



THE ROLE OF ENGLISH LITERATURE AND INDIA DRAMA

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ABSTRACT

Drama has been a very influential and powerful medium in the English literature because of its audiovisual medium of expression. "Drama is a mimetic representation of life combining in itself the real and the fictional, art and reality and representing the events and characters within a dimension of space and time. It combines the qualities of narrative poetry with those of visual arts. It is a narrative made visible. India has a long history of drama from ancient times. Its journey begins from Sanskrit plays. "Indian tradition preserved in Natyashastra the oldest of the texts of the theory of drama, claims for the drama a divine origin, and a close connection with sacred Vedas themselves. Opines A.B. Keith. Thus the origin of Indian drama is found in the Vedic period. The most celebrated dramatists of the ancient era are Ashwagosh, Bhasa, Shudraka, Kalidasa, Harsha, Bhavbhuti, Vishakhadatta. Tragedies like Urubhanga, romances like Abhijnana-sakuntalam and historical plays like Mudrarakshas are the well known works of the Vedic period. The literature in Sanskrit is classified into two categories- Drishya (that can be seen) and the Sravya (that can be heard). Drama falls in the category of Drishya. "Drama in Sanskrit literature is covered under the broad umbrella of „rupaka“ which means depiction of life in its various aspects represented in „forms“ by actors, who assume various roles.

INTRODUCTION

Drama in India has had a rich glorious tradition. It begins its journey with the Sanskrit plays. Indian tradition preserved in the "Natyasastra". The oldest of the texts of the theory of the drama, claims for the drama divine origin and a close connection with the sacred Vedas themselves. Origin of English drama can be traced to the ancient rules and seasonal festivities of the Vedic Aryans. The dramatic performances of those times mainly included depiction of events of daily life accompanied by music. Some members of the tribe acted as if they were wild animals and some others were the hunters. Those who acted as animals like goats, buffaloes, reindeers and monkeys were chased by those, playing the roles of hunters and a mock hunt was enacted. In such a crude and a simple way was drama performed during the age of the Vedic Aryans. Later, different episodes from The Ramayana, The Mahabharata and The Bhagvadgita were picked up and enacted out in front of the people. This kind of performance is still very popular in India especially during the time of Dussehra, when the episode of the killing of Ravana is enacted out in different parts of country.

Drama is an important cultural performance of a society. Drama not only registers but also manifests the changes (social, political or cultural) the society undergoes. Thus, the study of drama would enable to reconstruct the history,



understand the society and comprehend its identity. Modern Indian English drama can be taken into consideration to conceive the cultural identity of the society to which it belongs. Contemporary urban, middle-class English speaking stratum of Indian society is the society to which it belongs. When we consider Indian drama, obviously we are reminded of ancient drama. Ancient Sanskrit drama was so popular that the world recognizes India with ancient drama and the critical treatise associated with that, *Natyasastra*. Let us now do a critical scrutiny of the journey of India drama from ancient times to modern times.

Natyasastra is a complete book of performance. This book of Indian aesthetics details all kinds of performance and according to this book, drama is the prominent form of performance. Ancient drama followed *Natyasastra* in every respect. *Natyasastra* instructs right from the construction of the stage, the place where different artisans are supposed to sit, the direction of each artisan etc. all these details are a part of the construction of the stage and setting. The selection of the plot or *itivrtha* is a significant aspect of a drama. In chapter XXI entitled Sandhyanga Vikalpa, Bharata mentions all the details of the plot and its development.

THEATRE AND CONTEMPORARY INDIA

According to Paul Kurtz, like the cult of Dionysus, Vedic religion also held the seeds of dramatic theatre in India. In the fourth century B.C, actors were employed to perform at temples in honor of deities. Also, some villages forced residents to subsidize public performances of *Stree Preksha* (women's drama) and *Purusha Preksha* (men's drama). The *Natyashastra* of the third century B.C by Bharata brings out the evidence of theatre arts at festivals and public celebrations during the Maurya Dynasty, founded by King Chandragupta (reigned 321 B.C -297 B.C). The Maurya Dynasty ruled India for a long period. During this period, kings sent Buddhist missionaries to various places like Ceylon, Syria, Egypt, Greece, Tibet, China and Japan to spread Buddhism. As per Historian Will Durant (M.L. Varadpande, 1981: 36), in one sense drama in India is as old as Vedas, for at least the seed of drama lies in the Upanishads. The more actual source of drama surely older than these scriptures is the sacrificial and festival ceremonies and religious procession. Many known and unknown factors worked together to produce Indian theatre and give it a religious stamp that ambled throughout the classic age in the serious nature of the drama. Perhaps the final spur to drama came from the contact established by Alexander's invasion between India and Greece. History of dramatic literature of India starts with the plays of Bhasa which are ascribed to fourth-fifth century B.C.

The main audience for contemporary theatre is overwhelming urban coupled with a strong theoretical and critical presumption that it is homogeneous in composition. The typical Indian theatergoer is perceived as middle-class, educated (though not always professionally trained or employed), relatively unseasoned in the culture of theatre, and more or less receptive to an eclectic range of modern theatre forms (Aparna Bhargava Dhawadker, 2005:108). Although, in India as in the west the spectators have wide contact with the electronic mass media, they contrast with



the western views in the case of theatre viewership. If the options are available, the Indian audience prefers films to theatre show or drama. Thus for obvious reasons, for those who brings plays to the stage, the development of serious theatre has become not less than a brave act.

Some important conclusions about the reception of contemporary Indian theatre follow from this discussion. As most of the literary playwrights rarely engage with issues of spectatorship, directors such as Subbanna, Ganguly and Chowdry and directing authors such as Dutt and Siccar took the responsibility for the primary deal in audience development. In the contemporary Indian society, the primary audience for the modern Indian theatre is educated middle-class urban viewers. In India, a number of practitioners have been striving to expand viewership across the boundaries of class, region, and language. Such attempts include the successful innovative steps of female directors in creating new models of performance on the Indian stage.

Among many other disciplinary guide lines, selection of characters is a significant one. In chapter XXXIV in *Natyasastra* types of characters are discussed. There are three kinds of characters (male and female) in a play, *Uttama* (superior), *Adhama* (inferior) and *Madhyama*(middling). The starting of a performance with a prayer, usage of sutradhara, who would narrate the story and many more instructions of *Natyasastra* exhibit the culture of those days and also the social structure of ancient times. During this era theatre enjoyed a hay day for a long time before it saw a great gap of around ten centuries. i.e. till the advent of the British. The only performing arts that continued through this period are different folk arts of all the regions of India. Mainstream theatre and drama suffered for a long period which was again revoked in 18th century.

Drama in India is revoked during the British rule. Though vernacular drama became popular, English drama also saw the beginning during this time. Thus English theatre in India is essentially an 18th century phenomenon that began with a purpose of entertaining the British who came to serve British administration in India. European touring companies performed comedies, farces and operas in major urban Indian spaces where the British used to live.

Indians trained through British education system took interest in this art form. Their efforts resulted in the form of Indian English drama which grew as an off-shoot in the spread of nationalism. When these Indians wished to express themselves through the stage plays, their immediate role model was the European play presented in India. Ever since those times, Indian English drama was striving to grow as an independent genre of Indian English Literature. Indian English drama thus began its primary development following the European drama. A question that triggers our attention is, though Indians have had a well developed and well sophisticated theatre history why the ancient drama failed to attract the Indians? The reasons may be, firstly the immediate availability of a role model and secondly the cultural changes already taking place in urban India. These two factors influenced the Indian English drama to



follow the western drama mainly in the aspects of stage and setting. One of the main reasons is, the living style, clothing, commutation, technological development, home keeping - many such aspects of urban Indian living were influenced by the British. Thus the stage construction, setting was immediately accepted but English language was not accepted as language of communication in Indian home till the recent times. Natural conversation is the significant feature and vital necessity of drama. M.K. Naik observes this fact and writes.

The Indian English drama during colonial rule and in post-colonial India depicts the cultural changes sealed into Indian culture. As observed earlier, the revoked Indian drama did not follow ancient drama but followed modern, Western drama. The cultural changes that initiated with the advent of Britishers are quite evident in the stage, setting, costume (trousers and shirt), music and other architectonics of theatre. But the subjects, themes, issues, characters, actors were Indian, indicating the hybrid identity of this genre.

Neither the dramatic text nor the theatrical text followed the instructions of ancient Sanskrit drama but still this genre belongs to India. This unique hybrid identity is being carried by this genre of Indian English Literature. This genre gradually developed on these lines of hybridity to this present form which takes its identity with the cultural identity of the society to which it belongs. Contemporary Indian English drama takes up the issues related to the urban, middle class, English speaking society which is undergoing a noticeable cultural change. Issues like marital infidelity, homosexuality licentiousness are common place subjects of plays ex: *Do the Needful*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, *The Harvest* etc.

The necessity to focus on the conflicts in the lives of contemporary Indians springs from the complex situation in which he/she exists. Socio-cultural scenario of India was affected to a great extent by the colonial rule. Traditional Indian society which was inherently hierarchized was further stratified with the master-servant paradigm of colonial rule. This resulted in new personality types marked by clusters of characteristic traits such as submissiveness, psychofancy, dependence and lack of self-confidence. Therefore in post-independence India, an individual is caught in complex situation that is a result of the combination of traditional Indian culture and the culture of the British. His/her attempt to break these shackles at familial, social and cultural levels becomes significant feature of contemporary urban Indian life. In terms of values, individuals [especially urban Indians] in India are highly influenced by the new money power. Guru Charan Das in *India_Unbound* discusses the new middle class at length and he writes.

HISTORY OF THE INDIAN DRAMA

The Indian English Drama is supposed to have begun in the 18th century when the British Empire strengthened its power in India. It is taken to have started with the publication of Krishna Mohan Banerjee's *The Persecuted* in 1813. It is a social play which presents the conflict between the East and the West. The real journey of Indian English drama begins with Madhusudan Dutt's *Is This Called Civilization* which was



published in 1871. He also translated his play *Ratnavali* (1859) and *Sermista* (1859) originally written in *Bangla* into English. Rankinoo Dutt wrote his *Manipura Tragedy* in 1893. Indian English drama exhibited its genius after a long time in the 20th century. The Pre Independence era witnessed the emergence of many significant playwrights. They were Rabindranath Tagore, Aurobindo Ghosh, T.P. Kailasam, A.S.P. Ayyar, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, Bharati Sarabhai who made a tremendous contribution to the evolution and development of Indian English drama. R.N. Tagore and Sir Aurobindo Ghosh, the two great sage poets, are the first Indian dramatists of repute. Including Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, they are known as the „big three“ who made an abiding contribution to the Indian English drama.

Indian English Drama showed little progress in the Post-independence period. Though the efforts were made but it could not gain much. The Five Year Plans after the Independence encouraged performing arts as an effective medium for public enlightenment and healthy entertainment. Institutions like National School of Drama was established in Delhi, Institutions for training in dramatic art were founded in many cities, Departments of Drama were opened in many universities. The National Drama Festival was started in Delhi by the Sangeet Natak Akademi. But all those developments promoted the growth of drama in regional languages. Though the Theatre Group in Bombay and some other agencies did successfully stage Indian English drama yet these performances could not give much popularity to Indian English drama. By and large, plays written in regional languages dominated the Indian theatre.

The English theatre in India will have to project the kind of hybrid English we speak, interspersed with Indian expression. My approach is that the characters should speak the English that is spoken in India, using expressions like „Kya Yar“ „Chalo Bhai“. And actors can bring about a reversion in spoken English.

There are references to drama in Patanjali's Vyakarna Mahabhashya, Jame's Aagam of Raypaseni Sulta as well as Vatsyayam's Kamasutra, Kautilya's Arthashastra and Panini's Ashtabhyam. Thus the origin of Sanskrit drama dates back to 1000 B. C. All literature in Sanskrit is classified into Drishya (that can be seen on exhibited) and the sravya (that can be heard or recited). While poetry in all forms can be said to fall under the latter, drama falls under the formes. Drama in Sanskrit literature is covered under the broad umbrella of rupaka' which means depiction of life in its various aspects represented in forms by actors who assumes various roles. A `rupaka' has ten classifications of which `Nataka' (drama), the most important one, has come to mean all dramatic presentations. The Sanskrit drama grows around three primary constituents namely Vastu (plot), Neta (hero) and Rasa (sentiment). The plot could be either principal (adhikarika) or accessory (prasangika). The former concerns the primary characters of the theme and pervades the entire play.



SUMMING UP

Drama is a composite art in which the written word of the playwright attains complete artistic realization only when it becomes the spoken word of the actor on the stage and though that medium reacts on the mind of the audience. A play, in order to communicate fully and become a living dramatic experience, thus needs a real theatre and a live audience. The real success of the play is tested on the stage. Therefore a playwright needs a living theatre in order to evaluate his work. Besides this, many Indian plays do not get staged. As Rama Sharma in his preface to his "Collected Plays" remark, "Any play written in India in English has an inherent disadvantage in the sense that it is not very often staged. Stage worthiness being basic tests for a play....most of the plays written in English do not fulfill this requirement. Thus Indian playwrights writing in regional languages seem to succeed in comparison to the writers writing in English. As the former is more clearly regarding the purpose of playwriting, their perception of the form of drama, the intended audience/readers etc. very few dramatists in English have been successful especially in theatre.

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