

The Origin of the Indian English Drama

Dr.G.Ramesh

Lecturer in English, Department of English, Government Degree College,
Kodur(RS), Tirupathi Dist ,AP, India

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Abstract

This paper investigates the origins and development of Indian English drama, considering the impact of colonialism, indigenous cultural traditions, and mythic heritage. It analyzes how modern Indian theatre arose from the fusion of Western dramatic conventions with native practices under British rule. The study examines the rise of theatre in India, the influence of regional languages on dramatic forms, and the gradual expansion of English-language drama. It underscores the work of pioneering dramatists such as Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Rabindranath Tagore, and Sri Aurobindo, who shaped Indian English drama through themes of nationalism, spirituality, humanism, and cultural identity. The paper emphasizes the role of myths and legends from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, which playwrights used as symbolic tools to explore contemporary social and philosophical questions. By marrying Indian perspectives with Western techniques, these playwrights positioned Indian English drama as a major literary genre mirroring India's social transformation and intellectual awakening in the modern era.

Key Words: Emerging genre, Social structure, Hub, English theatre, Myths, Contemporary themes, Social reformer, protagonist, Playwright, Cognizance, Savant, Legends,

Introduction

Indian English drama occupies a significant place in the history of Indo-Anglian literature. It emerged from the interaction between Indian cultural traditions and Western literary influences during the colonial period. The advent of British rule in India brought remarkable changes in the social, cultural, and educational structure of Indian society. English education introduced Indians to Western drama, theatre, and literary forms, inspiring educated Indians to experiment with English-language dramatic writing. Consequently, modern Indian theatre developed through a synthesis of indigenous traditions and European theatrical conventions.

Initially, dramatic activity thrived in Bengali, Marathi, and Sanskrit, not English. Subsequently, Calcutta became the hub of nineteenth-century theatre. The founding of theatres and the adaptation of English plays into Indian languages then laid the groundwork for modern Indian drama. Over time, Indian playwrights began writing dramas in English, using the language to explore social realities, political awareness, spiritual dilemmas, and cultural identity.

Indian English drama drew extensively from myths, legends, epics, and folklore. Themes from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* gave dramatists symbolic and philosophical depth. Using myth, playwrights explored contemporary social and moral issues while preserving India's cultural heritage. Early dramatists such as Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo integrated Indian tradition with Western dramatic forms, enriching Indian English drama with themes of nationalism, spirituality, love, sacrifice, and universal harmony.

Thus, through these distinct phases, Indian English drama evolved as a powerful literary form reflecting India's socio-cultural transformation, intellectual awakening, and artistic creativity during the modern age.

Elucidation of the Topic

Girish Karnad, a leading playwright of this century, observed that "Indo-Anglian literature represents the most valuable contribution India has yet made to the world of books."¹ Indian English Drama is an emerging genre within Indo-Anglian literature.

The British rule in India transformed the country's social structure. "The desire of educated Indians to imitate the West, added to their urge for finding a new theatre, sowed the seed of the modern movement"².

During the British period, Calcutta became a hub of dramatic activity. Drama at first developed in vernacular languages like Bengali and Marathi, not English. Notably, for the first time in modern Indian theatre, two comedies—*Disguise* and *Cove is the Best Doctor*—were translated from English into Bengali by Lebedoff (a Russian) and Goloknath Das. Following this, Prasanna Kumar Tagore founded the first Bengali theatre, the Hindu Theatre, in 1831. Later, in 1843, Vishnudas Bhave's play *Sitaswayamvara* shaped Marathi theatre. According to P. Bayappa Reddy:

English theatre in India began in 1753, with a playhouse built by the British in Calcutta for the entertainment of the East India Company's employees. The Bombay Amateur Theatre came into existence in 1776, and the Calcutta Theater was built in 1779."³

Initially, English theatre was confined to Bombay and Calcutta before spreading to other metropolitan cities. Theatre acting was first dominated by the British and later by expatriates. Gautaman Bhaskaran quotes the contemporary actor Khola: "People like us who had a mad desire to act could not do so in this city, because the color of our skins was not right. They found fault with our diction."⁴ This is one of the reasons for the late start of Indian theatre in English.

Michael Madhusudan Dutt is credited with laying the foundation of modern Indian drama. His first Bengali play, *Sermista* (1859), stands as a milestone in modern Indian drama. During the freedom struggle, drama voiced the people's suffering. Dinabandhu Mitra's *Nil Darpan* revealed British brutality against indigo planters. It was the first Indian drama to highlight major economic injustices. It also sparked the establishment of Calcutta's public theatre in 1872. The play set the trend for patriotic themes, igniting nationalism and camaraderie during the freedom movement.

Indian dramatists in English drew on myths, though less so than Western dramatists like W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot, or French writers such as Andre Gide,

Jean Giraudoux, Jean Paul Sartre, and Jean Anouilh. American dramatists like Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams mined their country's myths as contemporary themes. Hugh Dickinson notes the pertinence of myths to current issues:

“The central answer is that myths are permanent. They deal with the greatest of all problems, the problems that do not change. They deal with love, with war, with sin, with tyranny, with courage, with fate, and all in some way or other deal with the relation of man to those divine powers which are sometimes felt to be irrational, sometimes to be cruel, and sometimes, alas, to be just.”⁵

Myths shape a nation's culture. Their use for aesthetic purposes has a long tradition in India. Most Sanskrit plays, except a few like Sudraka's *Mrichakatikam* or Visakhadatta's *Mudra-rakshasam*, are based on myths and legends, such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. R.G. Joshi opines that:

“Myths provide a concrete complex of feelings and emotions which have clear and definite contours. The playwright is free to modify these mythical structures to suit his own purposes.”⁶

At present, a myriad of Indian playwrights in English have employed myths in their works.

Some early Indian Dramatists in English

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) is almost a *phenomenon* ⁷ was born in an aristocratic family of poets and artists. He is a versatile artist, poet, dramatist, novelist, essayist, short story writer, philosopher, educationist, and social reformer. Tagore wrote his plays in Bengali, and these were translated by himself and others. Some of his notable plays are *Sanyasi (The Ascetic)*, *Sacrifice*, *Chitra*, *The Post-Office*, and *The King of the Dark Chamber*. Tagore was deeply influenced by classical Sanskrit literature, and his genius is evident in his plays, which blend folk drama with Western elements. R.G. Joshi speaks about the creative spirit of Tagore thus:

“As a supreme maker of the Indian Renaissance, he was free to borrow from all sources and had an imaginative daring to make anything that is borrowed his own. Along with the folk-theatre of Bengal, he was influenced by Sanskrit drama and also by western drama.”⁸

Tagore's play *Sanyasi* (1923) reveals humanity as inseparable from its world. The protagonist, Sanyasi, retreats into isolation seeking deliverance, but gradually rejoins society after discovering the love of the village girl, Vasanti, who dies. The play maintains that instead of negating or passively accepting life, one should pursue inner purification. Tagore described it as a dramatic poem."⁹

Tagore drew his theme from the Mahabharata for his play *Chitra*, a succinct Tagorean version of Kalidas's. *Shakuntala*¹⁰ In *Chitra* Tagore deals with the nature of the man-woman relationship. Arjuna loves Chitra in her borrowed beauty, and after a few days of idyllic happiness in her company, he begins to feel listless. The action moves from physical lust to a fuller meaning of love between man and woman. The mature love that makes them one represents the fact that true love yearns for simple, unadorned humanism.

Indian society, under English dominance, fostered uncertainty and hesitation. Traditional Indian ideals clashed with Western liberalism and realism. The educated classes became gradually estranged from their cultural roots. Tagore aimed to reconcile these opposing material and spiritual forces. The soul craved spirituality, while the body, influenced by Western culture, longed for materialism.

The play *Sacrifice* deals with the conflict between man and religion. The cruelty of rituals has widened the communication gap between the divine and the human, and the problem is resolved through love and sacrifice. Divine grace is always communicative, even when it assumes human speech, that is, the mundane and earthy should respond to the higher aspect of life. Human sacrifice, subjugation, war, physical cravings, and blind rituals are the leitmotifs in his plays.

Tagore's plays are engines of ideas, and men and women are caught just when they are possessed by and have become the vehicles of certain ideas:

“The humanity is not denied, nor is it altogether ignored or suppressed - it is transcended by new forces that blaze for a while with destructive fury till a new calm descends again.”¹¹

Sri Aurobindo

Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) was chiefly a romantic playwright. He had profound cognizance of Eastern and Western thought. "Sri Aurobindo produces in one the impression that he is a born lord of language. Sri Aurobindo is the author of five English plays: *Perseus*, the *Deliverer*, *Vasavadutta*, *Rodogune*, *The Viziers of Bassora*, and *Eric the King of Norway*. His play *Vikramorvasie*, or the Hero and the Nymph, is a blank-verse rendering of Kalidasa's Sanskrit play *Vikramorvasyam*. He wrote on the models offered by Elizabethan drama. The themes of his plays were drawn from Greek mythology and legends, from Indian and other ancient civilizations, from *Ancient Greek poets to Kingsley*¹². Sri Aurobindo is a savant, and as R.G. Joshi comments on the art of this playwright:

"This variety of themes is, in a way, a product of the global consciousness which was gradually pervading through the educated world from the middle of the Nineteenth Century."¹³

Sri Aurobindo drew on legends to create a world of romance and characters suited to the unfolding of the plot, thereby bringing home to the audience the contemporary urge for freedom, a definite achievement in the field of Indian English literature. His plays were literary pieces, not for the theatre but for a higher purpose. The purpose was to establish order amidst the disorder of this world.

All his plays convey political unity that transcends social barriers and represent a sense of universal harmony. Sri Aurobindo's plays are not stageworthy; they are closet dramas written in the Elizabethan form, drawing heavily on the myths from all over the world and glorified in chivalrous and romantic episodes. Tagore employed myths symbolically to reveal his thoughts on humanness and love. Sri Aurobindo exploited myths and legends to drive home the concept of cosmic order. Sri Aurobindo and T.P. Kailasam dramatized the strong revival of ancient culture and values during the pre-independent days.

Conclusion

Indian English drama emerged as a significant literary form during the colonial period through the interaction between Indian cultural traditions and Western theatrical influences. From its early beginnings in regional theatres to its gradual development in English, Indian drama reflected the nation's changing social, political, and cultural realities. The establishment of theatres in Calcutta and

Bombay, the influence of English education, and the translation of Western plays played an important role in shaping modern Indian theatre.

Early dramatists such as Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Rabindranath Tagore, and Sri Aurobindo laid the foundation for Indian English drama by blending Indian themes with Western dramatic techniques. Their works explored nationalism, spirituality, human relationships, sacrifice, and universal harmony. Mythology and legends from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* became powerful artistic resources through which playwrights interpreted contemporary concerns and preserved India's rich cultural heritage.

Tagore used myths symbolically to express humanism, love, and spiritual balance, while Sri Aurobindo employed legends and romantic imagination to convey cosmic order and universal unity. Their contributions enriched Indian English drama on both philosophical and aesthetic levels. Thus, Indian English drama not only mirrored India's intellectual and cultural awakening but also established itself as an important medium for artistic expression and social transformation in modern Indian literature

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