



Evolution of Indian English Drama since the Vedic period

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Abstract:

Drama is one of the most beautiful and the highest form of artistic expression. It is a harmonious blending of dance, art, verse, melody and action. It is a long literary composition like the novel, a great source of entertainment and the most appealing medium of instructions. While the novel is a long narrative tale complete in itself, the drama is not complete in itself. It develops through dialogues and actions amongst the characters on the stage and requires a large set of external equipments such as a theatre, a stage fully equipped with curtains, lights and sound for its presentation on the stage before an audience. Drama is also different from other literary genres because it is mainly designed for performance and not reading like a novel and thus is a public affair. The term drama is originally derived from the Greek word meaning 'action' or 'act' or 'to do'. It can also be defined

as a specific mode of fiction represented in performance on the stage by actors. It deals with a problem in its plot and may end either happily or unhappily.

It is almost certain that drama, in every part of the world, originated in the ritual ceremonies connected with some sort of religious worship. The use of the term owes its origin to mid-18th century France, when Diderot and later Beaumarchais used the word 'drama', to describe their plays of middle class life. In modern usage, however, the word drama is frequently extended to all serious plays. Drama is thus a literary artistic representation by actors who perform the action and dialogue and impersonate the characters.

There are many forms of drama. Some of them are Comedy, Tragedy, Chronicle plays, Mosque, Miracle, Mystery and Morality plays. Dramatic components include act, atmosphere, chorus, plot, character, setting, soliloquy, dramatic illusion and stock characters while the different Dramatic styles are Expressionism, Realism, Naturalism and Symbolism.

So far as the plot-structure of a drama is concerned, it has a well-defined division. Before the action takes place, the drama begins with a background. This part is called the Exposition. Then the plot or action develops slowly which is called the Growth. Gradually the growth reaches its peak, which is known as the Climax. After the climax, the plot declines, which is known as the Resolution. The final stage of the Resolution in a Tragedy is known as catastrophe, whereas, in a comedy it is called Denouement. Some plays have a prologue in the beginning and an epilogue at the end.

Keyword : artistic expression, harmonious blending, literary composition, appealing, narrative tale, public affair, impersonate, climax,

Aims and Objectives:

The main aim of this article is to present a general idea about drama, its components, dramatic styles and plot structure. Besides, it also throws light on the evolution of Indian English Drama since the Vedic period till today. The article also makes a comparative study between drama and other literary genres. In addition, it highlights the contribution of some major Indian dramatists in the growth of Indian English drama.

Review of Literature :

K. R. Srinivas Iyengar, in his *Indian writing in English*, has discussed in details about Indian drama, Indian dramatists and their contribution in the development of drama as a literary genre in particular and English literature in general. Dr. Satish Kumar's *A survey of Indian English Drama* is also an important source to gain knowledge about the growth and development of Indian English Drama before and after Independence. He has addressed all the major aspects of drama and its key features. It also deals with the salient features of almost all the English dramatists, their art of characterisation, themes, different techniques, methods of plot construction, use of humour, satire, irony and symbolisms etc. In addition to this, the book *A History of Indian English Literature* written by M.K, Naik is also useful. His comments on the status of Indian English Drama is worthy of notice.

Introduction :

India has a very glorious legacy of drama right from the Vedic period. The history of Indian drama is very charming, enigmatic and incredible. Its origin can be traced back from the Vedic period and is much older than the English drama. Indian drama was at the peak and in its full blossom before Aristotle's masterpiece 'poetics' came into existence. There are numerous evidences of dramatic art in the form of enactments of various episodes from the Holy Scriptures like the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Bhagavad-Gita and the Puranas in earlier times. One can still see such types of dramatic performances during the festival of Durga Puja. Drama in Indian mythology is considered as the Fifth Veda-Natyaveda, the zenith of all the four Vedas.

However, Bharata's *Natyashastra* (500BC) in Sanskrit is the most important work on Indian drama. Bharata and other Sanskrit dramaticians have laid down the principles of drama and discussed aptly in details, all the major aspects of drama, namely theme, stage-setting, situation, music, plot construction, characterisation, dialogue, acting and the audience. Bhasa (250AD), Ashwagosh (100AD), Shudraka, Kalidas, Harsha, Bhavbhuti, Vishakhadatta are the names who have no parallels in the field of drama.

On the other hand we have a rich and varied heritage of folk theatre performed in the villages by amateur nautanki and natak company or mandala as well. There were regional plays like Ramlila, Raslila, Tamasha, Yakshagana etc. in different states. Sanskrit drama flourished in its full glory till the fifteenth century and were performed on the stage in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh. But thereafter Indian dramatic activity almost ceased due to foreign invasions on India and other reasons. When the Britishers came in India, the crippled Indian drama regained its vigour with the western education. As a result,

Indian drama in English came into existence and flourished in the 18th century, much later than the English drama which was at its zenith in the 16th century England.

Indian English Drama started its journey and saw the first break of the day with Krishna Mohan Banerji's first play *The Persecuted or Dramatic Scenes Illustrative of the present state of Hindu Society in Calcutta* in 1831. The Indian English Drama is contemporaneous with Indian English poetry. In 1827, Henry Derozio published his first book of verse called *poems*. But the Indian English drama is older than Indian English novel, because the first novel in English titled *Raj Mohan's wife* by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee was published in 1864. However, Indian English drama cannot be compared either to Indian English poetry or novel in recent years for many reasons.

To quote M.K. Naik, "From 1831 to 1980, not less than 500 plays by Indian English writers had appeared, and during the short period of the last twenty years, about 75 have been published. But the sad state of affairs is that Indian English drama still suffers from neglect. It is a sad Cinderella of Indian literature in English."

Later, the tradition of Indian drama in English flourished by some prominent play-wrights like Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Rabinddra Nath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, Harindra Nath Chattopaddhaya, T.P. Kailasam and A.S.P. Ayyar in the pre-independence era. T.P. Kailasam (1885-11946), a gifted dramatist, had his themes from ancient epics, but his approach is purely his own. He was a humanist and he glorified the names of the underdogs like Eklavya, Karna and Keechaka. Being a skilled actor on the Kannada stage, Kailasam had a better sense of stageability than Tagore and Aurobinndo. A.S.P. Ayyar (11899--1963) has dealt with contemporary reality and historical themes. His main motive was the communication of message. His famous plays include *In the Church of the Devil*, *Sita's Choice* and other plays etc.

H.N. Chattopadhyaya's plays are based on social themes. Like Kailassam, he had full sympathy with the underdogs. He has exhibited social problems in his plays like Ibsen, Shaw and Galsworthy. His plays are realistic and symbolic. *The Window*, *The Parrot*, *The Coffin*, *The Cobbler Saint* etc. are his famous plays. Bharti Sarabhai, an important woman playwright wrote, *The Well of the people* and *Two Women*. She was very much influenced by Gandhian thought and philosophy.

Another pre-independence playwright of repute was Rabindra Nath Tagore who is well-known for his plays *Sanyasi*, *Malini*, *sacrifice*, *Kacha* and *Devyanni*, *Chitra*, *Mukta Dhara*, *The Motther's Prayer*, *Karna* and *Kunti* and others. He was one of the most original dramatists. Tagore's plays are theme oriented and symbolical. *Chitra*, *The Mother's Prayer* and *Karna* and *Kunti* are inspired by the Mahabharata. *Malini* shows the conflict

between Brahminism and Buddhism and tells about the importance of the religion of love. *The waterfall or Mukta Dhara*, considered as his greatest play, reveals his political convictions.

Tagore transcreated many of his plays from the Bengali plays. His plays are inspired by the Sanskrit plays and Jatra of Bengali drama. His dramatic art is simple in style and expression but complex in the variety of its forms and deep in meaning. His characters are his mouth-pieces who present the conflicting ideologies before us. The setting of his plays are genitive. His dialogues are poetical and musical. The plays of Tagore are often compared with the plays of W.B. Yeats who present action as 'the moment of intense life'.

Indian English drama before independence will remain in-complete without mentioning the plays of Sri Aurobindo. Aurobindo has the credit of writing five complete and six incomplete plays. His plays are a mixture of Elizabethan model and the classical flavour of Sanskrit drama. His famous plays are *Perseus-The Deliverer*, *Vasavadutta*, *Rodoguene*, *The Viciers of Bassora*, *Erri-The King of Norway* and others. Love, liberty and evolution are the main themes in Aurobindo's plays. As Aurobindo was deeply influenced by the Elizabethan playwrights, he used the Elizabethan model in his plays but with certain limitations in his dramatic technique. Like Shakespearean characters, his characters also grow and change with time and are not the dull epitome of one's ambition or humour. There are also Shakespearean echoes in his blank verse.

However, inspite of the mastery over language, the plays of Tagore and Chattopadhyaya lack in stageability. The plays seem to be meant for scholars and not for common men. Also due to the lack of a regular theatre, actors, other theatrical devices and interested audience and viewers, Indian English drama could not register any noticibility in the post-independence period like the ones in regional languages. If compared, Indian English drama stands nowhere in front of Indian English poetry and Indian English novel both in quality and quantity. But their plays are important for their thematic variety viz. myths, legends, history and the problems of contemporary society. Indian drama in English got some breathing space in films, T.V. serials and radio plays in the post-independence era. Translation of plays from regional language and international exposure gave them a real feel good.

So far Indian English drama in the post-modern period is concerned some play-wrights like G.V. Desani, Lakhan Deb, Pratap Sharma, Asif Currrimbhoy, Gurucharan Das, Nissim Ezekiel and Girish Karnad employ new techniques and methods to enrich Indian English Drama.

Desani's *Hali* is an allegorical play in poetic prose. It is based on the theme of search for fulfilment and the supremacy of love. *Hali* is named after a Muslim saint who stands for humanity. Lakhan Deb's *Tiger Claw* and *Murder at the Prayer Meeting* deals with Shivaji and Afzal Khan's encounter and the assassination of Gandhiji by Godse respectively. *Larrin Sahib* by Gurucharan Das is a historical play which is based on the events of 1946-47 in Punjab. Nissim Ezekiel's plays are written on the themes of hollowness of urban middle class, futility of social mores and the institution of marriage. His well-known plays *Nalinii*, *Marriage poem*, *The Sleep Walkers* and *Song of Deprivation* are fine pieces of healthy social criticism. His plays are well-constructed and well-knit.

Asif Currimbhoy, known as the dramatist of the public event, occupy a unique place in the Indian English Drama. He has written plays on variety of themes but there are some technical short-comings in his plays. His most popular plays are *The Captives*, *Goa*, *Inquilaab*, *The Refugee*, *Sonar Bangla* and *The Dissident MLA*. *The Captives* deals with Indo-china war whereas *Goa* is about the liberation of Goa from the Portuguese rule. *Inquilab* is based on the Naxalite movement. *The Refugee*, which depicts human concern, is all about the Bangladeshi refugees who came to India in the 1971 war. Currimbhoy's contribution to Indian English drama is very impressive and distinct. His plays have been successfully staged.

Mahesh Dattani is another very important post-independence playwright. His *Final Solutions and other plays* won the Sahitya Akademi Award for the year 1998. His *Collected plays* contains eight plays viz. *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, *Do the Needful*, *Final Solutions*, *Tara Bravery Fought the Queen and Others*. Being a theatre personality he was skilled in the art of production and staging of the plays at various places.

In his preface to collected plays, he writes, "I am certain that my plays are a true reflection of time, place and socio-economic background." His plays are a mirror of contemporary Indian society in certain respects. Dattani writes about homosexuality, eunuchs and homosexuality, which made him unacceptable to the conservative/orthodox Indian audience who don't want to talk about it because of social taboos.

The most important Indian English playwright writing in the post-independence era was Girish Karnad. He was one of the most remarkable modern playwrights. He was connected with theatre as an actor, director and producer which gave him immense experience about it and helped him in producing successful plays as a playwright. Karnad was deeply interested in native traditions, but at the same time, he learnt many things from

the western drama also. He was a product of cross-cultural fertilization and has dealt with various themes in his plays such as transfer of responsibility, conflict of a ruler, man's eternal desire to achieve completeness, problematic marriage, love for power, castewar and attainment of knowledge etc. His plays are full of innovations and deep insight into human mind. He treats in modern context and gives them existential touch. His well-known plays are-*Yayati*, *Tughlaq*, *Hayavaddana*, *Naga-Mandala* and *Tale-Danda*.

Yayati is a play of human responsibility. *Yayati*, the king of Hastinapur lives the life of sensual pleasures and shuns his responsibility as a ruler and the head of the family. He seeks his identity in sensual pleasures by exchanging his old age with his younger son, *Puru*. At the end, *Yayati* realises his selfishness after the suicide of *Chitalekha*, *Puru*'s wife, and returns to forest as a hermit. Though this play, *Karnad* portrays the life of the modern man who is also engrossed in sensual pleasures and fails in seeking his identity.

In *Tughlaq*, which is a historical play, *Karna* exposes the paradox of the idealistic Sultan *Mohammad Bin Tughlaq*, who was also the most intelligent and learned ruler of his time. One of the critics compare this play with *Camus's Caligula*. "*Tughlaq* is a tragedy of the limits of human power in a predominantly psychological context," says *M. K. Naik*. "*Tughlaq* is a combination of contradictory elements-a dreamer and a man of action, benevolent and cruel, devout and godless. He is a visionary idealist but his idealism and liberal views lead to his downfall".

Karnad's Hayavadana deals with the problem of the search of identity in a world of tangled relationships. All the characters in the play are fractured personalities and no one is complete or a whole.

Naga-Mandala is a play which exposes male chauvinism, the oppression of women and injustice done to them. It is a feminist play. *Karnad* suggests that matriarchy is the lost paradise which should be revived again. It is the story of *Rani*, a simple and ignorant girl who is ill-treated by her husband. Later she grows into maturity because of the love of *Naga*, a serpent and becomes the head of the family. *Karnad* gives the play a brechetian touch by initiating a critical discussion on the ending of the story.

Tale-Danda is all about social issues. This play deals with the deformity of the caste-system and communal struggle. Through this play *Karnad* gives a message to the society that we should treat all human beings as equal.

Besides these major playwrights, there are some minor playwrights worthy of notice like *Vera Sharma*, *Devak Antao*, *Gieve Patel*, *Dina Mehta*, *Manjula Padmanabhan*, *polie Sengupta*, *Pritish Nandy*, *Manjeri Isvaran*

and others. All these playwrights have tried to Indianize Indian English drama by selecting their theme, subject, time, place and setting from our national life.

CONCLUSION

Thus, to conclude, it can definitely be said that India has a great legacy of drama since the Vedic period and is much older than the English drama or drama in other languages world-over. However, the achievement of Indian English drama is not much as compared to poetry, prose and fiction, although, some modern dramatists like Mahesh Dattani, Asif Currimbhoy, Girish Karnad and others have done much to establish the sick, pale and poor Indian English drama as par with other literary genres.

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