

# INDIAN DRAMA – 19<sup>th</sup> Century

Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

## 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 every thing 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 Rown* (‘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 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 1880’s 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 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.

**Sambanda Mutaliyar** Modern Tamil drama gained an institutional basis in the 1890s through the efforts of Sambanda 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 after several revisions, made him a success on the stage.

### 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 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 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 (though 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 Delhi and Lucknow, 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 age 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 the same issue, say child-marriage, was treated differently in these two different media.

### Reading

Sisir Kumar Das, *History of Indian Literature, 1800–1910. Western Impact, Indian Response* (Sahitya Akademi, 1991)

K. Hansen, 'Language, community and the theatrical public in the Parsi theatre,' In Stuart Blackburn and Vasudha Dalmia (eds.), *India's Literary History: Essays on the Nineteenth Century* (Permanent Black, 2004), pp. 60-86  
P. Guha-Thakurta, *The Bengali Drama: Its Origin and Development* (Routledge, 2001)

### 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 acknowledged 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 Betrabeti, 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.