

Soofia Siddiqui, Vijaya Guttal and Palami Arangaswamy. *Shakespeare In India: A Selected Checklist of Performances, Translations and Adaptations*. Delhi: The Shakespeare Society of India, 2003. Pp. 50. Price Rs. 70.00

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Age cannot wither nor custom stale the infinite popularity of Shakespeare. National and linguistic boundaries are equally incapable of confining his immense appeal. Although not many Indian authors of the stature of Boris Pasternak with the possible exception of Harivansh Rai Bachchan have undertaken translations of multiple plays of the Bard, he has invariably fascinated the Indian psyche. Perhaps because of the sustained tradition of English Literary Studies in India, and also on account of his pervasive allurements, Shakespeare has invited an extraordinary number of translations, adaptations and performances. The Indians' engagement with Shakespeare that began with the Presidency towns – the heart of Anglophile India – spread beyond the metropolitan confines to other urban centers. The first encounter, William Monckton's *The Tempest* in Fort William College, in the 1780s started an unending train of productions, translations and adaptations. In 1964, according to the National Library in Kolkata, the number of translations and adaptations in Indian languages amounted to: Bengali (128), Marathi (97), Tamil (83), Hindi (70), Kannada (66), and Telugu (62).¹ As Ramnathan states, Ayyapa Panicker and Kavalan Narayana Panicker have translated 27 plays of Shakespeare into Malayalam.² If we consider as an instance, Shakespeare in 'Maharashtra' (then part of Bombay Presidency), there was in the very early years, Agarkar's Marathi version of *Hamlet* with Ganpatrao Joshi in the title role. School productions in English of *Julius Caesar* and *The Merchant of Venice* took place in the nineteenth century itself, and college students enacted Marathi versions of *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Merchant of Venice*. Among the prominent Marathi writers, Krishnaji Prabhakar Khadilkar developed roles based on Hamlet and Iago. Ram Ganesh Gadkari's *Ekach Pyala* has a structure based on *Othello*, and in the production, Balagandharva, the celebrated actor played the wife. Ratnakar Matkari has a popular version of *A Midsummer Night's Dreams*. Above all, there

¹ India is a multilingual country, with almost every state having its own language and independent script.

² See Ramanathan 2007. Ramanathan's article was written for the brochure of St. Mira's College, Pune for its seminar on "Theatre Text and Performance" (22–24 February 2007). I am indebted to this article for my information on Shakespeare in Maharashtra.

was *Natasamtrat* by Vi.Va. Shirvadkar, one of the greatest Marathi writers, which was an adaptation of *King Lear* with soliloquies from other Shakespearean plays as well. Vinda Nabar, a famous poet, translated *King Lear* as *Raja Lear*. In fact, the impetus partly came from Narayan Prasad Bettab's magazine *Shakespeare*, which published translations of the Bard's plays. The stream has continued down to our own age with Arun Naik's Marathi translation of *Othello*. Outside the Marathi world, but still in the Bombay region, the Parsi Natak Mandali founded in 1853 staged *Comedy of Errors* in 1867. Shenoi Goembab, the great champion of Konkani, adapted eleven plays of Shakespeare including some of his popular comedies and the four great tragedies.

What we observed about Bombay was not exceptional. Not only Calcutta, the colonial capital, which was the most prolific in its engagement with Shakespeare – some of the early highlights being Bengali students staging scenes from *The Merchant of Venice* in the Government House in 1837 and the Bengali adaptation of the same play by Haren Chandra Ghosh – and Madras, but many other cities witnessed multiple translations, adaptations and productions of Shakespeare. In the Hindi world, a prominent venture was Bharatendu Harishchandra's *Durlabha Bandhu* (1888), though the characters were Indianised, the Christian-Jew tension was replaced by Hindu-Jain division, and the casket device by an Indian style *swayamvara*.³ Soon in 1892 *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was translated into Sanskrit. Much later there were such unconventional attempts as Habib Tanveer's translation of Shakespeare in to Chattisgarhi dialect, quite a contrast to Rangeya Raghav's fifteen translations of Shakespearean plays into Hindi in 1957–58.

So it is only in the fitness of things that the Shakespeare Society of India should sponsor projects compiling these details in the form of Checklists. The present volume devoted to Delhi, Karnataka, and Tamilnadu is most profitably studied as a collection of three separate pieces rather than one unified volume. In the absence of an editor and a uniform pattern followed by the three compilers, it is desirable to examine each section individually before making any general observations.

Section I, "Shakespeare in Delhi: Shakespeare Performances and Urdu Adaptations and Translations of Shakespeare" by Soofia Siddique, follows a systematic approach. As the compiler states, the plays are arranged in alphabetical order and the entries related to each play are in chronological sequence. However, problems arise at the outset itself as the information furnished after each entry lacks uniformity. Some items include the names of translators, whereas some others do not. Some of the notable cases of omission are: *Kali Naagan*, the first Urdu rendering of *Antony and Cleopatra* (1906) and *Zan*

³ A form of marriage practiced in ancient times where the bride chose her husband from a number of suitors assembled in a hall by garlanding him.

Mureed, the second Urdu translation of the same play (1909); *Saide-Havas*, an Urdu version of *Richard III* (1906); *Madhye Grishme Ratrer Swapna*, a Bengali production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1964); *Othello*, a Malayalam film (1998). For some productions the directors are identified, whereas in many others, they are not. Almost as a norm, the directors of plays mounted by the Shakespeare Society of St. Stephen's College are not named. In entries on some productions, all the credits are recorded, eg. Asmita (Arts Group) production of *Julius Caesar* in Hindi (translation Jaimini Kumar) in December–January 1995–1996 at Sri Ram Center, Mandi House. For the Hindi *Hamlet*, translated by Amrit Rai and produced by the NSD on 2–6 December 1988, music, lighting, set, costume, make-up and the lead role (but not the other roles) are documented. Incidentally, this entry also includes a list of reviews, unlike other entries. In some cases, contemporary reviews are included while in the others they are omitted. Perhaps, some allowance can be made due to the relative non-availability of the commentaries written earlier. Along with Delhi productions, Victoria Theatrical Company's Urdu staging of *Pericles*, *Khuda-daad*, at Lahore in 1878 is introduced without giving any justification for covering a performance away from Delhi. Delhi listings stop at 1998, which leaves a gap of five years (1998 to 2003) which poses problems for a researcher.

Perhaps Ms. Siddique did not have much of a choice about the gaps in the list in view of the inadequacy of the information available and the absence of authentic sources. If the reviews were annotated, they would have led to a more balanced perspective on the plays concerned. Although it is not fair to have the compiler's comments on the productions not seen by her, her observations on the translations/adaptations would have been eminently desirable. The reviews cited could also have been critically annotated.

Vijaya Guttal's work on Shakespeare in Karnataka has slightly greater uniformity. It begins with useful notes and commentary, which provide some kind of a perspective. Some of the faults, however, seen in the Delhi section reappear. The names of the translators are frequently omitted as in *Coriolanus* by the Ranga Sampada Troupe (1985–86), *Gombe Macbeth* (Doll Macbeth) by Chinna Banna Troupe (1989), *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (rendered as *Challatede Chandureyaru* in 1995–96) by Ramesh, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (*Mischievous Fairy Duck*) by Chinna Banna Troupe (1993–94) or *The Tempest* (*Preet Dweep*) by Prayogranga Production (June 1987). This inconsistency extends to the recording of the cast list. Thus among the many entries on *King Lear*, for the 1984–85 staging under the direction of Jaytirth Joshi by the Abhinay Bharathi Troupe, no cast list has been given, but for a 1985 production by Chitra Abhinay Ranga (under the direction of B. Suresh), the names of all the actors with the roles played by them have been supplied, but not the corresponding characters in the original *Lear*. The same is true of a 1988 production by Tirugata (Ninasam)

with Raghunandan as the director which has a full list. The detailed cast list can also be observed in *Hamlet*, a production by Ninasam (director K. V. Subbanna) in September 1984 and *Julius Caesar* (1985) by Troupe of Friends (director Atul Tiwari) and again in 1986 by the members of the Aayana Troupe (directed by Mohan Chandra). On the other hand for *King Lear* itself, no cast list or stage credits are recorded for Chitra Troupe's production of the early 90s (directed by Sikkhikahi Chandru) or for the Karnataka Natak Akademi Drama Workshop for Teachers staged in 1957 under the direction of B. V. Karanth. Sometimes quotations are provided from reviews or production notes or pamphlets. One wishes, there were more of them but perhaps on account of the difficulty in securing them, that was not feasible. Dr Guttal herself does not furnish any commentary on the items. Finally as in the other two cases, she does not touch upon the recent translations/adaptations/productions when she stops at 1998.

The Tamil section by Palami Arangswamy is slight compared to the other two, especially when measured against the unit on Delhi. Perhaps this is so because he has only three sources: P. S. Mudaliyar, A. Narayan and Nataka Kalanjiyam. Given the long encounter of Madras (now Chennai) with the English rulers as the seat of the Presidency, there was a long history of engagement with Shakespeare in the region and one would have expected a more substantial list. Again here as elsewhere, there is some incompleteness and inconsistency regarding the information. Thus the names of translators are missing in the following entries: *Henry IV Part I* produced by the Suguna Vilas Sabha in 1913, *Julius Caesar* (1958) staged by the Coimbatore District Board, *Romeo and Juliet* (1968) performed by the Indian Arts Academy, Suguna Vilas Sabha productions in Tamil and Telugu to celebrate the Poet's birthday in 1905; films based on *As You Like It* and *The Merchant of Venice*, and other films with Shakespearean excerpts and echoes. Again to repeat, the number of entries is so limited that one wonders if what has been omitted is more substantial than what finds a place here. How exclusive can even a "selected" checklist become? Not only here but also in the other two sections, the principle of selection should have been logically and clearly spelt out.

One positive feature of all the three sections is the inclusion of film versions of the plays. This is, of course, in tune with the pioneering efforts by the Shakespeare Society of India in observing how the Hindi cinema has rendered Shakespeare. Analyzing any literary work in its Bollywood version is always a courageous task, considering how shabbily scripts and script writers have been treated there.⁴ It is well known that Premchand, the famous novelist, who went to the film world soon returned in utter frustration realizing the total insignifi-

⁴ Bollywood is the popular name ascribed to the Indian Film Industry situated in Mumbai (earlier Bombay) and is a take off on Hollywood.

cance of the script and the script writer in the Indian cinema. Vijay Tendulkar says in an interview published in *Frontline*, “for the mainstream, indeed for most cinemas the writer is no more than a hack”. Even with Shakespeare, producers have taken uncalled for liberty to make the films box office hits. Nevertheless, the Shakespeare Society rose to the occasion in this daunting venture and did some worthwhile research. In the same tradition, these three writers have included films which contain some landmark productions like Soharab Modi’s *Hamlet* entitled *Khoon ka Khoon* (1935) with himself in the little role and the later *Hamlet* movie of 1954 again by Minerva Movietone, but this time with Kishore Sahu as *Hamlet*; also an Urdu version of *Richard III*, *Saide-Havas*, which was “filmed with Soharab Modi” by the same unit Minerva Movietone.

The checklist certainly requires much greater uniformity both among the three sections and also inside each. The coverage for individual items could have been more balanced. Information on each item needs to be more complete, definitely inclusive of the name of the translator (or the playwright adapting the play) and the director of the production. Publication details of the script, as many particulars about the production as feasible and justification for every important omission should have been provided. It would have been desirable to accommodate all these entries and include commentaries on translation adaptations and productions.

Regarding the gathering and collection of information the impression created by this volume is that everything has been taken from the rather small number of acknowledged sources. This has made the entries not only lopsided but has occasionally introduced an element of bias as the source person or the persons close to him have been given undue prominence in relation to others. Moreover, some extensive field work and the compilers’ individual reading of the publications would have enhanced the quality of the work.

Perhaps I have expected from this publication what a short history or a brief survey of the field could have contained. It is after all only a checklist, and it is commendable that it contains some critical commentary. However, in view of the fact that the Shakespeare Society of India intends to bring out a series of checklists, I would recommend a general editor for each volume. In conclusion, it has to be conceded that the volume fulfills the goal of “presenting archival material as yet unavailable in any library”.

Works cited

- Ramathan, R. “Tis Fair Plays Shakespeare in India”. *Theatre Text and Performance*. St. Mira’s College, Pune. 22–24 Feb 2007.