

**Indian English Drama**

Indian English Drama dates back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century when the British Rule became stable in India. The British brought the theatre with them. But during the initial decades of their rule, they could not present English Drama because Indians were not familiar with English Language. Hence, a lot of English plays, like those of Shakespeare, were translated into Indian Languages and then presented before the Indians. Gradually, Western education made its way to India. As a result, Indian English Drama came into existence. Most of the playwrights preferred to write short plays as compared to full length plays. As far as themes are concerned, social problems were the main focus of this era. Plays dealing with legendary and historical themes occupied next place to the social ones. Dr. N Velmani comments:

Theatre has proved to be a creative and effective instrument of protest and social change all over the world. In India too, drama has been effectively used during the Freedom Struggle to reach out to the masses with the message of *satyagraha* – non-violent struggle for freedom from the British yoke and also for social and economic changes.

**Pre-Independence Indian English Drama**

The British brought the modern theatre to India and the first theatrical companies were established in those areas which first came under its rule and influence. The earliest Indian English play was written in 1831 when Krishna Mohan Banerji wrote *The Persecuted of Dramatic Scenes Illustrative of the present state of Hindoo Society in Calcutta*. The year of the play clearly shows that English plays could only be written after the English found a strong foothold for themselves in India. The production of the play also required an audience proficient in English. So this play comes after the establishment of Hindu College in Calcutta. By this time, nearly a generation had been educated in English and been influenced by western ideas. The reformation movement had begun and this play symbolises this movement. It is about the conflict in the mind of a young Bengali man between orthodox Hindu practices and modern ideas inculcated by English education.

In November 1795, two plays, *Disguise* and *Love is the Best Doctor* were performed in Bengali translation. These translations were done in collaboration by a Russian and an Indian. By 1831, a Bengali theatre called the Hindoo Theatre had been established. This theatre staged some portions of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. This resulted in the birth of modern theatre in various Indian languages. However, Indian English drama was still missing from the scene. Original British plays were staged to fulfil the need for English drama.

The first recorded play in English by an Indian is by a famous poet Michael Madhusudan Dutt. His play *Ratnavali* is based on a Sanskrit play by Harshvardhana. The English play is a translation of his original Bengali play. He also published another translation of a Bengali play written by him *Sermista*. In 1871 he published another play *Is This Civilization?* It has been regarded as a major play in English by critics. His fourth play *Nation Builders* was published after his death. Another Bengali writer Ramkinoo Dutt wrote a play titled *Manipura Tragedy*.

In 1776 the Bombay Amateur Theatre was set up in Bombay (now Mumbai). It was exclusively meant for performances by visiting European companies. Annasaheb Kirloskar's production of *Shakuntal* in 1880 is considered to be an important contribution. The Parsi Natak Mandali was established in 1852. It was followed by The Elphinstone Dramatic Club and Victoria Natak Mandal. *The First Parsi Baronet*, a play by

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C.S. Nazir is the first recorded play in English from Mumbai. It is a verse drama. The other plays to have survived from this early period are D. M. Wadia's *The Indian Heroine*. It is based on the first war of Indian Independence of 1857. Another play that has survived is P.P. Maherjee's *Dolly Parsen*.

In 1875, the Madras Dramatic Society was founded in Madras (now Chennai). Like the theatre in Bombay, it also encouraged amateur European theatrical productions. This was followed by The Oriental Drama Club and The Sarasa Vinodini Sabha. The theatrical scene in Madras was thriving with many dramatic activities and a number of playwrights contributed to stage productions. The themes of these playwrights were social, historical and mythological. P.V. R. Raju, Krishnamacharya, Krishna Iyer, T.B. Krishnaswamy were some of the playwrights of the period. Another dramatist who surpassed others in popularity was V.V Srinivas Aiyangar. He wrote one act and two act plays. His plays concentrated on the behavioural patterns of the middle class. Most of his plays were light entertainment or farces. Some of his well-known plays are; *Blessed in a Wife*, *Vichu's Wife*, *The Point of View*.

Two figures who stand out distinctly among the dramatists of the pre-independence era are Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo. Tagore was a towering figure in Bengali literature. His influence on his contemporaries was enormous. He wrote his plays primarily in Bangla but almost all his plays have been translated into English, either by himself or by Indian and English translators. Two of his well-known Bengali plays which have been translated into English are *The Post Office* and *The King of the Dark Chamber*. His plays are an exploration of man-woman relationship, the idea of freedom and an insight into the feminine mind. Tagore was first to use symbolism and allegorical significance as a prime technique in his plays. He presented a synthesis of East and West in his plays. Diana Devlin writes "the philosopher, teacher and writer Rabindranath Tagore sets out to unify Indian and Western traditions creating plays which have been described as a mixture of Bengali folk drama and Western medieval mystery plays."

Sri Aurobindo's fame rests mostly on his poetry. He was a revolutionary and a philosopher. He wrote five complete and six incomplete verse plays. He borrowed the material for his plays from western classics as well as Sanskrit texts. Krishna S Bhatta comments:

Sri Aurobindo employs ancient legends to highlight the contemporary urge for freedom and bondage and heighten the elements of heroism, adventure and mystery.

The influence of Shakespeare and the Elizabethans is clearly visible in his plays. He dealt with the themes of human evolution and love in his drama. Some of his plays are: *Perseus, the Deliverer*, *Vasavdutta*, *Eric, the King of Norway*.

Harindranath Chattopadhyay, better known as Sarojini Naidu's brother, was another poet who wrote seven verse plays based on the lives of Indian Saints. *Jayadeva*, *Eknath*, *Raidas*, *Tukaram* are his plays based on the lives of Indian saints. He was a member of the Progressive Writers' Movement. His socialist background found an echo in his five social plays. His play *The Window* is dedicated to the "Brave Textile Workers of Parel, Bombay." It exposes the exploitation of poor workers by the industrialists. *The Sentry's Lantern* deals with the theme of the evils of imperialism. It is dedicated to "all the victims of Imperialist Gallows". In all his plays he exposes social evils through symbolism and the indomitable spirit of the downtrodden. He has appeal for modern readers also with his good command over writing dialogues.

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T.P. Kailasam has contributed immensely to Indian English and Kannada literature. He was regarded as the father of modern Kannada Drama. He wrote on contemporary social issues in Kannada and the lives of the tragic heroes from the epics in English. His English is interspersed with Sanskrit words. However, he flourished more in Kannada plays. He used the spoken language of the middle class in Kannada which accounts for his popularity. His English plays include *The Burden* which is based on the epic *Ramayana*. It depicts the feelings of Bharata on hearing the news of his father's death. The themes of the plays *Fulfillment* and *The Purpose* are taken from the story of Eklavya in the *Mahabharata*. *Karna* and *Keechaka* are also modelled on the characters from the *Mahabharata*. Though his plays are based on the epics, he offers a new and fresh perspective of the characters.

Bharati Sarabhai was influenced by Gandhian thought. She wrote two plays – *The Well of the People* and *Two Women*. The former is a verse play. It is about an old woman who was unable to go on a pilgrimage to Kashi and Haridwar. Instead of lamenting her loss, she decides to construct a well for the “untouchables”. The material for this play was borrowed from a story published in *Harijan*. Her other play *Two Women* is about two women Anuradha and Urvashi. It shows that spiritual bliss and complete fulfilment can be found in the present without renouncing worldly pleasures and material possessions.

It is observed that pre-independence playwrights selected historical and mythological themes to construct the idea of a good Indian. Their attempt was to reinvent Indian past and challenge the British colonisers. They turned to rich Indian history, mythology and the lives of saints to show the image of India and Indians. They reinterpreted some of the ancient texts and tried to put Indian drama at par with the British drama. They also incorporated some of the social issues prevalent in Indian society in order to bring about social change. The plays offer comments on social problems such as widowhood, orthodoxy and modernism, caste system, religious beliefs.

### Post-Independence Indian English Drama:

After independence, the scenario of Indian English Drama did not change much. The domination of Indian languages continued for theatre goers. The establishment of National School of Drama and various State Akademies did not help English drama much as their focus was more on theatre in other Indian languages. However, after 1960s there was growing interest in Indian literature in English. Some Indian dramatists became successful abroad. Though not as popular as Indian fiction in English, drama has slowly come of age in modern times.

The first major Indian English dramatist after independence was Asif Currimbhoy. He was a prolific writer who wrote more than thirty plays. His plays have variety and range that is unrivalled. His plays deal with contemporary political and social issues. *The Captives* is a play about Sino-Indian conflict. *Goa* is about the invasion and liberation of Goa by India. *Monsoon* is about colonisation and *An Experiment with Truth* is about the freedom struggle and the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. In almost all his plays he depicts political events like the Naxalite Movement, conflict about East and West Pakistan, China's invasion of Tibet, student agitation in Gujarat. Since his plays were staged abroad, he did not use spoken Indian English. His later plays were read more and performed less. He experimented with technological presentation on stage.

G. V. Desani, who is known for his hilarious novel *All About H Hatter*, wrote one play, *Hali*. The play was well received by critics when it was produced in England. It is an abstract play with no actors on stage, only voices. It is an allegorical play about human longing and everyman's quest for fulfilment. The central character Hali is named after a Muslim saint. He keeps his hair long and wears bangles and anklets.

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He is also given a Hindu name Girija. Thus Hali stands for all humanity. Pratap Sharma's play *A Touch of Brightness* which is bold in theme and treatment, depicts the red light area of Bombay. It was banned for some time in Bombay and was performed abroad. His other play *The Professor Has a Warcry* is about a young man who comes to know that he is an illegitimate child of a mother who was raped by two men after having been deserted by her lover, a professor. Both his plays are known for their craftsmanship and effective dialogues.

Nissim Ezekiel, a well-known poet, wrote plays in English. He is known for his use of the spoken language of the urban middle class and upper class Indians. His plays deal with social issues and personal relationships. Gurucharan Das' *Larins Sahib* is much performed and much acclaimed play. It is a three-act historical play about the life of a British Resident Henry Lawrence in the court of Dalip Singh in Punjab. The play is known for its historical subject matter, lively dialogue, plot construction and life-like characters. Like Mulk Raj Anand who used Indian idiom in his novels, Das does the same in the field of drama. In an interview he said: "the English theatre in India will have to project the kind of hybrid English we speak interspersed with Indian expression. Approach is that the characters should speak the English that is spoken in India." the Vijay Tendulkar is an eminent Marathi playwright whose plays have been translated into English and performed on stage successfully. His plays focus on the conflicts between the individual and society. Some of his well-known plays are: *Silence! The Court is in Session*, *Kamala*, *The Vultures*.

Dina Mehta's radio play *Brides are not for Burning* was named the best play in a worldwide competition organised by the BBC. Another play by her *The Myth Makers* is a three act play about violent demonstrations against migrants from other states in Bombay. The play is a scathing comment on the role of politicians. Cyrus Mistry's *Doongaji House* presents the situation of the Parsi community and the communal divide between Hindus and Muslims. The writer comments on the divisions created on the basis of religion, language, community and class. Another playwright who deals with Parsi community in Gujarat is Gieve Patel. He has won critical acclaim for the use of Indianised English and an honest attitude. He gives a typical Parsi touch to the English language in his plays such as *Princes* and *Mr Behram*.

Another promising playwright is Girish Karnad. He is an actor and director also who wrote in Kannada. He is a recipient of the Jnanpith Award. For four decades Karnad composed plays using history and mythology to present contemporary issues. He has translated his plays into English. His first play *Yayati* received critical acclaim. The play established his use of the themes of history and mythology. It was an instant success and was translated and staged in other Indian languages. His next play *Tughlaq* tells the story of the 14<sup>th</sup> century sultan Muhammad Tughlaq. The play remains among the best known of his works. *Hayavadana* is considered to be the most important play of post-independence India. In *Nagamandala* he combined two Kannada folk tales to present a contemporary situation. *Taledanda* has won several awards for Best Play.

Manjula Padmanabhan is a more recent writer who wrote in the last decade of the twentieth century. Her play *Harvest* is a dark and bitter comedy. It deals with futuristic subject where citizens of the developed world shop for body parts in the third world countries. The play focuses on the rise in poverty due to increasing population.

In recent times one name that shines like a bright star in the firmament of Indian English drama is Mahesh Dattani. Dattani is a Bangalore based playwright, actor, director. He has established a theatre group called "Playpen", that trains and exhibits new talents in the field of drama. He is the first English language playwright to win the Sahitya Akademi Award for *Final Solutions and Other Plays*. His plays deal with contemporary issues of homosexuality, gender identity, family conflict. The milieu of his plays is usually middle-class urban India. He shows us the hollowness of middle-class lives. Some of his famous plays are

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*Bravely Fought the Queen, Where There's a Will, Dance Like a Man, Tara, Final Solutions.* He is known for the technical experimentation in his plays from creating different levels on the stage, giving double roles to actors, effective use of lighting and music. He also uses Indian English with great confidence and captures the rhythms of the spoken language.

**Challenges Faced by Indian English Dramatists:**

Though Indian fiction in English has a rich crop of writers, drama in English language is somewhat lagging behind. India has a number of regional languages and most of the people speak these languages. English has a limited scope and it is the language of the upper, elite, educated, urban class. Srinivas Iyengar attributes “the failure to the fact that English is not a natural medium of conversation in India.” Those who are not proficient in English do not prefer to watch English plays. In such a scenario, Indian English dramatist is faced with the challenge of creating convincing theatre. There is no accepted Indian English for the writers to use convincingly. They are faced with the problem of using what kind of Indian ways of speaking English. Since playwrights write their plays to be staged, the question before the writers is: how are they going to write credible dialogues? Another challenge faced by the playwrights is the lack of trained actors who can perform the characters effectively. Many India English plays do not get staged due to the lack of living theatre in India. Rama Sharma observes:

“Any play written in India in English has an inherent disadvantage in the sense that it does not very often get staged.”

Staging a play costs money and there are very few industrial houses who are ready to sponsor shows. Recently some corporates have extended their support to English theatre in India but only for those plays that have some entertainment value.

**Conclusion:**

In spite of these inhibiting challenges, Indian English drama has developed and evolved. There have been experiments in techniques, forms and styles. The subjects are not only restricted to middle class and lower class but also expose the trials and tribulations of urban upper class people. There is an amalgamation of the traditional and the modern, the classical and the contemporary. The works of new and emerging writers as well as translations of the regional plays have gained popularity. R. K. Dhawan observes:

Very recently Indian English drama shot into prominence. Younger writers... have infused new life into this branch of writing.

*Est. 1987*

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