

# Indian Folk Traditions and the Modern Theatre

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IN THE last twenty years or so, a new interest in regional cultural expressions and folklore has developed in India, leading to the rediscovery and reevaluation of indigenous forms of literature and the performing arts. Nowhere is this more apparent than in theatre. The traditional theatres such as Yakshagāna, Tamāshā, Rās Līlā, Nautankī, Bhavāī, Jātrā, and Khyāl have gone through a remarkable revival since Independence. Considered decadent and largely forgotten during colonial days, these regional theatres have recently received attention and a certain amount of governmental support from the national and state Sangeet Natak Akademis. Their status has been enhanced by an intellectual reappraisal which views them as the surviving fragments of the ancient Sanskrit dramatic tradition, on the basis of common features such as preliminary rituals, stylized acting and gestures, stock characters like the stage director (*sūtradhāra*) and clown (*vidūshaka*), and abundant song and dance. Through annual festivals held in the capital, folk theatre groups from all over India have performed for urban audiences, and Western scholars have also been attracted to study the traditions. As a result, greater familiarity with folk theatre forms has developed in the cities, and the urban attitude has shifted from scorn to curiosity and respect.<sup>1</sup>

Intellectual interest in folk theatre started in the late fifties and early sixties in India. The studies of Balwant Gargi and Jagdish Chandra Mathur were basically descriptive, documenting aspects of stagecraft in the different regions and comparing them in a general way (Gargi 1966; Mathur 1964). The vitality of rural theatre was widely acknowledged, as by Nissim Ezekiel in the April 1962 issue of *Seminar*

focusing on theatre (*Seminar* 32). But although many contributors to this issue spoke of the need for synthesis with urban theatre, none gave examples of specific attempts. At this time, the urban and rural streams still flowed separately.

The rediscovery of folk theatre had in fact heightened the sense of a rural-urban cultural dichotomy among the educated elite. Urban theatre was perceived more and more as imitative of the West and non-Indian, while the term rural was acquiring the prestigious connotation of "indigenous." Badal Sircar, the noted Bengali playwright, expressed this clearly:

Theatre is one of the fields where this [rural-urban] dichotomy is manifested most. The city theatre today is not a natural development of the traditional or folk theatre in the urban setting as it should have been. It is rather a new theatre having its base on Western theatre . . . , whereas the traditional village theatre has retained most of its indigenous characteristics (Sircar 1978: 1-2).

As a result, some dramatists began to reject Western influence and urge a return to village culture and traditions. The Urdu playwright Habib Tanvir stated:

It is in its villages that the dramatic tradition of India in all its pristine glory and vitality remains preserved even to this day. It is these rural drama groups that require real encouragement . . . it is not until the city youth is fully exposed to the influence of folk traditions in theatre that a truly Indian theatre, modern and universal in appeal and indigenous in form, can really be evolved (Tanvir 1977: 6).

By the early seventies, playwrights and directors had begun to incorporate folk conventions and ideas into their productions. Heightened awareness of rural forms was feeding back into the creative process, providing new resources for self-expression. In the Round Table on the Contemporary Relevance of Traditional Theatre, organized by the Sangeet Natak Akademi in 1971, complex questions were posed, such as the relation of rural forms to modern values, the role of the urban author vis-à-vis an unfamiliar regional genre, and the reaction of the urban audience. But the conference's basic assumption was unchallenged, namely that "as creative artistes we have to confront the traditional, specially in our case where tradition is a continuous living vital force" (Awasthi 1971: 7). These discussions made it clear that the manner in which traditional and urban theatres were to be integrated depended very much upon the sensibility of the individual playwright or director.

To illustrate some of the possibilities, let me briefly cite the efforts

of three well-known figures who have experimented with folk forms, Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad, and Badal Sircar. Tendulkar's Marathi play *Sarī Ga Sarī* was first produced in Bombay in 1964 (Abrams 1975: 121–127). In writing the play, Tendulkar utilized the Tamāshā form and its characteristic language patterns. The play contained the conventional *gaṇ* (invocation to Gaṇapati), *gaṭaṇ* (scene between Krishna and the milkmaids), and *poṇḍā* (a song form), but characters such as Mukunda (Krishna) were given satirical treatment and references to contemporary urban life filled the dialogues. Tendulkar was particularly interested in capturing the feeling of spontaneity of Tamāshā, and he discovered that the urban actors he used lacked the informality and improvisational skills of traditional actors. This problem highlighted for him one of the major differences between urban and rural theatre: the urban play depends upon the playwright, while in folk theatre, the actor is all-important.

Another approach can be seen in Girish Karnad's play *Hayavadana*, written originally in Kannada in the early 1970's (Karnad 1975a). Based on the tale of transposed heads from the *Kathāsaritsāgara*, *Hayavadana* is a symbolic drama employing several conventions of Yakshagāna, such as the half-curtain which is carried onstage to introduce new characters, and the Bhāgavata or narrator, who introduces the story and comments on the action throughout the play. The structure of the play as a whole, however, is not derived from any particular regional tradition, and its philosophical exploration of the problems of wholeness and identity has a decidedly modern orientation. Different productions have brought out more or less of the folk flavor. B. V. Karanth's Hindi version in Delhi maximized conventions such as masks for the main characters, a folk style of costuming, and music and songs based on folk tunes, while Rajinder Nath's Calcutta production largely eliminated the folk element (Karnad 1975b: forewords by Ramgopal Bajaj and Rajinder Nath).

A more radical avenue is represented by Badal Sircar's movement toward a "Third Theatre," which he conceived as a theatre of rural-urban synthesis. Sircar's goals were to abolish the proscenium arch stage, to emphasize physical movement of the actors over words, and to rely upon only the simplest techniques of lighting, costuming and staging, emulating Grotowski's Poor Theatre—all to build up the immediacy of communication between actors and audience (Sircar 1978: 25–27). His 1973 Calcutta production of *Spartacus*, based on the story of a Roman slave revolt, incorporated these elements. The actors moved in groups around clusters of spectators, no sets or properties were used, and most of the action was conveyed through physical ex-

ercises learned during long training sessions by the troupe members. Music was limited to a single refrain sung by the group of slaves without instrumental accompaniment (Sircar 1978: 53–60). This mode of presentation relied on none of the conventions of rural theatre, but it was aimed at establishing within an urban context the same sense of communal involvement and ritualistic action often found in folk theatre.

These examples indicate some of the ways in which rural theatre traditions may influence a playwright. He may attempt to write within the stylistic frame of the folk genre while exploring contemporary themes, as Tendulkar did. He may adopt particular stage conventions, like Karnad, which need not be restricted to one specific regional tradition, thus increasing the appeal of the play to a wider audience. Or he may imitate rural theatre in general principles only, following Sircar, and work towards rejecting all convention and inventing his own minimal performance environment.

#### HINDI AND URDU THEATRE

Let us now examine the parallel developments in the Hindi and Urdu theatres. Traditional drama in the Hindi-Urdu speaking area of North India is either primarily religious (Rām Līlā and Rās Līlā) or secular (Nauṭankī or Svāṅg). Perhaps it is the ongoing relevance of the Rām Līlā and Rās Līlā in people's religious lives, and the resulting respect for tradition, that has so far prevented these genres from being reworked in the modern context. At any rate, the main source of folk influence on Hindi drama has been the Nauṭankī, together with the so-called Parsi theatre of 19th and early 20th century North India, the Gujarati Bhavāī, and the Rajasthani Khyāl. Nauṭankī is a musical theatre form, using sophisticated poetic meters with heavy emphasis on rhythm and rhyme. The accentuated singing style, always accompanied by the drum (*naggārā*), seems appropriate to the popular Nauṭankī tales of chivalry, romance and adventure. Dance scenes displaying the charms of the *nāch* girls are ubiquitous, although dance-like movements and gestures are less a part of this form than some traditional theatres, particularly of South India.

A number of plays from the standard Nauṭankī repertoire have been presented in Delhi in the last fifteen years or so, some by traditional troupes, others using both urban directors and actors together with traditional artists. Shāntā Gāndhī directed *Amar Singh Rāthod* in 1968, cutting the ten-hour script down to two hours and reorienting it to the urban audience. The production used professional Nauṭankī singers of the Hāthras style, but the director modified their mode of

acting and controlled the dominance of the drum-player (Gāndhī 1969). In 1976, the National School of Drama presented *Lailā Majnūn*, also in Hāthrasī style, under Anil Choudhry's direction, employing the talents of professional Svāng singer Girirāj Prasād as well as urban singer-actors (Tanejā 1978: 105–106). Probably the most successful attempt at staging a folk drama for the urban audience has been Shāntā Gāndhī's production of *Jasmā Odan*, based on a Gujarati Bhavāi *vesha* (play). First presented in 1968 in Gujarati, the later National School of Drama production in Hindi enjoyed great popularity throughout the seventies, and has been taken to other parts of India as well (Gāndhī 1969).

Perhaps as an outcome of the success of these experiments, Hindi playwrights began writing original dramas which in some way would blend Nautankī elements with contemporary situations and themes. Of these attempts, the closest formal approximation to pure Nautankī is found in Mudrārākshas' play *Ālā Afsar* (Senior Officer), an adaptation of Gogol's famous play *The Inspector General* (Mudrārākshas 1979). Its first production was directed by Bansī Kaul at the Madhya Pradesh Kala Parishad, Bhopal, in 1977. The story concerns a *panchāyat* of corrupt officials ruling the town of Chitpur, who are thrown into disarray by news that a senior officer from Delhi has been sent to investigate local affairs. When a young stranger is spotted dining in a hotel, the chairman of the *panchāyat* approaches him obsequiously and invites him to his home. The gentleman is pleased because he has used up his credit with the hotel manager, and he amicably joins the chairman, his wife and daughter in an elegant meal. He subsequently receives the respects and bribes offered by the other four officials, and then listens to the complaints of the poor, promising to help if they give him the necessary petition fees. After winning the chairman's daughter's hand in marriage, he departs with the dowry, and only then is his deception discovered. As the leaders mourn their losses, a *chaukidār* enters and announces that the real officer is to arrive the next day.

About half the play is written in traditional Nautankī meters such as *dohā*, *chaubolā*, *baharetavīl*, and *daur*, and these are indicated explicitly as in Nautankī texts. Again, following the practice of Nautankī, song forms such as *ṭhumrī*, *bhajan*, *qawwālī*, and *rasiyā* are included to provide variety. Most of these are parodies of well-known tunes. For example, the common worship song used in the *ārtī* ceremony, *om jai jagdish hare* ("Om, hail to the lord of the universe") is mocked here: *om jai ālā afsar* ("Om, hail to the senior officer"). A Rangā (stage director or *sūtradhāra*) introduces the scenes and comments on them, as in Nautankī, and a chorus representing the townfolk also

interprets the action through songs placed at the ends of scenes. The situation of mistaken identity affords many opportunities for amusing double entendre and slapstick, and each scene accentuates the rapacity, foolhardiness, and temerity of the leaders. The Janatā Party (*mūt piyo pārtī*), Indira's slum eradication program (in the song, *jhuggiyā sāf karo*) and MISA are all explicit objects of satire. The language of the play throughout is simple Hindustani.

The author's willingness to cast the entire play in the Nauṭankī mold has several important effects. From the opening invocation to the final chorus, the action moves forward without a break. There are no scene or act divisions in the text (another feature of traditional Nauṭankī) and presumably no movements of background scenery or curtain. The sense of urgency is heightened by the forceful, direct language, in particular the strongly accented Nauṭankī meters with their clinching multisyllabic end-rhymes. The conventional flatness and exaggerated virtue or villainy of Nauṭankī characters also serves the author's purpose, which is to satirize corrupt politicians and expose their foibles, not to enable psychological identification. To make sure no one in the audience misses the message, the Rangā and chorus are on hand to explain the oppressive actions of the leaders. What the play may lack in subtlety it makes up for in briskness, humor, and clarity.

Sarveshvar Dayāl Saksenā's play *Bakrī* (Nanny Goat) is also a political satire, but of a different order (Saksenā 1974). The play was first performed at the National School of Drama in 1974, then directed in Lucknow by Ranjīt Kapūr and awarded the state drama prize, and presented again in Delhi under Kavitā Nāgpāl's direction. In it, three aspiring politicians seize upon the idea of turning a poor village woman's nanny goat into a cult object. They dupe the villagers into believing the goat belonged to Mahātmā Gāndhī and should be enshrined and worshiped as the mother-goddess. In spite of the progressive arguments against this course presented by a local youth, the *zamīndār's* son, the villagers build an *āshram* for the goat and offer donations regularly in exchange for *darshan*. The politicians decide to run for office on a program of *bakrīvād*, choosing the goat's udder (*than*) as their election symbol. Upon their successful election, the three politicians sacrifice the goat for the victory feast. A group of villagers led by the youth and the original owner of the goat, the old lady, arrive at the feast at the last moment and tie up the politicians, shouting "Inqalāb zindābād" ("Long live the revolution").

Some stylistic aspects of this play resemble *Ālā Afsar*, such as the adoption of Nauṭankī singing in typical meters in the opening scene, and the presence of many parody songs (for example, *ḍaṇḍā unchā*

*rahe hamārā* ("Let our stick stand high") instead of *jhaṇḍā unchā* . . . ("Let our flag stand high") Kavitā Nāgpāl indicates that old tunes from both the Nauṭankī and Parsi theatres were used in her production to intensify the satire (Saksenā 1974: 6-7). However, Nauṭankī style is not carried into the language of the main body of the play. The dialogues are almost all in prose, Hindustani for the politicians and youth, and notably, dialect for all speeches by the villagers. Further, each of the six scenes commences with an interlude performed by a Naṭ and Naṭin. These characters generally sing songs or recite poems which comment upon and foreshadow the action. The Naṭ is a rebellious figure who refuses to perform the invocation and derides the audience for its aesthetic pretensions, while the Naṭin wants simply to dance, entertain, and get on with the show. With the juxtaposition of these various scenes, a multifaceted verbal texture emerges, in which registers continually shift between village dialect, standard prose, poetic language, and song parody.

The question arises whether this complex verbal structure helps communicate the content of the play to its intended audience. In their forewords, both Saksenā and Nāgpāl express their purpose of reaching the ordinary man (*ām ādmī*) in the villages, towns, and laborers' *bastīs*. Furthermore, the plot structure bears out this stated aim. The ordinary man in the audience is made to shift his allegiance from the mute village community to the outspoken old woman and the *zamīndār*'s son, as the gullibility of the villagers and maliciousness of the politicians is built up scene by scene. The similarity of the nanny goat to the Congress Party's symbol, the cow, and the references to Gāndhī are so obvious that the satire can in no way be missed, but unlike the play *Ālā Afsar*, a solution is also presented—resistance and refusal to be duped. This simple logic seems ill-matched by the linguistic and stylistic intricacies of the play. These latter elements may appeal to the urban audience, but the abrupt ending, wherein a previously passive bunch of village folk suddenly shows a burst of solidarity in challenging the politicians, is bound to ring hollow to more sophisticated viewers. Whether this gap can be bridged may depend to a great extent on the direction.

#### A NAUṬANKĪ WITHIN A PLAY

An ingenious use of folk drama is present in Lakṣhmī Nārāyaṇ Lāl's play, *Ek Satya Harishchandra*, which was first directed by M. K. Raina at the National School of Drama in 1975 (Lāl 1976). The Harishchandra story has been popular in the folk theatre, Parsi theatre, urban literary theatre, and in film throughout North India for the last century.<sup>2</sup>

Lāl places a performance of the Nauṭankī *Harishchandra* at the center of his play, embedding it within a story of the struggle for power in a village; that is, we have here a play within a play, or rather a Nauṭankī within a play. The situation in the village is immediately symbolized by the positioning of two wells on the stage—one on the left for the Harijans, one on the right for the high castes. A *satyanārāyaṇ kathā* (recitation of a religious tale) is going on at the high-caste well, amidst which Devdhar, the *zamīndār*, is politicking among his friends, while the low castes, led by Laukā, look on. At the end of the recitation, Laukā invites Devdhar and his friends to attend his home to hear *his satyanārāyaṇ kathā*, which becomes transposed into a performance of *Satya Harishchandra*. Laukā plays the part of Harishchandra, while Devdhar takes up Indra's role, his sidekick Jitan becomes Vishvāmitra, and his secretary, Miss Padmā, plays the prostitute of Kāshī.

As the performance unfolds, the characters begin to understand their relationships to each other, the meaning of truth, and the nature of power in a new light, by entering into the dramatic roles and experiencing the story, not simply hearing it. The Nauṭankī is the medium for a change of consciousness, most notably in Jitan (Vishvāmitra). Jitan tries to persuade Devdhar to abandon his autocratic rule of the village, but Devdhar insists that he will have the last word. In the final act of the Nauṭankī, however, Laukā changes the ending and refuses to go to Indra's heaven, declaring that it is time for Indra to come down to earth and be tested like Harishchandra.

In this evocative drama, the truth of the high castes is represented by a religious *kathā*, while the truth of the low castes is contained in a folk play. The Nauṭankī story chosen is originally from the Puranic literature, but it is reinterpreted so that Harishchandra becomes an Everyman figure. He is the poor villager, who is constantly tested by the more powerful, who sells himself and his family to survive, who simply endures. In Lāl's version of the story, Harishchandra's son Rohit symbolizes the spirit of India's youth, rebelling against his father's servitude and declaring that if "truth" is nothing more than lifelong hardship, it is false. He questions the *dharma* of self-sacrifice, demanding to know why some always take while others always give (Lāl 1976: 37). In another innovation, Vishvāmitra is brought into frequent debate with Harishchandra and Rohit. Father and son keep reminding the sage that "we are all together," until Jitan goes back to Devdhar and tells him, "We are all Harishchandras... there are countless Indras—the police, politicians, capitalists, middlemen, goondas" (Lāl 1976: 59).

In stylistic terms, the Nauṭankī scenes based on the traditional



story reflect the folk form most authentically, as might be expected. Lāl introduces a Rangā to recount the abbreviated sections of the story in *chaubolā*, *dohā*, and *daur*, although the meters are used somewhat carelessly and there are faults in scansion. The interpolated dialogues, as between Vishvāmitra and Harishchandra, are all in prose, and so are the scenes outside the Nauṭankī in the village. Rhymed and metered lines are used throughout the climactic mourning scene after Rohit's death until the point where Indra enters and Harishchandra becomes Laukā again. The metered lines and singing thus set the Nauṭankī apart from the realistic village action and maintain the distance between the two plays. Since the Nauṭankī is woven into the play's structure allegorically, the contrast between language styles, between prose and poetry, is quite effective. More problematic is the tendency toward obtuse philosophical discourse in the middle sections of the play. Lāl's approach to the question of political authority shows more depth and seriousness than the treatment given by either Saksenā in *Bakrī* or Mudrārākshas in *Ālā Afsar*. It is significant that the vehicle of this seriousness is a well-known Nauṭankī story, not merely the meters, songs, and exterior apparatus of the form.

The last play I would like to discuss in fact precedes all of the above in date of composition. Habib Tanvīr's Urdu play *Āgrā Bāzār* was first written and performed in 1954 (Tanvīr 1979). It was revived in the seventies in Tanvīr's Nayā Theatre (Delhi) and became a success together with his other folk-inspired works: *Gānv kā Nām Sasurāl*, *Ṭhākūr Prithvīpāl Singh*, *Charandās Chor*, *Indar Sabhā* (Tanejā 1978: 87). How much influence *Āgrā Bāzār* had on later urban experiments is difficult to say from this distance. Unlike the above three plays, it does not appear to borrow directly from Nauṭankī. Rather, the play creates its own atmosphere of colorful intensity through a variety of dialogues, poems, song, and dances—all taking place in a bustling Āgrā marketplace in the year 1810. The focus of the play is the Urdu poet "Nazīr" Akbarābādī, who never appears onstage, but whose twenty-some poems are sung or recited at relevant points in the course of the play. Nazīr, unlike most Urdu poets of his day, wrote in an unaffected style close to Hindustani speech, on themes such as poverty, flattery, death, local fairs and festivals, as well as the more conventional topics like love. He lived at a time of cultural transition, when the grandeur of the Mughal court was fading and provincial capitals like Lucknow were patronizing the arts, while in Calcutta English education and journalism were taking root.

The conflicting tastes and manners of the period are represented by different groups of characters in the bazaar. On one side, a book-

seller and his friends, a biographer and a poet, constitute the conservative, high-brow literati, who exchange gossip of the great poets Mīr, Zauq, and Ghālib. Among them only the poet's companion queries the traditional bounds of Urdu poetry and shows an affinity for Nazīr's verse; the others refuse to consider Nazīr a poet. The low class of hawkers and vendors, on the other hand, are less interested in literature than in making a living under the difficult economic circumstances. They see poetry as a means of selling a product. The cucumber seller throughout the play is absorbed in searching for a poet who will compose verses in praise of his cucumbers. Later on these people gravitate to the shop of the kiteseller, an admirer of Nazīr's. Here an alternative circle to the snobbish bookseller's grows, as people from the market crowd around to hear Nazīr's works recited. Also residing in the bazaar is a courtesan Benazīr and her several suitors, including a police inspector intent on winning her favor. Benazīr too is familiar with Nazīr and his poetry.

The play is not simply about a poet and his poems, however. Nazīr's poems generally have a moral thrust, and the human moral condition is at the center of the play. Life is a marketplace, where men buy and sell. When times are bad, as they are in 1810, the hawkers quarrel and not only upset each others' stalls and lose their produce to looters but incur police fines for fighting as well. Among the poets and publishers, the same business sense prevails, albeit cloaked in formalities of etiquette and flattery. The poet wants his *dīvān* published by the bookseller, and requests the biographer to write an introduction, but the bookseller is broke and palms his friend off on a creditor where he gets a frosty reception. Meanwhile the possibility of packing up for Delhi and getting into journalism is mooted. In the courtesan's quarters too, favors are bought and sold. To capture Benazīr's attention, the police inspector has her more successful suitor arrested on charges of starting a brawl among the vendors. But high or low, generous or mean, all are human. The equality of all men is asserted by poems such as Nazīr's "Ādmīnāmā" at the end of the play.

*duniyā mẽ bādshāh hai so hai vah bhī ādmī  
aur mufalis-o-gadā hai so hai vah bhī ādmī* (Tanvir 1979: 70).

(The king in the world is still a man,  
And the poor beggar is also a man.)

As in the plays noted above, the audience of *Āgrā Bāzār* is regularly addressed with summations on the import of the play's various episodes. Tanvīr does this through two cloaked *fakīrs*, who enter and exit through the audience, and sing stanzas of Nazīr's which comment on the stage action, much as the Rangā and Naṭ-Naṭīn of folk

theatre. A vivid sense of street life is conveyed by the onstage appearance of a monkey-trainer, a group of *hijarās*, a party of peasants going to a *melā*, a crowd of Holi revelers, and a bear-trainer, all of whom sing, dance, and "perform" as they would in any public place in India. The play thus encapsulates a whole range of "cultural performances," from the recitations of sophisticated Persianized Urdu *ghazals*, to the simpler Hindustani stanzas of Nazīr, to the basic street scenes and animal acts. Considerable linguistic diversity is encompassed within this range, as would be expected in a market scene containing so many classes of humanity. Tanvīr's outstanding achievement is to bring all of this rich folk life into direct juxtaposition with the "high" culture of Mughal India, using essentially realistic dramatic techniques. The playwright's dual concepts of the market as spatial meeting ground and the poetry of Nazīr as mediating dramatic voice are admirably constructed to achieve this effect. Tanvīr's *Āgrā Bāzār* seems to me the most original and creative of the four Hindi and Urdu plays described here.

#### CONCLUSION

While these four plays neither encompass all attempts nor exhaust the possibilities for synthesizing rural and urban drama, they point to some of the ways which have been explored in the primarily Delhi-based Hindi-Urdu theatre of the last ten years. Similarities link these plays: the Rangā-figure or commentator, the chorus representing the local people, formal poetic meters, songs and dances (especially by courtesan-like female characters), performance on an open stage, explicit satire and moralizing. All of these traits (with the possible exception of the chorus) can be followed directly back to the folk theatre traditions of the area, especially to the secular Nauṭankī. The plays differ in the degree to which they formally imitate Nauṭankī, from *Ālā Afsar* at one extreme to *Āgrā Bāzār* at the other, but in spirit, each of these plays emulates the spontaneity, directness, and multi-textured intensity of folk theatre. An incisive, earthy use of language is also common to these plays, and all of them contain at least touches of local dialect and often a wide range of speech registers.

Perhaps an even more telling correspondence is that the characters in each of these plays cluster into two groups—the powerful, established elite of society, and the penniless, downtrodden common folk. Whether through techniques of farce, satire, allegory, or realism, conflicts between these two groups are posed in each play and audience sympathy is evoked for the cause of the weak. That is, these urban playwrights not only adopt the linguistic aspects of folk theatre, but also its polarized

mode of perceiving characters as either heroes or villains and its structuring of the plot around a conflict between the "good" and the "bad." Yet there is a difference. In the feudal value system of traditional Nauṭankī, the rich *are* the virtuous, and they generally triumph. In these urban plays, however, the poor people are the heroes, and whether they storm the politicians' bungalow (as in *Bakrī*) or simply sing Urdu poems in praise of vegetables (as in *Āgrā Bāzār*), their victory is desired, foreshadowed, and proclaimed in each of these plays. These playwrights ultimately are not interested in rural theatre as a stock of formal devices to dress up a play. Their purpose is to communicate a social and political perspective on contemporary society and to convince the audience of the injustices committed against the ordinary man. Their fondness for traditional techniques (not to be confused with traditional values) represents a political alliance as much as an aesthetic preference. But it also provides them with a persuasive rhetoric—for it is *through* the art forms of the rural people that their cause is being espoused. If the immediate response to rural dramatic performance is to be entertained, then the more lingering reaction to these forms, presented in the context of urban theatre, must inevitably be to respect their makers—the village people of India.

#### NOTES

1. This historical development differs somewhat from region to region. In Bengal, for example, the Jātrā has been part of urban cultural life for many decades. In Maharashtra, Tamāshā has found a sophisticated audience within the last twenty years and performances now receive serious critical review in the newspapers (Abrams 1974: 127). Such acceptance is yet to come for the Hindi-language traditions of Nauṭankī or Khyāl. In the countryside, however, these folk theatres are as popular as ever, despite competition from the Bombay cinema, which they now widely imitate.

2. The essence of the story is as follows. Harishchandra, a virtuous and wealthy king, is becoming a threat to Indra in heaven, so Indra sends the sage Vishvāmītra to test his truthfulness. In order to fulfil the boons Vishvāmītra demands, Harishchandra must abandon his kingdom in Ayodhyā and sell himself to an untouchable at the burning *ghāt* in Banaras. His wife and son are sold to a Brahman (a prostitute in this version), and one day the son dies of snakebite. When his wife brings the dead body to the *ghāt* for cremation, Harishchandra demands the toll that he extracts from everyone, and his wife, being penniless, tears her *sārī* and gives him a piece. Finally Harishchandra, having withstood the gods' testing without swerving from truth, is awarded a place in heaven.

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