DRAST IN THE PANJAB

CHAPTER XV

AMATEUR HEBREW DRAMA AND ITS MEDIA
Now that commercial theatre disappeared, ousted by the new born science-backed film Industry, the amateur drama which had had only a sporadic existence so far, found its long awaited opportunity. But every thing around it was ‘raw and untrained’ and it had to grope its way through trial and error. Staging a drama by the amateurs is a very tough job, exacting and without recompense, Khawaja Ahmad Abbasi, who has been connected with a number of amateur theatrical groups speaks from personal experience when he discusses the handicaps in the path of amateur dramatic activity. In an article contributed by him in, as late as 1955 he writes : ‘Consider the frustrating limitations of the amateur theatrical group. A band of young men and women, with the best of intentions and the highest of motives, form themselves into a group. After a normal working (and tiring) day, they devote their evenings and holidays to rehearsing a play. Since the time for rehearsals is necessarily short (two or three hours), it takes quite a long time to prepare one-act play. They then have to beg, borrow or improvise stage scenery, costumes and décor out of their own meagre resources or circulate a begging bowl, among their friends. They must then secure police permits, hire a hall (which will charge them anything up to Rs. 500 for a single evening) print and sell tickets, do whatever little publicity is possible and then put on the play.

The standard of production is inevitably poor the curtains and lighting improvised, the acting lacking in that finish and polish which comes only from intense and
and prolonged rehearsals. There is one show, perhaps two
or in rare cases three shows. And that is all. These
observations would ring all the more truer if applied to
conditions in the Panjab some twenty years back. Prospects
were far less encouraging and handicap more difficult to
surmount with the result that the opportunity offered
by the loss of the professional stage was no opportunity
at all, for no vacuum was in fact created. The films now
took over from the commercial theatre and instead set
themselves as an institution in the cultural life of the
people. There was actually no hunger for dramatic shows, for
the nascent film satisfied their aesthetic needs better
than any amateur dramatic production could ever hope to do.

Lahore had some studios too. Pancholi Studio was one. A number
of producer companies also had their head quarters there.

Very few dramas were written in Urdu after Anarkali of Intiaz
Ali Taj. All those who had any claims to talent in writing
and staging plays were drawn by the new born film industry
and this led to the paucity of stage worthy plays. The
drama enthusiasts had to depend upon to the old inferior
stuff with which the markets were still flooded. But good
drama forsook the stage. 'Anarkali' of Intiaz Ali Taj was
produced in a number of colleges by the student's dramatic
clubs. Khalsa College Amritsar Drama Club created history by
performing Laila Majnu in 1938. This, however, was in the

From Introduction to his 'Tim Natak' P. 19.
Away from Lahore, amateur dramatic activity was small and very much restricted. The schools showed little interest in dramatic activity. Except the most casual, the amateur actor got his inspiration and learnt his first lessons in acting from the films or worse still from the Leela Theatre which now was a more regular and standardized activity than the drama in the Colleges. To this form of amateur theatre we will revert presently.

There was no regular training school anywhere to train the young talent in histrionics and whatever they picked up from the Leela Theatre was in the old Parsi Theatrical style and hardly suited the needs of the new drama that held its ground in the Colleges. At about the time Matak Sagar was published the colleges provided a refuge to the Urdu drama. "Urdu plays have replaced the English ones in the schools and colleges of the Panjab, where the former are now staged in preference to the latter" observe the authors of this treatise.

Very soon, full length drama also found itself out of bound in the colleges of the province and one-act play replaced it almost completely. Saadit Hasan Kinto (who wrote more than 100 plays for Lahore Radio), Rajinder Singh Bedi, Cplinder Nath Ashak and Krishan Chander became favourite.

It must, however, be said that so far as colleges are concerned, very few one-act plays were staged during the period under discussion. Whenever such a play was staged, it was usually part of a variety show at some function of the institution. Dramatic activity in the colleges was not so moral as should have reduced results. It was the radio ur I, No. Umars Matak Sagar Ke Do Bab i 30 P. i (Translation mine). C. S.
and not the college, no. even the journal, that provided the chief incentive to the playwrights as the broadcasting house would give wider publicity and better remuneration than either the college stage or journal space could provide.

LABORS BORES.

Lahore, the capital city presented a some what different and more encouraging scene. Here a number of amateur groups grew up and subsisted in due course. While none of these caught mentionable proportions, they kept the footlights burning. Saraswati Stage Society flourished in 1926 and produced many Urdu plays. Later still, another theatre group came into existence with which Rai Bahadur Ram Rakha Mal Bhandari was prominently associated. The society employed the Y.N.C.A. Hall for its performances, a majority of these being in Urdu.

Government College, Lahore led others in staging plays of Urdu Language. 'Anarkali' of Taj was staged here with resounding success. Here late Prof. A.S. Bekhari initiated the movement and from Bekhari Principal G.D. Sendhi took over. This college kept up its tradition of one full play a year upto the partition (1947). Punjab Drama League, a powerful body of Drama connoisseurs of Lahore came into existence in these years and was responsible for building in India, the 1st open Air Theatre in the Lawrence Gardens Lahore in 1940. Among those who were associated with the new drama movement were Mrs. Neerja Richards, Mr. G.D. Sendhi, Mrs. Champa Mangat Rai, Prof. Sheela Bhanot and Frank Thakar Das and these were the people who had a good chance to produce plays in this open air theatre founded by them.
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MRS. NORAH RICHARDS' CONTRIBUTION.

GREATFUL TRIBUTE, AT THIS JUNCTURE IS DUE TO MRS. Norah Richards, who is a foreign lady, had the greatest hand in shaping out the Indian language drama in the Punjab. She remains the founder of the amateur drama movement, Urdu as well as Panjabi in this province. G.D. Sondhi himself a prominent worker in this field, has written thus:

"Mention of theatres brings to my mind the great contribution to the revival of drama in Punjab made by that brave lady Mrs. Norah Richards. Her wholehearted devotion to drama is responsible for lifting the stage from its old time banalities of melodrama. Many of the big personalities of the drama world Prithvi Raj, Bal Raj Sahni, Iftias Ali 'Taj' and most talented of all, the late Mr. A.S. Bokhari, were directly or indirectly influenced by her revival of drama. It was her open-air theatre in Dyal Singh College, Lahore that first put into my head the idea of building open air theatres."

Three Arts Club was founded at Simla in 1943 which staged Urdu plays only. This club gave us Romesh Mehta, who has written several plays in Urdu, on development themes mostly, The club shifted to Delhi with the central government employees who constituted it mainly 'Hamara Gaam' by Romesh Mehta was staged in 1951. 'Under Secretary' is a humorous comedy and 'Roti ke Beti' is another social play with liquidation of untouchability for its theme, 'Hamara Gaam' was later approved by the government for subsidised performances and was played at various places in the country.

1. He established Prithvi Theatre, Bombay.
2. G.D. Sondhi: I remember (The Tribune, 20.7.59)
3. The Amateur Dramatic Club Simla (A.D.C.) was founded a century back and produced English plays. After independence it has staged quite a large number of Hindi and Panjabi dramas Balmant Gargi: AMATEUR THEATRE. AFTER INDEPENDENCE. ADVANCE JULY-SEPTEMBER 1968.
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'Zamana' has been very popular with the college clubs.

AMATEUR LEELA CLUBS.

The 2nd branch of dramatic activity was the amateur Leela Club, connected mainly with the Hindu festival of Dasara as an auxiliary religious activity. Among Hindus of the Panjab Ram Ram Leela came to be staged by local clubs who used the improvised box-set stage of the conception of Parei Theatre. They would call themselves by such names as Krishna Theatrical Company, Rama Natak Club, Ram Leela Club etc.

On the approach of Dasara a city would be agog with preparations and usually more than one group rehearsed at various points in the city and competed with each other and were quite popular. These clubs principally meant to stage the story of Ramayana enlarged their scope and would produce plays of religious nature from all possible sources. Plays like Bilva Mangal, Sharvan Kumar, Hai Damyanti, Vir Abhimanyu, Bharadwaj Partigya were a great attraction and were their repertoire. A large number of these plays retained Urdu for their language.

RADIO IN THE FILD.

Besides college amateur stage where the developed form of Urdu drama was wanted and the Leela Theatre which was more extensive but far less artistically developed or catholic, there opened up another arena for the really talent ed at the time the Radio Station at Lahore. to

Balwant Gargi: Amateur Theatre After Independence. ADVANCE
July-Sept. 1958. P.29. 2. Leela Theatre has been treated fully in the Chapter on popular drama.
partition this was the only Radio Station serving the Panjab province. Here the beginning was made with historical and semi-historical plays and romances. By now Hakim Shujah and Imtiaz Ali Taj had staged a come back disgusted with the low dramatic taste of the film world and provided Radio worthy versions of plays to the Lahore Station. A good number of Radio versions of English and other western plays were got prepared and broadcast. Plays were produced at the rate of one in a week.

RADIO PLAY.

Eventually the Radio Station turned to the small Radio play proper. It was a sort of a one-act play easily communicable to the audience on the receiving sets through the medium of sound alone. Some of the leading one-act radio play writers of Urdu were the product of Radio Station Lahore. Very quickly the young talent mastered the Radio play technique produced small plays eminently suited to the broadcasting medium. These new plays were too 'lean' for the stage and only a small number of these were picked up by the College drama enthusiast professor and staged with the help of his students.

In most cases these production suffered from all the handicaps of an amateur performance. The stage was not sound conscious, the equipment with the team was always meagre, make up left much to be desired and with the rare exception of one or two actors none in any one group could lay claim to any histrionic talent or stage sense. Co-education was so limited that it was almost impossible to procure girls and make them appear on the stage with

1 K.S. Duggal in Introduction to 'Tin Nat' 2 K.P. Singh Duggal 'APNH PANHAR, PANJABI DUNYA, DUGGAL ANK (May-June 1962) P.12.
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boys. A drama in a men college would have an all-boy cast, while the case was opposite in a women college, (which were very few in number and suffered from all sorts of taboos and prohibitions). A really good play was in fact not wanted by a college and the obvious and the didactic was preferred over the subtle and the artistic.

ONE ACTER AND THE MONTHLY JOURNAL.

A.I.R. became drama conscious a few years after the publication of 'Natak Sagar.' This Urdu treatise mentions the publication of a collection of Urdu one-act plays 'Drame Chand' by the authors of the work but is otherwise silent about this new type of drama which was already in the process of inception, visibly so in the monthly journals of the times. Urdu one-act play can claim the Panjab as its birth place as most of the monthly publications that got interested in the one-act play started in right earnest about this time when Lahore Radio Station took to it quite seriously. The Radio found itself drawn more and more to the one-act play as its radio worthiness was discovered and the new talent became available. The one-act play found for itself growing acceptance on all sides by the radio, the amateur College stage and the journal, except the professional theatre which had by now practically ceased to exist. The full drama, in so far as Urdu language was concerned was the business of the more lucrative film industry.

SA-ADIT HASAN MINTO.

Among those who became famous as Urdu play-wright for the Radio, the name of Sa-adit Hasan Minto should rank at the top. He was a psycho-analyst of the Freudian school, possessed of the sense of the dramatic in life around and a mastery over the use of language almost unique. Known more for his stories, he was equally adept at creating dramatic
situations and working them into the mould of one-act plays. Some of his plays are immortal creations. More than one hundred radio plays and features came out and his prolific pen. Some of his plays found their way to the College amateur stage and were quite successful. He was liked for his craftsmanship as a playwright, his easy and apt use of the spoken Urdu, psychological depth and detail and yet he did not write a full play for the stage in the whole of his life.

RAJINDER SINGH BEDI.

Rajinder Singh Bedi was another great name in the years 1942-45 when he wrote a number of very well-organised one-act plays and published them in the paper. There is good psychology, and very subtle character study. Plots are meticulously worked and leave nothing to be desired. The social and economic and environmental back-ground is well related to characterisation. Themes of his plays are profound too profound in fact for the radio listeners to be easily comprehensible. His 'Khawaja Sara', a typical creation, is a gloomy social tragedy. The play is yet another Minto-like extremely convincing study in Friedian psychosysis on the one hand, on the other hand it is a powerful drama full of gripping surprises, suspense and conflict, with a well-built well timed climax and resolution. All the same Bedi wrote in a difficult language, and is more subtle than he should be to win popularity for himself. He was therefore, read but not played. Rajinder Singh joined Radio service and event
Krishan Chander, principally a man of fiction was also at Lahore in these days. He too wrote plays for the Lahore Radio and published more in the monthlies. Upinder Nath Ashk starting his career as playwright a little later than this set wrote in Urdu in the beginning. Krishan Chander and Upinder Nath Ashk also wrote features and plays for the Lahore Radio and were occasionally on the air. Of these Ashk turned to Hindi writing, sometimes later, more so after Independence while Minto, Krishan Chander and Bedi turned to screen deserting the less remunerative stage or even Radio. Drama never was their 1st love from the very beginning. Thus the one-act plays and features that these young people of the new generation wrote for A.I.R. or for the monthlies, were only secondary writings on their part and as it seems, they were not serious about them. Yet there is a sort of a deathless quality about Krishan Chander's 'Sarai Ke Bahar' or Bedi's 'Khawaja Sara' and will satisfy the high taste of a modern connoisseur. But Panjab in spite of the talent available, failed to avail of it in full and away from the Radio receiving sets (which were few in number and confined to the cities mainly) and the sporadic amateur performances, there was no drama worth the name and film ruled the roost. The theatre therefore, to all practical purposes failed to be exploited as a vehicle of mass entertainment or education and culture up to the last days of the united Panjab.

SONG AND DRAMA PUBLICITY.

During the war (1939) to (1945) the public relation Department of the Panjab Government organised a Song and
Drama publicity unit with its head quarters at Lahore, mainly for the benefit of the armed forces and recruitment drives. The Unit remained active even after the war was over but with no concrete results for the development of drama in the provinces. Its methods were rustic and crude and no artistic quality was aimed at.

Then came the partition holocaust with its preparation years of suspense and civil strife and the accompanying popular commotion that resulted in the exchange of population on religious basis, with the result that Punjab became rent in two politically and culturally different parts, with far reaching consequences for the development of Urdu drama. Climate for the subsistence of Urdu drama in the Indian part of the Punjab became unwholesome and it did not take long for Urdu drama to break its last as a developing cultural activity in this part of the country.

After the partition, the newly established radio station at Jullundur retained Urdu features and plays for its broadcasts for sometime only to discard them in favour of Hindi and Panjabi substitutes to which it switched over quite early in its career, as a result of the new post-independence language policy. Gurbux Singh Makhmoor Jallandhar and Ram Lal Piqar Taunwai, the latter specialising in humour and satire of a very brilliant type, wrote copiously for the Jallandhar radio station but soon switched over to Panjabi after sometime till both of them broke with the Radio Station altogether. Urdu drama was dethroned as was the language in which it was written and became a subsidiary and secondary affair.