
The Major Contribution of Twentieth Century Playwrights in the Evolution of Modern Indian Theatre

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Abstract

Modern Indian theatre owes its origin to the growth of large urban settlements in Kolkata, Chennai and Mumbai beginning sometime in the 18th century under the British who by the 19th century had gone on to establish secure centres of trade in India. Around the same time, English education became firmly established in the country, and an entire class of intelligentsia was born, exposed and initiated to the fine nuances of Western literature and drama (Richmond et al 388). By the last quarter of the 19th century, drama in Indian languages modelled on Western lines began to be performed, particularly in Kolkata, keeping in mind the tastes of the private audiences from the upper classes. Occasionally, however, theatre as a powerful political tool also began to make distinct attempts at subverting the existing oppressive colonial political order. But at the same time, this drama also often exposed the social evils, injustices and corruption within the greater Indian society. Perhaps, the most important among these plays were Nil Darpan (1858) by Dinabandhu Mitra and Ekei Ki Bole Sabhyata (1871) by Michael Madhusudan Dutt.

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Introduction

Modern Indian drama has since then come a long way. Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri in the introduction to her book Mahesh Dattani (2005) thus writes:

Many forms of profit generating, commercially viable professional drama, a whole gamut of amateur theatre, with varying degrees of commitment and competence, some experimental theatre of a very serious nature that makes radical departures from convention, and a host of dramatic activities that are seen in school and college campuses are some of the truly heterogeneous terrain of modern, urban theatre (Chaudhuri 3).

Among the major twentieth century dramatists who have contributed immensely to the making of modern Indian theatre, mention may be made of the following: Vijay Tendulkar, who wrote in Marathi about contemporary social issues; Badal Sircar, who was one of the major theorists and practitioners of contemporary experimental theatre in Bengal; Girish Karnad, who redefined the contours of modern Indian theatre with his Kannada plays; and Mohan Rakesh, who is known for his experimental Hindi drama. Among these stalwarts of Indian drama, Mohan Rakesh who was greatly influenced by Marxism, waged a relentless fight against the traditional stronghold of Hindi drama, and always endeavoured to project something new and challenging. As Nirad Chaudhuri has pointed out:

With Mohan Rakesh, Hindi drama makes a departure from pseudo-modernism and traditional symbolism to the drama of ‘non-communication’- the modern man’s failure to understand himself or to understand the other person and their mutual failure to understand each other, which is the real tragedy of modern life (Sircar 25-26).

Rakesh’s plays dramatize the sufferings of men and women who fall victims to socio-economic hierarchy and cultural hegemony. In *One Day in Ashadha* (1958) and *The Great Swans of the Waves* (1963), Rakesh makes use of history and legend to throw light on the contemporary problems. In *Adhe Adhure* (1959), Rakesh explores the ironies of middle-class life and reveals a fascinating preoccupation with its representatives as victims of their own incomplete or half-baked purposes and split personalities (Dharwadkar 49). Most of Rakesh’s characters in *Adhe Adhure* are fragmented beings. Each character considers himself to be a victim of others while he is in fact a victim of his own incomplete purpose. The stage directions demand that one man should play the roles of all the five men in the play. The exits and entrances are planned in such a way so as to enable one actor to manage all the roles indicating that all the men together combine to form the one whole person the woman sought and did not find in her husband (George 512-13).

But while Rakesh uses historical characters to project the breakdown of communication in contemporary life, Badal Sircar uses contemporary situations to project the existential attitude of modern life. He has created a genuine people’s theatre, known as Third Theatre, a theatre supported and created by the people, and not merely performed before the people (Iyer 141). Transcending the limits and limitations of the traditional and folk theatres, Third Theatre is a composite of a four-way flow of influences -- actor to actor, audience to actor, actor to audience and audience to audience. It is essentially a flexible theatre, aiming at not simply enlightening the people on socio-economic and political problems, but leading them to constructive action with a view to bringing about a social change. Rustom Bharucha described Sircar’s Third Theatre as “the most rigorously non-commercial political theatre in India” (Bharucha 127), and noted that Sircar believed that

... all human beings involved [in theatre] – whether as performers or spectators – should be free in their relationship with one another and no external factor should affect that relationship (Bharucha 128).

Sircar’s plays *Procession* (1974), *Bhoma* (1976) and *Stale News* (1979) are based on the concept of the Third Theatre. Procession, the most popular of the three plays, is

about the search for a new society based on equality. The chief concern of the play is to show the “real way” to a new society in which man does not have to live by exploiting man, and in which each works according to one’s ability and gets according to one’s needs. Evam Indrajit (1963), is acknowledged today to be the one play which brought existential angst into Indian theatre with a sense of immediacy (Prasad 62). Satayadev Dubey has said about this play that it is

the one play which accommodates and expresses practically all the major concerns, aspirations and problems of the new, rootless urban generation and invests it with deep autumnal sadness (Dubey 29).

Sircar wanted his audience to confront the truths of their lives, to explore the value of human life and social relationships in a world that is hostile and is constantly fashioned to confound the individual. As Sumanta Banerjee puts it, Evam Indrajit asks the question as to why one must live, and Sircar’s other plays like Sara Rattir (1963), Baki Itihaas (1965), Tringsha Satabdi (1966) and Shesh Nei (1970) show the guilt and responsibility that arise from an individual’s inability to fill the vacuity of existence with meaning (Banerjee 41). It is this that dovetails into Sircar’s experimentation in theatrical productions because he wanted to work towards true liberation of the individual and performance processes.

Vijay Tendulkar symbolizes the new awareness and the manifold attempts of Indian dramatists of the last quarter of the last century, to depict the agonies, suffocations and cries of man. He mainly focuses on the middle class society, highlighting in all his plays the theme of the isolation of the individual and his confrontation with social hostile surroundings. In most of his plays also, Tendulkar relates the problem of anguish to the theme of violence. He does not consider the occurrence of human violence as something loathsome or disgusting in as much as it is innate in human nature. He has been recorded as saying:

... unlike the communists I don’t think violence can be eliminated in a classless society, or, for that matter, in any society. The spirit of aggression is something that human being is born with. Not that it is bad. Without violence man might have turned into a vegetable (George 512).

Tendulkar’s consistent and prolonged engagement with human aggression has made him one of the most distinguished social theorists of violence in the country. According to Ashish Nandy, Tendulkar

often invokes a milieu where the individual is caught in a crosscurrent of

social forces that he or she does not understand. Buffeted by these forces, the individual finds the traditional concept of evil diffused, fragmented or invalidated at every step. Evil lurks everywhere, yet it rarely takes tangible form, and when it is tangible, the victim's survival frequently demands his silence. In such a milieu, violence - unprovoked and gratuitous - becomes a way of fighting unknown demons outside and, more crucially, within. It becomes a means of grappling with a world shot through with an unpredictable, dangerous, undefined evil that threatens to destroy you unless you strike out at it pre-emptively, through your version of violence (Nandy n.p.).

In the preface to his collection of Six One Act Plays Ratra (Night) (1994), Tendulkar states:

Recently, my name has been repeatedly counted amongst the followers of the new drama sect. I have felt no great urge thus, far to determine which sect I belong to, nor do I expect to feel the need to do so in the future. I have written on any theme that has occupied my mind over time, stubbornly insisting that I write on in which ever form I thought best ... It is wrong to support that everything different from the establishment is bad, childish and irrelevant. It is equally wrong to think that only which is different is good, true or valuable. Personally, despite being counted amongst the new dramatist, I love to lose myself in the best of Deval, Gadkari, Khadikar and Warekar ... (Tendulkar n.p.).

A powerful articulator of the socio-political situation of India, Tendulkar has further stated that:

As an individual or rather as a social being, I feel deeply involved in the existing state of my society (because I am affected by it though not immediately in some cases or not as much as some others are) and in my way brood over it. Once in a way I even do something to relieve myself of the tension and anxiety and agitation produced by this brooding. I participated in a protest meeting or dharna or a fast or morcha or a satyagrah I align myself with some civil liberty organization ... As a writer, I find myself persistently inquisitive, non-conformist, ruthless, cold and brutal ... As a social being, I am against all exploitation and I passionately feel that all exploitation must end ... As a writer, I feel fascinated by the violent exploiter and exploited relationship and obsessively delve deep into it instead of taking a position against it. That takes me to a point where I feel that the relationship is an external fact of life; however cruel, will never end. Not that I relish this thought while it grips me but I cannot shake it off (Tendulkar 197).

It is because of this that in such of his plays like *Sakharam Binder* (1972), *Ghashiram Kotwal* (1972), and *Silence! The Court is in Session* (1967), Tendulkar raises several questions about love, sex, marriage and moral values prevalent in Indian society, making ample use of irony, satire, pathos and parody to highlight the hollowness of middle-class morality (Tiwari 66). About the contemporary appeal of *Ghashiram Kotwal*, Tendulkar makes the further point that,

I never approached *Ghashiram* as a historical play. The impulse to write the play was provoked by the contemporary political situation of the time, specifically the rise to power of the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra. But it has been interpreted differently with changing political situations including the Emergency. Performed with sensitivity and intelligence, a play can be infinitely renewed to suit the current milieu. Take the case of Shakespeare, who remains the most widely performed playwright despite the passage of time. But the openness of the play to interpretation is not intentional on the part of the playwright. Rather, it is innate to the play. Though *Ghashiram* was a product of my reflections on the rise of the Shiv Sena, I was ultimately interested in examining the situations which lead to the creation of *Ghashiram*-like forces in society. The *Ghashirams* of the world die, but the situations, which give birth to such forces, recur and are personified in the character of Nana Phadnavis. Beneath the superficial changes in history, the larger dynamics of power are cyclical. That is why such a play continues to evoke interest (Tendulkar n.p.).

In *Silence! The Court is in Session*, Tendulkar has depicted the difficulty of a young woman, who is a victim of the male dominated society. Tendulkar has here criticized the follies prevailing in the society, by focussing on the human mind and the ugliness in it (Iyer 157). All the plays of Tendulkar are the result of his surveillance of life, society and different incidents in his own life. Tendulkar commented in an interview given on 20th October, 1999 that he personally did not “bother” about people who haven’t seen life. They close their eyes at the sight of suffering as if it doesn’t exist. The fact is that life is dark and cruel, it’s just that you don’t care for the truth. You don’t want to see it because it might make you uncomfortable. If escapism is your way of living, then you will fail to see the truth. I have not written about 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 ... an outcome of my observation of the world in which I live ... I have to speak the truth (Tendulkar n.p.).

Unlike Badal Sircar and Vijay Tendulkar who delve into the problems of middle-class society, Girish Karnad goes back to myths and legends with a view to making them a vehicle of a new vision. By exploiting the various myths, he shows the absurdity of modern life with all its elemental passions and conflicts, and man’s eternal struggle to achieve perfection (Dhawan and Pant 18). *Yayati*, Karnad's first

play, was written in 1961 and won the Mysore State Award in 1962. It is based on an episode in The Mahabharata, where Yayati, one of the ancestors of the Pandavas, is given the curse of premature old age by his father-in-law, Shukracharya, who is incensed by Yayati's infidelity. Yayati could redeem this curse only if someone was willing to exchange his youth with him. It is his son, Puru, who finally offers to do this for his father. The play examines the moment of crisis that Puru's decision sparks, and the dilemma it presents for Yayati, Puru and Puru's young wife. Yayati is a play about personal responsibility, and Karnad's interpretation of the old myth on the exchange of age between father and son puzzled and angered conventional critics even as enlightened readers and critics appreciated it for its contemporaneity. As a reinterpretation of an ancient myth, Yayati is indeed a great achievement (Dharwadker 166). Tughlaq, Karnad's second play, written in 1964, is perhaps his best known. It was directed by E. Alkazi and presented in London by the National School of Drama for the Festival of India in 1982 (Menon n.p.). The play shows the gradual transformation of the character of the medieval ruler Mohammad bin Tughlaq. From being a sensitive and intelligent ruler who sets out to do the best for his people, Tughlaq, misunderstood and maligned, suffers an increasing sense of alienation and is forced to abandon his earlier idealism and end up as a tyrant (Asnani 102, Tiwari 75). However, the play is no period piece, for Karnad was actually fascinated by the history of Tughlaq's reign because it reflected the political mood of disillusionment which prevailed in India in the 1960s. He wrote about this in Enact, June 1971:

What struck me absolutely about Tughlaq's history was that it was contemporary. The fact that here was the most idealistic, the most intelligent King ever to come on the throne of Delhi ... and one of the greatest failures also. And within a span of twenty years a tremendously capable man had gone to pieces. This seemed to be both lure to his idealism as well as the shortcomings within him, such as impatience, his cruelty, his feeling that he had the only correct answer. And I felt in the early sixties, India had also come very far in the same direction-the twenty-year period seemed to me strikingly parallel (Kumar 17).

Karnad also said about the play's contemporary significance that:

I did not consciously write about the Nehru era. I am always flattered when people tell me that it was about the Nehru era and equally applied to development of politics since then. But, I think, well, that is a compliment that any playwright would be thrilled to get but it was not intended to be a

contemporary play about a contemporary situation. I think if one gets involved with one's characters or one's play, then it should develop into some kind of a true statement about oneself. I think a play can be only as contemporary as the playwright is. If the writer does not have contemporary convictions or is not committed or fashionably involved, the issues don't emerge (Karnad n.p.).

Eight years after writing *Tughlaq*, Karnad won the Kamaladevi Award of the Bharatiya Natya Sangh in 1972 for his play *Hayavadana* (1971), the theme of which was drawn from "Transposed Heads", a story by Thomas Mann (Menon n.p.). In this play Karnad used the folk art form of yakshagana to examine the modern problem of the body/intellect divide. Padmini's search for the complete man who must have the best attributes of mind and body is frustrated in spite of her best efforts, and she realises that it is the intellect that is supreme and always determines what a man is and will become. Karnad does not succeed fully in investing the basic conflict in the play with the required intensity, but his technical experiment with an indigenous dramatic form here is a triumph and this opened up fresh lines of fruitful exploration for Indian English playwrights (Asnani 103, Tiwari 72). The play has also a postcolonial aspect, and one critic, G.S. Jha has written:

Post-colonialist, despite all controversies, includes the question of identity, alienation, moral code, fulfilment, mythological orientation, gender placement, meta-physical dualism, neo-colonial dialectic etc. Karnad plays with historical and mythological episodes to prove his typical post-colonial stature. (Jha n.p.)

In 1988 and 1990 Karnad wrote *Naga-Mandala* and *Taledanda* respectively, both of which received critical acclaim. *Taledanda* deals with the rise of Veerashaivism, a radical protest and reform movement in 12th century Karnataka, and the struggle between the forces of reaction and protest. It is seen as Karnad's first play that deals explicitly with the influence of the larger social and intellectual milieu on individual action. *Naga-Mandala* (Play with Cobra) is based on a folk tale related by A.K. Ramanujam to Karnad (Iyer 113). This play won Tendulkar the Karnataka Sahitya Academy Award for the Most Creative Work of 1989.

Indian drama has been regarded as one of the most erstwhile genres of art form. According to Indian Natya Shastra, Indian drama is a depiction of the unedited reality and when it is staged, it comes fully into life. It is considered as the coherent process of reflection of the true aura of life and in this regard the contribution of the twentieth century Indian playwrights can definitely not be undermined.

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