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1.0 OBJECTIVES

Unit 1 aims to provide you with essential background information about contemporary Indian theatre and also about Kannada drama. This will help you to get an idea of the major trends in post-independence theatre and also enable you to put the prescribed play in a proper perspective. It will also help you to approach the text with fuller confidence.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The cultural renaissance of the post-Independence years gave a fillip to theatre all over India and saw the birth of a new tradition in Indian theatre. Folk, traditional and classical theatre forms already had their own seasonal, ritual or entertainment bases in their respective regions. They took their narratives from Indian mythology and fell broadly into a song-dance-prose format. Costumes and make-up were wildly vivid, acting styles oratorical, and performance spaces informal, having their place within the community’s public spaces. The new theatre, which came into being with the country’s thrust towards modernity, was powered by the dream of building a nation founded on democratic and secular principles.

India’s first acquaintance with formal dramatic literature came in the middle of the nineteenth century with the opening of Universities in Bombay, Calcutta, Madras and Pune. The youth in Universities were introduced, on the one hand, to the works of Shakespeare, and on the other, to their own Sanskrit dramatists: Kalidasa, Bhavabhuti, Shudraka, Narayana Bhatta, and others. Aspiring dramatists in the regional languages received apprenticeship by translating, adapting, and emulating Shakespeare and Sanskrit dramatists.
There was in 1930's a surge both for modernity and indigenous cultural identity. Symbolic of this time was perhaps the fact that while on the one hand, Le Corbusier was invited to design and create the modernist city of Chandigarh, on the other, the Central Academies of the arts endorsed a so-called return to roots by encouraging the folk and the classical traditions with their patronage. A society setting out to re-mint itself as a coin with two heads facing opposite sides, one looking forward towards modernity, the other turned backward towards indigenous cultural identity, found itself trapped between two dramatic modes: While the realism of Ibsen allowed dramatists to deal with the social and moral problems of an emergent society, the folk and traditional theatre appeared to offer the only cultural roots which the largely urban dramatists and directors could see.

Those who sought state patronage for theatre with an eye on the foreign market, chose the colour, song and dance of folk traditions. European theatre too was turning to the East for its rich theatrical resources, branding its products with the highly-valORIZED epithet “intercultural”. In regions like Bengal, Karnataka, Kerala, and Maharashtra, however, where a strong, unbroken theatre tradition had been in place for over a hundred years by the time the country won its independence, the people had the decisive voice on what kind of theatre would be done: for they, not the State, were the patrons of the theatre.

1.2 GROWTH OF CONTEMPORARY INDIAN THEATRE

It is very difficult to capture the history of contemporary Indian theatre in a single frame, for the simple reason that there is no single history. Each region has evolved its own way of moving forward while looking back. One can only hope to indicate the why and hows of these moves, by looking at the thinking and work of some of the most significant practitioners of theatre in the country since Independence.

The history of modern theatre in India begins with Shombhu Mitra, who had achieved legendary status during his lifetime. Fascinated with theatre from his boyhood years, he entered the professional state in Calcutta at the age of twenty-four. Disenchanted with the profit-motivated selection of plays, ornate props, and painted scenery, Mitra quit the scene.

By the thirties, the professional theatre had begun to decline. It made very little sense at a time of global and local upheavals: World War II, the birth of the Azad Hind Force, the bombing of Calcutta, the manmade Bengal famine of 1943, the Naval Mutiny of 1945, and the communal riots of 1946, followed by the brutal killings during the partition of the country in which Bengal suffered a gash straight through the heart. These were the horrors, which were drastically changing people’s perception of human life.

It was in response to this, that Mitra joined the ‘Indian People’s Theatre Association’ (IPTA) in the early forties and directed Bijon Bhattacharya’s Nabanna [The New Harvest, Bengali, 1944] about the Bengal famine in 1944. This play was a radical departure from any that had been written and staged until then. The use of space and lighting, the style of speech and acting,
even the use of a dialect in stage speech were all new, breaking and re-forming the known language of theatre. With Nabanna, Mitra became the father of modern Indian theatre. In 1948, he set up his own group, Bohurupee, launching Bengal’s group theatre movement.

Of all the plays he directed and acted in until his retirement from theatre in the mid-eighties, the one that was hailed throughout the country was Tagore’s Rakitarabi (1954). In a tribute to Mitra on his 77th birth anniversary (Probe India, August 1992), senior director Habib Tanvir said, “I have had the chance to see many different productions of Tagore’s plays, but I feel that no other director has been able to give form to their ‘feelings’ except Mitra..... his play has had a profound impact on the theatre of the entire country”.

Unlike Shombohu Mitra, Utpal Dutt (1929-1993) declared himself a leftist political playwright. He too joined IPTA in the middle of his career, which had begun with English plays. Whereas Mitra was committed to new theatre which concerned itself with the aesthetics of theatre, its verbal, acting and production language, Dutt was committed to “people’s theatre”, and was concerned with using every theatrical means to awaken people to their condition.

Dutt’s Angar (1939), about a recent coalmine disaster, was the first play he wrote, directed, and produced. His earlier plays had been either translations/adaptations of Western classics or modern works, or Bengali plays written largely by earlier writers like Rabindranath Tagore and Michael Madhusudan Dutt. Angar was also the first play to be staged at Minerva, a professional theatre, which for the first time was filled to capacity without the enticement of song and dance. What Dutt had given the audience, instead, was ‘spectacle’ – the coalmine setting, the struggle of the miners, and the deliberate flooding of the mines by the authorities.

Dutt continued to stage his political plays on the professional stage until the end of the sixties, when political exigencies forced other choices on him. The upsurge of the Naxalbari movement, supported by China, brought daily violence to Bengal. During the decade, Dutt wrote and directed nearly twenty plays for the popular Jatra theatre. With these plays, he accelerated the hesitant entry of politics into the Jatra repertoire.

The Little Theatre Group, which Dutt formed after parting ways with IPTA, succumbed to internal ideological differences and betrayals. As resilient as ever, Dutt formed the People’s Little Theatre. Dutt’s first major production for the new group was Tiner Talwar (1971). Hailed countrywide by critics and theatre lovers alike for its intelligent use of melodrama, the rich nuances of its verbal text, and its bold use of theatre machinery which had been cast aside by the realists of the new theatre, Tiner Talwar was theatre speaking about itself. Accounting for the extraordinary power of this non-political play, Dutt said in an interview with theatre scholar Samik Bandopadhyay, “Tiner Talwar... was a statement with which all our actors and actresses had identified themselves. That is how the teamwork and the sincerity of the actors came through so powerfully”.

If an exact contrast is to be sought for Utpal Dutt, one finds it in Badal Sircar. He forms the third point of the Calcutta theatre triangle of the sixties and seventies. A civil engineer and town planner by training, Sircar went to the USA with a Jawaharlal Nehru Research Fellowship in 1972, to work on a theatre of synthesis as a rural-urban link.
Badal Sircar’s *Evam Indrajit* (And Indrajit) (1962), became one of the most widely translated and performed plays of the late sixties. At the very time, however, when he was being hailed as the new voice of the middle-class, he was questioning himself about whether he wanted to be just that. This self-questioning finally led to his giving up the proscenium theatre altogether and committing himself to what he called the Third Theatre, the first two being the middle-class urban and the folk. Since its inception, Sircar’s Third Theatre has been an inspiration for many theatre movements all over the country.

Whereas Dutt had proclaimed that political theatre should be performed on every platform available, including the proscenium and the Jatra stage, Badal Sircar was convinced that the nature of the performing space was implicated in the language of theatre and must be chosen to help create that language. In the seventies, Badal Sircar and his group, Shatabdi, stepped out of the proscenium frame and into an ordinary assembly hall to play to an audience sitting on benches on three sides of the performing space. This enabled an intimate dialogue to be conducted between the players and the audience, allowing the latter to become participants in the “reality” of the performance. This was different from their normal role of passively accepting the fabrication of reality that was offered to them on the proscenium stage. The Third Theatre, minus auditorium, costumes, lights, make-up, freed Sircar from the need for media support and from the need to sell his “product”. His audience was free to walk in and pay donation if they so desired.

Sircar’s best-known and most widely staged play, *Michhil*, was first performed in April 1974 in village Ramchadrapur in West Bengal; his second play, *Bhoma* was first performed in March 1976 in village Ramgabela in West Bengal; his third play, *Baki Ithas* [The Rest of History, 1965] was first performed in July 1979 at the Calcutta Theosophical Society Hall.

### 1.3 Theatre in Bengal

The time of the giants was over. Some theatre practitioners who continue to redefine theatre in Bengal and have been acknowledged on the national level are Rudraprasad Sengupta, Shyamanand Jalan, Proibir Guha, and Usha Ganguli. I shall briefly describe here the work of Guha and Ganguli.

Proibir Guha’s Living Alternative Theatre is, in a sense, an offshoot of Badal Sircar’s movement. Based in the industrial town of Khardah, 20 km from Calcutta, the group puts itself directly in touch with the audience through plays that reflect the daily impact of social, economic and political forces on the people. His actors and actresses are socially committed volunteers. Guha believes in fostering positive violence in the bodies of his actors. Towards this end, they are trained in various Indian martial arts systems. In a paper presented at the international seminar, Actor at Work, organized at the National Center for the Performing Arts (NCPA), Mumbai, in November 1991, Guha said of his theatre:

“I find my themes from happenings and encounters that occur only too often on the streets, in the slums, in train compartments, in village huts, in workplaces and worksites... I pick these situations up, remould them to a point of shock and present them to the public. There
is a desire to create a violent effect on the audience so that their 
complaisance cracks and they discover themselves’.

Despite doing plays in Hindi, Usha Ganguli has managed, over the last 
twenty-one years of work with her group Rangkarmee, to acquire a large 
following in Calcutta and elsewhere in Bengal and the rest of the country. A 
trained Bharat Natyam dancer, she began her career with a group that 
performed for the richer section of the Hindi-speaking population of Calcutta. 
This did not satisfy her either ideologically or aesthetically. She realized she 
wanted to do more consciously committed plays that would reach out to 
schoolteachers, students, clerks, and housewives — anybody.

Rangkarmee was formed in January 1976. Its members came from all walks of 
life, but their continuance with the group depended on whether they were 
willing to be theatre workers as the group name demanded or whether they 
were there only for the limelight. Those who stayed dedicated themselves to 
doing socially relevant plays. They were given rigorous training in acting, 
management, and back-stage work. Over the two decades and more of the 
group’s existence, each of its present repertoires of half-a-dozen plays had had 
at least a hundred shows.

The most celebrated Rangkarmee production is Rudaali (1993), based on 
Maheshweta Devi’s short story about professional women mourners in Bihar. 
The script for the stage evolved through workshops, which included well-
known writers, Ganguli her-self, and one of the members of Rangkarmee. 
Ascetically mounted, without set, lights or music, and performed in the 
naturalistic style with Usha Ganguli playing the main role, the play has 
travelled all over India and brought acclaim from critics and audiences alike.

1.4 THEATRE IN MAHARASHTRA

In Bengal, there is a tradition of writer-directors; indeed, of directors who 
have written in order to do the kind of theatre they want to do. In Maharashtra, 
on the other hand, there is a strong playwriting tradition in which the 
playwright is not necessarily directly associated with the brassstacks of theatre. 
Therefore, when we come to theatre in Maharashtra, it is only right that we 
should begin with playwrights who have been responsible for changing the 
language of modern Marathi theatre.

When Vijay Tendulkar (b. 1928) began writing, the new theatre movement in 
Mumbai was just gaining popularity. Young people, mostly collegians, were 
raring to put an end to the earlier song-and-declamation and later sentiment-
and-diluted social commentaries and to replace them with theatrical 
expressions relevant to their own times. Tendulkar was in the vanguard of this 
movement, which included later stars like Vijaya Mehta and Shreeram Lagoo. 
Unlike most playwrights, Tendulkar was in close touch with the directors, 
designers, and actors of the stage and was thus able to hone his playwriting 
craft with their practical comments.

The first Tendulkar play to cross the language barrier was Shantata! Court 
Chalu Ahe [Silence! The Court is in Session] (1967), which was staged in 
Bengali and Hindi. In quick succession thereafter came Gidhade [The 
Vultures] (1971), Sakharam Binder [Sakharam The Bookbinder] (1972) and
Ghashiram Kotwal (1973). The latter three plays ran into problems with the censors and/or the public. Gidhade offended the sensibilities of the middle-class audience with its portrayal of its protagonists, a middle-class family, as vultures. The censors objected to its abusive language and, amongst other scenes, to one in which the pregnant sister enters in a bloodstained sari after being kicked by her brother causing a miscarriage. The censors objected to the abusive language in Sakharam Binder too, while his mistress is beating up the audience protested against the protagonist Sakharam’s. Ghashiram Kotwal angered historians by its portrayal of Nana Phadnavis, Chancellor to the Peshwa, which they said was historically wrong, while it offended the Pune Brahmins because it depicted the Brahmins of that era as lecherous, greedy, and corrupt. Lust for power, greed, corruption and the consequent violence are the themes which Tendulkar explores through the story of Ghashiram Kotwal, the North Indian Brahmin who came to Pune to make his fortune. The Chancellor, who had his eyes on Ghashiram’s daughter, gave him unlimited power. Once he tired of her, he cut Ghashiram down brutally.

Ghashiram Kotwal became a cause célèbre in 1980 when it was scheduled to tour Europe. The Shiv Sena, went to court demanding an injunction on the tour on the plea that it would create a “wrong impression” of the country. The court’s decision allowing the play to go came just two days before the troupe was due to leave. They were allowed to go on condition that they would make a declaration before the curtain went up on every show that Nana Phadnavis was a great statesman who fought the British tooth and nail during his Chancellor-ship. Everybody connected with the play lived in terror during those days.

Tendulkar chose to cast his play in the Dashavatar folk form because he was fascinated by the multiple theatrical uses its idea of a human curtain could be put to. In the Dashavatar, the chorus stands in a semi-circle swaying rhythmically and singing its comments on the action. In Ghashiram, the chorus was used both to hide and reveal the action in tantalizing, often bitingly ironic ways. Mime, song and dance from folk tradition, and the sattradhar from classical theatre were used to give the play fluidity and create possibilities to take the work beyond the particular into the universal. Ghashiram Kotwal was and is a brilliant piece of theatre perfectly amalgamating a modern theme, a contemporary sensibility and the folk theatre form, but it has been held responsible for spawning a progeny, which uses folk elements to decorate their work in a spurious attempt to make it indigenous.

Mahesh Elkunchwar (b. 1939) began writing plays in 1968, after he saw a Tendulkar play which demonstrated how much power the senior playwright’s terse, economic, more-less-than-said style of dialogue writing held. A lecturer in a Nagpur college, Elkunchwar made his mark with Holi (1970) which Vijaya Mehta directed for her group Rangayan, bringing out the brutality of its depiction of campus violence through ragging.

Several of Elkunchwar’s plays including Holi, Pratibimb (1987), and Atmakatha [Autobiography] (1988) have been translated into Hindi, English, and Bengali. His most ambitious work to date has been his trilogy, which traces, through the fortunes of a small town family of Brahmin landlords, the crumbling of the feudal order, the plundering of the countryside by greedy jungle contractors, and a metaphorical reduction of the region to drought and
barrenness. The first part of the trilogy, *Wada Chirebandi* [Old Stone Mansion] (1982), was directed for the mainstream stage by Vijaya Mehta in 1985. The play was later expanded into a trilogy called *Yuganta* [The End of an Age] (1994). The entire trilogy was directed for Awishkar by Chandrakant Kulkarni in 1994 to mark the hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Marathi theatre.

Elkunchwar is a confirmed realist. He does not see his roots in folk theatre and would consider it a betrayal of his urban individualism and his Western-oriented sensibility to use folk elements in his plays. *Wada Chirebandi* is one of the finest examples of consummate realism in contemporary Marathi dramatic literature.

Satish Alekar (b. 1949) is a biochemist by training and has recently been appointed Director of the Performing Arts, Department of Pune University. He was one of the young members of the Progressive Dramatic Association who split from the parent group over the decision to stop performing *Ghashiram Kotwal* after the public furor against it. The young members including Alekar, Dr. Jabbar Patel, and Dr. Mohan Agash formed a new group, Theatre Academy, and made *Ghashiram* their first production. Satish Alekar wrote and directed several plays for the Theatre Academy, the most successful being *Mahanirvan* (1974). He wrote the play in the Kirtan form; having grown up in the heart of Pune, this form of musical religious sermon was very close to him. His acute sense of irony found in this form a perfect vehicle for its own subversion. The play is an irreverent look at Hindu death rituals, written with the spontaneous zest and quirky humor that marks all Alekar’s works.

*Mahanirvan*, although a highly successful play, is flawed. It has been translated and produced in Hindi and Bengali. Alekar’s finest play to date remains the more difficult and therefore less popular *Begum Barve* (1979). It delves into the real and fantasy worlds of two sets of people — a pair of government clerks, and a female impersonator of the old music theatre days and his employer, a ruthless cripple. *Begum Barve* has been published in English translation but performed, apart from the original Marathi, only in Hindi.

Vijaya Mehta (b. 1934) was one of the pioneers of the new theatre in Mumbai, both as a director and an actress. The first plays she directed were realistic. In those days in the context of the dominant theatre, which was melodramatic, musical, declamatory or sentimental and mushy, realism was seen as a bold experiment. The group of young collegians who collected around her looked up to her for leadership. Together they formed Rangayan in 1954. They were themselves like a theatre laboratory and study group. Every new play they produced was preceded and followed by discussions designed to develop the understanding of theatre by its members and cultivate the taste of the audience for this new realistic theatre. In 1971, the group split. The actor-couple Arvind and Sulabha Deshpande and a few others from the old group, notably organizer Arun Kakade, formed a new group, Awishkar. Their first play was a spectacular production of Karnad’s *Tughlaq*, translated into Marathi by Vijay Tendulkar, directed by Arvind Deshpande and designed with a stunning set comprising multiple levels by Damu Kenkre.

Mehta, hurt and disillusioned, joined the mainstream stage, where, along with Shreeram Lagoo she was responsible for introducing a new understated acting style. Although she directed many excellent productions for the mainstream
stage, including Jaywant Dalvi’s Barrister, which she later made into a film, she could not endure the pressures of touring and the aesthetic compromises of working in the main stream for too long. After quitting the mainstream, Mehta did some visually stunning productions of the classics Mudararakhshasa and Shakuntala. Bhaskar Chandavarkar composed the music and the artist D.G. Godse designed the sets. She also directed Girish Karnad’s Hayavadana and Nagmandala in the mid-eighties.

Although Vijaya Mehta has attempted many forms of theatre including Brecht, and has always done impeccable productions, her forte is still the meticulously planned realistic play where biographies of characters are constructed and the acting graph plotted accordingly. She has been a great team leader and organizer and has been wholly responsible for bringing rigorous professionalism and a serious concern for developing the aesthetics of theatre for the non-professional stage.

Dr. Jabbar Patel is a practicing gynecologist who lives and works in Daund, halfway between Pune and Sholapur. The three plays he has directed for Theatre Academy have all involved large casts, ensemble work, and music. Ghashiram Kotwal, under his direction, is by far the most travelled Marathi production of all times. During the twenty-five years that Theatre Academy ran the production, it saw two generation of actors being inducted and trained, although the main role continued to be played by the inimitable Dr. Mohan Agashe as Nana Phadnavis till the production was wound up. Fifty boys were trained to dance and sing and were put through a regimen of exercises to prepare them for Ghashiram. Bhaskar Chandavarkar composed the music, a major contribution to the success of the play. So integrated was music, dance, and the prose text that the director had to interact very closely with the composer and the choreographer. The result was a theatrical tour de force very different in character from the naturalistic plays Marathi theatre excelled in. The success of Ghashiram Kotwal at the box-office also served to subsidize the Academy’s less popular productions like Begum Barve.

Patel’s next production, Teen Pashacha Tamasha, (1977) was P.L. Deshpande’s adaptation of Brecht’s Threepenny Opera. This production, while excellently performed and sung by Madhuri Purandare as Rangu (Jenny), Nandu Bhende as Ankush (Macheath), and Chandrakant Kale as Peachum, did not enjoy the same popularity as Ghashiram. Dr. Jabbar Patel has been making films for the last twenty years, his latest being a magnum opus on the life and work of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar.

Satyadev Dubey has been one of the most influential directors in Maharashtra. It is not uncommon to hear theatre enthusiasts from small towns in the state say that some chance viewing of some play, such as Shyam Manohar’s strangely quirky play, Yakrut (1986) changed their perception of theatre and its possibilities completely.

Satyadev Dubey is the only director from the sixties’ generation to have stayed in touch with every succeeding generation of writers-directors on the non-professional stage. The playwrights’ workshop, which he organized in Pune in 1973, was crucial in bringing together the emergent generation of playwrights. Fifteen years later, he held Sunday workshops for the new playwrights. As a subjective selection from amongst the dozens of plays he
has directed, *Andha Yug* (1962), *Hayavadana* (1972) and *Aranya* (1984) have been his most outstanding Hindi productions and Elkunchwar’s *Raktapushp* [Petals of Blood] (1981), his most sensitive Marathi production.

Something unique happened to non-professional theatre in Mumbai in 1974. Arvind and Sulabha Deshpande managed to persuade the Chhabildas School in Dadar to rent out its assembly hall to their group Awishkar at concessional rates for experimental plays. This school hall soon became a buzzing center of theatre activity, making the name Chhabildas synonymous with the experimental movement in Maharashtra. As the eighties came to an end, theatre activity dwindled and the movement became moribund. The school soon withdrew the concessions it had once offered to young theatre people.

### 1.5 MALAYALAM THEATRE

K. N. Panikkar (1928 – ), is a poet who lives and works in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. His theatre started as an extension of his poetry and even today, draws its strength from his poetic imagination. He writes and directs his own plays for his group, Sopanam, which he established in 1974. He also trains his actors using the innumerable forms and martial arts that abound in the tiny state of Kerala. The martial art called Kalaripayattu is used as the basic system in the training of the actor’s body; simultaneously, the actor is also trained in acquiring the inner state of being that is required for the theatre.

Panikkar’s most well-known and widely performed productions are Bhasa’s *Urubhangam* and his own *Karim Kuttu* (1982) and *Ottayan* (1985). His plays work as parables, allowing their traditional folklore content and indigenous theatre language to be imbued with contemporary significance. His answer to the charge of revivalism that critics have leveled against him for using rituals in his work is, “This type of criticism is commonly raised by people committed to a political philosophy. I don’t have such a commitment. Also, I have placed no restriction on entering any region of human endeavour for my work. I use ritual as one of the most powerful forms of metrical expression.” (Interview with K.S. Narayana Pillai in Contemporary Indian Theatre, Sangeet Natak Akademi)

### 1.6 MANIPURI THEATRE

Like Kerala in the South, Manipur in the North-East also has its own traditional dance, drama, and story-telling traditions on which Ratan Thiyam draws. Trained in theatre at the National School of Drama (1971-1974), he returned to Imphal to set up his own theatre group, the Chorus Repertory Theatre, in 1976. His most well known works are the Mahabharata trilogy *Urubhangam* [The Shattered Thigh] (1981), *Chakravyuha* [Battle Formation] (1984), and *Karnabharam* [The Burden of Karna] (1989). Of these, his most widely travelled, admired and written about production is *Chakravyuha*, which deals with the death of Abhimanyu, son of Arjun. Like other writers-directors working in post-colonial times, Thiyam too uses theatre to straddle the divide between indigenous theatre traditions and contemporary issues. On the one hand, he sees *Chakravyuha* as a symbol of the conflict between two generations — callow youth pitted against experienced warriors; on the other
hand it symbolizes the conflict between the individual and society — Abhimanu against the seven charioteers. Ultimately, he sees it as a protest against violence and the threat of World War III, which the younger generation faces.

Heisnam Kanhailal expresses the feelings of anger and despair of a neglected people through his work. Manipur’s cultural history is dominated by the imposition of Vaishnavism on the local people and its post-Independence political history, by its marginalization on account of its remote geographical position and its people’s racial difference from the national mainstream. Kanhailal’s strong sense of ethnicity first drove him to steep himself in tradition. Then, under the influence of Badal Sircar, he moved out of the ethnic enclosure into a wider perspective. Finally, he arrived at what he terms the “theatre of transcendence”, which goes beyond verbal language and expresses itself through movement, song and dance.

Kanhailal’s wife, Sabitri, is one of the finest actresses in India. Nobody who has seen her performance in Kanhailal’s most celebrated production, Pehet, in which she plays the mother bird anxious for one of her seven babies captured by a cat who teaches it to speak and behave like itself, can ever forget her expressive body movements and her extraordinary voice.

1.7 SOME OTHER PLAYWRIGHTS, THEATRE GROUPS AND THEATRE PERSONALITIES

We shall talk about the Hindi playwright Mohan Rakesh, two theatre groups in Hindi, Habib Tanvir’s Naya Theatre and Bansi Kaul’s Rang-Vidushak; theatre personality Ebrahim Alkazi and Indian English playwright Mahesh Dattani.

i. Mohan Rakesh, Hindi Playwright (1925 - 1972)

Mohan Rakesh was one of those rare literary personalities who never accept the traditional set-up but always aspire to find and project something, which is challenging and new. Rakesh’s language separates him from other Hindi playwrights and puts him of a higher level of competence. His plays — Ashadhi Ka Ek Din (One Day in Early Autumn, Hindi, 1958), Lehron Ke Rajhans (Great Swans of the Waves, Hindi, 1963), Adhe-adhure (Halfway House) — show that his dialogues have a smooth flow, a meaningful depth and an elemental naturalness suitable to his characters. They express the character’s mental conflict, frustration, dissatisfaction and the resulting anger in a unique manner. Though some of the dialogues between Mallika and Kalidas in One Day in Ashadha tend to be longer than required and seem to be a little heavy on the audience, they are necessary to the play. As Kalidas says in the play, “people think that living in that life and atmosphere I have written a great deal. But I know that while living there I wrote nothing. What ever I wrote was a recollection of life here”. This lengthy dialogue is necessary for the reader to understand the feelings and moods of the characters. But Rakesh became conscious of this and made an effort to reduce the lengths of the dialogues in his other plays namely The Great Swans of the Waves and Halfway House. Though in the former play, the dialogues between
Nand and Sundari tend to become longer, in *Halfway House* the playwright seems to be completely in control of the situation. Here the dialogues are short, suitable and to the point. They hit at the subject immediately.

**ii. Habib Tanvir and his Naya Theatre and Folk Theatre**

Habib Tanvir is one of the Hindi theatre directors who started using folk artists in his plays very early on. Returning from his training in England, he found that most of what he had learned made no sense in his native environment. He therefore began working with tribals from the Chhatisgarh region of Madhya Pradesh using their mother language and some of their folklore in his productions. His group, Naya Theatre, formed in 1959, has been doing plays regularly since, struggling for survival every bit of the way. His most celebrated plays have been *Agra Bazaar* (1970) on the bazaar poet Nazir and *Charandas Chor* (1976) about a thief who inadvertently makes a pledge to his guru never to lie. Two other productions of his are *Mitti ki gaadi*, an adaptation of Sudraka’s *Mrichhakatikam* and *Bahadur Kalarin*, based on a Chhatisgarhi legend. Although Tanvir himself has been working in the folk idiom, or rather because he has chosen to do so out of individual commitment, he is severely critical of the folksy trend that started in the seventies in a bid to appear “rooted”.

**iii. Bansi Kaul and his Rang Vidushak**

Bansi Kaul came to theatre from a richly varied background, which included painting road signs and the backs of trucks. Kaul has been fascinated with the idea of the vidushak. His group, Rang-Vidushak, is comprised of members who have outside jobs and come mostly from the lower middle-class. In training them for his proposed theatre of the vidushak, he needed to find sources of body language that were immediately accessible to them. He found them on the streets, e.g., street entertainers and gymasts. Observation and documentation of their gestures and body language is Kaul’s training methodology. His plays tell simple tales energetically and humorously.

**iv. Ebrahim Alkazi**

Ebrahim Alkazi was trained at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, London. Returning to Mumbai, he set up the city’s first amateur theatre group, the Theatre Group in the early fifties. His sensibility was Western, his language English, and his audience elitist. Yet, Alkazi’s influence penetrated the local Marathi theatre through Vijaya Mehta’s apprenticeship on the advice of her counsellors when she began doing serious theatre. He gave her the visual and performative aesthetics of realistic theatre.

Ebrahim Alkazi’s Stanislavskian naturalism, set designs using levels articulated by occasional architectural elements like a pillar or a doorway, the orchestration of costume, lighting, music, and verbal text to arrive at a totality of theatrical effect, came as a radical departure for an audience grown used to star performers, the supremacy of the verbal text, and melodramatic delivery of lines. During his fourteen years in Mumbai, Alkazi staged many of the best-known plays of the West, from the Greeks, Shakespeare, and Moliere, to Ibsen, Chekhov, and Strindberg, and on to Anouilh, Osborne, and Beckett. His first Hindi production came after he moved to Delhi in 1961 as the first director of the National School of Drama (NSD). Two of his most well-known productions during his sixteen-year tenure at the NSD were of Dharmavir
Bharati’s *Andha Yug*, dealing with the aftermath of the Kurukshetra war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, and Girish Karnad’s Kannada play *Tughlaq* in Hindi translation. The latter was performed in the old fort in Delhi, giving the production a grand, spectacular scale.

Whether he staged his production in an indoor auditorium or out in an open environment, Alkazi adhered to the Stanislavskian style of acting, and it was this tradition that he bequeathed to the National School of Drama. Although successors like B. V. Karanth broke this mould by introducing the folk elements of music and dance, the strength of the NSD repertory continues to be realism.

v. **Mahesh Dattani, Indian English playwright**

Mahesh Dattani (1958 – ) is a playwright from Bangalore. He writes in English and has had eight plays published, almost all of them performed in Bangalore, most in Mumbai and a couple in Delhi and Kolkata. Dattani has no hang-ups about using the language of India’s ex-rulers. His protagonists are not only Gujaratis like himself, but also Gujaratis from Bangalore. The very specificity of his characters, however, carries his plays beyond those confines to become universally relevant. Realistic in form, complex in structure, many of them are shot through with an unforced humour that makes them generally appealing. He won the Sahitya Akademi award for his book of plays *Final Solution* and *Other Play* in 1998.

### 1.8 A NOTE ON KANNADA DRAMA

#### 1.8.1 Emerging Modern Kannada Drama

Actually the history of modern Kannada drama begins with Karki Venkataramana Shastri’s *Iggappa Heggadeya Vivaha Prahasana* (1887). This play deals with the problems of women, widow remarriage, the futile expenditure incurred in a Hindu marriage and the reformation that has to take place in society. Later, B. M. Shrikantaiah, who was inspired by Greek dramas, rewrote the 10th century Kannada epic ‘*Gadayuddam*’ (written by Poet Ranna) in the form of a Greek tragedy. He intuitively saw the possibilities of a tragic hero in the character of Dhuryodhana and with a few deft changes recreated his personality. Another play of his ‘*Ashwathamana*’ was the best example of his serious effort to bring a tragic experience to Kannada literature. He made some changes for the sake of tragic effect, the most drastic change being the death of hero, Ashwathama, originally one of the seven immortal men as explained in Mahabharata. This play was a transcreation of Ajax of Sophocles. The third play B.M. Shrikantaiah wrote was ‘*Parasikaru*’, a straight translation of a tragedy by Aeschylus. The language and rhythm of these plays are unique. The archaic language used in these works magically creates a living dramatic idiom trying its utmost to recapture the vitality of primitive emotions.

The next important play writer was Sami Venkatadri (1898-1934) popularly known as ‘Samas’. Unlike other historic plays by subsequent playwrights, the historic substance in Sams’s plays was not used metaphorically, nor was it that his plays voice contemporary sound by giving an ironic twist to historical
events. Nothing but the sheer continuity of history must have fascinated Samsa and while following the gradual unfolding of historical events a meaningful dramatic pattern emerged. Of the twenty three plays that he wrote only five have survived. Out of these five, ‘Vigada Vikramaraya’ fascinated many critics.

1.8.2 Towards Social Realism

The influence of western drama is quite obvious in both B. M. Shrikantaiah and Samas, but they were also influenced by the Indian classics and history. Their aim was to produce works of enduring value. It was ultimately T. P. Kailasam (1884-1946) and Adya Rangacharya (1904-1985), better known as Shriranga, who brought social realism on the stage. Both Kailasam and Shriranga were educated at British universities and were fully exposed to the influence of the new drama of that time. Kailasam was a popular stage figure in England singing comic songs.

Both these writers started writing plays with a strong protest against professional theatre. Kailasam’s short play ‘Num Kampni’ (Our Company) was a parody of the professional theatre, which he thought was no longer a theatre. Shriranga’s ‘Sampushta Ramayana’ ridicules the absurd speeches and gestures of illiterate actors trying to produce a Ramayana Play. Their purpose was to create a new form of drama and a new dramatic idiom, in which task they succeeded. Kailasam’s ‘Tollu Gatti’ (Hollow and Sound), ‘Bahiskara’ (Banish), ‘Soole’, (Prostitute), ‘Home-Rule’, ‘Ammavara ganda’ (Honecked Husband), ‘Badvalavillada Badayi’ (Empty pride), and Shriranga’s ‘Kattale Belaku’ (Dark & Light), ‘Harijanwara’ (Cut the Sacred Thread), ‘Kelu Janamejaya’ (Listen Janamejaya) were a few good plays of that time. Both these writers changed the content and expression of the Kannada theatre. By using common people’s language, they brought new dimension to the stage performances. In all we can say, that the essential form of new drama was initiated by these two writers. Both, in their zest for creating an alternative social value system criticized prevailing social practices. Both attacked popular theatre which according to them was promoting a static social order.

K.V. Puttopa, popularly known as ‘Kuvempu’ converted Hamlet in to ‘Raktakah’. His other plays ‘Beral ge Koral’ (A Head for a Thumb), ‘Maharatni’ (Great Night), ‘Smashana Kurukshetram’, (Kurukshetra graveyard) all are written in blank verse and their themes are borrowed from our mythology. Dr. Shivarama Karant, noted novelist and rationalist wrote musical plays like ‘Mukta Dwara’ (Open Door). All these playwrights developed drama as a literary form and therefore their works reflect the literary tendencies and attitudes of the age.

G. B. Joshi popularly known as ‘Jadabharata’ in theatre circles started writing plays after Indian independence. His ‘Mookabali’ (Silence Victim), ‘Kadadida Niru’ (Disturbed Water), ‘Nane Bijjala’ (I only Bijjala) and ‘Sattavara Neralu’ (Shadow of the Dead) brought the new theatre movement to Karnataka. The all time great director B.V. Karant directed these dramas with imagination that made this theatre successful. Girish Karnad continued this new trend in the seventies and eighties. As we have to discuss Girish Karnad later in detail, we will conclude this chapter with an account of new trends in Kannada theatre.
1.8.3 New Trends

New trends in Kannada theatre started emerging in late 1970’s. Dr. Chandrashekhar Kambara derives his strength from the folk plays of northern Karnataka. His ‘Sangya Balya’ is one of the most popular dramas even today. His other plays include — ‘Rishyashringa’, ‘Jokumaraswamy’, ‘Jai Siddanaika’, ‘Nai kathe’ (Dog Story), ‘Kadu Kudure’ (Forest Horse), ‘Harakeya Kuri’ (Scapegoat), ‘Samba Shiva Prahasana’, ‘Siri Sampige’, ‘Huliya Neralu’ (Shadow of a Tiger). These are all distinguished dramas of Kannada theatre. The use of folk techniques, folk music and folk language have made his dramas popular.

The significant departure from Shriranga or Kailasam is that of Lankesh. For Lankesh, playwriting was an extension of his literary pursuits, but interestingly, Lankesh used theatre to vivify the socio cultural milieu of the middle class family that was failing to grapple with the facts of modern urban life. Through ‘Kranthi Banthu Kranthi’ (Revolution Came Revolution!), ‘Nanna Tangigondu Gandu Kodi’ (Give a Bridegroom to My Sister), and ‘Giliyu Panjaradolagilla’ (Parrot is not in the Cage), Lankesh has tried to explain to us that the inadequacies of the individual do not allow us to adjust with the changing social situation. In the labyrinth of the male world, the suffocated woman aspires for liberation and she walks out in ‘Nanna Tangigondu Gandu Kodi’. Even in his play ‘Sankranti’, the historical intercaste marriage is de-contextualized, and folk narratives, so that the characters that appear in the narrative are not only projected as alternative cultural icons, but they are also used as weapons to battle against the dominance of western intellectual paradigms. ‘Manteswamy’, ‘Madari Madaiah’ and ‘Mahachaitra’ are other important plays of his.

One of the most interesting theatre stories of post-Independence India is that of K.V. Subanna’s Ninasam. Subanna and his friends formed this amateur group in 1949, fired with the idea of contributing to the making of new India through theatre. Located in their remote village Hegodu, 350 km from Bangalore, they worked enthusiastically for ten years with the encouragement of the family and the community. Then with the general post-Independence disillusionment that set in throughout the country, Ninasam grew apathetic and crumbled.

In the sixties, a literary movement, Navaa, was born in Bangalore. Sensing an all Karnataka cultural renaissance, Ninasam woke up in 1967 and has never closed its eyes since. Over the years, the repertory expanded its activities to include a training center for actors and an itinerant repertory, Tirugata, which caters to all nineteen districts of the state. Ninasam also has a film society and its own annual film festival.

K. V. Subanna stands for community-specific theatre. In the paper he read-at the Actor at Work seminar at the National Center for the Performing Arts (NCPA) in 1991, he confessed that he was partial to the new literature and realistic plays which confronted social issues, but his associates and the local community preferred company-style plays with a loud gesture language and voice projection. A middle road was found in the selection of plays through confrontation and discussion. Even the politics or the lack thereof of the Ninasam repertoire and “also the style of our productions... evolved through
Indian theatre today is as richly varied as its languages and its terrain. What is common to all the theatres described here is their perpetual struggle to survive. Theatre practitioners like to console themselves with the thought that always being on the edge is what theatre is all about. Yet, a wider patronage would do Indian theatre no harm.

1.9 LET US SUM UP

There were many kinds of plays from the 1920s till date. There were Sanskrit plays translated in to many Indian languages. During 1930s the socio-political plays gained popularity. After independence, theater activities focused on national identity, Indian myths, folktales, rituals, history and motifs from popular culture occupied an important place in theatre. What we have outlined above are theatre activities in some major languages like Bengali, Marathi, Malayalam, Manipuri.

The foregoing discussion is not meant to be exhaustive.

But I hope the outline of major trends in post-independence theatre and the work of some important theatre personalities has given you some idea of the rich variety and vitality of theatre activities in Bengali, Marathi, Malayalam, Manipuri, Kannada, Hindi and English in major centers in the country. The quest for a true authentic Indianness is on. I am sure you are now ready to take on Girish Karnad’s Tughlaq.

1.10 QUESTIONS

1. Write down some of the important milestones of the contemporary Indian theatre.
2. Assess the contributions of the Bengali playwrights to the growth of Indian theatre.
3. How was the theatre in Kerala and Manipuri different from other states?
4. Examine the major challenges that contemporary Indian theatre is facing.
5. Write a note on the contribution of Chandrasekhar Kambar to Kannada theatre.

1.11 SUGGESTED READINGS

Badal Sircar, Hayavadana by Girish Karnad, The Lone Tusker by K.N. Panikkar, Siri Sampige by Chandrasekhar Kambar, From Sunset to Sunrise by Surendra Verma, Aurangzeb by Indira Parthasarathy, Mahapoorn by Satish Alekar, Mareech, the Legend by Arun Mukherje, Hunting the Sun by Utpal Dutt, Whirlpool by Datta Bhagat, Mother of 1084 by Mahasweta Devi, and Roads by Govind Purushottam Deshpande.
