

**Bhuvaneshwar Prasad's *Tambe ke Keere* (1946):
Avant-garde or the Theatre of the Absurd?**

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Abstract

This paper proposes to discuss eminent Hindi literary historians' claim *Tambe ke Keere* as the first absurd play in the world. Bhuvaneshwar Prasad's work predates Jean Genet (1910-1986). Eugène Ionesco (1909-1994) and Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) had not staged their plays yet. So

how could he conceive a play like *Tambe ke Keere*? Did he encounter Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* (1896), the first absurdist drama? What are the Chekhovian motifs in his plays? Or did he come across the Russian absurdists? These are the few questions that the paper proposes to explore.

Keywords: *Tambe ke Keere*, Avant-garde, Absurdity, The Theatre of the Absurd

Let me begin by sharing with you the definition of the avant-garde from the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* and *Thesaurus*, "Avant-garde ideas, styles, and methods are very original or modern in comparison to the period in which they happen", and the well-known Absurdist playwright Eugene Ionesco defines 'absurd' as "that which is devoid of purpose. [. . .] Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless" (as cited in Esslin, 1961, p. 5). Similarly, in the context of music, "absurd" means "out of harmony" (Esslin, 1961, p. 5). David Hesla (1971) expands on this lack of harmony by saying human existence itself is absurd "because being human and existing are mutually contradictory" (p. 8). These explanations of 'absurd' are pretty similar as well as applicable to the characteristics of the Theatre of the Absurd, which include Verbal nonsense and devaluation of language, tempo and speedy character reactions, images which are at the same time "broadly comic and deeply tragic, "revealing of ultimate realities of the human condition, and dreamlike forms of thought" (Esslin, 1961, pp. 282-361). Absurdism in theatre was characterized by the lack of motivation in human beings, absence of moral values and a threat to their identity. The viewer is presented with a meaningless, chaotic environment; people speak in an illogical manner which is rather preposterous. Their ideas, mediation, and philosophy changed both the subject matter and the form of their plays.

When Alfred Jarry (1873-1907) wrote *Ubu Roi*, he was rebelling not only against the conventions of current drama but against all customs, society, and life. His intention, apparently, was to shock and provoke scandal. *Ubu* confronted the Parisian bourgeois with a grotesque picture of its greed, selfishness and was at the same time the personification of the grossness of human nature. Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) wrote plays that reflected the disconnectedness and inarticulacy of his characters in which people came together and parted because "people had no words or because there were no words" (Brooks, 1966, p. 25).

Bhuvaneshwar Prasad (1910-1957) had a sophisticated understanding of the realities of life from close quarters. He was born in Shahjahanpur district of Uttar Pradesh. His father was Onkar Baksh. Bhuvaneshwar was barely one and a half years old when his mother died. Thus, the responsibility of his upbringing came to his stepmother, Chameli Devi. It is at this juncture that his tragic journey of life started. A life full of deprivation and abject neglect in the family and trammelled by conventions thwarted his growth as an individual, which left some jagged ends in his personality. However, he got much love and affection from his paternal uncle, Mahamaya Prasad, but it was inadequate to heal his wounds. When he was fourteen years old, his uncle died due to the plague. Bhuvaneshwar felt neglected in the absence of a secure family environment. Ultimately, he had to leave home. Due to a lack of family control, he became fiercely independent and somewhat wayward. For most of his life, he lived in abject penury and alcoholism. He had his formative

schooling in Shahjahanpur, cleared his intermediate from Bareilly and received higher education in Allahabad. He had a keen interest in literature. Although he was a meritorious student, he could not bring himself to delve into his course textbooks. As a student, apart from Hindi, he studied English and Urdu adequately. After reading about his growing up years, one could guess that his sense of absurdity stems from his bitter life experiences.

When Jaishankar Prasad (1889-1937) was writing plays with a cultural perspective, close at heels, reinforcing literary trends were Seth Govind Das (1896-1974), Harikrishna Premi (1908-1974), and Udaishankar Bhatt (1942-1977). Lakshmi Narain Mishra (1903-1987) is known for Modern Drama and primarily wrote Plays of Ideas and Problem Plays. Bhuvaneshwar has broken the barriers of stage conventions to the shifting core of psychological reality present in human hopes and dreams. Shorn of all certainties, he is confronting a world in which God is dead. Characters disintegrate in a world in which the existentialist sense is absurd. He not only raises questions pertinent to his times but transforms them into more critical questions of drama in literature. Bhuvaneshwar Prasad's *Tambe ke Keere* provides a profound recognition of the absurd conditions of life expressing the difficulty of finding meaning in a world that is in constant flux.

Bhuvaneshwar's initial writings were published in Premchand's magazine *Hans*, and he developed a good rapport with Premchand. For a brief period, Bhuvaneshwar was associated with the Progressive Writers Association. After dropping out of college, he made Allahabad and Lucknow his workspaces. To eke out a living seemed to be the most mundane and challenging task for him. He was a good conversationalist, and this fuelled his fame. Ironically, he was simultaneously considered a vagabond, a genius, and a lunatic. About two years before his death, his mental health issues became a matter of grave concern. There are many versions of how Bhuvaneshwar died. The most acceptable version is that in 1957, he was found dead in a Shrikrishna Dharamshala in Benaras. His death was rather a tragic end to his recalcitrant storm-tossed life.

World War II (1939-1945) destroyed the faith people had in humanity and reason. It was not one war but a series of wars that brought mammoth military, economic, social, and psychological devastation. The shared hopelessness, anguish, gloominess, and despondency was widespread due to the extermination of human beings and decimation of cities. Despite the achievements of knowledge and science, human beings could go berserk with unimaginable barbarism and greed—was a bitter truth emerged. When the intellectual class surfaced after the war in 1945, they were in a state of bewilderment. A radio that had aired mellifluous music for them had been instrumental in bombing faraway places. The science that had provided logic and means for a comfortable living employed resources for the ruthless devastation of humankind. Witnessing this, people ultimately lost faith in logic, knowledge and science, and the whole world seemed to be an askew—every bit of the problems, possibilities, and all human relationships became chaotic. The dream to construct a beautiful world was instantaneously transformed to fear of destruction. Self-confidence lost its meaning. Living normally under the shroud of such incessant fears was impossible. Hence people began to live with inexplicable anxiety and skepticism. Finally, everyone realized that the new

realities were starkly different from what they had experienced before. The absurdity of realism does not embitter humankind but when its illusions are shattered.

The role of art is to ferret the multiple shrouded corporeality of life. It attempts to dive deep to represent the complexities that become the warp and the woof of art. In *Tambe ke Keere*, Bhuvaneshwar undertakes this exploration. The fundamental problem that he wrestled with was how to present rampant absurdity in the literature that evolves out of bitter reality. If, on the one hand, he wanted to keep intact the social complexity in his oeuvre, on the other hand, he was equally desirous of portraying the inherent dilemma in the unconscious mind of the individual. This was an enormously challenging task for any writer. Bhuvaneshwar chose *ekanki* (one-act play) and short stories genres to share his creative ideas. He was so proficient in constructively using *ekanki*, and it is because of this, his identity as a playwright is more prominent today. Apart from *ekanki* and the short story, he wrote poetry and literary criticism. He was highly fluent in English and was widely read in English literature. At the epicentre of his intellectual pursuits is his engagement with the futility of life, which did his works a cut above the rest.

Bhuvaneshwar's dramatic world was oppressive and poignant. Among the Hindi *ekanki* writers, Bhuvaneshwar carved a distinct identity for himself, and his position is unrivalled. Shamsheer Bahadur Singh (1911-1993) considers him the *janak* (father) of Hindi *ekanki*. (Singh 221). All literary historians are unanimous in acknowledging that Bhuvaneshwar is responsible for initiating a new writing style in one-act plays and made a unique contribution to *ekanki* in the history of Hindi literature.

The credit to recognize Bhuvaneshwar as a writer goes to Premchand, who gave him a place in *Hans*. He also wrote a detailed review highlighting the literary merit of Bhuvaneshwar, which set a mark for his literary career. Later on, Premchand published Bhuvaneshwar's first one-act play titled "Shayama: Ek Vaivahik Vidambana" (1933), based on Shaw's *Candida*. Added to the list are "Ek Samyahin Samyavadi" (1934) and "Shaitan" (1934). Premchand's publishing these plays in *Hans* brought an acceptance and appreciation in literary circles for Bhuvaneshwar. Subsequently, he compiled three other one-act plays- "Pratibha ka Vivah," "Rahasya Romanch", and "Lottery" in a single volume called *Karwan* (1935). In addition, Bhuvaneshwar wrote the prologue and epilogue to *Karwan* with an entirely novel approach and aphoristic style. Impressed by his work, Premchand wrote in the review of *Karwan* that it marked "the beginning of a new trend in Hindi literature" blending the styles of Shaw and Wilde "never before has anyone offered such a penetrating, philosophical and intellectual perspective on life and its various happenings, which is the basis of new drama" (as cited in Yayavar, 2011, p. 16). Bhuvaneshwar had incredible control over situations that manifest in his sharp and subtle sarcasm in his oeuvre. His characters are imbued with intellectual complexity and are often a victim of some mental affliction. Most of his one-act plays address man-woman relationships, love, and marriage.

Eminent writers like Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906), August Strindberg (1849-1912), Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) and D. H. Lawrence (1885-1930) had a compelling influence on Bhuvaneshwar. He was equally moved by the theories developed by Sigmund Freud

(1856-1939) in psychology and psychoanalysis. These influences are undoubtedly visible in his literary works. Western influence made him question the established truths, notions, and ideas. Therefore he was inclined towards freedom of thought, socialism, gender equality and breaking obsolete social norms. Thus, his focus was to express the hidden, suppressed, and unvented desires, emotions, and thoughts commonly experienced by ordinary men (Ankur and Anand 13). Because of his modernist tendencies and the angst of existentialism apparent in his plays, he shows a shift towards absurdist writings.

There is no linear plot in *Tambe ke Keere*. Prasad uses distorted characters mingled with sparkling humour. He represented interiority rather than the external world, there is no division between facts and fantasy, an independent perspective on the fluidity of time (Rastogi, 2001, p. 64). The impact that *Tambe Ke Keere* had on his career was enormous. It catapulted him from oblivion to notoriety. Its total disregard for existing conventions threw the dramatic world into confused consternation. Bhuvaneshwar emerged as a playwright of extraordinary radicalism and extreme dramatic precision, whose vision of life in the twentieth century became, for many, a path to follow. Theatre, for him, was a medium that must make man think. He desisted from the “culinary theatre”. His starkly vivid stage images articulated an experience that had previously been inarticulable, and in doing so, gave birth to a ‘new drama’. He achieved these effects by the stubborn refusal to meet all expectations: the apparatuses of drama, such as plot, setting, catastrophe, were all abandoned and with them went the conventions that allowed the critic to pass educated and sound judgment. “Man is a timeless abstraction incapable of finding a foothold in his frantic search for a meaning that constantly eludes him” (Pavis, 1998, p. 2). Behind the obscure and enmeshed patterns of events are experienced psychological realities which were of passionate importance to him. These reservoirs of emotion, sin, and misery were documented by the playwright and told through disparate tales on the stage (Stokenström, 1992, p. 97). His plays represent fragmented and flawed actions. None of the criteria by which conventional drama was measured appeared to be met in this play, yet it drew attention. Its power was perceived to lie in its incomprehensible, radical denial of the processes by which theatre becomes meaningful.

“Absurdist plays,” according to Styan, “fall within the symbolist tradition” in their lack of conventional plot and characterization and in a Sisyphusian manner “narrowed to connote man trapped in a hostile universe that was subjective and made to describe the nightmare that could follow when purposelessness, solitude and silence were taken to the ultimate degree” (as cited in Cornwell, 2006, p. 129).

Through different characters, situations and thoughts are echoed from behind the screen on the stage. Bhuvaneshwar makes use of off-stage characters reminiscent of the classical Greek playwright Euripides and Shakespeare. *Tambe ke Keere* has seven characters: Thaka Afsar (Tired Officer), Rikshawala, Pareshan Ramni (Anxious Ramni), Stree (Lady), Masroof Pati (Busy Husband), and Pagal Ayah (Insane Ayah). The only person who remains on the stage is the Lady Announcer. Pareshan Ramni and the Masroof Pati constantly convey to the audience man’s isolation and his failure to communicate. Both show acute dissatisfaction and the absurdity of human existence. The internal and psychic reality it recreates is profoundly moving. The

Rikshawala symbolizes the dehumanization of man. Pareshan Ramni is shown to be very distressed in a menacing way.

Bhuvaneshwar eschews naming his characters –instead, he keeps them nameless by giving them generic names. Elizabeth Sewell (1952) comments: “There is a suggestion here that to lose your name is to gain freedom in some way since the nameless one would be no longer under control...It also suggests that the loss of language brings with it an increase in loving unity with living things” (p. 128). In other words, individual identity is defined by language. Having a name is the source of our separateness and the origin of the restrictions imposed on our merging in the unity of being. Hence, Bhuvaneshwar, through the destruction of the language, through the nonsense dialogues, through the arbitrary rather than the contingent of naming things – expresses the mystical yearning for unity with the universe.

*(Screen ke piche se kuch gambhir mardani awazein):-
Kaun kaun sada akela nahi raha?
Kis kis nei apne padosi ka chera pehchana?*

STREE: *Akele aur besaro-saman hum bhule hue raste khojte hain.* (Bhuvaneshwar, 2004, p. 155)

*(Some solemn male voices from behind the screen):-
Who has not lived here alone?
Who has recognized the face of his neighbours?*

STREE: Alone and without any belongings, we try to find our lost pathways.
(Trans. author)

Bhuvaneshwar (2004) indicates in his stage direction: “*Yeh natak drawing-room ke liye hi hai*” (p. 155) [This play is meant for a drawing-room only]. This implies that the world outside is threatening: the circumstances seem ordinary, but a generalized, unspecified horror seething beneath the action. Nothing is verifiable, and there is a chilling sense of the isolation of the people (Hochman, 2013, p. 101). Through a woman’s voice, he satirizes the meaninglessness of man:

STREE: *Kisne Kisne apni aatma mein jeevan ke aadi muhoort ko sisakte-subakte nahi suna? Akele aur besaron -samaan hum bhoole hue raste khojte hain.* (p. 155)

STREE: Whom all have not heard the anguish and pain within their souls at the auspicious moments of their lives? Alone and without any belongings, we try to find our lost pathways. (Trans. author)

The role of the lady announcer is to control the off-stage characters:

ANNOUNCER: *Hum mrityu ko niruttar kar detein hain. Mrittu hamare sirhane loriyan gati hai. Hum apni janein khatre main daal sakte hain, pensionein nahin.* (p.156)

ANNOUNCER: We render death speechless. Death sings lullabies by our bedside. We can risk our lives, but not our pensions. (Trans. author)

Through the use of symbols, Bhuvaneshwar lends a new meaning to the play.

(Ek aur awaaz): *Kaanch ke beej. Inko barabar nahin bona padta. Ek bar bou, hazaar bar kato.* (p.158)

(Another voice): The glass seeds do not require to be sown repeatedly. Sow them once, and reap the harvest a thousand times. (Trans. author)

These are the symbols for the advancement of biotechnology, which enhance production, devastate the natural environment, and deplete the soil irreversibly.

Strindberg states in the introductory note to *A Dream Play*: “The characters are split, double, and multiply; they evaporate crystallize scatter and converge.” However, a single consciousness holds sway over them all-that of the dreamers.

MASROOF PATI: (*swapnil*) *Tumne suna...Nirmala mujhe aaj maloom hua ooni baadlon mein rehti hai.* (p. 163)

MASROOF PATI: (dreamily) Did you hear... I have come to know today, Nirmala lives in the woolly clouds). (Trans. author)

The tradition of the commedia dell’arte reappears in several other guises in *Tambe Ke Keere* - the rikshawala attempts to make the audience laugh as jokers do. He uses gestures extensively, which are evident from behind the screen- Pagal Ayah, Masroof Pati and Pareshan Ramni are all off stage and rely on it for dramatic effect.

PAGAL AYAH: *Rikshewale ne kitna accha naash kiya. Meri khwaish hai ki hum uske statue banayein. Uski jali autograph bechni ke liye, companiyan khadi karein.* (p. 170)

PAGAL AYAH: Rikshawala has done the destruction wonderfully. I wish to make his statues and set up companies to sell his fake autographs. (Trans. author)

Despite advancements in science and technology, Bhuvaneshwar intends to make his audience aware of man’s precarious and mysterious position in the universe “and brings to the forefront man’s discontent with this ambivalent position” (Esslin, 1961, p. 353). Various scientific inventions have destroyed the spontaneity of humankind, and it has been reduced to a veritable robot. This is the central issue in the play and has been dealt with from different perspectives. The most crucial sentence in the entire play is:

Hamari subse tazi ijaad, kaanch ke sooter. Inko sirf tambe ke keere kha sakte hain-(kuch ruk kar)...Hamari isse bhi taazi ijaad tambe ke keere. (P. 170)

Our most recent invention, glass sweaters. Copper insects can only eat these-(Stops for a while)... our most recent discovery than this is copper insects. (Trans. author)

The title of the play can be interpreted at many levels. “Tambe ke Keere” can mean the dehumanization of man due to the advancement of technology. The characters are neurotic. They seem to satirize despair, savagely illogical vaudeville non-sequiturs. In *Tambe ke Keere*, the language is that of the intelligentsia. It is spontaneous and has clarity, but at times, complex. Along with Hindi, it has a smattering of English and Urdu. English words like “auditorium”, “screen”, “autograph”, “statue”, “neurotic”, “central”, “significance”, and assimilation of “company” to “companiyan”. He makes use of some Urdu words like: “masroof”, “mukammil”, “ijaad”, “aina”. At times, he deliberately gives a colloquial touch to Urdu words: “tehjeebyafta” instead of *tehziyافتا*.

The use of symbolism makes the theme enormously complex. In *Tambe ke Keere*, the symbols become very abstruse at some places. “Jhunjhuna” (rattler), “ (a stone), “ek shabd”(a word), “ek patti” (a leaf), “ jeevan ka sangmarmar” (life is marble stone), “badal” (cloud), “suraj” (sun), “aina” (mirror), “andha kuan” (a dry well), “siti bajana” (to blow a whistle), “kaanch ke beej” (seeds of glass), “kaanch ka sooter” (glass sweater), “riksha” (rickshaw), and “tambe ke keere” (copper insects) are few symbols that have been used. Jhunjhuna symbolizes a sceptre, a whip, a symbol of power, ek pather denotes illiteracy, ek patti indicates perennial regeneration, ek shabd is the ability to express oneself. At the same time, jeevan ka sangmarmar implies our conscience, badal is symbolic of emotions, suraj is emblematic of intellect, aina is suggestive of dimwittedness, andha kuan implies fundamental darkness of the soul, siti signifies hope to create something new, kaanch ke beej symbolize industrialization, kaanch ke sooter connote being an outsider to one’s surroundings, riksha symbolizes meaninglessness, and tambe ke keere hints at the English, our colonizers, exploiting the resources of India and following the policy of divide and rule amongst its population.

The play is highly nuanced, and there can be myriad interpretations. Bhuvaneshwar (2004) himself is aware of it because, at the end of the play, he conveys this through the announcer:

ANNOUNCER: *Meri samajh mein iss natak ka lekhak neurotic hai. Jo hamein ruchta nahin, jo hamare vicharon ke saanchei mein antta nahin, usei hum neurosis na kahein to kya kahein...iss purei natak mein koi matlab nahi hai, vah hamein khamkha bharam mein daal raha hai.* (p.171)

ANNOUNCER: My understanding is that the playwright of this play is neurotic. What we do not like, what does not fit into the mould of our thoughts, if we do not call it neurosis, what else can we call it? There is no meaning in the whole play; it is creating confusion without any rhyme or reason. (Trans. author)

The above dialogue is an insinuation at the intellectuals of those times because, during Bhuvaneshwar’s life, critics could not evaluate his works objectively. In *Tambe ke Keere*, the shift from the objective reality of the world outside and surface appearance to the subjective reality of the inner state of consciousness—a shift that marks the watershed between the traditional and the modern, the representational and the Expressionist projection of mental realities are finally and triumphantly accomplished.

Krishna Narain Kakkar's persevering efforts and faith in Bhuvaneshwar's work came to fruition on 26 April 1996 when *Tambe ke Keere* was staged by the eminent theatre director Bhanu Bharti at Ravindralaya, Lucknow, under the aegis of Meghdoot Theatre group. According to Kakkar, "When Bhanu Bharti began work on "Tambe..." he found new energy, and a new meaning every time in the play (Rastogi, 2001, p. 78).

This paper argues that the much-neglected one-act play of Bhuvaneshwar Prasad *Tambe ke Keere* is rightly considered the first Absurd play in Hindi, and it may not be first Absurd play in world literature. Bhuvaneshwar had felicity in the use of English and was a voracious reader.

Though Absurdism achieved eminence only in the 1950s, its genealogy can be traced to the latter part of the nineteenth century, when Alfred Jarry wrote *Ubu Roi* and staged it in Paris (10 December 1896) first absurdist drama (Brockett, 1979, p. 340). Luigi Pirandello (1867-1936) was the first significant dramatist to state a fundamentally absurdist view explicitly. Russian literature flourished in English translation in the late nineteenth century, and the canon of plays and novels attained a certain eminence and "tone". It was primarily solemn but never irrelevant (Emerson, 2013, p. 3). There is evidence that Bhuvaneshwar read much Russian literature including Gogol and Chekhov. It is a strong possibility that *OBERIU* was available in translation to Bhuvaneshwar, and he had access to this collection of short pieces by Alexander Vvedensky (1904-1941), Daniil Kharms (1905-1942), and Nikolai Zabolotsky (1903-1958), three famous Russian absurdist. Between 1927 and 1930, the three formed the basis of *OBERIU*, an avant-garde literary organization (from an acronym standing for The Union of Real Art). To me, it seems, albeit tentatively, that Bhuvaneshwar Prasad may have read Kafka's famous novella *Metamorphosis* (1915), where the chief protagonist Gregor Samsa turns into a vermin: "His back became as hard as an armour plate, his belly became brown and arched in ribs, and two legs became thinner, which multiplied into several more legs and the difficulties he encounters in trying to carry on with his life." It has apparent resonances to the title of the play *Tambe Ke Keere* - the Kafkaesque imagery of "brown belly"- the colour of the same bronze family and several legs of the 'keere' (insects).

Bhuvaneshwar's bitter experiences effectuated a rebel who broke through all established conventions of the writing of his times. A close reading reveals both elements of avant-garde and absurdism in the play. Albeit the world he portrays is a rather bleak, "out-of-harmony" world and its representation at times is appalling, the absurdities explicitly indicate attempts by humankind to live in this deracinated world. Thus, he successfully laid its foundations, its style, and craft in Hindi drama which set the stage for Vipin Agarwal, Lakshmi Narain Lal, Lakshmikant Verma, Satyavrat Sinha to develop it further. The decade of the sixties witnessed its proliferation in Indian theatre. "Teen Apahij" (Three Handicapped People), "Coffee House mein Intezaar" (Waiting in the Coffee House), "Roshni Ek Nadi Hai" (Roshni is a River), and yet the brilliance of Bhuvaneshwar's *Tambe ke Keere* and its indelible influence continue to grow. It would be heartening to watch the afterlife of this text in the present times.

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