



## INDIAN ENGLISH DRAMA: PRE AND POST INDEPENDENCE

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### ABSTRACT

Drama is an audio-visual fictional stage performance through dialogues by live actors in front of a vast audience. It is a composite art formed in verse or prose, contains plot, story, music, dialogue, characters, conflicts, complexity, emotions, etc. India's classical drama themes have mainly related to Indian traditions, cultures, religious practices, and the story of Gods and Goddesses. Indian English drama got national and international recognition slowly but steadily. Indian drama in English did not flourish initially, as did Indian novels and poetry. The first Indian English theatre was opened in 1756 by the Britishers named 'Play House' in Calcutta. The first Indian English play is '*The Persecuted*' (1831) by Krishna Mohan Banerji. But the genuine expedition of Indian English drama was begun by the hand of Michael Madhu Sudan Dutt's '*Is This Called Civilization?*' (1871). Most of the dramas after Independence are written in prose style. Most post-independence dramatists followed the tradition of Shakespeare's writings and Elizabethan drama.

Keywords: Audio-visual, dialogue, conflicts, religious practice, culture, recognition, expedition, Elizabethan drama.

### Introduction

Drama is an audio-visual fictional stage performance through dialogues by live actors in front of a vast audience. It is an imitation of life through action. It is a composite art formed in verse or prose, contains plot, story, music, dialogue, characters, conflicts, complexity, emotions, etc. "*It is designed for representation on the stage by actors who act the parts of the characters of the story, and among whom the narrative and the dialogue are distributed*"<sup>1</sup>.

M. K. Naik in his article '*The Achievement of Indian drama in English*' observes: "*Drama is a composite art in which the written word of the playwrights attain complete artistic realization only when it becomes the spoken word of the actor on the stage and though that medium reacts on the mind of the audience. A play, in order to*

<sup>1</sup> Sarkar, Somnath. "Indian English Drama: An Essay", Journal of Indian English Drama, Oct. 26. 2019.

communicate fully and become a living dramatic experience, thus needs a real theatre and a live audience (180-181)"<sup>2</sup>.

The term 'drama' is emanated from the Greek word 'drae,' which means 'to do' or 'to act' means doing some actions. Like other forms of literature, Indian drama dates back to its religious origin. The source of Indian drama is from ancient religious mythologies like the hymns, and dialogues are from Vedas. The earlier drama of India was written in the Sanskrit language. The sources of these plays are Vedas, Rigveda, the Ramayana, and the Mahabharata. There are references to drama in the Mahabharata and the Ramayana.

Bharata Muni's *Natyashastra* (2nd century BC) is called the fifth Veda aims at describing the theories and practices of Indian drama and theatre. Like the '*Poetics*' of Aristotle, it gives a comprehensive account of theatre. As Thirumalai (2001) points out:

This work is of great significance for Indian poetics, drama  
And fine arts. Generations of Indians have been influenced  
By the thoughts adumbrated in this treatise. Even our movies  
Follow the same aesthetics suggested as appropriate to the  
India nation in this excellent treatise! Certain stereotype  
Notions that an average Indian now has about his  
And other ethno linguistic communities are discussed and used in  
This interesting work on drama. The work is a mine  
Of sociolinguistic information of the past and the present.<sup>3</sup>

India's classical drama themes have mainly related to Indian traditions, cultures, religious practices, and the story of Gods and Goddesses. The most talented and renowned playwrights and their works of Indian classical drama are Bhasa's *Madhyamavyayoga*, *Urubhanga*; Kalidasa's *Vikramorvasiyam*, *Abhijnanasakuntalam*; Harsha's *Nagananda*, *Priyadarsika*; Vishakhadatta's *Mudrarashasa*, etc. Ashwaghosh, Shudraka, and Bharabhti are also milestones of Indian drama. Indian English drama got national and international recognition slowly but steadily. Indian drama in English did not flourish initially, as did Indian novels and poetry. In the beginning, most Indian dramas were written in the native languages. The lack of English theatres and a literate audience is the main reason for the slow development of Indian English drama. Male characters had performed female characters. The audience did not show any interest in English drama because of the language problem. The first Indian English theatre was opened in 1756 by the Britishers named 'Play House' in Calcutta. And in 1777 'Calcutta Theatre' was established by the Britishers. But primarily, the plays of Shakespeare, like Macbeth, Hamlet, Othello, Richard III, etc., were performed along with other English plays. In 1789 a translated version of Shakuntala was performed in the Calcutta theatre. After that, other theatres started to emerge all over the country, like 'Bombay Theatre' (1770), 'Royal theatre' (1848), 'Parsi Theatre' (1850), a private theatre in Chaourangi in 1789 were established. M. K. Naik rightly says "*Indian drama in English is called Cinderella of the Indian English literature*"<sup>4</sup>. The period (1850 to 1940) is called the Golden Age of the Indian Theatre in any language. These theatres had a significant contribution to the development of Indian English drama.

Indian English drama before Independence: Indian drama is enormous in quantity but not quality. The first Indian English play is '*The Persecuted*' (1831) by Krishna Mohan Banerji. But the genuine expedition of Indian English drama was begun by the hand of Michael Madhu Sudan Dutt's '*Is This Called Civilization?*' (1871). Prema Nandkumar in his book '*Critical Essays in Indian Writings in English*' observes "*In the field of Indo-Anglian*

<sup>2</sup> Naik. M. K. "The Achievement: Perspectives on Indian Drama in English", Madras: OUP. 1977.

<sup>3</sup> Thirumalai, M. S. "An Introduction to Natyashastra – Gesture in Aesthetic Arts". Language in India (1.6). 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Naik, M. K. "Dimensions of Indian English Drama", New Delhi: Sterling. 1984.

literature, drama is but sparsely separated. We have had very few dramatists and one can easily count the number of good dramas" (P. 191)<sup>5</sup>.

Before Independence, the most renowned playwrights are Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo Ghosh, Harindranath Chattopadhyay, D. M. Borgaonkar, T. P. Kailasam Bharati Sarabhai, etc. Rabindranath Tagore is a sage poet of India, and the plays of him are primarily written in Bengali. Rabindranath Tagore himself translated his plays like *Chitra*, *Sacrifice*, *The Post Office*, *Mukhtadhara*, *The Cycle of Spring*, *The King of the Dark Chamber*, etc. are draped in deep Indian philosophy. According to Diana Devlin "Rabindranath Tagore sets out to unify Indian and Western traditions creating plays which have been described as a mixture of Bengali folk drama and Western medieval mystery plays" (P. 4)<sup>6</sup>. His plays are called 'plays of Ideas,' which explore the inner conflict of soul and extensive use of symbolism have enriched his dramatic art. Sri Aurobindo is a versatile writer and his patriotism served as a significant influence on his writings. His plays, *'Perseus the Deliverer (1907)*, *Vasavadutta (1957)*, *Rodogune (1958)*, *The Viziers of Bassora (1959)*, *Eric (1960)*, *The Maid in the Mill (1962)*, *Prince of Edur (1961)*, *Savitri*, etc. All his plays are poetic. Myth, legend, folklore, and history are the major characteristics of his plays. Heroism, adventure, and Mystery are seen in the actions of his characters. Harindranath Chattopadhyay wrote mostly social plays, viz. *The Windows*, *The Parrots*, *The Sentry Lantern*, *The Coffin and The Evening Lamp*, etc. These all are the realistic pictures of the Indian society, like widowhood, religious conflict, superstitions, socio-political conflicts and hypocrisy. D. M. Borgaonkar's *'Image Breakers' (1938)*; T.P. Kailasam's *The Burden (1933)*, *Fulfilment (1933)*, *the Purpose (1944)*; Bharati Sarabhai's *The Well of the People (1943)*, *Two Women (1952)* are other significant plays and playwrights of the pre-independence era.

India English drama after Independence: Indian drama in English did not flourish as the British drama did even after the Independence. Most of the dramas after Independence are written in prose style. Most post-independence dramatists followed the tradition of Shakespeare's writings and Elizabethan drama. There are few plays or playwrights who continued the poetic style of Tagore and Aurobindo. The Tagore-Aurobindo-Kailasam tradition of poetic drama continues, but in a difference in the hands of Manjari Isravan, G.V. Desani, Lakhan Dev and Pritish Nandi. The themes of Indian drama in English after Independence are the hollowness of the society, the oppression of women, oppression of the poor people, religiously orthodox, partition and its effectiveness on the oppressed, etc. The Indian English drama finds its root after Independence with the hands of Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sarkar, Mahasweta Devi, Asif Currimbhoy, G. V. Desani, and many others. The sources of Girish Karnad's plays are primarily from Indian myth, folktales, history, etc. The subjects of his Plays are sex, violence, caste discrimination, religiously orthodox, socio-political conflicts, greed etc. He wrote mythical plays as well as historical plays. *Tughlaq (1964)*, *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan (1997)*, *Tale-Danda (1990)* are his historical plays. *Yayati (1961)*, *Hayavadana (1971)*, *Naga-Mandala (1988)*, *The Fire and the Rain (1994)*, *Bali-The Sacrifice (2002)* are mythical plays. Vijay Tendulkar is a realistic playwright, and the subjects of his plays are related to the real issues of our society, such as the problems of common man, discrimination against women, patriarchy, intricacies of human relationships, the illness of contemporary culture, gender issues, violence, power politics, etc. *'Silence! The Court is in Session' (1967)* is a mock trial and his masterpiece. His well-known plays are the *Vultures (1961)*, *Kamala (1981)*, and many others. Badal Sarkar's plays mostly talk about the alienation, exploitation of the poor and the marginalized, guilt and responsibility, the frustration of the common man, lovelessness, and living death, and loss of roots. *Evam Indrajit (1963)*, *Pagla Ghoda (Mad Horse, 1967)*, *There's No End (1969)*, *Remaining History (1965)* is his most renowned plays. Mahasweta Devi is a Bengali Writer who wrote in her native language. Her first play is *'Jhansir Rani' (1956)*, a fictional reconstruction of Laxmibai, who fought against the British Author Army. *'Andhanmalik' (1967)* is based on the Naxalite movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. *'Hajar Churashir Ma' (Mother of 1084)* is the story of an upper-middle-class woman. She also talked about the position of tribal communities within India. *Imaginary Maps (1995)*, *Old Woman (1997)*, and *the Breast Stories (1997)* are the other important works of her. Asif Currimbhoy's *The Dumb*

<sup>5</sup> Nandkumar, Prema. "Bharati Sarabhai's English Plays", "Critical Essays of Indian Writings in English", Madras: MacMillan. 1977.

<sup>6</sup> Tandon, Neeru. "Perspectives and Challenges in Indian –English Drama", Atlantic: New Delhi. 2016.

*Dancer (1961), The Refugee (1971), Sonar Bangla (1972)* are the other essential works after the independence period.

### Conclusion

Indian English drama did not reach that level of Indian novels, and poetry did. Most of the dramas of India are written in native languages. The theatres of India are not as living as required. Drama is a composite art that requires the shared experience of the writers, the actors, and the audience on the stage, which has its problem. As there is a lack of stages, the plays do not get staged. If it is staged, the audience is limited because of the language problem. And English is not understood by everyone. Most of the playwrights do not give importance to the native culture, myth, historical heritage, etc. In spite of these problems, Indian drama in English has been reached the global level. They are staged globally. They are committed to social issues, to the accurate picture of the society, written with a definite purpose and aims at bringing changes in the community and the English drama.

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