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“Acrobating between Tradition and Modern”: The Roots Movement and Theatre’s Negotiation with Modernity in India

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Abstract

When playwrights like Girish Karnad joined the stage after the nation’s independence in 1947, the Indian theatre was suffering from acute identity crises being torn between its ancient cultural past and its more recent colonial legacy, which gave birth to hybrid dramatic forms. Several theatre personalities at that time articulated the aspirations of a newly independent nation through their attempts to decolonize the aesthetics of modern Indian theatre by retracing its roots in the repository of India’s classical and folk traditions. In the light of these developments my paper aims to look at some of the diverse indigenous forms that had been deployed with much success in plays like Karnad’s *Hayavadana* or Tanvir’s *Charandas Chor*, thereby significantly contributing to the larger project of decolonization after independence. At the same time the paper also wishes to interrogate whether this ambivalent process of *Indianization*, sometimes loosely brought under the umbrella of ‘Roots Movement’, is quintessentially ‘anti-modern’, or whether it is actually an attempt to evolve a discourse of an ‘alternate modernity’ by subverting some of the paradigms of its European counterpart which are actually a by-product of both capitalism and imperialism in the West.

[**Keywords:** Modern Indian theatre; Girish Karnad; alternate modernity; tradition, Roots Movement; Indianization]

In the final pages of Sunil Gangopadhyay’s *Those Days*, a historical fiction spanning around the momentous canvas of 19th century Bengal, or more precisely the time that came to be known as *Banglar Nabajagaran* or Bengal Renaissance, Nabin, its flamboyant protagonist, modelled as one the progenitors of this new awakening, expressed his visionary death wish in the following words: ‘I was born to a race of hapless men and women, crushed even now, under the heel of a foreign power... Ah! Will this dark age never be spent...I want to hear the cannon booming at midnight a hundred times, ringing out the old and ringing in the new—the twentieth century’ (588). While, his early demise left his dreams woefully unrealized, his spiritual successor Pran Gopal looking out into the night ‘heard its footsteps in the distance and his eyes glowed with the light of another—a more glorious world’ (588). Indeed, the new century dawned with a promise of a long cherished freedom, but even after Empire’s dissolution the vestige of the colonial past lurked beneath the veneer of the postcolonial nation and made its presence felt in every sphere of our cultural life. So the generation that came after

independence suffered from a cultural schizophrenia, being caught between two worlds—one that refused to die and the other that was still struggling to be born. Thus when playwrights like Girish Karnad associated themselves with stage productions post 1947, the Indian theatre, much like his own creation, Hayavadana—the human with an equine head, was still trying to grapple with an acute identity crisis, being torn between the cultural past of the country and the more recent colonial legacy, which gave birth to a curious melange that can be termed neither exactly Western nor precisely Indian, but perhaps *both* ‘Western’ and ‘Indian’ (Mee 142) at the same time. Expounding the causes behind this strange hybridization Karnad explains:

My generation was the first to come of age after India became Independent of British rule. It therefore had to face a situation in which tensions implicit until then had come out in the open and demanded to be resolved without apologia or self justification: tension between the cultural past of the country and the colonial past, between attractions of the Western modes of thought and our own traditions, and finally between the various visions of the future that opened up once the common cause of political freedom was achieved. (Girish Karnad 1994:1, qtd in Erin B. Mee p. 141)

Indeed the quest for an appropriate theatre form that would resolve these contradictory stains became a part of the larger ontological questions that these dramaturgists asked themselves: ‘Who am I? ...Where do I belong in this complex social structure in this complex world? What are my times? What is my language? What is my theatre? What is the language of my theatre?’ (Badal Sircar: *The Changing Language of Theatre*. p.9). While Karnad’s Hayavadana, in his bid to integrate himself in the human society as a ‘complete man’ faithfully participated in a range of material, institutional, and cultural practices of the newly emergent nation—*Civics, Politics, Patriotism, Nationalism, Indianization* et al and crooned out the national anthem with a great gusto, the Indian thespians attempted to *reverse*, even if it was partial, ‘the colonial course of contemporary theatre’ (Awasti 48), by recovering from amnesia the traces of their roots as a way of asserting their cultural autonomy.

In 1955, Satyajit Ray’s rendition of *Pather Panchanli* which became a watershed mark in shaping the cultural history of post 1947 India has a particularly poignant scene where Durga wakes child Apu by opening his eye with her hands, and as Apu stares wide through his tattered blanket, the camera fixes upon Apu’s gaze. This may be read as a succinct metaphor for the opening of the eye of Indian consciousness searching for a collective and national self-definition. An awakening into a new realization, a gaze that now looks inward at its own history to enable the present and reinterprets myths and traditions to patch and darn the rich tapestry of its Indigenous culture. Thus the decades from 1950s to 1980s may be roughly deemed as an era of Indianization when the nation was gradually trying to rediscover itself by removing the mantle of the colonial culture. In 1961, Habib Tanvir called for ‘our own plays about our own problems in our own forms’. So for

at least next thirty years after independence by ‘disclaiming colonial practices and by seeking to reclaim classical and other precolonial Indian traditions of performance as the only viable media of effective decolonization’ (Dharwadker 2), *The Sangeet Natak Akademy* under the stewardship of Dr. Suresh Awasthi, culled out a whole new gamut of indigenous folk forms— *Nautanki, Ramlila, Krishnalila, Swang, Kabigaan, Gambhira, Tamasha, Yakshagana, Kuchipudi* etc drawing upon the epic and the folk resources of the country. The thespians of course, differed substantially in their approach to the tradition which was often mediated by vastly different cultural and linguistic articulations. However, this difficult and often impossible search for a postcolonial *Indian* theatre as a collective category within the larger ideational context of decolonization led to a widespread rejection of the models of Western realism tradition on stage, which itself was dying out in Europe, giving way to new and exciting experimental forms.

In this heady quest for rediscovering the centuries-old roots, theatre personalities like Habib Tanvir, K.N. Pannikar, Ratan Thiyam, Girish Karnad or Vijay Tendulkar variously experimented with the paraphernalia of ‘folk’ theatre. The Marxist theatre veteran Utpal Dutt, for instance, showed an abiding interest in the folk form of *yatra* to reach out to the masses. In his forceful defence of *yatra* *In Search of Form*, Dutt praises *yatra* (*yatra*) for having the potentials for a revolutionary theatre. Forms such as *yatra*, ‘evolved over centuries and continued to adapt from and adapt to contemporary reality’ (Katyul xviii) —whether this means satirical digs at status quo or topical references to current affairs and local scandals, all are adroitly interpolated into their performance routines. *Yatra*, which Dutt argues persuasively, ‘has refused to die with the incursions of Capitalism into countryside’, unlike ‘many other folk forms have been wiped out’ (Dutt 464) is ‘theatre at its primitive best’ (Dutt 465):

[it] relies for its dramaturgy on figures of history and mythology who are well known to its audience—Mughal Emperors, British proconsuls, revolutionary martyrs, even Lenin, Mao and Che, the new mythical heroes...But the elements [of the folk form] must be there, robust proletarian audiences dictating their shape, size and nature... [it upholds] a mythical world where even Mao Tsetung must conform to the requirements of a *Yatra*-hero...The *yatra* can take any subject from any country but must necessarily mould it into its own folk-lore. Compare this to the petty-bourgeois experimenters of the city who can take the most local subject but must necessarily Europeanize it, and make it a[...]bastard, revolting in its rootlessness. (Dutt 465-66).

Dutt himself experimented with the form in ‘*yatra*-plays’ as he calls them, like *Sanyasir Tarabari* (*The Crusade*), *Tutu Meer* and the critically acclaimed *Tiner Toloar* [*The Tin Sword*]. He even ventured into a direction of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* in a *Yatra* style. Like Dutt several of his contemporaries were experimenting with different ingredients of Sanskrit as well as folk theatre by

incorporating masks, mime, half-curtains, dance and music in their plays dealing with diverse subjects and belonging to different genres such as *Hayavadana*, *Ghasiram Kotwal* or *Charandas Chor*, just to name a few. 'This was a time when varied plays were being written and staged in different parts of the country with exciting linguistic manoeuvres and transfers from one region to another.' (Dutt 2:2013) Nonetheless one must acknowledge that even before the *Roots Movement* the Leftist Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), out of their interest in the various living traditions in folk culture, explored many of these ethnic performative traditions by weaving them into their theatrical presentations. In the light of these developments my paper aims to look at some of these theatres, and at the same time interrogate whether this 'encounter with tradition' as Suresh Awasti terms it, loosely brought under the umbrella of 'Roots Movement', is 'anti-modern in its essence' or, whether it is actually an attempt to 'enact an alternative modernity' by subverting the paradigms of Western modernity a by-product of both capitalism and imperialism in the occident.

In order to search for an answer whether this whole process of *Indianization* that Dr. Suresh Awasti describes as 'a move towards creating 'a kind of Indian national theatre' (qtd in the Introduction to *Modern Indian Theatre*) is 'anti-modern' we need to probe into the nature of Indian modernity that was born somewhere in the ferment of the 'first light' of 19th century Renaissance, the concomitant issues of nationalism, and the growth of the modern theatre itself in colonial India.

In his seminal works such as the *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* or in *Nation and its Fragments*, Partha Chatterjee has elucidated that the ideological structure of nationalism, a progeny of the post-Enlightenment European Modernity, was imported to India by the colonizers themselves. Within this hegemonic framework of a received or borrowed knowledge, Indian nationalists shaped their own modes of anticolonial expression to overthrow the yoke of Western domination in the subcontinent. His contemporary Dipesh Chakrabarty in his evocative commentary on Partha Chatterjee's *Derivative Discourse* in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 11th July 1987, agrees with Chatterjee, that the nationalist thought in countries like India exhibits a 'characteristic element of self-contradiction. While there is a continual urge to "emphasise the differences of the 'national' culture from that of 'the West' [it] is combined with an aspiration towards a modernity that can be defined only in terms of the post-Enlightenment rationalism of European culture' (Chakrabarty 1137). The modern Indian theatre whose inception in the 19th century can be traced in the 'colonial encounter' that resulted in the imposition of European models on local theatrical traditions' (Introduction to *Modern Indian Theatre* xv), too betrays similar contradiction that exists in the heart of Indian nationalism. In the late 18th century, theatre first found a congenial home in India in the bustling colonial cities of Calcutta and Bombay. The wealthy and educated Parsi entrepreneurs of Bombay were one of the first groups to embrace Western staging techniques and

organization. In Bengal, modern theatre, which was a foreign import from England came via the English traders and colonial rulers of Calcutta, and was facilitated by the rise of a native English educated *Babus* that formed a large section of the Bengali intelligentsia. In an early account of the Indian theatre in British Bengal, Hemendra Nath Das Gupta writes:

We have no hesitation to admit that they [The English theatres of Calcutta] were not only the forerunners of Bengali Stage but also inspired the enlightened Hindus with a love for theatre and with a strong desire for the establishment of the genuine Bengali Theatre. The English Stage in Calcutta used to be patronized by our countrymen and both the Chowringee theatre and the Sans-Souci owed much to the princely liberality of Dwarakanath Tagore, and his contributions to the growth of stage were not less than that of a Torrens or Parker. Such was the earnestness for English plays amongst our countrymen that each night a number of Bengali spectators were amongst the audience, as is testified to by the following observations of the Asiatic Journal:-

The Indian Gazette adds: “It affords us pleasure to observe such a number of respectable natives among the audience every play-night, it indicates a growing taste for the English Drama which is an auspicious sign of the progress of general literature amongst our native friends.”ⁱⁱ

The impact of colonial modernity on Indian theatre may be also illustrated with an example narrated in Sudipto Chatterjee’s riveting essay on the ‘Nationalist Discourse in Late 19th century Bengali Theatre’. Earlier Sushil Kumar Mukherjee’s encyclopaedic account of the *Calcutta Theatres (1753-1980)* recalled the birth of the National Theatre (1872-73) by the enthusiasts of Bagbazar Amateur Theatre group who mustered all their resources for a public theatre but ‘when all arrangements were complete’ says Mukherjee, a problem arose about a suitable nomenclature. Finally Nabagopal Mitra, Editor of *National Paper*, nicknamed ‘National Nabagopal’ for his zealous nationalism and ‘his keenness on adding the word National to every Bengali enterprise, suggested the name The Calcutta National Theatrical Society, which was ultimately shortened as the National Theatre.’ A year later, National Theatre merged with the Hindu Theatre to establish their first professional theatre hall in 6 Beadon Street, Calcutta. Alluding to the paradox involved in its very conception, Sudipto Chatterjee refers to a newspaper article in *The Englishman* on October 3, 1873 that reports “laying [of] the foundation stone’ of a Bengali public theatre, a wooden structure modelled on the European proscenium theatres of Calcutta’ (Chatterjee 98). Its inaugural ceremony presented a mishmash of the *Eastern* and the *Western* cultural aspirations—it had a procession led by a European band with flags bearing the inscription “The laying of the foundation stone of the ‘Great National Theatre’ (qtd from Sushil Mukherjee: *The Story of Calcutta Theatres: 1753-1980*, p. 40 in Sudipto Chatterjee 98). This so

called Bengali National Theatre was a replica of the Lewis Theatre in Chawringee that staged European productions for the expatriate English community in Calcutta. This 'neo Hellenic' construction of the Bengali Great National Theatre, observes Sudipto Chatterjee:

had very little to do with the play, the first and the last, that was to be produced within its premise two months later—A Bengali mythological, referred to as a 'Fairy Tale' by its author, Amritalal Basu. But although the architecture of the theatre seemed to be literally at war with the content of what was staged inside, it was nevertheless, dubbed the Great National Theatre! (Chatterjee 98).

Not only was the playhouse, the Modern Indian Theatre itself a product of two opposing cultures: The European drama which had generated a strong interest among the English educated Middle Class audience in the 19th century, and Sanskrit Natya, restored to reputation from the nadir of neglect by the European Orientalists like Sir William Jones, H.H. Colebrook, William Carey et al. This theatre, purports Rakesh Solomon 'sought to project both modernity and Indianness in its style and subject matter, and thus constituted a fundamental component of the Indian Intelligentsia's grand nationalist enterprise to invent, on one hand, a pan-Indian nation state that was modern' but simultaneously attempted to bring about an 'imagined nation into existence through a return to ancient Hindu traditions' (intro xvi). Thus while on one hand Modern Theatre in India internalized the British bourgeoisie representational form gleaned from the European proscenium stage techniques, on the other, it sought its legitimacy from the greatness of its ancient Indian Theatre. Post-Independence, what came to be identified as *The Theatre of the Roots* embodied a similar ambivalence (at least in its initial stage) — that one observes in Pre-independence Modern theatre, due to its 'cultural ambidexterity', (Mee 142) or the ability to operate concurrently in two opposing cultural systems. The *Roots Movement* strikes a middle ground between *revivalism* and *imitative Westernization*, says Aparna Dharwadker, in its attempt to reconcile 'pre-colonial traditions with the socio-cultural formations of a modern nation-state (Introduction xxi). Hence, the tag anti-modern needs a closer examination, since the concept of Indian Modernity born as a result of cross-pollination between the East and the West has always remained a contested terrain, as it cannot be totally understood or restricted to the European sense of the term. Rather, it requires a more inclusive categorization that would permit not only the co-existence of the European and the Indian traits, but sometimes even allow the juxtaposition of the contemporary with the old with only a thin line separating the two. So what we know as the *Theatre of the Roots*, as defined by Dr. Awasti is 'both avant-garde in the context of conventional realistic theatre, and part of the 2,000-year-old Natyasastra tradition' (Awasti 296).

This so called *Roots Theatre*, as elusive as the definition of Indian civilization itself yokes together such heterogeneous cultural practises and performance forms under its portal, having to negotiate more than one self, more

than one history, more than one language in the shaping of an intracultural narrative’ (Bharucha 78), that it becomes impossible to make any sweeping generalization about them. In fact Dr. Awasti in his defence of *The Theatre of the Roots* speaks of ‘plurality of theatres’ that combines ‘traditional and modern elements... where village and urban cultures existed both independently and in combination’ (Introduction xxiii). Further, as Bharucha points out, ‘in India we have a more differentiated gradation of cultures in tribal, rural, folk, ritual, mofussil (district town), urban and metropolitan contexts [...] alive in different states of vibrancy, and different proximities to the process of modernization, industrialization, and secularization in India that is far from complete.’ (79). The sheer variety of traditions it endorses can be understood just by mentioning some of the doyens who attended the Sangeet Natak Akademy’s Nehru Centenary Festival in 1989, one of the high points in the Roots Movement, to discuss ‘The Retrospective of Modern Indian Theatre’. The galaxy of luminaries included Bijan Bhattachariya, Utpal Dutt, Girish Karnad and Panikkar. Those absent but should have been present were Habib Tanvir, Ebrahim Alkazi and Badal Sircar. This staggering diversity shows the sheer absurdity of any rigid straitjacketing. A point of commonality that may bind several of these theatre schools in the political milieu of postcoloniality is the self-conscious eschewal of a blind mimicry of the colonial theatre aesthetics that was meant to assert the empire’s cultural superiority with Shakespeare at its helm and dramatic realism as its most effective tool, as a way of exorcising the spectre of colonialism that still loomed large over the subcontinent even after its independence. Therefore, they searched for a more ‘localized’ indigenous tradition, however diverse and polyvalent it may be in the context of its Indian articulation, but distinctly identifiable from the Metropolitan theatre. They also broke a common ground in their rejection of the canons of the Western Realism which became obsolete by the time most of the colonies were granted independence in post-World War II era. This denunciation of the realist paradigms in Indian stage was however not an exclusive gift of the *Roots Movement*. Years before the independence, Rabindranath Tagore had scathingly criticized the deployment of elaborate stagecraft, particularly scenography with all its symbolic gloss, in Western realist theatre. He alludes to the time-revered text of *Natyashastra*, showing how Bharata’s description of the stage precludes any mention of artificial scenes. He claims that the use of painted backdrops to obtain a verisimilitude of the reality pays the spectator a very poor compliment, by ‘ascribing to them an utter poverty of imagination’ (Tagore 432). Then further elaborating upon the limitations of European realist mode he indicts:

European wants his truth concrete. He would have imaginative treats, but he must be deluded by having these imaginings to be exact imitations of actual things [...] The theatres that we have set up in imitation of the West are too elaborate to be brought to the doors of all and sundry. In them the creative richness of the poet and player are overshadowed by the wealth of the capitalist. If the Hindu spectator has not been too far infected with the

greed for realism and the Hindu artist still has any respect for his craft and skill, the best things they can do for themselves is to regain their freedom by making a clean sweep of the costly rubbish that has accumulated roundabout and is clogging the stage. (*Rangamancha*, translated into English as *The Stage* by Surendranath Tagore, p. 434)

Nonetheless, in post independence years the dissenting voices in theatre became all the more prominent as the rejection of the realist tradition gained a new momentum under the larger project of decolonization. Badal Sircar, for instance, in the 70s made a radical departure from the European realism with his dismissal of extensive props, costumes and sets. Almost in the *Growtowskian* convention of the ‘poor theatre’ⁱⁱ, which believes that ‘theatre can exist without make-up, without automatic costume and scenography’ (Growtowski 19), the stage setting is kept minimal. However, while Sircar often sought inspiration from several futuristic trends in European dramaturgy, —his theatre, particularly that which came to be known as the *Third Theatre* self-reflexively appropriated, translated, relocated and read anew these Western models, thus furnishing a subversive critique of the cultural prototypes of colonialism and neo-colonialism. For Sircar, theatre has always been a potential weapon for challenging various echelons of political and cultural power. Thus, by assimilating in his works the traditions of some of the famous proponents of avant-garde, anti-realism, such as Artaud, Beckett, Brecht and Growtowski, he allowed the undercutting of the Western realism from within the West itself, and finally he offered a postcolonial response to European theatre at large through a localization of the *Growtowskian* or *Brechtian* models.

This apathy of the Indian playwrights towards the realist conventions was nevertheless, a part of a larger global drift. Roughly around the same time several practitioners of theatre in Sri Lanka, South Korea, Japan, and even China discarded the naturalist mode to evolve a style in tune with the aesthetic praxis of one’s own culture. In Europe itself as mentioned before, during the 50s which may be deemed as an era of transition between the modern and the post-modern, the realist conventions showed signs of waning with the immense success of what came to be known in popular parlance by lazy labelling —*The Theatre of the Absurd*. But while in the post-apocalyptic Europe a playwright like Beckett was attracted towards minimalism, or staging the ‘lessness’ as he calls it, by discarding all props of the outmoded modern culture, in India the artists preoccupied themselves in the rediscovery of their pre-colonial roots after a long somnolence that persisted over two hundred years. For instance, Girish Karnad’s *Hayavadana*, which immediately after its publication in 1971 attained the status of the ‘poster play’ for the movement was inspired by the *yakshagana* forms of Karnataka. Much of the action in the play is presented through stylized gestures or mime (*Mukhavinaya*). Another device of the folk theatre that Karnad adopts with much ingenuity is the use of masks which is an integral part of our traditional and tribal art-forms including Kathakali, *Chhau Yakshagana* etc. In *Hayavadana*, Devdatta,

one of three protagonists, appears on the stage wearing a pallid mask and Kapila a darker headgear. Later on to signify the transposed heads, their masks are interchanged. Likewise, Lord Ganesha wears an Elephant-headed mask and Hayavadana appears on stage with a mask of a horse.

In the mid 1950s Habib Tanvir’s production of *Mitti Ki Gadi* (1954), a popular operatic version of Sudraka’s *Mrichchhakatikam* (*The Toy Cart*) and *Agra Bazar* (1954) on the life and works of the renowned Urdu poet, Nazir Akbarabadi brought ‘music and poetry back to the theatre’ (Awasti). He worked with a troop of brilliant folk performers from *Nacha* background, closely associated with ‘robust oral culture’ from his native state Chattisgarh, to revive the tribal traditions that were pushed to marginality by the artefacts of ‘high culture’:

I believe in the viability of the rich forms of the rural theatre in which they have tendency to incorporate the most topical, the latest local happening, the thematic and formal flexibility by which we cannot claim this is how it was performed 200 or 2000 years ago...I believe that it is possible to usher in progress without demolishing this culture. (Habib Tanvir as quoted in Katyal, p. xviii)

Yet, notes Javed Malik in his introduction to the Seagull edition of *Charandas Chor*, Tanvir did not ‘romanticize the ‘folk’ uncritically or ahistorically. He was aware of their cognitive limitations and [did] not hesitate to intervene in them and allow his own modern consciousness and political understanding to interact with the traditional energies and skills of his performers.’ (Introduction xii).

A radical development in the *Roots Movement* is the change in the spatial dimension of drama brought about by the rejection of the modern proscenium stage by several practitioners of theatre and their experimentation with a variety of theatre spaces. E. Alkazi for instance, used his terrace in Bombay as a performance area in the late '50s and later, after moving to Delhi as a director of the *National School of Drama*, he explored an array of location from closed studio to the open-air *Meghdoot Theatre*.

The Roots Movement broadly aimed at two contradictory things— as an ideological apparatus of the government, at an institutional level it displayed a distinct homogenizing tendency by trying to shape a *national* theatre, as a part of a larger *national* culture. This of course, like the grand rhetoric of European Nationalism, a bi-product of Western Modernity has encountered a stiff resistance for ignoring the experiences of difference. As Bhaba claims in his introduction to *The Location of Culture*: ‘What is theoretically innovative and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. [...] The very concepts of homogenous national cultures, the consensual or contiguous transmission of historical traditions, or ‘organic’ ethnic communities—as the grounds of cultural comparativism—are in a profound

process of redefinition.’ (2 &7) Further, in India, ‘there are conflicting nationalities that resist the very idea of a ‘single nation’ in the first place. Secessionist and insurgent groups demand separate nations, while entire communities of tribal and indigenous peoples lie outside of the framework of the nation altogether.’ (Bharucha 79) Such ‘totalizing’ impulse often legitimizes the oppression of minorities and disempowered groups either by excluding them, or by subsuming their cultures ‘within the cultural hegemonies of the dominant groups’ (Bharucha 11).

Conversely, at a micro level, the *Roots Theatre* rejected the framework of metanarratives by creatively engaging with a plurality of traditions, upholding local histories and preserving specific practices of a particular region. What Habib Tanvir does with the *Nacha* tradition or Teejan Bai with the *Pandavani* tradition of Chhattisgarh are examples of such practices.

While it is impossible to undo temporally and culturally, what can be called the colonial trace in Indian theatre, the complex articulation of hybridity in *Roots Theatre* realigns our definition of modernity which is neither pre-modern, nor post-modern exactly in the European sense of the term, even though the mindless use of folk elements as a cultural commodity inadvertently created a whole new culture of kitsch and postmodern superficiality. Nevertheless the intention was perhaps different. The prefix ‘post’ modern can be used, it at all, to *Roots theatre* to denote what Bhaba calls the ‘gesture to the beyond’-the ‘restless revisionary energy’ (7) embedded in the various liminal traditions and folk forms with which it experimented, to transform the present into an ‘expanded and ex-centric site of experience and empowerment’ (ibid 7).

Roots Theatre in its nuanced complexities went beyond (or at least it intended to go beyond) the simplistic binary of tradition and modernity, urban and rural, to create a platform for experimenting with various performance forms— *Tamasha* and *Lavani* of Maharashtra, *Bhavai* of Gujarat, *Yakshagana* of Karnataka, *Koodiyattam* of Kerala, *Therukoothu* of Tamil Nadu and *Chhau* of Orissa and Bengal. Further, it involved some of the stalwarts of Indian theatre, who believed that the ethos of Indian modernity comprising various regional/vernacular *alterities* cannot be separated from the folk resources that constitute ‘the memories of their childhood, family, community, and tradition.’ (Bharucha 93) It would be rather an oversimplification to label the *Roots Movement* as ‘anti-modern’ in its essence because of the departures it takes from the normative understanding of Western modernity which in any case has multiple versions, or because of post-colonial Indian theatres’ engagement with the non-European past. While acknowledging its hybrid lineage, the *Roots Movement* in a way pioneered a theatre that enacted ‘an alternative modernity’ to use Mee’s words, that did not ‘repudiate’ but attempted to ‘redefine’ modernity from certain non-Western vantage points and simultaneously through new interventions, worked towards an evolution of the variegated traditions of *lok-parampara* in India.

Notes

ⁱ The first performance in Prasanna Kumer Tagore’s *Hindu Theatre* (1831) were Bhababhuti’s *Uttar Ram Charita*, translated by Professor Horace Hayman Wilson) and portions from *Julius Caesar*.

ⁱⁱ It is a term coined by Polish theatre director, Jerzy Grotowski (1933 - 1999) in his seminal book, *Towards a Poor Theatre* (1968)

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