

The theatre in Lahore and rural Punjab

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WHEN one thinks of the theatre, one is reminded of ancient Greece, where the activity used to be a great pastime. The statue of Dionysus, the god of wine, used to be carried through the streets of Athens leading a procession to the outdoor hillside theatre, where plays were staged. Several plays, religious in content and nationalistic in character, were staged every day. The spectators were charmed by the dramatic presentation of the stories of gods and heroes, and had the added excitement of witnessing a contest for the best playwright.

According to a consensus among anthropologists, the rural milieu in the Punjab is steeped in the long traditions of the theatre, the roots of which go back many centuries. What is now called the Lok Theatre, used to project the yearnings, hopes and fears of the people through dialogues suffused with rural images and metaphors. Some social historians also claim that the theatre has always remained an ineluctable ingredient of our culture ever since the advent of recorded history.

To many theatre enthusiasts, especially the city dwellers, theatre

means entertainment associated with neon signs and phony glitter with the opulence and gaudiness that masks shallowness. Before its quality began to deteriorate, touring theatrical companies provided a better alternative, especially for the village folks, who were entertained by the million every year. Although a majority of theatre companies originated in Lahore, it was not a matter of location. It was a state of mind. If city theatre evoked images of shallowness and superficial slickness, the touring rural theatre brought to the mind images of dedicated artistes, who spent gypsy-like lives, always on the move, visiting places throughout the length and breadth of the Punjabi hinterland.

As has been the case elsewhere in the world, the Lok Theatre in the Punjab also had its osmosis in song and dance. Sung to the accompaniment of simple, indigenous musical instruments like the flute, chimta, lyre and the dhol these songs were meant to eulogise heroes. The dances depicted various activities and vocations of the people like sowing and harvesting, and their moods and sentiments in different seasons and the religious rites

that were performed by the followers of different faiths living harmoniously in a multi-religious and multi-ethnic society.

Theatre, *nautanki* and *swang* of those days were not performed in large auditoriums as they are now presented in urban centres, but staged under large *shamianas* (tents) pitched outside villages, where people went for inexpensive entertainment.

In villages and small towns, fairs were (and still are) the main attraction for the poor. Touring theatres did a lot for the villagers in those fairs by providing them with enduring, inexpensive entertainment with a variety of items that tickled their sensibilities. Epics and ballads such as *Heer Ranjha*, *Mirza Sahibaan*, *Sohni Maheenwal* and *Sassi Pannu* were used as major crowd pullers.

The form, style and presentation of the rural theatre were moulded by an understanding of the images which permeate the hinterland, its culture and customs, and the comprehension level of the people. A theory of performance value was evolved, which combined the aesthetic responses of the villagers and their understanding of the crafts of the playwrights, and the

art of play-acting. Thus, the theatrical language of gestures, customs and costumes, movements and musical interludes (providing breathing spells to the actors and change of dresses between two acts) were understood by the spectators.

Before the advent of the cinema and radio, large theatre groups were based in Lahore, did not have a municipal or metropolitan corporation. In those days, the theatre was the only source of community entertainment. Located at different places in the Circular Garden (which once ringed the Walled City), especially outside Bhati Gate, these theatre companies later fanned out into the countryside, visiting small towns and villages, where their presentations were lustily cheered by village folk.

In the beginning, actresses were not easy to find, and male members of the cast had to enact female roles as well. However, the hawkish owners of theatre companies lured women (mostly from Hira Mandi) with tempting offers. As all performers in those days were required to sing songs in a given play, nautch girls from the *Bazar-i-Husn* (who were trained in the art of singing and dancing) formed the only

sources for the owners of theatre companies to tap. They put attractive, good-looking singing girls from that area on their payroll, and assigned them the roles of heroines in the plays. No wonder, a number of popular heroines of the theatre era ended up as real life wives of the owners of the companies.

During its heyday, rural theatre in the Punjab was a much sought after entertainment of the village folk. Associated with it were a number of talented artistes, who played their roles with much gusto. Those crowd-pulling artistes were highly paid and well looked after, especially when they went on a tour. A congenial environment was necessary to get the best out of them. However, the inroads made by the cinema and the consequential drain on the traditional sources of acting talent, took a heavy toll of rural theatre by severely depleting its manpower and repertoires.

The advent of television in 1964 created more difficulties for the rural theatre, which tried to put up a brave resistance for a while, but failed to hold its own in the wake of massive onslaught by the visual electronic

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medium. A few theatre groups still float in the vastness of the Punjabi hinterland, and the people associated with them derive a modicum of creative and artistic satisfaction, but not much income.

There seems to be a glut of theatrical activity in more than a dozen halls in Lahore. A large number of producers/financiers are promoting the theatre in different areas of the city, albeit on purely on commercial basis.

However, from the standpoint of quality there is not much to be written about. With the introduction of amorous dances, vulgar double-meaning dialogues and repartees among different characters, people with sophisticated tastes have stopped going to these theatres. Despite strict vigilance by the departments concerned, impromptu dialogue and vulgar exchanges among members of the cast creep in the already-approved scripts. This happens with the collusive support and acquiescence of both the producers of stage plays and the owners of theatre halls. Thus a creatively satisfying activity has been vulgarized by those who promote the theatre with the sole purpose of making easy money.