

## Evolution of Indian Drama: A Unique Literary World

Dr Taruna Anand

Assistant Professor

Guru Tegh Bahadur Institute of Technology

### ABSTRACT

Indian drama, with its long history of 2000 years, is a unique event in the literary world. Drama is the product of a civilized and cultural society. Drama in India originated from the need for entertainment. Sanskrit drama has been the most beautiful and important part of Indian literature for a long time. The *Natyasastra* is the largest and most comprehensive study on dramaturgy. Bhasa is the oldest known dramatist, later playwrights like Kalidasa and Bhavabhuti distinctly bear the imprint of Bhasa's dramatic style. The greatest achievement of Indian drama is undoubtedly in Kalidasa, known as the Shakespeare of India. With the impact of Western civilization on Indian life, a new renaissance dawned on Indian arts including drama. The newly awakened creative efforts first took the form of translation and adaptations from Sanskrit and English drama. The pre-independence era saw some stalwarts-Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, T.P. Kailasam, A.S.P. Ayyar, Lobo-Prabhu, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya and Bharathi Sarabhai-who contributed substantially to the growth and development of Indian English drama. Nissim Ezekiel, a well-established Indian English poet who has also enriched Indian English drama in his own characteristic way. The major hurdle for the flourishing of Indian English drama is said to be the lack of a viable language as suitable medium for its expression.

**Keywords:** Theatrical, Playwright, Renaissance, Protagonist, Stagecraft

The root of theatre in India goes back to antiquity. Initially, for decades drama formed a part of public life as music, dance, storytelling and scheduling during festivals or special occasions. Later its different forms were accepted by the upper classes of the society and continued for more than a thousand years. Theatrical activity with elements of music, dance and acting was practiced in our country. According to O. P. Budholia,

The history of drama is as old as the existence of man on this earth. Indian drama has got its divine origin and hence it includes in its purview the cultural signification and an inclusion of the various form of emotions for its performance, the realistic overtones and the distinguishing features such as

the traditional heritage, folklore, the oral signs of literature, myth and mythopoeic vision, secular and religious approaches to life.<sup>1</sup>

The drama offers a heterogeneous audience. It largely depends on the popular taste and the current fashion for its success and livelihood. But this argument is not good for drama in English by Indian writers because it is always for the elite audience of choice. There is always a special audience in this country, a genre for plays in English. We have substantial stage techniques and many sophisticated devices for lighting and sound effects.

Our knowledge of the early, primitive stage of the theatrical process is very meagre. But in India, like any other culture, we can safely assert that theatrical activities originated from ancient magical, religious or social rituals, ritual dances, festivals, and so on. Today, many tribes in different parts of the country perform rituals related to birth and death, puberty, marriage, food gathering and hunting. Praying to deities and primitive powers, in which theatrical or theatrical elements are important. In rituals and ceremonies related to the yajnas of the Vedic age, many situations and actions accentuated theatrical aspects.

There are frequent references in the Vedic literature to song, dance and musical instruments and to persons associated with acts such as Gandharva, Sudha, Shailush, Kari, Apsara, and Veena Player. Then a music presentation appeared on the lives of heroes and other celebrities in the community. Most of the requirements of the early theatrical forms were passed down through the generations in ballad or mere storytelling form. In Valmiki's *Ramayana*, of Suta and Magadha dance and drama in the *Mahabharata* to dramatization of the *Ramayana* in the Harivansha Purana, and about the actor and dance, drama and music in Bhagvata Purana and Markandeya Purana are standing examples.

Indian drama, with its long history of 2000 years, is a unique event in the literary world. Taking recitation from the *Rig Veda*, imitation from *Yajur Veda*, melody from *Sama Veda*, and aesthetic flavor from *Atharva Veda*, Indian drama came as a subtle means of communicating truth of things. Drama is the product of a civilized and cultural society. Drama in India originated from the need for entertainment.

Sanskrit drama has been the most beautiful and important part of Indian literature for a long time. The *Natyasastra* is the largest and most comprehensive study on dramaturgy. Bharatmuni is the author of the *Natyasastra*, which has remained since long the only text on

dramaturgy. It discusses the ancient stage craft in detail. All the aspects of drama - stage setting, music, plot construction, characterization, dialogue and acting are closely scrutinized by the author and a set of rules to guide the conduct of the stage has been elaborately laid down. Whatever be the origin of drama, the minute details present in the *Natyasastra* are evident of the long tradition of Sanskrit drama. The title *Natyasastra* literally means "the science of drama" and Bharata took into account theatre organization, along with various aspects of drama. The task of a dramatist is the most difficult one because he has to present a work that is audible and visible. The function of drama is not just entertainment, it also serves the purpose of instruction. The purpose of Sanskrit drama is to preserve moral values of the society and thereby nurture them through dramatic activity. Bharata felt that the total impression left on the mind of audience of a play should be peaceful but not worrisome. He declared that drama was not merely a source of entertainment, but rather a vehicle of instruction and illumination.

The surviving Sanskrit dramas are numerous and varied, ranging from short one-act playlets to very long play in ten acts. The prominent dramatists were Bhasa, Shudraka, Kalidasa, Harsha, Bhavabhuti, and Vishakahadatta .

The golden age of Sanskrit drama could give equal impetus to social comedies like *Mrichakatika* and melodramas like *Malathimadhava*, romantic tragi-comedies like *Shakuntala* and heroic play like *Venisamhara*, historical play like *Mudrarakshasa* and romantic comedies like *Ratnavali*, allegorical plays like *Prabodhachandrodaya* and satirical farces like *Mattavilasaprahasana*.

All literature in Sanskrit is classified into *Drishya* (visible or visual) and the *Sarvya* (audible or recitable). While poetry in all forms can be said to fall under the latter, drama falls under the former. 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.

A 'rupaka' has ten classifications of which 'Nataka' (drama), the most important one has come to mean all theatrical presentations. The Sanskrit drama revolves around three main elements, 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 pervade 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 further 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 involves minor incident represented by minor characters.

The *Neta* or the hero, according to the definition prescribed by the *Natyashastra*, is always portrayed as humble (*vineeta*), sweet-tempered (*madhura*), sacrificing (*tyagi*), talented (*daksha*), civil in discourse (*priyamvada*), belonging to a noble family (*taktaloka*), pure (*suchi*), articulate (*vagmi*), consistent (*sthira*), young (*yuva*), intellect (*buddhi*), enthusiasm (*utsaha*), good memory (*smriti*), aesthetics (*kala*), pride (*maana*), 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 noble at the same time.

The *Rasa* or sentiment is the lasting impression which appeals to poetic sensibility, arising out of any emotion of pleasure or pain pervading the heart. The primary sentiment is nurtured and excited by subordinate and related feelings. There are nine primary emotions, namely *rati* (enjoyment), *hasya* (mirth), *soka* (grief), *krodha* (anger), *utsaha* (enthusiasm), *bhaya* (fear), *jugupsa* (disgust), *vismaya* (surprise) and *sama* (peace). On these emotions are based respectively the well-known navarasas (nine primary sentiments) of *sringara* (erotic), *hasya* (comic), *karuna* (pathos), *rudra* (fury), *veera* (heroic), *bhayanaka* (fearsome), *beeabhatsa* (loathsome), *adbhuta* (wonder) and *santa* (tranquil).

*Sringara* or the erotic is the main *rasa* in plays like *Abhijnana-Shakuntalam*, *Vikramorvasiyam*, and *Malavikagni-mitram* of Kalidas and *Swapanavasavadattam* of Bhasa. *Karuna* or pathos is the main sentiment in *Uttararamacharita* of Bhavabhuti, *Veera* or the heroic is the pervading *rasa* in *Venisamhara* and *Mudrarakshasa* of Visakhadatta.

Each play consists structurally of a prologue introduced by an invocation and a formal ushering in of the plot and author, by the Sutradhara. This is followed by the theme presented in equally divided parts of five or ten acts. Every act is concluded by the exit of all the characters and the stage is left empty. Incidents like journeys, killings, wars etc. are never enacted, but are only suggested.

As Subhalakshmi Narayan remarks, "Sanskrit drama never offers tragedy unlike many of the Shakespearean plays."<sup>2</sup> While all emotions including grief, terror and disgust are depicted; the Sanskrit drama never allows a tragic catastrophe to cause a painful impression in the minds of the audience. As Sri Aurobindo argues in *Hindu Drama*,

To the Hindu it would have seemed a savage and inhuman spirit that could take any aesthetic pleasure in the sufferings of an Oedipus or a Duchesse of Malfi or in the tragedy of Macbeth or an Othello.<sup>3</sup>

It is clear that a drama with a tragic end has never been popular in India. Sri Aurobindo exhibits the spirit of Indian drama in these words:

An atmosphere of romantic beauty, a high urbanity and a gracious equipoise of the feelings, a perpetual confidence, is the sunshine and the flower are the essential spirit of hindu play: pity and terror are used to awaken the feelings, but not to lacerate them, and the drama must close on the note of joy and peace: the clouds are only admitted to make more beautiful the glad sunlight from which all come and into which all must away.<sup>4</sup>

It is obviously a matter that is closely related to the Indian attitudes and philosophy of life. The difference between Western and Indian thought and traditional belief is so great that the two artistic expressions cannot be different. A comparison between the two traditions takes us deeper into the hearts of the two cultures. 'Evil' has been a positive thing in the West, while in India 'evil' is not a positive force; it does not stand on its own. It is the absence of 'good'. Darkness cannot exist unless there is light: rather, darkness is the sure proof of the existence of light. It can be called the temporary absence of light. The moment light glows, darkness disappears.

Bhasa is the oldest known dramatist who might have flourished sometime between 500 BC and 50 BC, a period certainly earlier than that of the celebrated grammarian, Panini. Of the thirty-five plays he is said to have written; only thirteen have come to light. Interestingly enough, he has written not only seven-act and ten-act plays but also one-act plays and one-scene plays. Many of these abound in soliloquies, thus blazing a trail for later playwrights. His masterpieces- *Urubhanga* and *Dutavavakya* and *Karna*- are known for their tragic intensity and dramatic style.

Later playwrights like Kalidasa and Bhavabhuti distinctly bear the imprint of Bhasa's dramatic style. The greatest achievement of Indian drama is undoubtedly in Kalidasa, known as the Shakespeare of India. Though he does not have the range and variety of Shakespeare, he has given the world a profounder spiritual vision of life. His immense work, *Abhijnana Shakuntala*, is said to be the richest and most satisfying romantic drama. Bhavabhuti turned out dramatic poems rather than stage plays. His *Mahaviracharita*, *Malatimadhava* and *Uararamacharita*, reveal the "poet's maturity of mind, a sense of workmanship, an acute understanding of human mind, and some of the deep values of life"<sup>5</sup> opines G.K.Bhat.

The Sanskrit drama flourished in its glory under the patron-age of the court and the aristocracy till the 12<sup>th</sup> century when the Mohammedan intrusion shifted the Sanskrit stage. The glory of Sanskrit drama became a thing of the past in the period of decline when it was divorced gradually from the stage. Instead of poets, 'pandits' took to playwriting and produced works on the stock epic themes in a conventional way. The decadent drama distanced itself from life in its sophisticated setting, stereotyped characters and artificial diction. Vidyanaatha's play, *Prataparudrakalyana*, provides a patent example of the virtual death of the ancient Indian drama.

After the Sanskrit drama ceased to be acted and was read only as literature, the theatre of the people flourished for many centuries and catered to the Indian masses. The old splendor and fullness of drama was gone, but people still needed relaxation and entertainment. As a result, music, dance and drama survived in varying forms in different parts of India- Bengal, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra, Karnataka, Gujrat and also in North India. The 'jatras' of Bengal, the folk plays of Tamil Nadu like *Satharam*, and *Nallathangal*, the 'yakshaganas' of Andhra and Karnataka, the 'Kathakali' of Kerala, the 'Kirtaniya' of Mithila, the 'Bhavni' of Gujrat, and the *Ramlila* plays of North India took place instilling their meaning into the sub-conscious of the race, and penetrating to the very backbone of the people's art and morality. These variegated forms of entertainment had but little merit as literature, but they conveyed to the people the essentials of Indian culture. Above all, as K.S. Ramaswamy Sastri observes, "they formed a transition from the classical Sanskrit drama to the modern Indian drama and had some influence on the evolution of the latter."<sup>6</sup>

It was only after the British set up their regime in India that the crippled Indian drama received new strength and witnessed a revival. As Krishna Kriplani points out, the modern Indian drama “owed its first flowering to foreign grafting.”<sup>7</sup> 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 not only Western drama, but also 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 the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, according to K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, 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 way for a fruitful cross-fertilization of ideas and forms of expression.”<sup>8</sup>

The newly awakened creative efforts first took the form of translation and adaptations from Sanskrit and English drama. Kalidasa's *Shakuntala* was translated into quite a few regional languages. *Mrichchakatika* was translated into Maithili by Ishanatha Jha and *Ratnavali* into Sindhi by Dewan Kauromal. Shakespeare was naturally the most sought after, and among his plays the frequently translated or adopted were *Comedy of Errors*, *the Merchant of Venice*, *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *Cymbeline*. To cite but a few examples Viresalingam Pantulu's rendering of *All is Well That Ends Well* came out in 1897, a Tamil adaptation of *Cymbeline* in 1898, and a Bengali edition of Shakespeare's plays in four volumes was issued between 1896 and 1902. K.S. Ramaswami Sastri translated *A Midsummer Night's Dream* into Sanskrit. Apart from Shakespeare's plays, Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* was a favorite play among Indian translators.

The Western impact also quickened the drying roots of Indian native tradition with the sap of a new life, thereby opening the exciting chapter of modern Indian drama written originally in the vernaculars, and at times, translated into English. By the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century there were pioneering efforts boldly employing the mother tongue for creative dramatic expression. The earlier dramatists from different regions of the country tried their hand at different forms-romance, opera, comedy, farce, tragedy, melodrama, and historical

play. As a result, the modern India drama was a product and blend of many models and forces. When old puranic themes were handled, various approaches—the reformist, the revivalist, the idealistic the iconoclastic, the frivolous and the allegorical—were tried. Just to mention the most representative plays written in regional languages, we have Khadilkar's mythological play *Keechaka Vadha* in Marathi, Lakshminath Bezbarua and Gohain Barua's historical play *Jaymati* in Assamese, Amanat's opera *Inder Sabha* in Hindi, Ram Shankar Ray's *Kanchi-Kaveri* in Oriya. Gurajada Apparao's social play *Kanyasulkam* in Telugu, T.P. Kailasam's *Tollu-Gatti* in Kannada, Sundaram Pillai's poetic drama *Manonmaniyam* in Tamil and Tagore's symbolic poetic plays like *Chitra*, *Sacrifice*, *Mukta Dhara*, *Red Oleanders*, and *The Post Office* in Bengali now quite familiar to us in English renderings. Thus, by 1920 in almost all the Indian languages a new drama was thriving, reflecting potent influences of Marxism, psychoanalysis, and the symbolist and surrealist movements.

While the theatre movement in the Indian languages had already gathered momentum under the influence mainly of British drama, the theatre in English could not flourish on expected lines. Though the first Indian play in English, *Is This Civilization?* was written by Michael Madhusudan Dutt as early as in 1871 it was not followed up by any sustainable creative effort for decades together. There are plausible reasons for the arrested growth of Indian English drama. Unlike poetry and novel, drama is a composite art involving the playwright, the actor, and the audience in a commonly shared artistic experience, calling for total commitment of the persons concerned to create a lasting impact. Moreover, since the normal medium of conversation in India is the mother tongue, it is difficult to make a dialogue between Indians in English sound natural and convincing. This difficulty, however, has been overcome to a considerable degree by some talented Indian English dramatists by carefully choosing the situations and language that transcend time and place, and the characters that are plausible and convincing.

The pre-independence era saw some stalwarts—Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, T.P. Kailasam, A.S.P. Ayyar, Lobo-Prabhu, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya and Bharathi Sarabhai—who contributed substantially to the growth and development of Indian English drama. Rabindranath Tagore was the first major playwright who invested Indian drama in



English with lyrical excellence, symbolic overtones and allegorical significance. His best-known plays- *Sacrifice*, *Chitra*, *Mukta Dhara*, *The Post Office*, *The King of The Dark Chamber* and *Red Oleanders*- display a unique blend of simplicity and complexity as also conventionality and modernity. Though his plays abound in great variety and richness they tend to be too suggestive and symbolic thereby lacking in dramatic action. In the words of Thompson, they are “vehicles of thought rather than expressions of action.”<sup>9</sup> However, Tagore’s plays though rendered into English, often by the author himself, belong properly to Bengali drama.

Sri Aurobindo inherited and carried forward the tradition of Elizabethan poetic drama of Marlowe and Shakespeare revived by Robert Bridges and Stephen Phillips in the Victorian era. His dramatic genius is amply revealed in his five complete plays- *Perseus*, *Vasavadutta*, *Rodogune*, *The Viziers of Bassara* and *Eric*—which were written originally in English. Modeled on a Greek legend, *Perseus* depicts the vision of a world moving through evil and anarchy towards the attainment of a blissful state. Based on Somadeva’s *Kathasaritasagara*, *Vasavadutta* is a romantic comedy dealing with the love-story of Vuthsa Udayam, the young king of Cosambie, and Vasavadatta, the princess of Avanti where Udayam is kept in prison. Taking sustenance from Shakespeare’s and Jacobean tragedies, *Rodogune* shows how the suffering that comes to man is designed not to crush him, but to raise him to a new consciousness and a higher plane. Cast on the Elizabethan pattern. *The Viziers of Bassara*, takes its theme from *The Arabian Nights* dealing with the love affairs of Nur-ul-Din Ali, the good-natured son of Vizier, and Ania-al-Jalice, a slave-girl. *Eric* is a comedy of love and adventure showing various stages of love and establishing man’s kinship not only with his fellow human beings but with the universe at large. In its form, maintaining as it does the dramatic unities of time, place and action like Shakespeare’s

*The Tempest*, *Eric* is Sri Aurobindo’s nearest approach to the classical form of drama.

A study of the five plays of Sri Aurobindo reveals that he is a highly competent dramatist and an accomplished craftsman in verse. They are steeped in rich poetry and romance recalling the spirit and flavor of the distinctive dramatic type exemplified in a different way by Bhasa, Kalidasa and Bhavabhuti. “All the same, they are often labeled ‘closed drama’ designed for reading in the study (closet) or to small groups rather than for

performance on the public stage”<sup>10</sup> remarks Alexer Preminger. Nevertheless, the plays reveal Aurobindo’s exquisite skill in the portrayal of characters. S.S. Kulkarni acclaims that Aurobindo has created “extremely interesting men and women by developing psychological element which endows his plays with inexhaustible human interest and significance.”<sup>11</sup> What is more, Sri Aurobindo opened up new vistas in Indian English drama displaying his robust optimism about the future of mankind.

Though T.P. Kailasam’s English plays are inspired by puranic themes taken from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, he renders them brilliantly in the ‘intellectual idiom’ of his own day in such a way that they come home to men’s business and bosom. His first play, *The Burden* (1993), is derived from the *Ramayana* and deals with the predicament in which Bharata is placed at the death of his father, Dasaratha, and the exile of his elder brother, Rama, driving home the point that one should not shirk one’s duty. *Fulfillment* is a ‘terrible play’ recounting Ekalavya’s decision to join the Kauravas against the Pandavas. When he reverses his decision, he is slain stealthily by Krishna who kills his mother too, just to spare her from even a moment’s misery of losing a son. Representing as it does the crown of Kailasam’s dramatic art; the play bears full testimony to the fertile imagination of the playwright. *The Purpose* (1944) dramatizes Ekalavya’s single-minded devotion to the art of archery in the forest aimed at protecting the lives of fawns and the weak from the tyranny of the strong. The passing reference to Ekalavya in the “Drona Parva” of the *Mahabharata* becomes a powerful play in the hands of Kailasam. *The Curse or Karna* (1946) deals with idealization of Karna for whom it is intrinsic worth, not accidental birth that should count. The play demonstrates that it is the purpose of the killing, not the means and the manner of the killing that decides the fairness. *Keechaka* (1949) dramatizes the heroic character of Keechaka as he returns from war and falls in love with Sairandhri and is eventually killed by Valala. Kailasam’s exalted and idealized Keechaka is entirely different from the mean-spirited Keechaka of the *Mahabharata*. Thus, Kailasam’s English plays display his ‘quest for greatness’ and his bold, original approach to characters in the epics. With many imperfections in the art of characterization and the use of dramatic style, most of the plays of Kailasam are a great success on the stage.

Harindranath Chattopadhyaya added a new dimension to Indian English drama with his leftist leanings and revolutionary zeal. If his devotional plays-*Raidas*, *Chokha Mela*, *Pundalik*, *Saku*

*Bai, Jayadeva and Tuka Ram*—deal with the lives of saints in his own characteristic way, his social plays (1937), *The Window, The Parrot, The Coffin, The Evening Lamp* and *The Sentry's Lantern*—reveal the playwright's acute awareness of social problems and his innate sympathies for the suffering masses. If *The Window* works like an explosive bomb on the hard-hearted capitalists, *The Parrot* raises a revolt against conventional morality that gets women caged constrained. While *The Sentry's Lantern* comes down heavily on the evils of imperialism, *The Coffin* takes cudgels against the snobbish living of those creative writers who live in cozy cocoon of safety that is entirely cut off from the outside world and its problems. The play is a powerful plea for a purposeful writing. Thus, Harin's plays are all products of an earnest commitment to certain values and ideas and according to K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, the "manifestoes of the new realism."<sup>12</sup>

Bharati Sarabhai is the first, most distinguished woman dramatist, who gave a Gandhian touch to Indian English drama. Her first play, *The Well of the People* (1949) upholds Gandhi's well-known doctrine 'Daridra Narayana' (worship of the poor as god). An old widow, the protagonist of the play, who fails to go on a pilgrimage to Haridwar, decides to build a well with her savings for the untouchables of her village. The lyrical play, in the view of S. Mokashi-Punekar, is "probably the only articulate work of literary art giving complete expression to the Gandhian age... flawlessly executed with the fullest awareness of all the problems"<sup>13</sup> of the age. Sarabhai's second play, *Two Women* (1952) dramatizes the conflict between tradition and modernity, the material and the spiritual, driving home the point that God is within.

After Harindranath, we have a few playwrights who proceeded on the lines suggested in his social plays, thereby making Indian English drama more and more realistic and purposeful. Srinivasa Iyengar was "a master of social comedy, delighting in the incongruous ludicrous and droll elements in the lives of the sophisticated."<sup>14</sup> His plays are published as *Dramatic Divertissements* in two volumes. However, with all their interesting situations, convincing characters and vivacious, quick moving dialogue, they are yet to receive the critical attention they deserve.

A.S.P. Ayyar and Lobo-Prabhu are two other playwrights of distinction whose contribution to Indian English drama cannot be ignored. The very titles of Ayyar's plays—*In The*

*Clutches of the Devil* (1926), *Sita's Choice* (1935), *The Slave of Ideas* (1941) and *The Trial of Science for the Murder of Humanity* (1942), show that they are written with reformist zeal. They all deal with contemporary problems like blind beliefs and superstitions, widow-marriage, caste system and gross materialism. A vigorous critic of contemporary life, Aayar handles the prose medium effectively. Lobo-Prabhu's *Collected Plays* (1954) contain plausible drama. *Apes in the Parlour* is a trenchant critique of sophisticated life. *The Family Cage* presents the plight of a widowed sister in a joint family. *Flags of the Heart* dwells on the importance of sacrifice and service for the poor. Though his characters are not generally convincing, Lobo-Prabhu is good at dramatic situation and dialogue.

Although the pre-independence Indian English drama is notable for its poetic excellence, thematic variety, technical virtuosity, symbolic significance and its commitment to human and moral values, it was by and large not geared for actual stage production. Very few Indian dramatists so far had shown great interest in producing drama for the stage. One singular exception to this phenomenon was Asif Currimbhoy who is rightly hailed as "Indian's first authentic voice in the theatre"<sup>15</sup> by Faubion Bowers. His plays are essentially pieces of theatre. By fusing the elements of pantomime, dance, and song, he succeeds brilliantly in creating powerful auditory and visual images that go a long way in making his plays vitally theatrical.

Currimbhoy is a playwright with a social purpose. He is a prolific dramatist who has thirty plays to his credit dealing with the social, political and religious problems of contemporary society. In a Currimbhoy play, one can discern a definite philosophical basis that can be recognized in the very titles of his plays-*The Hungry Ones*, *The Captives*, *The Doldrums*, *An Experiment with Truth*, *Goa*, *This Alien... Native Land* and *Om Mane Padma Hun!* The variety of his themes and techniques, the topicality of his several plays; the social realism and implicit philosophy of his plays, the opulence of his scenes, situations and characters, the bold experimentation in technique, the resourceful improvisation of his stagecraft, and the mastery of his dialogue are some of the qualities that reveal Currimbhoy's dramatic genius. Though in his later plays, Currimbhoy subjects his dramatic art to a strain it cannot bear; his plays remain 'colorful instruments of an intense theatricality.'

Quite a few contemporary playwrights have made a significant contribution to the development of Indian English drama. The foremost among them is Nissim Ezekiel, a well-established Indian English poet who has also enriched Indian English drama in his own characteristic way. His *Three Plays* (1969) consisting of *Nalini*, *A Marriage Poem and The Sleep-Walkers*, and another play, *Song of Deprivation*, expose the hollowness of the urban middle-class life, fickleness of modern lovers, greedy fascination for American life and hypocrisy and inhibitive nature of contemporary Indian society respectively. Ezekiel is an excellent craftsman. His plays are fine examples of symmetric construction, abounding in irony, wit and humor. They reveal his sharp observation of the oddities in human life and behavior providing glimpses of a cross-section of contemporary society. Though they do not meet the full requirements of the stage, but according to Prema Nanda kumar, they “make pleasant reading” and are known for their “stage-worthiness.”<sup>16</sup> And , in the words of Chetan Karnani, “in his satire of current fashion, in his exposure of pose and pretence, Ezekiel comes very close to the spirit of some English social satirists in the theatre.”<sup>17</sup>

Some playwrights like Lakhan Deb's and Gurucharan Das have made a significant to the development of historical play. Lakhan Deb's *Tiger's Claw* (1947) is a powerful dramatization of Shivaji's killing of Afzal Khan bringing out the heroic nature and nobility of Shivaji. His *Murder at the Prayer Meeting* (1976) deals with the murder of Mahatma Gandhi echoing T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*. Modeled on the technique of Greek tragedy, the play deftly employs the dramatic unities of time, place and action as well as the classical devices of prologue and chorus. Gurucharan Das's *Larins Sahib* (1970) is based on the events in Punjab during 1846-47, and is reconstructed from the documents and letters exchanged by the principal characters. It is a remarkable achievement in historical drama in that the playwright has not only recreated history faithfully, but also suitably captured the essential traits of the historical characters. What is more, he succeeds admirably in evoking the nineteenth century colonial Indian background.

Gieve Patel and Partap Sharma are two other contemporary dramatists who have distinguished themselves. Gieve Patel's *Princes* (1970) is the first Parsi play, set in the semi-urban Parsi sub-culture of the Sanjan-Nargol area of South Gujarat, focusing on two Parsi families and their savage conflict for the possession of a sole male child. It is

significant for its experiments with language and its brilliant success in handling situation, character and dialogue. It creates a situation-the obsession with male children-that most Indian can identify with, and creates a language of sub-cultures that characters can speak without straining our credulity. Patel succeeds in evolving “a form of modified English which is not standard English, which has distinctively Indian rhythms, but none of the ‘cuteness’ or self-conscious phony “Indianness” of other experiments in this genre”<sup>18</sup> remarks Eunice De Souza.

Partap Sharma has created a prominent place for himself among contemporary playwrights by dealing with the theme of sex in two of his plays-*The Professor Has a Warcry* (1970) and *A Touch of Brightness* (1970). The first play brings out the mental anguish of Virendra who becomes aware of his illegitimacy and the second is a realistic portrayal of the red-light area in Bombay. Both the plays have been commended for their thematic boldness, character delineation and technical triumph.

Despite the interesting record of Indian English drama, it must be admitted that in terms of both quantity and quality it lags behind Indian English poetry and especially the Indian English novel. Various reasons have been given for the lack of Indian drama in English. It is generally felt that Indian playwrights in English have failed to impress rich and diverse Indian theatrical traditions, as well as make rich use of the rich funds of Indian mythology and Indian historical heritage. Another important reason given for the development of Indian drama in English was its ineligibility for stage production. There is no doubt that we had very talented and enthusiastic Indians who actively tried drama in English, but “seldom actual stage production”<sup>19</sup> remarks K.R.Srinivasa Iyenger. Indian English drama has also been affected by the need of a real theatre and live audience in India. As M.K. Naik puts it,

A play, in order to communicate fully and become a living dramatic experience, needs a real theatre and a live audience.... It is precisely the lack of these essentials that has hamstrung Indian drama in English all along.<sup>20</sup>

Above all, the major hurdle for the flourishing of Indian English drama is said to be the lack of a viable language as suitable medium for its expression. It is generally believed that we have very few actable plays mainly because a dialogue between Indians may not sound

convincing except when the characters are drawn from an urban, sophisticated milieu. But it is not proper to take such a narrow and shortsighted view of the problem. Rightly approached, this much-dreaded difficulty is more apparent than real. For, confronted by a similar problem in fiction, Raja Rao could solve it by infusing the tempo of Indian life into his English expression. Similarly, M.K. Naik remarks,

When Shakespeare makes his Romans speak in Elizabethan English, we do not bat an eyelid; when Shaw's St. Joan speaks English, no one asks whether the French girl held a certificate of proficiency in that language; and when Brecht makes the good Woman of Setzuan express herself in German, we are not horrified.<sup>21</sup>

Samuel Johnson infers, "The truth is that the spectators are always in their senses, and know from the first Act to the last, that the stage is only a stage and that the players players."<sup>22</sup>

Therefore, the Indian English playwrights need not have any qualms about making their Indian characters speak in English. If they can take sufficient care to create convincing characters in live situations, perhaps, the language would take care of itself.

## REFERENCES

1. Budholia, Om Prakash. "Introduction" *Girish Karnad: Poetics and Aesthetics*. Delhi: B. R. Publishing Corporation, 2011, p.1.
2. Narayan, H. Subhalakshmi: *The Hindu*. Tuesday, January 28, 1997, Madras, p.22.
3. Sri Aurobindo: *Hindu Drama*. Sri Aurobindo Circle, No.09, Bombay 1953, p.60.
4. *Ibid*, p.60
5. Bhat, G.K. *Bhavabhuti*. New Delhi: Sahitya Academy, 1979, p.34.
6. Sastri, K.S. Ramaswamy. "Drama in Modern India with Special Reference to Tamil Literature." *Drama in Modern India*. New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1982, p.127.
7. Kriplani, Krishna. *Literature of Modern India*. New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1982, p.40.

8. Iyengar, K.R. Srinivasa. *Drama in Modern India*. Bombay: P.E.N. All India Centre, 1961, p.4.
9. Thompson, Edward. *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and Dramatist*. London: Oxford University Press, 1926, p.51.
10. Alexer Preminger, Frank J. Warnke and O.B. Handison, ed., *Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Princeton University Press, 1965, P.142.
11. Kulkarni S.S. "The Plays of Sri Aurobindo." *Perspectives on Indian Drama in English*. Ed. M.K. Naik and S. Mokashi Punekar. Madras: Oxford University Press, 1977, p.7.
12. Iyengar, K.R. Srinivasa. *Indian Writing in English*. Bombay: Asia, 1977, p.195.
13. Punekar, S. Mokashi. "The plays of Bharati Sarabhai." *Perspectives on Indian Drama in English*. Madras: Oxford University Press, 1977, p.129.
14. Iyengar, K.R. Srinivasa. "Drama in Modern English." *Drama in Modern India*. Bombay: P.E.N. All India Centre, 1961, p.38.
15. Bowers, Faubion. "Introduction." *Asif Currrimbhoy's Plays*. New Delhi: Oxford & IBH, n.d., p.xii.
16. Prema, Nanda Kumar. "Indian Writing in English Three Cheers." *Indian Literature*, vol. XIII, No. 4, December, 1970, p.36.
17. Karnani, Chetan. *Nissim Ezekiel*. New Delhi: Arnold- Heinemann, 1974, p.126
18. De Souza, Eunice. "Some Recent Plays in English." *Perspectives on Indian Drama in English*. Madras: Oxford University Press, 1977, p.163.
19. Iyenger, K.R. Srinivasa. *Indian writing in English*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1985, p.226.
20. Naik, M.K. "The Achievement of Indian Drama in English." *Perspectives on Indian Drama in English*. Madras: Oxford University Press, 1977, p.181.
21. *Ibid.* p.191.
22. Johnson, Samuel. "Preface to Shakespeare." Water Raleigh, *Johnson on Shakespeare*. London: 1940, p.27.