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The concept of Group Theatre (GT)

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ABSTRACT

There is hardly any Professional-Commercial Theatre in India. Currently, the Mainstream Theatre of India is represented by Amateur, Non-profit making Theatre Groups which is categorized as “Group Theatre (GT)”. The concept of “Group Theatre”, in the world, was incepted in America in 1929. There is a difference between Professional-Commercial Theatre and “Group Theatre”.

Key words: Concept, Inception, Amateur, Professional-Commercial, Group Theatre (GT).

I. INTRODUCTION

Every concept has its historical origin. The concept of “Group Theatre (GT)”, in the world, also has its own origin. We need to understand its historical link in order to determine our apt response to the zeitgeist. A common thread runs through the World theatre, National theatre and Regional theatre since theatre is a global art practice. The reflection might have occurred sooner or later, but it has a historical link from the World level to the Regional level. So, it is necessary to know the origin of the concept of “Group Theatre”.

The origin of the concept:

The concept of “Group Theatre” was incepted in USA in 1929. It had an historical background. Crisis in capitalistic society began soon after the devastating First World War. Economic stagnation ultimately affected the socio-cultural life of people. Poverty, self-centered insecure life, disbelief in God brought about a change in the minds of conscious middle-class people. Pragmatic approach to life galvanized them towards scientific thoughts of Karl Marx/ Communism. They started analyzing the history of evolution of the mankind dialectically in order to have a correct response to their living time. Such type of revolutionary consciousness was also reflected in the field of Art & Culture. Communist revolution of Soviet Russia in 1917 became a model example for accelerating such revolutionary thinking. Conscious and serious persons in the field of Art and Culture endeavored to do socially purposeful creative work with commitment. They believed in ‘Art for society sake’, not in ‘Art for art sake’. They wanted to use their professional skills in a dedicated manner to build up progressive socio-cultural movement and bring revolutionary change in the society. The then Professional/ Commercial Theatre, which was principally meant for sheer entertainment of the audience, couldn’t satisfy the creative urge of such type of serious professionals who wanted to do socially purposeful theatre. Ideologically, they were Leftists. They wanted to do theatre radically, which was not viable for experimentation in the existing Commercial Theatre set up. So, they formed a platform of their own to experiment with new ideas without any profit motive. Their priority was to educate and enlighten the audience instead of entertaining them with cheap taste. Such type of platform of the committed theatre professionals, where committed amateurs were also members, had been categorized as “Group Theatre (GT)”.

The concept of “Group Theatre” was incepted by Harold Clurman, Cheryld Crawford and Lee Strasberg at New York with their debut play “Redrust” in the year 1929. These three former members of the ‘Theatre Guild’ wanted to establish a group of dedicated actors who would train according to the method based on the teachings of Stanislavsky of the Moscow Art Theatre. The unifying goal of this theatre was the belief that a point of view was necessary for the actors, directors and designers of a show and that the actors should all train in their craft in the same way to realize this vision in true ensemble acting. The group was committed to social realism. This “Group Theatre” gained popularity with performance of the play “The House of Connelly” in 1931. But the Group couldn’t continue more as it was banned in 1940 for producing Anti-Government plays and supporting Communism. However, the concept of “Group Theatre” Movement’ was soon spread throughout the World. In London, “Group Theatre” was a private play-producing society formed in 1933 with the objective of performing non-commercial and experimental plays. ‘People’s Theatre’ of Romain Roland, ‘Political Theatre’ of Erwin Piscator and ‘Epic Theatre’ of Bertolt Brecht which incepted during the first half of the Twentieth Century and before the Second World War were also guided by the spirit of “Group Theatre”. The spirit of those theatre concepts was similar to that of “Group Theatre”.

Difference between “Group Theatre (GT)” and Professional/ Commercial Theatre:

There is a conceptual difference between “Group Theatre” and Professional/Commercial Theatre. The word profession means paid occupation, especially, one that requires education, training, experienced skill and expertise. A professional person does the work as a full-time worker when others/ amateurs do as a hobby or as a part-time job for having special interest, attraction towards that occupation/ trade. Amateurs are not skilled persons. So, they are not paid professionally. We can mark two attitudes with a professional person. The first is to gain more experience, expertise and the second is to earn more money by selling his professional expertise. The first attitude is to cultivate persistently for development of his/ her own artistic quality/ talent and the second obviously, being a commercial attitude. This is also true in case of professional artists and technicians. But when a group of professionals as well as amateurs unite to form a Registered Theatre group / Organization / Society / Trust, they do it for a social purpose with a commitment. Here the commercial attitude is sublimated by social commitment to contribute to the development of Theatre Culture.

Hence, the concept of “Group Theatre” is completely different from Professional/ Commercial Theatre. It is distinguished by its nature of work, ideology, vision and mission. It is a platform of committed Professionals and Amateurs where dramatists, directors, actors, designers, technicians and other staff seek perfection in their art. The motto is to do socially good, moral theatre. They believe in innovative experiments for qualitative change in the field of theatre culture. It is an alternative/ parallel platform formed by them to satisfy their own creative urge as well as to play a role in progressive socio-cultural development of the society. It gives greater emphasis on educating and enlightening its audience rather than catering to their baser tastes by providing wholesome but cheap entertainment. So, it is not quite the same as Commercial Theatre that existed merely for making profit out of its ticket-earnings. In contrast, providing quality on a professional basis without an eye on profit is the goal of “Group Theatre”. Of course, without money, the basic requirements for a production cannot be organized. But the difference lies in the professional attitude of the practitioners and the ideology of the organization. The professional attitude here is to achieve artistic excellence rather than to earn ample money. It is driven not by the profit motive but a desire to usher in progressive socio-cultural movement through the medium of theatre.

Here, profession does not mean to earn livelihood. That is why most of the GT practitioners in India are service holders. They earn their livelihood from other sources and do GT without receiving any professional remuneration. But when the same person works in professional mediums like Films, AIR and TV, he charges remuneration. Now it is clear that GT is not Professional Theatre. It is very difficult to make it profession for livelihood.

“Group Theatre”, from its inception days in the World, was based on Left ideology to hoist revolutionary theatre. In course of the time and changing conditions, it has been confined to the sophisticated Western model of Proscenium Theatre productions. It struggles amidst torrential current of films, electronics media. Incidentally, it has not forsaken its social commitment. But it has been confined to elite sections of audience for which common mass branded it as Intellectual Theatre. It is dependent on Government grants / Corporate patronization and yet to find a way to sustain in the era of globalization, post-modernism and consumerist culture.

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