

Interview of Prabodh Joshi

Ashok Da Ranade

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Prabodh Joshi

Bio Data	
Name	Prabodh Navinchandra Joshi
Date of Birth	28 November 1926
Birth Place	Ahmedabad
Residential Address	12 Pravati, Room No. 5, Sion (W), Bombay 400022
Profession	Playwright
Education	B.Sc. (Gujarat University)
Languages known	Gujarati, Hindi, Marathi and English
Languages of theatre work	Gujarati, Hindi and English
Awards	Gujarat State Government Awards for screenplay and dialogue for the films, <i>Ramat Ramade Ram, Kalapi, Anand Mangal, Kaashi No Dikro</i> . 3rd State Competition (Gujarat Government) award for playwriting— <i>Pattani Jod</i> (1956). Recipient of several awards for one-act plays.
Expired on	27 April 1991

Excerpts from audio-video interviews:

Dr. Ranade: To date Prabodh bhai has 501 one-act plays, around 350 radio plays, 45 full-length plays to his credit, as also a history of Gujarati Theatre, spanning the period of 125 years. Obviously, he is a major chronicler of Gujarati theatre. Prabodh bhai, welcome to you and the first question is about the beginning of your association with theatre movement.

Prabodh bhai: Basically, I am a student of science and a cricketer. Once we went to Baroda for the Bengal Famine Relief Show. The principal of the Baroda College said, 'You cricketers come and do something and donate something.' We made donations and said, 'We must have theatre because there are all types of plays. A game is a play and a theatre is a play'. When we came back, we started a Dramatic Society in the college and I, being interested in drawing, started as an art director doing setting, lighting and costumes. That was in 1943. At that time Theatre Movement was mainly a

medium for propagating National Movement for freedom. That was the best media with which we could go to the people. So that was a double-edged weapon, doing theatre also and then informing the people.

Dr. Ranade: What type of plays did you produce at that time?

Prabodh bhai: We had socially relevant plays, especially written by the young giants in those days like C. C. Mehta or Yeshwant Pandya or Shridhrani, then Jayanti Dalal. They all were involved in movements and were also men of literature and theatre. Later on, we went on doing some classics. In Gujarati *Jaya Jayant* by Rana Lal. It is a major play with a difficult style of presentation because there are 21 scenes in one play and no scene is repeated. So you have to create 21 scenes and it was not possible to have any equipment in 1946, therefore, we had to bring dimmers from the Physics Department of our college, but we could do it!

Dr. Ranade: When did you discontinue to have this pronounced political theatre?

Prabodh bhai: By 1947. At that time we performed a play *Shah Jahan* for four days in the open air. Everyone was allowed to enter and see the play. There was a saying, 'From one ring our slavery goes and from the other ring enters our freedom'. Later on we searched plays which would have some relevance and the first play that came in Gujarati Theatre in a modern style was Kaufman and Hart's *You can't take it with you*. That was in 1948 in Ahmedabad. There was no activity in Bombay at that time, much of the new stage, modern theatre, was basically based in Ahmedabad Rangmandal which was founded in 1938.

Dr. Ranade: When did you shift to Bombay?

Prabodh bhai: I came to Bombay in 1950 to cover a test match. I was a sports-writer also. Then, it so happened that All India Radio wanted to start the Gujarat sports review, so I came handy! Somebody there made a comment, a very great man Dilip Kothari, 'Most difficult thing in the world is to write drama.' I took it as a challenge. I got a chance in 1953 in S.N.D.T. Women's College. This College had a great artiste Bharati Seth but she had no play because no play was available without a male character. So I wrote that play *Maaf Karjo Aa Natak Nahi Thai*. In that play the girl has got so much talent that she has to do 60 types of difference roles! And that play to my luck got me a prize. They all encouraged me. The play was performed in the Delhi festival. And Nehru and Azad, praised the girl and said that they were fortunate to see a great artiste. That gave me some impetus to go ahead as a playwright as I had already stopped working as an art director.

Dr. Ranade: Did you continue to write on sports as well as for theatre after that?

Prabodh bhai: For about three years, I wrote about theatre and other things which I stopped after writing a play. But sports writing I continued till 1967.

Dr. Ranade: Your involvement with the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan Movement dates back to 1953. We would like to discuss more about this movement. What do you feel was the special feature of the movement?

Prabodh bhai: Because I wrote that play *Maaf Karjo Aa Natak Nahi Thai* in Gujarati, when the play was performed, I met doyens of Marathi, Hindi and English theatres interested in the play and said, 'Let us discuss and let us meet each other and do something'. Damu Kenkre, Nandkumar Raote, Anant Pai, Shirodkar, Sudha Karmarkar, Madhu Wagal, Arvind Deshpande, Pushpa Kothare, all these people were there. We used to meet every evening. We might learn something, they might learn something. It was an open discussion and mutual understanding. It helped so much. Vijay Anand and Mahendra Kapoor were also involved. The latter, a playback singer, was a prize-winning actor for consecutive years. He had left acting but then he would also come and see Marathi plays, and say, 'I want to become this'. Then somebody would go and see a Hindi play and pick up something. Munshi used to tell us that theatre teaches you three things – dash, dress and address. It gives you dash to go on the stage, it teaches you how to dress yourself and present yourself, and address i.e. speech to the people. Munshi's dream was fulfilled. His festival and Bhavan competition was not run by Bhavan, it was run by these youngsters who were participants and they wanted to find out! This was very clear in their mind: where they want to go.

Dr. Ranade: Would you say that Bhavans provided a platform for every kind of constructive theatre activity? Would you also say that the character of plays which you put up at Bhavans was different from what was happening outside? How was it?

Prabodh bhai: They had two things in mind: to get a tradition which was going on and bring something new. Other thing, it has to give some relevance to the life that is being lived today. To guide is not propagating. It can be like this and it should be like this! That is a very rare thing which we do not see today. Suppose, if Damu Kenkre does one play *Udyacha Sansar*, he will not do *Sansar* again, he will do something different. He would do *Brahmachari*. He would say, 'No, I want to do something different next time'. For example, Master Dattaram, (I am going out of way but), I have seen Master Dattaram in one play *Duritanche Timir Jao*. Then I saw him in one comedy role in *Punyaprabhav* and next in *Chandra Nabhicha Dhalala*. They always used to encourage youngsters and always used to give them due credit which is not so today. Bhavan gave

that constructive encouragement. Bhavan was not an academy. I think it was a laboratory. You go and experiment there and find out something which you can analyse quantitatively or qualitatively and Bhavan provided the audience which was not bound to one language, it was real Bombay theatre which turned into Indian theatre later on. I would not say Bhavan was for only Marathi, Gujarati or English or Hindi, it was doing theatre in Bombay. It was the Bombay stage being seen on Bhavan stage.

Dr. Ranade: Can you mention some very specific cases with extra-ordinary production values or acting values or scripts?

Prabodh bhai: I cannot limit to one or two! *Udyacha Sansar* was done as a one-act play, not only that, from one act *Damu* had deleted 9 minutes without stopping. The stage shows time and calendar and date - Thursday, 4.30. Lights go off and then when the lights come the time is changed, the date is changed, Sudha changes her dress, second act is performed thereafter and then after one minute's drop, the third act is performed. That was one great production. Another production was Tendulkar's *Vairyanchi Ratra*. A new play is being opened and the playwright is nervous and the producer says, 'Do not worry if the play flops. You will get the award, if the play succeeds. You will make money. And they say it is a priority. And the people take it as a great comedy. And the author is crying!'

Dr. Ranade: You did not mention the English theatre as a part of Bhavan's Movement. Do you feel that English theatre was a part?

Prabodh bhai: It was actually in Bhavan Competition that one-act plays presented in English later on led to formation of Theatre Group and Theatre Unit.

Dr. Ranade: I have a feeling that Gujarati theatre or Hindi or Marathi - one can easily understand the give-and-take. But you talk of English theatre too at that time as running side by side. This is something which needs some attention. Do you think that the situation persists today or do you feel that the relationship is not as it used to be?

Prabodh bhai: I have seen only two groups in English at that time, Theatre Group and Theatre Unit. The same people had just parted for doing productions but afterwards, for 10 years there was a lull – barring Alyque Padamsee I think nobody was there. Then came Burjor Patel and others with not that commitment or attachment.

Dr. Ranade: How would you describe the technical achievements of the Bhavan's Theatric Movement?

Prabodh bhai: I think Bhavan's development of techniques and use of techniques helped the professional theatre later. In those days in one-acts they were doing everything to perfection. Ramesh Zamindar played a very important part in uniting and taking all these extra efforts for the technical part to be perfect.

Dr. Ranade: Why did the movement discontinue or where did it fail?

Prabodh bhai: After the competition was over, the prize was Munshi shield, the best play out of 14 languages. Language was not material there, only performance and the team. It went on, Marathi got 4 prizes, then Gujarati got 2 to 3, then Hindi, Bengali, English and Kannada got some. Kannada's very good plays were done in Bhavan, I think, by R. D. Kamat and Suvarna. In 1968, we had decided to give a new impetus to the Bhavan competition because there everyone mingles. Because some 12,000 students from different colleges with different languages, used to stand outside Bhavan to know what was the result, who was the newcomer, etc. One great thing about the drama competition was that you were praised and they would take you on their shoulders. If you do not do well, you are thrown out within two minutes! But in '69 a very funny thing happened. The date for the competition was a weekday after 15th August. So 16th was Monday, some 4 days before K. Munshi calls and says, 'There is one problem, the President's election result will be announced on Monday evening. If anything happens, there is going to be some political split somewhere. It might start from some theatre here. I don't want that to happen. So please drop the competition for one year'. This was a very sad decision. Myself and Damubhai, we thought this one year is alright! It will go, pass away like this but it did not pass away! After that everyone tried but nobody succeeded.
