

MINOO Masani's remarks about the conduct of parliamentary proceedings on the Budget day provoked angry protests from a number of members of Parliament. Some of them wanted to bring a privilege motion against him. It was the Speaker's wise handling of the case that largely helped defuse the angry episode.

I do not agree with what Masani wrote about the opposition MPs who had preceded the finance minister's Budget presentation, raising important points of concern. At the same time, I would uphold Masani's right to say whatever he feels. His allergy to the Communists is as old as the hills—the world may change, but not his views. That's a matter about which one can have angry exchanges, but it cannot be a plea to silence him, not certainly by the threat of Parliamentary privileges.

I personally think the Speaker was absolutely right in having permitted three interventions—by V. V. Singh, Somnath Chatterji and L. K. Advani—to precede Manmohan Singh's budget speech. It was indicative of the widely-held concern about the finance minister's abject attitude towards the Fund-Bank authorities. Masani would not agree with this viewpoint, but this can hardly be pushed aside. He has been ecstatic about Manmohan Singh's performance in presenting the Budget. Others may have a very different view about it, which he would have to respect just as they have to respect his. Here lies the very essence of democracy: views which are poles apart have the right to be heard and communicated—both of Masani and the Marxists.

The MPs have, no doubt, their privileges to protect. It is but natural for them to get agitated if they are called "howling hooligans" as Masani has done with reference to some of them, who belong to his unswerving target, the Left bloc. At the same time, one has to put up with the fact that the Parliamentary privileges are never defined. Even the British precedents would not help, because the privileges have not only been left undefined, but the concept itself has varied from time to time.

I recall the case of the veteran journalist R.K. Karanjia when in his paper certain derogatory remarks were made about Acharya Kripalani's performance in the Lok Sabha. Karanjia held his ground and appeared before the bar of the House for administration of the admonition, as he did not bend on the point in dispute. And what was taken as objectionable then was milder than Masani's "howling hooligans". Times change and with it the temper, as also the balance of political forces. And one has to concede that the Parliament's appreciation of the privileges of its members depends to a large measure on

VIEWPOINT

Nikhil Chakravarty

Question hour

Over the years, Parliament has witnessed a steady erosion of its traditions with shouting brigades taking over the floor.

the balance of political forces at any given point of time.

What this episode has raised is, however, not just the question of privilege or the specific occasion for the provocation on either side. This brings one to the question of the level of Parliamentary functioning. After the promulgation of the Constitution, the first session of Parliament saw a much smaller opposition as both Houses were literally dominated by the Congress party. And yet the debates were not necessarily dominated by the Treasury Benches. A small Opposition wielded influence and respect far beyond its strength in Parliament. To a large extent, this was due to

the enforcement of the brute majority would only undermine the attraction for and efficacy of the Parliamentary system. The Congress never spared other parties in the open arena of mass political activity. At the same time, once within the precincts of Parliament, the national leaders, particularly Nehru, treated each member with respect as the elected representative.

THIS was seen very sharply when Nehru himself was under attack over the crisis with China. He was badgered and attacked day after day, but he never made any attempt to bypass or mislead Parliament. Rather one had the feeling

in the mysteries of the Budget, would pour over the voluminous material to prepare for their intervention in the debate; and I still remember how some of them, in course of time, became near-specialists in the intricacies of finance. Every session there was a foreign policy debate, in which important contributions were made by individual members apart from the party leaders and the Prime Minister.

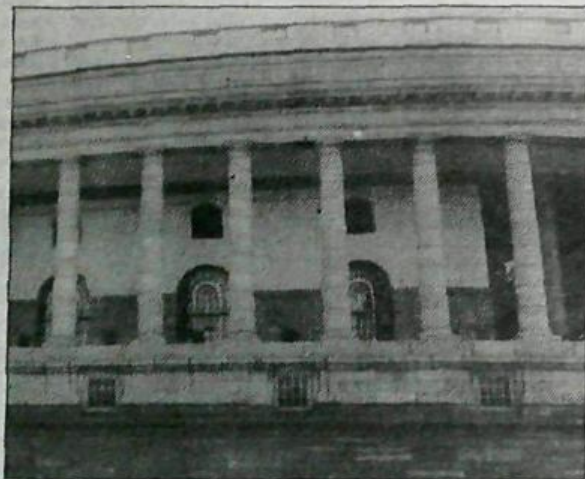
This tradition of Parliamentary function got eroded by the late seventies. The advent of the Raj Narain style was the first signal, though one has to admit that though his speech was aggressive, the content could not be dismissed as insubstantial. The deterioration was accelerated by the split in the Congress party when the no-holds-barred politics arrived in Parliament. It is true that there were shining exceptions. There were outstanding contributions by individual members in the best of Parliamentary tradition—Minoo Masani's was one of them.

The Emergency saw the stifling of Parliament as well, and the rebound came in the Janata interregnum that followed. However, it was since 1980 that a shouting brigade came to stay—and its members are spread all over the House. Then came the famous zero hour, the practice of rushing to the well of the House, the persistent barracking of a member so that he or she could not be heard, and even manhandling—as it happened once in the Rajya Sabha, one Congress MP trying to gag another belonging to his own party, with the party leader

The Congress never spared the others in the open arena of politics. But once within Parliament, the leaders treated each other with respect.

choosing not to intervene; the chair insisting on the member to apologise or leave the House as he did.

Most of this has become common fare today. No doubt we have a speaker who not only has patience but exudes fair play and goodwill to all sections. But the House needs more than a Speaker to uphold its honour and authority before the electorate that has voted it into existence and pays for its functioning. There is no need to turn it into a billingsgate.



Parliament: losing sight of democratic traditions

Jawaharlal Nehru's calculated insistence on the Opposition getting its more than full share of time and attention. He rarely missed being present when a major speech would be made by an Opposition leader, and even in the midst of tension, he would insist on members being heard; no matter if they were provocative. It was not just Nehru who was personally magnanimous, extending a benign tolerance to the Opposition. Temperamentally, he was perhaps more tolerant than many others. Also one has to take into account that tolerance, the principle of live-and-let live, was very much an essential part of the tradition of our freedom struggle.

With this has to be taken Nehru's concern for building up the edifice of Parliamentary democracy in this country. He realised that

that had he been less responsive to some of the points raised in the House, it might have been better for the government as also for the nation. But then that would have been the beginning of the erosion of the supremacy of Parliament.

It was not only the approach of Nehru and other leaders, cutting across party lines, which helped establish an impressive tradition of Parliamentary functioning in our country, individual members contributed no less towards the enrichment of that tradition. The hardships of those early days bear testimony to the meticulously prepared interventions—whether in putting supplementaries during the question hour or in course of debates—by members, some of them belonging to the middle or the backbenches. New members, unversed

MUCH has been heard in recent days about the violation of India's sovereignty imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). And India's has not been an isolated case. Conditions imposed by multilateral financial institutions are known to have aroused fierce passions in some African and Latin American countries too. However, there are others, including rich European nations, who have used the Fund-Bank support without a great deal of fuss.

The rationale behind the Fund-Bank conditions was explained by finance minister Manmohan Singh in his budget speech. They derived from the institutions' concern about loan repayment by borrowing countries, he said. These institutions hold that in the absence of policy changes accompanying the conditions, borrowers will not be able to service the loans.

Moreover, in case India did not want to accept the conditions, the only option it had was of "going it alone". And abstaining from borrowing quick disbursing funds from the Fund-Bank would have meant either prolonging the severe import compression that had already led to a fall in the industrial output, or reneging on debt servicing. It is doubtful if equivalent funds could have been raised from other sources, given India's falling international credit rating. The foreign commercial banks, institutional investors and the NRIs had lost confidence in the capacity of the Indian government to manage the economy. In fact, news of the Narasimha Rao government reaching an agreement with Fund-Bank on financial and economic policies helped restore this confidence.

It can be argued that in negotiating terms with the Fund-Bank, the government exercised its sovereignty just as it would if it signed a contract with a multinational corporation or a treaty with a neighbouring country. All such agreements involve making compromises. The critics of the finance minister cannot be so naive as to object to such agreements. In all probability, they are suggesting that agreements with the Fund-Bank are unfair in that India has been forced to toe their policy line, as the government was caught off-guard. Besides, its financial position was desperate. However, those who heard the finance minister deliver his spirited budget address, will find it difficult to accept this interpretation. He did not sound like a man being bullied by the powerful Washington multilaterals.

What's more, the main planks of the economic reform that the Narasimha Rao government is trying to adopt are not new to the Indian intellectual circles. The underlying concepts and arguments have been brushed out in numerous semi-

IMF-Bank conditionalities

Between the devil...

Though conditions imposed by multilateral agencies arouse passion, they are not always against national interests.

nars and expert committees and commissions appointed by the government. It was about a quarter of a century ago that these ideas were unfashionable. However, they have been steadily gaining acceptance in many countries, including India.

And the text of the finance minister's letters to the Fund-Bank too can be seen not as the *diktat* of the two multilateral institutions, but as the considered policy programme of the government. And the policy matrix of the structural adjustment loan from the Bank, which mentions a number of specific and time-bound commitments regarding policy measures to be adopted, can also be seen as a genuine agreement between the two parties, rather than the outcome of an arm-

ANOTHER study of IMFs operations in sub-Saharan Africa by two IMF officials, Justin Zulu and Saleh Nsouli, comes to similar conclusions. As far as the Bank is concerned, Paul Mosley, another British academic, found that of the 11 countries that signed structural adjustment loans, four complied with policy conditions to the extent of 90 per cent or more, another four 60-90 per cent and the remaining three less than 60 per cent. The Bank's own study of 51 policy-based loans to 15 countries found that 40 per cent of all conditions were not implemented.

What is the relevance of this conditionality experience for India? The architects of the unfolding



twisting process.

Would it be right then to say that those claiming that the Fund-Bank have violated India's sovereignty are striking a desperate note? Could it be that they feel alienated from what now seems to be the policy paradigm?

However, the historical record of Fund-Bank conditionalities is far from unsullied. On the basis of the experiences of many countries, including those from the less developed world, Tony Killick, a well known British development economist, and Stephan Haggard, an American professor of political economy, concluded that the IMF failed to get government compliance with some of its important performance criteria in numerous instances. This non-compliance, in turn, led to interruptions or suspensions of many stabilisation programmes.

economic reforms are serious about carrying them out. Clearly, they are not playing games with the Washington multilaterals just to get some money. The main issue, however, concerns the staying power of Indian reform-mongers. By and large, they are technocrats committed to the new policy paradigm. They do not have a strong political base of their own. However, at present, they have the ear of the Prime Minister. He can keep the opposition parties at bay, at least at this stage. However, can the reformers "stay the course", to use the Reagan lingo? Will the Fund-Bank conditions be fulfilled?

Much will depend on the extent of the pain involved in carrying out stabilisation and structural adjustment. The Indian polity seems to have very little tolerance for inflation. Even though the rate at which prices are rising can be described

only as "moderate", compared to what has happened in other countries, the public anguish about inflation fills the air. Plus, rationalisation of the industrial sector is bound to generate unemployment to some extent, notwithstanding plans regarding the safety net. Additional joblessness, besides the frustration, can be politically dangerous.

The business community seems supportive of the reforms at this stage. But will this posture be sustained as protection against imports is reduced sharply? In Rajiv Gandhi's regime, reduced protection to capital goods producers could not be sustained. The rich farmer lobby prevented an initial decision to increase fertiliser prices by 40 per cent last year and the government had to settle for only a 30 per cent price hike. It will require political dexterity to reduce or eliminate fertiliser and other subsidies.

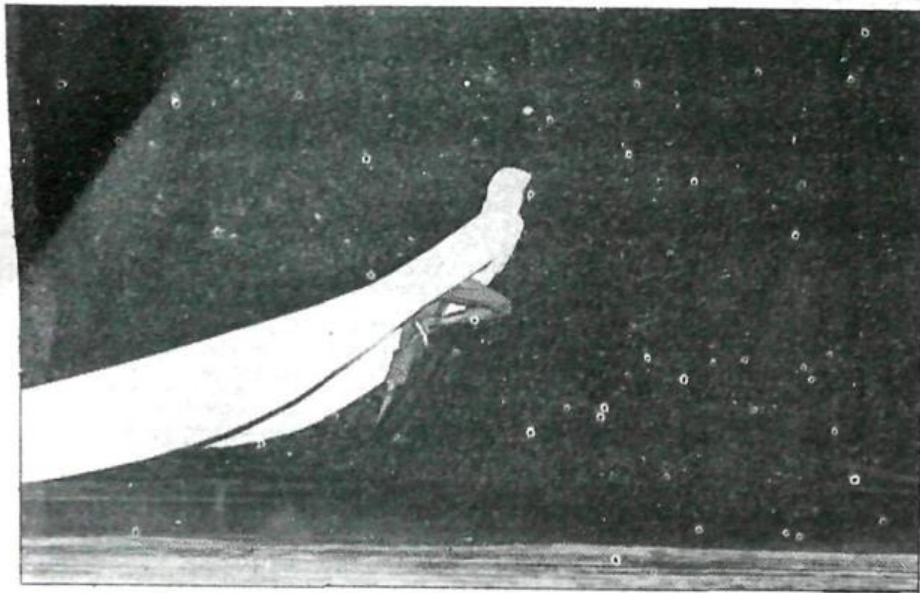
Clearly, the implementation of the reforms requires large-scale co-operation. And India's record on this score is not very reassuring, particularly when personal and bureaucratic interests are at stake. There are four pre-requisites for the reforms to succeed. First, we need political leadership that can energise the government and mobilise the people. It will not do to leave policy-making to the bureaucrats who continue to exhibit a pronounced propensity for secrecy and manipulation. Leaders will have to set an example by making visible sacrifices and by displaying an even-handed approach to share the burden of reforms.

Secondly, a masterly technical design of individual measures and policy packages is required so that the time interval between policy inputs and the pay-off, in terms of improved living conditions, is minimised.

Thirdly, we need a little bit of luck. For example, a series of good monsoons and low international price of oil will be helpful.

Finally, the Fund-Bank must contribute to the continuing policy discussion about the sequence, scope, timing and speed of the reforms as well as by delivering sufficient external funds. Their worldwide experience regarding economic reforms can be helpful to technicians in Delhi. However, if conditionalities begin to rely too much on leverage or arm-twisting, it can be counter-productive. In fact, in the ultimate analysis, if the aim is to secure sustained change, then the Fund-Bank policy agreements with borrowing governments must rest on the solid platform of *desi* convictions. Only national leaders have the mandate to make detailed decisions about how and when to introduce important changes.

■ Ravi Gulhati in New Delhi



NATYA SAMAROH



Time for serious stock-taking

SANGEET Natak Akademi's Natya Samaroh this year should prompt us to do some serious stock-taking. The festival of plays, which comprised two plays from the West zone, one each from the East and the North zone and none from the South, meant that these plays were really 'selections' — a pat on the back for the west and a kick on the posterior of the south. One only wished that the rigour of this judgement had reflected in some excellence in the fare offered.

It would be worthwhile to note and remember that the selection of plays for a grant of financial assistance at the zonal level, is made on the basis of mere intentions expressed and claims made on paper by the applicants. Hence, it is a gamble of sorts and if the judgements misfire, the selectors cannot be blamed.

But the four regional language plays, presented in Delhi last fortnight, were selected only after viewing the realised productions. What, then, led the decision-making authorities to select such trite and mediocre plays? Charitable disposition or a sudden lapse of aesthetic sensibility? Or, perhaps, a desire to save face from the embarrassment of not having a Samaroh at all this year?

This year's Samaroh has not thrown up a single worthwhile production. It has neither discovered a single playwright to remember and look forward to nor introduced to us any folk/traditional form used creatively in a manner suggesting the inevitability of its use. The mediocrity of the Rajasthani play, Mugli Gatha, and its production was appalling. The Marathi play, Amhi Jato Amuchya Gawa, was pseudo-symbolic: naming characters 'I', 'you', 'they' and so on does not make a play symbolic. The theme and treatment

doubts. *Imagi Ningtham*, the Manipuri film, was a moving pastoral poem in celluloid, a la Sayajit Ray. But the production was over-stuffed with rituals, making one wonder if the producers considered their tribal rituals as an exotic commodity to be dumped on the eager Delhi market.

The actors in *Pana Lamjel*, were all excellent — a well-disciplined and competent lot. But the eagerness to hoodwink the gullible and overzealous folk art enthusiasts of Delhi was apparent, which is a pity. The same attitude governed the Marathi playwright's attempt to trade off a straight-forward work as symbolic just by naming the characters 'I', 'you' and so on. Where was the need, one wonders?

There is no place in art for such affected stances and phoney postures. Art is, first and last, being oneself, a baring of one's soul. I do not have the heart to question the Sangeet Natak Akademi's noble intentions of providing financial assistance to young talents in theatre and staging their works in a Natya Samaroh each year. The folk arts are languishing and we are at the inevitable brink of losing many of them forever. Understandably, that should not be allowed to happen; it would be tragic if it does. Many of the folk forms have, within them, theatre of great vitality, immense vigour and unmatched expressive power and there is a lot that the present day men of theatre have to learn from them.

Sangeet Natak Akademi's eighth annual festival, under the 'assistance' scheme, generated only a phoney idiom. Venkat Swaminathan returns disappointed from the Delhi Samaroh.

country. But all these, every one of them, came about not by any external inducement but as a natural flowering of a personality, in its search and encounter with tradition and its milieu. Perhaps there have been sharp fluctuations in their varying achievements. With some of them, the newly discovered theatrical language has become clichéd. Others, satisfied with their initial success, stopped their search and stagnated. Perhaps they fail dismally when they take on modern themes or when they step out of their folk and traditional world. But then, they could not have been otherwise. For, above all, they have been true to themselves.

However, the shift of these forerunners to folk and traditional forms and the novelty and success of it nationwide has resulted in the outbreak of an epidemic of fakes. And quite a few put on the now-fashionable mask.

Unfortunately, with a majority of the

younger crop, the lure of money from the Akademi has led, not to a genuine realisation, on stage, of a discovered idiom, but to a manufacture of brand new folk tales and unnecessary interpolation of naach gana, a la Bombay Chitrahaar, as spicy ingredients.

TRIBAL men and women and rural folk are innocent, childlike, unassuming and sincere and the arts they have nurtured are an expression of these personality traits. These are their natural expressions, inextricably interwoven with their lives. There is nothing phoney, or false about them.

Hence, it is excruciating to see the urban culture-vultures, sprouting like seasonal mushrooms, putting on a tribal or folk mask and masquerading in their frantic image-building exercises; they are neither engaged in a search for our roots, as they seem to claim, nor rebelling against Western proscenium

theatre.

But while they loudly claim to do so, they are, in fact, cutting out a manageable piece of meat from the body of a 'total' theatre, isolating it from its milieu, its ritualistic base and its ethos and transplanting it in an urban proscenium show case. This is a small-scale industry of an exploitative kind, not theatre; an insult, not an honour or appreciation.

I am not for a moment accusing the Akademi of dishonest intentions. I am not even questioning the bonafides of the early guiding spirits, their energetic advocacy for a total theatre that is Indian and their search for roots in folk and traditional theatre. But one must apply the breaks when patronage gives birth to fake Panickers, Badal Sircars, Thiyyams and Karanths.

Indian theatre, all over, seems to react to the Sangeet Natak Akademi grants as stock exchanges do to new tax proposals in the national budget. This is not art

at all. The foster parents of folk must pause for a while to reflect why, the past 20 years, in which a shift to traditional forms took place almost like a mass religious conversion, have not given us a single literary dramatic text? The dramatic text should have an independent existence as a product of art and based on that alone, there could be theatrical expression of any manner and style.

Yes, Greek theatre was also born of rituals. But it had a Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes etc who had given us dramatic texts, masterpieces, that have come down to us even after a passage of two and a half millennia. Even our own roots tell us a story different from our present practice.

Sanskrit theatre was no doubt a theatre of dance and songs, stylised expression, but then there the scripts came first — and they were complete in themselves, unfolding the whole of the playwright's world and vision. Kalidasa, Bhavabuti and Basa have left us dramatic texts that have an independent life of their own. It is also true that our folk theatre had no script to talk of and whatever script they had, like the Tamil Therukoothu's for instance, it was only an excuse for the on-the-spot inspired improvisations by the actor. And again, more importantly, nobody bothered about these scripts, as the story was of common heritage, from universally known epics and folk tales.

I do not believe that any of Utpal Dutt's Jatra plays will succeed in doing this. Again, I must clarify that I am not suspecting Utpal Dutt's bonafides. His are sincere agitational politics. It is neither art nor theatre. It is an extension from politics to theatre and so are Safdar Hashmi's. The folk and traditional attempts of these 20 years are extensions from commerce. I would rather have an extension from theatre to politics, like Deshpande's *Uddwasta Dharamsala*.

Before the Seventies, when obsession for folk had not reached a high, a number of playwrights enlivened the theatre scene — Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar, C.T. Kanolkar, Girish Karnad, Madhy Rye and Dharamvir Bharati. The last name remains at the peak of dramatic imagination in recent times. Incidentally, it is also a search for meaning of the present in the roots of the past. Amongst the disappointing contemporary works, a lone *Wada Chirebandi* by Mahesh Elkunchwar provides a silver lining. It may not be in the folk idiom, but a look at the roots alright. Theatre is born when an artist looks inwards and bares himself and not when he hides himself behind masks and images, be they folk or otherwise. It is the mushrooming of these masks and images that we have witnessed all of these last 20 years.

This is not, however, to deny some encouraging flashes in the pan. I can off hand recall some brilliant talents, unknown folk traditions and new discoveries in theatrical language. Waman Kendre's *Zulva* unfolding the Yellamma cult, the Manipuri *Ima Keithal*, giving theatrical expression to a mass agitation by women in Imphal, *Karunchuhi*, a Tamil production from Arumugham, Krishna Kant's *Maharathi*, exploiting the Mahab-

From Arumugham's 'Karunchuzhi' (top left), Karanth's 'Hayavadana' (top right), Alkazi's 'Andha Yug' (below left) and 'Maharathi' (right): classics that employed the immense vigour and unmatched expressive power of the folk forms

The Hindi play from Ambala, *Uljhan*, supposed to be an allegory, was instead a cesspool of confused thought. The only redeeming element was the acting prowess in Alka Ameen's portrayal of a Banjara woman whose costume made her resemble a Spanish gypsy. The play was ample proof that when one is not sure of what exactly one wants to communicate, no spectacular lighting effects or even genuine acting talent can save a production. And, most importantly, the Akademi's grant is not for that.

The Manipuri production, *Pana Lamjel*, was a competent enactment. Tribal/folk idiom seems inescapable for a Manipuri expression. Or, is it really so? One

help goes to a person who needs such assistance in order to realise his discoveries in a production. The Akademi was perhaps inspired to launch the grant scheme by what they saw was happening all around. Yakshagana inspiring Karanth to do *Hayavadana*, Koodiyattam and Kalaripayattu going into Panicker's *Madhyam Vyayog* and *Urubhangam*, Manipuri folk and martial arts giving form to Ratan Kumar Thiyyam's *Uchet Langmeidong*, street-singing inspiring Habib Tanvir's *Agra Bazar*, Badal Sircar's efforts to reduce theatre to the bare essentials of body language and his search for a political theatre idiom in *Bhoma*, *Juloos* etc.

Well, it was happening all over the



prospective applicant, a man living in the 90s, weaves his own folk tale in a day and believes that the rest of it will emerge in workshop discussions. All these 20 years, we have had nothing to give the next generation except skeletal performance texts or notes which say little. And even where we have a text, for instance, Badal Sircar's *Bhoma* or *Juloos*, there is little to be conveyed to the next generation unlike in the playwright's other plays like *Bakti Itihas* or *Evam Indrajit*.

Tagore's theatre was also a search for roots Indian. But he has left behind his major piece of work *Raja* which reflects what was taking shape in Tagore's vi-

vision on contemporary caste politics, Raja Barthari, which brought to limelight the Punjabi 'naqqal' form and so on.

One could add a few more if one is endowed with a better memory. That one longs for a better memory establishes the fact these steps were lone swallows that did not make a summer and hence did not leave a lasting impression on the national theatre scene. And if one argues that out of hundreds of attempts even if five or ten succeed, it is well worth the while, I may be inclined to meekly submit. But my pointing at the resultant barrenness of dramatic texts and theatre men of vision would still remain unanswered.

THIS year's Sangeet Natak Akademi's Natya Samaroh was unremarkable for the quality of productions staged by the four invitee groups from Jodhpur, Imphal, Pune and Ambala. And disappointing, though not unexpected, was the extremely lukewarm response of the Capital's theatre-going public to the regional language plays.

The overcrowded hall on the day *Uljhan* — a Hindi play — was staged by Adi Manch of Ambala, bore testimony to the fact that for Delhi audiences, if it's not Hindi it's not worth going to. Throughout the performances of *Pana Lamjel* (a Manipuri play staged by The Lilong Chaijing Youth Community Centre cum Cultural Insitute, Imphal) and *Mugthi Gatha* (a Rajasthani play staged by Rammat, Jodhpur), one was surrounded by people

shifting restlessly in their seats muttering "What did he say?...I don't understand a word...What's happening?" and of course, the occasional snores and bored coughs. Unable to go to *Ami Jato Amuchya Gawa*, the Marathi play staged by Parichay, Pune, one is unable to say what response that attracted.

The innovative movements incorporated by the regional language plays, (by contrast missing in the Hindi play), forced one to consider the possibility that Hindi theatre may just have got caught in a time warp, whereas the regional language plays are alive and kicking, imbibing energy from traditional and folk dance and theatre forms.

Which is not to say that Adi Manch's production was inadequate but it's strength lay mainly in Vijaydhan Detha's superb scripting and not its execution. On the other hand, Rammat's *Mugthi*



(Top and above) Rammat's Rajasthani play, 'Mugthi Gatha': laying bare the bitter confrontation between authority and the artiste

Confronted with the language barrier

Arti Vaish on the four tepid plays in Rajasthani, Manipuri, Marathi, Hindi and the disinterested Delhi audiences at the SNA Samaroh.

Gatha and *Pana Lamjel* from Imphal were strong on movement and the use of simple yet innovative dramatic devices in their production.

However, both plays tended to drag, perhaps because of their emphasis on the visual aspects alone. While one can understand the efforts of both the regional groups to transcend the use of language to communicate ideas, it is with a particular frame of mind that an average theatre-going person attends a play and except for those who were there for their academic interest or who had a working knowledge of the language, most people were plainly bored.

Though *Uljhan*'s script was gripping, it could have done with a bit of tightening in the scenes and closer attention to costume and set design.

Mugthi Gatha, which attracted a sprinkling audience, narrates the battle between *satta* (power) and *sahitya* (literature) externalised in the confrontation between a king fascinated by warfare and a poet who is a prisoner of war. The play's efforts to highlight the dangers of war-mongering where "humanity becomes synonymous with hypocrisy" are lost in director Arjun Deo Charan's obsession with movement and music. While, in themselves, the stylised dance sequences were interesting, after a point



Alka Ameen as Banjari and Manoj G. Vajpayi as the 'apeman' in 'Uljhan'

one just wished the play would get on with it — and make its point.

Pana Lamjel too suffered from an obsession with movement. But, unlike *Mugthi Gatha*, the movement and dance sequences were not separated from the dramatic progression of the play but made part of the enactment. In that sense the play was more watchable despite the language barriers and especially noteworthy was the agility and lithe grace of all the actors.

The play is about the aspiration of a young man, Khamba, to win the *Pana Lamjel* — a ritual race organised as part of the Thangjing Lai Haroba festival —

the winner of which is awarded the hand of Princess Thoibi. Competing against this commoner are young men from noble families. Although Khamba wins the race, his competitor, Nongban, (and a favourite with the ruler) makes sure that Khamba is not declared the winner. The entire exercise aims at making Khamba, and hence the audience, aware of the forces working against the aspirations of the young.

However, it was *Uljhan* that stood out for its superb concept and scripting. Unfolding the *uljhan* or dilemma that presents itself when one is in a position to give life to a human being, the play nar-

Pana Lamjel, was watchable despite the language barrier and especially noteworthy was the agility and lithe grace of all the actors.

rates the story of a gypsy woman, Banjari who comes upon an apeman (a human being who was brought up in the company of animals). On seeing the apeman, her husband abandons her in the forest. Banjari, determined to give the apeman "a new life", transforms him, over a period of time, into a handsome young man. Later found to be a long-lost prince, the apeman is soon transformed into a power-hungry monster. At the end of the play, Banjari, who is now bearing his child, is left wondering whether she was

right in giving "a new life" to the apeman and if she should give birth to a child in a world where only the powerful can survive.

Gripping though *Uljhan*'s script was, it could have done with a bit of tightening in the length of scenes and closer attention to costume and set design. Some of the scenes, for instance the soliloquy where Banjari addresses the entire dilemma of interfering with nature, reached the level of unnecessary hysteria and instead of trimming it to an appropriate length, the scene just went on and on leaving the audience shuffling in their seats. One scene that is handled effectively is when the apeman questions the motives of Banjari for giving him a new life. Even in her supreme generosity, he says, it was for her own satisfaction and her emotional needs that she 'tamed' him. Nowhere was he allowed to de-



Y. Bimol as Khamba and Bala Devi as Princess Thoibi in the Manipuri play, 'Pana Lamjel': incorporating the energy and agility of martial art forms