

# INDIAN DRAMA

*Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.*

- Classical
- Early Post-classical
- Late Post-classical
- Early Modern
- 19<sup>th</sup> Century
- Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century
- Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century

## Classical

**Overview** Although little is known of the beginnings of drama in India, the earliest surviving plays (from the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE) contain some of the best-loved stories in Indian literature. Classical Indian ‘drama’ is, at the same time, very different to modern Indian ‘theatre.’ Closer to folk and regional traditions, classical drama is a mixture of the three arts of music, dance and theatre. As with classical Indian poetry, drama flourished under the generous patronage of the Gupta kings of north India. While drama was certainly performed in classical south India, we have no surviving texts or reliable evidence of this tradition.

**Genre** ‘Theatre’ in Sanskrit is known as *natya*, although this term also covers ‘dance’ for the simple reason that the two arts were combined in classical India. Another term *nataka* (or *natakam*) refers to ‘drama’ that is based on epic themes, although now *nataka* is used widely in most Indian languages to mean ‘theatre’ in the western sense. Ancient Tamil literature refers to ‘drama’ using the Sanskrit term *nataka*, and several plays (or what appear to be plays) are mentioned in subsequent literature, though none survive. The Tamil term *kuttu* is used for more localised, regional traditions and for today’s folk theatre.

**Aesthetics** Indian classical theatre, and all Sanskrit literature and many art forms, are guided by a single aesthetic theory. The two key terms in what is called the *rasa* theory are *bhava*, the mood or emotion of the dancer, and *rasa*, the distillation of that mood that is evoked in a discerning audience. The eight different *rasas* (love, pity, anger, disgust, heroism, awe, terror and comedy) were also later used to describe music and poetry.

**History** Early fragments of a drama by Asvaghosa date from the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, although it seems likely that dramatic performance must have occurred earlier. Two early Sanskrit texts, the *Mahabhasya* (‘Great Commentary [on grammar]’) and the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (‘Treatise on Theatre’), from about the same period, provide evidence of a developed drama form. The earliest extant complete plays are those by Bhasa, Kalidasa and Sudraka (all 5<sup>th</sup> century CE).

**Greek influence** Some scholars have detected Greek influence in early Indian drama, arguing that plays enacted at the courts of Indo-Greek kings (c. 250 BCE-50 CE) inspired Indian poets to develop their own form. Indeed, the curtain that divided the stage is called *yavanika* (from *yavana*, the Sanskrit word for ‘Greek’). The famous ‘Clay Cart’ (see below) also bears a superficial resemblance to the late Greek comedies of the school of Menander.

**Transmission** Manuscripts of plays by both Kalidasa and Sudraka have been copied and transmitted throughout Indian literary history, but Bhasa's 13 plays had been lost for centuries and were known only from mention in other works. In 1912, however, palm-leaf manuscripts were found in an old Brahmin house in south India. While these manuscripts did not mention an author, linguistic research eventually (after much debate) credited them to Bhasa.

**Performance** Plays were performed by professional troupes of both men and women, but amateur dramatics were not unknown (texts refer to performances at court by officials, kings and ladies of the harem). No physical theatre building survives, and it is assumed that plays were performed in palaces or in the homes of rich merchants. A curtain, through which actors emerged, divided the front from the back stage, though no curtain divided the actors from the audience. Scenery was non-existent and props were few. Conventional costumes were worn by stock figures, who also used the language of gesture to convey meaning.

**Form** Plays began with an invocation to the gods, followed by a long prologue, in which the stage manager or chief actor often discussed with his wife or chief actress the occasion and nature of the event. Most of the play's dialogue was in prose, interspersed with verse, and it was declaimed rather than sung.

**Content** Classical Indian drama, like most of Indian literature, did not hold with tragedy. Heroes and heroines might suffer defeat and loss, but a happy ending was not far away. There was always sufficient melodrama to satisfy the emotional needs of the audience. Innocent men are led toward execution, chaste wives are driven from their homes, and children are separated from their loving parents.

**Bhāsa** Very little is known about Bhasa, the earliest (and arguably the greatest) of the classical playwrights. He is dated between 200 BCE and 200 CE, and all that is certain is that he pre-dated Kalidasa and that 13 plays are attributed to him. Many of those plays retell episodes from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, and some are tragedies, which was unusual in classical Indian theatre. For example, the *Pratima Nataka* tells the story of Kaikeyi from the *Ramayana*, usually considered the evil step-mother responsible for the sufferings of Rama and his father. Bhasa, however, shows how she herself suffered from her guilt.

**Kalidasa** The best-known playwright of the classical period is Kalidasa (5<sup>th</sup> century CE), whose fame rests also on his poetry. Three of his plays have survived: *Malavika and Agnimitra* (a palace intrigue), *Urvashi Won by Valor* (the Vedic story of Urvashi) and *The Recognition of Shakuntala*. This last has always been considered his finest work and is still performed today, around the world.

**Shakuntala** *Shakuntala* is a love story, between a king and Shakuntala, the foster-daughter of a hermit. After their meeting and falling in love, much of the play describes their love-sickness, as they are unable to meet or marry. When they do meet again, the king gives her a ring to remember him by and to plight their troth. They marry but are cursed by an irascible Brahmin: Shakuntala will lose the ring, and the king will not remember her. In a tragic scene, Shakuntala, pregnant and veiled, is led before the king, who is unable to recall her. In folktale fashion, however, the lost ring is found by a fisherman inside a fish. The king recovers his memory and all ends happily.

**Sudraka** The only other surviving play of significance in this period is *Mrcchakaṭika* ('The Little Clay Cart') written by Sudraka, a contemporary of Kalidasa. This story is one of the most realistic and the plot one of the most complicated in the large corpus of classical Sanskrit literature. The central narrative concerns a love affair between a poor Brahmin (whose son can only have a little clay cart instead of grander toys) and a virtuous courtesan, but it quickly moves into political intrigue, stolen jewels, vivid court scenes and the overthrow of a wicked king. With this moving story, 'The Little Clay Cart' is the most easily appreciated of classical dramas.

## Questions

1. Drama was popular with court cultures in the classical period of Indian history, yet it has struggled since the medieval period to achieve a similar status. Drama has had similar fluctuations, as both literary form and popular entertainment, in Greece, China, Russia and England, to name only a few nations. How does the history of classical Indian drama compare with the history of drama in two other countries?

2. The recognition theme in *Shakuntala* is widespread in world literature (cf. the ancient Egyptian text of *Sinuhe*, King Lear, Cinderella and Lord of the Rings). Consider how such topics as memory loss and recollection, identity and disguise, loyalty and betrayal, are expressed in different literary cultures.
3. A theory of classical Indian aesthetics was codified in the *Natyasastra*. The two key terms are the *bhava* ('mood,' 'emotion') of the artist (poet, dancer, actor) and the *rasa* ('taste,' 'sentiment') or the distillation of that mood that is evoked in an audience. How does this aesthetic theory compare with another aesthetic, such as that in Greek theatre, Chinese opera or Shakespearean theatre?

### Reading

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### Text

from 'The Little Clay Cart,' trans. Arthur Ryder

Maitreya [a friend]: Well, which would you rather, be dead or be poor?

Charudatta [Brahmin]: Ah, my friend,

Far better death than sorrows sure and slow;

Some passing suffering from death may flow,

But poverty brings never-ending woe.

Maitreya: My dear friend, be not thus cast down. Your wealth has been conveyed to them you love, and like the moon, after she has yielded her nectar to the gods, your waning fortunes win an added charm.

Charudatta: Comrade, I do not grieve for my ruined fortunes. But this is my sorrow. They whom I would greet as guests, now pass me by.

"This is a poor man's house," they cry.

As flitting bees, the season o'er,

Desert the elephant, whose store

Of ichor [blood of the gods] I spent, attracts no more.

Maitreya: Oh, confound the money! It is a trifle not worth thinking about. It is like a cattle-boy in the woods afraid of wasps; it doesn't stay anywhere where it is used for food.

During the mating season, a fragrant liquor exudes from the forehead of the elephant. Of this liquor bees are very fond.

Charud: Believe me, friend. My sorrow does not spring from simple loss of gold;

For fortune is a fickle, changing thing, whose favors do not hold; but he whose sometime wealth has taken wing, finds bosom-friends grow cold.

Then too: A poor man is a man ashamed ; from shame

Springs want of dignity and worthy fame;

Such want gives rise to insults hard to bear;

Thence comes despondency; and thence, despair;

Despair breeds folly; death is folly's fruit

Ah! The lack of money is all evil's root!

Maitreya: But just remember what a trifle money is, after all, and be more cheerful.

Charudatta: My friend, the poverty of a man is to him a home of cares, a shame that haunts the mind,

Another form of warfare with mankind; the abhorrence of his friends, a source of hate

From strangers, and from each once-loving mate; but if his wife despise him, then't were meet in some lone wood to seek a safe retreat.

The flame of sorrow, torturing his soul, burns fiercely, yet contrives to leave him whole.

Comrade, I have made my offering to the divinities of the house. Do you too go and offer sacrifice to the Divine Mothers at a place where four roads meet.

Maitreya: No!

Charudatta: Why not?

Maitreya: Because the gods are not gracious to you even when thus honored. So what is the use of worshipping?

Charudatta: Not so, my friend, not so! This is the constant duty of a householder.

## **Early Post-classical**

### Overview

In the first half of the early post-classical period, Sanskrit drama maintained a level of excellence, with several plays that are considered worthy of comparison with Kalidasa's masterpieces. By the end, however, the political impetus for much of classical Sanskrit culture had waned and the remaining texts are mediocre. One interesting feature of all these plays, nonetheless, is the intermixing of drama and politics, a combination that, on reflection, seems entirely natural. In south India, drama is virtually absent from the historical record, although inscriptions and other texts refer to specific titles and playwrights.

### Sanskrit

**Bhavabhuti** Following the highwater mark of Sanskrit drama during the time of Kalidasa (5<sup>th</sup> century CE), the tradition was ably continued by Bhavabhuti (7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> century CE). Fortunately, three of his plays have come down to us in more or less complete form: *Malati and Madhava* (the names of the hero and heroine), *Mahaviracarita* ('The Deeds of the Great Hero') and *Uttararamacarita* ('The Later Deeds of Rama'). The first of these is a melodramatic story, full of incident and terror, in which a heroine is repeatedly rescued from death. The other two texts rework the Rama story. Critics judge Bhavabhuti as inferior to other dramatists of this period in terms of plot and characterisation, while at the same time praising his ability to express sorrow and loss.

**Visakhadatta** Visakhadatta (6<sup>th</sup> century CE?) wrote plays about politics, although only one entire play and fragments of another have survived. The partial text (*Devichandragupta*, ‘The Queen and Chandra Gupta’) is an ambitious attempt to tell the story of Chandragupta Maurya II and his rise to power in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The other, complete play is the justly famous *Mudraraksasa* (‘The Minister’s Signet Ring’), which focuses on high-drama and court intrigue during the same historical period.

**Minister’s Signet Ring** The complex plot of this play begins with a plan to overthrow the fourth-century BCE Nanda dynasty and put a Maurya king on the throne. The plotters are successful and divide up the kingdom among themselves, but one key figure is soon poisoned to death, leaving his son to take his place. Then, a minister of the defeated dynasty plots with the son to reclaim the lost territories. The coup gains strength from its alliance with the kings of Persia, Kashmir and Sind, but they are foiled by the clever minister of the Mauryas, who persuades the son to rejoin his side.

**Historicity** The convoluted plot of the *Mudraraksasa* does appear to describe historical events that took place about a thousand years before it was written. Indian and Greek sources tell a roughly similar story of political intrigue, including the usurpation of the Nandas by the Mauryas, and warfare between the Mauryas and the smaller kingdoms in northwest India that formed after the departure of Alexander the Great. Here again, we see evidence that Greek tradition may have influenced classical Indian drama.

**Harsha** Politics and drama combined once again in the figure of Harsha, who was both king and playwright. After the fall of the Gupta Empire (4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century CE), which patronised much of classical Indian culture, central and north India fragmented into small kingdoms. But then in the early seventh century, Harsha gained control of most of the subcontinent, excluding south India. Three plays are ascribed to Harsha, although they may all be the work of a ‘ghost’ writer. *Ratnavali* and *Priyadarsika* are both comedies based on the lives of the ladies of the harem, in which the eponymous heroines display wit and charm through banter. The third play, *Nagananda* (‘Joy of the Serpents’), is a religious story in which a prince gives his own life in order to stop the sacrifice of snakes to Garuda, a divine bird.

**Decline** With these three literary figures (Bhavabhuti, Visakhadatta and Harsha), the legacy of Kalidasa lingered for several centuries, but without further genius it eventually declined. Toward the end of the early post-classical period, Bhatta Narayana (8<sup>th</sup> c. CE?), Murari (9<sup>th</sup> c. CE), Rajasekhara (10<sup>th</sup> c. CE) and Krsnamisra (10<sup>th</sup> c. CE) continued to write plays, though the dialogue became stilted, the language more literary and the texts intended for reading rather than performance. With the advent of Muslim rule in north India, from about 1000 CE, Sanskrit drama became a thing of the past.

### Tamil

**Mattavilasa** *Mattavilasa* (‘Drunkards’ Gest’) is the only Tamil drama that survives from this period. It is a one-act play written by Mahendravarman I, a Pallava king of south India (7<sup>th</sup> c. CE). It is a delightful farce, parodying both Hindu and Buddhist ascetics at a time when conflict between these two sects often resulted in violence. In the play, at least, a drunken Hindu mendicant uses a human skull to drink wine, as well as to collect alms. When it goes missing, he accuses his Buddhist counterpart of stealing it, prompting a series of humorous satirical dialogues. In the end, of course, it turns out that the dog took the bowl.

**Lost plays** Tamil literary tradition and inscriptions tell us that other dramas were produced and performed during this period, although none, not even in fragments, survives. One frequently mentioned play is *Pumpuliyurnatakam* (‘Play of Pumpuliyur’), which appears to be a religious story in the fictional town of Pumpuli. Another is *Rjarajesvaranatakam* (‘Play of Rajarajesvara’) written by Narayana Bhattitayar in the late 9<sup>th</sup> century CE. The story is based on the life of the famous Chola king Raja Rajesvara and his construction of the temple at his capital, Tanjore.

### Questions

1. While Kalidasa’s successors have generally been regarded as less skilled than the master, others have suggested that this judgement is simply a cliché and not borne out by close textual analysis. Compare one of the later dramas mentioned in this article with one of Kalidasa’s dramas and make your judgement.

2. Although the genre of drama (*natakam*) has a long textual history in Tamil, and several inscriptions and commentaries mention plays, no text (with the exception of a single one-act play) has survived from this period. This poses the question of how literary memory functions in the absence of literary or other evidence. Consider, for instance, a Shakespearean tradition based entirely on secondary sources. What would this mean for an understanding of English literature?

### Reading

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### **Late Post-classical**

#### Overview

There is no doubt that classical Sanskrit drama never recovered from its Golden Age during and immediately following the Gupta Empire (4<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> c. CE), and this can be probably be explained by two inter-related factors. First, there was the loss of royal patronage at court, not only because the Gupta Empire fragmented but also because the successor Muslim courts did not promote drama. Second, the dominance of devotionalism (*bhakti*) during this period, especially as sung poetry and music, pushed other performance styles, like drama, to the side-lines, even in Hindu courts. While the diminution of courtly performance in north India is incontestable, in south India the *kutiyattam* tradition flourished. It is also true that provincial drama continued to develop in both north and south India. Although no texts survive from the period, contemporaneous literary references and twentieth-century documentation enable us to reconstruct the beginnings of these more provincial drama traditions. In north India, these emerging drama traditions include Ram Lila and Nautanki, while in south India, they include Kathakali, Yakshagana and Terukkuttu.

#### Kutiyattam

**Origins** *Kutiyattam* is a drama of medieval Kerala combining classical Sanskrit models with innovations from Malayali playwrights. It was performed in temple compounds using elaborate costumes, face paint and unusual percussion instruments. The term *kuti-yattam* means 'acting/dancing together' and apparently refers to the fact that the actors were both men from the Chakkyar caste and women from the Nampiar caste. Ancient Tamil poetry and temple inscriptions (from the early centuries of the Christian era) mention *kutiyattam* and provide a few details about patrons and performance. However, we have no textual or material evidence before 1000 CE that establishes the presence of *kutiyattam*.

**Repertoire** The repertoire of *kutiyattam* includes revised plays of Kalidasa and other classical playwrights, as well as plays written for this drama form. These locally produced plays include some of the earliest drama texts in Indian literary history. They are *Kalyanasaugandhika* by Nilakanthakavi, and *Subhadradhananjaya* and *Tapatisamvarana*, all by Kulasekhara Varman and all dated to the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> century CE. Most *kutiyattam* plays draw on the Rama story for inspiration, and they tend to focus on either Ravana (the demon king) or Sita (Rama's wife) rather than on Rama himself.

**Abandonment of Sita** This emphasis is illustrated by a play, still performed today, called *Sita Pratiyagam* ('Abandonment of Sita'). After Sita is rescued from Ravana, rumours of a love relationship between captor and captive spread. Lacking belief in the fidelity of his wife, Rama submits to pressure and abandons her in the forest, where she gives birth to two sons. Husband and wife are reunited, but Rama demands that she undergo a trial by fire. In despair, Sita asks the Earth goddess to accept her, and despite Rama's protestations, the Earth opens up and receives her.

**Kulasekhara Varman** Kulasekhara Varman (late 10<sup>th</sup> or early 11<sup>th</sup> c. CE) was a king in the Chera dynasty that ruled the southwest coastal region of India known as Chera (or now 'Kerala'). He was not just a playwright but also a stage director, who introduced the practice of using both a play text (*granthapatha*) and a performance text (*rangapatha*). He also introduced the technique of *nirvahana* (summarising the play's plot by an actor) and codified the repertoire of eye movements for expressing emotions. Finally, he promoted the element of dance (*attam*) over pure acting (*abhinaya*).

**Language** While the early plays used Sanskrit only, by the 13<sup>th</sup> century CE they were written in a combination of Sanskrit and Malayalam (the regional language). In this innovation, the stage manager or Nampiar (a stock character) spoke to the audience in Malayalam to introduce and later comment on the action. However, since Malayalam had not yet evolved into a separate language from Tamil, the language of the stage manager was actually called *Nampiar Tamil*.

**Manuals** Malayalam was also used to write manuals for the actors. One of these (*attaparakara*) explains what an actor should do to interpret and enact the verses and the prose sequences. A second manual (*kramadipika*) provides details for make-up, costumes and props. Fortunately, for scholars, these manuals have survived in manuscript form.

**Temple theatre** Although we believe that these Kerala plays were originally performed in temples, we have no supporting archaeological evidence for this until the 15<sup>th</sup> century CE. This 'temple-theatre' (*kuttampalam*) is a covered, open-air hall divided into two halves: one for the acting and one for the audience. The oldest theatre, which is still standing at the Vadakkunnathan temple in the town of Trichur, is believed to date from 700 CE

### Questions/Discussion

1. What accounts for the presence of a flourishing classical drama tradition in Kerala at a time when it had all but vanished elsewhere in India?
2. *Kutiyattam* is still performed today, more than a thousand years since its inception, but it is much changed and largely intended for a tourist audience. It receives funds from the UNESCO cultural heritage programme, which some people see as fossilisation rather than protection. Any tradition must be flexible to survive for centuries, but at what point does change diminish authenticity?

### Reading

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### **Early Modern**

#### Overview

Although India never again produced drama that rivalled classical Sanskrit theatre, this period generated a variety of interesting forms. Three trends can be identified. First, in the absence of patronage at the Muslim courts, drama moved from the palace to the temple. Second, in doing so, particularly in south India, it became more ritual performance than textual enactment. And third, again in south India, drama (and other literary forms) developed at minor courts of the Nayak kings during the 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. In these turbulent times of European advance and Muslim retreat, these new drama forms, often composed in a mixture of Tamil, Telugu, Marathi and Sanskrit, were satirical, with a good deal of farce.

### North India

**Ram Lila** Based on the text of Tulsidas's *Ramayana* (16<sup>th</sup> c. CE), Ram Lila ('Play of Rama'; *lila* carries both meanings of the English 'play') is a hugely popular drama that is still performed annually throughout the Hindi-speaking regions of north India. With elaborate costumes, it is staged outdoors over a series of nights, typically ten, though in Varanasi it stretches to 31. Dialogue is minimal, and reciters chant verses from the Hindi text. Although we have no reliable evidence prior to observations by Europeans in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it seems reasonable to assume that the Ram Lila formed sometime in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

**Pandava Lila** Another popular drama in north India is Pandava Lila, which takes its name from the five Pandava brothers, protagonists of the other great epic of the *Mahabharata*. Unlike Ram Lila, however, it is written and performed in the Garhwali language spoken in the mountainous region of Garhwal. Performances are temple rituals loosely based on textual versions of the epic, and different villages focus on different episodes in the epic story. It, too, appears to have emerged sometime in the period between 1600-1800 CE.

**Nautanki** Unlike the preceding two traditions, Nautanki is a secular theatre tradition, drawing on popular tales from Hindu and Muslim traditions in north India. Dialogue is usually in Hindi, while libretti are often in Urdu. There is a strong satirical strain in the plays of Nautanki, as revealed by its original name of *svang* ('impersonation', 'mime'). As with the other north Indian theatres of this time, its history is poorly documented, although most scholars believe it coalesced into its present form sometime around 1600 CE.

### South India

**Terukkuttu** In south India, as in the north, there is a popular theatre form based on the *Mahabharata*. Terukkuttu ('Street Theatre') is a ritualised enactment of episodes from Tamil versions of the epic text. The plays, which are performed over a series of nights (from one to 18), focus specifically on the character of Draupadi, the wronged wife of one of the Pandava brothers. The series of performances are held in villages temples dedicated to Draupadi, as a goddess. Again, song dominates over dialogue.

**Tolpava Kuttu** Tolpavu Kuttu ('leather puppet play') is a traditional shadow puppet play based very closely on the Tamil *Ramayana* (12<sup>th</sup> c. CE). It is performed over a number of nights (typically 8 to 41) in certain temples on the border between Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The puppeteers memorise and recite thousands of verses from the medieval text, while peppering their all-night performances with humorous banter.

**Kathakali** Kathakali ('Story-drama') is a highly sophisticated theatre, or opera, performed in central Kerala. One of several related drama forms found on this southwest coast region, it consists of a number of plays written in a Malayalam heavily influenced by Sanskrit and dating from the late 16<sup>th</sup> century and early 17<sup>th</sup> century CE. Sanskrit verses recited by vocalists explain the action, while the actors, in elaborate costumes and face paint, 'speak' the dialogue by dance, gesture and eye movement.

**Teyyam** Further up the northern coast of Kerala, Teyyam is another ritualised drama form that we can trace back to this period. Like Kathakali, from which it is surely derived, it uses elaborate costumes, especially headgear, face paint and the language of gesture. It is a heavily ritualised form, performed only in temple compounds, and involves intense spirit possession.

**Yakshagana** Similar in performance mode, but not textual base to Teyyam, Yakshagana is a theatre form performed in the Kannada- and Telugu-speaking areas of south India. The Telugu tradition, which emerged in minor courts during this period, employs a high-literary Telugu (mixed with Sanskrit) to create plays ostensibly devotional but laced with mockery, usually directed at Brahmins. The Kannada tradition, which uses stories from the epics, is a more serious, ritual theatre performed in temple precincts.

**Kuravanci** Another largely parodic theatre form of south India is Kuravanci ('Play of the Fortune-Teller Lady'). This text-based Tamil theatre arose in the eighteenth century in the courts of noblemen and temple festivals. On the basis of an existing manuscript, we can date the first play, the *Kuttrala Kuravanci*, to 1718 CE. Like most of these early modern drama forms, singing dominates over dialogue, although there is a more or less fixed plot. A tribal fortune-teller woman pines for her high-born lover and sings of the beauty of her hilly homeland. Her bird-catcher husband tries to find her, and the tribal couple are reunited, but not before all the characters, from tribesman to king, are made the object of satire.



**Nonti Natakam** Nonti Natakam ('The Gimp's Play') is yet another popular and satirical drama that appeared during this period in the Tamil country. Scholars date the first texts to the late 17<sup>th</sup> or early 18<sup>th</sup> century and pinpoint the action to the large city of Madurai. The play is narrated by a one-legged thief who is cheated out of his ill-begotten gains by a courtesan. Forced to steal to replenish his funds, he grabs a king's horse but is punished by amputation. A holy man sends him to a temple, where a god restores his missing limb (possibly a hint of Christian influence). Despite the devotional overtones, and as with other dramas of the time, it has elements of farce and parody.

**Cavittu Natakam** Cavittu Natakam ('Stamping Play') is a unique form of drama that arose during the latter half of the sixteenth century CE in Kerala among the region's recently-arrived Christian community. While it draws on local drama traditions in its theatrical elements (a stage manager, for example, who comments on and translates the action), the stories are biblical. Plays of Charlemagne and of St. George are performed on feast days, at weddings and other major events by the Catholic community of Kerala.

### Questions/Discussion

1. Many of the drama traditions that arose or took final shape in the early modern period involve satire, parody or farce, or all three. Some cultural historians have explained this as a response to the fragmentation and new ethnic mix of society during this period (see Narayana Rao et al, below). Even if this is not a simple one-to-one causal relation, can we explain literary history by reference to such macro cultural history?
2. There is very little evidence that Muslim courts, either of the opulent Mughal Emperors or the smaller kingdoms in the Deccan, patronised drama. Some scholars have challenged this, repeating the mantra that 'absence of evidence is not evidence of absence,' and indeed there are creditable references to Akbar hosting some kind of drama at his court. A future ground-breaking study of the hidden theatre at the Muslim courts is not unlikely.

### Reading

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### Texts

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There courting monkeys gather fruit and offer them as gifts,  
And heavenly poets beg for fruit that the monkey couples scatter.  
There passing hunters gaze upwards inviting the gods to descend.  
Venerable saints come there to tend their herbs and rare plants,  
Where water rears up from sweet streams, reach skyward and pour down,  
While the sun-god's chariot wheels and horse's hoofs slip on the spray,  
Our mountain belongs to the god who wears the crescent in his hair.

2. From *Bhisma Vijaya* (Yakshagana), trans. Shivarama Karnath, 1997

[Two persons appear on stage holding a curtain. From behind the curtain a mask of Ganesh peeps at the audience. Two women dance and offer prayers to Ganesh, remover of obstacles.]

[palace of a king]

King: Listen to me, minister. It is not a lie. I am very worried. My daughter, now beautiful and young in age, is ready for marriage. Invite the kings, send them letters, let my daughter select a husband.

[Another king is addressed by a servant]

Oh, king. The king of Kashi has sent letters to kings everywhere, to come and win his daughter in a fight. But you, who are brave and who do not care for anyone, neither on earth or in heaven, you have been done a great injustice. You are not invited.

## 19<sup>th</sup> Century

### Overview

Indian drama during the nineteenth century is a story of two halves, neatly separated by the rebellion of 1857-58. During the first five decades, traditional forms continued to dominate. In Kerala, for instance, the classical Kutiyattam and the medieval Kathakali were popular, while elsewhere, more regional forms that had emerged in the early modern period (Terukkuttu in Tamil, Yakshagana in Kannada, Nautanki in Hindi, and so forth) were the norm. During the second half of the century, however, the 'new drama' developed, inspired by English models and an increasing confidence in the ability of regional Indian languages to produce modern literature. A very significant exception to this generalisation was the growth of the Parsi theatre, which drew on traditional content and techniques (narrative, music, song and dance) to become a major contribution to Indian drama. In common with the so-called 'new' drama, Parsi theatre grew largely in the metropolitan centres of Calcutta, Madras and Bombay,

### Bengali

**Michael Madhusudan Dutt** Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-1873) contributed to this radical change in Indian theatre. In 1858, he was commissioned by a raja to translate a Bengali play (itself a translation from Sanskrit) into English. Frustrated by the poor quality of the play, however, he instead wrote his own in Bengali (*Sarmistha*) and then translated it into English. Although the story was taken from the *Mahabharata*, the play did not follow the conventions of Sanskrit dramaturgy. Anticipating criticism, Dutt explained that he had written the play 'for that portion of my countrymen who think as I think, whose ideas have been...imbued with western ideas...it is my intention to throw off the fetters forged for us by a servile admiration of everything Sanskrit.' He went on to write plays based on a variety of sources (such as a Greek legend), but he is remembered also for two farces. *Ekei ki bale Sabhyata* ('So this is what you call culture?') pokes fun at rich, half-educated young men who ape western manners, while *Bure Saliker Ghare Rowan* ('The Dotard Sports a Plume') satirises a lecherous old landlord.

**Dinabandhu Mitra** While Dutt influenced thinking about the theatre, perhaps a more substantial contribution to the content of new drama was made by another Bengali, Dinabandhu Mitra (1829-1874). His *Nildarpan* ('Indigo Mirror', 1860) was the first experiment in what is now a long tradition of social realism in Indian theatre. In it, he exposes the cruelty of British indigo planters and the struggle of peasants against them. Despite its popularity, ironically guaranteed when the government forbade its English translation, Mitra went on to write a number of farces and comedies, revealing his admiration for Moliere.

**Rabindranath Tagore** Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), better known as a poet, also contributed to the new Bengali theatre, which in turn influenced new drama throughout India. He wrote several plays in the 1880s and 1890s, based on English models (including Oscar Wilde) or utilising traditional Indian stories. *Praktir Pratisodh* (1884), however, marked a significant departure from the mythology, historicity and musicality of most contemporary drama. It used verse to present a secular story set in the present, involving ordinary men and women in outside scenes, beyond the proscenium arch.

### Tamil

**Vedanayaka Sastri** During the first half of the century, Tamil drama, like most Indian drama, was dominated by traditional forms and written by poets.

Of these men, the most influential was Vedanayaka Sastri (1774-1864), who composed an intriguing play in the *kuravanci* ('fortune-teller woman') genre, one of the many diverse drama forms that had emerged in the early

modern period. His choice of this genre, which focuses on the erotic and parodic elements of low-caste life, for a play promoting evangelical Protestantism is curious indeed.

**Bethlehem Kuravanci** On close inspection, however, his *Bethlehem Kuravanci* ('The Fortune-Teller Lady of Bethlehem', 1809) is a perfect vehicle for his purpose. The fortune-teller lady, who usually falls in love with a disreputable raja, here falls in love with God. Her traditional bird-catcher husband is transformed into a catechist, and other bird-catchers become biblical fishermen, who use the net of the Gospel to trap birds (people) and thwart the attempts of the evil bird-catchers (the Catholic Church).

**Manonmaniyam** Another unusual 'new' Tamil drama was *Manonmaniyam* (1891) by P. Sundram Pillai (1855-1997). It was written in verse, not for performance but for reading, something that we might expect from a writer who was more a scholar than an artist. Unsurprisingly, the play, based on Lord Lytton's *The Secret Way*, was not successful on the stage, but it did become a rallying cry for Tamil activists in the independence movement. One of its verses was adopted in 1970 as the state anthem of Tamil Nadu.

### Parsi

**History** In the first half of the century, nearly all drama in Bombay was produced in English, largely by British actors and promoters. In 1835, however, the primary theatre venue in Bombay was sold to Parsi entrepreneurs, who sensed an opportunity to use culture as a platform for gaining wider participation in the public sphere. In 1853, a Parsi play in Gujarati, was performed there for the first time, and by the 1870s Parsi drama had spread across India. It remained the dominant form of drama until the 1930s, when it was replaced by another form of entertainment mixing story, song and dance: the cinema.

**Gujarati** Gujarati plays written by, and largely performed for, the Parsi community had a clear message. The writer of the very first play in this language announced in the preface his intention to promote what he called *swadeshi* ('self-reliant') plays for his 'fellow countrymen'. These Gujarati plays drew primarily on the Parsi heritage (Zoroastrians who came from Iran to Bombay, mostly in the 18<sup>th</sup> century), especially the Persian *Shahnama*, in an attempt to reinvent their Persian past.

**Urdu** Urdu (often written in the Gujarati script) was later used in the Parsi theatre because it was recognised across India as a prestige language of Muslim elites and because it could draw on the rich legacy of Indo-Persian literature for story material. Urdu-language plays were performed all across the subcontinent by touring companies, who went west to Lahore, north to Delh, south to Madras and east to Dacca.

### Discussion/Questions

1. The Parsi theatre, despite its widespread popularity, is still a relatively poorly-researched tradition. A good PhD could be written on the history and means by which the Parsi theatre influenced Indian cinema.
2. The pioneers of new drama in both Bengali and Tamil, respectively, Michael Madhusudan Dutt and Vedanayaka Sastri, in Bengali and Tamil, were Christian. Yet, their plays have little in common. Is that contrast attributable to the difference in the historical periods in which they lived or to some other factor?
3. Many, though hardly all, new plays addressed the same social issues that stimulated most early novels. Consider how one common issue, say child-marriage, was treated differently in these two different media.

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## Text

From *Nildarpan*, by Dinabandhu Mitra, trans. James Long

[FIRST ACT FIRST SCENE. SVAROPUR GOLUK CHUNDER's GOLA OR STORE-HOUSE. GOLUK CHUNDER BASU and SADHU CHURN sitting]

Sadhu. Master I told you then we cannot live any more in this country. You did not hear me however. A poor man's word bears fruit after the lapse of years.

Goluk. O my child! Is it easy to leave one's country ? My family has been here for seven generations. The lands which our fore-fathers rented have enabled us never to acknowledge ourselves servants of others. The rice which grows, provides food for the whole year, means of hospitality to guests, and also the expense of religious services ; the mustard seed we get, supplies oil for the whole year, and, besides, we can sell it for about sixty or seventy rupees. Svaropur is not a place where people are in want. It has rice, peas, oil, molasses from its fields, vegetables in the garden, and fish from the tanks ; whose heart is not torn when obliged to leave such a place ? And who can do that easily ?

Sadku. Now it is no more a place of happiness : your garden is already gone, and your relatives are on the point of forsaking you. Ah ! it is not yet three years since the Saheb took a lease of this place, and he has already ruined the whole village. We cannot bear to turn our eyes in the southern direction towards the house of the heads of the villages (Mandal). Oh ! what was it once, and what is it now ! Three years ago, about sixty men used to make a daily feast in the house ; there were ten ploughs, and about forty or fifty oxen ; as to the court-yard, it was crowded like as at the horse races ; when they used to arrange the ricks of corn, it appeared, as it were, that the lotus had expanded itself on the surface of a lake bordered by sandal groves ; the granary was as large as a hill ; but last year the granary not being repaired, was on the point of falling into the yard. Because he was not allowed to plant Indigo in the rice-field, the wicked Saheb beat the Ma jo and Sajo Babus most severely; and how very difficult was it to get them out of his clutches ; the ploughs and kine[cows] were sold, and at that crisis the two Mandals left the village.

Goluk. Did not the eldest Mandal go to bring his brethren back?

Sadhu. They said, we would rather beg from door to door than go to live there again. The eldest Mandal is now left alone, and he has kept two ploughs, which are nearly always engaged in the Indigo-fields. And even this person is making preparations for flying off Oh, Sir ! IT tell you also to throw aside this infatuated attachment (mayo) for your native place. Last time your rice went, and this time, your honour will go.

Goluk. What honor remains to us now? The Planter has prepared his places of cultivation round about the tank, and will plant Indigo there this year. In that case, our women will be entirely excluded from the tank. And also the Saheb has said that if we do not cultivate our rice-fields with Indigo, he will make Nobin Madhab to drink the water of seven Factories (i.e. to be confined in them).

Sadhu. Has not the eldest Babu gone to the Factory ?

Goluk. Has he gone of his own will? The pyeadah (a servant) has carried him off there.

Sadhu. But your eldest Babu has very great courage. On the day the Saheb said, " If you don't hear the Amin, and don't plant the Indigo within the ground marked off, then shall we throw your houses into the river Betraboti, and shall make you eat your rice in the factory godown ;" the eldest Babu replied, "As long as we shall not get the price for the fifty bigahs[measurement] of land sown with Indigo last year, we will not give one bigah this year for Indigo. What do we care for our house ? We shall even risk (pawn) our lives."

Goluk. What could he have done, without he said that ? Just see, no anxiety would have remained in our family if the fifty bigahs of rice produce had been left with us. And if they give us the money for the Indigo, the greater part of our troubles will go away.

[NOBIN MADHAB enters.]

O my son, what has been done ?

Nobin. Sir, does the cobra shrink\* from biting the little child on the lap of its mother on account of the sorrow of the mother ? I flattered him much, but he understood nothing by that. He kept to his word, and said, give us sixty bigahs of land, secured by written documents, and take 50 Rupees, then we shall close the two years' account at once.

Goluk. Then, if we are to give sixty bigahs for the cultivation of the Indigo, we cannot engage in any other cultivation whatever. Then we shall die without rice crops.

Nobin. I said, " Saheb, as you engage all your men, our ploughs, and our kine [cows], everything, in the Indigo field, only give us every year through our food. We don't want hire." On which, he with a laugh said, "You surely don't eat Yaban's\* rice."

Sadhu. Those whose only pay is a belly full of food are, I think, happier than we are.

Goluk. We have nearly abandoned all the ploughs ; still we have to cultivate Indigo. We have no chance in a

dispute with the Sahebs. They bind and beat us, it is for us to suffer. We are consequently obliged to work.

Nobin. I shall do as you order, Sir ; but my design is for once to bring an action into Court.

\* The Mahomedans and all other nations who are not Hindus, are called by that name.

## Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century

### Overview

During this period, traditional and regional theatre was gradually overtaken by drama as a literary form. While the Parsi theatre continued well into the 1930s, and Kutiyattam and Kathakali in Kerala remained popular, writers in all languages, especially English, were drawing on western models as well as responding to the social and political issues of the day. Still, the authors of these new plays, which were generally idealistic and reformist, had to be satisfied with small audiences and little critical notice. Publishers were reluctant to print 'new' dramas, and plays in English by Indian authors had neither a stage nor a public. As a spoken form of literature, plays were considered *deshi* ('provincial') and disregarded by the literary elite. If traditional theatre emphasised visual effects, the new theatre focused on themes. Yet, all drama needs an element of wonder, and modern Indian theatre continued to seek the optimal balance between story and spectacle.

### Urdu

Agha Hashr (1880-1936) is the best-known Urdu playwright of the period. Born into a family of shawl merchants in Benares, he wrote more than thirty plays for the Parsi theatre, established the Indian Shakespeare Theatrical Company and went on to adapt many of his works for the silent era of Indian cinema. His most famous play, *Yahudi ki Larki* ('The Jew's Daughter,' 1913), is an historical drama, adapted from an early nineteenth-century English play that tells the story of the persecution of Jews by the Romans in Palestine. With its mixture of spoken and literary language, it remains a favourite and has been made into a film on two occasions.

### Bengali

**Rabindranath Tagore** Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) continued to break new ground in Bengali drama in the early twentieth century. He criticised his fellow playwrights for their slavish imitation of English, especially Shakespearean, models, including an 'obsession' with realism and technical accessories. In response, he wrote a series of plays imbued with what he thought was a 'freer', Indian spirit: *Raja* (1910), *Dakghar* ('Post Office,' 1912) and *Phalguni* ('Cycle of Spring,' 1915). Critics thought these efforts unconvincing on the stage, however, and Tagore only found popular and critical success when he translated (and radically edited) his earlier Bengali plays into English. The outstanding example, which had success in London, was 'The Post Office.'

**Girish Chandra Ghosh** One playwright whose plays filled the theatres in Calcutta in the first decade of the century was Girish Chandra Ghosh (1844-1911). He was not only a fine writer, but also a director, actor and lyricist. He wrote more than forty plays, beginning with adaptations of traditional Indian stories but ending with his own original plots. In the period 1904-1908, he wrote two plays that dramatized the early history of British rule in Bengal (*Siraj-ud-Daula* and *Mir Qasim*, each telling the story of its eponymous hero), a biting social satire on dowry (*Balidan*, 'The Sacrifice') and, finally, an historical play praising a Hindu king who defeated the Mughals (*Chatrapati Sivaji*).

### Kannada

**T.P. Kailasam** T.P. Kailasam (1885-1946) was a colourful and complex figure. Although a Tamil, he was born and educated in Mysore, spend several years in England (doing nothing, according to his disappointed father), but then became a leading playwright-actor who wrote plays in both Kannada and English. His Kannada plays annoyed critics because he introduced colloquial language and poked fun at contemporary figures, but his satires won huge audiences.

In line with his contemporaries elsewhere, he also wrote about social issues, including education (*Tollu Gatti*, 'The Hollow and the Solid', 1918), the dowry system (*Tali Kattoke Cooline*, 'Wages for tying the Wedding Necklace'), corrupt religion (*Bahishkara*, 'Open Prison,' 1929) and prostitution (*Soole*, 'Prostitute', 1945). Swallowing his pride, one critic managed to concede that he was a 'bohemian genius.'

### Tamil

**Shankaradas Swamigal** An outstanding figure in Tamil drama in this period was another playwright-actor-director Shankaradas Swamigal (1867-1922). He wrote dozens of plays, mostly adapted from traditional mythology, which were performed in Madurai, where he had set up his own a theatre company, and in Madras. He was also associated with several theatre companies known as 'Boys Companies' because they used the traditional *gurukula* system (in which young men lived together and were trained by a guru) to teach the profession of acting.

**Sambandha Mutaliyar** Modern Tamil drama gained an institutional basis through the efforts of Sambandha Mutaliyar (1873-1964). Encouraged by his father to see performances in Madras, Mutaliyar also read Shakespeare as a child and, when only 19 years old, established a theatre company in Madras (the Suguna Vilasa Sabha, 'Society for Respectable Drama'), which exists to this day, though only as a men's club. Despite his full-time job as a lawyer, and later judge, Mutaliyar wrote dozens of plays, including an adaptation of *Hamlet*, which made him a success on the stage. The popularity of his plays meant that, finally, publishers began to print them, audiences paid to see them and drama earned a foothold of respectability in Madras.

**TKS Brothers** More literary backbone was inserted in the new Tamil theatre by the TKS Brothers Dramatic Group. It was founded in Madras in 1925 by a man who had trained in a drama company linked to Shankaradas Swamigal. The brothers then recruited successful fiction writers, from a newly-established literary magazine, instead of employing the traditional playwright who had more experience with the stage than the page. These new writers produced powerful plays on social reform (*Uyiroviyam*, 'Life Portrait') and historical themes (*Rajaraja Colam*, a Chola king).

### Assamese

**Jyotiprasad Agarwal** In the far northeast corner of India, Jyotiprasad Agarwal (1903-1951) succeeded in almost singlehandedly creating a new theatre in Assamese. Born into a wealthy tea-planter family, he completed his education in Calcutta and Edinburgh, where he absorbed influences from Shaw and Ibsen, especially the technicalities of staging. His plays, like those of his contemporaries in other languages, foreground social and political struggles, but they also introduce a strong romantic element. Again, following many other literary figures at the time, he served a jail sentence for his nationalist activities but went on to even greater fame as a film screenwriter.

### English

**Sri Aurobindo** The influential poet and philosopher Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) also wrote several powerful plays during the first decades of the century. For various reasons, including the seizure of his papers by the British police, only one (*Perseus the Deliverer*, 1907) was published during his lifetime. Although the plots of these plays are largely taken from Indian, Greek, Roman and Norse history, Aurobindo infuses the stories with a spiritual nationalism. In *Perseus*, for example, the Greek myth is stripped of its cultural elements and turned into a universal 'myth of the hero', who must revive the lost spirit of a nation. All his plays are finely wrought literary accomplishments, though not, one suspects, good entertainment on stage. In some of them, Aurobindo skilfully mixes delicate verse with colloquial banter, while in others he uses pure poetry to create an atmosphere of deep tragedy.

**Harindranath Chattopadhyay** Another Bengali Brahman who made a substantial contribution to English-language Indian drama in this period was Harindranath Chattopadhyay (1898-1990). He was born outside Bengal, in Hyderabad, to a philosopher-educationalist father and a poet mother. His wife was Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, the famous leader of women's organisations; their divorce marked the first time a court in India recognised legal separation. His most famous drama, *Five Plays* (1929), covers a spectrum of social ills, including exploitation of textile workers and child marriage. After independence, he went on to write scripts for the booming cinema industry.

### Questions/Discussion

1. Many Indian plays written during this period were either translations or adaptations of English plays or borrowed from the reservoir of traditional Indian literature. Many were translated from one Indian language (usually Bengali) into another, and sometimes by the original writer an Indian language into English. This initial lack of original narrative material was overcome by the growing pressure of nationalism, which supplied numerous stories.
2. Sri Aurobindo perhaps illustrates another trend, and possibly problem, in modern Indian drama. His subtle intelligence and literary skills produced complex and ambiguous plays, which did not appeal to the theatre-going public. What are the historical roots of this split between aesthetic and popular drama in India. Is it found in other literary cultures?
3. The touring theatre company was a mainstay of Indian theatre right up to the end of this period. (See, for example, the 1965 film 'Shakespeare Wallah' by James Ivory.) Modern drama, however, required a financially viable theatre in the large cities, which Calcutta, Madras and Bombay struggled to achieve. How does this contrast between two models of drama help us to understand the status of drama in modern India?

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### Texts

1. Sri Aurobindo in his preface to *Perseus the Deliverer*:

Acrisius, the Argive king, warned by an oracle that his daughter's son would be the agent of his death, hoped to escape his doom by shutting her up in a brazen tower. But Zeus, the King of the Gods, descended into her prison in a shower of gold and Danaë bore to him a son named Perseus. Danaë and her child were exposed in a boat without sail or oar on the sea, but here too fate and the gods intervened and, guided by a divine protection, the boat bore her safely to the Island of Seriphos. There Danaë was received and honoured by the King. When Perseus had grown to manhood the King, wishing to marry Danaë, decided to send him to his death and to that end ordered him to slay the Gorgon Medusa in the wild, unknown and snowy North and bring to him her head the sight of which turned men to stone. Perseus, aided by Athene, the Goddess of Wisdom, who gave him the divine sword Herpe, winged shoes to bear him through the air, her shield or aegis and the cap of invisibility, succeeded in his quest after many adventures. In his returning he came to Syria and found Andromeda, daughter of Cepheus and Cassiopea, King and Queen of Syria, chained to the rocks by the people to be devoured by a sea-monster as an atonement for her mother's impiety against the sea-god, Poseidon. Perseus slew the monster and rescued and wedded Andromeda.

In this piece the ancient legend has been divested of its original character of a heroic myth; it is made the nucleus round which there could grow the scenes of a romantic story of human temperament and life-impulses on the Elizabethan model. The country in which the action is located is a Syria of romance, not of history.

Indeed a Hellenic legend could not at all be set in the environments of the life of a Semitic people and its early Aramaean civilisation: the town of Cepheus must be looked at as a Greek colony with a blonde Achaean dynasty ruling a Hellenised people who worship an old Mediterranean deity under a Greek name. In a romantic work of imagination of this type these outrages on history do not matter.



Time there is more than Einsteinian in its relativity, the creative imagination is its sole disposer and arranger; fantasy reigns sovereign; the names of ancient countries and peoples are brought in only as fringes of a decorative background; anachronisms romp in wherever they can get an easy admittance, ideas and associations from all climes and epochs mingle; myth, romance and realism make up a single whole. For here the stage is the human mind of all times: the subject is an incident in its passage from a semi-primitive temperament surviving in a fairly advanced outward civilisation to a brighter intellectualism and humanism – never quite safe against the resurgence of the dark or violent life-forces which are always there subdued or subordinated or somnolent in the make-up of civilised man – and the first promptings of the deeper and higher psychic and spiritual being which it is his ultimate destiny to become.

2. From 'Purpose' by T.P Kailasam

DEDICATED  
IN  
ALL HUMILITY  
TO  
MY YOUTHFUL BROTHERS  
OF  
MY MOTHERLAND  
IN  
HAPPY MEMORY  
OF  
*MY YOUTHFUL YEARS*

**"IF Youth but knew!  
If Age but Could!"**

*Personae:*

<b>BHEESHMA</b>	The Patriarch of the Royal Kuru House
<b>ARJUNA,</b>	Bheeshma's Grandchildren
<b>NAKULA and SAHADEVA</b>	
<b>DRONAACHAARYA</b>	Preceptor to the princes
<b>EKALAVYA</b>	A Nishaada (Non-Aryan) Boy

*Period:*

The Aadi Parva of THE MAHAABHAARATA

## ACT I

*Place:* THE ROYAL ATHLETIC GROUNDS: HASTINA

DISCOVERED: **In the Background:** *Stalwart Youths at Mace and Sword exercise*  
**In The Mid-Ground:** *Arjuna practising with bow, his target swung by a tree-branch*  
**In The Fore-Ground:** *Dronacharya with Nakula and Sahadeva; the former with a riding whip and the latter with a bow taller than his own self.*

Sahadeva: *(With a wry face)* Gurujee! I cannot use this bow! It is too big for me! I c a n n o t even lift it!

Drona: (*Feigning astonishment*) Bow too big for you? But my little man, you seem to forget you are a Kshatriya! Why, no bow in the world is really too big for a Kshatriya -- not only to lift, but to bend, string, and shoot with!

Sahadeva: (*With a more pinched face*) I AM remembering I am a Kshatriya, Gurujee! But (*Straining at the bow*) this is too big and I canNOT lift it!

Drona: Oh! You mean YOU are not big enough to lift it?

Sahadeva: (*Puzzled*) It is the same thing, I suppose?

Drona: "Same thing"? By no means! For, if it is the bow that is too big for you, no one can make that BOW smaller; but if it is YOU that is not big enough and strong enough to lift and use that bow... you can make yourself big enough and strong enough... can you not?

Sahadeva: (*Stragglingly*) I s u p p o s e I can.

Drona: "Suppose"? Why, of course you can: Look at your big brother yonder! Last week he made out that his GADA was too big for him. But now it turns out it was HE that was not strong enough then to lift it! For look, he is wielding the SAME gada as it were a flower! And you know where Bheemasena has been these past eleven days?

Sahadeva: I know! The Vyayaamasala!

Drona: Yes. And that is where you will spend your next eleven days. (*Looks at Nakula for a moment and looks away*) YOU will do the same too, Nakula!

Nakula: (*Startled*) I, Gurujee! Why?

Drona: (*Still looking away*) You thought perhaps that I was not watching you this morning whilst you were riding at day-break! But I was!...The MANE of a horse, Nakula!... (*Nakula bites the tip of his tongue guiltily*) is not meant for the rider to hold on to... unless he be a... (*meeting Nakula's eyes*) FRIGHTENED HORSEMAN!

(*Scandalised*) "FRIGHTENED"! I was NOT frightened, Gurujee! It was not fright that made me...do...what...I...did.

Drona: What was it then made you...do...what...you...did?

Nakula: I held on to the mane because...I did not want to slip off that very very big horse!...the horse was really much too big for me, Gurujee!

Drona: (*Feigning disgust and anger*) "Horse much too big"! And you are a Kshatriya! And to think I have just told your little brother that...I mean...

Nakula: (*Interrupting*) I KNOW what you mean...Gurujee...!

Drona: And what do I mean?

Nakula: You mean, Gurujee. I must never forget I am a Kshatriya! And that no bow in the world...I mean, no HORSE in the world is really too big for a Kshatriya to lift...I mean, to RIDE without holding the mane; that it was not the horse that was too big...as no one can make that horse smaller...but it was I that was not big enough and strong enough...so a MANDALA for me too in the Vyaayaamasala...and when I come back...

Drona: (*Suppressing a smile*) Yes...It is CHATHURTHEE today; and even as you can watch the MOON wax bigger and brighter every night—so must you watch your limbs and frame grow bigger and stronger everyday... and on, POORNIMA DAY—when your Royal Grandsire comes to visit us—you, Nakula, will be riding his big big, very very big, but—“never never much TOO big” war-horse DEERGHAKESHA, (*adding significantly*)—without holding the mane! And you, (*to Sahadeva*)—my little hero, will not only be lifting this bow, but bending it, stringing it and shooting with it!

Sahadeva: (*Clapping his hands*) Will I, Gurujee!?

Drona: Of course you will. Now, my little men, run away and start your SAADHANAAS this very now!

## Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century

### Overview

Like the poets of post-Independence India, many of the country's leading playwrights eventually migrated to the world of the cinema, where their monetary reward and public recognition is far greater. As a spoken literary form, drama does connect more directly with audiences, but its costly production requires a cast of actors and an infrastructure that militates against success.

Some of this problem has been mitigated by the establishment of cultural organisations on the state and central level. These well-funded organisations promote classical forms of theatre, such as Kutiyattam, folk forms, such as Teru Kuttu, and the new theatre written by urban elites. Outside these institutions, politically-motivated theatre continues to attract audiences, but not on a regular basis. Thus there remains a divide between urban elites and the bulk of the population, which some playwrights have attempted to bridge by using traditional techniques, colloquial language and stories from mythology and epics.

### Radio-plays

An obscure episode in the history of Indian drama in the twentieth century is the radio-play. At first these plays were written as if for the stage, but producers soon realised that the new medium of radio required a drama stripped of all its visuality and commissioned scripts based on the concept of 'total action.' In Calcutta, Birendra Krishna Bhadra and Bani Kumar rewrote old classics and adapted new work to fit these requirements. Among the best of these early experiments, all written in the 1950s, are *Rachodlal* by Yashodhar Mehta, *Vani Mari Koyal* by Chunilal Madia and *Anant Sadna* by Shivkumar Joshi.

### Bengali

**Utpal Dutt** The career arc of Utpal Dutt (1929 –1993) charts the fortunes of Indian modern theatre in general. He began as an actor in Bengali theatre performed in Calcutta, later founded the Little Theatre Group and twice toured the country in the early 1950s with the Shakespearean International Theatre Company. With the later company he was famous for his passionate performances of Othello. However, his reputation primarily rests on the political dramas he wrote and directed in the 1960s and 1970s, such as *Kallol*, *Manusher Adhikar*, *Louha Manob*, *Tiner Toloar* and *Maha-Bidroha*. The radical views expressed in his plays earned him a jail sentence in 1965 and meant that several were banned, despite their wide popularity. In the 1980s and 1990s he rounded off his life with several starring roles in Hindi and Bengali cinema.

**Badal Sircar** Badal Sircar (1925 – 2011) was another radical Bengali playwright of the late twentieth century who tried to bridge the gap between elite theatre and folk drama by creating what he called the 'third theatre.' He came to prominence during the Naxalite rebellion of the 1960s and 1970s when he took his plays out into the countryside. Earlier, his 'day job' as an engineer had taken him to England and Nigeria, where he entered theatre as an actor. Soon he wrote *Ebong Indrajit*, 'And Indrajit'), a play about the alienation of youth in post-Independence India, which brought him national attention. In 1976, he established his own theatre company, Shatabi, which performed in open spaces in Calcutta without elaborate props or lighting. There was no ticketing, and audiences were encouraged to participate in the productions.

### Marathi

**Vijay Tendulkar** Vijay Tendulkar (1928-2008) also attempted to create a new theatre that would combine the best of traditional drama with western-inspired writing. He wrote more than 30 full-length and many more one-act plays (plus short stories and film scripts) in Marathi, focusing on major social themes, such as poverty, women's rights and political corruption. His most famous plays include *Shantata! Court Chalu Ahe* ('Silence! The Court is in Session,' 1967), *Sakharam Binder*, 'Sakharam the Binder', 1971) and *Ghashiram Kotwal* ('Ghashiram the Constable,' 1972). In his later life Tendulkar wrote numerous successful film scripts.

**Sakharam Binder** In *Sakharam Binder*, Tendulkar tells the story of its eponymous protagonist, a book-binder who picks up discarded women and employs them in his home as servants and sex partners. He convinces himself that he is a social reformer by giving each woman a new sari, 50 rupees and a ticket to wherever she wishes to go. Slowly, the psychological damage is revealed. The play was banned in 1974.

**Ghashiram Kotwal** Tendulkar's *Ghashiram Kotwal* is an equally powerful play about political ambition and corruption. It was written in 1972, during the rise to power of the Shiv Sena, a right wing Hindu party in Maharashtra. Tendulkar, however, sets the action in the court of a Hindu king in Pune in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. With its use of broad satire, and song-dance routines from Tamasha (Marathi folk theatre), it proved extremely popular and has been performed in more than 20 countries.

### Kannada

**Girish Karnad** What Tendulkar did for Marathi theatre, and Sircar did for Bengali, Girish Karnad (b. 1938) has done for Kannada.

An intellectual educated at Oxford, as well as a writer, Karnad has more consciously than the others attempted to create a theatre that reflects the complexities of post-colonial India. As he has explained, contemporary India is a convergence of anxieties and dreams from the past and the present. He mines the rich resources of traditional Indian stories, layering them with modern technique, to reveal the passions and absurdities of human existence. His most performed play is one of his first, *Tughlaq* (1964), which tells the story of a Sultan in 14th-century Delhi, widely interpreted as a comment on Prime Minister Nehru, whose idealistic vision of a modern India collapsed in disillusionment. Karnad has also been active in the cinema, where his film scripts have won a long string of awards

### Hindi

**Mohan Rakesh** Mohan Rakesh (1925-1972) is credited with starting the new theatre movement in Hindi in 1958 with his first play, *Ashadh Ka Ek Din* ('One Day in Ashadh'). It tells the story of Kalidasa, the great classical Sanskrit playwright, and his broken marriage. Although on the surface it appears to be a traditional historical play, it introduces Rakesh's trademark themes of a lack of communication, guilt and alienation. Our inability to understand each other is the cause of our tragedy. It might be relevant to note that Rakesh's own, arranged marriage ended in 1957, as did a second one in 1960.

### English

**Lakhan Deb** Although Lakhan Deb (b.1953?) is not a household name in India, two of his plays are regarded as original contributions to modern theatre. In both *Tiger's Claw* (1967) and *Murder at The Prayer Meeting* (1976), Deb uses blank verse to portray two key events in Indian history. The first play dramatizes the killing of a Muslim general (Afzal Khan) by a Hindu king (Shivaji) in 1659, which some historians believe was the death-knell of the Mughal Empire. *Murder at the Prayer Meeting* enacts a second seminal death, the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in 1948, with a strong echo of T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*.

**Mahesh Dattani** Mahesh Dattani (b.1958) began his working life in an advertising firm and did not write plays until he was 30 years old. *Tara* (1990) was hailed as breakthrough in revealing the male chauvinism hidden beneath the polite, educated veneer of modern Indian society. Homosexuality is another taboo topic that Dattani explores in his writing, especially in 'Bravely Fought the Queen' (1991). Other plays address the complex identity of eunuchs (*Seven Steps Around the Fire*, 1998), patriarchy and feminism (*Where There's a Will*, 1988) and the institution of marriage (*Do the Needful*, 1997). Several of these works were written as radio-plays for the BBC. In 1993, Dattani was the first playwright in English to win the annual national prize (from the Sahitya Akademi) for drama with his *The Final Solution*.

### Questions/Discussion

1. Modern drama in India is not a thriving business. Audiences do not flock to the theatre, and playwrights (as playwrights) do not gain national attention. Producing a play is expensive, and the returns are minimal. One solution has been to put drama on the life-support machine of government funding through cultural organisations (Sangeet Natak Akademi in New Delhi and its regional affiliates). Is state-supported drama ('drama in a museum', as one critic put it) a viable long-term solution? What is the level of state support for drama, or opera, in other countries?
2. On the other hand, various forms of regional, folk and 'street' theatre do manage to survive, if not thrive, especially when there is a local or national issue to address. Perhaps we should think of two distinct genres: literary drama and performed theatre.

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