

MODERN INDIAN ENGLISH DRAMA HAS THE IMMENSE SCOPE FOR TRADITIONAL TECHNIQUES

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ABSTRACT

India has the longest and the richest tradition in drama. The origin of Indian drama can be traced back to the Vedic Period. As a manifestation of our national sensibility Indian drama came into existence as a means of exploring and communicating the truth of things and was popularly known as the "Fifth Veda." During the age of the Vedic Aryans, drama was performed in a simple way. Different episodes from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and the Bhagavad-Gita were enacted out in front of people. Such type of performance is still very popular in India during the time of 'dussehra.' Bharata's Natyashastra in Sanskrit is the most pioneering work on Indian dance and drama. It discusses deftly all major aspects of drama, namely stage-setting, music, plot construction, characterization, dialogue and acting. Sanskrit drama flourished in its glory till the fifteenth century but thereafter Indian drama activity almost came to an end due to certain invasion on India. When Britishers came in India, the crippled Indian drama regained its strength. Thus, the western impact awakened Indian drama. However, K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar writes: Western education was as yet carrying all before it. It was the 'open sesame' to knowledge, freedom, power; it cut the old bonds of convention and tradition; it let in light into the old dark rooms of an obscurantist faith; and it made a new world and a new life possible for its beneficiaries.

INTRODUCTION

India has the longest and the richest tradition in drama. The origin of Indian drama can be traced back to the Vedic Period. As a manifestation of our national sensibility Indian drama came into existence as a means of exploring and communicating the truth of things and was popularly known as the "Fifth Veda." During the age of the Vedic Aryans, drama was performed in a simple way. Different episodes from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and the Bhagavad-Gita were enacted out in front of people. Such type of performance is still very popular in India during the time of 'dussehra.' Bharata's Natyashastra in Sanskrit is the most pioneering work on Indian dance and drama. It discusses deftly all major aspects of drama, namely stage-setting, music, plot construction, characterization, dialogue and acting. Sanskrit drama flourished in its glory till the fifteenth century but thereafter Indian drama activity almost came to an end due to certain invasion on India. When Britishers came in India, the crippled Indian drama regained its strength. Thus, the western impact awakened Indian drama. However, K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar writes: Western education was as yet carrying all before it. It was the 'open sesame' to knowledge, freedom, power; it cut the old bonds of convention and tradition; it let in light into the old dark rooms of an obscurantist faith; and it made a new world and a new life possible for its beneficiaries.

The next requisite of drama is a living theatre. M.K.Naik in his article says, "Drama is a composite art in which the written words of the playwright attains complete artistic realization only when it becomes the spoken word of the actor on the stage and through that medium reacts on the mind of the audience. A play in order to communicate fully and become a living dramatic experience thus needs a Real theatre and a live audience." (180-181). Thus lack of a living theatre and enthusiastic audience have really hampered the natural growth of Indian English Drama. The major setback in the growth of Indian English Drama is language. English which is not the mother tongue of India poses many barriers before the actors and the audience. Being foreign language, it affects the most important factor of drama that is natural conversation. The Indian characters are not able to speak fluently. Supriya Shukla

finds: "the inherent inadequacy of the English language to express temperaments, sensibilities, and realities which are essentially Indians." (9). Indian drama has flourished in regional languages and Indian English Drama is a translation of it to a great extent. So translation, as it is obvious, is always an approximation which lacks natural expression.

It was only after the British set up their regime in India that the crippled Indian drama received new strength and witnessed a revival. Indian-English Drama made a humble beginning with the publication of Krishna Mohan Banerji's 'The Persecuted' in 1831. However, the real journey of Indian English Drama began with Michael Madhusudhan Dutt's 'Is This Called Civilization' which appeared on the literary horizon in 1871, though it was not followed by a sustainable creative effort for decades together. Among the various forms of Indian writing in English, drama seems to lag far-behind poetry and fiction. After a long hiatus of few decades it was only by the early 20th century that Indian English Drama gathered momentum under the influence of British Drama. There are plausible reasons for the arrested growth of Indian English drama.

Drama is meant to be staged. It should also provide some incentive to the playwright which depends on the professional stage and box office. But with the advent of talking films in 1930, drama faced downfall. Films provide more refined entertainment at the cheaper rates. The performances of Indian English Drama have also been affected by regional drama. After independence, National School of Drama was established but only a few plays were staged there in a year. Not only this, performances were rarely repeated. UNESCO affiliated theatres like Indian People's Theatre and Indian National Theatre were not entirely devoted to drama in English. They became the medium to stage regional drama.

Theatres were established in three major cities Calcutta, Madras and Bombay under British Rule. The people of these cities were highly influenced by British way of living and the "social values of this class were shaped by the English education it has received." (Karnad 4) This was the time when theatre companies from England used to visit India to entertain English people in India. It left an indelible impact on the Indians in these cities also. The Indian theatrical taste underwent a sea change. Before nineteenth century there was no fee for watching a play. Theatre depended on patronage of kings, ministers or temples. The improvisation of the actors with the given narrative material determined the success of the play. Like folk and traditional theatrical forms, actors did not learn their dialogues and rehearse for the same. But as soon as the box office started assessing the success of a play, drama became a matter of more conscious effort.

Compared to Sri Aurobindo and Kailasam, other major playwrights like Harindranath Chattopadhyaya and Bharati Sarabhai are less influenced by Elizabethan drama. Chattopadhyaya presents the lives of the Indian saints in an almost traditional manner. Though he does not directly follow the models and techniques of our classical as well as folk-stage, the shadow of the Sutradhara in the form of a Preface, as in Jayadeva, can be noticed easily. Asif Currimbhoy also let his one act plays to be influenced by western models. But, most of his plays may fail on the stage on account of his excessive dependence on cinematographic techniques and other stage gimmicks. Thus it is clear from the survey that the playwrights have, by and large, ignored our ancient dramatic tradition, though here and there a few experiments in this regard can be noticed. This is perhaps an important reason why Indian drama in English has remained mostly derivative and imitative.

Modern Indian English Drama has the immense scope for traditional techniques. It has the courage to give new dimensions to traditional theatrical perceptions. It not only uses old conventions but gives them new meanings also. So it is never a blind imitation of classical drama but evolves its new theory and takes drama to the common man. Modern Indian English Drama is not the offspring of any specific tradition rather it has laid the foundation of a distinctive tradition in the field of drama by exploring new vistas through reinvestigation into history, legend, myth, folklore and contemporary socio-political issues. A whole new theatrical perception is evolved by the modern Indian English Playwrights like Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar, Habib Tanvir and Badal Sircar.

Girish Karnad was well aware of the challenges which Indian playwrights had to face after independence. They "had to face a situation in which tensions implicit until then had come out in the open and demanded to be resolved without apologia or self justification: tensions between the cultural past of the country and its colonial past, between the attractions of western modes of thought and our own tradition, And finally between the various visions of the future that opened up once the common cause of political freedom was achieved." (Dodiya 21). So in such a scenario Drama was to fulfill great expectations and dedicate itself entirely to the noble cause of building a new nation. Modern Indian Dramatists, definitely, have taken the cause in their hands. Girish Karnad's genius lies in the fact that he draws a parallel between antiquity and contemporariness. His plays like *Yayati*, *Tughlaq*, *Hayavadana*, *Nagamandal*, *Tale Danda* and *Fire and the Rain* are based on History, Myths and legends. He explored new vistas to further Indian English Drama. In Sanskrit plays there have been the uses of Nandi, Bhagavat, masks, puppets and the like. Girish Karnad "went back to myths and legends and made them a vehicle of a new vision." (Dodiya 44) Through Karnad Modern Indian English Drama gets new ways to address social and individual issues. He finds the Sanskrit plays worthier to be staged than the plays of Tagore and Aurbindo.

While Karnad uses historical and mythical set-up, Badal Sircar, the great Bangali playwright uses contemporary scenario to throw light on the social problems of modern man. 'Utter meaninglessness on human existence' is the chief theme of his plays. He wants to go from village to village and involve the people. His great contribution lies in his Third Theatre. It is also called Street Theatre. It has brought revolutionary change in the concept of Dramatic performances. Through this theatre, Sircar addresses not only socio-political but ecological issues also. This theatre is the result of growing unemployment among educated youth. It is very cheap and mobile medium that would, besides many more, serve the purpose of forming a society based on equality. Nivedita Tandon says, "Various issues of social and ecological concerns are voiced through this medium of theatre. They seek to enlighten the masses on a plethora of social an, political, religious, economic, communalism, caste, disparities, terrorism, nuclear disastes, corruption, and AIDS awareness find a place in the repertory of street plays." (104)

Iconic Marathi dramatist, Vijay Tendulkar kicks-off a virtual revolution in Indian theatre both in terms of content and style. He is a subtle observer of Indian social reality. He is a humanist, an innovative playwright who continuously experimented with form and structures. He is known for his insightful "objectification" in the development of multi-layered characters whose existential angst was held up against the social traumas of the society. Tendulkar's plays have dealt with themes that unravel the exploitation of power and latent violence in human relationships. Leading the Vanguard of the avant-garde Marathi Theatre, Vijay Tendulkar symbolizes the new awareness and attempts of Indian

dramatists of the century to depict the agonies, suffocations and cries of man. In all his plays, he works upon the theme of isolation of the individual and his confrontation with the hostile surroundings. Habib Tanvir's genius lies in his deployment of folk elements like Karnad. He touched new horizons with his Chhattisgarhi folk troupe. He founded 'New Theatre' in Bhopal in 1959. Nach, chorus that provides commentary with song, is his novel contribution to Drama. Besides, he experimented with 'Pandavani' a folk musical form. Not only this, the contribution of many more like Mahesh Dattani, Indira Parthasarathy, Mahasweta Devi and Padamanabhan also can not be ignored whenever Modern Indian English Drama is talked about. So Modern Indian English Dramatists dare to defy the professional stage established by the previous playwrights. They have the genius and the power to transform any situation into an aesthetic experience. They really deserve hats-off salute and a standing ovation for exploring new vistas and confirming the novel identity of drama among storytelling and poetry.

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