

Patronage and Theatre

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No dramatic presentation today is able to pay for itself. At least, the feat is achieved rarely! Yet the urge to do theatre has proved irrepressible and ways are invariably found out to meet the challenge. Some of the methods to collect the necessary funds are: grants, subscriptions, collaboration, profit-sharing, sponsorship, contracted shows, co-operative financing etc. Very often the concept and term of patronage is evoked. Patronage is also defined as offering support and protection to art, great causes, worthy projects, etc. Thus, understood patronage does not appear to be a new social act. Therefore, it might be interesting to note some models and examine some details pertaining to patronage available to drama-presentations earlier.

Perhaps it would be helpful to desist from the temptation of referring to the ancient period! What was the scene like in the 19th century Maharashtra?

Vishnudas Bhave, the acknowledged source-person for the Marathi music-stage (in 1843), was in the employ of Patwardhans who ruled the erstwhile Sangli state. What kind of patronage did he offer to Bhave?

The contemporary records indicate that:

- Bhave was given 'food and clothes' by the Chief in appreciation of Bhave's craftsmanship revealed through the idols of deities and models of the bazar scene he prepared.
- He was entrusted with the task of producing a dramatic performance on the lines of a production of an itinerant Karnatak-based group which the Chief liked very much.
- To ensure production-facilities to Bhave, the Chief handed over to him some other persons in the Chief's employ offering them also additional incentives. He also sent talent-scouts to Konkan to recruit suitable males for female roles. All the required expenses were met by the Chief.

- When certain Brahmin-s threatened action against Bhave (a brahmin himself) for the 'irreligious act of adorning clothes of an actor', the Chief engaged one Pt. Gopinath Shastri Agashe to defend Bhave and legitimize his dramaturgical activity.
- In 1843 a few shows were successfully produced by Bhave to the Chiefs delight who promised the cast unconditional grants in perpetuity so that they should continue the dramatic work in the State. However, before this could happen the Chief died in 1851 leaving behind a young heir who was looked after by a Dewan appointed by the British. Bhave was thus compelled to accept the arrangement under which Bhave was given paid leave for four years and his colleagues were given a leave of absence for the period to perform at other places to earn their living.

In the next ten years Bhave took out seven performing tours visiting and performing in Bombay, Pune. Nagar as well as other major urban centres. By all accounts the tours were self-managed, i.e., there was no contractor involved. Bhave's professional engagements outside Sangli bring to notice the non-royal aspect of the patronage involved. Some observations would be in order:

1. On most of the occasions Bhave could attract the policy-making elites of the society to support his venture. Judges, doctors, professors, journalists never failed to attend his shows and praise them unreservedly, yet critically. It is obvious that they gave Bhave recognition and fame.
2. Yet the performances were not full houses. The cover offered by gate money was mostly inadequate. The contemporary press was indeed exhorting readers to attend the performance in the name of culture and learning about native customs and manners!
3. Though there are contradictory statements found in the records of the times it can be deduced that Bhave's work was often rewarded with prizes, felicitations etc. There might have been occasions when he received intangible services free in recognition of his expertise. (For example, medical aid, legal advice etc.)
4. In the initial shows he is reported to have collected arati, i.e., voluntary donations from spectators at the end of the performances. (Arati amounts to passing around the hat in this context!) Discontinuance of this practice and

arranging shows by sale of tickets indicates progressive secularizing or at least de-ritualizing of dramatic performances.

Bhave discontinued professional dramaturgy after a brief but illustrious career though he lived a long life. He is reported to have engaged himself in dramaturgy again in 1872 and 1894 at the behests of the chieftons ruling Jamkhindi and a *jagirdar* at Gwalior respectively. But these could hardly be described as major revivals of his art.

It should be obvious that the kind of patronage Bhave enjoyed contained more intangibles than expected. His main patrons, the Sangli chief and the newly educated professional class, operated as motivating force and legitimizing source respectively. Bhave's patrons appear to have received from the performances something more than 'enjoyment' which even the ordinary theatre-goer, who paid for his admission could be assumed to have received. From Bhave's angle he clearly valued the intangibles which made him continue his theatric endeavours in spite of the continuous struggle involved in breaking even! In material aspects Bhave was probably on his own while in the case of non-material aspects he drew upon his patrons considerably.
