


<b>History</b>	<b>Paper 2: Cultures in the Indian Subcontinent</b>	<b>Unit</b>	<b>Lesson 3 : Modern Indian Theatres</b>
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### 3.1: Tradition vs Modernity

The trajectory of modern Indian theatre can be mapped through an account of its **negotiations** with colonial and traditional theatrical forms, colonialist constructions of India and English education and print culture introduced by the British. Theatre historians trace back the evolution of modern cultural forms to the encounter with European culture and performative practices in late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Hence, modern Indian theatre, as it emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was impelled by questions of nationalism, self-identity, modernity, **recuperation** of 'Indian' traditions and social and cultural hierarchies. However, 'modernity' is not a category that can be qualitatively counterposed against tradition. The Sanskrit, folk and European forms of theatre were a cultural complex available in that historical context and out of an intermeshing of these emerged a hybrid 'modern' theatre. Hence, modernity cannot be simply construed as a break from tradition. Rather, it involves a retrieval and use of traditional forms that is predicated upon the historical needs of the time.

#### What The Critics Say

The designation, modern Indian theatre, refers to a new genre that developed between the late-eighteenth and the mid-nineteenth centuries. During this period, while the Europeans were discovering ancient Indian culture, Indian elites were discovering modern European culture. Out of this encounter arose the new theatrical genre called the modern Indian theatre. Shaped by the imperatives of empire, nationalism, and nativism, this was a metropolitan genre, created by a bilingual high-caste bourgeoisie, who strategically adapted elements from a gallery of models that included the Sanskrit theatre, traditional theatre, and European theatre.

Solomon, Rakesh H., "Towards a Genealogy of Indian Theatre Historiography", in *Modern Indian Theatre : A Reader*, ed., Nandi Bhatia, New Delhi : Oxford University Press, 2009, p.16.

### 3.2 : Theatre Emerging from Colonial Experience

Rakesh H. Solomon further classifies modern theatre into three phases : the Orientalist phase that begins in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century with the birth of Indology; the high nationalist phase at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the postcolonial phase from 1947 to the present (Solomon, 2009, p.4). The British brought theatre to India as a form of entertainment that catered to their people stationed in India. The Playhouse(Calcutta, 1753), Calcutta Theatre(1775) and Bombay Theatre(1776), the earliest theatres established in India, introduced innovations like the proscenium arch and drop curtain to the Indian stage. This exclusive form of entertainment for the British soon opened itself up to the Indian middle class elite. This was also a part of the British agenda of disseminating knowledge of 'superior' cultures that would 'humanize' the natives. Thus, a class of English-educated elites would be produced that would help them in effective governance and control over the colonized societies.

Gradually, urban theatre must have acquired a larger following, which is proved by the success of ticketed shows in 1853. It was Vishnudas Bhave who presented the first ticketed shows for Indian audiences at the Grant Road Theatre in Bombay, in Marathi(Lal,2009, p.33). In fact, Ananda Lal, in his essay "A Historiography of Modern Indian Theatre", says that the commercial system of staging plays rather court patronage is an important landmark in modern theatre(Lal, 2009, p.33). Another important feature of 'modernity' is the **self-reflexive** social and political critique that theatre began to develop in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Ramnarayan Tarakratna's *Naba Natak*(1867), Michael Madhusudan Dutt's *Ekei ki Bale Sabhyata*(1865) and *Buro Shaliker Ghare Ron*(1867) and Hemchandra Barua's *Kania Kirtan*(1861) are important plays in this regard.



Figure 1: Stuart Hogg, Commissioner of Police was satirized as a pig in the play, "The Police of Pig and Sheep" written by Upendranath Das in 1876.

Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dramatic\\_Performances\\_Act](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dramatic_Performances_Act)

After the war of independence in 1857 and the Indigo revolt of 1859-60, theatre became a mode of communication for anti-colonial sentiment and a powerful means of mobilization. Availability of printed copies contributed to the wide reach of theatre. The publication of the English translation of *Nil Darpan* (1860), a play written by Dinabandhu Mitra on the colonial oppression of indigo farm workers in Bengal, marked a decisive turn in the history of anti-colonial theatre in India. The following archival material tells us about official responses to the play:

#### From the Archives

But this production [*Nil Darpan*] is, after all, but a fiction, a degradation of the drama, the most powerful mode of appeal to the half-civilized mind, to the purposes of sedition, and the fostering of the popular hatred against the dominant race.

(*Lahore Chronicle*, June 5, 1861, p. 359)

Literature of this class, however worthless in itself, has nevertheless its value; it is of importance relatively to the time, as tending to throw light upon the temper, taste, talent, and tendencies of the several sections of society.

(*Madras Times*, June 25, 1861, p.586)

Source: Bhatia, Nandi, *Acts of Authority/ Acts of Resistance : Theatre and Politics in Colonial and Postcolonial India*, New Delhi: Oxford University, 2004, p.21.

The open critique of oppressive British policies generated a tremendous response and led to a whole tradition of **subversive**, anti-colonial writing. Playwrights such as Sisir Ghose, Manmohan Bose and Girish Chandra Ghosh wrote plays that radically questioned British policies. *Nil Darpan* was followed by anticolonial plays like *Gaekwar Durpan* and *Chakar Darpan*, written by Dakshina Charan Chattopadhyay, based on the conditions of workers in tea plantations. The efforts led to the building up of the Great National Theatre in Calcutta in 1875, that also started touring northern India (Bhatia, 2004, p.35). The anxieties and fears of the colonial authorities and their desire to curb the effectiveness of theatre led to the passage of the Dramatic Performances Censorship Act in 1876, whereby the government could "prohibit dramatic performances which are scandalous, defamatory, seditious, obscene or otherwise prejudicial to the public interest" (Bhatia, 2009, p.427). The following statement made by a government official in 1876 on the need for governmental control over theatre is an indication of the subversive power of performative practices.

#### Archival Material

Certain it is that we accept conduct and language on the stage if we read these same things in a book, we should at once reject as false, absurd and incredible, so powerful is the effect produced by the actual living representation before our eyes. And in times of excitement, no surer mode has been found of directing public feeling against an individual, a class or a Government than to bring them on stage in an odious light. It is doubtless for these reasons that the laws of civilized countries give to their Government great controlling power over the stage.

Source: Bhatia, 2004, p.7.

As censorship became more severe, dramatists at the turn of the century began to camouflage contemporary concern through mythological stories. Thus, mythological drama emerged as an important genre that sought to challenge colonialism and built a national identity. However, its celebration of a Hindu national identity was deeply problematic.

#### What the Critics Say

Aimed at challenging colonial structures, such Hinduistic revivals consequently fostered the simultaneous growth of a Hindu nationalism. In this context, besides a story of repression and resistance, dramatic censorship and anti colonial nationalist drama are also part of the story of the consolidation of an elite Hindu nationalism.

Source: Bhatia, 2004, p.50.

#### 3.2.1: The Indologists

While the colonial government sought to exercise control over the contents of dramatic productions through censorship, scholars associated with the school of Indology implicitly hierarchized Indian

theatrical traditions and pushed some traditional forms into disrepute and oblivion. The curiosity and eagerness to systematically understand native culture led to the development of 'Indology' as a discipline. Scholars interested in the culture and philosophy of India such as William Jones, H.H.Wilson and Goethe responded excitedly to the 'discovery' of ancient Indian culture by western scholars. William Jones translated Kalidasa's *Abhijanasakuntala* into English in 1789 and this was followed by a spate of translations into Danish, French, Italian and German. With this translation Jones announced his discovery of the great Sanskrit culture and theatre which he equated with "the national theatre of the Hindus" (Dharwadker, 2005, p.7). Similarly, Sylvain Levi, in his history of Indian Theatre, *Le Theatre Indien* (1890) describes Sanskrit theatre as "Indian Theatre par excellence". At the same time, he dismisses non-Sanskrit popular theatre as "unsophisticated", "indifferent to literary qualities" and as having "no history" (Bhatia, 2009, p.11-12).

Clearly, the Indologists' recuperation of Indian theatre traditions was not an objective collection of facts. Their version authoritatively equated Sanskrit tradition/Hindu tradition with Indian tradition and constructed an exoticized view of India as changeless and fixed. Moreover, their inability to cope with a variety of languages and forms of folk theatre bred insecurities and anxieties, thus leading them to brand folk theatres as licentious and low.

#### From the Archives

The puns in the [performances] are numerous, the Hindostaanee language being particularly adapted for indigenous plays upon words, double meaning, and droll associations, and to those who have made any progress in their study of the native dialects, the dramas afford instruction which it would be difficult to obtain by any other means.

In Calcutta. . . although very large sums are expended upon the festival in honour of the goddess Kali. . . performers of every denomination are admitted, Mussalmanee women as well as the real worshippers of the goddess; these people, it may be supposed, must be of a very low class and very loose morality.

(*Asiatic Journal*, January-April, 1837)

Source: Bhatia, 2004, p.6

The western-educated middle class internalized this idea of English theatre as high culture and indigenous forms as immoral. In their desire to construct a national identity which was both modern and rooted, they reinforced this idea of Sanskrit theatre as a glorious tradition that had to be merged with European modernity. This devalued folk traditions further and invisibilized them.

#### Critics Speak

In the field of literature, writers such as Bharatendu Harishchandra of Benaras "declared most kinds of popular theatre 'depraved' and lacking in theatricality...[and] championed a refined form of drama limited largely to drawing rooms and school auditoriums whose purpose would be to assist in the moral regeneration of the nation." In Bengal, this distaste for "folk" culture coincided with the rise of a bhadralok culture associated with the emerging middle and upper classes, who attempted to differentiate themselves from the populace by increasingly associating popular forms with the "licentious and voluptuous tastes" of the "vulgar".

Source : Bhatia, 2004, p.17.

Thus, theatre at this time also plays out the historical need of the middle-classes to carve out a new self-identity through the discourses of 'reform', 'modernity' and 'high culture'.

#### What the Critics Say

Indigenous forms came under attack because of the self critical thrust of social reform movements, the emergence of middle class culture in the cities, and the commitment of such major authors as Bharatendu Harishchandra, D.L.Roy, and Rabindranath Tagore to the literary and cultural possibilities of the new aesthetic. . . Sudipto Chatterjee argues that the English educated Indian who had lost his "native-ness" through contact with the colonizer, "had to invent a new identity for himself. This new identity, essentially a paradigm of hybridity, was fashioned out of the binary strains of Sanskrit revivalism and Westernization".

Source: Dharwadker, Aparna Bhargava, *Theatres of Independence: Drama, Theory, and Urban Performance in India since 1947*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005. p.141-2.

### 3.2.2 : Parsi Theatre

A significant popular trend that flourished in India between the 1850s and the 1930s was that of Parsi Theatre. This was the first major pan-Indian commercial and professional theatre seen in 19<sup>th</sup> century India. Beginning as an amateur student dramatic society at Elphinstone College, Bombay in 1850, it developed into a highly successful commercial venture that had an all-India presence. Initially funded by Parsi businessmen, it soon developed into a multi-troupe venture with salaried actors and dramatists drawn across regional and linguistic boundaries.

The productions that the troupes in Parsi theatre mounted were usually extravagant, **melodramatic** and grand spectacles. These plays drew their stories from Hindu mythology and epics, the Persian *Shahnama*, *Arabian Nights*, Victorian melodramas and even Shakespeare. Elaborate music and dance sequences enhanced their mass popular appeal. In appropriating the western stage and techniques and combining it with indigenous forms such as the nautanki and tamasha, it emerged as a truly hybrid theatre.

#### What the Critics Say

An economically workable commercial stage in most urban centres fitted folk performance to the European proscenium, creating technical models and unexpected marvels; eventually, and paradoxically, these were put in the service of realism as being assembled at this time. Architectural and stage technologies allowed for vampire pits, flying beds, miraculous appearances and disappearances, best suited for romances and mythological tales.

Source : Lal, Ananda, ed., *The Oxford Companion To Indian Theatre*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004, p.342.

Famous plays in this tradition include Amanat's *Indrasabha* (1853), Agha Hashr Kashmiri's *Yahudi ki Ladki* (1913) and *Rustom and Sohrab* (1929), Radheyshyam Kathavachak's *Vir Abhimanyu* (1914), *Shravan Kumar* (1916) and *Bharatmata* (1918). Shakespearean adaptations include Ahsan's *Khun-e-nahaq* (1898 from *Hamlet*), *Shahid-e-wafa* (1898 from *Othello*), Hashr's *Safed Khun* (1906 from *King Lear*) and Betab's *Gorakhdhanda* (1909 from *Comedy of Errors*) (Lal, 2004, p.340). Javed Malick, in his essay, "Foreign Origins/Native Destinations: Shakespeare and the Logic of Vernacular Public Stage" identifies at least 75 texts used by Parsi Theatre that are either direct translations or adaptations of Shakespeare and terms it 'nativising' of Shakespeare. Shakespeare's plays, in fact, formed an important part of English Studies in Indian universities. He was a venerated cultural icon and a symbol of the cultural superiority of the British. Malick suggests that the appropriation of this grand icon into the vernacular may be seen as an act of cultural **resistance**.

However, most middle and upper class dramatists of the time dismissed Parsi theatre as cheap, titillating and catering to 'low' tastes for mere commercial interests.



Figure 2: A Scene from Agha Hashr Kashmiri's *Yahudi ki Ladki* directed by Nadira Babbar.

Source: <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2000/20000625/spectrum/16tt8.jpg>

### 3.2.3 : Contributions of Bharatendu Harishchandra

Bharatendu Harishchandra (1850-85), considered the father of modern Hindi drama, was one of the earliest literary figures to articulate the need for the establishment of a national theatre. Known for his political plays, such as *Bharat Durdasha* (1876), *Andher Nagari* (1881) and *Nildevi* (1881) and many Shakespearean adaptations, he was also instrumental in setting up theatres in Banaras, Allahabad, Kanpur and Bareilly. Bharatendu distanced himself from commercial theatre, which he considered to be 'low' and 'vulgar' and conceptualized theatre as a national institution for the moral, ethical and political reform of the nation. This theatre would be, significantly, rooted in the Sanskrit tradition but would also adopt the new techniques. He attempted to construct a canon of Hindi drama that would serve nationalistic needs. However, in this age of emerging print culture his plays remained confined to 'literary drama' rather than 'performative theatre'. His staying away from commercial theatre may also have contributed to his plays being literary texts and not stageable plays.

#### What the Critics Say

... colonial Indian theatre thus appears to have been an environment in which plays and playwrights could meaningfully inhabit the domain either of print or of performance, but not both : the multimedia spectacles on stage lacked literary value, and most plays of literary value remained unperformed or unperformable.

Source: Dharwadker, 2005, p.58.

This contradiction also marked the works of Jayashankar Prasad (1886-1937) and Rabindranath Tagore whose plays were considered valuable works of literature but never met the success of popular performance.

### 3.2.4 : Tagore's Theatre

Tagore is considered a pioneer in the field of modern Indian theatre because of the range of his social and political critique and his experiments with a hybrid theatre. He wrote more than 60 plays, most of which were performed either in his house or at Santiniketan, the school that he established. His subjects range from a critique of institutionalized religions (*Bisarjan*, 1890; *Malini*, 1896) to political and social satires (*Achalayatan*, 1911; *Dakghar* 1912; *Chandalika* 1933), notions of sexuality (*Chitrangada*, 1892) and exploitation of natural resources (*Muktadhara*, 1922 ; *Rakt-Karabi*, 1924). In an age when respectable women were still not accepted on stage, he encouraged women of his own household to act in his plays. In fact, one of his plays *Natir Puja* did not have male characters at all. His plays were translated into many Indian and foreign languages as well and acquired international repute after he won the Nobel Prize in 1913. He also experimented with Sanskrit and indigenous theatre forms and European techniques, thus bringing a "performative hybridity" to his theatre ( Bhatia, 2009, p.39).



Figure 3: Tagore was hailed for supporting women's movements through plays like *Chitrangada*

Source: [http://www.google.co.in/images?hl=en&gbv=2&biw=1350&bih=748&tbs=isch%3A1&sa=1&q=Tagore%27s+plays&btnG=Search&aq=o&aqi=g10&aql=&oq=&gs\\_rfai](http://www.google.co.in/images?hl=en&gbv=2&biw=1350&bih=748&tbs=isch%3A1&sa=1&q=Tagore%27s+plays&btnG=Search&aq=o&aqi=g10&aql=&oq=&gs_rfai)

### 3.3 : Indian People's Theatre Association

As we have seen, theatre became an important site for the projection of a national identity for the middle classes in the colonial period. Into this arena entered the questions of reform, tradition, modernity and **hybridity**. But theatre was not the exclusive preserve of the urban middle-classes. Although folk forms were pushed into the margins of respectability, they continued to be practised and in some cases appropriated into 'elite' culture. Neither should nineteenth century Indian theatre be treated as a case of one-sided domination by the British and passive reception or collusion by Indian middle-classes. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, theatre had become a powerful arena of contestation and resistance against the colonial rule. The Progressive Writers Association (formed in 1936), committed to social reform and reaching out to the grassroots, recognized the power of popular theatre as a potent weapon against colonialism and fascism. Thus, the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) was established as the theatrical/cultural chapter of the PWA in 1942 with the aim of reaching out to the lowest of the low and making theatre into an effective 'People's Theatre'. The main aim of the IPTA as contained in its Draft Resolution was to mobilize "a people's theatre movement throughout the whole of India as the means of revitalizing the stage and the traditional arts and making them at once the expression and organizer of our people's struggle for freedom, cultural progress and economic justice" (Bhatia, 2004, p.76).

What began as an organization in Bombay and Calcutta in 1942 acquired a pan-Indian presence in a few years and a force that addressed "mass" audiences in the remotest parts of India in their own languages. The state units of IPTA would consist of travelling troupes who would pan out to the villages with a missionary zeal and involve local people in presenting their problems through the dramatic medium. Performances would come up collectively and project specific stories of exploitation and drought, poverty, hunger and sometimes collect money for relief. The IPTA theatre was characterized by realism and a direct political engagement with issues and a desire to bring about transformation in the lives of disadvantaged groups. It made use of diverse local popular dramatic traditions, such as the Jatra of Bengal, Burrakatha of Andhra Pradesh and the Tamasha of Maharashtra and sometimes assimilated these with western traditions, used outdoor locations and constantly improvised to reach out to people across linguistic regions.

The earliest plays that were aimed at a direct political intervention against imperialism and facism were *Roar China* and *Four Comrades* (1942). These plays generated a lot of controversy as they questioned the strategy of non violence followed by the Congress in the heyday of the Quit India movement. The plays were translated into many languages and performed all over India to generate people's participation in a nation wide debate. *Nabanna*, a play about the Bengal famine of 1943 by Bijana Bhattacharya was another successful production mounted under Shombhu Mitra's direction. The play was performed in many languages across the country to collect money for drought victims. It generated tremendous emotional response and roused people against exploitative systems. Balwant Gargi, in his book *Theatre in India* (1962) provides a first hand account of audience response after *Nabanna* was performed in Punjab. It struck such an emotional chord with audiences that women donated their ornaments for the victims :

The broken voices merged into a song as the six mounted the stage. They formed themselves into a group and sang, their eyes burning. All the suffering of famine and poverty was expressed in their voices and strained faces.

Their movements, gestures, expressions and speech had no theatricality; it was as real as the street scenes we experience daily. These faces were familiar to us in the poor quarters of Lahore....[T]hey mirrored Indian life, the poverty and suffering under the heel of a foreign power.

Women in the audience sobbed; the eyes of the men misted; two college girls who had wrinkled their noses at the players now wiped their tears....People and players, the two halves of the theatre kept apart for so long joined and became one whole. (Bhatia, 2004, p.86)



Figure 4: Shobha Sen in Nabanna in 1944.

Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shobha\\_Sen](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shobha_Sen)

By the 1960s, IPTA plays had successfully addressed a number of issues ranging from the world war and fascism and their connection with economic oppression in India, the Bengal famine of 1943, droughts, epidemics, workers' exploitation in mills and the communal divide after the partition of India. Some prominent IPTA members were Ali Sardar Jafri, Balraj Sahni, Balwant Gargi, Prithvi Raj Kapoor, Mulk Raj Anand, K.A. Abbas, Shombhu Mitra, Habib Tanvir, Anil de Silva, Utpal Dutt, Shiela Bhatia, Uma Chakravarty, Shanta Gandhi, Zohra Sehgal and Rasheed Jahan. IPTA was criticized for being the cultural arm of the Communist Party of India but this criticism is not entirely true. Not all members of the IPTA were card holding members of the CPI. The IPTA members played a very important role at the time of partition by touring and performing in the regions torn apart by communal conflicts.



Figure 5: A Scene from Balwant Gargi's *Lohar* directed by S.M. Azhar Alam in 1999.

Source: <http://littlespian.org/images/production/lohakutt4.jpg>

By the end of the 1950s, the IPTA had split up and practically wound up largely due to ideological differences within, lack of patronage, government control and censorship. It left behind a legacy of radical political theatre and activism that went beyond the stage to touch people's lives. It was truly a 'People's Theatre' connected with the lived experiences of the common people significantly the IPTA also created a space and a more progressive culture for the involvement of women. Many women participants involved in the touring squads of IPTA have left behind biographies and records



of how political activism radicalized their middle class lives and liberated them from class and gender barriers.

#### Of Further Interest

The following are examples of women's biographies:

1. Roychoudhuri, Reba, *Jeebaner Taaney Shilper Taaney*, Kolkata: Thema, 1999.
2. Roychoudhuri, Sajal, *Gana-natya-katha*, Kolkata: Ganamana Prakashan, 1990.
3. Mukhopadhyay, Kanak, *Narimukti Andolon O Amra*, Kolkata:NBA, 1993.

Source : Singh, Lata, "Foregrounding the Actresses' Question: Bengal and Maharashtra" in Lata Singh, ed., *Theatre in Colonial India: Play-House of Power*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009.

#### Audio Visual

The IPTA songs which were used for mobilization is a disappearing tradition. Hear some of these songs and get to know about a project that is trying to recover these songs.

Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U2yHRIszJwM>

### 3.4: Theatre after Independence

Post independence theatres were confronted with a new cultural context where an inclusive nationhood had to be defined and a new confident nation had to emerge after centuries of denigration of its culture. As a new nation emerged in 1947 into a separate political unit with marked geographical boundaries, it became imperative to prove its cultural oneness as well. The state took upon itself to construct this 'unity in diversity' and thus were formed central institutions which were to promote theatre and performing arts.

The Sangeet Natak Akademy was established in 1953 in Delhi and the National School of Drama in 1959 also in Delhi. As patronage and funding was made available in Delhi and other metropolitan cities, they became centres for new experimentation and search for an 'Indian' idiom. There was a surge not only in theatrical activity but also in the availability of translations across India. Thus, Karnad's plays in Kannada and Badal Sircar's works in Bengali were available to Hindi and English speaking audiences elsewhere as soon as they were written. In this way, translations had a major role to play in giving to urban theatre a pan-Indian character. Soon, the big four-Mohan Rakesh, Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar and Badal Sircar emerged as theatre personalities with a national stature (Dalmia, 2006, p.5).

The search for a new 'Indian' idiom in independent India generated many debates and took several trajectories. One of the most primary questions addressed was regarding the future direction that India theatre should take and the constituents of this 'Indianness'. Many playwrights and directors felt that the British period disrupted the continuity of Indian traditions and was therefore an aberration in the theatre history of India. As a corrective, western impositions needed to be done away with and 'pure' and unadulterated Indian traditions were to be recovered as an attempt at decolonization. They saw modern theatre as largely imitative of realistic western theatrical practices and unsuited to Indian reality and asked for a theatre which made use of folk forms and indigenous material. Narain Kale's argument at a seminar organized by the Sangeet Natak Akademy in 1956, is symptomatic of this critic of western modernity. He said that the new national theatre "must make the maximum use of indigenous material from our national heritage, and its foundations must be firmly laid in our national traditions." The seminar recommended that "the regeneration of the Indian theatre can only be possible by revitalising the traditional folk forms so as to narrow the gulf between the dramatic forms that have developed during the last hundred years and the survivals from the past." (Dharwadkar, 2005, p.42). The proceedings of this Seminar have been reported in Sangeet Natak Akademi Report, 1953-1958.

#### 3.4.1: Search for Roots

The theatre of roots arises from this stance against imitative western modernity, as mentioned above. The practitioners of the theatre of roots believe that the traditional and the folk practices are more authentic and Indian and using this idiom grounds them to their roots. Although the theatre of Habib Tanvir, Chandrashekhar Kambar, K.N.Panikkar and Ratan Thiyam has evolved differently, they

have together shaped a major trend in post colonial Indian theatre that has engaged with folk and traditional forms in a very wholesome way. In their work, folk elements do not merely exist as museum pieces, decontextualized from their origins but are integrated into the modern social and political contexts.

Habib Tanvir's *Agra Bazar* (1954), *Mitti Ki Gari* (1958), *Charandas Chor* (1974-5), *Good Women of Sezuana* (1958), *Jis Lahore Nahin Vekhya* (1990), Chandrashekhar Kambar's *Jokumaraswami* (1972), K.N.Panikkar's *Urubhangam* (1987) and Ratan Thiyam's *Chakravyuha* (1984) and *Ritasamhara* (2003) are famous plays in this genre. Habib Tanvir says, "It was only natural that theatre should have looked for indigenous material, for innovative method and peasant resources. So the folk theatre techniques that one fell back upon was a most natural thing." (Dalmia, 2006, p.253)

Tanvir, however, exercises caution in the use of the 'folk' and says that in an urban milieu, his attempt cannot be to conserve or recover 'authentic folk forms' but to find an idiom that transcends the rural/urban divide. In his Naya Theatre, which consisted of actors from Chattisgarh, he would improvise plays with the help of his actors and make them relevant to their context.



Figure 6: Tendulkar's popular play 'Ghashiram Kotwal', inspired by the rise of the Shiv Sena, was first directed by B.V. Karanth. Above, a scene from the play when it was staged at Bharat Bhawan in Bhopal on September 3, 2006, to mark the fourth death anniversary of Karanth.

Source: <http://www.frontlineonnet.com/fl2512/stories/20080620251208600.htm>

Vijay Tendulkar in *Ghashiram Kotwal* (1972), Girish Karnad in *Yayati* (1961), *Tughlaq* (1964), *Nagamandala* (1988), Badal Sircar in *Ebong Indrajit* (1962), *Pagla Ghoda* (1967) and Utpal Dutt in *Angar* (1959), *Mahabidroh* (1985) variously use folk forms, sometimes to universalize social and political oppressions and at other times to widen their repertoire and to carry political messages.



Figure 6: A scene from Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* directed by B.V. Karanth

Source:

[http://www.google.co.in/images?hl=en&source=imghp&biw=1366&bih=748&q=Hayavadana&btnG=Search+Images&gbv=2&aq=o&aql=&aql=&oq=&gs\\_rfai=](http://www.google.co.in/images?hl=en&source=imghp&biw=1366&bih=748&q=Hayavadana&btnG=Search+Images&gbv=2&aq=o&aql=&aql=&oq=&gs_rfai=)

#### Audio Visual

Watch a feature on Ratan Thiyam, "Some Roots Grow Upwards"

Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZPVOc21qHso&NR=1>



Figure 7: Amrish Puri in Girish Karnad's *Yayati* directed by Satyadev Dubey.

Source: <http://www.hindu.com/mag/2007/11/25/stories/2007112550080200.htm>

### 3.4.2: Critique of the Use of Folk Forms

The use of folk forms in urban theatre was critiqued on several grounds. Critics referred to the use of folk forms as only "exotica, splash of colour and caricature" that were used to garnish urban productions. In a scathing critique G.P.Deshpande says:

"Over the past four decades or so, the middle class in our country has grown enormously. Unlike the middle class which produced IPTA, this middle class is almost completely rootless. It does not have an ancestry. It is trying to create one for itself. The newly found love for the classic and the folk are both indications of the search for roots by an alienated middle class. This class, for the first time in India's history, has become a Trishanku, hanging in the middle air. It needs tradition but cannot relate to one. It needs classicism but does not know how to come to terms with it. It needs modernity but still does not know how to understand it." (Dalmia, 2006, p.208)

In fact, the very assumption that the western influence on Indian theatre is an 'alien' imposition and therefore tradition needs to be recovered, has been questioned. To assume that traditional forms are more authentic and Indian than colonial hybrid theatre is fallacious. Indian theatre appropriated and indigenized western influences so that the theatre that emerged is 'India' rather than a mere replica of British theatre.

#### What the Critics Say

"Our tradition had already been mediated by the colonial machinery of the nineteenth-century theatre, the conventions and staged tricks derived from the pantomimes and historical extravaganzas of the English Victorian stage," and the borrowed conventions were in turn thoroughly Indianized through music, song, color, pathos, melodrama and histrionic delivery.

Source : Rustom Bharucha quoted in Dharwadker, 2005, p. 140.

### 3.4.2 : Contemporary Theatre

Contemporary Indian Theatre scene looks very promising with the emergence of new playwrights, writing both in English and Indian languages. Manjula Padmanabhan and Mahesh Dattani, for example, are playwrights who have chosen to express themselves in English. Bansi Kaul, Feroz Khan, Usha Ganguly, Arvind Deshpande, Vijaya Mehta, Ranjeet Kapoor, Arvind Gaur, Ebrahim Alkazi, Satyadev Dube, and others have contributed to Indian Language Theatres through their productions. These theatre practitioners have been engaged in experimental, innovative and socially relevant theatre. Theatre has also been an effective medium to engage with issues of identity, group rights, and caste, class and gender oppression.

A significant new theme that has emerged in the works of some women directors is their gendered experience and the construction of gender on stage (Anuradha Kapur, in Bhatia, 2009, p.49). Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry's productions of *Yerma*, *Madwoman* and *Fida*, Amal Allana's *Himmatmaj*, Anuradha Kapur's *The Job* and *Sundari : An Actor Prepares* and Anamika Haksar's *Antar Yatra* not only question inflexible constructions of identity but also seek to rupture

conventional dramatic presentations. Theatre thus continues to challenge social conventions through experiments in form.

## Summary

- The projection of nationalism through cultural forms, continuity of Indian theatrical traditions and the British influence on performative traditions are the major themes that modern Indian theatre deals with.
- Modernity is usually ascribed to the Indian encounter with the west but it is important not to view this encounter as one sided imposition with the colonizer. Indian theatre traditions assimilated and indigenized western traditions and emerged as hybrid products that can be located in specific historical situations.
- Although theatre in the nineteenth century was initially restricted to the British population and then to the elite middle class, it soon became a potent medium to articulate resistance against colonial authority.
- Indologists claimed to have discovered the ancient Sanskrit tradition but in a distorted account, equated it with Indian traditions. The popular was thus dismissed as irrelevant. This view was reinforced by the reformists and therefore folk theatre was pushed to the margins by urban middle class theatre.
- After the enactment of the Dramatic Performances Censorship Act in 1876, theatre adopted the genre of the mythological to camouflage protest.
- The Parsi theatre emerged as a popular commercial theatre that had a pan-Indian presence in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It combined the proscenium stage, drop curtain and other European practices with folk forms, music and dance to mount spectacular costume dramas. With their themes derived from mythology, the plays were pageantry on stage.
- The Parsi theatre was rejected as merely commercial and cheap popular culture by serious literary writers such as Bhartendu Harischandra and Jagdish Chandra Mathur. Thus began a trend of plays that were important as literary pieces rather than a performative success.
- Rabindranath Tagore contributed to modern Indian theatre by presenting social and cultural critiques and by devising hybrid forms of theatre.
- Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), an outfit associated with the Progressive Writers Association, left a legacy of revolutionary theatre which went out of theatrical space to touch the lives of people and became 'People's Theatre'.
- After Independence, the promotions of the arts by the government, institutional funding and translation activity contributed to a 'pan-Indian' theatre.
- One of the important questions that the theatre of the 1960s dealt with was how to emerge from the shadow of realistic, western theatre and acquire a more authentic voice. Playwrights and directors such as Girish Karnad, Chandrashekhara Kambar, Habib Tanvir, B.V. Karanth, etc. advocated the use of folk theatre to construct a vibrant urban theatre. 'Theatre of Roots' would be more grounded in Indian traditions.
- In contemporary theatre social groups that had been invisibilized earlier are beginning to find a voice. The works of Neelam Mansingh, Anuradha Kapoor, Amal Allana and Anamika Haksar is important in this respect.

## Exercises

### Essay Type Questions

1. Discuss the contributions of IPTA to modern Indian Theatre.
2. Write a note on the 'Theatre of Roots'.
3. Comment on the 'discovery' of ancient Indian literature and culture by the Indologists.

4. Describe the significance of the Parsi Theatre of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
5. Describe the main issues and concerns of nineteenth century Indian theatre.

#### Objective Type Questions

##### I. Choose the Correct Option:

1. *Nildarpan* was a) a play about oppression on indigo plantations b) a play from Parsi Theatre c) an ancient Indian epic d) a modern Indian novel
2. Tagore's theatre a) was a commercial success b) discouraged women from participation c) was hybrid in nature d) was largely rural
3. Ali Sardar Jafri and K.A. Abbas were members of a) Parsi Theatre b) IPTA c) Theatre of Roots d) mythological theatre
4. *Ghashiram Kotwal* a) uses folk forms to universalize political questions b) is written by Girish Karnad c) is a mythological play d) was written in colonial times
5. Theatre of Roots a) imitates western dramatic forms b) recuperates folk forms for modern urban theatre c) rejects folk forms d) came up in colonial times

##### Answers:

1-a ; 2-c ; 3-b ; 4-a ; 5-b

##### II. State whether the following statements are true or false :

1. Theatre in post independence India was imitative and derived from western theatre.
2. The Dramatic Performance Censorship Act promoted theatre in India.
3. The middle classes contributed to the erasure of folk traditions in 19<sup>th</sup> century India.
4. The IPTA mobilized popular support against imperialism and fascism.
5. Translations of plays into modern Indian languages gives them a pan-India presence.

##### Answers:

1-False ; 2- False ; 3- True ; 4- True ; 5- True

##### III. Match the following :

- |                           |                            |
|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. Indology               | a. Agha Hashr Kashmiri     |
| 2. Theatre of roots       | b. Bhartendu Harishchandra |
| 3. Parsi Theatre          | c. Bengal Famine of 1943   |
| 4. Non-commercial theatre | d. Ratan Thiyam            |
| 5. <i>Nabanna</i>         | e. William Jones           |

##### Answers :

1-e ; 2-d ; 3-a ; 4-b ; 5-c

## Glossary

- Negotiations : give and take ; transaction  
 Recuperation : recovery  
 Self-reflexive : Consciously think about oneself  
 Subversive : anti-establishment ; questioning  
 Melodramatic : use of exaggerated emotions

Resistance : opposition  
Hybridity : mix of characteristics or attributes

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### Suggested Readings

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