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Sahitya Akademi

invites you to
meet the author

Vasant Kanetkar





Delivering the Presidential Address

Maharashtra is one of the few states in our country that enjoys a rich tradition in theatre and Sri Vasant Kanetkar has made significant contribution to theatre awareness in the people of Maharashtra. Kanetkar's career as a dramatist spans over four decades. He has to his credit more than forty plays and is at present busily engaged in adding to his oeuvre with several plays on the anvil.

Born in 1920 at Rahimutpur, Satara district, Sri Vasant Kanetkar was educated in Pune and Sangli. His father was the famous S. K. Kanetkar popularly known as Kavi Girish, scholar poet and founder member of the *Ravi Kiran Mandal* that devoted itself to serving the cause of the poetic muse. Sri Vasant Kanetkar's career presents a striking parallel to that of his illustrious father. Soon after his M. A. which he obtained at Sangli in 1948, he joined as a lecturer in Nasik. In 1950, he became a life member of the Gokhale Education Society with which he was associated till 1972.

Sri Kanetkar was fortunate to have been guided initially in the literary endeavours of his youth by the famous Marathi novelist V. S. Khandekar to whom he was related and by the well-known educationist and lit-

terateur V. K. Gokak who had taught him at Sangli. While the former taught him to savour the classics, the latter gave him a thorough insight into Shakespearean drama. In 1950 Kanetkar published his first major work, *Ghar*, an experimental novel combining the stream of consciousness technique and free verse, which registered notable success. This was followed by two more novels.

It was almost by accident Sri Kanetkar turned to playwriting. *Vedyache Ghar Unhat* (1957) staged by Progressive Dramatic Association created a theatre history of sorts - it won the state award for its author besides several other prizes and brought several important theatre personalities into the limelight. The play was hailed by one and all as a bold experiment in psychological drama.

Kanetkar reached the pinnacle of success with his fourth play *Raigadala Jenvha Jaag Yete* in which he depicted the Marathi heroes Shivaji and Sambhaji in real life perspectives. Sri Kanetkar received the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award for this play. It revealed Kanetkar to be a master craftsman with fine sense of controlled dramatic tension.

Sri Kanetkar has handled a wide variety of themes, from middle class morality to tragedies based on Shakespearean themes. In *Prema Tuza Rang Kasa?* and *Lekure Udanda Zali*, he handled social themes in a humourous style perfectly enjoyable even to the hard to please critics. With his finely honed skill in dramatising, he has contributed to keep Marathi commercial theatre alive and vibrant. In attempting to assess Sri Kanetkar's contribution to Marathi drama one is confronted with a basic question. Is art acceptable only if it passes the severe scrutiny of the cerebral critic or is it the audience that certifies a work, by the level of enthusiasm it displays? A good craftsman will always attempt a judicious blending of both elements, as has been done by

Kanetkar and the people of Maharashtra have unequivocally expressed their choice of playwright, play after play. The cerebral critic is of-course not pleased; as one of them puts it, "Sri Kanetkar's theatre is a happy blend between the *Kitsch* and the cultural hallucinations of Maharashtra middle class. He is an unabashed defender of the dying values of the middle class, its culture, its perception of history." Here it will be relevant to quote Kanetkar himself on the subject. Kanetkar says: "I am averse to undue emphasis on Novelty or catchy technical acrobatics or psychoanalytical pedantry to impress my audience. I would rather have my audience reacting to the substance. Experiment for the sake of experiment is the last thing that should happen to the field of art. Drama essentially is and should remain an expression of a powerful artistic experience."

For Kanetkar meaningful theatre has necessarily to be rooted in the soil and should be relevant to its own sense of aesthetic fulfilment rather than conscious cerebral iconoclasm or even nihilism. Blind borrowing from alien cultures cannot lead to audience empathy and hence such works remain distanced from us. To paraphrase, from the Marathi autobiography of Sri Kanetkar, "Unfortunately, the experimental theatre is falling into a format consisting of Narration, drill and chorus. Absurd theatre could be

something new for the Westerners but it is very much rooted to Indian philosophical tradition. What is कर्मणे वाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन?

The essence of *Gita*, the foundation of Vedanta and our concept of Mithyavad is nothing but absurdity. Instead of aping the Western theatre our experimental theatre should stem from our own tradition, and only then the movement will gain some impetus. I can give you another example of this - why could not Shakespearean tragedy establish itself here, mainly because tragedy is inextricably connected with grandeur. Indian concept of grandeur itself is different. For us the person who is totally self-effacing becomes great. I mean people like Mahatma Gandhi, Savarkar and such others. Now the one who has achieved that kind of self-effacement what tragedy can you make out of the ennoblement? Duke of Windsor forsook his throne for his wife while Rama in his supreme duty towards the state inflicted separation on himself and his wife. When you have such polarity and difference of views how is emulation of West possible and acceptable?"

Kanetkar has also written the screenplays for three films namely *Aansu Ban Gaye Phool*, *Iye Marathichiye Nagari* and *Jal Bin Machhali Nriya Bin Bijali*. The first one won the Film Fare Award for the best film-story in 1971.

Sri Kanetkar is highly popular in translation in Indian languages. Most

Receiving Sangeet Natak Akademy Award from Sri Vyankatraman-1984



of his plays are translated in other Indian languages and staged notably in Hindi, Gujarati and Kannada. Abhinaya Jyoti, a theatre movement of Varanasi started a festival of plays in 1985 by presenting five plays of Kanetkar rendered in five different Indian languages and staged by five different regional groups, that was a rare honour. He was honoured by the Kannada Kala Kendra of Bombay too. Sri Kanetkar has also received all the honours that should go to litterateur of his eminence. Five of his plays received the Maharashtra state awards for the best play of the year. He has been the President of the Natya Sammelan in 1971 and the Marathi Sahitya Sammelan in 1986.



With D. L. Gokhale, Kavi Yashwant, Kavi Girish (Father) and G.T. Madkholkar-1944

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With Son, daughter-in-law and wife on the Bridge on the River Kwai

A Chronology

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| <p>1920 20 March: Born Rahimutpur, Dist. Satara, Maharashtra.</p> <p>1946 M. A. with Marathi and English, Bombay University.</p> <p>1946 Lecturer in Marathi and English, H.P.T. College, Nasik.</p> <p>1948 Nominated as Life member of the Gokhale Education Society, Pune.</p> <p>1950 <i>Ghar</i>, his first novel published.</p> <p>1958 <i>Vedyache Ghar Unhat</i> his first play won the Maharashtra State Award for the best play.</p> <p>1959 <i>Devanche Manorajya</i> won the Maharashtra State Award for the best play of the year.</p> <p>1960 <i>Prema Tuza Rang Kasa?</i> won the Maharashtra State Award for the best play of the year.</p> <p>1962 <i>Raigadala Jenvha Jaag Yete</i> won the Maharashtra State Award for the best play of the year.</p> <p>1964 <i>Raigadala Jenvha Jaag Yete</i> received Sangeet Natak Akademy Award and was broadcast from All India Radio, in fourteen Indian regional languages.</p> <p>1967 President, Marathi Wangmay Parishad, Baroda.</p> <p>1970 President, Sahitya Sammelan, Indore.</p> <p>1971 President, Akhil Bharatiya Marathi Natya Sammelan, Bombay.</p> | <p>1971 Filmfare Award for the best story of the year <i>Aansu Ban Gaye Phool</i>.</p> <p>1977 Natya Darpan Prize for <i>Kasturi Mruga</i>, best play and best playwright of the year.</p> <p>1982 First performance of the play <i>Gaganbhedi</i> at Golden Ring Theatre, London.</p> <p>1982 Natya Darpan Award: Man of the year.</p> <p>1984 Sangeet Natak Academy Award for best playwriting.</p> <p>1985 His five plays in five Indian languages presented in Varanasi Rangotsav as a part of <i>Kanetkar Abhinandan Samaroh</i>.</p> <p>1987 President, Maharashtra Sahitya Parishad Sammelan, Pune.</p> <p>1988 President, 61st Akhil Bharatiya Marathi Sahitya Sammelan, Thane.</p> <p>1988 Member, General Council of Sahitya Akademi.</p> <p>1990 Ram Ganesh Gadkari Award.</p> <p>1990 Vishnudas Bhawe Gold Medal.</p> <p>1990 Maharashtra Gaurav Award.</p> <p>1991 President, Marathi Wangmaya Parishad, Baroda.</p> <p>1991 Honoured by Jagtik Marathi Parishad, Mauritius.</p> <p>1992 Padmashree.</p> |
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