CHAPTER FOUR
COMMERCIAL AND ENTERTAINMENT THEATRE GROUPS

The origin of commercial theatre in its true sense is attributed to the Parsi community during British rule as early as 1850. However it could be argued that the first commercial theatre came into existence much earlier during the time of Shaivism and Vaishnavism, when the charanas first introduced professionalism in theatre. They not only made theatre as their source of winning bread but also a medium for reneiassance. In the beginning the commercial companies provided source of inspiration to the contemporary modern dramatists to pursue their work with them but in due course the degradation of Parsi theatre began when they started using vulgarity and sheer stage techniques to earn money. Thus, by and large Parsi theatre became a mere source of entertainment due to commercialization and was looked down upon by the serious theatre practitioners. Gradually some commercial groups emerged which tried to convey contemporary themes through their productions.

4.1 AN ANALYSIS OF THE NATURE OF DIFFERENT COMMERCIAL AND ENTERTAINMENT GROUPS IN INDIA DURING BRITISH RULE

Parsi Theatre: *In 1870, when the contemporary theatre in the 19th century was experimenting with the traditional and folk theatre, some enterprising persons of the Parsi community developed interest in Hindi/Urdu theatre. They were the first to lay the foundation of professional theatre companies. Pastanj Framji established ‘Original Theatrical Company’ which was followed by Khurshidi Bialiwa’s ‘Victoria Theatrical Company’ in Delhi in 1877. This company was also established in London but it failed badly as it could not compete with advanced stage techniques of the Europeans. Some of the Parsi companies of that time were: ‘New Alfred Theatrical company’, ‘Old Parsi Theatrical Company’, ‘Kuranthian Company’, Alexandra Company’, ‘Prince Theatrical Company’ and

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‘Imperial Theatrical Company’. Every company had its own team comprising of a playwright, director and producer. Most of the plays had themes based on truth, sacrifice and bravery. Along with the historical and mythological stories a member of Shakespearean plays, plays based on contemporary social issues and communal harmony (like Hindu-Muslim unity) were also written and staged. ‘Itefaq’ and ‘Nure-Watan’ were the famous plays of 1920-25. One of the famous playwrights of that time, Aaga Hashar Kashmiri, known as ‘Shakespeare of Urdu’, was famous for his play ‘Rustam-o-Saurab’. Parsi theatre was a combination of European techniques and Indian folk and traditional drama. Elaborate settings, costumes reflected Indian life and culture. The techniques of cyclorama were used for creating special effects like ghosts, magic etc. to make their presentation real and interesting. The designing of stage was such that it used to add to these special effects. The appearance and disappearance of Gods was done with the help of hidden doors... Special techniques were employed to make the angels fly. All this was an imitation of ‘Daruri Lane Theatre’ in London. A lot of money was spent on every play especially; the mythological plays were very costly due to the need of special effects. Every play began with prayer reminding the Nandi of Sanskrit drama. The actors’ bright make-up, head gears, crowns and decorations worn by kings and queens resembled that of the folk theatre. At times, as in the Sanskrit drama, Sutradharara appeared in the beginning, introducing the play. In the play ‘Bilwa Mangal’, written by Aaga Hashir Kashmiri, the opening scene is a debate between Lord Krishna and Narad Muni who conveyed the theme of the play to the audience [3]. Statue-techniques were used in plays to mark the transition between the scenes. The plays were staged at night. The Sutradhars and comic characters entertained audience between the scenes and made them laugh using vulgar language and actions. Songs were added without any need. All this and the emergence of commercial cinema led to the decline of the Parsi theatre companies. Though, the critics hardly appreciated the works of Parsi theatre companies.
companies, it is true that they widened the horizons of Indian theatre. *But Parsi theatre kept away from discussing social, political or contemporary issues in their productions. Though their sole aim was to earn profit, the Parsi theatre contributed greatly in terms of technique and presentation. However, it played very little role in the struggle for freedom against the British rule.

**Marathi Theatre:** Marathi theatre was born in 1843 when the first modern Marathi Play, ‘Sitaswaymara’ was performed at Sangli. No doubt, there are references to drama, actors and stage in ancient Vaishnava literature and there is also evidence that mythological plays were staged in Goa even in the middle of 18th century. The play, ‘Sitaswaymara’ included many songs and dance sequences for the sake of entertainment and its plot was very thin [15]. This play became very famous due to techniques used in it and was staged many times in different theatres. **Vishnu Das Bhave, therefore, is known as ‘Father of Marathi Theatre’. But the educated class was not satisfied [1]. They were unhappy with the inclusion of songs and dances without any requirement. They new that true drama could move an audience without the aid of music and dance. ***In 1861, Keertane wrote a play called, ‘Thorle Madhavrao Peshwe’. This was the first play entirely in prose. It was based on a contemporary theme and became very famous. Infact, after that political leaders, social reformers, essayists and novelists started expressing the contemporary needs and aspirations in their writings. Maharashtra was fortunate in having social thinkers like Gopal Ganesh Agarkar and N. C. Kelkar and Savarkar; and political agitators like Khadilkar and Wamanrao Joshi who turned to drama and naturally their works became powerful carriers of their ideas [15]. Many touring companies came into existence. Some produced translations of Shakespeare like Narharowwa and Aryoddharak who translated ‘Comedy of Errors’ successfully and some of mythological plays like Shahunagarwasi. Gopal-Ganesh Agarkar, a well known social reformer

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translated ‘Hamlet’ into Marathi. Kirlosker’s and Khadilkar’s contribution to Marathi stage have already been mentioned in the earlier chapters and will be discussed later on in this chapter also. Yeshwantrao Tipnis formed his own company only to stage historical and social plays. His company’s most successful plays were ‘Matsyagandha’ written by himself, ‘Totayache Band’ by N.C. Kelkar and ‘Vadhu-Pareeksha’ by Bhaurao Kolhatkar. Another contemporary writer was Mama Warerkar who wrote ‘Sanyashacha Sansar’ which dealt with the problem of enforced conversion by Christian missionaries of Hindus to Christians. His play ‘Haach Mulacha Baap’ was a satire on the evil of dowry system. His play ‘Turungachya Darant’ was the first play in Marathi to do without scenes \[12\]. It was based on the theme of untouchability and was honoured by Bombay Congress. Many other theatrical companies worked on the contemporary themes and will be mentioned in later section.

**Bengali Theatre:** In August, 1868, the journal ‘New Essays’ wrote, “For five years now the current of theatrical and musical performances has been flowing strong in this city. There can be no doubt that such performances are more beneficial to public than obnoxious Jatra, half-akhari, panchali, etc….But the impediments which the amateur theatre in the city has to face are growing day by day. The future of the theatre is dark….We appeal to the owners and the managers: Please get together, build a play house in a public place, engage actors and actresses on a salaried basis, sell tickets and with the sale proceeds meet the expenses” [8].

*The article showed that commercialization became inevitable during that period for the survival of artists and dramatists. Many theatre groups were coming into existence. Baghbazar Amateur Theatre was such a group whose members were Girish Chandra Ghosh and Ardendhu Mustafi. Its first production in 1868 was Dinabandhu Mitra’s ‘Sadhabar Ekadas' [16]. On 11th May, 1872, the group which was now renamed as ‘Shyambazar Natyasamaj’ produced another of Dinabandhu Mitra’s play, ‘Lilabati’. **On 7th Dec, 1872, the first ever theatrical play was produced for a ticket buying public in Calcutta in National Theatre. It was Dinabandhu Mitra’s play ‘Nil-Durpan’. It was described as an event of National importance.*

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GIRISHCHANDRA GHOSH
PLATE :11
was Dinabandu Mitra's play 'Nil-Durpan'. Amrit Bazar Patrika wrote Nil-durpan was rejuvenated by this performance. Another newspaper described it as an “event of national importance” [17]. Great National Theatre staged a number of plays with patriotic themes one of which was 'Sarojini' written by Jyotirindranath. National Theatre ended with its last performance on 8th March, 1873, with a play called 'Krishnakumari' written by Madhusudan Dutt. It broke away into two groups, one led by Ardhendu Moustafi and the other by Girish Ghosh. The former was called 'Hindu National theatre'. It staged Madhusudan Dutt's 'Sarmistha' on 5th April, 1873. *The group led by Girish Ghosh staged plays written by Dinabandhu Mitra and Madhusudan Dutt. Another theatre called 'Bengal Theatre' came into existence on 16th August, 1873 and its first presentation was Madhusudan Dutt's 'Sarmistha'. It was the first theatre to engage women to play the female roles. Two plays of Jyotirindranath Tagore, 'Puruvikram' (1874) and 'Asrumati' (1879) were also produced here. Both of them inspired the audience with a spirit of patriotism [18].

A large number of plays were being written at that time due to the unceasing demand of public but unfortunately, most of them were written just to satisfy the audience. Even great contemporary dramatists like Girish Chandra Ghosh were compelled to write a great number of plays to serve the need of stage.

Another actor playwright known for his satirical plays was Amrit Lal Basu whose 'Vivaha-Vibhraf' was very famous. **Dwijendra Lal Ray wrote historical plays imbied with a spirit of patriotism. He gave realism to Bengali acting.***During Swadeshi movement, Mukunda Das, another playwright, came into limelight. He wrote Palas to inspire the youth of the country to high patriotic duties [18]. Jyotirindranath Tagore, another playwright of Bengal, whose plays were translations or adaptations of Sanskrit and French plays, especially Moliere's. Because of the similarity between corruption and hypocrisy of the French bourgeoisie in Moliere's times and the society of the newly rich Bengali...
Baboos of the mid-nineteenth century, Jyotirindranath’s attempt was greatly successful. His play ‘Aleek Babu’ was about an ignoramous and cheat trying to marry a rich woman on false pretences. He wrote historical plays like ‘Puru-Bikram’ about Alexander the Great and the king Porus. Through this and several other plays he gave expression to growing nationalist sentiments.

Girish Ghosh’s first social play was ‘Prafulla’ in 1889 which was a tragedy depicting the downfall and ruin of a prosperous Bengali family. It encompasses a wide range of emotions springing from misfortune, evil designs and melodramatic misdeeds. His play ‘Balidari’ pointed towards the evil of dowry and ‘Sasti ki Santi’ towards the plight of widows [8].

**Other Regions:** The birth of Gujarati drama can be traced back to Bombay in 1852. The term ‘Gujarati Drama’ includes the pioneering work done by the Parsis and the subsequent phases of growth and decline of the stage. In starting the theatre movement in Bombay, the initiative was taken by its Parsi residents. Although the Parsis had played a predominant part in the establishment of Gujarati stage, the movement was cosmopolitan in character, as some leading enlightened Hindus-Gujaratis as well as Maharashtrians had offered their active support to it. The foremost among them were Vinayak Jagannath Shankersett, Diwan Bahadur Ranchhodbhai Vdayaram, Mangaldas Nathubhai, Mansukhram Tripathi and Dr. Bhaub Daji. **Nrisinh Vibhakar tried to give a new turn to stage by introducing contemporary problems in his plays. Jaman had been known as a revolutionary writer for his courage to discuss controversial social problems in some of his plays. Manilal Tribhuvandas’s plays also dealt with social problems. ‘Ra Mandlik Sansar Leela’, ‘Hansakumar’ and ‘Manorama’ were among his best plays [19].**

In the late eighties of nineteenth century, some Parsi companies visited South India and similar ventures developed in Andhra and Karnataka. In Andhra, they visited Bellary and it was in Bellary that the first company was formed. Two companies came into existence, ‘The Sarsa Vinodini Sabha’ of ‘Dharamvaram Krishnamacharya’ and ‘The Sumanorama Sabha’ of ‘Kolachalam Srinivas Rao’.

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The themes of the plays were mostly mythological or traditional like ‘Bhakta Prahlada’, ‘Shiladitya’, etc [1].

In 1877, the first professional group called ‘Gadag’ was formed in Karnataka. Other companies formed later on were: ‘Halasagi Natak Company’ (1878), ‘Tantupurastha Natak Mandli’ (1880), ‘S’i Chamarajendra Karnataka Sabha’ (1882), ‘The Metropolitan Theatrical Company’ (1882) and ‘Sri Gubbi Chennabasaweshwara Kripaposhita Natak Sangh’ (1884). Kannada literature has always been influenced by Sanskrit drama [1]. The first known Kannada drama was written at the end of the 16th century by ‘Singararya’. It was an adaptation of Sanskrit play ‘Ratnavali’. The play was called ‘Mitre/vinda-Govinda’. Earlier plays dealt with stories taken from the Mahabharata, the Ramayana and the vedic mythology. The influence of English education led to the translations of plays of Shakespeare in Kannada but these plays could not be staged. The play ‘Pativashikarana’ written by ‘Sri Kerur Vasudevachar’ was a translation of Oliver Goldsmith’s ‘She stoops to conquer’. It marks the turning point in the history of Kannada drama. Not only the names of characters but the social atmosphere had also been changed. It rightly marks the beginning of modern phase of Kannada stage [20].

*Though commercialization initially led to the downfall of Indian theatre due to vulgarity, inappropriate use of songs and dances but it could not escape itself from the strong waves of reformation. The contemporary dramatists gave an answer to Parsi theatre by starting their own theatre groups which not only entertained people and earned money but also educated people by staging contemporary social and political plays.

4.2 ADOPTION OF SOCIO-POLITICAL THEMES AND PROBLEMS IN DRAMATIC LITERATURE AND STAGING METHODS DURING FREEDOM STRUGGLE IN INDIA BY COMMERCIAL THEATRE GROUPS

The theatre groups formed by different contemporary dramatists were a lesson for those commercial groups whose mere purpose was entertainment and...
earning money and never bothered about the prevailing social and political conditions. But among these commercial dramatists, there were people like Anna Saheb Kirloskar etc. who believed in the necessity of commercialization but at the same time never forgot that the real aim of theatre was to educate people and worth discussion.

**Kirloskar Natak Mandli:** Kirlosker Natak Mandli was formed by Anna Saheb Kirlosker in 1880. Its first production was a Marathi adaptation of the Sanskrit play ‘Abhijnanashakuntala’ written by Kalidas. In this, Kirloskar completely gave up the traditional ‘Dashavatara’ pattern of presentation. Kirloskar’s plays were musical plays with a mixture of prose and poetry. His play ‘Sangeet Saubhadra’ was a mythological play. Kakasaheb Khadilkar’s plays called ‘Manapman’ and ‘Vidyaharan, produced by this company, were based on the social conditions like inequality between the classes and evil of drinking respectively [15].

After Kirloskar Marathi stage was dominated by Bhonsale and Bal-Gandharava., two great actors who remoulded the drama of their time by acting in plays written by Mama Warerkar and Kakasaheb Khadilkar [15].

**Gandharava Natak Mandli:** It was formed by Bal-Gandharva who was first associated with Kirlosker Natak Mandli. The Gandharva Natak Mandli which almost attached itself to Khadilkar’s plays introduced spectacular effects in mythological plays. Bal-Gandharva also acted in social plays like Gadkari’s ‘Ekach Pyala’, dealing with the evils of drinking alcohol [1]. The close association of his natak mandli with Khadilkar who was a disciple of Lokmanka Tilak was really beneficial for the commercial Marathi theatre which for the first time saw Indian politics was put on stage. *Khadilkar’s early mythological and historical plays showed the strong influence of Shakespearan tragedy* [15]. He got all-India fame with his play ‘Keechak-Wadha’ produced in 1907. Based on the episode of the Epic ‘Mahabharata’ of Bhima killing Keechaka, the play allegorically pointed out to the audience that to Khadilkar, Keechak actually meant Lord Curzon and Bhima, Lokmanka Tilak [3].

**Lalita Kaladarshana Natak Mandli:** It was Keshav Bhonsle’s theatre group. He was associated with Mama Warerker and most of his social plays were produced

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ANNASAHEB KIRLOSKAR
PLATE :12
by Lalit Kaladarsh Natak Mandli. Warerkar’s play ‘Sanya Sacha Sansar’ was based on the Christian missionaries who forcibly tried to convert Hindus to Christians. This company also produced Warerkar’s another play called ‘Haach Mulacha Baap’. It was a comedy whose theme was to highlight the evil of dowry system [15].

Between 1934-36, almost all the major companies in Maharashtra closed down including the Gandharva Natak Mandli and Lalit Kaladarsh Natak Mandli.

**Great National Theatre:** The Great National Theatre was one of the earliest public theatres of Calcutta in 1872 and its opening play was ‘Nil-Durpan’ written by Dinabandhu Mitra. This was regarded as a play of national importance. A number of contemporary social and political plays were staged in the theatre. One of these was Jyotirindranath’s ‘Sarojini’ which was based on the theme of patriotism. The period of national theatre ended on 8th March, 1873 with Madhusudan Dutt’s ‘KrishnaKumari’ as its last production [18].

Many other commercial theatre groups also contributed to the objective of making theatre a strong weapon against British. Two types of commercial groups existed during this period. One was the contemporary dramatists who besides being commercial never forgot their motive of educating people and making them aware of the contemporary conditions from time to time. The other groups comprised of companies like Parsi Theatre whose sole purpose was earning profit. But they suffered a set back because audience accepted only those contemporary groups which motivated them in their struggle for achieving freedom.
BAL GANDHARVA
PLATE :13
THE GREAT NATIONAL THEATRE
PLATE :14