

Girish Karnad : Pioneering ‘The Theatre of Roots’

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The Indian drama has undergone momentous transformation since its inception. While it flourishes in its new form it has also shown a tendency of revisiting its classical origins. Girish Karnad, being a leading playwright of the contemporary times, represents generation of playwrights, who have commendably resolved the conflict between modernity and tradition. These playwrights knew that they were faced with the huge task of liberating drama from its subjugation to colonial models. These playwrights, however, knew that it would not be wise to altogether dump the western dramaturgy. Therefore, while they decolonized the contemporary drama, they also worked towards finding an alternative modernity. Girish Karnad himself sums up the social and historical context of the contemporary drama:

My generation was the first to come of age after India became independent of British rule. It therefore had to face a situation in which tensions implicit until then had come out in the open and demanded to be resolved without apologia or self-justification: tensions between the attractions of Western modes of thought and our own traditions, and finally between the various visions of the future that opened up once the common cause of political freedom was achieved. This is the historical context that gave rise to my plays and those of my contemporaries. (Karnad, Three Plays,1)

Modern Indian playwrights turned to a genre that was culture-specific, while being modern at the same time. It marks a return to the ‘folk theatre’ that had been completely sidelined during the colonial rule. For this reason, the emphasis was shifted more to performance while text-based western dramaturgy took a back seat. The dramatists looked for models in their cultural past. The scholars and playwrights began to look up to authoritative texts on Indian theatrical traditions for inspiration. *Natyashastra*, which is a universally accepted treatise on theatre, was published in the Gaekward Oriental series in 1926. This was the first critical edition edited by M. Ramakrishna Kavi. What came to be called the ‘Theatre of Roots’ was inspired not only by the folk theatre but also by the principles of the *Natyashastra*.

The *Natyashastra* is a treatise on dramaturgy written in Sanskrit language. The name consists of two Sanskrit words ‘Natyā’, meaning theatre, scenic action or more specifically drama, and ‘Sastra’, the term accepted in the Indian theatre tradition for holy writ dedicated to a particular field of knowledge. The book has a story about the birth of drama, which like all theories of origin needs to be decoded. The mode of presentation is one of dialogue between Bharata and the sages. It makes an inquiry into the nature of

drama that unfolds the origin theory and technique of drama and theatre with all its components of speech, word, body-language, gesture, costuming, décor and the moods.

It is believed that the legendary author of the *Natyashashtra*, the Bharata Muni received his knowledge of dramatic art from none other than God Brahma; Bharata asserted that Brahma, the creator of this world also created drama and thus its origin cannot be questioned.

The *Natyashashtra* is one of the world's earliest treaties on theatre. Its first chapter tells the story of the birth of Drama. The legend has it that when the world was sunk in moral depravity and people had become slaves to irrational passions; new means had to be found which could uplift humanity. So Brahma the creator, combined elements from the four Vedas to form a fifth text, the Veda of performance. Since the gods were not capable of the discipline of drama, the new Veda was passed on to Bharata, a human being, who with the help of his hundred sons, and some celestial dancers sent by Brahma, staged the first play.

The first play dealt with the history of the conflict between the gods and the demons and celebrated the ultimate victory of the gods. The production delighted the gods and the humans, but the demons in the audience were deeply offended. Therefore, they used their supernatural powers and disrupted the performance by paralyzing the speech, movements and memory of the actors. The gods in turn attacked the demons and killed many of them. Brahma, the creator, approached the demons and explained that drama is the representation of the state of the three worlds. It incorporates the ethical goals of life-- the spiritual, the secular and the sensuous, as also its joys and sorrows. There is no wisdom, no art, no emotion which is not found in it.

The myth condemns the demons, as they had failed to comprehend the true nature of theatre. Thus, Brahma's discourse on theatre becomes the essence of the myth. The creator Brahma himself, along with other gods, celestial nymphs and trained actors, was involved in the project. The result should have been a roaring success. However, it was a disaster. The myth points to an essential characteristic of theatre that every performance, however carefully devised, carries within itself the risk of failure, of disruption and therefore, of violence. This age old myth also points out that the playwright, the performers and the audience form a continuum, but one which will always be unstable and therefore potentially explosive.

Brahma created drama so that the knowledge of the Vedas becomes accessible to all. He combined the four essential elements of theatre-'pathya', 'gana', 'abhinaya' and 'rasa' with the Vedic rituals. He established the sanctity and efficacy of 'natya' as the fifth Veda. The *Natyashastra* also provides us with a reliable historical picture of the correlation between ritual and drama, as the Indian drama originated from the religious rituals of the Vedas. According to the *Natyashastra*, the connection between rites, rituals and drama is that of mutual conditioning. The Sanskrit drama did not succeed to the rite. Neither did it originate out of the rite, but evolved parallel to it as part and parcel of the ritual ceremony.

The main object of the *Natyashastra* is to prescribe what should be shown and what should not be shown in a drama. What one hears and what one sees must be good, decent, decorous, pleasing, elevating and instructive. What is to be shown is the way of the world, 'lok-charita', and the doings of men, so that the audience gets education and guidance. According to Bharata, drama is the imitation of men and their doings, 'loke-

writa', 'anukarana'. The actions have to be presented on the stage, so drama is called in Sanskrit by the generic term 'roopaka' that which gives form. All the media of expression employed by an individual such as speech, gestures, movements and intonation, must be employed in a dramatic performance. The *Natyashastra* elaborately explains how language is formed and how sounds are produced and intonations employed to convey various shades of meaning.

The *Natyashastra* also prescribes the entire structure of a play from beginning to end. The play begins with poorvarang, 'a prologue' in which various deities are worshipped and which also includes dance and music to make the show more entertaining.

The theatre of roots follows many of the concepts and features as laid down by Bharata. Many playwrights use the technicalities as prescribed by Bharata, for example beginning a play with poorvarang, or 'a prologue', a common feature of western drama as well. The 'Sutradhara', that is, the holder of strings, begins the play in accordance with the rules laid down by Bharata. Karnad's *Hayavadana* opens with the address of the 'Sutradhara'.

Apart from these facts about the origin of drama, it can be said that Indian drama could not have come into its own without the availability of the highly developed mythological structure of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Besides all these influences, it can be assumed that the theatrical elements formed in the Vedic, ritualistic and mythological system served as the starting point for the ancient Indian drama.

Hindu religious literature was produced in successive periods of history and can be divided into different categories. The earliest was the Vedic period, assumed to be between 2500 BC and 600 BC. Four *Vedas*: *Rig*, *Yajur*, *Sama* and *Atharva* were composed by scholars whose identity remains unknown except for the fact that they must have been of the Aryan race. The oldest and the most important of the *Vedas* is the *Rig Veda*, which is a sizeable compilation of hymns. The *Rig Veda* has worldwide significance, uniqueness and irreparability. The *Rig Veda* is one of the pillars of knowledge on which the superstructure of Asian culture is built. In a rare honour, thirty *Rig Veda* manuscripts dating from 1800 to 1500 BC were included in Unesco's Memory of the World Register, a compendium of documentary heritage of exceptional value, in the year 2007.

The *Vedas* raise the level of Indian poetry to the metric level, and the *Upanishads* provide an imaginative reconstruction of Vedic hymns' experience. Max Muller rated the *Upanishads* as decidedly the chief canonical texts of the Indian poetic tradition. The Vedic religion consisted of a very developed mythology. Its pantheon lacked an absolute sovereign and distributed gods according to the regions occupied by them. Vedic mythology is concerned with the nature-myths and the functional deities, whose original function can be deduced from the etymology of their names. The *Vedas* offer in an embryonic state a majority of characteristics which developed with the passage of time.

The second period can be referred to as the epic (or Puranic) period. It was during this period, between 600 BC and AD 200 that the great epics of Hinduism the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* were composed. The *Mahabharata* is the older and the more voluminous of the two epics; it is, in fact, the longest religious epic of the world, running into as many as 2009 chapters. The *Mahabharata* is full of stories within stories, which have been retold, rewritten and reinterpreted over the centuries, each conveying

some moral lesson. All the Vedic mythology, all the existing folklore, the entire legendary literature and even the various forms of religion and schools of philosophy are described in the *Mahabharata*.

The period also saw the flowering of Hindu philosophical thought to its fullness. Commentaries on the Vedas, known as the *Upanishads* were written. The *Upanishads* were about two hundred in number. The *Bhagvad Gita*, considered as a great piece of Hindu religious writing, is the culmination of the teaching of the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads*. It is 'the most exalted of India's religious poems.' The *Gita* has inspired much religious and secular writing. The *Bhagvad Gita* is the sixteenth chapter in the epic of the *Mahabharata*. The *Bhagvad Gita* could be taken as the best representation of the *Upanishad* philosophy — a piece of literature that in T.S. Eliot's words is the greatest poem of the world, second only to Dante's *Divine Commedia*. It has symbolic, archetypal, metaphorical and moral values. Attempts have been made to read it while deconstructing it. One can also find strains of existentialism in the text.

It is this vast canvas of themes, on which the playwrights of the Theater of Roots movement based their plays. These playwrights, rooted in the Indian traditional culture, explored every possible area of interest being aroused by these literary canons. The roots movement strengthened the point that these epics contain the truth of human existence. *The Vedas*, the *Puranas* and the *Upanishads* are of eternal value to the Indian literary tradition.

The text has been seen as a ritual in the Indian tradition. The whole Vedic culture is based upon *yajanas*, or oblations offered to the fire. The fire germinates for us the seeds; seeds sprout and grow into trees and this cycle goes on in an eternal continuum. That is what the puranic models of toxicology explain. Most of the *Purans* have a cyclic structure with tales of creation and destruction that go on renewing themselves. Nature plays a key role in such cycles and Krishna the cow boy steals the show. "The centre and the periphery try to dominate each other with victory to both and defeat to none" (Sheel Singh, 27).

After the decline of classical Sanskrit drama, it was the *Charanas*, caste-professionals who substituted a form of dance drama in place of written plays. The dance-drama gained popularity, which encouraged the kings to write new compositions to patronize the *Nati* class.

The revival of *Shaivism* and *Vashnavism* and *Bhakti* cult led to the emergence of the language of the people, as the medium which gained momentum and their religious revival led to the construction of a number of temples by kings. A numbers of plays were written and performed during these days. Thus, the *Charanas*, the kings and the saints can be said to have laid the foundations of modern Indian drama.

About the 14th century, a new form of dance-drama came into being which came to be known as 'Kalakshepa' or 'Harikatha'. 'Harikatha' is a one-man show. There is no stage, no scenes and no make-up and it is often arranged in a temple-yard, where the entrance is free. The themes were culled from the *Bhagavata*, *Mahabharata* or from the epic *Ramayana*. Various deities are praised in the beginning and the *Harikatha* artist like the *Sutradhar* of a play introduces the characters to the audience and also informs the audience as to which part of the story he would be reciting and finally comes to the story.

This Sutradhar is well acquainted with mythological stories. With the help of gestures and voice modulations, he creates different characters. He improvises the dialogue, quotes from the scholarly Sanskrit texts and explains their meaning with apt illustrations from contemporary experiences.

Harikatha recitation came to be known as a means of achieving 'punya' (merit). The *Bhakti* doctrine on the one hand and the Brahmin *Harikatha* artists on the other propagated this belief. The *Charana* and the artists influenced the beginning of modern Indian drama in the different linguistic regions of India. The essential contents, however, remain the same everywhere. The themes from the *Bhagvata* or sometimes heroic tradition, dance and music were incorporated in their renderings with all the technicalities of Sanskrit drama.

The elements that go into the making folk-drama, were handed over to the folk-stage by the Bhakti-school of drama. It also strengthened the direct contact between the audience and the actors. The *Charana*, the *Harikatha* artists and the Sutradhar were also linked together. The foundation of the folk-stage of India was laid on this well crafted structure.

The *Natyashastra* also recognises the existence of the folk stage. As mentioned earlier, Bharata composed his *Natyashastra*, to recognise the ten forms (das rupaka) of drama and to prescribe the do's and don't of the stage. The folk-stage exploited the legends of bravery of the heroes of the *Mahabharata* and the noble life of Rama. These two epics also provided the main source for the themes of folk-plays.

The drama and theatre in India suffered a complete blackout for a period of five or six centuries. This period of eclipse is also commonly referred to as the Dark Age in the Indian dramatic history. The curtain rises again in the middle of the eighteenth century. From the decline of Sanskrit drama to the rise of the modern drama the classical drama existed in some form or the other in the first century A.D. with sporadic and artificial revivals taking place throughout the subsequent centuries.

What emerged as the modern Indian drama, though rooted in the Sanskrit drama for technique and theme, was influenced by the western drama as well. Many playwrights of the pre-independence periods followed the tradition of Elizabethan drama in general and of Shakespeare in particular.

It took a century and a quarter for Indian drama in English to reach respectability. In 1831 the first Indian English play was written by Krishan Mohan Banerji, *The Persecuted or Dramatic Scenes of the Present State of Hindoo Society in Calcutta*. It is a social play which presents the conflict between Indian orthodoxy and the new ideas which came from the west. It exposes the hypocrisy of the affluent in Hindu society and also refers to the historic theme of East-West encounter.

Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, H.N. Chattopadhyaya, T.P. Kailasam are playwrights of considerable merit who made epoch making and abiding contribution to the development of Indian drama, towards the close of the last century.

Tagore was an ardent admirer of Kalidasa, Shakespeare and Ibsen. He modelled most of his plays on the five-act structure of Elizabethan drama. Poetic in temperament and outlook, Tagore revelled in the employment of imagery and symbolism in his plays. Deeply influenced by the classical Sanskrit literature, he had extensive knowledge of Indian epics, *Vedas* and *Upanishads*, which is reflected in many of his plays.

Sri Aurbindo's writings bear testimony of his profound knowledge of Eastern and Western thought. In his play *Perseus the Deliverer*, he uses the Perseus myth to unfold the suffering and travails of the fighters engaged in the struggle for India's freedom. The theme of his play *Vasavadatta* is borrowed from Somadva's *Kathasritasagar*, one of the most popular Sanskrit classics.

In a similar vein, many other playwrights also used the Sanskrit classics and the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* in their plays. The mythology, folk legends, religious rituals and folk lores have, thus, been incorporated by the playwrights in drama over a period of time.

The early period of the resurgence of the Indian drama was, therefore, marked by a tendency to follow the rich tradition of the classical Sanskrit drama and the folk-theatre. This leaning among the playwrights however, shared a space with their fondness for the Elizabethan dramatic idiom. This was largely because of the availability of the British dramatic models and the awe these inspired among the educated Indians. Despite some serious efforts to return to their roots, the playwrights were still struggling to revive their classical heritage. In this connection G.P. Deshpande observes:

A search for authentic 'Indian Theatre has begun ... This search had two distinct features. It postulated a comparable if not uniform 'Indian' theatre. It also postulated a notion of theatre which is civilization-specific. It would be a theatre of Indian forms which would be completely understandable; it would also be theatre of 'Indian timeless content' which is not easily understandable (Deshpande, x).

The present age has seen great works of art being written in various Indian languages. These works of great literary value and cultural centrality have made a great impact on the contemporary literary scene, emphasizing the need to make these available to people all over the country. Consequently, literature written in regional languages is being translated into English and other languages, thus establishing closer ties between different regions of India.

At the same time, some serious literature has been produced in English by the Indians in recent years. This literature is both an Indian literature and a variation of English literature. This body of writing has been designated as Indo-Anglian literature, which is used to denote original literary creation in the English language by Indians. Indo-English literature is also a term used to classify the literature consisting of translations by Indians from Indian literature into English.

A significant fallout of such vigorous literary activity is particularly visible in the field of drama, which is the most popular medium of entertainment. In this way, regional drama in India has slowly paved the way for a "national theatre" into which all streams of theatrical art came together. The major language theatre, such as Hindi, Bengali, Marathi and Kannada active all through the fluctuating years of regeneration and strengthening, led to the emergence of great playwrights in major Indian languages.

Among the pioneers of this new resurgence are Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad among others. Their plays have been translated in other regional languages as well as in English. As such, they have succeeded in building a national theatre movement.

These playwrights presented a variety of themes in their plays and contributed significantly towards innovative style. Most of their plays were experiments of an intense and deeply felt emotion rather than superficial innovations. They infused a basic simplicity and naturalness coupled with a meaningful depth in their plays.

Girish Karnad is also a part of the “theatre of roots” movement, which typifies search for an indigenous dramatic Idiom. Theatre of roots is one of the vibrant theatre movements in the recent history of Indian theatre, pioneered by Ratan Thiyam. Ratan Thiyam is one of the most important directors of contemporary Indian theatre, a distinction which he has achieved through his purposeful work. He comes from Manipur of the North Eastern states of India. During the late 60’s and early 70’s, Indian theatre experienced a period of re-awakening to its own traditional heritage. The theatre pandits were advocating a National theatre to be evolved from our own roots and rituals. The playwrights started to question the western sensibility, western style of production and its techniques. Ratan Thiyam answered this call with his powerful productions, real spectacles of movement, a renewed audio-visual sensibility with fresh native energy. It can be defined as the mixed dramatic idiom developed by certain post-independence playwrights and directors who modified certain aspects of traditional Indian genres to the modern proscenium stage. The rejection of proscenium stage was one part of the overall rejection of the western idiom in favour of a native one. Plot and characterization became secondary and the actor became more important than the character. Later it became a common feature of the individual doctrines of such stalwarts like K.N Panikar, Ratan Thiyam and Habib Tanvir to name a few.

The exponents of this movement rebelled against British-influenced drama, turning to their roots in folk and classical performances to create a modern theatre that would be genuinely Indian. As Erin B. Mee puts it: “Thus, the theatre of roots movement can be best understood as a way of decolonizing the theatre, as a politically driven search for an indigenous aesthetic and dramaturgy” (Mee, 2). She further adds that the goal of this movement is “to establish a modern universal, indigenous national theatre in India”. A number of playwrights and directors turned to classical dance, religious ritual and other forms of popular entertainment along with Sanskrit aesthetic theory to see what dramaturgical structures, acting styles and staging techniques could be used to create an indigenous modern Indian theatre. “This impulse became known as the theatre of roots movement – a post-independence effort to decolonize the aesthetics of modern Indian theatre by challenging the visual practices, performer spectator relationships, dramaturgical structures and aesthetic goals of colonial performance” (Mee, Enacting, 5).

The theatre of roots movement was the first conscious effort to produce a body of work that synthesized modern European theatre and traditional Indian performance – creating a new, hybrid theatrical form. As director M.K. Raina, puts it “We are not going back to tradition... we are in the process of creating new thinking, new sensibilities, and therefore new forms. Perhaps the fusion of some of the traditional forms and contemporary struggles may give birth to vital new forms, representative of contemporary Indian reality” (136-8). This new theatrical form is not at all anti-modern but challenges “a cultural definitions of modernity that define modernity and modern theatre in and on western terms” (Mee, 5).

One of the important characteristics of the roots movement is that the directors and playwrights “complicate the linear narrative”, incorporating “multiplicity of voices and multiple perspectives on a particular theme or story” (Mee, 6). The most renowned

practitioners of this influential theatrical innovation are Kavalam Narayana Panikkar, Girish Karnad and Ratan Thiyam. Production is given prominence which gives an opportunity for “multivocality”, for privileging voices other than just that of playwright (Mee, 6). Similarly, “vocal expression and physicality” (Mee, 6) serve a parallel means of communications providing information and commentary on the text. The commentary is conveyed through “physical movement, vocal gestures... music and non-verbal modes of expression” (Mee, 6) to communicate experiences. “This is an excellent example of the way the theatre of roots focuses on multisensory, multilayered and performance-driven events for an actively engaged audience” (Mee, 6).

There are two major aspects of the theatre of roots: “the impulses of the individual artist”, which compel him to turn to the roots in traditional genres of performance. The traditional genres included techniques and aesthetics from the colonial theatre and the ‘cultural dichotomy’ thus formed, profoundly influenced the theatre of roots movement which developed as a response to colonial definitions of modern theatre. Girish Karnad in most of his, plays combines the Western dramaturgical structure with the modern theatrical tradition to which he could relate and express his ideas. Karnad uses myths in many of his plays to refer to the complexities of present age and apprehension of present age and apprehension about future. But he combines the Indian myths and stories with their Indian setting with western dramaturgy. Karnad has based many of his plays on myths and epics from India. But he combines them with western dramaturgy. Consequently, he succeeded in devising an indigenous dramatic structure. Habib Tanvir found the western dramatic idiom “inadequate for effectively projecting the social aspirations, way of life, cultural patterns and fundamental problems of contemporary India” (Mee, 7) Habib Tanvir also felt that two centuries of alien rule had annihilated India’s cultural identity. So he called for “our own plays about our own problems in our own forms” (Mee, 7). Habib Tanvir, Vijay Tendulkar, Vijaya Mehta, Satish Alekar, Neelam Man Singh Chowdhry, Arjun Raina and Maya Krishna Rao are among the pioneers of modern drama to use elements of popular performance in their productions. They believed that the theatre forms borrowed from the west were not sufficient to efficaciously portray the hopes, dreams, anxieties and cultural configurations of contemporary Indian society.

Ratan Thiyam graduated from the National School of Drama (NSD) in Delhi in 1974 and acquired knowledge about the Western theatre. When he returned to Manipur to work he realized that his western training came in the way of communicating with his audience. Alongwith other playwrights, he strove to create a theatre which would involve community, because theatre, afterall, is a collective experience. The prominent Malayalam – language playwright G. Sankara Pillai spearheaded the movement to formulate the principles of ‘Theatre of Roots’. Actors, theatre critics and playwrights got together and organized workshops to work for a new drama culture based on the performing arts of Kerala. C.N. Sreekantan Nair “coined the term *thanathunatakavedi* in the 1960s to describe the new theatre. Thanathu means ‘one’s own’; nataka translates as ‘drama’, ‘story’ or ‘play’, and vedi is ‘stage’ – so *thanathunatakavedi* means ‘one’s own theatre’” (Mee, 8). Pillai wanted Kerala’s performing arts to be recognized as “modern theatre forms that reflected the aesthetics of these genres rather than the aesthetics of British theatre” (Mee, 8). The idea of *thanathunatakavedi* was adopted by Panikkar “in opposition to Western text-based naturalism” as a response to what he has called the ‘onslaught of alien influences on our aesthetic sensibilities’ (Mee, 9). Panikkar regarded it as “not just drama but drama culture” (Mee, 8).

Ngugi wa Thiong'o talks about the way colonialism not only controlled people's wealth but also "the mental universe of the colonized" (Ngugi, 16). Panikkar defines *thanathunatakavedi* as a process which 'is to be understood as the discovery of the self' through theatre (Mee, 9). The major difference between Western and Indian theatre is that the western theatre has textual orientation and the Indian theatre is performance oriented. Many western avant-garde artists also scoffed at the text-based naturalistic western theatre. Many theatre artists wanted to dismantle the aesthetics of the western theatrical practices. As a result, serious efforts were made to turn to the aesthetics of Indian drama. In the year 1918 Dr. Suresh Awasthi coined the term 'theatre of roots' to describe modern Indian theatre's 'encounter with tradition' characterized as a 'liberation from Western realistic theatre' (Mee, 12). This theatre was expected to reflect the issues related to historical, political, social and cultural situation of the nation that was struggling to be independent.

After independence the Sangeet Natak Akademi (SNA) and the National Academy of Music, Dance and Drama came into being in Delhi. Through a series of festivals produced by the Akademi between 1984 and 1991, a group of artists spread across the nation and used traditional performance in the making of their modern theatre. These artists developed 'a theatre idiom indigenous in character, inspired by the folk/traditional theatre of the country' (Mee, 11). As Dharwadker points out, "the quest [was] not so much for a "national theatre" as for a significant theatre *in and of* the nation, linked intra-nationally by complex commonalities and mutual self-differentiations" (Dharwadker, 24). The SNA promoted an indigenous theatrical idiom and a community of theatre lovers, artists and playwrights by making regional drama accessible to readers and playgoers. The roots movement thus emerged as the most powerful post-independence theatrical movement in India.

Erin B. Mee refers to Partha Chatterjee who distinguishes between three stages of nationalist thought, which contributed towards the development of the theatre of roots.

The first stage, the moment of departure, recognizes an 'essential cultural difference between East and West' in which the West is thought to be superior in terms of its material culture, its science, its technology and its commitment to progress, while the East is thought to be 'superior in the spiritual aspects of culture'. The second stage, the moment of manoeuvre, 'consists in the historical consolidation of the "national" by decrying the "modern"'. In the case of the roots movement, traditional performance (including religious ritual and the non-technological aspects of performance practice) was defined and mobilized as that which represented 'Indian culture'. The final stage, the moment of arrival, occurs when the discourse is 'conducted in a single, consistent, unambiguous voice' at which point it 'succeeds in glossing over all earlier contradictions, divergences and differences' (Mee, 16).

Amal Allana, chairperson of the NSD in an interview (with Amrith Lal of *The Times of India*) reveals that National theatre has meaning, "as the local has become the global. Boundaries have been dissolving at such a fast rate that describing any theatre ..., as a national theatre has become extremely difficult". (Lal, *The Times of India*)

Allana refers to India as a country, which is actually a continent with a rich theatrical legacy and aesthetics [of its own]”. She further remarks that there was a time when an attempt was made to create a national culture during India’s freedom struggle and in the Nehruvian era “when people believed in an Indian or utopian monolith. But this was short-lived because it was neither relevant nor possible”. She stresses that “the issue today is to decentralize everything and rediscover the path that we have in part lost sight of in the past twenty years”.

India’s independence in 1947 sparked a movement to return to more traditional practices, and Mee considers Girish Karnad as one of the most pivotal figures of the Theatre of Roots. His play *Hayavadana*, begins with a ritual offering; Karnad invites the audience to see the play both as a Western audience would and as a traditional Indian work at the same time – a “double viewing” in which the spectator sees simultaneous realities at once.

Son of Raghunath, and Kasibai, Karnad was born in Matheran, a small town near Mumbai in Maharashtra on May 19, 1938. Though his mother tongue is Kannada, he had his initial schooling in Marathi. Most of Karnad’s plays were originally written in Kannada. Many of them have been translated into other languages and English. The English translations of his plays are his own. They have brought him international acclaim as a pre-eminent contemporary playwright.

He passed through a rewarding and enriching academic career from graduation to Doctor of Letters. After graduating from Karnataka University in 1958, Karnad moved to Bombay for further studies. He received the prestigious Rhodes scholarship and went to England for Master’s degree.

During his stay at Magadalen College, Oxford, Karnad found himself getting deeply interested in art and culture. On his return to India in 1963, he joined the Oxford University Press, Madras. This offered him an opportunity to get exposed to various kinds of writings in India and elsewhere. Such exposure left an indelible mark on his creative genius.

During his formative years in a small village in Karnataka, Karnad had the first hand experience of the indigenous folk-theatre. The dramatic performances made a lasting impression on his mind. Karnad acknowledges the contribution of the Natak Mandalis and says:

It may have something to do with the year that in the small town of Sirsi... Natak ‘companies, would come, set up a stage, present a few plays... I loved going to see them and the magic has stayed with me. (Karnad, Three Plays, Vol.1, vi)

It was his parent’s fondness for plays and his own interest in them that started shaping him into a successful dramatist from his early years. It was his great desire to be a poet but he realized in his early twenties that his true vocation was to be a dramatist. As a young man studying in the provincial Karnataka College in Dharwar he had one burning ambition—to go to England and write poetry in English. “I wanted to be internationally famous like Shakespeare and T.S. Eliot”, he confesses.

As observed already, Karnad stayed in England on a Rhodes scholarship. During that period he was attracted by great authors such as Giradoux, Anouilh, Camus and Sarte

in his search for new forms of drama. But Indian mythology and epics still fascinated him a great deal. So he found himself irresistibly drawn towards them. His reworking of myths, Puranic, historical and literary, puts him in the same category as Kailasam and Rangacharya as much as to those European dramatists who recreate their myths.

In 1974, he received an important assignment and was appointed the Director of Film and Television Institute of India, Pune. In 1987, he went to U.S.A. as Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence at the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations, University of Chicago. From 1988 to 1993, he served as Chairman of the Sangeet Natak Academy, New Delhi. In 1994, he was awarded Doctor of Letters degree by the Karnataka University, Dharwad. He was awarded the Padma Bhushan in 1992 and the Jnanpith award, the country's highest literary recognition for his contributions to modern Indian drama.

Karnad has acted, directed and scripted a numbers of films and documentaries, which have won awards; including the award-winning movie *Samskara*. His films have been shown at film festivals all over the world. Karnad has also acted in several Hindi and Kannada feature films, for well known directors such as Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen and Shyam Benegal. He made his mark in films like "Manthan", "Godhuli" and "Ratandeeep", and won the Best Actor Award for his performance in "Swami". Still he makes a startling revelation. "I never wanted to be an actor". His recent film where he is cast as an actor is *Life Goes On*, a Stormglass production, UK. After a hiatus, Karnad has returned to the screen in Girish Acharya's film "Brides Wanted" which has stimulated him to write a contemporary play "The Wedding Album" based on a wedding in a middle class family.

Karnad's works include *Yayati* (1961), *Tughlaq* (1964), *Hayavadana* (1971), *Hittina Hunja* (1980), *Naga Mandala: Play with a Cobra* (1988), *Agni Mattu Male (The Fire and the Rain)* (1995), *the Dreams of Tipu Sultan*, *Bali: The Sacrifice* (2004), *Taledanda. Broken Images and Flowers* are two monologues published in the year 2005. His most recent play is *The Wedding Album*, (2009).

Karnad's drama is all about re-presenting the known and the familiar in a novel manner. Using folktales, mythological and historical legends he "weaves together timeless truths about human life and emotions contained in ancient Indian epics, legends and Upanishads" (Gupta, 249). As Karnad experiments boldly with technique, his plays forge a bond between the past and the present. He obviously refers to the past while delving deep into the world of myths and folklore. But the spirit of his drama is unmistakably modern. He not only links the past with the present but also the grandeur and mobility of the epics like the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* with the simplicity and charm of folk imagination. Thus, mingling the epic and the folk strains, his drama acquires a universal appeal and imaginative richness.

Karnad's ingenuity and artistic skill consists in the way he examines the tales he incorporates in his drama, from his own point of view along with their historical mythic perspective. The subject is then developed by him "in the crucible of his own imagination and personal experiences, and [he] employs them as a medium to communicate his own independent and original feelings, thoughts and interpretations." (Chatterji, 1)

Although rooted in Indian mythology and history, his plays convey a strong and unmistakable affinity for the western philosophical sensibility as well. The existentialist crisis of modern man is conveyed through strong individuals who are torn by intense psychological and philosophical battle raging within their mind.

Based on his serious explorations of folklore, mythology and history, the subjects of his plays reflect the problems and challenges of contemporary life, and endeavour to forge a link between the past and the present. 'Karnad has been accused of escaping into the past', says Lakshmi Chandra-Shekhar and academic and an active figure in Kannada theatre. "But the use of mythology in most modern literature validates individual experience and universalizes it. And I think Karnad has been able to do that" (Dass, 71)

Thematically, Karnad offers a rich variety of plays which refer to myths. His first play *Yayati* is based on an episode in the *Mahabharata*. The play revolves around the legendary *Yayati*, one of the ancestors of the Pandavas, Shukracharya and Puri. Thus, Karnad combines the myth of *Yayati* with the characters of *Mahabharata* and examines the moments of crisis and dilemma which are at the core of the play. The play *Yayati* which is a self-consciously existentialist drama on the theme of responsibility shows the influence of Camus and Satre as well.

Karnad's fusion of the Indian and the Western theatrical tradition is reflected in the story of *The Transposed Heads* in *Hayavadana*. The mind versus the body debate from Thomas Mann's *Transposed Heads* in *Hayavadana* echoes the Cartesian concept of duality. The play is a 'riddling philosophical thriller in which Karnad "problematizes the issues of personal identity" (Chatterji, 1) The theme of incompleteness runs throughout the play and to highlight this aspect, Karnad puts into use the Indian myths, associated with Lord Ganesha presenting them as archetypes. The transposition of the heads constitutes the main crux of the play, which results in a confusion of identities, revealing the essential ambiguity of human nature. In *Hayavadana*, Karnad blends mythological and the folk legends with the theme of universal quest for perfection and completeness. The Ganesha myth is interfused with the myth of *Hayavadana*, the man with the head of a horse. The motif of transposed heads is further extended to the story of Kapila and Devdatta. The multilayered structure of the play points towards a single meaning, that is, the eternal search for perfection and completeness.

Karnad has always taken a leading part in movements and crusades concerning social and cultural issues of India. In the recent years, he has been a bitter critic of religious fundamentalism in India. In his play *Tale-Danda*, Karnad tries to explore the evil effects of social deformity at cultural, social and psychological levels. In this play, Karnad deals with the political situation of a turbulent state. The play takes up the issue of reform movement and the rise of Virshavism, a radical protest movement in 12th century Karnataka to explicitly deal with the influence of the larger social and intellectual milieu on individual action.

Karnad foregrounds the social context of individual conflict, something that is further developed in *Agni Mattu Male (The Fire and the Rain)*, his most popular play. Karnad here deals with the traditional controversy between asceticism and rituals. The source of the play comes from the *Mahabharata*. It is an obscure story, with a play within a play, which centres around a fire sacrifice to bring rain. Karnad's play is a masterpiece mapping conflicting human emotions. It is an excellent combination of human, metaphysical and supernatural elements.

The Fire and the Rain employs several myths and legends, each having a standpoint of its own. All these viewpoints, however, refer to the central story. Karnad's disillusionment with dead and worn-out traditions is clearly discernible in the play. It is an outright condemnation of the dogma and hypocrisy associated with the orders of

religion. Another point driven home through mythic references is the possibility of the annihilation of the cosmos itself, if human vices rampant in society go unchecked.

In *Bali The Sacrifice*, Karnad strengthens the belief that indulging in any kind of violence, however minor or accidental, meant forfeiting one's moral status as a human being. Based on his serious explorations of folklore, mythology and history, his plays reflect the problems and challenges of contemporary life and endeavour to forge a link between the past and the present.

Karnad turns away from the 'classical' traditions as his source to local Kannada folk-tales in *Naga-Mandala*. Here he combines two tales, the central one focusing on the snake-lover motif, "while the frame story explores the notion of stories having a life independent of their narrators, derived from oral traditions"(Chatterji,3). Karnad draws heavily on the legend of the supposed powers of the Naga to transform itself into any shape. The significance of the play, however, extends beyond the surface charm and simplicity of the tale of a serpent. What is fore-grounded is the essential reality associated with the "experience of men and women in the psychologically transitory phase" (Gupta, 250) of growth into selfhood. The serpent myth is also used to highlight the essentially feministic bias of the play.

The play *Tughlaq*, of the sixties, presents a "rich and complex symbolism and also reflects the mood of disillusionment which followed the Nehru era of idealism in the country. *Tughlaq's* thematic concerns have a universal significance. Karnad here critically explores the psychic structure of the characters and brings to the fore the fundamental human motives with a distinctive, masterly control. The play is more than a political allegory and the treatment of the theme is not entirely historical. The dualism of the man and the hero in *Tughlaq* is the source of the entire tragedy. The play presents Muhammad-Bin-Tughlaq, the enigmatic character, who keeps on changing his roles. The focus is on the psychological implication of the theme of human power in respect of a self-righteous idealist, who wants to exercise absolute power over his subjects. Karnad's *Tughlaq* has been compared by critics to Camus *Caligula*, for both the plays present a tyrant using his power absolutely and indulging in senseless cruelty. There are many references to acting, theatre, and performance in *Tughlaq*. The play highlights one of the fundamental concepts of theatre, that theatre is an illusion, a fleeting shadow, a vision and a dream-like experience.

Karnad's monologue '*Broken Images*' takes sustenance from the images of the 'now'. It explores the facets of the urban Indian society with its fascination for technology. In an interview Karnad calls it "a technically intricate play" (Konkani,1). He further adds that the "in a sense, [the play] is a comment on the relationship between theatre and T.V. the real and the virtual." The Kannada version is called *Odakalu Bimba*. It is a story about a woman professor in English literature Manjula Naik who writes in Kannada and is being interviewed on TV after she has won accolades for her literary work in English. As the interview ends she gets up to go but her image on the screen wants to stay on. It wants to talk to her; she gets scared but then starts talking. The play is essentially a discussion between the woman and her image. The monologue foreshadows Karnad's own experience as a playwright who has faced broad criticism in Karnataka for being 'westernized' as he writes in English.

Karnad, pointing to the literary scene in India today says that writers in English are rewarded with acclaim, recognition and money while regional writers have to fight hard for all of these. "It's money and public recognition that English brings, that itself is a

point of envy”, explains Karnad. And that is the underlying theme of this play; envy as part of the human condition that manifests itself in today’s globalised world, and the ‘politics’ of writing as Karnad refers to the literary scenes today. Manjula Nayak’s talk on TV defending her choice of language in a talk she gives on a television channel sounds suspiciously like a repartee from Karnad to his detractors. Nayak’s alter ego on a television screen is an innovative method of including modern technology in drama. Another interesting aspect of the play is the subsequent dramatic unfolding of Nayak’s innermost motives and actions from the “private self” of the public image that continues to both intrigue and shock. This play is different from the other plays of Karnad, that revolve around mythology and folklore. The sense of contemporaneity sets it apart from the other “roots” plays, but incorporates cultural image of present day India. For this reason, it marks an important phase in Karnad’s writing. Karnad’s *Wedding Album* is a family drama set in a middle-class family where twenty two years old Vidula is looking forward to her arranged marriage, with an NRI in the US. The play has a typical Indian flavor. The play also brings up the issue of how some rituals are broken by the present generation in today’s “technologically savvy India”.

Flowers is based on a folk-tale from Chitradurga region in Karnataka. In this play Karnad reverts to the world of folklore and takes up the legend of Veeranna. The legend was used by T.R. Subbanna in his novel *Hamsageethe* (Swan Song). Karnad ‘recasts the legend as a conflict between religious devotion and erotic love, undergirded by the priest’s guilt at his daily betrayal of his wife’ (Karnad, Vol. 2).

Girish Karnad has a keen sense of utilizing essential theatricality for appropriate effect. He is a good theatre maker and a good writer and his work uses a whole range of theatrical form, engages with central social and political issues of recent and contemporary Indian life.

Karnad’s ability to universalize the individual and social predicament of human beings through the medium of drama has given his works a wide appeal. As already noted his works have been translated into several Indian languages and staged by eminent directors such as E. Alkazi, Satyadev Dubey, B.V. Karnath, Alyque Padamsee, Vijay Mehta, Shyammanand Jalan and Amal Allana. They have also been translated and performed for audiences abroad. As A.K. Sinha puts it:

In all his plays—be the theme mythical, historical or legendary, Karnad’s approach is modern and he uses the conventions and motifs of folk art, like masks and curtains to project a world of intensities, uncertainties and unpredictable denouements (Sinha, 24).

Karnad believes that the energy of folk theatre comes from the fact that although it serves to uphold traditional values, it also has the means of questioning these values. V.Rangan in his article “Myth and Romance in *Naga-Mandala* or their Subversion” attaches a label to the interplay of folk imagination and folk play in the plays of Karnad and remarks:

Folk imagination is at once mythopoeia and magical. In the folk mind, one subsumes the other. Folk belief, besides being naïve, has a touch of poetry about it which works towards a psychic adjustment. All folklore is religious, often based on animism because the primitive imagination

extends its vision from the natural, in which it is steeped and with which it is saturated, to the supernatural, which to the folk mind is only an extension of the former (Rangan, 199).

In affinity with the Brechtian theatre, Karnad's theatre is a theatre with a purpose. He does not advocate a theatre by which the spectators become emotionally involved in a play. Therefore, like Bertolt Brecht, Karnad works for the 'alienation effect' making the stage devices visible, making announcements and allowing the narrators directly talk to the audience. A fine example of this can be seen in *Hayavadana*, where Bhagvata speaks to the audiences in the course of the play and keeps them updating about the happenings, while reviewing each and every situation in the play.

In the drama of Girish Karnad, myth is not merely a ritual or a structural device. It is a means of exploring a modern outcome of a traditional situation. Karnad in his plays tries to establish a 'dialectical relationship between tradition and modernity' (Ravindran, India Today), which is also a central theme in contemporary Indian society and literature. Karnad's drama, therefore, has a distinct contemporary flavour. He strives to give a new meaning to the past, examining it in the context of the disturbing scenario of the present. In his work there exists a harmonious relationship between his versatility as a true artist and his ingenious handling of mythic and the folk material. By reverting to the rich mythic and folkloric Indian culture, he articulates his concerns in consistently engaging 'language of total performativity' (Chatterji, The Hindu).

Karnad does not employ the myths in their entirety. He picks up threads of legends and folk tales that he finds useful. He adds to these tales his imagination to construct the plots. The technique of fringing together myths, legends and folk narratives is his forte. He combines the literary and the folk elements with an unparalleled skill.

The principle involved in projecting myths in literature is the preservation of tradition. According to Alan W. Watt 'myth is to be defined as a complex of stories—some no doubt fact and some fantasy—which for various reasons human beings regard as demonstrations of the inner meaning of the universe and of human life (Gurine, 16). Karnad has a keen sense of utilizing essentially theatrical qualities for appropriate effect. He uses a variety of literary devices such as the masks, chorus, music and the mixing of the human and the non-human worlds to enrich the literariness of the texts. All these conventions employed by him permit a simultaneous presentation of alternative points of view through mythic and folkloric traditions.

Northrop Frye, the most eminent of contemporary mythopoeic critics define myth as follows:

... in the history of civilization literature follows after a mythology. A myth is a simple and primitive effort of the imagination to identify the human with the non-human world, and its most typical result is a story about a god (Frye, 13).

Karnad seems to be doing what Frye has asserted. In his plays myth becomes a structural principle of story-telling and mythology inevitably begins to merge into literature (91).

Application of mythopoeic criticism is central to the study and analysis of Karnad's plays as it takes us far beyond the historical and aesthetic realms of literature. The mythopoeic approach is used as a critical method which considers "literature as the ultimate embodiment of myth and ritual in the form of art". This methodology insists upon the fact that society and literature depend upon each other and approaches literature as a means of expressing human emotion and experience. A mythopoeic critic "sees the work holistically, as the manifestation of vitalizing, integrative forces arising from the depth of humankind's collective psyche" (Guerin, 167). Frye in *The Stubborn Structure* claims that:

Mythology as a whole provides a kind of diagram or blueprint of what literature as a whole is all about, an imaginative survey of the human situation from the beginning to the end, from the height to the depth, of what is imaginatively conceivable (102).

Myths have long been recognized as the structural organizing principle of a work of art. Besides imparting an organizational unity to the literary form, myths and legend also have the power to combine the alien and the inaccessible world of gods and the recognizable and accessible world of mortals.

The mythological approach to literature assumes that there is a collection of symbols, images, characters and motifs that are recognizable and evoke basically the same response in every work of art. This approach tries to surface out meanings by decoding the metaphorical and symbolic nuances in a work of art while still remaining humanistically connected with its aesthetic appeal.

Mythological themes are consciously employed in literature to bring out certain ideas which can be expressed through the projection of myths. Mythopoeic critics use the similarities and differences to argue and discover the underlying themes and hidden meanings of a myth. In a similar vein, plays are written, putting forward certain themes imbued with mythological symbols motifs and legends. Mythology encompasses a wide range of subject matter for a dramatist as well and gives a wider scope to construct a work of literature. Myths therefore become the symbolic projections of human aspirations, hopes, fears and values.

The pre-modern theories interpret myths on account of historical events. Various distortions occur because of the telling and re-telling of many myths. During the second half of the nineteenth century attempts were made to interpret myth scientifically. E.B. Taylor interpreted myth as an attempt at a literal explanation for natural phenomena. He speculated that early man attributed souls to inanimate objects and tried to explain natural phenomena thereby giving rise to a myth.

Max Mueller called myth a "disease of language" (Mythology, Wikipedia 8). He was of the view that myths arose due to the lack of any form of language. The anthropologist James Frazer interpreted myths as "a misinterpretation of magical rituals". The twentieth century theories of myth have the most acceptable and practical approach of interpreting myths. The psychoanalysts like Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung and Claude Levi Strauss believed that "myths and dreams reveal unconscious psychological forces within people" (Mythology, Wikipedia, 7). Mark Schorer remarks in *William Blake: The Politics of Vision*:

Myth is fundamental, the dramatic representation of our deepest instinctual life..., capable of many configurations, upon which all particular opinions and attitudes depend (Guerin, 160)

Guerin aptly remarks that myths take their shapes from the cultural environments in which they grow. "Myth is ubiquitous in time as well as place. It is a dynamic factor everywhere in human society; it transcends time, uniting the past (traditional modes of belief) with the present (current values) and reaching toward the future (spiritual and cultural aspirations) (Guerin, 160).

The mythopoeic perspective has been most impressively represented in Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, which stands as the poetics of the entire mythopoeic movement. Frye asserts "In literary criticism myth ultimately means mythos, a structural organizing principle of literary form. He also endorses a view and argues that the monomyth is "the story of loss and regaining of identity".

This loss and regaining of identity is well exemplified by Karnad in *Hayavadana* through the incompleteness of *Hayavadana* who holds the central key of the play. Karnad in his plays presents an amalgam of facts and fantasy by combining and exploring the dramatic potential of the ancient Indian myths, legends and folk traditions. In a way Karnad has shown to the world theater community, how our past and present can coalesce to give a direction to theatre activities and how this fusion can add significance and meaning to our present day existence.

Karnad's drama bears out that cultural specificities cannot be ignored while formulating a theory of modernity. In this context, Charles Taylor's observations are highly pertinent. While arguing for what he terms a cultural theory of modernity, he says:

[T]ransitions to what we might recognize as modernity, taking place in different civilizations, will produce different results that reflect their divergent starting points. Different cultures' understandings of the person, social relations, states of mind, foods and bads, virtues and vices, and the sacred and profane are likely to be distinct. The future of our world will be one in which all societies will undergone change, in institutions and outlook, and some of these changes may be parallel, but they will not converge, because new differences will emerge from the old. (Mee, 17-18)

Similarly, in his essay Dilip Gaonkar advocates "a culture-specific reading of modernity" (18). The theatre of roots, therefore, says Erin B. Mee, "asserts an alternative notion of modernity and modern Indian theatre – one based on aesthetics derived from Indigenous Indian performance" (18). This assertion certainly does repudiate theatrical modernity but is a 'redefinition of it' (18).

Taylor also points out that alternative modernity "has to be able to relate both the pull of sameness and the forces making for difference" (18). He further says: "simply taking over Western Modernity couldn't be the answer... They have to invent their own."

In much the same manner, Dilip Gaonkar talks about creative adaptation, which according to him points to the manifold ways in which people question the present. It is

the site where people make themselves modern, as opposed to being made modern by alien and impersonal forces and where they give themselves an identity and a destiny.

The roots movement like many other voices from the margin, questions the colonial cultural constructs of modernity as being the only notion of modernity. Providing alternatives, it goes a long way in establishing new definitions of modern Indian theatre. While defining the roots movement, caution has to be served vis-à-vis its nationalist stance. It must be remembered that it is not a revivalist movements. It is in essence, anti-colonial, but does not scorn the western dramaturgy. It simply creates one of its own. While doing so, it celebrates the regional developments in the Indian Theatre.

The relevance of the theatre of roots cannot be questioned. The drama of Karnad, Pannikar and Rattan Thiam bears out that while using traditional performances, their drama incorporates ideas and themes, very relevant to contemporary social set-up. The roots movement does not revive the past but gives it a contemporary meaning.

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