CHAPTER XIV.

LITERARY URDU DRAMA IN THE PUNJAB
As the Parsi Theatrical Companies from the very beginning were commercial enterprises, they valued the least sophisticated play writing and went strongly for the popular appeal. It was the labouring classes and the semi-literates who frequented the dramatic shows most and therefore the company manager would have no truck with any drama that may rise even a little above the understanding and taste of their usual audiences. Thus it was that the standards were kept purposely low and entertainment value was kept in view and emphasised to the neglect of aesthetic, artistic or morally instructive or constructively inspiring. An appeal to the religious sentimentality was cheaper affair still and the commercial theatre went whole hog to exploit the religiosity of the Indian masses. Here the artistic side of dramatic presentation could be neglected more callously still. The companies or other commercial groups given to entertaining people against monetary remuneration had no eyes for any drama which aimed at serious moral instruction, social reform, or even artistic finish. These were however, being written from the very beginning and Panjab contributed its quota towards the general pool. These were doomed for the most part to remain stageless for a very long time, till after the company boom was over and most of these socially more responsible creations had already turned into dead stock.

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILIT AND THE SERIOUS DRAMA

In this, the author of 'Good Peaseman' led the way. Abdul Majid who wrote this play on matrimonial reform,
PUbiti discussed in the dramatic form Albert Bill, a subject of the day for heated controversy. It was, however, not a serious affair and had poor quality as a drama. Maulvi Zafar Ali of Lahore is credited with the authorship of a play entitled Jang-e-Roos-e-Jan (Russian Japan War). This war was fought in 1905 in which a small Asiatic country, Japan, was able to triumph over the Russian tsardom.

Brij Mohan Dattatreya, a renowned scholar and critic of Urdu, contributed some good plays. 'Raj Bulari' was one prescribed a course of study of the Panjab University. His themes were of high social significance but his dramas failed to influence the contemporary practices, for these were not meant to be staged.

'TBAHMAN' OF HABET SEN.

There came a really bold experiment and 'Brahman' a play with heavenly bodies for characters was conceived by Kamwar Sen, one time principal of law college Lahore.

HAKIM AHMED SHUJJAH AND THE DRAMA OF TRANSITION.

He was followed by Hakim Ahmed Shujjah, assistant secretary, Legislative Council Panjab and editor 'Hazar Dastan' Urdu monthly, with his transition dramas which were a compromise between the old and the new. His 'Gunah' was staged in Lahore 'January 1923' at Alexander Theatre and like some of Nasr's plays had a double plot - Balvant Gargi in Rung Mauch has mentioned the date of its publication as 1921, which is not correct.
This was a concession to the prevailing custom with the Company Theatre but in the published version, unity of action was kept intact.

Next play by him was 'Bharat Ka Lai' in which he successfully employed Hindustani, the spoken Indian language, in its dialogues. Some Bengali dramas, 'Kira', 'Tara' etc. were also translated by him into Urdu. Hakim Shujah, wrote for above the prevailing theatrical level of his times and therefore could not be a favourite with the commercial stage. Mohd. Rassain Azad of Oriental College, Lahore, started writing 'Akbar' which was later completed by Faiz Dehlvi. The book had only a semblance of the dramatic form and could not be called a drama proper.

Then came Intiaz Ali Taj with his epoch making 'Anarkali'. The opening lines of his introduction to this play read as under (in translation) "I wrote Anarkali in 1932. In its present form the theatres would not accept it and I, on my side, could not accept the improvements they suggested. After having studied the Western drama I could not muster courage to publish it a decade before. Knowing the state of Urdu drama for what it is, I have no hesitation to publish it even today." This was in 1932. The publication created a stir in the Urdu world. Here was a play originally conceived and artistically executed, free from the blemishes associated with the drama of the popular theatre of the times. Sir Mohd. Iqbal, Mumshi Prem Chand and Prof. Bukhari were among those who paid liberal praise to 'Anarkali' (1932).
tributes to the high merits of the play. Syd. Ali Ashar, Director Bharat Biyakul Company Ltd. Opined, "In Urdu Language this remains the only play written for the purpose of acting."

"Anarkali" was a bold and determined departure. It bid farewell to the rhymed prose, verse-prose alternations in speeches and out of context songs and dances. The story was only legend but 'Anarkali' for the 1st time tried to recreate truth, the pure unalloyed historical truth and achieve verisimilitude. There was no 'manglachar' (Benediction), no fixed scenes, no supernatural wonders, no farcical comics, no vulgarisation of history or degeneration of taste. Balvant Gargi lays emphasis on its 'poetic realism', on the truthful portrayal of grandeur of the Mogul court and palaces. There is subtle psychology drawn out with adroitness of touch praiseworthy in the extreme. Emotions clash, filial affections and violent hate tear at each other. The drama is a powerful and poignant tragedy.

Thus with the publication 'Anarkali' came to surface the struggle that had gone on underneath for a number of years between the Company Theatre on one side and a product of art that was Anarkali or Imitiaz Ali Taj, on the other side.

'Theanarkali' was written for the stage but no company would accept it. They insisted on changes, which the author doggedly refused to introduce. Thus was raised in the

1. Imitiaz Ali Taj: Introduction to 'Anarkali' (1932).
panjab the banner of revolt against the rut into which
the Company-stage had fallen. At about this time, 'Tehrik'
an Urdu monthly published from Lahore devoted itself
almost entirely to the appreciation of drama and direction
of taste pertaining more especially to this particular form
of literature. It preached and advocated the advent of
'principled' dramas as against the 'unprincipled' ones
which meant a call to revolution against the prevailing
taste. Syd. Tafazzal Hussain Nazir translated Shakespeare's
'Julius Caesar' in 1923; it was found good by the authors
of Natak Sagar but the stage had no use for it.

COMMUNAL FACTOR.

'Takshi Panjab' by Kishan Chand Zeba of Lahore
was proscribed by Panjab Government being allegedly
seditious in content and theme. Although Zeba was a
prolific playwright and wrote about social reform and
patriotic themes, he never rose about mediocrity. The
authors of 'Natak Sagar' are spiteful towards Zeba and
his dramatic capacity and call him a 'Polluter of
Language' and 'murderer of a drama' when commenting on
his play 'Dan Vir Karan'. Nanak Chand Nas wrote also in
the same strain. In the matter of language, they were not
purists and employed something near the spoken Hindustani.

In plays with Hindu themes they used Sanskrit words in place of Persian or Arabic and employed a special vocabulary spiritually akin to the subject matter they handled. In a way it was a healthier trend but growing linguism of the times hastened to condemn it, probably taking it to be a communal manifestation. Their criticism was unsparing. Outside the commercial stage drama and dramatists were falling prey to the communal virus and the non-commercial plays began to acquire features distinctly different according to the religion of the author, symptomatic of the deep rooted evil bedeviling the atmosphere around. Criticism in Natak Sagar was directed against the mixed language used by Zeba and Maz, which was neither pure Urdu, nor pure Hindi.

Zeba wrote for the amateur dramatic clubs also (Mainly Ram Leela clubs) such plays as 'Dast Vir Karon' Kaya Palat' (the theme is patriotism) Krishan Sudama etc. These are all very ordinary works and the authors of Natak Sagar have nothing but contempt for them yet these are indicative of a trend, a development of the Ras tradition under the influence of the Company theatre which held its field much after its fostering Company drama breathed its last.

Another play with a frankly political theme was 'Bedari' by Hakim Ashar Dehlvi, Editor 'Tehrik', Lahore. The play was not stage-worthy.

These dramas, however, commanded good circulation in the public and were avidly read by semi-literate school boys mainly.

MUNSHI AHAD HUSAIN AND 'HUSAN KA BAZAR'.

By sheer good luck, a fine drama 'Husan Ka Bazar' by Munshi Ahad Husain, editor 'Shabab-i-Urdu' Lahore came to be staged at Globe Theatre, Lahore but failed to impress the spectators.

TRANSLATIONS.

Nur Ilahi and Mohd Umar, who jointly produced Natak Sagar (1932) the 1st really great book on the subject of world drama to be written in Urdu language, were themselves great devotees of the dramatic art. They had a plan to translate and adapt world drama classics into Urdu and as a result of joint endeavour were able to produce and publish a number of plays by the time their treatise on the art was out of press. 'Rooh-i-Siyast' (based on the struggles of Abraham Lincoln) 'Qazaq' (Translation-adaptation of Schiller play) 'Bigest Dil' (Translation of a comedy by Moliere), 'Zafar Ki Maut' (Translation of a play by Goethe) 'Tin Topian' (a humorous comedy) Natak Zatha (Ancient Indian stories in Hindustani) 'Drama Ghana' (A collection of original one-act plays) are the books of drama enlisted as having come as a result of their joint venture 'Sapoot'. 'Aa Bail Mujhe Kar', 'Mahabbat ki Bazi' were announced as ready for publication. It has not been ascertained whether these ever saw the light of the day.

Losing Battle with the Film.

By about this time (early thirties) a poignant situation had developed in the province. While drama was getting self-conscious as an art form and was evoking a lot of enlightened interest on the part of the highly
1 educated, the theatre suddenly found itself in the throes of a life and death struggle with its mortal adversary, the new born film and fighting a losing battle with the prospect of ultimate doom staring in the face. Thus it was that at a juncture, the intelligentsia was planning to take the stage forward with a big leap, or suffered a surreptitious attack by the voracious all embracing film industry and the hopes of promoting a highly developed drama and stage in this and fell an easy prey to its ruthlessness.

The stage held its ground against the silent picture but by about 1935 the Urdu Theatre had already lost to the talking film which by then had successfully contended against the stage drama for public favour and had definitely published the latter out of the field. There was a mad rush to convert 'Mandoos' into Cinema Halls all over the province and every where in the rest of the country votaries of stage felt that they have lost their cause. The triumph of the film was quick and complete. Pessimism filled the air. A visible dread of the future is writ large in the depressing observation made in Natak Sagar, towards the close of the story of the drama:

2 it narrates with such gusto to the art, of drama, 'Hazar Dustan' 'Shahab-1' Urdu 'Humay' and 'Harvan' urdu monthly magazines published from Lahore were devoting their spaces to critical and research studies on stage practices and urdu dramaturgy -C.S. -

Nur Ilahi and Mohd Umar: Natak Sagar Ke Do Do Bab (1935) p.94.
But the hopes of an early revival of the stage were not realised. The film industry in India made a poor start, incorporating all the features of lowest stage practices of the times as it did, votaries of developed drama pitched their hopes high and thought that ultimate glory will come to a resurgent and more vigorous drama the resurrection of which seemed to them only a question of time. It was hard to believe that doom for the commercial stage was final and for good, it had come so incredibly suddenly.