



Rafaut

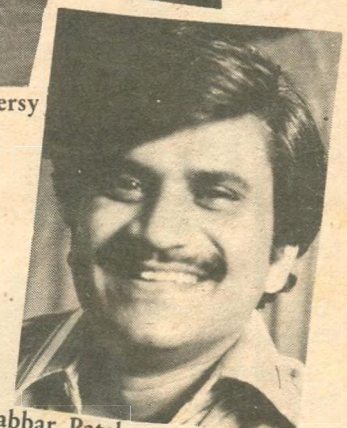
Ghasiram Kotwal: historical figures embroiled in modern controversy

GHASIRAM KOTWAL

An Inconclusive Muddle



Tendulkar: rewriting history



Jabbar Patel: strong direction

SUDDENLY, eight years after it had first been performed, *Ghasiram Kotwal* was in the news again. Bombay's theatre world watched, stunned, as a dispute that everyone thought had been settled forever, grabbed the headlines last fortnight. Contributing to a sense of *déjà vu* was the fact that the opposing sides in the dispute were old adversaries—the controversial Marathi playwright Vijay Tendulkar on the one hand and Shiv Sena leader Pramod Navalkar and the massed legions of his Prekshak Sangh, on the other.

Ghasiram Kotwal, a play about Nana Phadnavis, the last Peshwa, had aroused much controversy when it was first staged in 1972. The conservative

Chitpavan Brahmin community had complained that Tendulkar's version of history was unacceptably biased against it. The Shiv Sena, which had also objected to Tendulkar's equally controversial *Sakharam Binder*, had joined the clamour against the play. But the uproar had soon died down and *Ghasiram* continued to be staged without attracting much attention. Mani Kaul and the Yukta film cooperative went on to make a film out of it and it seemed, that in the more permissive '80s, it had become a non-issue.

No eyebrows were raised when the Chief Minister A.R. Antulay granted Pune's Theatre Academy Rs one lakh from the Chief Minister's Fund to go to the Berlin Festival. The Academy,

whose members include such theatre luminaries as Mohan Agashe and Jabbar Patel, innocently scheduled a performance of *Ghasiram* for the Festival.

Objections Raised: It was only on September 19, a mere six days before the group was due to depart for Berlin that the backlash began. Shiv Sena legislator Pramod Navalkar wrote to the Government demanding that the Academy be prevented from going abroad. ("I would have complained earlier but I was in Singapore" offers Navalkar by way of explanation).

However, the first stone that set off the avalanche was not from the Prekshak Sangh but from Prabhakar

Panshikar, the Marathi actor. It was his letter to the editor of *Loksatta* that started the controversy. According to Kamalakar Sarang, director of *Sakharam Binder* and a spokesman for the Theatre Academy, "The whole thing was an afterthought. The protest was originally sparked off by the personal jealousy of certain theatre people. Panshikar could not take up the matter earlier because he was on a tour. Maybe they even delayed it deliberately. But I personally feel that Vidyadhar Gokhale, Panshikar and others found that their agitation had not much strength. That is why they had to turn to Thackeray and Navalkar."

Navalkar's letter resurrected the old objection about historical inaccuracy but Navalkar went on to make two new points. Firstly, he claimed, even if we in India understood Tendulkar's



Ghasiram Kotwal: inaccurate presentation?

satirical intentions, was it correct to allow an inaccurate version of our history to reach foreign audiences? And secondly, whatever the merits of the play, did the Government have the right to use tax-payers' money to subsidise a frontal assault on a particular community?

With a rapidity that even the play's critics found surprising, Navalkar's initiative snowballed. Naturally, the Shiv Sena and its supremo Bal Thackeray endorsed his stand, but his objections were also echoed in Delhi. Foreign Minister Narasimha Rao who speaks fluent Marathi made his objections in public. Said Rao: "The play is somewhat controversial, historically inaccurate and perhaps even defamatory of that famous historical personage."

Marathi Lobby: Navalkar and gang were unlucky however that Rao had to leave for the United Nations with the matter still unresolved. From there Information and Broadcasting Minister Vasant Sathe who is a Maharashtrian took up the cry. As far as Sathe was concerned the Academy ought to be stopped from going. Back in Bombay, the wily Chief Minister, Antulay, who is a friend of Navalkar's, refused to take a stand. The state Government, said Antulay, had no power to prevent trips out of India—this was a matter for Delhi. Privately though, the sophisticated, British-educated Antulay, who is an old-fashioned liberal, refused to throw his considerable weight behind the Shiv Sena's initiative.

Inevitably, the matter went to Mrs Gandhi (for which there may have been no need but for Rao's exit). On September 21, three days before the troupe's departure, she gave her decision: *Ghasiram* could go to Berlin. No reasons were offered but in 'background' briefings to newsmen, government spokesman explained that short of actually impounding passports, the Government, with the abolition of the 'P' form, had no way of keeping members of the Academy from going at this stage.

Certainly, it would have been an

OFF STAGE

Desperate Hours

AS the Ghasiram controversy raged all over the country, Jabbar Patel, his 32 member Theatre Academy troupe and Vijay Tendulkar spent the most insecure nights of their lives. Enraged partisan groups in Pune and Bombay had threatened them with physical harm, and members of the group began to go underground. Even Tendulkar, who is used to controversy, was reportedly shaken by the uproar. Priya, his daughter says, "I myself received several anonymous telephone calls to the effect that my father would be brought out of the house, dead or alive. I was also threatened that acid would be thrown on his face!" Also, many of the troupe members received constant calls enquiring about the exact date and time of their departure to Berlin.

Unusually, Shiv Sena leaders deny that the threats emanate from them. Says Pramod Navalkar, "I did not act in my capacity as a Shiv Sena member at all, but as president of the Mumbai

Prekshak Sangh." Navalkar, who knew that the troupe was hiding at Santa Cruz Airport, did not divulge this information. "Our battle is over issues, not people," he says. "I asked the police commissioner to book anybody threatening Jabbar and the troupe."

In fact, even while the press reported that the 'warring factions' were getting ready to fight, the two sides met informally several times—one evening, Jabbar Patel, Pramod Navalkar, and Sharad Pawar sat up and gossiped till the early hours of the morning.

Why then did so much tension surround the troupe's departure? When they flew off, armed police ringed the airport terminal to protect them. In part it was the Shiv Sena's reputation that scared the actors. But it was also the inevitable fallout from any bitter battle. No matter how high-minded and principled Navalkar claims to be, the people who supported his initiative have been sufficiently ignited to not share his supposed disdain for violence. In fact, now, it is feared that when the group returns from Berlin, its rowdier opponents will be waiting to give it a violent welcome.

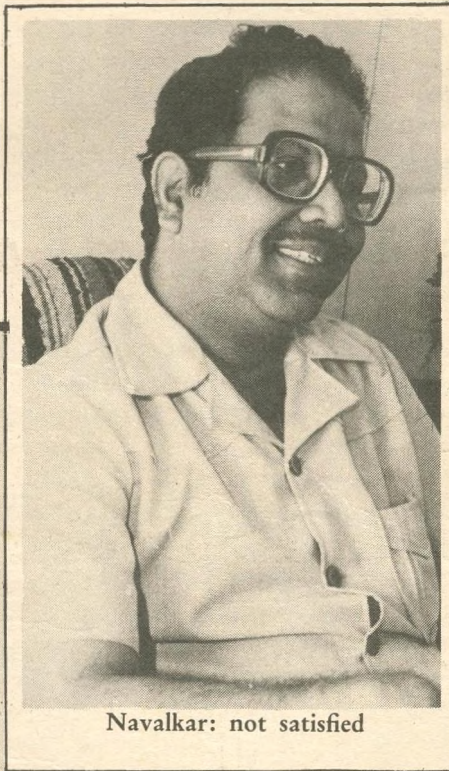
undiplomatic move. Posters of the play had already gone up in Berlin. In fact, Madhuri Purandare, one of the members of the Theatre Academy troupe says that she spoke to a friend in Paris who was actually involved with the Berlin Festival and who expressed great surprise over the uncertainty of the play's fate. Purandare believes that a fairly sizeable negative reaction would have been created in Berlin, had the play been withheld.

And as for the Iccr's grant, the case had become enough of a *cause célèbre* for the group to easily raise the money from private sources even if the grant was withdrawn.

The matter did not, however, end there. Vasant Sathe broke the convention of collective Cabinet responsibility and bitterly opposed the trip at a press conference, despite the prime minister's decision. And in a last-ditch attempt, Thackeray and Navalkar went to court on September 22, two days before the group's departure to Berlin. The hearing took up all of the next day and in a face-saving compromise measure, the Shiv Sainiks agreed to withdraw their petition if the Academy

promised to circulate a fair summary of Nana Phadnavis's historical achievements among its German audiences. "The compromise having been ironed out by both sides, the *Ghasiram* troupe flew off on schedule. "All's well that ends well," sighed a relieved Kumud Mehta, the drama critic who had taken on the job of defending the Academy's interests. "A victory against bigotry", said the *Indian Express* in a leading article and throughout the city, theatre-people cheered the outcome.

Questions Unanswered: But in a sense, it was the worst possible solution to an important problem. *Ghasiram Kotwal* has gone to Berlin all right but not one of the significant and deeply meaningful questions it raised has been satisfactorily resolved. Even



Navalkar: not satisfied

PRAMOD NAVALKAR

A Matter Of Principle

PRAMOD NAVALKAR, MLC, bristles when he sees the *Ghasiram* controversy being referred to as a Shiv Sena affair. According to Navalkar, a deputy manager with the travel firm of McKinnon and McKenzie, he acted in his capacity as president of the Marathi Prekshak Sangh, a cultural organisation and not as a Sena leader. BOMBAY met Navalkar at his modest Girgaum flat.

Q. Do you think the *Ghasiram* issue is settled once and for all?

A. No, I think we acted too late. Had we moved in time, the troupe could have been stopped from going.

In any case the questions of principle that I raised have not been resolved.

Q. What do you plan to do now?

A. My opposition is based on personalities, not individuals. There is a court verdict which I will respect. There is no question of doing anything to the troupe even when they come back. Jabbar is a friend of mine and

the court decision, which many legal experts expected would go in favour of the Academy, was headed off by the compromise worked out by the opposing parties. As the *Mumbai Sakaal* pointed out in a thoughtful editorial, we are all none the wiser for the *Ghasiram* controversy.

None of Navalkar's basic objections have been answered. Firstly, he had claimed, a play that attacked a particular, easily identifiable community, ought to be banned. The standard response among Bombay's theatre circles has been to argue that works of art must be judged on their own merits and that they are not subject to the standards of historical accuracy demanded of textbooks. And on its own merits, *Ghasiram* is a great play. According to Alyque Padamsee, it is the "most outstanding production" he has seen in India. Fine, says Navalkar, who is personally friendly with Academy members, but do we ever judge works of art, strictly on those criteria in India? Critics suggest that had *Ghasiram* attacked either Harijans or Muslims with the vehemance with which it denounces the Chitpavans, most peo-

should anyone threaten a single member of the group, I will defend him.

At the same time, I firmly believe that *Ghasiram Kotwal* presents a slanted view of history, unfairly attacks a community, will misrepresent India abroad, and does not deserve government finance. And I will continue to press these points.

Q. What about the allegations that you are only in it for the publicity?

A. The publicity, in fact, has done me much damage. A large section of the press has ignored the issues that I have raised and has concentrated on a 'Shiv Sena goondas run amuck' approach. I may be a member of the Shiv Sena but as somebody interested in theatre, surely I have the right to fight for a matter of principle? And I think I am entitled to a hearing without being dismissed as a trouble-making goon.



Thackeray: character assassination

BAL THACKERAY

**"Three-Fourths
Of A Victory"**

SHIV SENA PRAMUKH BAL THACKERAY says that his involvement in the Ghasiram controversy is that of a concerned citizen, not that of a politician. BOMBAY met the kurta-clad leader at his Kalanagar bungalow in Bandra.

Q. Why did you take up the issue so late?

A. You see, the news item about the Government grant and the Theatre Academy's departure was entirely missed by me. I did not know about it till the last few days. If I had been aware of it, we would have acted earlier.

Q. What are your main objections to the play going abroad?

A. I feel that freedom should not be misused. People should know how far freedom can be stretched. *Ghasiram Kotwal* is merely character assassination. All historical figures are controversial. But why should only the weakness be emphasised?

Q. But the play has been running for eight years now....

A. It is all right here. In India it was exposed only to a section of the population. When you send it abroad you are sending your 'culture'. Nobody will have heard of Nana Phadnavis there. But from the play they will jump to the conclusion that the playwright wishes to draw a picture of politicians in general.

Q. What do you feel about the attitude of the supporters of Ghasiram?

A. Look, if I recite an Urdu sher, even if you do not understand it, you will feel obliged to say 'wah-wah'. Why else are people like P. L. Deshpande, who was so actively against 'a touch of brightness', now supporting this play? *Ghasiram* has become an issue which people are supporting without really understanding it.

Q. Are you satisfied that they will now be including a piece extolling the virtues of Phadnavis?

A. It certainly shows an inconsistency on their part. If, as they claimed, the play was not historical in the first place, if the characters depicted were not Nana Phadnavis and Ghasiram, where was the need to make the compromise? They should have stuck to their own original stand. Why did they surrender? That has given us three-fourths of a victory.

ple would have agreed to ban it.

Is the Government then guilty of deciding each case on an ad hoc basis? Supporters of *Ghasiram* had counted on Mrs Gandhi to come out with a forceful defence of the artist's right to portray whatever he wants. This has not been forthcoming, adding some fuel to Navalkar's claim.

Wrong Image: Secondly, argues Navalkar, there is the question of India's image abroad. *Ghasiram* will be presented as a slice of history, whether or not the Academy hands out fairer summaries of Nana Phadnavis' career. For the German audience, Maratha history will be what Tendulkar portrays it as. In his preface to *Ghasiram*, the playwright confesses that it is not a historical presentation, but rather, the depiction of certain human tendencies in "legend" form. The characters however are distinct historical personages—Nana Phadnavis and Ghasiram, the Police Kotwal. 'Legend' or not, Tendulkar's verdict is quite unequivocal. Phadnavis is a despicable lecher. The playwright's defenders point out that Peshwa history is sketchy and so Tendulkar drew his own conclusions.

"But," ask Navalkar and his allies, "should the Government of India allow a controversial playwright's individualised interpretation of history to reach foreign audiences?" Others want to know if a play that showed Mahatma Gandhi in an unfavourable light could be performed at foreign festivals using the same sort of justifications. The Academy's supporters take the attitude that if a play is good enough to be shown here, it ought to be shown abroad—an attitude that does not convince skeptics who claim that foreign exposure is another problem altogether. Certainly, the hopes of liberal circles that Mrs Gandhi would uphold international exposure for controversial plays have been dashed. The Government has offered no policy statements.

Moreover, says Navalkar, there is also the question of the taxpayer subsidising this controversial rendering of our history. The Iccr has presumably agreed to subsidise the Theatre Academy on the grounds that the

cultural life of the country would somehow be enriched if one of our most talented groups was allowed to perform *Ghasiram* abroad.

Unsatisfactory Resolution:

However, the play's opponents firmly believe that the cultural image of India can only suffer abroad if we present a somewhat inaccurate version of our history. "Why should we make fun of our own historical personalities abroad?" asked V.P. Sathe, echoing the sentiments of the Prekshak Sangh. Those voicing their opinion against the play feel that it is absurd for Indians to flagellate themselves for the benefit of foreign audiences. Its supporters argue that India should uphold the principle of subsidising free artistic expression even if it involves government money. Some theatre personalities have their own opinions. According to Alyque Padamsee performing the play abroad could well show that India examines its own problems and does not sweep them under the carpet. Such an opinion is, obviously, pooh-poohed by Navalkar and company.

To *Ghasiram's* opponents—a list that includes not just the Shiv Sena, Vasant Sathe, Narasimha Rao, and Prabhakar Parshikar but also Durgabai Bhagwat, Balachandra Pendharkar, S.A. Dange, Sctumadhav Paghdi and Kashinath Ghanekar—the controversy has had a most unsatisfactory resolution. The play's supporters though, are glad that the Government did not take the stand it adopted with regard to Pratap Sharma's *A Touch of Brightness*. Then, the entire cast had been forcibly prevented from going abroad and all passports impounded. Today, such an action would be reminiscent of a police state, or even, of the Emergency.

By taking a pragmatic stand, Mrs Gandhi has headed off such criticism. But by refusing to come out openly for the freedom of artistic expression, she has in fact, strengthened Navalkar's case. Next time, if he raises the issue in time and the Government can act without seeming heavy handed, he will probably get what he wants.

So the apparent victory of liberal artistes in the *Ghasiram* case may well be short lived.

—Robini Soman with Travesh Sinha

PRABHAKAR PANSHIKAR

Raising The Storm

AMONG the opponents of the play is Marathi stage actor Prabhakar Panshikar, who unwittingly set the ball rolling on the *Ghasiram* controversy, with an article he wrote for the Marathi daily *Loksatta*. When he spoke to BOMBAY Panshikar explained that he was not even present when the political overtones crept in, and that he returned only after the Theatre Academy troupe had left for Berlin.

Q. What were the main issues, according to you?

A. You see, the Theatre Academy had mentioned that it was the only play selected to represent India at the Berlin Festival. I wondered which other plays had been scrutinised. What was the criterion of selection? Who were the people that chose the play? The Berlin organisers? If so, on whose advice did they choose this one play from several successful Marathi plays?

Q. So, your objection was to the play's being declared representative of Indian theatre?

A. Very much so. Even if Nana Phadnavis' personal life was blameworthy, that is not all that he is known for. We know him for his able administration and the fact that he held off the British for a good 15 years. The play should mention something of that. I want to know, would any government send a play like that to another country? Would America send as its representative a play about Watergate? Would it send one about Jacqueline's second marriage? Is the reason that the play has been presented in an impeccable form enough? Just because she was very beautiful, would we consent to a prostitute representing the womanhood of India? Although I have asked so many questions, not one has been answered satisfactorily.

Q. Why did you take so long over expressing your views? After all, the grant had been sanctioned to the troupe

THEATRE



Panshikar: "no question of jealousy"

two months before your letter appeared.

A. As I told you, I was inspired to write only after the advertisement's appeared. I objected mainly to the play, being referred to as representative. That's all.

Q. You have been accused of having been prompted by jealousy...

A. That is nonsense. We ourselves had been approached 10 years ago to perform in Germany, and we had refused. So there is no question of jealousy. In fact, there is pride that a Marathi play will be going.

Q. What do you feel about the compromise agreed to by the Theatre Academy in court?

A. I feel they have more or less confessed their guilt in portraying Nana in an untrue light. Although so far they had claimed that *Ghasiram* was not a historical play, the preface they have agreed to include in each performance proves otherwise. Actually now the situation has worsened. After the summary of Nana's achievements, the play will be presented, and it will show that the playwright has preferred to concentrate on the darker side of his life.