving for art, smothered for four to five months has to be satisfied. Drama is the only form to do so... in such places festival-drama flourishes.

Shelke: You had made a distinction between *Darshani Jatra* and *Vyapari Jatra*...

In the former people gathered to take darshan and go back. e.g. *Aashadhi Ekadashi Yatra* in Pandharpur. On the other hand the fair on *Kartiki Ekadashi* is for trading and continues for 15 days... In early period the fair was for trading horses. The traders... were monied people... After this fair we used to camp there for nearly two weeks, very gainfully. In any place you cannot earn more for a performance on a market day, but on the next day, yes. On a market day you get a spectator who is less wealthy... The local spectator in sacred places is less of a believer. All their life revolves around God but no trace of belief in it. Pandharpur loves tamasha but not theatre... there were some theatres in Pandharpur but we used to perform in pendals, in schools anywhere.

Shelke: Tents?

But first you must know why tents. The talkies arrived in 1930. We ran the drama companies somehow till 1935. All theatres began screening films. We went to the

proprietors 'to borrow' theatre from them... for four to five performances. They would charge for 'not screening' and they would also charge for rentals! Under the circumstances how to run a play? Thus came the vogue of the tent. The tent would be pitched in a school ground... further one would perform always facing the east.

Shelke: Why?

Because in Maharashtra the breeze blows west-east in the evening and voice reaches well. In a tent the audience would be sitting on the ground. An audience of one thousand would hear properly without a microphone. Secondly in summer, the wind is strong in the evening causing great difficulties in a tent. The solution is to have slopes on two sides of the tent. The wind blows over. All this I studied. Read books on that. The wind should slide over, it should not come in. We used to close all openings with tarpaulin... The slope would be at the back of the stage and downwards to the grounds.

Shelke: What about the lighting?

We had a small generator providing adequate power for the stage, elsewhere petromax.

Datar: Was the play performed in 'general' lighting or with spots etc.?

Spots were not in vogue.

Datar: You said that trick scenes should be performed in general lighting. Why?

So that there should not be any scope for deception. How can trick scenes be impressive otherwise? To have trick scenes in dim lights is to deceive. Trick scenes in my plays are in the open (i.e. in general lighting).

... In fact I do not like to play with darkness and light as such. A performance is disturbed by successive use of darkness and light ... by introducing darkness you break the continuity ... to 'light' an entry of a character and to introduce darkness at its exit is unnecessary. In fact even at change of curtains, don't introduce darkness. Curtains connote effectiveness in theatre. Let the people see how the curtains go up and how they roll down. There is a great fun in this ... you may dim the lights to suggest a nighttime but otherwise don't play with lights and darkneses ... In my play on Namdeo there was a scene in which Namdeo tells his servants to extinguish all lights. Here the script demanded darkness, and hence it was justified ... I had seen a play in which lights came and went at least 80-90 times! I asked the producer, he said 'the play doesn't run,

what should I do?' I told him to stop this light-darkness business... You can use such things only for effect. Now we have electricity but in the early days performances were in gas lights. How could we have employed this darkness-light device? And secondly in day to day life too you do not have such light-darkness-switched on and off. Once the sun is up you have light for the whole day.

Shelke: After 1933 you produced *Bhav Tochi Dev* (1960) after a long gap. What were your productions during the period?

We continued performances but in tents.

Shelke: Were you involved in the centenary, celebration?

No. We were far in the interior in a village near Nagpur. People in the rural areas love drama. They cannot come to the cities. So we take theatre to them! ... However today they can afford to come to the cities, we cannot go to the rural areas.

Shelke: You managed an institution in the past and you continue to do the same now - what is the difference? e.g. You have performances based on Dnyaneshwar's ovi-s for school children...

Our children's theatre was not for the children. Only the actors were children... The contemporary children's theatre has adults to act in it and fairy tales etc. to entertain them. Our children's theatre was different ... *Dnyaneshwari* is a grand work. I selected 10 to 15 ovi-s to offer ethical training to children through a performance of about 90 minutes duration. I have dramatised the performance so as to appeal to children.

Shelke: And what about *Parikshepurvichya Saat Raatri*?

That was science-training. In those years there used to be a paper on general science. My programme was based on that. It included some scenes (which can hardly be called trick scenes) but the schools' response was not encouraging.

Datar: Can your plays be described as music plays?

I do not understand the term sangeet natak (music plays) Music is included in plays just as drapery, make-up etc... as complimentary. My plays on devotional literature included music but they were not plays to sing. The music, being complimentary, comes in when the prose stops. Intense grief or happiness can hardly be expressed through prose ... e.g. *Vahato Hi Durvanchi Judi* (written, directed by Bal

Kolhatkar) has music through play-back. It is used well to emphasis the emotion of the scene...

Shelke: Your views on contemporary plays?

If a play has a dramatic element, I will then call it a drama ... even if it is a 'hit and hot' drama! Entertainment achieves everything ... Enthusiasm creates a power ... you may also offer advice but only when you have succeeded in offering an entertainment. People like V. V. Shirwadkar have done so already. Those who lack the capacity to be didactic should at least offer entertainment ... this is my feeling!
