



INDIAN ENGLISH THEATRE: PERSPECTIVES AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

Drama is hailed in India as the “Fifth Veda” and has had a rich and glorious tradition. The theatrical expressions have been an integral part of life. Meanwhile, the theatre has undergone fast changes during the last two or three thousand years. This research tries to discuss two contradicting issues of the theatres today, which on the one hand handle current issues in an audacious innovative style with respect to its theme and technique and ironically on the other hand witnesses paucity. First and the foremost reason for the paucity of Indian Drama is the want of living theatre. In India, right from the early Sanskrit tradition, Theatre has been used to address social issues. To draw the masses into anti-colonial struggles during the pre-independence period, Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA) instrumented street theatre as its campaigning tactic. Drama comes in direct contact with the masses who are the moral fibers of a stage production. Thus a lack of professional stage and encouraging box-office leaves the playwright desolate without incentives. In spite of all these adversities, the versatile variety of the present scenario of drama is the result of a long traditional epoch of dramas in India as well as the influences of multiple and novel theories which have dominated it. The focal point of the Indian dramatists was always on making use of the rich plethora of Indian myths and its varied historical heritage supplementing it with modern techniques of masks, dream sequences, innovative prologues and the like, making it an amalgamation of both Indian traditional theatre and modern western theatre.

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Perspectives and Challenges

The term drama comes from Greek word meaning action. In simple terms drama is a literary composition involving conflict, action, crisis and atmosphere designed to be acted by players on a stage before an audience. The earliest form of Indian drama was the Sanskrit drama which emerged sometime between the 2nd century BCE and the 1st century CE and flourished between the 1st century CE and the 10th. During this period, drama was looked at as the most popular and

accepted means for the concerns, foils, foibles, leisure, amusement and all other human emotions. These two words Drama and Theatre are as old as music and dance. But today there are only a few playwrights in India and even fewer who write in English. Some of the prominent Indian writers in English are Rabindra Nath Tagore, Sri Aurabindo, T P Kailasam, Asif currimbhoy, Gurucharan Das, Girish Karnad, Mahesh Dattani, Manjula Padmanabhan, Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sircar.

A survey of contemporary Indian Drama shows that the works of Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad represent a powerful and resurgent Indian Drama. These playwrights with their innovative and experimental work of contemporary relevance gave new directions to Indian drama. Let us now discuss how Indian Drama as an art form has gained relevance and applauses with its novel techniques and styles. For dramatists a play is very obviously a tool for social analysis and thus they appear as spokesperson for their society. Their plays throb nevertheless with strong compassion for their fellowmen and a deep involvement with social and moral issues. While several playwrights go with western philosophers and writers to shape their dramatic themes and ideology, the Playwrights like Girish Karnad are conscious of the western canon as well as the Indian tradition.

It was Badal Sircar who played an important role in the formation of the Third theatre or the Street Theatre. After gaining independence and a democratic form of government, the IPTA activists, who were all in opposition, found theatre a potent weapon for contracting the people and voicing their opinions. When writers like Mahesh Dattani and Badal Sircar concentrated on the political and social aspects of drama, Girish Karnad went to the folk tradition.

Dattani is well acquainted with the works of Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller and Strindberg. In his dramatic technique, he has been compared to Ibsen in the sense that the ghost of the past, the dark secrets of the human consciousness that torment the present, are explored in his plays in a very subtle and convincing manner. His plays expose the violence of our private thought and hypocrisy of our public morals. [...] They reveal the physical and spatial awareness of Indian Theatre on the one hand and the textual rigour of Ibsen and Tennessee Williams on the other. (Rai 21)

Dattani's first play, *Where There is a Will* was published in 1986 and since then he has been devoting himself to theatrical activities. In 1998, Dattani set up his own theatre studio meant for the training of new talents in acting, directing and stage

writing. In 2000, Penguin Books India bought out an anthology of Dattani's eight plays – *Seven Steps Around the Fire, On a Muggy Night at Mumbai, Do the Needful, Final Solutions, Bravely Fought the Queen, Thara, Dance Like a Man* and *Where There is a Will* under the title, *Collected Plays*.

Contrary to these social criticism novels by Dattani and street theatre that portrayed communalism, terrorism, police brutality, bride burning, dowry system and caste inequalities, are the novels by Girish Karnad which deals the same issues using folk art, myth, and other traditional methods. It had been a herculean task for the scholars to trace the origin of Indian and Sanskrit drama for the last several decades.

It is not easy to say when and how Indian theatre originated. For that matter, it is impossible to determine the origin not only of Indian but also of any other theatre. Mimicry and pleasure, are the essentials of the theatre and since mimicry and pleasure-seeking are instinctive to man, the theatre may have come in to existence, almost with man. (Chandramouli 1)

One of the oldest scholars of drama, Amulya Charana Vidyabhushana tried to find out the seeds of the origin of the Indian drama in the music and dance of the early days. It can be perceived that Indian theatre and movies right from the beginning was invariably associated with music, sports and other merry making activities which were a part of their rituals and sacrificial ceremonies. And so Bharatha said in his *Natyashastra*, "Theatre is life. There is no art, no craft, no learning, no yoga, no action, which cannot be seen it"

Drama is so deeply associated with our inner consciousness and so in all its varieties and manifestations, it can be regarded as the best means for the exploration of human mind. *The Persecuted* by Krishna Mohan Banerjee in 1831, is regarded as the first Indian - English Drama. Since then about four hundred plays have been written and staged not only in Indian theatres, but also in abroad. While Indian English Poetry and Indian English Fiction found space in foreign lands and hearts, pathetic enough, "Indian Drama is not so rich and impressive either in quality or quantity". (Rai 11)

Rai also refers to an eminent Indian Critic, M.K. Naik, who in his article, "The Achievement of Indian Drama in English", rightly opined drama as a composite art where the written word of the playwright attains complete artistic realization only when it becomes spoken word of the actor on the stage and through that medium reacts on the mind of the audience. He also adds that a play, in order to communicate fully and become a living dramatic experience, needs a real theatre and a live audience. Though some 360 plays and playlets appear to have published either in book form or in periodicals, proper care has not been bestowed on the publication aspect for want of due encouragement. Under the auspices of the Department of English of Karnataka University, an attempt is made to tap all the sources available and thereby bring out a latest bibliography of Indo-English drama including author's translation of their works. Though some Indo – English dramas were written for light entertainment, there were writers who took up drama in a serious manner experimenting on the Elizabethan model and the rich Sanskrit tradition.

Even after establishing National School of Drama in Delhi after independence, the performance of English plays was not given importance and due to this reason only one or two plays in English were being staged every year, that too in big cities. Since Indian English playwrights do not have adequate facilities for getting their play staged in a live theatre, it has done irreparable harm to the growth of Indian English drama.

There are a number of dramatists who have significantly helped in shaping the genre of Indian-English drama. For dramatists, a play is inevitably a tool for social criticism and the moral purgation and these themes naturally echoes in their plays. In the field of Indo-English Drama, there are a few names worth mentioning, namely, Sri Aurabindo, Kailasam, Harindranath Chadopadyaya, Bharathi Sarabhai, and a few others. Though Rabindra Nath Tagore cannot in strict sense of the term be grouped under the Indo-English Playwrights, some thirty plays of his, written in Bengali had been translated to English by the author himself. It is in the hands of such playwrights like Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar,

Badal Sircar, Mahesh Dattani etc. drama gets enriched and embellished.

In the late 1960's, contrary to the well established English theatre, an indigenous Hindi wing was started. While the English theatre survived due to the box-wallah culture and advertisements, Hindi theatre suffered from lack of rehearsal space, advertisement and hardly any choice as far as script was concerned. To revive Hindi theatre from this destitution, the only way for the language writers was a Hindi production of their play. So, with the help of three or four translators, the important playwrights - Girish Carnad from Kannada, Vijay Tendulkar in Marathi, Badal Sircar in Bengali – tried to operate in a small unostentatious manner to present unestablished contemporary plays. The major failure of this type of translation was that most of its readers couldn't read the script in the original or its hindi version. Thus in 1969 *Enact* started publishing the full-length plays of these important playwrights in English translations. To those who couldn't read and understand Hindi, English became a necessary link. That was how Indian English Drama came to existence.

Even though a series of successful plays by the contemporary playwrights, pulled Indian English drama to the forefront, the contemporary movement lost its breath and followed a declining curve. The reasons behind this decline to a great extent resides in the playwright themselves. These renowned playwrights who took up writing as a serious profession was later carried away by their own popularity. Rajender Paul opines that, these playwrights were carried away by seminars, discussions, the media lap-ups and social circuits which became the visible rewards of popularity. Thus the initial kick-off one witnessed in the Indo-English theatre followed a decline in the later years.

Rakesh and Sircar got the Nehru Fellowship to do some research, while Karnad got the Baba Fellowship, and Tendulkar gave up his journalistic job to devote more time to writing and later he too became a Nehru fellow. Nothing worthwhile really came out of their individual forays except for their display of a general sense of euphoria and

greater mobility or an escalation in social standing. (Paul 85)

Later in the seventies, the decline of the Indian Drama was high up when Rakesh died in 1971, Sircar changed his course from urban playwright to a new theatre named Environmental Theatre and when Karnad and Tendulkar were usurped by the growing popularity of the parallel cinema. While the first reason for the decline of the theatre lies in the hands of the playwrights, the second reason for the decline of contemporary theatre is attributed to the format wise incredibility of the Indian theatre which was too western to be called Indian. We often find in Indian drama, the ideological concepts of several Western thinkers like Sartre, Camus, Ibsen, Pinter, and Becket. "...translated to English these plays wouldn't even stand alongside second rate European plays. Whatever the merit of this, I think it did give a jolt to the playwrights, and they began to seek their roots". (Paul 86) Probing to the roots landed the playwrights in the folk form or the folk tale. Subsequently in the name of tradition the Sangeeth Natak Academy organized several funding agencies including the Ford Foundation which have doled out large sums for staging productions based on one folk form or another, all of which hasn't produced any worthwhile script for re-use. In Karnad's own words:

The basic concern of the Indian theatre in the Post- Independence period has been to try to define its 'Indianness'. The distressing fact is that most of these experiments have been carried out by enthusiastic amateurs or part-timers, themselves entirely to theatre. I see myself as a playwright but, make a living in film and television. There is a high elasticity of substitution between the different performing media in India: the participants-as well as the audiences- get tossed about. (Tandon 9-10)

There is another problem with the growth of Indian English drama. The problem is related to the language. English is not the natural medium of communication in our society. As it is spoken only by a small fraction of elite people in our society, its appeal is confined to that sophisticated class alone. Moreover the technology provides them with a

wider range of entertainment in T V and video so the major fraction spends time and money in them. Girish Karnad was aware of the problems and challenges Indian playwrights had to face after independence. Caught between the two tensions of depicting 'the cultural past of the country and its traditional past', between 'the attractions of western modes of thought and our own traditions', the playwrights had to find solutions through their plays in a style mediating the interest of both streams of the audiences. Due to all these reasons in some places like Karnataka, professional theatre still survives in some pockets as a pale shadow of the commercial cinema. In some other places like Maharashtra, the professional theatre is interacting with elitist theatre resulting in the most unusual vigor and popularity of theatre there. Whereas in some such places like Assam and Kerala the professional theatre stay more or less untouched by changes in institutional and movement theatres. There is yet another type of popular theatre that runs through India which could be termed as purely classical; for example - Kathakali in Kerala, Yakshagana in Karnataka, Bhavai in Gujarat etc. Most of these forms of classics exist only in seminars and symposiums now-a-days. "...Theatre, the most composite of all art forms, draws strength from multifarious interactions among varied cultural expressions. The perfection of form need not be at the expense of the raw energy of real theatre..." (Prakash 6)

The challenges faced by Indian English drama also include the distance and disparity between the remote and urban population, lack of sponsorship and opportunities to stage plays among others.

An intellectual renaissance in the real sense and not the pseudo- intellectualism of the bourgeoisie accompanied by a revolution for literacy may establish drama as one of the most provocative genres of literature and a next-door form of entertainment. (Sharma 26)

Starting from the Vedic period, drama had a long tradition of living and literature and one would find it hard to name another such body of writing with the same vitality and drive as this. At the end of this

research, it can be confirmed that in spite of all the necessary innovations that have made Indian English Drama the first and the undying genre amidst other popular ones, it has to be reconstructed economically and more thoughts should be given to the theatres and its existence. The stage artists should be given proper financial back-ups along with cordial recognitions. We should remember the fact that drama, is the earliest and the most appropriate tool to portray the follies and foibles of the society and dramatist, the god-signatured man who with his enticing weapon- a pen - capable to dream of a "second coming".

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