

Punjabi Theatre in Britain: Context and Challenge

Conference address, Hounslow

To start with, what my speech is not about! I am not going to talk about Punjabi Theatre in Britain: there are many more qualified to do so. However, having practiced Asian Theatre in England for some 20 years now, I may be able to offer this Conference some context and, from my own perspective, some sense of the challenges I see facing Punjabi Theatre in particular, as we move towards the next century.

When I began active involvement in the theatre in 1976, I could not ignore the only other Asian theatrical presence in this country: and this was what has come to be called "language theatre". Groups of individuals and companies producing theatre in Punjabi, Urdu, Gujarati and Marathi. Naseem Khan's report in that year, *The Arts Britain Ignores*, specifically documented the existence of such activity. For a time, this theatre was the only context for my own company, Tara Arts. By the 80s, it began to become clear that "language theatre" was no longer a part of the definition of Asian Theatre: many more companies had arisen which, like mine, were run by Asians and used English as a medium of communication.

Ironically, however, as time went on, many (if not all) of these companies began to incorporate features of the "language theatre": the spoken language itself and music being perhaps the two most important features. Today, as the 90s move headlong to their end, there appears to be a new vitality to Punjabi, in particular. Popular music and comedy have combined with a renewed sense of identification from the young to fuel this revival. Along, significantly, with a self-confidence born of 30 years of life and work in this country.

At this juncture it is perhaps necessary to look back at the rift of the 80s, to see if there are lessons for the future.

What was the rift? Basically, between those who were part of the arts funding system and those who were not. The companies and individuals of the 70s were, without exception, involved in an activity which could only be characterized as "amateur" within the arts funding system: i.e., it was occasionally produced, and the participants did not derive their living from this work. If infrequency was one characteristic, then communality was clearly the other. What I mean by this is that language productions, almost by definition, were for only particular language groups: Punjabi shows for Punjabis, Gujarati for Gujaratis, Marathi for Marathis, etc. There was little if any cross-over of audiences. Not only was the Asian market therefore fragmented, the non-Asian market was simply non-existent and, perhaps, un-considered. This was reinforced by the production values of "language theatre": essentially, these were in the vein of English social comedies. Theatrically, therefore, there was a further dis-incentive for non-language speakers to attend "language theatre".

If infrequency, communality and theatrical conventionality were the defining features of "language theatre" in the 70s and 80s, what was the soil that kept them alive?

Sentiment. In the 70s, there was still a generation that dreamt of "going back" - the myth of return had a greater emotional resonance then than it does now. And language provided the one tangible means of keeping that myth and hope alive. It also, in evidently racist Britain, provided the mark of self-worth: reviled as un-cultured in factories, shops and other places of work, at least one could draw on another language - with its range of narratives, poetry, jokes, songs - to sustain one's sense of self.

But the 70s and 80s also saw the rise of a generation who saw in Punjabi and other Asian languages a disability: to get on in life, to be seen as "modern", to converse as equals one had to speak in English and strive to be as English as the natives. A fact reflected in our greatest source of entertainment and defining source of culture - the Indian Cinema. The Cinema of the 70s and 80s reflected a much greater emphasis on English: the "modern", the "progressive" characters spoke more and more English. Indeed, how many of us took pride in our children, when very young, speaking their first words in English, as opposed to whatever was the "mother tongue"! And this was natural: after all, we did want our children to succeed in this world; a world to which many of us migrated with hopes for our children's success.

And so a generation grew up with, at best, a deep ambivalence to Indian languages; and at worst, a disowning of those languages. A process aided by the lack of formal educational facilities in those languages. How long can a language survive if you cannot write in it, if you cannot read it, if it exists only in non-public spaces?

This ambivalence ensured that, on the one hand, there was a reluctance to champion the cause of these languages - be it in formal education spheres or in state subsidy for the arts; while, on the other, the languages clearly provided a ready badge of a distinctive identity. Hence it was cool in school playground conversations to drop in the odd "yaar", to create a kind of secret language.

The 90s, I believe, are showing signs of an easing of these ambivalences. The myth of return has faded: now if people are thinking of migrating to India or Pakistan it is because there are better economic opportunities there than here, rather than for any sentimental reason! A generation is growing up which is able - thanks to technology - to directly experience India and Pakistan and which is aware that the world has become a much more eclectic space. We don't have to be burdened by the need to choose: it is possible to be Indian and English. And this generation is also more acutely aware of the commercial advantages of being ethnically-specific: there is a market for Punjabi songs like there's never been before! Into this pot must also come the role of religion. This last decade has witnessed an unprecedented religious revivalism: Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism are all on the march. Each of the religions has built considerable visible symbols of their distinction: temples, mosques, gurudwaras proliferate in all the cities of England. And they've each become much more acutely aware of the need to have cultural programmes to retain the active interest of their young, let alone gain new recruits.

Today, the music of individuals like Apache Indian and the comedy of groups like the Secret Asians are drawing-in crowds of young Asians who want to publicly consume Punjab - who no longer feel vaguely embarrassed and uncomfortable when Punjabi is spoken in public. In addition, today we are much more able to import directly Punjabi musicians, actors, writers, poets, as centres like Waterman's Arts Centre in Hounslow have demonstrated. In addition, there is a public outside of the specifically-Punjabi which is willing to pay to consume Punjabi work. As Neelam Mansingh Choudhury's company from Chandigarh demonstrated on their first visit to England, with the production of *Yerma* in 1993 at the Tricycle Theatre: their audience was predominantly non-Asian.

And this is a factor which must also not be discounted: the country is now much more willing to see foreign work in foreign languages.

So, altogether there is a much more hopeful climate for the revival of a specifically Punjabi Theatre. However, I believe the very features that marked its distinctive-ness in the 70s now also pose challenges for the way ahead.

Infrequency, communality and theatrical conventionality I'd suggested were the hall-marks of the earlier movement of language theatre. At least 2 out of these 3 factors have to be addressed if Punjabi Theatre, in particular, is to have any hope of achieving a major presence in the theatre scene of contemporary England.

With regard to "infrequency", it is encouraging to see the rise of a company like MEHTAAB - aided without a doubt by the programming policies of Hardial Rai at Waterman's Arts Centre. The company exists on a professional footing, touring small-scale venues around the country. There is a commitment, in other words, to making a living from specifically Punjabi Theatre. Its individuals understand the language and world of the state's arts funding sector and are prepared to make demands of it - as much as being able to meet the requirements of the funding sector.

There need to be many more companies like MEHTAAB, if Punjabi Theatre is going to achieve a public presence. But I do not think that that in-itself is enough. The craft of theatre needs to be more rigorously approached. The challenge facing us is not playing to our own people: that can be a comfort and a justification, but it can also make us lazy in our approach to theatre. We need to aim much higher in standards. I do not think I'm wrong in claiming that no Punjabi theatre in the country at the moment has come anywhere near the theatrical standards achieved by Neelam Mansingh's company from Chandigarh. Punjabi Theatre, if it is to have any distinction, needs to be much more than simply a translation of conventional English social comedies. How do you make a non-Punjabi speaker understand what is going-on on the stage? That is the challenge which companies from India, from Japan, from Brazil, from many other parts of the world regularly present to English theatre audiences - and present it successfully in both commercial and critical terms. The ultimate achievement of Punjabi Theatre will be when we no longer have to look overseas for exciting theatre, but only as far as Hounslow or Newham or Leeds or Birmingham.

I firmly believe that Punjabi Theatre needs to break out of its communal boundaries of the 70s. It can be, and is, a theatre for all. I am reminded here of a story about Guru Nanak. It is said that when he visited Mecca, he lay down to rest with his feet pointing in the direction of the Ka'aba. When asked who he was, he replied,

"Hindu kahiey tey maariey, Mussalmaan bhi naah; Punj tut dha putla, Nanak meyra naam!"

That, ultimately, is my hope for Punjabi Theatre: that one doesn't need to belong to the community, it is enough that one is a human being.

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