

# Zhadipatti Rangabhumi

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**W**hen one talks about the theatre of Maharashtra, it is understood only as the 'commercial theatre' that exists in Mumbai and Pune. No one ever contemplates beyond this. Maharashtra gets sized only between Pune and Mumbai. In this context, I would like to take your attention to another theatre movement existing in Maharashtra since the last twenty five to thirty years, having a yearly income equivalent to that of the commercial theatre flourishing in Pune and Mumbai. However, it remains in the dark abyss of anonymity.

Vidharbha is a region in east Maharashtra comprising of districts like Nagpur, Chandrapur, Vardha, Bhandara and Gadchiroli. This region that has often been quoted in mythological texts, regarded today as a backward area. In the month of September, cultivation of rice is the main occupation of this region. With the advent of winter when the crops have been harvested, begins the theatre activity, which is referred to in this region as 'Zhadipatti Rangabhumi'. The structure of this theatre is similar to the structure of commercial theatre that we

frequently discuss in the history of Marathi theatre. Apart from that it has its own distinct characteristics as discussed below.

### Getting Started or Just the Beginning

The procedure is initiated by various groups of villagers or *mandals* (a sort of a committee that takes initiatives for organizing all cultural activities in the village) from different villages, who approach the owner of the theatre company in order to fix performance dates in their villages. Currently, the following theatre companies exist in the region:

1. Maharashtra Lalit Kala Rangbhoomi, Wadsa.
2. Dhananjay Smriti Rangbhoomi, Wadsa.
3. Bharat Rangbhoomi, Wadsa.
4. Natraj Rangbhoomi, Wadsa.
5. Mahalaxmi Kala Rangbhoomi, Wadsa.

Bookings are completed from September through March. A week before the performance takes place the stage construction, organized by the *mandals*. In a large open field, soil is dug out and used to create an elevation of approximately three to four feet with the dimensions of twenty by twenty feet, which becomes the stage for the actors. In the hollow, directly in front of the stage, chairs are placed and in the space around the chairs, *durees* are spread as a seating arrangement for the audience. The auditorium walls and ceiling are recreated with the help of *pandals* or *shamiyanas*. Separate spaces for men and women are created in the back stage and these are separated from the main stage by a large curtain on cardboard. These *pandals* are sent by the owner of the theatre company a day before the performance. The performances commence at 10 p.m and conclude at around 4.00 a.m.

The contractual payment by the *mandal* is made first to the owner of the theatre company, who then distributes it among the actors and the backstage workers. The company returns from the village immediately after their performance. These arrangements may sound very simple; however it may take a company up to eight hours to reach the village and another eight hours to return. From the borders of Andhra Pradesh to the borders of Chhattisgarh, they may need to travel any distance any number of times, daily!

## Economic Independence

In this regard it will be necessary to understand a few facts about this region. This region, where the *Zhadipatti Rangabbumi* exists, is considered as an *Adivasi* area. It should also be noted that this theatre happens only in the areas bordering the proper cities since these areas have no other means of entertainment. For instance, in Gadchiroli 'city' there is only one cinema, where movies are screened almost two years after their release. After the rice crop harvesting, *shank pat* – a race of bullock-carts is held. Earlier, the *shank pat* was followed by *dander* (a traditional theatre form with mythological characters), which has now been replaced by *Zhadipatti Rangabbumi*. These are somewhat glamorous and easily accessible to the ordinary man. The tickets are priced at as follows: front chairs Rs.50/-, *durce* arrangement for women and children at Rs.10/- and for men at Rs.15/-. These are affordable sums, since these performances take place, more or less, once a month at any given village. Apart from this, people from neighbouring villages also make their way to these performances either on foot, cycles or bullock carts. The atmosphere is that of a *mela*, and during the interval, several snack and tea stalls attract one and all. Since this night becomes a special occasion for all the people, the company owner can expect a whopping ticket sale—1000 tickets of Rs.50/-, 1000 to 800 tickets of Rs.30/-, 1000 to 800 tickets of Rs.15/- or Rs.10/-. The total revenue amounts to approximately Rs.90,000/- of which the theatre company owner receives Rs.35,000/- and the balance is retained by the *mandal*. This way they are able to function smoothly without any financial support from an outside party, like the government, a political person or a private sponsor.

In the Gadchiroli district is situated Kurud, a village that has a population of approximately 1500 people. On the eighth of February every year, *shank pat* takes place and during the night, eight to nine plays are performed simultaneously by different theatre companies. 'Khadi gammat' (*tamasha* and *lawanee*) and *Quawwali* performances also take place. All the plays compete with each other. Most plays have a full house with an audience of approximately 3000 people each, with the exception a play or two, which may not click with the audience. Families even use this opportunity to settle marriages. It can be easily estimated that on a given night, approximately 20,000 people gather to witness and celebrate the joy of theatre. Absolutely stunning!

### **The Written Word**

The script is written in three acts, which contains seven to twelve characters. They are generally a hero, a heroine, a mother, a father, a friend/brother/sister, a villain, a comedian and a dancer. The plot always revolves around these characters. Most scenes take place in a house (so, the permanent set of a house is constructed, while all the scenes that take place outside the house are played before painted curtains). The story also includes seven to eight song situations, which are sung by all the characters. A happy family, the entry of villain, the destruction, the confusions and finally a sad or a happy ending is a typical plot. Along with the main plot runs the sub-plot, involving the comedians and the dancers, which merge with the main plot at the end. This is the purview within which the actor performs.

However, new writers are now exploring relevant issues and themes in the scripts. For instance, the problem of *Ashramashala* and how people don't get jobs in spite of having paid huge sums to the owners of such schools. Local issues like superstition, poverty, Naxalite movements, women's problems and even the spread of AIDS are tackled and played by these theatre companies.

An actor, as per the agreement with the theatre company, receives the script, which consists only the dialogues of his character, any time between a week to twenty four hours before the scheduled performance.

### **The actor preparation**

On the day of the performance the team gathers before the office of the company and they depart in a vehicle to the village they are performing in. They reach by around 9 p.m. where everything is already arranged. After a dinner hosted by the *mandal*, the actors put on their costumes and make-up and are ready to perform.

All dialogues are said by the prompter, which is repeated and projected to the audience by the actor, in his 'individual style'. One mike hangs from above and hence there is always a struggle between the co-actors to get to the mike. If one doesn't get to the mike he loses his link with the audience. It becomes important for the actor to be alert constantly in this voice game.

Though the audience is aware of the presence of the prompter, however, hearing the same dialogue being repeated by the hero, heroine, villains or the comedian thrills them. If the hero laughs with joy, they laugh with him; if he cries, they share the sorrow with him; they curse the devious antics of the villain, and at the end of the show they also heartily appreciate the talents.

The actors should be confident singers. The songs that they sing may be old Marathi film songs or *sugam sangeet* (popular light music). The hero may sing romantic or sad songs, the comedian may sing funny songs, mother and sister-in-law may sing devotional songs or traditional Marathi songs like *ovi* (which are sung by the women in the morning, while they are grinding). Many a time, original compositions are also sung.

Apart from this, the story always has a dancer or a *kothewali* who comes as "dance relief" in dance sequences. Her central action is to dance since the audience considers this as an irreplaceable element of joy in a theatrical performance. For this the writer ensures that the dancer is somehow given a place in the script through possibilities created by characters such as a detective, a police inspector, a girl of a poor family forced into this occupation or occasionally even as a villain. Sometimes she could even be the main character of the play around whom the whole plot revolves. The dancer ties *ghungaroots* that weight 5 kg on each leg and performs the *lawanee*. She has one dance item in every act. Twice the dance item lasts for approximately half an hour and the final item lasts for 45 minutes, during which she is continuously singing and dancing, in a constant *jugalbandi* with the tabla player. These dances are not vulgar and the audience appreciates the skills and stamina involved, at the same time grading the dancer in comparison with the previous dancers. These dancers are treated with immense respect. For the dancer, commitment implies dancing daily for seven months, in spite of feeling unwell or having personal problems. The audience is her 'be all and end all' and the show must go on.

Most often, show bookings depend on the story or on a special actor who will perform in the show. No actor receives any prior formal training in acting or signing. The actor has a complex task of carefully hearing the prompter and delivering the dialogues with his best energy. Improvisations are the keynotes to any show. However, great skill and wit is required of the actor to be in tune with his co-actor, in order to play with the scene and return back to the theme,

without any prior rehearsals. These improvisations are mainly seen in the romantic scenes and the scenes involving the comedian and the villain. The comedians have an additional task of taking the dialogue off the prompter at the right energy level and delivering it with a punch. This calls for an accurate sense of timing.

The audience is able to critically evaluate the performance of each actor. It is not a stammer or a fumble that matters; what counts is the audience appreciation. Thus the 'hero' here is not the one who is the best-looking, but the one who is intelligent, has a presence of mind and is definitely witty. To reach the calibre of a main role, the actor has to struggle for at least three years and even when he reaches the pinnacle, he has to give a sustained performance for several months each night. The actors can be categorized as follows: the main actor who earns Rs.1000/- per night and side actors who earn Rs.500/- to 700/-per night. Female actors earn approximately Rs.1500/- per night. The actors' backgrounds range from not-so-well educated individuals to lecturers, doctors, actors in Mumbai T.V. serials and other famous personalities. This is an open field for any talented person. Yet it does not give just anyone the liberty to come to the stage and act. To be able to perform the main role, the actor has to win the approval of the audience.

The actor rests during the day and performs throughout the night. This is the schedule that he has to follow from September to March, continuously and consistently. Every actor performs a different role, with a different co-actor, in a different village, every night—the only factor that remains unchanged is 'the moment', the presence of the actor and the audience which had paid its hard-earned money to be there, because they have only this one night of pleasure for them!

As backstage support, there are two musicians—a tabla player and an organ player. Two people handle the lights, along with projectors, to enhance the mood in the dance sequences. (Six loud speakers are placed inside the *shamiyana* while approximately twenty *bhongas* – megaphones— are tied on trees in the immediate vicinity). There are two prompters, twenty backstage workers (responsible for all remaining odd jobs) and three drivers who make a show possible. Currently in the Maharashtra Lalit Kala Rangbhoomi, Wadsa, the team comprises of eleven actors, six female actors, one writer, twenty backstage

workers, two musicians, two light men, two sound operators, two prompters and three drivers. This troupe that has been performing for over thirty years, has the maximum number of fifty members including the manager who is responsible for these presentations each night. Other troupes may have a total team ranging between twenty-five to thirty-five members.

### **An Afterthought**

Such a combination of co-ordination of skills, talent and hard work is required to put up a show every night through the long 'season'. There are chances that the troupe meets with accidents since performances takes place in regions that have no tarred roads or even street lamps. The village may or may not have power supply. Sometimes rivers have to be crossed on ferries. Lives are put to risk when passing through forests and battling darkness, facing attacks by animals or even by dacoits. The Naxalite movement is also predominant in this region. In spite of all these hardships, the shows go on. The actors are often stressed, both mentally and physically, due to continuous work each night to the extent that he/she is on drips during the day and on the stage during the night. So, do these performances happen driven only by economic interest? Can we deny the concern of these performers towards the remote, illiterate public who exist in these far off villages?

Then how come such a theatre movement still remains unrecognized in the national scenario? Do these insignificant and worn out plays of the rustic folks have no relevance at all before the commercial theatre existing in west Maharashtra? Will it be only regarded as a mere 'prompter's theatre' amidst the intellectuals of Pune and Mumbai? How long is the *Zhadipatti Rangbhoomi* bound to remain shrouded in this dark abyss of anonymity?

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