I

Foreword

As in other branches of culture, Karnataka has created for itself a unique position in the field of art and architecture. This fact is borne out by eloquent evidences that have stood the test of time, - evidences like the Karnataka Music and the sermons carved in the temple stones, distributed all over the Kannada country. The aesthetic culture of historical Karnataka comprises all the fine-arts from architecture and sculpture to literature and music. The range is wide and goes back into a hoary past, for, one of the many strange things revealed by the unearthed sites of Mohenjodaro and Harappa is the intimate relation in the domain of art between the central South - the main land of Karnataka - and 'The Land of the Dead'.

Many an art of the Kannada land seems to possess a considerable degree of originality and variety with a pronounced capacity to influence other regions and peoples towards its own mode; and the theatrical art of Karnataka is not an exception to this glorious heritage. Available evidences - literary and epigraphical - would doubtless indicate that the theatrical art of Karnataka is quite ancient, for, one can assess its development for at least a thousand years from now. Like the music and architecture of the land, its theatrical art seems to have had a colourful past imprinting its influence on the neighbouring
regions of different languages. It must also be said to the credit of the theatre that it has received with open arms the salient theatrical features and patterns from other regions for its own enrichment and progress.

The story of the theatre of Karnataka should be enchanting; but unfortunately, not much written material is available because, either much was not written on the subject, or most of that which was written in the past is lost. It is different with regard to Karnataka Music, for, independent works on it came to be written from the early 13th century by eminent 'exponent - critics' starting from Sarangadeva, Kallinatha and Purandaradasa. Architecture has preserved its own story because of the capacity of the stone structures to defy the onslaught of time. The history of the theatrical art, however, has remained obscure for want of reliable and connected material, but even the available evidences - scanty as they are - indicate almost in unequivocal terms the antiquity, originality and the glory of the Karnataka theatre.

Strictly speaking, the professional theatre of any region in India is just about a hundred years old and considerable research and writing on the regional theatre has been done particularly in Bengal and Maharashtra but the Kannada country does not seem to have made an effort

1. Even today, in the Tamil-nad and Andhra, the centre of Karnataka music, the basic lessons which include S-eeta-vali in Kannada are the ones set by Purandaradasa.
to present either in Kannada or in English a recorded history of even its professional theatre. There are however, quite a few articles, mostly in Kannada, published in different magazines from time to time in the last thirty years. They do provide some links and enable one to build up the story of the growth of the Kannada stage in the recent hundred years. The matter is different in Bengal and Maharashtra, as in each of these regions there are scores of published works - mostly in the regional languages - dealing with the different aspects of their theatres.

The theatre of Bengal in particular, did attract all-round attention because Calcutta was the seat of the ruling powers on the one hand, and on the other, books on the Bengali theatre were written in English by writers like Dr. Guha Thakurta, Prof. Sukumara Dutt and Sri S.P. Bose.

The absence of any publication of authoritative and connected history of the theatre of Karnataka has rendered it considerable injustice because in the books written in English aiming to introduce the different regional theatres of India, the Kannada stage is either left out of mention, or if mentioned at all, it is misrepresented.

Mulk Raj Anand, who tried to interpret the Indian theatre to the Western readers, does not mention anything regarding the theatre of Karnataka when he covers - though in brief - the Telugu, Marathi, Bengali, Hindusthani, Parsi and the Gujarathi theatres. H.N. Dasgupta, who collected and

presented valuable material on the Indian stage deals at length with Bengali theatre and drama in five volumes but yet discusses in brief the different theatres of South India. He has but one remark to make regarding the Karnataka theatre and that, obviously an erroneous one for, all that he observes is that "The Kerala Stage of Mysore is now making progress through the patronage of the ruling people". R.K. Yajnik did some justice to the Karnataka theatre when he recorded that the "Karnatak plays" were entirely instrumental in inspiring into existence the professional theatre of Maharashtra which in turn influenced the Parsi stage. But it looks as though he ignored the richness of the folk theatre of South Canara and the colourful professional theatre of North Karnataka when he observed that "the Canarese theatre is only in Mysore". Further, on no justifiable consideration could the Kannada stage be made part and parcel of the "Madras Theatre" as is noticed by Yajnik. The theatre of Karnataka is will be discussed later - seems to be convincingly one of the oldest

1. Hemendra Nath Dasgupta : The Indian Stage - 1944
4. Ibid. p. 95.
5. Ibid. p. 99.
6. Ibid. p. 98.
in South India having an independent and original development. Even the professional theatre of Karnatak seems to be older than those of the Telugu and Tamil regions. In fact the available evidences indicate that the latter were inspired into existence by the theatre of Karnatak. Yajnik himself observes that the professional Marathi stage is the outcome of the influence of Kannada Yakshagana and so, it looks strange, - his remark that the Kanarese theatre is the youngest in South India.

Reasons for the lack of a correct perspective and knowledge regarding the Kannada stage are manifold but the most prominent among them deserve some consideration. Absence of a territorial unity of the entire Kannada speaking land as to sufficiently impress on other regions of its entity is one in question. For reasons historical, the Kannada land is split under different administrations and each part has naturally imbibe the cultural and artistic patterns of the region in which it is housed, and consequently, it looks as though each part has ceased to keep pace with the others. The resultant lacking of the feeling of oneness has perhaps incapacitated the land from consolidating, preserving and prospering its

3. Ibid. p. 101 - The context suggests that the comparison is in connection with the professional theatres of different regions. While the professional theatre of Karnatak was influenced by the Marathi and Parsi performances, it is decidedly older than the Tamil and Telugu theatres of South India.
VI

artistic treasures including the theatre. Thus, it is
difficult for an outsider to behold the theatre of
the entire Kannada land as a whole. A second reason
seems to be the obvious lack of initiative and effort
among the Kannada speaking people to make themselves felt
by others in different walks of life, for, regarding
the theatre itself it may be said that when the neighbour­
ing regions were far in advance in writing their theatric­
cal history, the Kannada land which inspired some of them
into existence did not record its history, nor did it see
to the translation of its plays into English or other
Indian languages. Other reasons like the differences in
the spoken dialect in different parts of Karnataka, or
the absence of a central institution to foster the theatri­
cal art and record its history - are only the outcome of
one or the other of the above mentioned fundamental causes.
It is due to these handicaps, the theatre, though ancient
and glorious, did not draw the attention of the critics
and research workers and it is perhaps due to these again,
that the story of the theatre has in it many a missing link.

Though meagre when compared with the literary
output of other regions - particularly Bengal and Maharashtra
in building up their respective theatrical history, there
are evidences and reflections available regarding the thea­
tre of Karnataka. Ancient Kannada classics and a few
inscriptions throw incidental light on the theatre, its
plays, writers and performers. Extant remnants of
of the Folk Theatre reflect on the glory of its past. Researches conducted by Sri Govinda Pai, Sri T.T. Sharma, Sri Muliya, Timmappayya, Sri Bendre and others give a glimpse of its antiquity. Proceedings and speeches of the different Drama Conferences conducted from time to time under the auspices of the Kannada Sahitya Parishat, The Amateur Dramatic Association of Bangalore, The Joladarashi Amateurs of Bellary and The Gubbi Company throw some light on the professional phase of the Karnatak theatre. The short narrative verse entitled 'Nataka' (1919) composed by Shantakavi and the speech delivered by T. Raghavachari on 'The South Indian Stage' under the auspices of the Mysore University (1930) provide an insight into the conditions that prevailed to prompt the professional theatre. Monthly magazines like 'Rangabhoomi', 'Kala' and the quarterly, 'Theatre' that dedicated themselves to the cause of the theatre provide tangible details with regard to the professional theatre. Space devoted to the theatre and its various aspects by the prominent journals like 'Jayakarnataka', 'Prabuddha Karnataka', 'Prema', 'Sharana Sahitya', 'Parishat Patrike', 'Jayanti' and others contribute valuable material which fills up some of the many gaps left blank in the history of the professional and amateur theatre of Karnataka. Valuable facts and reflections regarding the various aspects of the theatre are provided by many a modern Kannada writer of fame in stray articles and books.
Availing of the above-mentioned material and consulting the reminiscences of some of the veteran stage artists of Karnatak,\(^1\) an attempt is made here at providing a narrative survey of the theatre of Karnatak with reflections on its antiquity, different aspects and stages of development. The attempt is to treat the theme essentially from the point of view of the theatre rather than of the dramatic literature. The attempt is towards a connected story of the theatre to impress its stature and indicate its rightful place among the South Indian theatres.

I may make a humble mention here that my acquaintance with the professional stage of Mysore, owing to my working as a paid actor in the Karnatak Natak Sabha of Sri G.V. Ramaswami Iyengar for about two years (1936-37) and later, my close connection with the Students’ Dramatic Association and the University Amateurs of Mysore stood me in good stead. Some of the professional actors of Karnatak whom I interviewed recently, and with whom I corresponded, readily responded to me and the information they gave proved to be valuable for this work. I thank them and also express my indebtedness to the late Sri C. Anandarao, the late Sri Garud Sadashivarao and to Sarvasri A.N. Krishna Rao, T.S. Shama Rao, Betgeri Krishna- shenma and Pandit C.Y. Kavali for having kept at my disposal valuable material, published and unpublished.

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1. Of these, it is a matter of profound regret that Sri Garud Sadashivarao passed away recently on the 27th August 1954.