CHAPTER XIX

THE CURRENT SCENE
We will touch here briefly upon the conditions in the Indian part of the partitioned Panjab after 15th August, 1947. Most of the story has been narrated already in the preceding chapters dealing with the latest phases of dramatic activity under different headings such as Urdu, Hindi, Panjab drama and the small opera movement.

The present scene is one of all round pessimism. Suddenly but decidedly theatrical activity has come almost to stop.

Urdu language has since been replaced by Panjabi and Hindi with the result that death has come to Urdu drama where as neither Panjabi nor Hindi drama has come up to fill the vacuum.

I.P.T.A. took the flame of the living tongue of the people to the countryside. The opera movement had its day, but with the subsiding of kisan and labour movements Panjab branch of I.P.T.A. broke down and the dramatic movement associated with the people's movement has expired. No opera is performed these days anywhere in the Panjab.

A.I.R. Jullundur follows the routine and puts on the air, originals, translations and adaptations, important and unimportant plays. Panjabi plays for rural programmes are regularly being broadcast. The radio station holds competitions also for the students and non-students and operettas are also broadcast from its studio. All this has the staleness of routine business about it. Moreover the radio drama does not catch and is not capable of kindling any dramatic activity. On the other hand, it militates against the stage sense of the playwrights and the listeners alike.
Some Hindi dramas are staged here and there in the colleges. Panjab Languages Department holds competitions throughout the state on district, divisional and state levels but the results have been progressively discouraging.

Government of India instituted a scheme for subsidising the performances of certain approved plays by amateur groups but the ill-conceived scheme has ended in smoke.

Panjabi is the dominant language of the bilingual state of Panjab and as has been seen, some really good drama has been produced in the language. But the surprising fact is that Delhi came to be the new venue for Panjabi dramatics and no other Panjab city has any stage or dramatic performances worth the name.

At present, Panjabi drama throughout is at its lowest ebb. There are no good amateur clubs in the cities, in the colleges or anywhere else. The organisations like Roop-Kala Sangam, Rang Manch, Panjabi Rang Manch have not produced many plays.

The University youth festivals do not draw good teams and such is the case with the Languages Department competitions.

Some of the best Hindi dramatists from Panjab have left the state and have settled in other states, mostly in U.P.

What about Chandigarh? There stands in sector 18 the imposing structure of Tagore Theatre but it is only a hall with a dias. Rarely a drama is staged in this hall and the building is usually put to non-theatrical uses.

Some open air theatres came to be built in the colleges of the state but like Tagore Theatre, these are utilized generally for purposes other than drama.
Of late the State Public Relations Department engaged some dramatic troupes who would play to the village audiences on developmental themes. A scheme for opening open air theatres in the villages was also announced, but the theatrical activity associated with these Government troupes was casually taken and not a single good play was written or produced, nor any actor caught the fancy of the people.

State Government had a Department of Cultural Affairs in the making. News appeared in the press that a school for imparting training in acting will be opened and will be attached to the Tagore Theatre. The threat to the Indian borders in 1962 and consequent emergency nipped the good in the bud.

National Emergency is now of one year duration. Drama is one of its main casualties, at least in the Panjab. There is a general and woeful failure to realize and recognize drama as the most powerful instrument of mass propagation as well as entertainment.

There is no mass movement among the peasantry or the labourers and the political drama to back these up has therefore packed off.

The public relations dramatic squads on Government pay rolls have refused to develop and have not gone much above theatricality. Neither the department nor the people have taken their art more than casually.

The Sangeet Natak Akademy, Delhi is only of academic interest and has no impact on the theatre in the Panjab. It has not touched the masses, not even the playwright of the Panjab. Its existence in the state has not been felt at all.

Radio, as has been noted, cannot do much to inspire a dramatic movement among the people.
The state of emergency has put the revival of the dramatic art out of question, at least for the present. What may be the cause of this dismal situation? National Emergency cannot be the only factor. The rival pull of the film may be another. But where drama is a live institution, it has been invoked most during national crises, for drama has greater mass appeal than all other means of propagation. In this respect, it outmatches the screen and is incomparably superior when it comes to the printed word or even poetry and direct speech.

We know that the Sangeet in Haryana had its latest revival during the first world war when this form of popular theatre was successfully utilized in the service of war propaganda.

Drama has, therefore, missed its due recognition in the psychology of the nation as a potent medium of propaganda. Since the art has a past history of association with the morally low, it is still considered to be an instrument of cheap and erotic entertainment, unfit for the serious minded people. This erroneous impression should have been fought down in time and drama should have been conceded its due place and priority in the schemes of national development envisaged in the national 5 years plans.

Drama is not only a peace time pursuit, it can be the instrument of War preparation as well. It can prepare the nation for heroic action and inspire them to work for national integration, development and defence.

Unless the nation is awakened to the great value of drama as an institution of national progress, the art will be face to face with a bleak future in the Panjab, a state known for its dramatic talent, and the most ancient seat
of theatrical activity in India, in which the classical Sanskrit drama took birth and was nursed into what blooming thing it came to be later on, in the hands of masters like Kali Dasa and others.