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Pedagogy, practice and research in Indian theatre

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Modern academic training for theatre in India has a history of just over fifty years (since independence). The National School of Drama (NSD) was set up in 1957, but the prime objective of the institution at that time was to generate professionals to develop children's theatre and rural theatre. Although India possessed a wide range of traditional performance cultures throughout the country, from rituals to folk performances and classical performances, the NSD was modelled on the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (RADA) since the new institution was led by a graduate of RADA, Professor Ebrahim Alkazi, who put the institution on a functional track. Thus the toolkit used during the initial days was primarily based on Western models conducive to realism rather than growing organically out of the actual practices of the different forms of Indian performance. This early orientation remains today, emphasizing the creation of referential meanings on the stage through conventional methods and devices, taken as the unshakable organizing principle of theatre practice.

In pedagogy, the next important paradigm at the NSD focused on stylization evolved from traditional practice structures in combination with Western models and contemporary realities. This training was initiated by B. V. Karanth, the second leader of the NSD, whose influence coincided with the postcolonial 'Indianization' project in all fields of cultural expression. No further innovations occurred in the area of pedagogy at the NSD, with the exception of some minor refashioning in operational aspects of training. To some extent, the convergence of new concepts, new thoughts, new principles of performativity and new practice structures, including technology, have yet to be negotiated or updated in a formal, coherent plan or strategy to address the cultural heterogeneity of the country. It is not that the older principles should be abandoned, but that unexamined adherence to these early ideas can result in confining diverse modern forms to the familiar classical formulae; indeed, this is in evidence at the moment.

Although new departments for theatre were started in universities in the following decades, they mainly tried to replicate the NSD model. Many such departments had nothing like either the infrastructure or the funding of the NSD, nor were they able to hire qualified teachers to train the students at a professional level. Most of these departments were handled by teachers of literature and ultimately the students could acquire proficiency neither in theatre nor in drama. With one or two exceptions, such as the School of Drama in the University of Calicut and the Department of Indian Theatre in Punjab University, at least in their early days, theatre departments were stranded, isolated in ways that meant their students were neither theoretically nor practically equipped to get into either theatre research or professional work. And as graduates were finding it

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difficult to get into the profession, there was no effort to start new departments for theatre studies.

Within this difficult and even circular context (stagnation blocks innovation, which in turn continues stagnation), modern academic training for theatre practice has been severely restricted. Considering the amount of creative practice happening in Indian theatre in different genres, regions, languages and cultures, the corresponding amount of academic knowledge production is not proportionate, especially in the area of modern theatre. Most of the productions by eminent directors simply culminate in a newspaper review, even in urban areas. Any discussion of theatre in the public cultural sector usually ends up referring to traditional performance cultures like Kathakali, Kudiyattam or Jatra – not the modern theatre. Tradition is a comfortable space where preservation and conservation are concerned. So many written documents are available on traditional theatre but these do not address the sociopolitical aspects of the performance, nor do they apply any analytical tools from other disciplines or from theory. There are many directors, productions and different practice processes in modern theatre and many practice cultures embedded in traditional performance cultures with seminal value in terms of knowledge, but they have not been adequately identified and transformed into a body of knowledge through research or study. It is alarming to note that classroom resources available to teach Indian theatre – including all language theatres – are only at a very minimum, even where celebrated directors and their works are concerned.

Meanwhile, outside academic institutions, theatre is finding new avenues to negotiate between tradition and modernity. The rapid growth of popular theatre cultures in Assam, Maharashtra, Manipur and Orissa is phenomenal. Experiments by young directors are demonstrating the redefinition of tradition, playwright, space and actor. By contrast, no academic efforts are being made to research these new initiatives, to understand the interwoven relationships between performance and context.

Given this backdrop, theatre academics in India have to implement the following strategies to address the issues outlined here. In the future, we must:

1. develop some leading-edge trends in training, changing practice structures and embracing contemporary Indian cultural diversities;
2. expand the area of research in respect of different performance cultures and bring in new methodologies, interdisciplinary in nature;
3. initiate different practice as research models for diverse contexts in order to foster knowledge production of modern Indian theatre practice;
4. organize workshops for researchers and practitioners on current trends in theory and practice as regular events;
5. open up new academic departments for theatre and performance studies, as at the moment India has only one national institute and twenty-five university departments for theatre expecting to serve a population in excess of 1.8 billion across India's twenty-eight states.

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