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Modern Indian Theatre: A Critical Evaluation

Manisha Sagar

Assistant Professor, Department of English
Deshbandhu College, University of Delhi

Abstract:

The journey of contemporary Indian theatre can be understood through its interactions with both colonial and traditional theatrical styles, alongside colonial representations of India and the British's introduction of English education and print culture. Theatre historians connect the development of modern cultural expressions to the influence of European culture and performance practices during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Barucha 2001). As a result, modern Indian theatre, which took shape in the nineteenth century, was influenced by issues surrounding nationalism, identity, and modernity while seeking to revive Indian traditions within a broader social and cultural context. Importantly, modernity should not be viewed as separate from tradition; instead, it represents a necessary retrieval shaped by the historical context of the time.

Keywords

Colonialism, Identity, Indian theatre, Modernity, Nationalism, Negotiations, Tradition

Theatre is a living art form that changes continuously. The origin and development of theatre in India can be divided into three phases. The first is characterised by high-quality Sanskrit dramatic literature, imaginative staging styles, and Bharata's Natyashastra. The second phase commences after the decline of classical Sanskrit theatre and the emergence of regional languages in India. The third phase involves the encounter of Indian theatre with the

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West in the nineteenth century, leading to a new type of theatre in urban centres, weakening ties with tradition and intensifying the urban-rural divide.

The British introduction of new entertainment styles to India was significant. Even before Britain's ultimate conquest, English theatre was flourishing in Calcutta. By the late eighteenth century, dedicated theatre venues had opened in Calcutta and Bombay, showcasing English plays performed by local British groups or touring troupes. The influence of foreign theatrical traditions grew as universities and colleges were established, paving the way for English education. This blend of English theatre and education spurred the development of modern theatre in India (Barucha 2001).

Indian theatre has been shaped by various factors, with three key influences standing out. First, many English plays, particularly those by Shakespeare, were translated or adapted into regional languages, encouraging writers to embrace Western styles. Second, dramatists began translating and performing Sanskrit plays in educational settings during a revival period. Lastly, folk and traditional theatrical forms maintained their connections to the audience and remained vibrant. Together or individually, these three elements significantly influenced the development of Indian theatre, resulting in remarkable outcomes.

Bengal and Maharashtra spearheaded the movement in India, which expanded to other regions and thrived, particularly in fertile areas. The three models, Sanskrit and folk, were either independently copied or blended. These models fluctuated in prominence and impact throughout different periods and locations. In the post-British era, Indian theatre presents a captivating blend of various influences, occasionally showcasing creative expressions while seeming rough and unrefined at other times.

The impact of English theatre began in Bengal when an enterprising Russian named Herasim Lebedeff, with help from his tutor Golok Nath Das, translated two English plays, '*The Disguise*' and '*The Love is the Best Doctor*,' into Bengali. This marked the start of a new chapter in Indian theatre, as he staged these plays in a theatre designed in typical Bengali style in Dom Tollah on 27 November 1795.

Yet, this emerging dramatic trend took several more years to establish itself in Bengal and other regions of the country, albeit with varying intensity levels. By the late nineteenth

century, all theatre practitioners nationwide felt its influence. What transpired? The theatre began to engage audiences while addressing their social and political concerns symbolically or directly. These themes were groundbreaking for traditional Indian theatre. Dramas began to voice political discontent and anger toward colonial domination, utilising mythological and historical narratives. The plays were designed to reveal social disparities and hypocrisy subtly. We could describe this as a purposeful theatre (Barucha 2001).

Next, the writers began exploring human emotions by placing their characters in simple, complex, or conflicting situations to achieve a sense of reality. This significantly changed the narrative nature of traditional Indian theatre, mainly characterised by its aesthetic focus. A new form of theatre arose, filled with music, dance, and song for the general audience. Any theme could be transformed into a grand entertainment spectacle. Performances frequently resembled musical concerts, where the singers took centre stage rather than the actors. This can be described as the theatre of entertainment.

Here are some general categories in the theatre world. These categories are not rigidly defined; their boundaries frequently overlap. Some works, like those by Rabindra Nath Tagore, defy strict categorisation, showcasing their distinctiveness. Numerous layers and levels coexist within each category, often parallel to and intersecting. A strong play isn't limited to any single category; each category contains its share of weaker plays.

The first category encompasses plays that reflect nationalistic sentiments, such as *Kichaka Vadha*, authored by Krishanji Prabhakar Khadilkar in Marathi, which challenged the very foundations of British rule in India. Likewise, the impactful play *Niladarpan* unveiled the injustices committed by British indigo planters when a confrontation was impractical. Historical or mythological themes acted as a façade to voice potent political and anti-British sentiments, delivering a message of rebellion. Social reformers employed theatre to confront outdated customs and social norms that impeded societal progress. Several plays, including *Sharada* in Marathi, denounced unequal marriages, while *Ekacha Pyala* exposed the vices of alcoholism. *Kulinakulasarvasva* in Bengali contested polygamy, and other plays critiquing the Hindu caste system and advocating for Gandhian philosophy were also written in various languages.

The Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) depicted social and political realities through drama, embodying progressive ideologies. For the People's Theatre, the theatre played a vital role in the mass movements of militant workers, peasants, and youth. IPTA staged numerous notable plays, drawing in talented theatre practitioners nationwide. Even after IPTA's dissolution, the theatre artists affiliated with it made significant contributions to the theatre movement. Among the prominent figures who were once part of the IPTA and later flourished independently are Shombhu Mitra, Utpal Dutt, Balaraj Sahani, Habib Tanvir, and Sheela Bhatia.

Professional Parsi dramatic companies, central to theatrical entertainment, travelled internationally and even to Europe with their performances. This vibrant theatre scene began in the mid-19th century, fueled by the entrepreneurial spirit of the Parsi community, and lasted until the mid-20th century. These companies presented plays in multiple languages, including Hindi, Urdu, Gujarati, and English. They sought to integrate European theatrical techniques while incorporating aspects of Indian folk theatre, such as music and dance. With creativity, they harmonised various theatrical influences, showcasing them in a way that enthralled audiences. The Parsi theatrical landscape was brought to life with grand stage designs, spectacular effects, exciting fight sequences, alluring dances, stunning costumes, and a mix of loud, melodramatic performances and Western, Indian, classical, and folk music. Mythological, historical, and romantic plays were predominantly performed for entertainment purposes. Parsi theatrical companies played a crucial role in shaping pre-independence theatre in India, with playwright Aga Hashra Kashmiri, who wrote for them, earning the title of Shakespeare of India. The impressive productions mounted by these companies significantly influenced theatres across other languages and regions. Parsi theatre was well-known then for its appeal to those seeking entertainment.

This category encompasses musical theatre, which significantly emerged in Maharashtra in 1880. Under the leadership of actor Balagandharva and dramatist Khadilkar, the theatre flourished during the first quarter of the 20th century. The drama primarily served as a loose framework for showcasing numerous songs set to classical and folk melodies. It was more a theatre for singers than actors. Musical theatre evolved from folk theatre, presenting a more polished style and advancing in dramatic artistry.

This theatre, shaped by Maharashtra's theatrical figures, has a distinct charm that still appeals to audiences today. Unlike the loud and flamboyant nature of Parsi theatre, musical theatre maintains its elegance and attraction. At times, however, the performance felt more like a musical concert, featuring occasional prose interludes that introduced the upcoming songs. This aligns with the emergence of prose theatre in several areas across the country, which has enriched theatrical art through modern playwriting and presentation techniques.

In the modern context, theatre emerged across almost all regions with varying degrees of success influenced by local reception and patronage. Bharatendu Harishchandra and Jaishankar Prasad significantly impacted Hindi theatre. In Punjab, original prose playwriting began towards the late 19th century, alongside translations and adaptations of works by Shakespeare and Kalidasa. Norah Richards and Ishwar Chandra Nanda worked to develop modern Punjabi theatre centred in Lahore. A vibrant theatrical scene thrives in southern India, where professional and amateur groups work to keep theatre alive. South Indian theatres, especially in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, were notably inspired by Marathi theatre. Groups like the Indian National Theatre and Prithvi Theatre emerged during this time. However, the rise of cinema as a mass entertainment source severely affected Indian theatre. Fortunately, it saw a revival after independence.

Following independence, especially after 1960, Indian theatre started to evolve significantly. Several influential playwrights surfaced, accompanied by a new wave of directors and actors. The insightful director and actor E. Alkazi was central to this movement and led the National School of Drama, a key theatre laboratory. Alkazi's brilliance has been a driving force behind the emergence of this new form of theatre. His students, trained in theatrical techniques and performance skills, now showcase their talents nationwide. He motivated them to pursue a theatre that is authentic and genuinely representative of India. As a result, a pan-Indian theatre movement began to develop, aiming for cohesion within a rich tapestry of diversity. For the first time, critics started to examine the rise of a national theatre.

The landscape of Indian theatre started to broaden in multiple ways. At first, theatre practitioners redirected their attention to the rich Indigenous traditional theatrical forms flourishing across various regions. Nonetheless, their perspectives on traditional theatre differed significantly. Some maintained that it should be upheld in its original state. For

instance, when presenting a Yakshagana performance, one should select a play by Bhasa or Kalidasa.

Shakespeare can be adapted into a Yakshagana style. Some believe strict adherence to the Yakshagana technique isn't necessary when presenting a modern play. Formal modifications can be made while keeping the Yakshagana structure largely intact. They argue that tradition evolves and change is unavoidable. Certain directors think that different folk theatre forms can be integrated harmoniously into one performance. The core idea is finding effective ways to communicate the play to the audience. These perspectives have influenced the production methods in post-independence Indian theatre.

Brecht's exposure to Indian theatre as a playwright and director highlighted his philosophical views on alienation. The production techniques he employed closely mirrored those found in Indian folk theatre. Indian theatre practitioners readily embraced his ideas, once again acknowledging the significance of folk theatre for meaningful artistic growth. The narrative techniques utilised in folk theatre – including the Sutradhar and his chorus – experienced a revival, accompanied by dance and music. Drama broke free from the limitations of proscenium settings, allowing a renewed connection between performers and audiences in open-air venues. As a result, theatre regained its vitality and began to thrive again.

As Indian theatre began to explore its rich traditions, it simultaneously looked outward at theatrical practices globally. This dual approach connected Indian theatre with various international trends (Dalmia 2006). Across the nation, experimental theatre groups began to form, influenced by playwrights such as Sartre, Camus, and Beckett. Indian theatre practitioners absorbed these influences meaningfully rather than superficially. In addition, efforts to revive classical Sanskrit theatre became increasingly methodical. Initially, Sanskrit plays were translated and performed through folk methods.

Furthermore, some directors revisited the foundational texts of Bharata and his Natyashastra for their Sanskrit productions. The local tradition of presenting Sanskrit plays in temple theatres in Kerala thrived. Many conventions and techniques from Sanskrit theatre were preserved within Kerala's Kudiattam, which contemporary directors now study and

employ, enhancing the authenticity of their productions. K.N. Panikkar's name is prominently featured in this narrative.

Multiple elements shaped the multifaceted growth of Indian theatre in the post-independence era (Lal 2004). In the early 1960s, Mohan Rakesh made a significant entrance into Indian theatre with his play *Ashadha Ka Ek Din*, while Dharamveer Bharati followed suit with *Andha Yug*. The presentation of these plays marked the dawn of a transformative era in Indian theatre's timeline. Habib Tanvir enriched the scene by performing a folk interpretation of the Sanskrit play *Mricchakatika* under *Mitti ki Gad*. *Andha Yug*, written in verse, illustrates the repercussions following the devastating Mahabharata war. The consequences of this monumental battle affected all, from the defeated to the victors, reflecting a war devoid of hope and direction. Audiences are confronted with a portrayal of a modern world ravaged by global disputes, nearly driving humanity to the brink of extinction. The suffering inflicted upon people stemmed from their actions or karma. The play was produced in Bombay by Pandit Satyadeva Dube, with E. Alkazi directing it in an open-air theatre set against the stunning ruins of Ferozeshah Kotla in Delhi. These ruins served not just as a passive background but symbolised the essence of the play, actively participating in the narrative through their sombre presence. The play has been translated into several Indian languages and has seen innovative productions, notably Ratan Thiyam's rendition in the Manipuri style, which thoughtfully incorporates the region's martial arts.

Mohan Rakesh's rise in Indian theatre signifies another crucial milestone. His works, including *Ashadha Ka Ek Din*, *Leheronke Rajahans*, and *Adhe Adhure*, reflect the sensitive explorations of human emotions clashing with life's harsh truths. *Ashadha Ka Ek Din* presents a lyrical narrative rooted in the life of poet Kalidasa, showcasing the profound pathos of existence. *Adhe Adhure* is a standout piece by Rakesh, powerfully depicting the anxieties and struggles of a struggling middle-class family, mainly focusing on a woman's efforts to maintain stability (Nandi 2009). The play has been translated into various Indian languages, raising new awareness. In Bengal, Shombhu Mitra was notable for his Tagore adaptations and his exceptional production of *Oedipus Rex*. On the other hand, Badal Sircar redirected the theatre landscape with his plays *Baki Itihas*, *Pagla Ghoda*, and *Evam Indrajit*, which introduced a fresh sensibility.

Another key Indian playwright from this era is Girish Karnad, who wrote in Kannada. Although his debut play, *Yayati*, didn't gain much attention, his historical drama *Tughlaq* achieved remarkable success. This piece shifts focus from the historical events of the Sultan's rule to the Sultan himself, exploring the conflicting and puzzling aspects of his intricate personality that he struggles to understand. His actions alternately exhibit violence, magnanimity, cruelty, and generosity, sometimes manifesting together or in isolation. The play illustrates that the drama of history unfolds not only through spectacular external events but also within the individuals who create, influence, engage with, and bear the effects of those events. The National School of Drama premiered this play at its open-air theatre. Still, director E. Alakazi later moved it to the ruins of Purana Quila to underscore the troubling aspects of the Sultan's mind. Karnad's other work, *Hayavadna*, tells the tale of a woman pursuing the ideal man. This captivating play draws inspiration from an Indian legend in the ancient anthology *Kathasaritsagar*. In its Marathi adaptation, B.V. Karanth and Vijaya Mehta presented the play in a folk style, setting a new trend (Nandi 2009).

Vijay Tendulkar significantly impacted Indian theatre with his Marathi play, *Shantata Court Chalu Ahe*. This exceptional piece uncovers the deep-seated violence and cruelty found even in ordinary middle-class people as they verbally assault a woman with fierce hostility during a mock court trial rehearsal, taking pleasure in tarnishing her character (Dalmia 2006). Many of Tendulkar's works, such as *Sakharam Binder*, *Gidhade*, and his most famous, *Ghashiram Kotwal*, delve into the themes of sex and violence that are part of human nature, whether subtly or overtly expressed. Tendulkar's plays frequently incited controversy and prompted vital discussions regarding writers' freedom to portray these themes on stage. He inspired theatre practitioners to tackle bold concepts with earnestness. His unflinching examination of challenging topics introduced a fresh perspective to Indian theatre. The staging of *Ghashiram Kotwal*, directed by Jabbar Patel, was a groundbreaking moment for contemporary theatre, as Patel skillfully infused various forms of Marathi folk theatre into its presentation.

Habib Tanvir pioneered the integration of folk theatre with his play *Mitti Ki Gadi*. He skillfully blended the folk and tribal theatrical traditions of Madhya Pradesh into his work. Although many directors have used folk forms, their casts have mainly consisted of urban actors (Nandi 2009). Tanvir established a company of folk and tribal performers whose

genuine involvement brought the outstanding play *Charandas Chor* to life. This comedic story about a thief who must give up his life for his ethical vows was enhanced by including tribal dance and music echoing through Madhya Pradesh's lush forests. In Karnataka, Chandrashekhar Kambar also embraced folk elements in his productions, including *Jo Kumaraswamy and Sangya Balya*. Various writers and directors have increasingly turned to folk theatrical forms, creating meaningful new trends. This evolving genre is known as the “theatre of roots.”

In Maharashtra, a body of work known as Dalit literature, or literature of the oppressed, has emerged. It vividly captures the struggles of low-caste individuals through powerful expressions of anger and sorrow. Meanwhile, Dalit theatre is steadily gaining traction in the region. The landscape of Indian theatre is dynamic, with various forms—including folk, traditional, and modern urban theatre—interacting and creatively influencing one another. Since independence, pursuing a distinct Indian identity in theatre has continued, embracing a diverse array of external influences that enrich the colourful tapestry of Indian theatre, which remains distinctive in many respects.

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