



## The Origins of Indian Drama in English: Playwrights of the Pre-independence Era

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### ABSTRACT

The rich tradition of the Indian theatre dates back atleast to 5000 years. The earliest book on dramaturgy *NatyaSastras* written by Bharataan Indian sage who unraveled the hidden connections between performance and religion, culture and mysticism. Also he spoke about the profound physical, metaphysical and spiritual affiliations embedded in this realm. Bharata in his *NatyaSastras* says that Gods are never so pleased on being worshipped with scents and garlands as they are delighted with the performance of drama.

A host of playwrights who were primarily satisfied writing short-plays took to writing as it was meant for the purpose of reading. Their choice of writing was social themes with more preference, history next and at last allegory. It can be observed in a common glance that most of the playwrights were not serious enough to avail the source from the rich Sanskrit drama; probably they felt a new language had to find its roots from the native land. And so, Sri Aurobindo adopts the Elizabethan model, Kailasam had a strong interest in fashioning his play in the Shakespearean mould, Bharathi Sarabai was influenced by Yeats and many followed neither The East nor The West, but had their own way in the making of a play. Some had the interest to draw the source from ancient myths and legends.

**KEYWORDS:** metaphysical, dramatic, supernatural, humorous, holistic

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Krishan Mohan Bannerji wrote *The persecuted* in the year 1831. This contains dramatic scenes of illustration of the then state of the Hindu society in Calcutta which contains the Brahminical hegemony, helping the common man to be wary of their traits. Sri Aurobindo, a master in both Eastern and Western thought, (1872-1950) wrote five complete plays. In addition to this, he wrote comedies and tragedies. His plays are Elizabethan in model having five acts and sub plots. Aurobindo actually wanted to imitate Shakespeare. His plays are a mix of prose and verse. His completed plays are *Vasavadutta*, *Rodoegune*, *The Viziers of Bassora*, *Eric the King of Norway* etc.. His incomplete plays are *The Birth of Sin*, *The Maid in the Milk* and a few more. His plays find their theme from numerous sources. The theme of the play *The Viziers of Bassora* is taken from *The Arabian Nights*. Also the author's own inventions too find their space. Characters ascending to romantic heights can be often seen in his plays. Countries from Scandinavia to India provide material for his plays. It also tells of the vast learning of the playwright.

Of all these five plays, *Rodoegune* is a tragedy. Like Shakespeare, he blends supernatural elements in his plays. The goddess of Athena adds to the heroic process of persons and enables him to risk his life in many adventures. *The Viziers of Bassora* is replete with romance and subplots. We find the interest of Aurobindo in

projecting the medieval romance. Aurobindo through his plays takes us to various regions, and periods. One important feature of his plays is the idea of human evolution and his concept of love as a force that destroys evil. A conscious reader of Aurobindo will invariably hit at different levels of reality. There are various answers that he presents and some are metaphysical in nature. Sri Aurobindo upholds a natural view throughout his writing. His view of life is that no one sticks on to sentiment or ambition, but is coerced by circumstances that demand an individual be so. His use of language is highly commanding than his contemporaries.

Yet another writer who made a significant effort other than the triumvirs was Sarath Kumar Ghose who wrote, *The Prince of Destiny*, *Kedarnath*, *Das Gupta's*, *Calif for a Day*. Also, Dhan Gopal Mukherji's *Layla-Majnu*, is a popular play written in the year 1916. Adya Rangacharya (1904-1985), deemed to be one of the greatest literary figures has written Plays, Poetry, Criticism, Travelogue and Biography and Autobiographical predictions: His only English play is *A Peasant and his Wife* which is a joke in one scene. He had the rare skill of blending western realism and native dramatic devices in drama from the Sanskrit and the folk traditions.

A.C. Krishnaswami proved to be a playwright with a societal concern. His play, *The Two Twice-Borns* (1914) was written to abolish the then existing evil customs such as widow-marriage and ill-assorted marriages. Along with him, S.M. Michael too wrote a three act play *Nation-Builders* defending inter-caste or inter-sub-caste alliances in marriages. The condition of the social life in India, especially of the sophisticated middle class people in Indian cities was sketched in his five playlets named *Dramatic Divertissements* (1921) by V.V. Srinivasa Aiyangar. There is an element of suspense in his plays but most of his plays are but random thoughts and comments and are written in the form of a conversation.

He also brought to limelight the subtle fraudulence that encircles every religion. He was greatly commended among the pre-independence playwrights who used much humor in his plays. *The surgeon-General's Prescription* and *The Point of View* are frameworks of real comedies. Few other plays of him are, *Blessed in a wife*, *Vichu's wife* and *Wait for the Stroke*. His efficiency lies in entertaining the public and he succeeded in doing so. He basically dealt with the struggles of the middle class people in the society. He himself admits at one point that his dramas can be hardly categorized as dramas.

Tagore's *Bisrajan* inspired Niranjana Pal that he wrote the three act play *The Goddess* in the year 1924 exploring the insidious corruption in priestcraft. This was also considered a satire on the duplicitous life style in the Christian world. But this man did not find enough success on stage because; his writing though with content did not carry coherence. Moreover, he worked on subjects that were too complicated.

*Where God is not and other Playlets* (1933) is a collection of four playlets by V. Narayanan. These plays severely attack institutionalized religion and society which imposes rigid demands of people. His plays speak of the idiocies of the Hindu Customs. In his powerful play, *The Lawyer and His Daughter*, he speaks the condition of a Virgin widow, Padma, whose father compels her to get her head shaved. Her two other brothers subscribe to the father's superstitions. The play reveals the moronic blunders that every Indian family had those days.

Another target of V. Narayanan is the dowry system which is powerfully described in the play, *You are Not My Husband*. Among the other playwrights of the then period, V. Narayanan aimed at making a higher type of humanity. This playwright is remembered for his master art, *Beauty is a Leveler of Castes*, where he introduces different names of castes. The word caste spells horror in the play because the rivals look to set fire to the house of the girl who desires to marry much against the will of her family and community. The contribution is definitely tremendous as he highlighted the true picture of inter-caste marriage.

Besides the aspect of stage worthiness of a play, allegorical method too impresses the minds audience. Demoralized India in the pre-independence was illustrated with eternal truths by Svarnakumari Devi Ghosal in her play, *Princess Kalyani* (1930). *The Eastern farce* (1931) is another allegory by M.S. Gopal. This is a beautiful play in which the Hero's 'Inner Conscience' acts as his Prime Minister, his 'Superior Intellect' being the Education Minister and the 'Lower Intellect' as Vice-Chancellor respectively. Man's desire for remarkable power and the ability to rule is vividly seen here.

The idea that, 'service to mankind is a service to God' was promoted by P.A. Krishnaswami in his play, *Kailash* (1944). This technique of allegorical writing was used to portray any situation in life. Shanti Jhaveri's *Deluge* (1944) is a five-act play with a prologue and an epilogue. It is a satire on the world-view of the modern man.

Another allegorical mock-trial, *The Trial of Science for the Murder of Humanity* was written by A.S.P. Ayyar in the year (1942). Though the play is quite humorous, it is very much thought-provoking and tries to re-establish humanism over man's crude scientific applications. There are conversations in the plays in which there are people who defend science on one end and those who defend faith on the other end. In the year 1935, A.S.P. Ayyar wrote full length plays with vital discussions about the social customs and conflicts. Moreover, he commented on the popular opinions of those days. He wrote three plays, *Sita's choice*, *Brahma's Way*, and *The Slave of Ideas*.

Anyone who reads “*Image-Breakers*” by D.M.Borgaonkar is bound to confuse by the number of characters in the play and also how they are related to others. But his focus is on the discontentment of youngsters in the country and their revolt against conventions. He deals with several issues including inordinate affection, perversion and multiple marriages. His plays have a melodramatic tone. In this particular play, he remarks, *We have been image-breakers, not with sinful intentions to spite social discipline, but to escape its defects....* (Bhatta, 1987)

The playwright is of the opinion that solution must be sought by fair means or foul. But the method by which the playwright tries to bring solution is apparently incorrect. His methods to justify an issue or to solve a problem are fallacious as he tends to yield to those ills to solve them.

D.M.Borgaonkar, S.Fyzee-Rahamin, BalwantGargi, Khwaj Ahmed Abbas, AjoyChunderDutt are some of the minor playwrights who had their interests in elevating the standards of the society and their major effort was to set a benchmark in dealing with those problems. HarindranathChattopodhyaya (1898) wrote five plays and a few social playlets. His plays deal with the conflict between good and evil, the grace of God and how good triumphs over evil. The brutal efficiency of the capitalists on the poor laborers in depicted in his collection of five social plays *The Window*. Here, he boldly speaks of the quality of laws and how people suffer for their fundamental rights. The play *The Parrot* is a tragedy. It speaks of the inner man and his desperate attempts to be emancipated.

The adverse effects of imperialism are portrayed in his beautiful play, *The Sentry's Lantern*. We find how the desires of men evaporate in no time. They hope for the other world and believe that their dreams would be alive in the other world. This play reveals a hope for rebirth and conviction of the world unseen. The play opens the readers to the illusory benefits of modern civilization. The playwright was much concerned about the prevalent evils such as caste system etc.

TyagarajaParamasiva Kailasam-1885-1946, a Kannada playwright, found a prominent place in Indian English Drama. He published the plays, *The Burden*, *The Purpose Fulfillment*, *The Curse or Karma*, and many playlets. The sources for his writings were taken from *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*. *The Purpose* is a play in two acts, and *Fulfillment* is a sequel to it. *The Curse or Karma* is a play of five acts. His beautiful work of art, *A Monologue* cannot be strictly called a drama, but is a portrayal of woman to be a sufferer in the society and man to be the consoler. The suffering woman is given in four stages, a little child, a little girl, then a maid and then as widowed woman. Solutions to problems are rarely found in his plays, but he brought to limelight the social issues.

Bharati Sarabhai wrote two plays, *The Well of the People* and *Two Women* which are simply stirring. She proved to be an outstanding woman playwright of her days. Being a woman, she understood the pitiful plight of women and focused on themes such as traditional womanhood, complex, sensitive nature of sophisticated modern women and a woman's private world. The first play especially, *The Well of the People* speaks of the ambition of an old woman to build a well for the untouchables in her village with her little savings. The play is a picture of synthesis of religions and social service.

Indian writers also wrote on philosophical issues. They had the inclination to fathom the world of reason and they were introduced to the classical world of thinking. Modern doubt and atheistic worldview is discussed in the play *The Trial Celestial* by Suryadutt J. Bhatt. In this play, a man who is in search of God, goes to spirits and inquires about his life. The spirit replies,

*the tragedy of the faithful is that they are  
always in a maze and lose their way. Their  
allegiance to the supernatural, their pursuit  
of the unreal and their craving for the  
immaterial debar them from seeing the natural,  
the real and the material.* (Bhatta, 1987)

Many plays, though did not receive global acclaim, really aimed at the betterment of people as they spoke of human sensitivities. This in fact is the created purpose of such plays. The so called commercial elements prevalent in modern literatures are only a current component which art forms of the yester years did not comply with. It is obvious that V.V. SrinivasaAiyangar's plays lack unity of time or place but they were successful primarily because of their social relevance.

There requires a certain measure of regional understanding while critiquing Indian playwrights. The plot of certain plays is incredibly thin and is highly marginalized, bound to the situation. V.Narayanan who wrote *Where God is* Not obviously lacked the essential dramatic elements. He could not build the climax properly; there were abrupt ending to scenes. But the plays carried a significant philosophical depth in them.

Staging of plays in a language that does not hold public significance requires definite creativity. One of the challenges of Indian drama in English is the linguistic adroitness of the actors. Though the playwrights were dexterous in the making of a play, the actors were not proficient in the usage of English as powerfully as the dramatist. Quality and achieving status in an unknown language is achieved only after years of travail. There are

occasions when the play becomes popular mainly by the actor. Inversely, the play can lose its quintessence when the actor underperforms. This view is explained in the words of Srinivasa Aiyangar as he says that the real beauty of the play is revealed only by trained acting.

#### CONCLUSION

A holistic approach to Indian English plays conveys the message that the focus was predominantly on the society, highlighting its ills. It was a mode of reprimanding the evils of the society. The successors of major playwrights too followed a similar method when they took to writing. Many started focusing on inter-caste marriages and several other forms of evil. Whoever had skills that combined English proficiency and theatre arts focused on the need of the hour and expressed them through their plays.

However, this approach systematically reduced other issues and generic themes that required a touch from art. Moreover, literary objects did not find any serious significance and became an anachronism. The playwrights just produced English texts that least bothered over the elements of literature. The dramatic medium itself suffered advancement owing to the political conditions that prevailed then. Some of the plays were written and staged during the felt presence of the British imperialistic regime. Indian mind was antagonistic to any form of English. Despite these setbacks, English drama found its survival, because, there was consistency in production at least with a minimum interval.

By writing current politics and history, A.S.P. Ayyar, Mrinalini Sarabhai and a few more playwrights found their popularity. Some of the dramatists and their plays that found success were, Kailasam's *The Purpose*, Chattopadhyaya's *The Saint*, Narayanan's, *You are not my Husband*, Ayyar's *In the Clutch of the Devil*, Gargi's *The Vultures*, Abbas's *Invitation to Immorality*.

Unlike the other literary genres, Indian drama in English has been making a slow stridency. Some of the playwrights are less known and several original manuscripts too were lost. Despite these constraints, Indian drama in English advanced greatly, particularly in the post-independence era. The playwrights worked on diverse literary and non-literary elements lifting their banner high in the arena of making plays

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