



## Staging Society: The Role of Contemporary Indo-English Drama in Reflecting and Reshaping Social Realities

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DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.13.1.102](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.13.1.102)



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### Article info

Article Received: 22/01/2025  
Article Accepted: 25/02/2025  
Published online: 08/03/2025

### Abstract

Literature is considered as the reflector of the society. It has many forms like Drama, Novel, Poetry, Short story and many more. Amongst all the literary forms, drama is the unique one. According to Aristotle, "drama is an imitation of an action". Here people can notice the strong bond between the characters and the audiences. John Dryden defines drama as "Just and lively image of human nature, representing its passions and humors, and the changes of fortune to which it is subject, for the delight and instruction of mankind". There are several dramatists like Girish Karnad, Ramu Ramanathan, Mahesh Dattani, Vijay Tendulkar and so on. They utmost tried to stage or perform the societal issues in their respective plays. In an earlier stage, drama is used to be as a medium to inform, to teach, to delight and it actively works for conjunctive to the masses. Most of the rural people of India think drama as a 'Cinema' and that the living performances of drama on the village street or in the sacred place like temple is waned. With the passage of time, the mode of communication switched to a mediated interaction which means a process of interaction carried out by the use of information communication technology and it can be contrasted to head-to-head communication. The prime motive of this paper is to explore the perite/skilled role played by the theatre in accosting to perform or stage the social realities in contemporary Indo-English drama.

**Keywords:** Literature and Society, Theatre as a Medium of Communication, Drama and social issues, and Mediated interaction and its discourse.

### Introduction

Theatre is a primordial aesthetic practice in India and around the world. All existing evidences suggest that theatre existed in

the Indian subcontinent from the beginning of civilization. According to Paul Kurtz, the Rig Veda suggests that dramatic theatre in India came into being around the eighth century B.C.

Additionally, according to him; Jataka stories illustrating Indian life between 600 B.C. and 300 B.C. contain evidences of theatre (Paul Kurtz, 1988:66). But, According to P.V. Kane, for a number of reasons the Natyashastra of Bharata, an exhaustive memoir on the art of performance which is an earliest form of Indian drama is to be considered as the oldest extant work on the Sanskrit poetics of drama (P.V. Kane, 1994:10). Dramatic theatre in India gives the impression to owe part of its origin from religion. In Indian theatre the two great narrative epics of India, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata have a greater importance. According to Paul Kurtz, like the cult of Dionysus, Vedic religion also held the seeds of dramatic theatre in India. In the fourth century B.C, actors were employed to perform at temples in honor of deities. Also, some villages forced residents to subsidize public performances of Stree Preksha (women's drama) and Purusha Preksha (men's drama). The Natyashastra of the third century B.C by Bharata brings out the evidence of theatre arts at festivals and public celebrations during the Maurya Dynasty, founded by King Chandragupta (reigned 321 B.C -297 B.C). The Maurya Dynasty ruled India for a long period. During this period, kings sent Buddhist missionaries to various places like Ceylon, Syria, Egypt, Greece, Tibet, China and Japan to spread Buddhism. The missionaries used various forms of arts including drama, to teach Buddhist dogma. In a similar way, the Gupta Dynasty (A.D. 320- A.D. 535) ushered in India's golden or classical age in which the Buddhism accepted by King Asoka (reigned 274B.C- 232 B.C) and the dramatic theatre was flourished. The great playwright Kalidasa was patronized by King Vikramaditya (A.D. 373 - A.D. 415) and also gathered a unique group of poets and scholars (Paul Kurtz, Ibid). As per Historian Will Durant (M.L. Varadpande, 1981: 36), in one sense drama in India is as old as Vedas, for at least the seed of drama lies in the Upanishads.

The more actual source of drama surely older than these scriptures is the sacrificial and

festival ceremonies and religious procession. Many known and unknown factors worked together to produce Indian theatre and give it a religious stamp that ambled throughout the classic age in the serious nature of the drama. Perhaps the final spur to drama came from the contact established by Alexander's invasion between India and Greece. History of dramatic literature of India starts with the plays of Bhasa which are ascribed to fourth-fifth century B.C. As many as thirteen of his alluring plays have survived crossing the time span of several centuries. The most interesting thing to note is that without knowing who the author was the individual acts of Bhasa's plays were performed by the Chakyar actors of Kerala in Kutiyattam style in the temple theaters known as Koothambalam at least for one thousand years.

The age of the classical theatre is believed to be the golden period of Indian theatre. This period last until the fifth century, soon after which the flow of Sanskrit drama faded. Although the dramatic literature diminished, the performance traditions transformed into various forms through the traditional and classical folk, just as the basic aesthetics of Bharata. Modern Indian theatre is influenced by and draws inspiration from various sources. It was only at time of the consolidation of the British Empire in various parts of India in the late eighteenth century, modern theatre or the so-called Western proscenium style of theatre was introduced in India. However, the first aboriginal performance with native actors happened in 1795 when a Russian violinist by the name of Herasim Stepanovich Lebedeff staged a Hindi and Bengali mixed-language version of a short play by Paul Jodrell. But the momentum was sluggish and only in the 1830s, under the patronage of the rich native families, the first Bengali-language theatre, which was outside the traditional format of indigenous folk performance genres came into force. Due to the great influence of Western proscenium style theatre, the indigenous traditional folk theatre

and various other theatrical genres of India got a great hit. It is the same time; the British had established a small professional theatre outfit in Calcutta. An Indian actor named Baishnab Charan Auddy for the first time played *Othello* in 1848.

### Depiction of Social Realities in Indian English Drama:

There are several dramas which are dealt with social realities. The dramatist named Vijay Tendulkar, Ramu Ramanathan, Mahesh Dattani, Asif Currimbhoy, Girish Karnad, Farhad Sorabjee, Habib Tanveer, Manjula Padmanabhan, Badal Sircar and so on talked about social realities.

### Social realities in Tendulkar's plays:

Vijay Tendulkar tries to depict the harsh realities of the society in his plays. In an interview with Sumit Saxena he himself has said, "I have not written about the hypothetical pain or created an imaginary world of sorrow. I am from a middle-class family and I have seen the brutal ways of life by keeping my eyes open. My work has come from within me, as an outcome of my observation of the world in which I live. If they want to entertain and make merry, fine go ahead, but I can't do it, I have to speak the truth" (Interview with Sumit Saxena).

With his portrayal of the grim realities of life, love, and existence, Vijay Tendulkar has revolutionized the post-independence theatre genre. Tendulkar made an effort to portray the current society's true value, problems, obstacles, hardships, and complexity in all of its intricacy. Without making any attempt to moralize them, his characters are painted on the blank canvas of individuality. In order to represent life honestly, his plays eschew the utopian depiction of it and are composed in a realistic light. Every area of human life has been examined and touched upon by Tendulkar. As Shailja Wadikar states, "He may be seen as a silent 'social activist' who covertly wishes to bring about a change in people's mode of thinking, feeling and behaving" (Shailja Wadikar 2008).

Tendulkar's plays pose problems rather than offering a remedy or suggestion for how to resolve the issues they address. Tendulkar in one of his interviews said, "By not giving a solution, I leave possibilities open, for whatever course the change may take" (Saran and Patil 1993). As Wadikar rightly says, "The playwright seeks to present the modern man with his predicament, his challenges, his difficulties and complexities" (Shailja Wadikar 2008).

The interior and exterior worlds of a person are both reflected in Tendulkar's plays, which are similar to a reflection. He shows two key societal trends of Indian society as he deals with societal structures: male supremacy or hegemony and feminine vulnerability.

Indian English Playwright Vijay Tendulkar portrays several facets of human nature and the complications of human relationships in each of his plays. In his plays like *Kamala*, *Kanyadaan*, *Ghashiram Kotwal*, and *Gidhade*, he carefully examines and describes the different layers of blood ties. For instance, the various interconnections in the play *The Vultures* reveal how the relatives and friends' wild and crazy behaviour is caused by their lust for wealth. In the play *Ghashiram Kotwal*, the father trades his own daughter's purity for the accomplishment of his ambition, this is how the play *Kamala* illustrates the vacuousness of a couple's relationships. Tendulkar has made a concerted effort to provide significant modifications and developments in both the style and the topics.

One of Tendulkar's best plays, *Silence! The Court is in Session* (1967), was first written in Marathi and afterward translated into English by Priya Adarkar. *Silence! The Court is in Session*, a play praised for its inventiveness and creativity in the arts, "combines social criticism with the sorrow of an individual afflicted by society" (Arundhati Banerjee xviii). The play is based on a true story in which Tendulkar overheard a group of dabbler athletes whom he was escorting to Vile Parle, the Mumbai

neighbourhood where he lived, where they were planning to hold a demo prosecution. The play is presented as "a play inside a play" or "a play inside a practice." In *Silence! The Court is in Session* (1967) Tendulkar illustrated the challenges faced by a young woman who is a prey of the male-dominated culture. Tendulkar has highlighted the social absurdities that are prevalent. All of the vitality of modern life is present in the play. It concentrates on the human psyche and finds the ugly in it. Tendulkar's plays are the culmination of his observation of people, culture, and many events in his personal existence. The issue of unwanted pregnancies is addressed. Tendulkar sheds light on the bad tendencies ingrained in human behaviour, such as corruption, brutality, and bloodshed, in the play. In this play, the white-collar learned and civilized middle-class characters act violently and aggressively with their female partner in order to amuse themselves at the expense of her respect and pride. Benares, who claims that she was not involved in the crime as she says,

These are the mortal remains of some cultured men of the twentieth century. See their faces – how ferocious they look! Their lips are full of lovely worn-out phrases! And their bellies are full of unsatisfied desires (Vijay Tendulkar 117).

#### **Social realities in Ramu Ramanathan's plays:**

The playwright Ramu Ramanathan is good enough depicting social realities. Mostly his plays are dealt with hypocrisy, extramarital affairs, poverty, materialistic mindset and several other things. In his play titled *Collaborators* discusses about hypocrisy. In act II, Scene I at one side people are celebrating Lala Lajpatrai's anniversary whereas in another side a vivid gender discrimination is noticed. Keynote speaker of this programme was the father of the protagonist named Kranti. In order to grab the attention of the audience, the organisers offered lunch. Kranti's father noticed that during lunch women aren't served while men are serving. And the organisers let the

father know that it is a custom, first they will serve to men and then women. Father got furious and decided to teach a lesson.

... he sat down to eat ... as per convention, the others could start eating only after the guest of honour had begun ... so, everyone waited for father to begin ... father took a handful... threw it over his shoulder... second handful, over the shoulder... third handful... the organisers were outraged... Father explained, he was following a protocol... he always feed the great characters from history (Gandhi, Nehru, Sardar, Bose, Ambedkar, Bhagat Singh) before he began a meal... after all, a custom is a custom. (Ramanathan, 235)

Here in one side, they are celebrating Lala Lajpatrai's anniversary who believed in equality at the same time they are following their own made custom. This is a sheer hypocrisy.

Ramu Ramanathan has also talked about poverty in his magnum opus play named *Collaborators*. Here in this play the poor people never consult a doctor rather the consult the paanwallah for medicines. Here we have also noticed that the character named Mahadik, husband of Bai suffered from pecuniary difficulties. He beats his wife and his daughter who is a spastic. This is all happened because of financial difficulties. All the characters of this play named Arundhati, Kranti, Shivani and Himanshu tried to get the character Bai rid of from financial problems.

**Wife (Arundhati):** Oh oh oh, that must be a message from the bai. There's been a death in her family. TB. Apparently thirteen TB deaths in the past seven days in the slums. It's a crime. Did you know, instead of a doctor, these poor people consult the paanwallah for medicines. We must do something for the poor people. And the newspapers don't even report it!

**Woman (Shivani):** We must, we must.

**Man (Himanshu):** Yeah, right. Absolutely. No question about it.

**Wife:** Can you procure a job for my bai's husband? She needs the money. Her daughter is spastic. And the bai's husband sits at home and abuses all and sundry and beats up the bai and the daughter. His company shut down. See if you can get him a job? Anything. Watchman, courier-man, anything. Ask Aditya? His name is Mahadik. I have even told Daddy about him. But Daddy is so busy. We must help these poor people, no? Whatever. (Ramanathan, 229)

He also talks about the harsh reality of the society called extra marital affairs. In his play titled *Collaborators*, the characters aren't happy with their present partners. In the play they (characters) present themselves as a seeker of peace but in reality, they are involving themselves in materialism and they aren't happy with their current spouse. The characters of this play suffer from lacuna of peace in mind. And the reason is they are expecting too much from this world. William Wordsworth in his poem titled *The World is Too Much With Us* said that people will not be happy if they are obsessed with materialism. Here in these paly characters aren't happy enough because they are obsessed with materialism.

Ramu Ramanathan also talks about some social realities like curfew, women issues, Mumbai dock explosion, partition etc. In his play titled *Curfew*, the playwright talks about the problem suffered people from curfew. Here people are supposed to maintain the rules and regulation set by the authority. If it is imposed then everybody has to obey. Here in this play the character Yama (God of death) also suffers from this curfew and he is compelled to stay away from snatching someone's life. In the play *Shanti, Shanti, It's a War* Ramu Ramanathan discuss about war, gender discrimination and all. Here all the characters named Karna, Dushana, Duryodhana, Arjuna, Krishna are busy in expanding their territory. They are least bother about education and all. Their main motif

is to extend their legacy. In the play 3, *Sakina Manzil* the playwright discusses about Bombay Dock Explosion. Here he touches the pain and agony of partition as well. It is a sort of love saga. The play *Jazz* talks about the past and present music. His play titled *The Boy Who Stopped Smiling* has dealt with rote learning and all. His another play titled *Mahadevbnhai (1892-1942)* is a kind treatise of politics.

#### **Social Realities in Mahesh Dattani's Play:**

Mahesh Dattani is a playwright who always tries to depict the rough realities of the society. Jamirul Islam in his article named "Child Abused in Dattani's *Thirty Days In September*" discusses about social issues like child abuse, discrimination, homo sexuality and all. In practically all of his plays, he essentially tries to represent a socially challenging issue. He makes an effort to expose the ugly realities of our culture. Additionally, he examines several societal problems in his writings. His plays primarily discuss how people are treated unfairly in society on the basis of their sexual orientation, gender, caste, or religion. The topic of gender identity is addressed in the play *Dance Like a Man*. He discusses the exploitation of innocent female victims by males in *Bravely Fought the Queen*. The playwright addresses the concerns of gay marginalization in the play *Do the Needful*. He exhibits the issue of women being treated differently than men due to physical flaws and illnesses in *Ek Alag Mausam* and, of course, Children's exploitation in *Thirty Days in September*.

#### **Social Realities in Farhad Sorabjee's Play:**

Farhad Sorabjee tries to unmask the scathing realities of our society. Jamirul Islam in his research paper titled "Intertextuality in Farhad Sorabjee's Play *Hard Places*" discusses about social issues of the play titled *Hard Places*. This particular play talks about the life of pre-partition and post-partition. The playwright depicted how the characters named Saira, Aziz and their mother are longing for the interaction with each other. The border snatched their life.

Though the distance isn't far yet, they cannot interact because of border. They shout in the shouting valley in Godan Heights and exchange their dialogues. Here in this play, we may have seen that all the three characters named Saira, Aziz and their mother have their own motives. Saira wants to bridge the gap of emotion as she is suffering from emotional constipation. Now she wants to let out her emotions. She suppressed her emotions because of border and therefore she wants to get rid of from this emotional constipation. Her bother Aziz wants his mother back because of political benefits. After analysing the play, it is clear to us that all of the three characters have their own agenda.

The playwright shows how difficult it is to spend their life in no-man's land where the land is filled with snipers and mining lands. It is an absolute brazen land. The researcher named Jamirul Islam also compared their (Aziz, Saira and their mother) life with D.G Rossetti's *Blessed Damozel*. In the poem *Blessed Damozel* the persona is longing for her lover who stays at this earth whereas her beloved is also desperate to intimate his lover who is now in paradise. Almost the same thing is noticed here in the play titled *Hard Places*. All the characters are eager to interact with each other.

#### Social Realities in Girish Karnad's Play:

Girish Karnad has basically dealt his play with social issues. He is a prolific playwright. The authenticity of the Rigvedic tradition of ritual slaughter in Hindu ceremonies is called into doubt in Karnad's 2009 ethical dissertation, *Bali-The Sacrifice*. He depicts the clashing religious and cultural ethos of India in this drama. *Yashodhara Charite*, a Kannad epic from the thirteenth century, is the work he has chosen to examine the social, moral, and theological foundations of one's faith. He also looks at how a person uses his or her private love, sex, and passion for the sake of his or her public existence. In an interview meeting, he shares:

Bali worried and excited me...It deals

with the idea that violence is pervasive, lying just beneath the surface of our everyday behaviour, and is often masked by a conscious effort. It also posits that human thought, intention, and action are interlinked. It debates the Jain notion that intended violence is as condemnable as the action itself...The play debates the conflict of faith. (Mukherjee 2006: 49)

According to Nayak (2011: 79), "Karnad employs the play's backdrop to allude to the positivist and exclusivist possibilities of all ideologies and the necessity of human bonds in interpersonal relationships". The folktales of Karnataka have been recreated in the drama titled *Hayavadana* (1971), *Naga-Mandala* (1985), and *Flowers: A Dramatic Monologue* (2004) by Karnad with fresh perspectives and current relevance. He popularises them by narrating a human plight as he translates the oral history into a verbal and visual form on theatre. The storyline of *Hayavadana* is taken from *Brihat Katha-Saritasagar* by Somdeva. In order to build the play's subplot, Karnad also took inspiration from Thomas Man's recounting of the same tale in the *Transposed Heads*. The drama is replete with references to discrepancies and a person's desire for excellence and wholeness. People go out for unusual things because of this need, which makes them anxious in their regular lives. The tale of the displacement of heads is the primary plot, and the secondary is on *Hayavadana*, a man with a horse's face (Haya means horse and Vadana means face).

One of Girish Karnad's finest plays is *Naga-Mandala*. The man-woman interaction in their marriage is portrayed in this drama. While reading A. K. Ramanujan's writings on folktales, Karnad learned about the two tales. The first is a mythical story about a cobra that transforms into a man at night and visits a married woman, and the second is based on the widely held notion that keeping a 24-hour surveillance at a shrine can prevent death. *Naga-Mandala* paints a vivid picture of the pain and suffering experienced by both men and women as they

grow into adult positions. It also addresses how a person adjusts to social life in a culture where there is limited room for personal growth and individuality. Gupta (1999: 250) rightly says, "It is remarkable achievement of Karnad's play that he adapts this 'man-oriented' folk tale in such a manner that it becomes the representation of the experience of man and woman in the psychologically transitory phase".

Beyond these above-mentioned playwrights there are several Indian dramatists who talk about social realities. Amongst them Habib Tanveer, Manjula Padmanabhan, Asif Currimbhoy and Badal Sircar are renowned enough in the contemporary period.

#### Communication, Cinema & Media:

Drama is a genre which helps people to educate and learn so many real issues. Here people receive an explicit experience. The dramatist can easily communicate to his audience. It likes a short film. As cinema is interesting and people watch it unconditionally similarly drama does. Drama is a kind of medium to reach to the spectators. Drama is a kind of vehicle to enlighten the people. Here actors demonstrate the real issues to them. As the prime task of the media person is to cover the social issues and display it to the audience similarly the playwright does the same. He also tries to cover up the social issues and unfold it to the masses. Drama role plays as one in three. In one side it is communication to the masses but in another side, it is role plays as a cinema which is sometimes comedy, tragedy and sometimes tragi-comedy. It (Drama) is a process of enlighten people in a delighted manner. Here people enjoy, learn and most importantly find themselves out in real life. Amongst all these things its role plays as a media as well. Whomever playwrights I have discussed over here, their plays deal with social issues only. They gave more priority to the society than anything else. As we are social animals and we live in the society. Therefore, it is the duty and responsibility of a playwright to pen down

something on society.

#### Conclusion

From the above discussion it is clear to us that people need to take part in education. Education is a password to success. The mentioned realities can be wiped out if people become happy with whatever they possess. People should lessen their expectations. Nowadays people are obsessed with materialism, hence, they are suffering from mentally disorder life, couldn't find peace and involve themselves in evil activities. Drama is the best medium to reach to the people to make them aware about their own issues and all. As it is an audio-visual method therefore, people easily got attract. The Indian English playwright Ramu Ramanathan tries his best to elevate the social issues like extra-marital affairs, poverty, materialism, Women issues, curfew, war, partition and several other realities. He used myth as a weapon to present the realities. He extensively used myth as a shield to protect himself from the contemporary political personalities in his drama titled *Shnati, Shanti, It's a War*. To present the reality he used docudrama (it is research and reality-based drama). Mahesh Dattani is the playwright who always talks about social reality. His drama titled *Tara* also deals with the social issues like gender discrimination. The character Chandan is enjoying education as he is male whereas Tara is derived from this privilege as she is woman. Girish Karnad, Asif Currimbhoy, Farhad Sorabjee and so on talk about social realities. They find out the social problems and stage it to work it out.

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