
**An Assessment of Indian Theater of 20th Century with Reference
to Mahesh Dattani**

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Before 2000 years, Indian drama has its distinct place in the scenario of world literature. The celebrated Natyashastra in Sanskrit, by the sage Bharata in his manifest presents the inclination of the Indian mind towards the great art of drama which was treated not just as an entertainment but as a way towards the fulfillment of the aims of life. In all his aspects of drama including stagecraft, music, plot-construction, dialogue and acting were elaborately discussed by Bharata who also provided a set of rules to be followed by the actors and directors. His emphasis was on the far-reaching, significance of ‘rasas’ – the nine primary emotions of human being standing out in the midst of shifting moods. It was emphasized that the total impression left on the mind of the spectators of a play should be one ‘peace’.

The great master of the art- Bhasa, Shudraka, Kalidasa, Harsha and Bhavabhuti, to name a few prominent stars from the galaxy, were devoted to the highest principles of Indian aesthetic and could also entertain the audience with their technical excellence and a capacity to see the essence through the ironies of life. Drama survived in varying form in different regional language of India. The ‘jatras’ in Bengal, the folk plays of Tamilnadu , the ‘yakshganas’ of Andhra and Karnataka, ‘Chadiya-chadiyani’ of Orissa, the ‘Bhavai’ of Gujarat, the Ramlila plays of North India. There were other folk form of theater also, such as *Khyal*, *Manch*, *Bhagat*, *Svang*, *Nautanki*, *Tamasha* which were accompanied by music, dance and mimic action. Modern Indian drama is linked both to the classical Sanskrit drama and folk theater. The classical Sanskrit drama manifested the concept of the plot (*vastu*), hero (*neta*) and the lasting final impression (*rasa*) which was accepted, to some extent, by the folk theater.

Modern Indian drama profusely borrowed from the Western Theater and it is also found that some devices which apparently came from the Western tradition had their roots also in Sanskrit plays. The folk theater in India brought laymen as their ‘heroes’ and also used apparently insignificant matters of day to day life as their subject matter. Modern Indian theater has links with the classical Sanskrit drama, the folk theater and also the western theater. Modern theater in India is an urban product that flourished during the British period

in great cities such as Calcutta (Kolkata), Bombay (Mumbai), and Madras (Chennai). As far as Professional theater is concerned, a rich section of the society took it up as the most distinguished form of entertainment. Permanent building with necessary setting for the stage where constructed or hired by rich businessmen having a taste for fine arts and there were regular show on the stages. People were naturally, attracted towards this new form of entertainment and eventually, these theater halls became the center of spreading national feelings.

In Calcutta, ‘The Star’, ‘Rangmahal,’ ‘Biswaroop,’ ‘Minerva’ etc. were among the forerunners of self-sustaining and active theater houses that drew audiences from far and near. Professional theater also developed in Thiruvantpuram and Gauhati. Entertainment is not the chief aim of such theater, though presentation of classics entertains the educated class. Generally, the amateur theater group performs serious plays with strong political or satiric overtone. With Bijan Bhattacharya and his Marxist followers, drama became more or less a medium of protest against various social oppressions. Gradually, Bombay grew up to be the most flourishing place for Amateur Theater; the multi-lingual population of the city encouraged its growth in Marathi, Hindi, Gujarati, English and also in South Indian languages. The presence of Bollywood personalities in Bombay – to mention Prithviraj Kapoor who founded the Prithvi Theater and his son Shashi Kapoor- harnessed the blooming of theater there. The establishment of the National School of Drama in Delhi in the 1960s is another step towards the fulfillment of the aspirations of the director and actors of the country. Experimental theatre is not altogether different from serious amateur theatre .the influence of Brecht, Sartre, Camus, Beckett were clearly visible in experimental theater that sought of present the contemporary world of reality through its renew theme, structure, dialogue, setting, performance. But all these experiments were done mostly in regional languages. The modern drama is therefore performance-oriented and not as much text-oriented as it was earlier. All the experiments on the stage discussed above were seen mainly regional drama during the ninety sixties, seventies and eighties. English drama was not of much significance during the time. At that time English translation of plays, originally written in regional Indian languages, appeared on the stage making the Indian readers aware of the new trend of drama in different corner of the country. Indian English drama was influenced with new realism by Harindranath Chattopadhyaya who introduced social and human problems in his plays. Though both the realistic trends and spiritual trend prevailed

side by side in the arena of Indian drama in English, realistic and purposeful plays dominated the stage. A.S.P Ayyar expressed his reformist zeal in the clutches of the devil, Sita's choice, the slave of ideas and the trial of science for the murder of humanity. Written during the nineteen thirties and forties, these plays deal with the burning social issues such as widow remarriage and caste system in India and serve as social criticism. Asif Currimbhoy is perhaps the most notable dramatist of the time who succeeded in bringing the theatrical effect successfully. In one of his later plays 'Goa' for example Currimbhoy probes into mother-daughter relationship tangled with their lovers and friends in Goa.

Nissim Ezekiel, the most significant Indian english poet who enriched English drama with his Nalini, a marriage poem, the sleep walkers and song of deprivation, an excellent craftsman. Ezekiel dramatized the oddities in human life-particularly, the hollowness of urban middleclass life-through successful use of irony, wit and humor. He is compared to some English social satirists for exposing the pose and prudence of contemporary life. Contemporary political events are also taken up by some dramatists like Lakhan Dev and Gurucharan Das. After trying his hand at the historical play 'Tiger's Claw' that deals with Shivaji's killing of Afzal Khan, Lakhan Dev dramatized the murder of Gandhiji in murder at the prayer meeting (1976) which is a reminder of Eliot's murder in the cathedral. Pratap Sharma is noted for bringing the theme of sex on the stage which had been a taboo in the indian society. The professor has a war cry (1970) displays the anguish of the central character, Virendra, who cannot help establishing illegitimate relationship and is yet tortured by conscience. A Touch of Brightness (1970) is a realistic portrayal of the red light area in Bombay. Technical triumph combined with thematic boldness made Pratap Sharma successful on the stage. Cyrus Mistry's Doongali house, written in 1978 but first produced in 1990 is about the parsi community in India. It shows the disintegration of a Parsi family and exposes how India is divided on the basis of language, religion, community and class. It cannot be denied that Indian drama in English during the nineteen eighties and nineties-notable for bold innovations and fruitful experiments-is mostly the translation from vernaculars. And yet these are to be seriously considered in a discussion of Indian drama in English. Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar, Mahesh Elkunchwar, Mahasweta Devi and Girish Karnad are the most faithful representatives of modern India. Dattani considers Mahesh Elkumchwar as the father of modern Indian theare while Mohan Rakesh was greatly influenced by marxism. Badal Sircar was influenced by existentialism and the

absurd drama. Sircar created a genuine people's theatre, known as the third theatre, which intended to bring about social changes as well as changes in the thought process of mankind. Procession, for example, is about the search for a real home, a new society based on equality. Vijay Tendulkar has also established himself as a leading Indian playwright in English. He created new models for the stage, demolishing the three-act play. His Ghashiram Kotwal is a perfect example of the vibrant new theatrical form created by him. 'Sakharam binder'. 'Silence! the court is in session', belonging to the early phase of his career brought immediate popularity both for the new form adopted by Tendulkar and for raising relevant questions about love, sex, marriage and moral values prevalent in the society. His latest plays, To Hell with Destiny and the Tour, deal with the value system in Indian society. Besides the English translation of plays written in regional languages, Indian stage also presents English translations of foreign plays. During the nineteen nineties, younger playwrights like Mahesh Dattani and Manjula Padmanabhan brought new themes and technique in Indian drama. While Dattani concentrates on the mean, ugly, unhappy things in life, Padmanabhan projects the terrifying world of utter poverty and inhumanity. Her best known play 'Harvest' deals with the struggles of survival of the slum dwellers in Mumbai. Marginalized and alienated from the mainstream, the play, brought her a major international award, the Onassis.

Indian dramatists in English, however, are trying their best to introduce a new language quite different from British English. Gurucharan Das commented, "English theatre in India will have to project the kind of hybrid English we speak, interspersed with Indians are able to use English as an Indian tongue to the stage.

Padmanabhan fails to bring great success on the stage. Dattani, on the other hand, is quite successful, able to capture the imagination of the audience. Mahesh Dattani is the only major Indian English playwright in English in the closing decades of the twentieth century and now, in the twenty-first century. The question wherein does his originality lie? To my mind is experimentations with new and unusual themes make him what he is today.

Dattani brings unusual themes like hijra marriage, lesbianism, homosexuality, bi-sexuality, dreaded disease like HIV positive into the orbit of Indian English drama. Previously, it was unthinkable to write a play on hijras but Dattani makes it possible in his well-known play. *Seven steps around the fire*. He dives deep into the psyche of hijras to portray characters like Kamala Champa and few others hijras. Added to it is the theme of homo-sexuality and same sex-marriage. Traditional conformists will run away from the play on the plea that it violates

our traditional norms and offends our sensibility. Dattani has the courage of conviction to say what is what. One can't run away from reality, however painful it might be. Dattani not only faces reality but depicts it with all sincerity and devotion.

Taboo subjects and words find a place in Dattani's works because he writes topical plays. Take the case of gay and lesbian characters depicted in his plays. Dattani knows that Indian mind does not accept such kind of thing as same-sex love (homosexuality and lesbianism) either in life or in literature. But the fact remains that many people are born like that- they have inclination for same-sex love and what is more, they want to be united in wed lock as is the case with hetero sexual persons Dattani has called spade, a spade. Recently we find well-known writers like Vikram Seth and Shobha De supporting the cause of same-sex marriage.

Dattani's plays such as *seven steps around the fire*, *mango soufflé*, *on a muggy night in Mumbai do the needful* are based on gay and lesbian relationship. Life in these plays is presented from bi-sexual and same sex love point of view. By highlighting the problems of hijra in our society, Dattani shows how they are exploited in our society. To treat them as untouchable and again to utilize their services at the time of marriage and childbirth, speaks volumes for the double standard in our society.

Problems of Indian middle class family such as marriage negotiations in heritors poverty caused by natural calamities like earthquakes and droughts are treated as themes in plays like where there's a mother feeding her child. Dattani sees life dwindling under the pressure of poverty and depicted his characters with compassion in his plays. In his 'Thirty days of September, a family play based on incestuous relationship Dattani shows how women feel humiliated and get exploited by male members of the family. Here, a helpless mothers, Shanta turns to Deepa to save her daughter, Mala for both the mother and the daughter were physically exploited by the same man who happen to be her, brother and Mala's uncle. The agonizing request "please saves her. I did not save her. I did not know how to save her. How could I save her when I could not save myself..." (CP II 55) rings in our ears over and over again, as we go through the play till the end.

If 'family 'and 'gay 'themes are to central to some of his plays, crime and disease are the focus of threw of his plays, the Swami and Winston, Uma and the fairy Queen, and *Ek Alag Mausam*. SitaramTrivedi, a fake religious person wants to cheat people in the name of religion by building ashrams inside and outside the country. The horror of partition haunts him without end. He tells, Uma, the researcher about it emphatically: "what do you know of

horror partition? I have lived through it!” Dattani exposes the fake sadhus who betray people in the name of religion. Committing crime for sensual gratification is shown in the character of Nila in *Uma and fairy queen*. Nila killing of Michael, her second husband speaks volumes for her sensual nature and criminal bent of mind. Her son Feroz calls a spade, a spade.

CONCLUSION

Dattani’s plays don’t evoke the myths and legends of ancient India. Here, there is no intersexuality – no going back to the Indian epic or dramatic tradition, as we find in Girish Karanda’s plays. (There is only one reference to the *Ramayan* in “Seven Steps around the Fire”.) His plays are about modern India.

His technical innovations in the form of stage directions, ‘thought’ and ‘speech’ which represent subconscious and conscious mind, conversational idioms, are hallmarks of his plays. Future dramatists will look forward to him for making innovations both in themes and techniques (as he has done in his plays) in their plays. So far as the themes are concerned, only the sky is the limit.

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