

Basavaraj Naikar, *The Folk Theatre of North Karnataka*. New Delhi: Author Press, 2012. 110 pp. ISBN 9788172735760.

India is a land of remarkable diversity. Geographically its terrain comprises snow-capped peaks, lovely lakes and resounding rivers, verdant valleys as also arid plains, inhospitable marshes and infertile lands. Even as this diversity makes the life and people of the country, around 80% of them living in villages lead a quiet life bound by the thread of folklore, legends and myths. While they till their lands to eke out a meagre living, they look for some entertainment provided by the folk dancers and singers. Almost everywhere folk literature is replete with songs and snatches of love, separations, battles, praise of Nature, adulation of heroes and heroines and encomiums to the prowess and wisdom of gods and goddesses. The folk theatre of Karnataka is no exception.

Basavaraj Naikar's monograph on the folk theatre of North Karnataka is a commendable effort in the direction of propagating knowledge about the theatre of that region as also an attempt at correcting the misconception spawned by Balant Gargi's book, *The Folk Theatre of India*. Gargi's book, as Naikar notes, prompted him into doing this monograph. Gargi's cursory reference to what in Naikar's opinion is a vibrant presence in North Karnataka, is probably due to oversight or inadequate information or both. Gargi's otherwise fine book has thus been faulted and led to Naikar's well-documented monograph.

The Folk Theatre of North Karnataka reveals how well entrenched the theatre has been on both sides of the Sahyadri mountain range for centuries; it was the only source of entertainment for the starved imaginations of the area. With motion pictures and T.V. now acquiring fighting potential, survival of the folk theatre all over India has been in danger and North Karnataka is no exception. Nevertheless it continues to thrive in the teeth of all odds.

The folk theatre of Karnataka, known in native Kannada as *bayalata* (open-air play), manifests itself mainly in two forms: *bidiyata* and *attadata*, meaning street-play and stage-play respectively. But each of these categories has several sub-categories and even sub-sub-categories. While *bidiyata*, has an open form and can be played both by professionals (called *baburupis*) and amateurs (*pagarana*-players), *attadata*, on the other hand, too has two categories: *paduwalapaya* (western mode) and *mudalapaya* (eastern mode). While the former of this category is played more commonly in coastal Karnataka, the latter is more prominent on the other side of the Sahyadri range, *viz*, in North Karnataka. The two forms are not only geographically distinct but also deal with different themes. As regards the categories, *mudalapaya* can be sub-divided into the *doddadata* (big-play) and the *sannata* (the small-play). Likewise *paduwalapaya* may be seen to manifest into two sub-categories as *yaksagana* and *tala-maddale*.

Naikar's monograph details these categories and sub-categories. He goes into the depth as also into the ritual and religious roots of these folk art-forms. The influence of classical drama based on Bharata's *Natya Sastra* on Karnataka dramaturgy is also traced. It is seen that the principles of *Natya Sastra* are adapted to suit the folk theatre and the understanding of the folk-audience. *Sutradhara* and *sarathi* devolve into the folk theatre and perform important roles. *Sutradhara* is a key figure, who performs the ritual worship and takes the audience into confidence about what they are going to watch. It is he who starts the dialogue with *sarathi* and the two, together, acting as choric figures advance the action of the play to its logical climax. They keep the audience regaled with jokes, pranks and snatches of songs. *Sarathi* in fact is the darling of the crowds. It is he who strikes a rapport with the audience through interaction in their native dialect, spruced up with lively anecdotes, keeping the audience glued to their seats.

Another important feature of the folk theatre of Karnataka, as of all folk theatres, is the regular use of songs and musical dances. The omnipresence of music in folk theatre has, apart from entertainment value, the vital ritual role. As music is sacred to gods, the musician and the dancer know best how to communicate with the gods. The performance by dancers in the company of musical instruments the *tala* (rhythmic pattern) and *bol* (notations) create a musical atmosphere. *Yaksagana*, among others, is capable of expressing subtle feelings.

The themes played in the folk theatre are generally derived from the ancient epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* as also other religious books and legends. While the main characters generally stick to the well-known story line and the thematic context, the *sarathi* and *sutradhara* often weave in the local and contemporary strands by commenting on the political, social and cultural scenario.

The *sannata* (also called *dappinata*) as against the *doddata*, which is serious, dignified and upright, was evolved to give expression to the *rasas* of eroticism (*sringara*), pity (*karuna*) and humour (*basya*). The *sannata* does however try to expostulate and interpret the exotic Vedantic philosophy in a simple style without losing the interest of the audience. Naikar has towards the end of the monograph listed several popular folk plays and reproduced some of the scenes in the form of photographs. Naikar feels that the purity of the folk art-form should be maintained and *bayalatas* should not employ film songs in the plays. While Naikar's sentiment should be respected, it cannot be forgotten that folk art forms derive their sustenance from all sources. There is no harm if in order to keep the art form alive, snatches of film songs are used.

Naikar has given English equivalents of the vernacular and Kannada phrases, ideas and concepts bringing the *bayalata* closer to the non-Kannadigas. This is a signal service for which his effort needs to be commended. He also

deserves praise for bringing out a well-researched, comprehensive and knowledgeable monograph. His effort will help understand the folk theatre of north Karnataka better. At the same time, it will help the theatre languishing in obscurity get its due place in the Indian folk theatre tradition. A praiseworthy effort indeed!

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