



Indian Drama Has its Roots in Vedic Period! : *A Bird's Eye View*

Dr. S. J. Earnest
Head, Department of English
Noble College (Autonomous)
Machilipatnam
Email id: seelam.johnearnest@gmail.com

India has rich tradition of Drama from the ancient times. India is a land of several types of dramas in several languages. Drama in India begins its journey with the Sanskrit plays. A.L. Basham, a prominent historian, expresses his views in this manner “the origin of Indian theatre is still obscure. Genius has its own alchemy to transmute everyday life experiences into artistic creation and conceals the potential to reconstruct life beyond its apparent realistic fabric of human conditions. Indian Drama having found its roots in Classical Sanskrit models, in postmodern era has emerged as a potent force to fill the gap of ‘page and stage’ and bring theatre close to life. It is certain, however that even in the Vedic period dramatic performances of some kind were given, and passing references in early resources point to the enactment at festivals of religious legends, perhaps only in dance and mime” Indian traditions are preserved in the “*Natyasastra*” the oldest of the texts of the theory of the drama. This play claims for the drama divine origin and a close connection with the sacred Vedas themselves. Origin of Indian English drama can be traced to the ancient rules and seasonal festivities of the Vedic Aryans. The dramatic performances of those times mainly included such events like 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 crude and a simple way was drama performed during the age of the Vedic Aryans. Later, different episodes from *The Ramayana (Ram Leela)*, *The Mahabharata* and *The Bhagvadgita* were chosen and dramatized in front of the people. The 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.

There are references to drama in Patanjali's *Vyakarna Mahabhashya*, as well as Vatsyayan's *Kamastura*, Kautilya's *Arthasastra* and Panini's *Ashtabhyam*. Thus the origin of Sanskrit drama dates back to 1000 BC. All the literature in Sanskrit is classified into Drishya (that can be seen or exhibited) and the Sravya (that can be heard or recited). While poetry in all forms can be said to fall under the later, drama falls under the former. Drama in Sanskrit literature is covered under the broad umbrella of '*rupaka*' which depicts life in its numerous aspects represented in forms by actors who take 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. The latter serves to further and supplement the main topic and relates to subordinate characters other than the chief ones. This is again divided into *banner* (pataka) and *incident* (parkari). The former is a small episode that presents, describes, improves or even hinders the primary plot to create added excitement. The latter has minor characters. The *Neta* or the hero, according to the definition prescribed by the *Natyashastra*, is always depicted as *modest* (Vineeta), *sweet tempered* (Madhura) *sacrificing* (Tyagi), *capable* (daksha), *civil in talks* (priyamvada), belonging to a *noble family* (taptaloka), *pure* (suchi) *articulate* (vagmi), *consistent* (Sthera), *young* (yuva) endowed with *intellect* (buddhi) *enthusiasm* (utsaha), *good memory* (Smrthi) *aesthetics* (Kola), *pride* (maana) and is *brave* (Shura), *strong* (dridha), *energetic* (tejaswi), *learned* (pandita) and *pious* (dharmika). The main category in which the hero of Sanskrit drama normally falls is the '*Dheerodatta*' that is he who is brave and sublime at the same time.

Bharata's *Natyashastra*, is the most significant work on Indian poetics and drama. In it there is description in detail about composition, production and enjoyment of ancient drama, a wealth of information of types of drama, stage equipment, production and music. According to the legend, when the world passed from the golden age to the silver age and people became addicted to sensual pleasures and jealousy, anger, desire and greed filled their hearts. The world was then inhabited by gods, demons, yakshas, rakshasas, nagas and gandharvas. It was the gods among them who led them by Lord Indra, approached god and Brahma and requested him thus, "Please give us something which would not only teach us but be pleasing both to eyes and ears".

Bharata ascribed a divine origin to drama and considered it as the fifth Vedas. Its origin seems to be from religious dancing. According to Bharata, poetry (kavya) dance (nritya), and mime (nritya) in life is play (lila) produce emotion (bhava) but only *drama* (natya) produces flavor (rasa). The drama uses the eight basic emotions of love, joy (humour), anger, sadness, pride, fear, aversion and wonder attempting to resolve them in the ninth holistic feeling of peace. Thus, when the dramatic art was well comprehended, the natyaveda was performed on the occasion of the celebration of Lord Indra's victory over the Asuras and danavas. In the *Natyashastra*, there is a verse in its sixth chapter which can be quoted as Bharat Muni's own summary of his

dramatic theory. “The combination called natya is a mixture of rasa, bhavas, vrittis, pravrittis, siddhi, svaras, abhinayas, dharmis instruments, song and theatre-house”.

The most celebrated dramatists of the ancient era are Ashwaghosh, Bhasa, Shudraka, Kalidas, Harsha, Bhvabhuti, Visha-khadatta, Bhattnarayana, Murari and Rajeshkhora, who enriched Indian theatre with their words like Madhya-Mavyaayoda, Urubhangam, Karnabharan, Mrichkarikam, Abhigyana Shakuntalam, Malankagnimitram, Uttar Ramacharitam, Mudrarak, Shasa, Bhagavadajjukam, Mattavilasa etc. The supreme achievement of Indian drama undoubtedly lies in Kalidasa who is often called the Shakespeare of India, the Sanskrit drama flourished in its glory till the 12th century in India when the Mohammedan intrusion shifted the Sanskrit stage. But till the 15th century, plays of Sanskrit tradition were performed on stage in Tamilnadu, Kerala, Karanataka, Andhra, Uttra Pradesh and Gujarat but thereafter, Indian dramatic activity almost ceased due to foreign invasions on India. The beginnings of *Loknatya* (people’s theatre) are noticed in every state of India from the 17th century onwards. We see in Bengal ‘*Yatrakirtaniya*’ ‘*Paol*’ and ‘*Gaan*’ in Madya Pradesh ‘*Mach*’ in Kashmir ‘*bhandya thar*’ and in Gujarat the forms were ‘*Bhavai*’ and ‘*Ramleela*’ in Northern India. There were ‘*Nautanki*, ‘*Bhand*, ‘*Ramleela* and ‘*Rasleela*’ in Maharashtra ‘*Tamasha*’ in Rajasthan ‘*Raas*’ and ‘*Jhoomer*’ in Punjab ‘*Bhangra*’ and ‘*Song*’ while in Assam it was ‘*Ahiyanat*’ and ‘*Ankinatya*’ in Bihar it was ‘*Videshiya*’ and ‘*Chhari*’ in West Bengal and Bihar.

The rise of the modern drama dates back to the 18th century when the British Empire strengthened its power in India. As Krishna Kriplani points out, the modern Indian drama ‘Owed its first flowering to the foreign grafting. ‘With the impact of western civilization on Indian life, a new renaissance dawned on Indian arts including drama. Furthermore, English education gave an impetus and a momentum to the critical study of nor only Western drama, but classical Indian drama. English and Italian dramatic troupes toured India and performed many English plays, mainly Shakespeare’s in cities like Bombay and Madras. The Portuguese brought a form of dance drama to the west coast. A Russian music director, Rebedoff, is said to have produced the first modern drama in Calcutta towards the end of 18th century. Thus, the western impact awakened “the dormant, critical impulse in the country to bring Indians face to face with new forms of life and literature, and to open the ways for a fruitful cross-fertilization of ideas and forms of expression”. In 1765 one Russian drama lover Horasin Lebdef and Bengali drama lover Qulokhnath had staged two English comedies *Disgaig* and *Love Is the Best Doctor*. But the real beginning was in 1831 when Prasanna Kumar Thakur established ‘*Hindu Rangmanch*’ at Calcutta and staged Wilson’s English translation of Bhavabhuti’s Sanskrit drama Uttar Ramacharitam. Social drama of Girish Chanda Chosh, historical dramas of D.L.Roy and artistic dramas of Rabindranath Tagore (Muktadhara, Chandalika) continued to reach up to the stage of realistic dramas during the period of the Worst- ever famines of Bengal and the second World War. In 1852-1853, the famous Parsi Theatre was launched in Bombay which influenced the whole country in no time. Postagi Pharmji was the pioneer in establishing the Parsi Theatre company in India. Many new theatre experiences were brought up on stage during Parsi Theater’

evolution in India. On the other hand, the amateur theater also developed with the works of Bharatendu Harishchandra, acclaimed as the father Hindi drama.

Indian English drama was inaugurated when Krishna Mohan Banerji penned *The Persecuted* in 1837. The real odyssey of Indian English Drama begins with Michael Madhusudan Dutt's 'Is this called civilisation' which appeared on the literary scene in 1871. Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo, the two great sage-poets of India, are regarded the pioneer Indian dramatists in English. R.N.Tagore wrote mainly in Bengali but almost all his Bengali plays are available to us in English translation. His prominent plays are Chitra, The post office, Sacrifice, Red Olenders, Chandalika, Muktheadhara, Natir Puja, The King of the Dark Chamber, The Cycle of Spring, Sanyasi and The Mother's Prayer. These plays are firmly rooted in the Indian culture in their themes, characters and treatment. R.K.Ramaswamy appreciates his plays for depth and gravity of purpose and appreciates his dramatic art "- more than anything else, he has shown the way both in respect of ideas as well of methods ,by which the soul of India could be realized and revealed in the realm of dramatic creation and representation" Sri Aurobindo is the second prominent dramatist in Indian English drama. He wrote five complete black verse plays besides his six incomplete plays. His complete plays are Perseus the Deliverer, Vasavadutta, Radoguna, The Viziers of Bassora and Eric and each of these plays is written in five acts. His incomplete plays are The Witch of Ilni, Achab and Esarhaddon, The Maid and the Mill, The House of Brut, The Birth of Sin and Prince of Edur.

The notable feature of Sri Aurobindo's plays besides his six incomplete plays. His complete plays are Perseus the Deliverer, Vasavadutta, Radoguna, The Viziers of Bassora and Eric and each of these plays is written in five acts. His incomplete plays are The Witch of Ilni, Achab and Esarhaddon, The Maid and the Mill, The House of Brut, The Birth of Sin and Prince of Edur. The notable feature of Sri Aurobindo's plays is that they present different cultures and countries in different eras, with variety of characters, moods and sentiments. Perseus the Deliverer is based on the ancient Greek myth of Persues, Vasavadutta is a romantic tale of ancient India, Rodoguna is a Syrian romance of Scandinavia, a story of love and war between the children of Odin and Thor. In Aurobindo's dramas there is romance, heroic play, tragedy, comedy, farce all different shades and varieties which we can expert from Indian English dramas.

As Dr.K.R.S Iyenger observes, "But all five plays are steeped in poetry romance, recalling the spirit and flavor of the distinctive dramatic type exemplified in different ways by Bhasa, Kalidas and Bhavabhuti. Though, of course all have Aurobindonian undertones." Harindranath Chattopadhyay also made significant contribution to Indian drama. He started his career as playwright with his play Abu Hassan (1918). He has written seven verse plays to his credit published under the title of Poems and Plays (1927) and all the seven plays are based on the lives of Indian saints. His Five Plays (1929) all are prosaic. The Window and The Parrot deal with the lives of the poor. Whereas the Sentry's Lantern is a symbolic display of the expectation

of the arrival of a new age for the downtrodden people. Sidhartha: Man of Peace is an adventurous effort to dramatize Lord Buddha's life. Another great dramatist is A.S.P. Ayyar who writes six plays. In the Clutch of The Devil (1926) is his first play and the last one is The Trial of Science for the Murder of Humanity. P.A. Krishnaswamy has also his name in the history of Indian English drama who is famous for his verse play The Flute of Krishna which is very unusual. Another dramatic voice on the Indian literary scene is Thyagaraja, Paramasiva, Kailasam. He wrote bilingually both in English and Kannada. Though Kailasam is considered as the father of modern Kannada drama but he excelled his full expression in his English plays such as *The Burden* (1933), *Fulfilment* (1933), *The Purpose* (1944), *Karna* (1964) and *Keechaka* (1949). G.S. Amur holds lauds T.P. Kailasam. Amur rightly remarks- "A talented actor who appeared on the amateur as well as the professional stage, he brought to the writing of drama an intimate knowledge of the theatre. It is for this reason that his plays whether in Kannada or English, have a uniform technical excellence."

Bharati Sarabhai is the modern woman playwright voice during the colonial era of Indian English drama. She has written two plays, *The well of the people* (1943) and *Two women*. Of these two plays, the former is symbolic, poetic and is besides a notable contribution to the Gandhian social order, while the latter play is realistic in its theme and content. J.M. Lobo Prabhu is the last significant voice in pre-independence Indian English drama. He has written over a dozen plays but only *Mother of new India: A play of India village* in three Acts (1944) and *Death Abdicates* (1945) appear before independence. His collected play was published in 1956. Upto post-independence era, drama in English could not become successful on Indian soil as a major current of creative expression. In another words Drama could not be attached with the main stream or people, it could not divert the attention of the people in such a way which can be called significant. Although the pre-independence Indian English drama is notable for its poetic excellence, thematic variety, technical art, symbolic significance and its commitment to human and moral values.

The post-independence Indian English drama got some momentum when foreign countries started taking interest in Indian English literature in general and Indian English drama in particular. Many plays by Indian playwrights Asif Currimbhoy, Pratap Sharma, Gurucharan Das were successfully staged in England and U.S.A. and in this these playwrights got some recognition in the foreign countries. But the plight of Indian English drama is that no regular school of Indian English drama was established in our country till post-independence. Its reason was that because the encouragement drama received immediately after Indian regional languages while Indian English drama continued to depend on other things.

References

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Sarkar makes the point with regard to the treatment of women that: “Indian men” hardly required the help of British officials to essentialize feminine nature as dangerous ... They had two thousand years or more of indigenous, highly patriarchal and oppressive, traditions and texts.’ Sarkar, ‘Orientalism Revisited: Saidian Frameworks in the Writing of Modern Indian History.’, 216.