Chapter IV

SHAKESPEARE AND THE HINDI STAGE

The amount of conscious thought given to the theatrical technique in Bharata's Natyashastra denotes that there was a great theatrical tradition in ancient India. The Sanskrit plays were not merely well grounded in philosophy and equally unsurpassed in respect of style, they were also written in remarkable conformity with the well established principles of dramaturgy. The principles of dramatic writing and their production on the stage had been elaborately and carefully devised by theorists, very much like Aristotle, on the basis of their practical experience of the theatre and they were rigorously followed by the practising dramatists. This great tradition laid emphasis on organic construction, consistent characterisation, idealistic representation, exquisite lyricism, unity of impression and lofty moral tone.

After the 11th century A.D. the classical drama and its great theatrical tradition declined in importance giving place to many folk theatres like 'Ramalila', 'Rasalila', 'Nautanki', 'Yatra', etc. Although R.W. Frazer is unable to trace any connection between the ancient Indian theatre and the medieval popular theatre, yet it cannot be doubted that

the folk-theatres were the 'lineal descendents' of the 'Bhana' and 'Prahasan', the lower species of Sanskrit drama which came into prominence after the rise of Mohammedan power in India. The artistic subtlety of the Sanskrit stage gave place to haphazard incidents, loose spectacular sing-song representations with a curious inter-mixture of crude farcical devices, coarse jokes, and vulgar expressions. The folk plays were precisely like the Improvista Commedia of the Italians, the main outline being sketched out by the author and the dialogue supplied by the actors themselves.

The folk-theatre could not give birth to any great dramatic tradition in Hindi in the medieval times and continued to have an existence almost independent of the literature proper. It was probably due to the apathy of the Mohammedan and Moghul rulers who regarded the dramatic representation of life as profane and unwholesome. This is why that, although a great many other arts had flourished at the courts of the Great Moghuls, the theatre never enjoyed any favourable reception and vogue there. Only in the countryside the tradition of the folk-theatres went on unchecked. The poet Imanat seems to have drawn very largely on this tradition but no other dramatist arose to give shape to a great dramatic tradition. Nevertheless,

these earlier rural performances had something very vital about them and we may apply to them Nicoll's words which he wrote about the earlier rural performances:

"There is a freshness of fancy here, a free treatment of material, a rich fund of humour, and at times a true sense of the profound and the tragic". 1

Such was the state of affairs when Shakespeare appeared on the Indian scene. Shakespearean productions in Calcutta and other big cities of India revived the interest of the Indian people in stage and drama. The Shakespearean stage being "a raised bare platform, jutting out some considerable distance among the audience, so that the group of players were seen from any points of view" 2 drew the attention of the Indian people towards the medieval stage which had many things in common with Shakespeare's. But the elaborate setting of the Shakespearean drama inspired them to look back to classical Sanskrit dramas. The influence of Shakespeare - of both his style and dramatic productions - led to a revival of the great dramatic tradition in India which flourished from the ancient classical times down to the medieval, both literary and folk, well-defined and crudely devised but inherently vital, forms. It also awakened the people to the modern trends in drama that were eventually to flow from the West. The post-war theatre

1. A. Nicoll, British Drama, p.29.
2. Walter Raleigh, Shakespeare, p.118.
in India has been largely influenced by the Western theatre, employing for its setting and technique the latest scientific devices for regulating scenic and sound effects, and it is very difficult to say precisely what debt it still owes to the Shakespearean stage. While considering the influence of Shakespeare on the Hindi stage, which constitutes a vital part of the Indian stage, it would be fruitful to consider first the staging of Shakespeare's plays in original by Europeans as well as Indians and then to analyse its influence on the Hindi stage.

The history of Shakespeare productions in original in India began with the establishment of the 'Calcutta Theatre' in 1776, where Richard III (25th January and 1st February, 1788), Henry IV, Part I (8th February, 1788), Henry IV, Part II (22nd February, 1788) and 'a number of plays' chief amongst them being Hamlet, Richard III and other Shakespearean plays were staged. In 1789, Julius Caesar was acted in Mrs. Bristow's Theatre and in 1797 (5th May) Catherine and Petruchio, a comedy, as altered by Garrick from Shakespeare's Taming of the Shrew, was performed. The Chowringhee Theatre played Henry IV on 23rd July, 1814 and Merry Wives of Windsor on 25th September, 1818. The Sans-Souci Theatre staged Othello, on April 24, 1844,

3. Ibid., p.218 and 242.
4. Ibid., p.250.
and August 17 and September 12, 1848. These are but a few references of which we have ample evidence on record. Several other attempts were also made to put Shakespeare upon the stage. In almost all these performances, it is to be remembered that actors were all Indians.

Besides these performances, several famous Shakespeare actors with their troupes visited India and staged Shakespeare's plays. Thus, in November 1911 and 1912, the well-known Shakespeare actor Mr. Allan Wilkie with Miss Frediswyde Hunter Watts came to India and performed Macbeth, Wives, Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, Julius Caesar, Merry/Of Windsor, The Merchant of Venice, Twelfth Night, and Othello. Mr. Matheson Lang and his co-adjutor Miss Hutin Britton, who had thrilled the stage-goers in London, visited India in 1911-12 and gave performances of Taming of the Shrew, Hamlet, Much Ado About Nothing. Mr. Howitt came in 1918 and showed The Merchant of Venice. Norman Marshall toured India with his company in 1948 and performed Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice, Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, and Julius Caesar in several big cities of India like Delhi, Agra, Allahabad, Calcutta, Bombay etc.

In 1951, Erric Eliot brought his troupe to India and played The Merchant of Venice, Hamlet, and Othello in several big cities of India like Patna and Calcutta. Eliot had also come to India earlier. A company of Shakespeare actors also visited India in 1956 and gave performances of Macbeth and the other plays of Shakespeare at Agra, Aligarh and several other places.

These performances not only popularised Shakespeare in India but also induced Indians - specially students - to stage Shakespeare's plays. For instance, in 1956, the L.T. students of the B.R. College Agra requested the visiting English company to enact Macbeth as they themselves intended to perform it on their college stage. As to the liking of these performances, Norman Marshall himself expresses it thus:

"Perhaps rather surprisingly, I found in India the reaction of the audience to some aspects of the plays was more Elizabethan than it is in England".

Mr. Virendra Narain's impressions of the performances of Erric Eliot's company deserve a mention here:

The students of various institutions, colleges and universities also showed a keen enthusiasm for staging Shakespeare's plays. The influence of the English theatres of Calcutta, and of their own professors, was largely responsible for this enthusiasm. In 1837, the students of the Hindu College and Sanskrit College, Calcutta 'represented a few plays of Shakespeare or different scenes therefrom' on the occasion of the distribution of prizes. At the David Hare Academy, The Merchant of Venice was played on the 15th February, 1853 by the students trained by Mr. Clinger, Headmaster of the English Department of the Calcutta Madrassa. In 1853-54, the ex-students of Oriental Seminary also performed Othello. We need not pile up these facts as the tradition once set us was carried on by students. In every good college or university, Shakespeare's plays were acted by the students on annual functions or some such occasions. Every big institution had some kind of club where Shakespeare was staged at one time or another; 'Friday Club' of Allahabad University, is an example. Jagdish Chandra Mathur records that the students of Muir Hostel of the Allahabad University used to stage English plays every year on the occasion of the convocation when he himself took part in the performance of Julius Caesar, The Merchant of Venice, and As You Like It. And this is true of almost all the good

educational institutions. It is interesting to quote the authority of Prof. Sisson in this connection:

"It is interesting to observe the unmistakable zest with which school and college amateur theatricals busy themselves almost exclusively with Shakespeare in English, and have for favourites precisely those plays which have been most successful on the popular stage, Romeo and Juliet, Othello, The Merchant of Venice." 1

This Shakespearean vogue gave rise to the Parsi Theatre which may be regarded as a parent of the Hindi stage. This theatre began as a commercial venture with the establishment of the Original Theatrical Company in Bombay in 1870 by Seth Pestanji Framji. The principal actors of this company were Khurshadji, Balliwala, Kawasji Khatau, Sohrabji and Jahangirji. Pestanji Framji himself, Mohammed Miyan 'Ronak' benarasi, and Husain Miyan 'Jarif' were its playwrights. After the death of Framji, in 1877, Balliwala founded The Victoria Theatrical Company in Delhi and Kawasji Khatau founded The Alfred Theatrical Company. Munshi Vinayak Prasad 'Talib' was the writer of the plays of the first and Syed Mehdi Hasan 'Ahsan' and Pandit Narain Prasad 'Betab' that of the second. The Victoria Theatrical Company disintegrated after the death of Balliwala and the other company was purchased by Mr. Madan, the famous comic actor of the same company, after Khatau's death in 1914. Another company, The New Alfred Company, came

1. C.J. Sisson, Shakespeare in India, p.15.
into existence. Its owners were Mohammed Ali 'Nakhuda' and Sohrabji with Agha Hashra and Radhey Shyam Kathawachak as the playwrights. Agha Hashra left this company and established an independent one named Shakespeare Theatrical Company, which however could not survive more than a year owing to financial and other handicaps. By this time there was a spate of such companies: Parsi Theatrical Company (Lahore), Jubilee Company (Delhi), Alexandria Company, Imperial Company, Light of India Company, Surjivai Company (Kathiawar) and Vyakul Bharat Company (Meerut) were some of the most notable. Many of these companies toured all over India and gave performances in different cities.

These theatrical companies staged the plays written by their 'Kavis'. Along with the original plays based on Mahabharata, Ramayana and History, the adaptations of Shakespeare's plays were also performed by them. In its earlier stages, the Parsi theatre staged the adaptations too often. Thus, Gorakhdhanda (The Comedy of Errors) by Agha Hashra, Ek Aurat ki Vakilat (The Merchant of Venice) by Shrikrishna 'Hasrat', Bhool Bhullaivan (Twelfth Night) by Munshi Mehdi Hasan 'Ahsan', Shaheede Naz (Measure for Measure) by Agha Hashra, Saide Havis (Richard III) by Agha Hashra, Junune Vafa (Titus Andronicus) by A.B. Latif 'Sad', Bazme Fani (Romeo and Juliet) by Mehr Hasan, Khune Nahaq (Hamlet) by
Munshi Mehdi Hasan 'Ahsan', Safed Khun (King Lear) by Agha Hashra, Shaheede Vafa (Othello) by Munshi Mehdi Hasan 'Ahsan', Kali Nagin (Antony and Cleopatra) and many other Shakespearean adaptations were put upon the stage of these Parsi companies. We have already considered the merits and limitations of these adaptations in the preceding two chapters.

From the point of view of the present study, a more detailed enquiry into the nature and performance of this Parsi theatre is required as it presents a striking parallel to the Shakespearean theatre. This parallelism has been neatly stated by Professor C.J. Sisson thus:

"The more one examines the vernacular theatre and drama in Bombay, in general or with special interest in its versions of Shakespeare, the more one feels that where we have something like the conditions of the Elizabethan stage in actual working order, and that light may be thrown thereby upon some of the problems of that stage." 1

Like the Elizabethan theatres, the Parsi theatres were commercial ventures owned by one or many actors which aimed at profit by entertaining the common people, as they were patronised by the 'cultured classes' or by 'respectable women'. Most of these companies were financed by rich businessmen of the stamp of Henslowe, who worked as the 'banker', as aptly described by Dr. Greg. These theatres

2. W.W. Greg (ed.), Henslowe's Diary, Vol. II, p.120.
too were established, split into two or more, joined with others for a time, and toured different parts of the country like the Elizabethan theatres.

The commercial rivalry among the managers of the different theatres led them not only to apply all their resources to the most startling scenic displays and gorgeous dresses, but also to win over the well-known actors by every possible allurement. They also used the Elizabethan device of a 'claque'. The managers hired 'a prepared company of gallants to applaud his jests and grace out his play'¹ and to hiss off a rival show to make it end in fiasco. The managers employed theatre - posters for publicity, laying 'stress upon the novelty of a play' - an appeal that Henslowe would have understood.

The audience in a Parsi theatre was like the Elizabethan audience demanding action and spectacle, delighting in music, dancing, and rhetoric and declamation and thrilled by exciting events and crises. These one could see the people from the 'rif-raff of society' and also people from the new moneyed classes. The women of low morals also visited the theatres and made them their 'hunting ground'.

5. Ibid., p.96.
Usually the companies employed the playwrights to write plays. Even here this theatre presents a parallel to the Elizabethan theatre. The system of collaboration in writing plays was also in vogue. The manager sometimes thought of an outline of a plot and assigned the job of writing of the play to several writers according to their genius, serious part to one, comic to another and so on. The 'Kavis' or the dramatists for the companies wrote new plays, re-dramatised old subjects and furbished old plays, even as Marston 'furbished up an old academic piece called *Histriomastix or the Player Whipped*, to order and received payment from some Bombay Henslowe. They had no further rights in the plays and were also not free to write for other companies very much like Henry Porter and Henry Chettle who wrote for the Admiral's only. And if the play happened to be highly successful, a fixed bonus for the proceeds of one or two nights were handed over to the 'Kavis' very much in the fashion of the 'benefit night' of an Elizabethan author.

Very much like the practice of the Elizabethan 'Boy Companies', in these Parsi theatres generally boys were

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3. Ibid., p.373.
selected for the talent in singing and for handsome features and charming personality. They first played parts as chorus girls and eventually rose to the rank of 'stars' to have considerable share of the profit to become partners and even proprietors of their own companies not unlike the Blackfriars boys who became 'masters themselves' in 1608.

The adult actors were of three types: (i) The Harlequin; (ii) the pair of romantic lovers; and (iii) the thundering hero. The Harlequins or the comic actors were much given to extemporisation which is criticized by Hamlet in the theatre of Shakespeare's day. The thundering hero also regularly 'offended against' Hamlet's dramatic canon by his rant and bombast. They used to 'saw the air too much' with their hands in a 'whirlwind of passion', and were given much to mouthing.

Like the Elizabethans, the actors had to undergo a severe training in singing, dancing and fencing to become experts. They could have done well in a wrestling match in 'As You Like It, and a fencing match in Hamlet quite like the 'trained experts' of the Elizabethan stage. The community of actors formed a separate class of their own and the

attitude of the sophisticated classes towards them was quite similar to the attitude of the Elizabethan 'respectable' classes towards their own actors.

Like the Elizabethan theatres, the Parsi theatrical companies followed the repertory system. And in the production of scenes the system of alternation employed by the Shakespearean theatres and also by Shakespeare in his plays, prevailed on the Parsi stage. There was also the convention that comical scenes were generally acted before the proscenium and serious scenes on the full stage. Characters mostly entered and left the stage by the side openings which served as doors. In the manner of Elizabethans, they walked out 'on the stage' and never 'into a habitat prepared'.

Let us now visualise the actual performance in a Parsi theatre. The performances took place at midnight on weekdays and, not unlike the Elizabethan performances, in the afternoon on Sundays. 'Stage-Keepers' were present for mechanical help and the 'book-holder' or prompter, with his prompt-copy, sat close to the inner stage. One could see some actor peeping out from behind the curtain to estimate the number of audience. If the performance began upon the

2. cf. C.J. Sissons, op. cit., p.34.
'third sounding' of a trumpet on a Shakespearean stage, that on a Parsi stage began after the third bell. The counterpart of a Prologue was a prayer or a 'welcome' by the chorus girls. And then the actual play began.

In the Shakespearean performances on the Elizabethan stage, the dramatic producers relied upon dresses as an aid to dramatic illusion. The necessary outlay on costume was the heaviest part of theatrical expenses, and the chief actors were furnished with a varied and splendid wardrobe. Shakespeare's plays were written with unfailing care for these externals. The same thing holds true of the Parsi stage. Expert tailors were employed to prepare gorgeous dresses which entailed a heavy drain on the financial resources of the company. At first, no doubt, this practice was a very crude imitation of the Elizabethan practice in which 'Costume was something more than idly decorative; it was a note of rank, profession, or trade, and so helped to tell the story'. Gradually, the 'love of sheer Oriental costume' gave place to 'more appropriate dresses' on the Parsi stage, and they began to study 'the proper models from original authorities' and engaged expert tailors to get those models prepared.

1. C.J. Sisson, op. cit., p.34.
3. W. Raleigh, Shakespeare, p.120.
4. Ibid., p.120.
All this similarity or parallelism clearly indicates the influence of the Shakespearean stage upon the Parsi stage in its crudest form. The Shakespearean adaptations held the stage from 1800 to 1912. However, after 1912, there was a decline in the vogue of Shakespearean adaptations and there was a return to indigenous themes, derived mostly from the Mahabharata and Ramayana. Gradually as the influence of Shakespeare settled down, its finer aspects began to emerge with the shedding off of undesirable features.

It was against the earlier vulgarity and somewhat disorderliness of the Parsi theatres, that Bhartendu Harishchandra directed his criticism in 1883 and sought to revolutionize the Hindi stage. Balkrishna Bhatt also criticized it for the same reason i.e. for its vulgarity and immorality. Although these criticisms under-rated the Parsi stage, yet it should be kept in mind that the later amateur efforts to revolutionize the Hindi stage were,

correctly speaking, offshoots of this stage. Mr. Ramgopal Singh Chauhan, on the other hand, holds these critics responsible for stemming the growth of the Hindi stage:

The later efforts mainly derived their inspiration from the Parsi theatres or were directed as a reaction against it but did not introduce any change in the general plan, technique and stage-craft of this theatre. No doubt, the earlier dramatists for the Parsi stage, not caring much for the plot, concentrated on producing a bewildering scenic effect by grand dresses, colourful curtains and elaborate 'transformation' scenes, and invented an independent comic sub-plot and wove it into the different parts of the play without any connection, but the later dramatists like Radhey Shyam Kathawachak, Narain Prasad Betab and Agha Hashra

took sufficient care in devising the main plot and in linking it with the sub-plot with effectiveness. The standard of acting also improved to a great extent.

As a reaction against the Parsi stage, Bhartendu formed his own troupe at Benaras which stages its first play, Shitla Prasad Tripathi's Janaki Mangal, in 1868. It was followed by many other performances. Bhartendu Harishchandra's Bharat Durdasha, Satya Harishchandra, Nil Devi, Vaidiki Hinsa Hinsa Na Bhavati, and Andher Nagri, and other plays were performed between 1869 and 1885. The other playwrights, whose plays were enacted, were Badri Narain Chaudhri 'Premghan' (Bharat Subhagya), Shrinivas Das (Sanyogita Swayamvar and Randhir aur Prem Mohini), Radhakrishna Das (Maharana Pratap Singh), Pratap Narain Mishra, Radha Charan Goswami, Balkrishna Bhatt and so many others. Indeed every playwright wanted to see his plays acted. Varanasi had many theatres - Benaras Theatre, Bhartendu Natak Mandali, Kashi Nagri Natak Mandali, Arya Natya Sabha etc. and temporary stages were erected for the enactment of plays from time to time in Kanpur, Allahabad, Aligarh, Bareilly, Gorakhpur, Balia and some other cities.

1. B. Harishchandra, op. cit., p.418.
Although so many efforts were made to improve the stage, the fact remains that no change took place in the planning, technique and stage-craft of the Parsi theatre. They only sought to bring about good and natural acting by discarding the canting and ranting manner of the Parsi stage. They could not give birth to a permanent stage with well-defined conventions. Vrindabanlal Varma describes a Hindi performance on an amateur stage thus:

This description does not substantially differ from that of a Parsi stage. At this amateur stage too Shakespeare found his place as many plays produced were influenced by Shakespeare e.g. Maharana Pratap Singh of Radha Krishna Das, Sanyogita Swayamvar and Randhir aur Prem Mohini of Shrinivas Das, Nil Devi of Bhartendu Harishchandra etc. The translations of Shakespeare's plays were also put upon the stage. Kashi Nagri Natak Mandali staged, King Lear which had been translated into Hindi by Lala Sitaram. Very recently Little Theatre Group of New Delhi enacted Bachchan's verse translation of Shakespeare's Macbeth on December 18, 19, 20, 1958 at the

Fine Arts Theatre. The Hindustan Times wrote about the success of this production thus:

"This is a production by no means perfect, but yet a landmark in Delhi's amateur dramatics."

And, again, on January 4, 1963, Othello by Bachchan, another Hindi translation of the great English dramatist was put upon the stage at the Fine Arts Theatre, New Delhi by the Little Theatre Group. The Drama critic of The Hindustan Times reported it in the following terms:

"At the Fine Arts Theatre this evening Othello in Hindi turned out to be quite a treat. It was perhaps a measure of the play's rapport that the Prime Minister and a few members of the Cabinet sat through its length despite the emergency."

The efforts of Bhartendu and his contemporaries could not make an advance upon the stage-craft of the Parsi stage. And afterwards, drama completely isolated itself from the stage as it was not written to be acted. The plays of Jai Shankar Prasad are closet-dramas. Coming to the more recent times, we see the efforts of Pritivi Theatres (Bombay, 1945) and Indian Peoples Theatrical Association (Bombay, 1942) which experimented successfully with the recent trends in the stage-craft, acting etc. But these are more influenced by the realistic twentieth century stage of the West than by Shakespeare's. Even so Shakespeare and his stage still haunt the minds of the people who think of establishing a 'Shakespeare Manch'.

1. H.R. Bachchan, Preface to his translation of Macbeth, p.23.