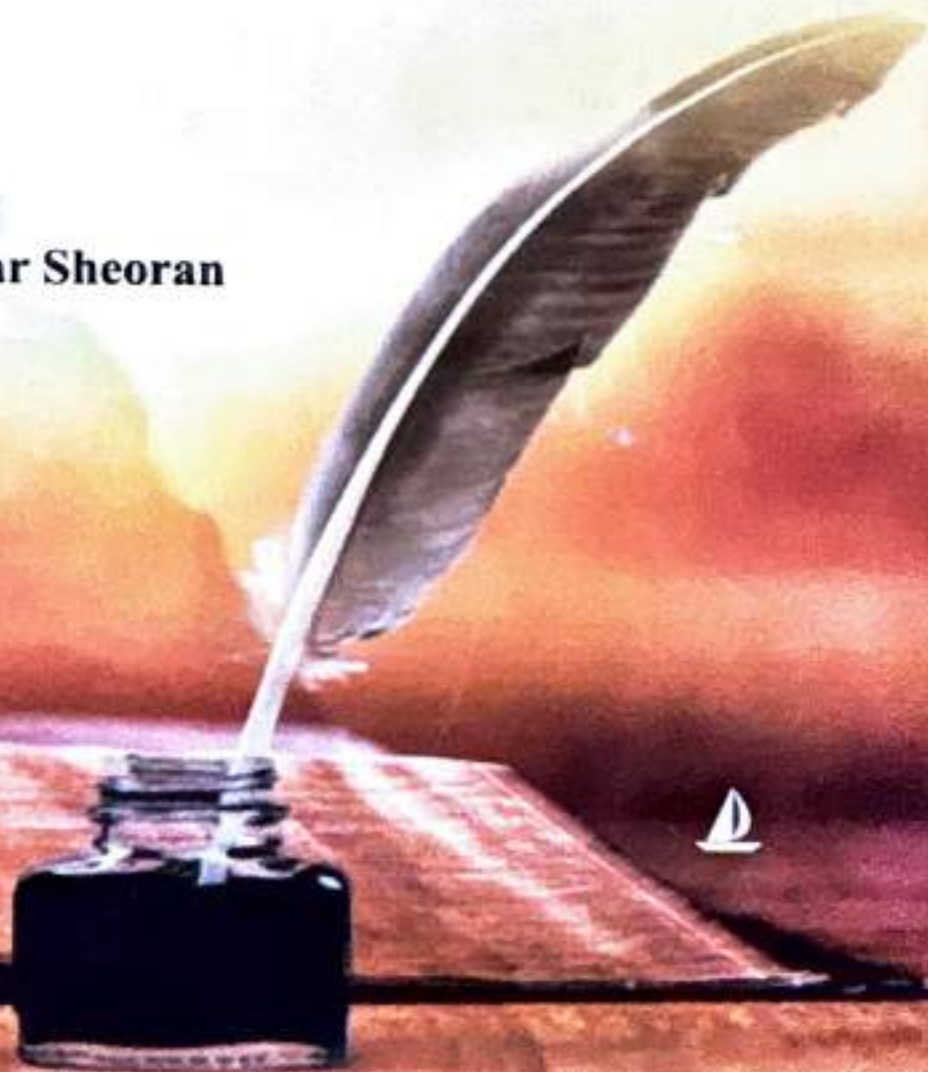


Indian Writing in English

Trends and Outlook

Editor:
Dr. Sandeep Kumar Sheoran



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Edited by
Dr. Sandeep Kumar Sheoran
Assistant Professor (English)
Markanda National College, Shahabad, Haryana.

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Indian English Drama - A Cultural Expression

Dr. Alik Roy

Over thousands of years, Indian drama has had a remarkable history that has reflected the diverse cultural, social, and religious fabric of the Indian subcontinent. Influenced by a variety of historical, political, and artistic circumstances, Indian drama has seen considerable alterations from the ancient Sanskrit plays to the modern theatrical scene. Indian theater has its origins in the Vedic era (1500–500 BCE), when ceremonies, songs, and chants were recited to venerate gods and impart moral lessons. Dialogue, music, and dance were among the theatrical components that developed from these early performances. The *Natyashastra*, a comprehensive book on performing arts credited to the sage Bharata Muni, is the oldest known theatrical work and dates to about the 2nd century BCE to 2nd Century CE. It serves as a fundamental guide for classical Indian theater, encompassing various aspects such as aesthetics, stagecraft, and character portrayal.

The Gupta era (4th to 6th century CE) saw the rise of well-known playwrights like Kalidasa, Bhasa, and Shudraka, which led to the pinnacle of Sanskrit drama. Works of Kalidasa, such as *Shakuntala* and *Malavikagnimitram*, have been praised for their complex narratives, poetic beauty, and realistic depictions of human emotions. Despite his lesser-known position, Bhasa made significant contributions to the development of Sanskrit play through his realistic portrayals of individuals and society. Known as *Natyagrihas*, these plays included a fusion of dance, music, drama, and ornate costumes. They were presented in large theaters. Sanskrit play progressively gave birth to regional theater styles, each

with distinct traits and performance traditions, while the Gupta Empire declined. Folk art *Yakshagana* is one of the most well-known regional theatrical traditions. Similar to this, the colorful costumes, elaborate makeup, and stylized dances of Manipur's Manipuri dance drama and Kerala's Kathakali dance drama, which are frequently based on Hindu epics and mythology, are well-known.

Indian theatre underwent enormous transformation throughout the colonial era as western ideas started to seep via educational establishments and cross-cultural interactions. English theater became more well-known after organizations like the National School of Drama were founded in 1959 which played a pivotal role in promoting contemporary Indian theater. Playwrights such as Rabindranath Tagore, Vijay Tendulkar, and Girish Karnad emerged as leading figures, exploring diverse themes ranging from social issues to existential dilemmas. Post-independence, Indian drama witnessed a resurgence of traditional forms alongside experimentation with avant-garde techniques and themes. Street theater, or "nukkad natak," became a powerful medium for social and political commentary, addressing issues such as poverty, corruption, and gender inequality. Meanwhile, contemporary playwrights continued to push the boundaries of conventional theater, exploring new forms of storytelling and narrative structures. In recent years, Indian drama has embraced globalization and digital platforms, reaching wider audiences both domestically and internationally. The proliferation of theater festivals, workshops, and collaborative projects has contributed to the revitalization of the Indian theater scene, fostering a vibrant ecosystem for artistic expression and cultural exchange. The evolution of Indian drama reflects the dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation, rooted in the country's diverse cultural heritage. From the ancient Sanskrit plays to the contemporary experimental theater, Indian drama continues

to evolve, responding to the ever-changing social, political, and artistic landscape. Through its rich tapestry of stories, characters, and performances, Indian drama serves as a mirror to society, reflecting its aspirations, challenges, and complexities.

India boasts a rich tapestry of theatrical forms that span from traditional to contemporary expressions, each reflecting the diverse cultural and social landscapes of the nation. Traditional Indian theatre encompasses a plethora of styles, each unique to its region. In Kerala, the ancient art form of *Kuttiyattam* mesmerizes audiences with its elaborate performances, while Gujarat's *Bhavai* captivates with its vibrant storytelling. Assam offers the dramatic spectacles of *Bhaona* and *Ankiya Nats*, while Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, and Malwa resonate with the energetic performances of *Swang*. Bengal's *Jatra*, and Kerala's *Kathakali* further add to this rich tapestry of traditional theatrical expressions.

For social commentary and expression, street theatre has emerged as a powerful medium. Often dubbed as "theatre by the people, for the people," it amplifies the voices and concerns of the common folk. Street theatre has evolved into a platform for addressing the social and economic issues plaguing independent India since the beginning of 1949, when "Chargesheet" was performed in Calcutta. Also, Mobile theatre, a unique phenomenon born in Assam, stands as a testament to the nomadic spirit of performance. With its inception in 1963 by Achyut Lahkar, mobile theatre brings the stage directly to the people, traversing towns and villages with a troupe of actors, musicians, and dancers in tow. This immersive experience, complete with tents and seating, ensures that theatre remains accessible to even the most remote corners of the region. In the contemporary landscape, these theatrical forms continue to evolve and adapt, resonating with audiences across India. Visionaries like Utpal Dutta and Badal Sircar lend their support to these diverse expressions, recognizing their power to provoke

thought and incite change. As India's theatrical tradition thrives, it remains a testament to the enduring spirit of storytelling and performance that unites the nation in its diversity. However, the colonial encounter was not merely one of passive assimilation. Indian playwrights and theatre practitioners actively engaged with English drama, adapting and subverting its conventions to reflect their own cultural and social realities. Rabindranath Tagore, often hailed as the father of modern Indian theatre, drew inspiration from both Eastern and Western theatrical traditions in his plays, blending elements of Indian mythology with Western dramatic techniques. Tagore's works, such as *Chitra* (1913) and *The Post Office* (1912) exemplify the synthesis of English and Indian influences in shaping the trajectory of Indian drama.

The post-independence era witnessed a resurgence of Indian identity and cultural nationalism, leading to a reevaluation of the role of English in Indian theatre. While English-language theatre continued to thrive, particularly in metropolitan cities with cosmopolitan audiences, there was a renewed emphasis on the promotion of regional languages and indigenous theatrical forms. Playwrights like Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad emerged as leading voices in Indian theatre, crafting plays that grappled with pressing social issues and cultural dilemmas in vernacular languages. Nevertheless, English remained a potent force in shaping the thematic and stylistic landscape of Indian drama. The rise of globalization and the proliferation of digital media further fueled the hybridization of Indian theatrical practices, blurring the boundaries between English and Indian-language theatre. Contemporary playwrights and directors, such as Mahesh Dattani and Anuradha Kapur, continue to explore the interplay between English and Indian aesthetics, infusing their works with a multiplicity of linguistic and cultural influences.

There are numerous factors contributing to the limited popularity of Indian English drama and its struggle to establish itself as an independent genre within Indian English Literature. One significant obstacle appears to be the prevailing reluctance, particularly in rural or semi-urban areas of India, to fully embrace English as a language for communication and emotional expression. Plays written in English often reflect Western realism in terms of attire, dialogue, and lifestyle, which may alienate a majority of Indian audiences who do not feel a personal connection to such portrayals. Consequently, they may feel uncomfortable watching English-language plays, finding them lacking in the natural flavor that resonates with their experiences.

Additionally, the inability of some actors, influenced by their native tongues, to convincingly deliver English dialogue further hampers the success of English-language performances. However, in the 20th century, Indian drama in English experienced a resurgence following a prolonged period of dormancy, coinciding with the postcolonial era of Indian history. Playwrights during this period, such as Mahesh Dattani, Manjula Padmanabhan, and others, began to explore themes of social, political, and economic change through English-language plays, aligning with Western realism traditions.

These playwrights, emerging from the postcolonial context, have contributed significantly to the development of Indian English drama, attracting attention primarily from urban audiences. Yet, these plays have yet to penetrate rural audiences. With the introduction of colonialism, Indian English Drama started deriving from the European dramas. European dramas have a long-standing tradition rooted in classical theatre, with influences ranging from ancient Greek tragedy to Shakespearean drama to modernist and postmodernist movements. Indian English drama draws on a diverse array of influences, blending elements of Western realism with indigenous storytelling techniques and

theatrical traditions. However, Indian English drama may also exhibit a unique fusion of Eastern and Western aesthetics, reflecting the hybrid nature of contemporary Indian identity.

The linguistic barrier was one of the main issues Indian English drama faced. The playwright found it difficult to learn a new language and write dialogue with ease. Many dramatist also felt that they could not fully convey their emotions in English. It presents several obstacles for the playwright, performers, and audience alike. That's why Supriya Sulekha says, "The inherent inadequacy of English Language, to express temperaments, sensibilities, and realities, are essentially Indians" (Shkla-9).

Apart from other literary art forms, drama has always been used as tool for artistic and social reflection. From its roots in colonial influence to its current state of diverse voices and narratives, Indian English drama encapsulates the complexities and nuances of Indian society. One of the defining features of contemporary Indian English drama is its engagement with a wide range of themes that resonate with the Indian experience. Issues such as identity, globalization, gender, politics, and socio-economic disparities are recurrent motifs in many plays. For instance, Mahesh Dattani's *Final Solutions* (1993) explores communal tensions and religious intolerance, while Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session* (1963) delves into the patriarchal structures and societal norms that oppress women. These playwrights, among others, use the medium of drama to critique and interrogate the complexities of Indian society.

Contemporary Indian English drama reflects the plurality of voices and perspectives within the Indian subcontinent. Playwrights from diverse linguistic, regional, and cultural backgrounds contribute to the rich tapestry of Indian theatre. For instance, Girish Karnad, explores themes of mythology and history in works such as *Hayavadana*

(1971) and *Tughlaq*(1964). Badal Sircar, popularly known as 'barefoot playwright', Sircar often delves into the struggles of the marginalized, the disenfranchised, and the oppressed, shedding light on their plight and challenging the status quo. For example, in *Evam Indrajit*, Sircar presents a powerful commentary on existential angst and alienation in modern society through the character of Indrajit, a disillusioned young man grappling with the meaninglessness of life. Sircar's plays are characterized by their minimalist aesthetics and emphasis on the actor-audience relationship. He pioneered the concept of "Third Theatre," which sought to break free from the constraints of both commercial proscenium theatre and traditional folk forms. Sircar's plays often dispense with elaborate sets and props, focusing instead on the raw power of performance and the immediacy of the actor's presence. His *Evam Indrajit* is a milestone in the history of Indian English Drama. Bipin Kumar Parmar says "He has not only broken the dictionary between the actors and audience but reduced the drama to its barest by dispensing with conventional story, plot, characters, and dialogues" (Parmar-17).

Another important aspect of modern Indian theatre is the emergence of women's theatre in India. "Women's theatre" refers to the whole gamut of productions and scripts by women about women, and characterised by the consciousness of women as women; while women conscious plays may include plays about women by man as well. Consciousness raising regarding the issues concerning women's existence seems to be major aim of both woman conscious plays and women's theatre. Many women's organisations in India during the 1980s and 1990s adopted the concept of street theatre as a powerful medium for creating awareness on a variety of social issues including the issue of violence against women. Women's theatre is an exclusively women's domain while the feminist theatre in the Indian context, unlike in the West, also includes plays

about women by men. For example, the plays such as *Silence! The Court is in Session* by Vijay Tendulkar, and *Nagamandala* by Girish Karnad are also considered feminist plays. The well-known street play *Women (Aurat)* by Jan Hashmi – a male playwright, is also popularly known as a feminist play. Tutun Mukherjee offers an appropriate and convincing definition of the term women's theatre; it is a politically nuanced theatre that is oriented towards change and produced by women with feminine concerns. She calls it a forward-looking step trying to break away from reductionism, and locates gender identity in the flux of socio-historical processes. It is the product of feminism; feminine awareness shapes the making of the play. An important strand of women's theatre in India is its intervention in areas which directly concern women. It has been used to voice those issues which are largely suppressed or considered as non-existent by mainstream theatre. Indian English drama serves as a vibrant and dynamic cultural expression, reflecting the complexities and nuances of Indian society. Through its exploration of diverse themes, engagement with cultural diversity, interrogation of social norms, and contribution to global dialogue, Indian English drama continues to evolve and thrive as a rich and multifaceted artistic tradition. Drama is a composite art in which the written words of the playwright attains complete artistic realization only when it becomes spoken word of the actor on the stage and through 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 theater and a live audience" (Naik - 180-181).

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