

INDIAN DRAMA – 20th Century

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Early 20th Century Drama

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 Kudiyyattam 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 spectacle, the new theatre focused on themes. Yet, all drama needs an element of wonder, and Indian theatre continued to seek the optimal balance between these two emphases.

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, *YahudikiLarki* ('The Jew's Daughter,' 1913), is an historical drama, adapted from an early nineteenth-century English play, which 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 (*ChatrapatiSivaji*).

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 (*TolluGatti*, 'The Hollow and the Solid', 1918), the dowry system (*TaliKattokeCooline*, '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

ShankaradasSwamigal An outstanding figure in Tamil drama in this period was another playwright-actor-director ShankaradasSwamigal (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 *gurukul* system (in which young men lived together and were trained by a guru) to teach the profession of acting.

SambandhaMutaliyar The new Tamil theatre, however, was established by the remarkable SambandhaMutaliyar (1873-1964). A lawyer by professional, a fine actor and an exacting director, he wrote more than 80 plays. 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. Nevertheless, it has to be said that Mutaliyar's plays, which were written for the stage rather than the armchair, were ephemeral.

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 ShankaradasSwamigal. The brothers then recruited successful fiction writers, from a newly-established literary magazine, instead of employing the traditional playwright (*vattiyar*) 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 (*RajarajaColam*, a Chola king).

Assamese

JyotiprasadAgarwal In the far northeast corner of India, JyotiprasadAgarwal (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.

HarindranathChattopadhyay Another Bengali Brahman who made a substantial contribution to English-language Indian drama in this period was HarindranathChattopadhyay (1898-1990). He was born outside Bengal, in Hyderabad, to a philosopher-educationalist father and a poet mother.

His wife was [KamaladeviChattopadhyay](#), 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 from, for example, Hindi 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. Consider 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?

Reading

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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:

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

Period:

The AadiParva 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 Vyayaamasaala!

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!

Drona: (*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 Vyaayaamasaala...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 20TH CENTURY DRAMA

Overview

Like the poets of post-Independence India, many of the country's leading playwrights have 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 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 TeruKuttu, 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 *AnantSadna* by Shivkumar Joshi.

Bengali

UtpalDutt The career arc of UtpalDutt (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 drama he wrote and directed in the 1960s and 1970s, such as *Kalol*, *ManusherAdhikar*, *LouhaManob*, *TinerToloar* 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.

BadalSircar BadalSircar (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 *EbongIndrajit*, ‘And Indrajit’), a play about the alienation of youth in post-Independence India that 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 ChaluAhe* (‘Silence! The Court Is in Session,’ 1967), *SakharamBinder*, ‘Sakharam the Binder’, 1971) and *GhashiramKotwal* (‘Ghashiram the Constable,’ 1972). In his later life Tendulkar wrote numerous successful film scripts.

SakharamBinder 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.

GhashiramKotwal Tendulkar’s *GhashiramKotwal* is an equally powerful play about political ambition and corruption. It was written in 1972, during the rise to power of the SivSena, a right wing Hindu party in Maharashtra. Tendulkar, however, sets the action in the court of a Hindu king in Pune in the late 18th 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

GirishKarnad What Tendulkar did for Marathi theatre, and Sircar did for Bengali, GirishKarnad (b. 1938) has done for Kannada. An intellectual (he was 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, *AshadhKaEk 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 hidden male chauvinism 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 SahityaAkademi) 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 (SangeetNatakAkademi 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.

Reading

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