

## **Arrival of Indian Drama: A Critical Note**

**Dr. N. Anil Krishna, M.A., Ph.D.**

=====  
It is often believed that drama in India lags behind the other genres. Drama, being a composite art that requires “considerable organization and resources,” is not taken up by many creative writers. In spite of the meagre output, drama in India is on a par with the novel and poetry in terms of qualitative excellence and reflection of social milieu. The contribution of Indian dramaturgy to the world drama is substantial. Modern dramatists still draw inspiration from ancient Indian drama. The present day Indian drama as a medium of forceful communication scores over other genres compelling recognition.

The evolution of Indian drama, from classical theatre to the present day dramatic forms, reveals its latent potential. Indian theatre may be broadly classified into (i) Classical or Sanskrit theatre (ii) Folk theatre (iii) Modern theatre. Classical theatre is the mainstream theatre which was patronized by both the ruling class and aristocracy. It is rigid, complex and sophisticated. The tradition of Classical Sanskrit drama had “long been lost and had not, in any case, percolated the popular pattern of culture, except indirectly through what had survived in the folk traditions” (Kriplani 41).

Classical and Folk theatres are not antithetical to each other. They co-exist; they borrow from and lend each other. Folk drama is primarily rural. The *Jatra* in Bengal, *Nautanki*, *Ramlila* and *Raslila* of North India, *Bhavai* of Gujarat, *Tamasha* of Maharashtra, *Therukoothu* of Tamilnadu, *Yakshagana* of Kanada; and the *Chhau* mask dramas of Seraikella are the various folk theatre forms popular in India. The advent of East India Company to India, however, eclipsed the popularity of the classical and folk forms. The British introduced the concept of the picture-frame stage, sowing seeds of modern theatre in India. This concept was initially influenced by the European theatre.

Modern drama in India may be classified into (i) Company drama (ii) Social drama (iii) Politically-conscious drama. Company drama is the first phase of modern Indian drama. It deals with *puranic* and historical themes in proscenium. Parsi Company drama, Dharwad Company drama, Surabhi Company drama, Gubbiveeranna Company drama and Mylavaram Company drama are offspring of the Company Drama Movement. By 1930 the *puranic* and historical themes gave way to social themes signaling the second phase of modern Indian drama. The period of social drama can be divided into (a) early social drama and (b) later social drama. The period of

early social drama lasted for three decades from 1930 to 1960. The predominance of the melodramatic element is perceptible in the dramas of this period. The later social drama, which has blossomed since 1960, sheds its melodramatic element and exhibits an unprecedented social consciousness. The dramatists after 1960 have become more socially conscious hinting at the futility of the existing order. Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar, Satya Dev Dubey, Shivaram Karanth, Mohan Rakesh, Nissim Ezekiel and Partap Sharma, Mahesh Dattani, Manjula Padmanabhan belong to the second phase of social drama. The establishment of the National School of Drama is a landmark in this period. The dramatists of this period did not abandon the proscenium. The present day Indian English drama has its roots in this period.

The third phase of modern Indian drama is the politically conscious drama. Politically-conscious drama can again be categorized into (a) Leftist party related drama and (b) Politically-conscious drama without any party affiliation. The period of Politically-conscious drama, in fact, begins in 1940 overlapping the period of social drama. Indian People's Theatre Association, a cultural wing of the Communist Party established in 1943, led the Politically-conscious drama. Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) is the first organized National Theatre Movement in India. Shambhu Mitra in Calcutta, Balraj Sahani in Mumbai and Dr. Garigapati Raja Rao in the erstwhile Andhra Pradesh were the forerunners of political drama in India. The early period of the Political drama which is pro-leftist was rhetorical, propagandistic and melodramatic. But the dramatist was firmly committed to the cause of establishing the egalitarian society. It was also a proscenium theatre. The upsurge of the Communist Party in the form of Telangana Armed Struggle in 1940s and the Naxalbari movement in 1970s influenced the political dramatists. The later period of the Politically-conscious drama witnessed various theatre forms.

By 1970 the Politically-conscious drama without party affiliation became popular. The dramatists belonging to non-party drama call themselves the "outsiders in the modernist left theatre." They followed non-proscenium forms. Utpal Dutt, Badal Sircar, Prabir Guha in Bengal and Purnachandra Rao in the erstwhile Andhra Pradesh belong to this category. Utpal Dutt, a modernist to the core, used the Brechtian technique freely. The themes of his plays are anti-establishment. His play *Kallol* had to encounter an all-out attack from the establishment and he was imprisoned twice i.e. in 1965 and 1967 for his revolutionary plays. As a mark of protest, he refused to accept the Sahitya Akademi award for direction (Drama) in 1966.

Badal Sircar improved upon the two existing theatres (Indian Folk & European based proscenium theatres) and named his new discipline the Third Theatre. He is influenced by the European dramatist and the Polish dramatist Grotowsky's "Laboratory Theatre". His drama is meant for the urban middle class and the blue-collared section. Badal Sircar is the father-figure of all socially committed theatre-activists of our country. He is internationally known for his pioneering and "pace setting contribution in creating socially-conscious, pro-working class,

inexpensive, plastic and mobile alternative new theatre discipline” (Purnachander Rao 6). The theatre group *Satabdi* established by the playwright Badal Sircar in 1967 helped a great deal in bringing theatre outdoors. In the beginning, *Satabdi* would perform both on and off the proscenium. But in 1973, members of *Satabdi* severed connections with proscenium theatre and concentrated on “direct communication with the spectators” (Dutta vii). *Satabdi* also rejected artificial aids such as elaborate costumes, props, make-up, lights and sound. In one of his plays *Julus*, Badal Sircar says that the play is meant to be staged on the roads. Sircar is known for his dramatic élan as he provides a diagram to explain his scheme of dramaturgy. It is said that Badal Sircar’s idea of theatre is influenced by Richard Schechner’s “Environmental Theatre” and Julian Beck’s “Living Theatre”. Badal Sircar’s theatrical explorations include “a search for a ‘full theatre’ that will not be limited to an urban audience belonging to the middle and upper classes, nor did it tie down to backward values unrelated to the life and problems of the working masses of the country. He realized gradually that a flexible, portable, and inexpensive theatre is needed for the country and that is his Third Theatre (Dass 188-89)

The present day Indian English drama is more a Social drama than a Political drama. The modern Indian English dramatists, no doubt, deal with political themes and political personalities. But they do not subscribe themselves to any political ideology and their treatment of political themes is from a contemporary perspective. Most of them seek to present a moral vision and social purpose. They are keenly aware of contemporary social problems and try to project them in their plays with a view to suggesting solutions in a subtle way. Dealing with controversial public issues, they posit themselves against the degenerating trends of society with a non-conformist stance. This is probably the reason why they chose violence, sex and liberation as themes. A bird’s eye-view of the modern Indian Drama reveals many of the elements of British “Pop” drama such as homosexuality, nymphomania, abortion, violent or casual death, disfigurement and callous humour, homosexuality and nymphomania (Brown).

The various changes that have taken over the world theatre have also had their own share of influence on modern Indian drama. Compared with the World drama, Indian drama suffers from inadequate use of stagecraft. Probably this is the reason why many of the modern Indian plays tend to be “closet plays,” their stage-worthiness being meagre.

---

### Works Cited

- Brown, John Russel, ed. Introduction, *Modern British Dramatists: A Collection of Critical Essays*. New Delhi: Prentice-Hall of India, 1980. Print.
- Dass, Veena Noble. “Towards an Indian Drama: Some Conclusions,” *Modern Indian Drama in English Translations*. Hyderabad: 1985. Print.
- Dutta, Ella. Introduction. *Three Plays*. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1983. Print.

Kriplani, Krishna, Literature of Modern India (New Delhi: NBT India, 1982. Print.  
Purnachandra Rao, P.V. "To the Rural Masses Through Street Play." Rural Development  
Advisory Service. Secunderabad. Print.

---

**Dr. N. Anil Krishna, Asst. Prof. of English**  
**Osmania University, Hyderabad**  
[anil\\_nellutla@yahoo.co.in](mailto:anil_nellutla@yahoo.co.in)