Experimentation and Innovation in Modern Indian Drama

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Abstract

The article traces the emergence of post-independence Indian national theatre with a focus on the dialectic between traditional performance forms and contemporary theatre work. The cynosure here is the dramatic text by the modern Indian male playwrights—Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar and Vijay Tendulkar, who acknowledge the importance and relevance of establishing reciprocity between traditional art forms and contemporary idioms. The essay traces some of their productions as emblematic of their experimental and innovative dramaturgy, wherein a novel understanding of realism, textuality, performative stylisation and modernism finds immersive visibility. It underlines and draws parallels between the artistic endeavours of all of these three playwrights however, also delineates their individual nuances and artistic expressions evident in their writings.

Keywords: Indian Drama, Indian Playwrights, Post-Independence Indian Theatre,

Innovation and experimentation are constant phenomena in the theatre. Drama, being a performative art has an immediacy of appeal which poem or fiction may not need. Initially, drama was meant only to be staged. Then, it started being written also in the form of a text meant to be analysed and interpreted. Together with spectacle and entertainment, the social and cultural role of the theatre in the larger context of a people's history cannot be neglected. Our theatre reflects different kinds of popular aspirations from time to time as testified by the impact of broader movements for national independence, cultural identity, social reform and other radical aspirations on the evolution, theme and form of theatre.

Modern Theatre in India began in the colonial cities set up by the British as commercial ports. These cities had an urban middle-class audience with values and tastes shaped by the English style of education they received and by the need to work with the British in administration and commerce. Much of the theatre in this era replicated the British drama and therefore took on, to some extent, the aesthetics, dramaturgical structures, and

even the architecture of Western aesthetics. Until the development of modern theatre in India, most performances did not take place on a proscenium stage, nor did they depend upon ticket sales, but were rather dependent upon patronage. The proscenium, which was adopted for much of the modern theatre, separated the participants from the observers; ticket sales put an emphasis on theatre as a commodity, making it available to a smaller and wealthier group of people.

The situation changed after independence when a tremendous release of new energy brought about a renaissance in the arts, leading to a fresh spurt of dramatic and theatrical activity all over the country. A number of playwrights felt the need to develop a theatre that did not follow British models but was in some way Indian. This led to several avant-garde trends from time to time that drew their inspiration from international, national, and regional traditions of theatre—both classical and folk. These experiments and innovations are signs of the vitality and robustness of Indian theatre but are also a cause of a number of aesthetic–ideological contentions between the popular and the highbrow, proscenium theatre and street theatre, use of performance elements contrasted with conventions from the traditional as well as folk theatre, together with delineating them as misappropriation. Girish Karnad, on the use of traditional Indian performance forms, states: 'The attempt was not to find and reuse forms that had worked successfully in some other cultural context. The hope, rather, was to discover whether there was a structure of expectations and conventions about entertainment underlying these forms from which one could learn' (Karnad).

In the 1970s, Sangeet Natak Academy released a special issue of its journal (vol. 21) dealing with the debate on the pros and cons of attempts to draw upon tradition for contemporary theatre work. It was a round table on the contemporary relevance of traditional theatre in India with most of the major theatre doyens articulating their theoretical perspectives on the same. Sircar comments:

> I do not know anything about traditional theatre; I have seen practically no Jatra at all. But still I think that probably there are certain things in the form which I have heard from other people about the form, which can be used in the urban theatre, made by an urban man like me for the urban audience. (Sircar)

Mohan Rakesh explains:

> I don't understand why a sort of deliberate, conscious and artificial exposure to

traditional forms are necessary, because we are being exposed to whatever our tradition is in

our daily life- right from birth. (Rakesh)

Tendulkar says:

I would like to indulge in some folk form that would suit my needs—I want to find my way out. (Tendulkar)

These opinions indicate some of the ways in which traditional forms may influence a playwright.

The Post-independence period is extremely significant for dramatic writing in a number of Indian languages. The major language theatres that were active all through the turbulent years of rejuvenation and consolidations were those of Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, and Kannada. The plays explored many layers of our social life and individual psyche. A number of them reveal a keen observation and concern for deeper social realities and vital issues of human existence. Some of the themes tackled include war and its impact on the moral and material life of man, the meaning and purpose of life, the struggle for political power, emerging patterns of man–woman relationships, and all. This wide-ranging exploration of social and individual relationships has been carried out by means of sharp, evocated dramatic images, and often inventive structures. It has led to a search for authenticity and identity for a distinct Indian dramatic form which would link this drama to our long and varied tradition, and would also enrich and develop it by rejecting all that is decadent and irrelevant, incorporating all that is forward-looking and meaningful in both Indian and western traditions.

Post-independence playwrights, especially the writers since the 60s, have shown a greater awareness of theatre and the multiplicity of forms that modern theatre employs. There was widespread conviction that the spate of new plays being written and performed in the post-independence decades in many parts of the country, at long last, brought to fruition the promise of the long overdue Indian national theatre. There was a birth of new realism, emerging from the problems and issues of a rapidly industrialising India, as well as folk forms. Badal Sircar who wrote in Bengali, Mohan Rakesh writing in Hindi, Karnad in Kannada, and Vijay Tendulkar in Marathi were seen as the ‘Big Four’ of the new upsurges in

theatre and were also part of a much larger network in their own cultural-linguistic centres. I will briefly examine Sircar's Evam Indrajit, Mohan Rakesh's Aadhe Adhure, and Vijay Tendulkar's Ghashiram Kotwal to further illustrate the aforementioned dynamics.

Badal Sircar's Enriching Textuality

Born in Calcutta in 1925, Sircar stands at the forefront of a new theatre movement in India. His training as a civil engineer, professional career as an urban planner, his life as a playwright, and his role as a theatre director and actor have all contributed to the rich texture of his work in Indian theatre. After writing a few pure comedies of middling local Bengali renown in the late 1950s and early 60s, he shot into the national limelight in 1965 with the publication of his play Evam Indrajit. Written in 1962, the play revolves around a Writer's search for the subject of his play. He summons individuals named Amal, Vimal, Kamal, and Indrajit out of the audience to be the subject. The first three pass from school to college to careers and family life without event, following the predictable vector of middle-class tedium. They are therefore unsuitable fodder for dramatic work. Indrajit, however, is markedly different. Forever restless, he looks for ways out of his dreary life and states, "There must be a world outside geography. Its not here. But it'll be somewhere far away-outside-beyond" (Sircar 12). He cannot marry the person he loves, his Manasi, because she is his first cousin. He marries another. Drained by a life of meaningless substitutions, Indrajit realizes that each break he makes from his preordained middle-class life brings him back to the same predictable pattern he was trying to escape—"My wife looks after the house. I work in the office. My wife goes to a film. I go with her. My wife goes to her parent's house. I eat in a restaurant. She comes back. I go marketing" (Sircar 18). He finally confesses to the Writer that he is indeed 'Nirmal', the last in a chorus of rhyming names summoned from his anonymous audience. The Writer refuses to accept this and says, "Walk! Be on the road! For us there is only the road." (Sircar 48). Showing the angst of the educated middle-class man, the play shows elements of existentialist drama in the tradition of Camus and Beckett. It consequentially broke away from naturalist conventions that had tied down Indian theatre until then. It abandons consistent characterization and self-defining settings and scenes are fragmentary. Indrajit's existentialist questioning makes use of a minimalist format in order to cut straight from one scene to another. The unity of time is shattered to create instead a montage of past and present life. Sircar's extensive use of poetry, wry humour, and the novelty of the language used ads to the list of innovations in modern Indian dramaturgy. G.P.

Deshpande (2000), on this spirit, comments upon how Badal Sircar's Bangla is radically different from the pre-Sircar theatre speech in Bangla and that it came close to actual speech is not its only achievement. He also commends Sircar on the economy of words that he employed in his writing as a methodology unknown to several theatre traditions in India. Evam Indrajit, on the whole, presents aspirations for life and relationships beyond the banality of the everyday world and concomitant anxieties about lack of significance. In the play, the traditional elements of drama—namely crisis, climax, and denouement—are missing. Instead, the complex use of sound effects through chorus, poetry, and music, together with stylized actions through mime and gestures create a complete theatrical effect. The anti-illusionist dramatic technique of the play makes it by any reckoning a hallmark in Indian dramatic history. The very fact that the characters in the play are a part of the audience shatters the dramatic illusion of the play. What this play invoked is an immersive spectatorship. There is a constant interaction between the real world and the artificial world within the play. Sircar's use of space is also highly innovative. At several points, stage images of extraordinary concreteness are dissociated from the milieu that normally defines them. For example, the stage scene of an exam hall also serves as a public park and so on. Almost a decade later, Indrajit of Sircar's play emerges as a character in Satyajit Ray's movie Pratidwandi; then, despite his real feel in cinema, one finds that an Indrajit so totally circumscribed by the realism of cinema never achieves the evocative richness of his original theatrical framework.

By the 70s, Sircar had given up the proscenium stage, but could not simply turn to traditional folk theatre as he was a city-bred man. His solution was what he called 'Third Theatre', which he conceived as a theatre of urban–rural synthesis. His goal was to emphasize the physical movements of the actors over words and to rely upon the simplest techniques, emulating Grotowski's Poor Theatre—to build up the immediacy of communication between actors and audiences. Theatre critic's points out that many of the rhetorical techniques of his later plays can be traced back to passages in Evam Indrajit, which can be seen as the most important play in the playwrights' entire oeuvre.

Mohan Rakesh's Modernist Quest

Drama in the Hindi speaking areas never had a vigorous theatrical tradition with a wide popular base. The dominant form of theatre in these areas from the 1870s to the 1930s was Parsi theatre. Objections to this theatre were raised on grounds of artificiality and moral

depravity. As a reaction, Bhartendu Harishchandra went back to the tradition of Sanskrit drama writing plays like Chandravali. However, Hindi drama could not develop into a force of social importance due to lack of professional support. Even in the glorious period of Hindi theatre, which began in the 1920s, Hindi theatre continued to be divided into stage play and literary plays written by intellectuals such as Jaishankar Prasad. After Prasad, two dominant trends emerged in Hindi drama. One, those that continued to deal with historical and pseudo-historical themes. Other, the realist drama that dealt with domestic interiors, psychological studies, and social reform, such as the works of Upendranath Ask. However, his plays were only read and not performed due to the unavailability of a platform for performance. In 1936, with the founding of the All-Indian Radio, an outlet was provided with plays being broadcast regularly. It is here that Mohan Rakesh's first one act plays were broadcast.

Rakesh is associated with a literary movement in Hindi known as nayi kahani. The movement expressed an age of uncertainty, unease, and frustration significantly called moh-bhang. He began his writing career in the years immediately after independence. His full-length plays, Asadh Ka Ek Din (1962), Laharon Ke Rajhans (1967), and Aadhe Adhure (1969), break away both—from classical Indian aesthetic theories developed by Bhartendu and Prasad, as also from the task of cultural revivalism seeking ideals in the past. They deal with the crises of individualism, alienation, and internal conflict faced by the modern man. His main conceptual categories of yatharta, samgharsh, and dvanda are those of Strindbergian naturalism rather than Prasad's dramaturgy. He was the first of playwrights to evolve his dramaturgy in constant interaction with the performance.

> Rakesh writes: "The words in a play, unlike those in a novel or a short story, have a double duty to perform. They are both to be read as well as uttered. Hence playwriting would entail a combined activity of the playwright and others who could speak his words for him and help him to check their suitability" (Rakesh 3).

His was a realism of a new sort, as it set out to recreate the politics of urban interiors as they evolved in a new and extremely conflicted repositioning of gender roles. In the play Aadhe Adhure (Halfway House), he explores the ironies of middle-class life and reveals a fascinated preoccupation with its representatives as victims of their own incomplete purposes and split personalities. Most of the characters are fragmented beings. When questioned on why writers at the time in Hindi were focusing upon the middle class as their subjects, Rakesh says:

> Most of the writers do come from the urban middle class themselves…I think there is a Sociological phenomenon going on. I think this country today at all levels: lower, middle, upper classes-is becoming middle class. I identify the mentality of the middle class as that uppishness that struggle for attainment of material possessions, the going to any lengths to attain all of this. (Rakesh 3)

This opinion of Rakesh is clear in the conflicts depicted in Aadhe Adhure wherein the relationships are examined in the context of class structures, its financial ramifications, and a new consciousness of an economically independent woman. He, in the play experiments with the dramatic language, which he makes tight and crisp. The stage directions are very detailed and delineate every movement and change of expression of the character, positing a total identification of the player with the play. His innovations in the play, like one actor playing all the male roles, open up the closed doors of the proscenium. In terms of thematic import this device is very important and crucial to the experimentation he heralded. Perhaps Rakesh wished to suggest through this technique that there is something similar in all these men. However, the emphasis changes when the play moves from text to performance. The audience saw how well the actor performed all the roles rather than being a witness to any thematic statement. Due to the use of such devices the play is often interpreted as an absurdist play. In the Prologue to the play, the speaker declares that the play is going to be an "undefined" one with "undefined" characters. The reality in the play is presented in intangible terms, "there is something in this house…" that cannot be touched and seen.

However, I do not see the play in the form of an absurd play. The devices used lend to the meaning the play is trying to convey. They lend to the play its bitter disillusionment, the growing frustration, cynicism, and angst that was corroding the urban middle class. It talks of how this disillusionment arises out of the individual psyche of the characters. The prologue to the play introduces the basic thematic concern of the play and establishes a framework. Nevertheless, this framework is not justified by the actions in the play. The man in the black suit makes a thematic statement, "I am there in each one of you", but except for class and gender similarity, each of them is a different individual with a name, personality and profession.

Vijay Tendulkar's Experimentation with Folk Traditions

In the 1950s, Marathi theatre was in a state of crisis. Due to the advent of cinema and the collapse of the infrastructure of theatre, the very survival of theatre was at stake. Playhouses, as well as theatre companies, had vanished. The fifteen years from 1955–1970 saw the stabilizing of the new infrastructure on the mainstream stage and a consolidation of its audience through a nostalgic harking back to the Sangeetnatak era, tearful family dramas and more or less funny comedies and farces. Along with this was also the birth of a fringe movement, to be known variously as the "experimental", "parallel", or "amateur theatre" of which Tendulkar was a part. The 1960s was marked by the re-appearance of two "old forms" on the urban, professional stage—the neo-traditional Sangeetnatak and the neo-folk Tamasha. The themes of the Sangeetnataks continued to be myths and legends, but obeisance was made to modern spirit of realism by making singers and poets the chief protagonists, so that songs could feature as a natural part of their lives. Though the revival of Sangeetnatak may be seen as harking back to an old form, it was also a way of questioning the dominant form on the mainstream stage, the family drama. It implied that other forms might effectively involve contemporary audiences. The 60s also saw the virtual end of Marathi cinema that had begun so gloriously with Prabha films. The middle class that had turned to cinema in the 40s and 50s now returned to theatre, demanding from it an attention to their needs, taste, and self-image.

In the "experimental" theatre, Vijay Tendulkar was the first playwright of the new stage. He discarded the flourishes of the theatre of mythology, history, and sentiment and turned everyday speech into a forceful dramatic tool. His plays, such as Srimat, rejected the songs and heightened prose of the old Sangeetnataks and attempted to reject the sentiment and melodrama of the professional mainstream stage of the time. The one play in Tendulkar's entire oeuvre that confirms his standing as one of the country's finest playwrights is Ghashiram Kotwal. It marked the turning point by breaking expected codes of both form and content and achieving an amazing amalgation of tradition and experimentation. The play attacks the decadent Brahmin rule just prior to British ascendancy. Tendulkar used as narrative material a well-known story regarding historical figures, to make a political statement about the creation by political parties in power of monsters for temporary gain, leading to iniquity, brutality, and ultimate destruction. Ghashiram Kotwal is a play that relies heavily on performance for its full effect. Tendulkar has remarkably used various traditions

of Marathi theater and music—the Lavani, the Dashaavatar, and the Gondhan—to highlight social criticism. Nilu Phule says,

> As a playwright, Tendulkar's great strength lies in his dialogues. It is as if he doesn't need a director at all. The man seems to be able to 'see' every action, every move from curtain up to curtain down. He can probably even 'hear' it all. (Phule 57)

Tendulkar himself says on the use of Tamasha:

> It gave me the feel of liberation- because I was used to the vagaries of my form of writing and consciously I was fed up with this form. And here was the technical freedom which I required at that stage. (Tendulkar 21)

The statement makes it clear that Tendulkar had not consciously set out to find an alternative to the dominant realist mode. His intention was not the same as Sircar's when he moved out of the proscenium into school halls and parks. According to Tendulkar, the combination of these folk forms came in answer to his search for a way to tell the story he wanted to tell.

All the formal innovations, such as the use of songs, gestures, music, precise language, lyrics, human curtain, and sutradhar are used due to their potential to carry the message. Among all he makes use of the folk theatre, Tamasha, very innovatively. The word Tamasha has Persian origins and means—a show or theatrical entertainment. It emerged in the Deccan Plain in the late sixteenth century from earlier forms of entertainments and served as a bawdy, lascivious form of entertainment for both the occupying Mughal army and the opposing Maratha forces trying to free the territory. Recent refinements introduced into the Tamasha have led to the evolution of a more sophisticated version—the people's theatre or Loknatya. A Tamasha performance places no physical boundaries on time and space, and realistic stage setting or props are unnecessary. By a variety of gestures, movements, mime techniques, and word images in the dialogue, an actor may convey any kind of setting in time or space. This convention has been employed effectively in Ghashiram Kotwal. For instance, when the human curtain forms the temple or the actors mime throwing Ghashiram in jail, it is also an accepted convention that actors may step in and out of character and that they can switch roles when needed. In the play, the sutradhar adopts the roles of several characters

besides his own. For example, in the jail, he becomes a fellow prisoner. Involvement of the audience in a two-way contact with the performers is another tamasha convention. In the play, the audience is included in the scene itself several times. For example, when Ghashiram steps off the stage amongst the audience and vows to take revenge against the Pune Brahmins; also, the inclusion of the audience in the ritual of Ganesh Chaturthi chanting, "ganapati bappa morya!"

The presentation of the Tamasha may differ from troupe to troupe, but it generally begins with the invocation, an opening devotional song offered to Lord Ganesha, remover of obstacles and bestower of success. Tendulkar has employed this invocation tradition seamlessly in the play. In the tamasha tradition the songadya or the comic jester has a special relationship with the audience as well as the actors. His task is clearly to wander in and out of the dramatic action, sometimes interrupting tedious proceedings with unscripted jokes and witty remarks or asides to bored or impatient spectators. In Ghashiram Kotwal, Tendulkar innovates and extends the traditional role of the sutradhar to include the role of the songadya, and makes him an anti-establishment figure. For instance, the sutradhar asks a string of onomatopoeically rhymed questions about why Nana is limping: "How did it happen?", "Where did he fall?", "Did his foot fall crooked?" He makes the double entendre clear, as "foot falling crooked" is a euphemism for illicit sexual adventures. So, Nana hopping around on one leg becomes the visual incarnation of lechery. The lyrics and the play add layers of ironic meaning to the text:

Night has fallen, the Brahmins of Pune have gone to Bavannakhani,

gone to the burning ground

gone to the keertan

gone to the darshan…

This is full of sacrilegious juxtapositions. The iniquitous places (redlight district) are juxtaposed with the Keertan. Sex and worship are thus bound up together. This is followed by the swaying human curtain which sings the name of Krishna in unison. This is an ironic play on the gaulan segment of the Tamasha performance. The abrupt end of Peshwa patronage, once the British rule came to power in 1818 signified the decline of Tamasha tradition. It was revived in the 1930s by a group of socially committed artists who used it as a means of social

reform. The power of the Tamasha to communicate with the people was also used by the nationalist movement and the communist cause. In the current times, two lower caste communities are closely linked to the Tamasha entertainment tradition—the Kolhati and the Mahars. However, with the exception of sophisticated Loknatya troupes, many of the professional Tamasha troupes operate in villages and barely manage to earn a subsistence living for their members. Tendulkar's innovative use of the folk theatre traditions certainly helped to attract attention to the declining art of the Tamasha and helped to reconcile the traditional Sangeetnatak moulds with the modern realist theatre mould. Yet, in terms of the troupe involved in the production, as well as the audience catered to, this revival was restricted in its reach to the middle and affluent classes, while the lives of the actual Tamasha performers continued in poverty and obscurity. It is interesting to note the way in which the Lavani is represented in the play. The text continually juxtaposes the sacred and the profane, the temple and the bavannakhani (prostitution center) or the Keertan and the Lavani. Thus, the Keertan is posited to be the religious, respectable opposition to Lavani, which may then be viewed as a popular, though debased form with lewd connotations.

The 1960s was a definitive decade for the arts in many parts of the world, including India. Moving into a post-colonial era, Indian theatre was starting to be demarcated in national terms. What comprised national theatre itself varied from one region to the other, but perhaps for the first time, we Indians could begin a discussion of what or who constituted our modern Indian theatre. However, Indian theatre like the notion of Indianness, is debatable and debated, part of an ongoing cultural crisis which is extremely complex and involves much more than theatre.

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