CHAPTER ONE
THE RESURGENCE OF MODERN INDIA AND THEATRE

The first stage performance in a modern Indian language took place when a Russian named Herasim Lebedeff staged the Bengali version of two Western plays in 1795 in Calcutta [1]. This was the period when India was under the British rule. But, with the passage of time, the sufferings inflicted by the British on Indians and the injustice perpetrated by them forced the transformation of theatre from a mere source of entertainment to a powerful instrument to bring awareness among the Indians and to persuade them to fight for their rights. The first evidence for this comes from a Bengali play called “Nil-Darpan” written by Dinabandhu Mitra, which expressed the underlying spirit of revolt [1]. The play made such a great impact on the dramatists of that time who by now started considering that theatre should hold the mirror to social conditions. This was for the first time when freedom fighters, social reformers and dramatists joined hands to fight for the common cause of freedom.

The British captured and established their rule in Bengal in 1757 after defeating Nawab Sarajuddaula in the Battle of Plassey [2]. Therefore, it became the first region to come under British influence. The newly educated class of Indians thus first came into existence in Bengal. The British first settled in Calcutta (now Kolkatta) on the Coast of Hooghly River which developed into a major business centre for the Europeans, especially the British [3]. They built many churches for worship, clubs and dance bars for their entertainment. In respect of theatre too, they used to put up English plays themselves or arrange visiting troupes from their homeland. Even the newly educated Indians were neither allowed to be a part of or to watch these shows. This created a feeling of resentment among Indians and gave birth to the desire of having their own theatre as source of entertainment.

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- The first evidence of using theatre as an instrument against the British comes from a Bengali play called “Nil-Darpan” written by Dinabandhu Mitra. This was for the first time when freedom fighters, social reformers and dramatists joined hands to fight for the common cause of freedom.
This desire of Indians to have an indigenous theatre of their own first materialized when the first ever modern Bengali production was mounted in a specially built urban theatre on 7th November, 1795 by Mr. Herasim Lebedeff, a Russian adventurer, who worked as a band master with the British army. He had a very good knowledge of music, language and drama. He along with his tutor (who taught him Bengali) GolakNath Das translated two English comedies, one called "Disguise" and the other, "Love is the best doctor" into Bengali [1, 3]. This play attracted a huge audience and thus the doors to European drama were thrown open to the Indians. The play had no songs, dance and it had no concern with Indian tradition but still the audience noticed the moral conveyed through it. In this production some indigenous features were also introduced for the Bengali audience, a few poems of poet Bharata Chandra Ray were included and set to music and all the decorations were done according to Indian tradition [1]. The deep urge of Indians to develop a theatre of their own wrapped in the true colors of Indian culture and tradition, is clearly depicted by these modifications done in the field of production, scripting and presentation. However, momentum of this achievement could not be sustained for long as the next 60-70 years witnessed no growth in the field of theatre.

After this event although nothing "dramatic" happened in the field of Indian theatre, a great socio-political upsurge had been simmering in the background and it is important to analyze these happenings as it had to have a definite impact on the Indian theatre and drama.

1.1 THE RESURGENCE OF MODERN INDIA IN NINETEENTH CENTURY.

In the century between the battle of Plassey in 1757 and the annexation of Avadh in 1856, the British East India Company had transformed itself from a commercial power into an imperial power. Correspondingly, during this period India fell from a state of productive well being into one of the helpless dependence [4]. Historically, India has always been exploited socially, politically and culturally by different powers. Although the Mughals were also conquerors and were a privileged ruling class with their hierarchy but they eventually settled in India and became part and parcel of this nation. Even other foreign conquerors

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- After Herasim Lebedeff’s production, nothing dramatic happened in the field of Indian theatre for the next 60-70 years but a great socio-political upsurge had been simmering in the background.
who had settled down in India had financed public works that led to economic development. All the previous rulers of India had spent the revenue they collected from the people in the country. So the economic exploitation did not result in national wealth leaving the country but the British were the first one to drain all the wealth of India. They organized trade for their own advantage and used Indian revenue to purchase goods that were sent to England as investment. That India was becoming poorer as a result of the drain of wealth from the country was matter of concern for Indian thinkers, activists and economists of that time. “Poverty and ‘un-British’ rule in India” was the name of a detailed study on the subject by Dadabhai Naroji [5]. No government ever existed on the face of this earth, which was more corrupt, more pernicious and more rapacious than the government of East India Company. No one could have imagined that the British nation, rich with the plundered wealth of its empire would have become by then the most powerful country in the world, leaving India, one of the poorest, not only economically but socially and politically also. The material impoverishment of India was a great evil but far worse was the feeling among Indians of being outsiders in their own home. Along with this effect of thraldom on the minds and hearts of Indian people, three new factors were responsible in awakening the spirit of nationalism so strong that it inevitably led to a strong desire for independence.

Some social and political changes that gave rise to national awakening:

The first was the uniform system of law and administration imposed by the British on the people of all religions, caste and regions. All of them were given a uniform code of behavior, thus, giving them a common substratum of thought. The second factor was the spread of English education which widened the mental horizons of Indians and the third factor was a new consciousness awakened by the missionary zeal of Indian social reformers. In 1813, Charter Act was passed which laid down that company was to spend at least one lakh rupees a year on the education of Indians [6]. Earlier, this sum was used for the

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development of traditional learning. But after 1823, a controversy arose between the ‘Orientalists’ who advocated the imparting of native type of education and the ‘Anglicists’ who desired to promote modern western learning through the medium of English. The latter were supported by Indian intellectuals and social reformers. So, in 1835, Thomas Babington Macaulay passed a law according to which knowledge of English literature and science was to be imparted through the medium of English language. This enabled the British to get cheap clerks to help them in administrative functions and to increase the demand of British goods in India. Also, the Christian missionaries got a chance to spread Christianity, but were not very successful in their attempts to convert Hindus to Christianity. The newly educated Indians accepted western learning which brought them closer to English literature. They read about French revolution and the struggle of Ireland for freedom. This aroused their political consciousness and they began to understand the ideas of rights of individuals. A sense of nationalism was being developed which was greatly stimulated by the growth of active and independent press both in English and vernacular languages [7]. The repealing of Press Licensing Regulations Act in 1833 gave a remarkable degree of freedom to press which acted as an effective forum to organize political activities and helped in promotion of nationalism. During this time, the educated middle class began to emerge in society which played a major role in the fulfillment of nationalist aspiration in the country. Thus, western learning put the tools of rationalism and scepticism in the hands of a generation of young Indians. First used to break the fetters of tradition, the same tools helped a later generation to cut through the chains of political thralldom. It is ironic that it was the British who provided their subjects with just what was needed to undermine the British rule and to give a spirit of reformation to Indians.

The developing interference of the British in every sphere, whether it was political, social or economical and the new awareness caused by education made the masses apprehensive of the intentions of their masters. The social miseries

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RAJA RAM MOHAN RAI
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of a rigid caste system, the horrible rites of sati, female feticide and the illiteracy of women, prompted the educated population to think about the plight of the Indian society. As a result, a new class of social reformers emerged out of these newly educated masses. As reformation was a slow process and it took place under the cover of British authority, it was an internal movement, which did not touch or influence the outside events [5]. Although at the outset, the reforms were seen as a challenge to the traditional religion but later on, as the people’s outlook became wider, they accepted the reformers as leaders. In fact, according to K. M. Panniker [5]. India’s independence and emergence into modern world would hardly have been possible without the reformation of Hinduism. The first outside attack on Hinduism was done by the Christian missionaries who through the spread of western education, wanted to see the dissolution of Hinduism and widespread acceptance of Christianity. The educated middle class accepted western education with avidity and willingly studied Christian scriptures, but neither the dissolution of Hindu society so hopefully predicted nor the conversion of intellectuals so devotedly hoped for showed any signs of materialization. They rejected Christianity while accepting the wide humanism of European thought, its ethics and its general approach to the problems of life. So, they thought of reinterpreting Hinduism and reforming Indian society and the result was a broad movement of regeneration—an Indian Renaissance. At this critical juncture, there appeared on scene a figure who seemed to gather up in himself all the significant trends of his time. The many sided contributions of Raja Ram Mohan Roy to his country’s development entitles him to be called the “Father of Modern India”. Also, called the “Father of Hindu Reformation”, he was one of the country’s first champions of women’s rights [4]. He fought for the freedom of press and the abolition of sati which put him in the front rank of world’s reformers. He was the first Indian to be consulted on the Indian affairs by the British Parliament [6]. He laid the

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foundation of Brahmo Samaj in 1828. He was the first to start a political movement on constitutional lines. Caste distinction, Polygamy and the subordinate status of women in the Indian society were some of the evils which he wanted to remove by adopting western knowledge and technology [2].

The vedantic reformation found its most widely accepted exponent in Swami Vivekananda who wanted to revive Hinduism and purify its religious and social teachings so as to awaken the national consciousness in the people of India. Hinduism assimilated new learning and revived itself as a universalized religion based on Vedanta. In fact, the activities of social reformers aroused the feeling of nationalism among all Indians who now wanted to remove all the evils of Indian society and to fight the British unitedly.

One of the major issues of that time was the issue of remarriage of widows which got support from reformers like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, a renowned educationist and social reformer of nineteenth century. By 1849, Pramhansa Mandli began promoting widow remarriage, female education and cast reform in Maharashtra. Around 1851, a reform movement began among the Parsis [4]. This way, the social reformation continued till the day of independence. Cast excesses, untouchability, the oppression of women, etc. were all symptoms of rigid social system that prevented development of Indian society to its full potential. This immobile structure divided the Indian people and kept them from acting together as a united nation [4].

The reason for the lack of direction of social ideas and the failure to prevent the growth of anti social customs was undoubtedly, the loss of political power. So, reformation was carried out from the point of view of making people realize the need to have political control on their country [5]. Renaissance was the only way through which social, political and economic condition of India could be improved and our great reformers were successful in doing so. In fact, they also were a source of inspiration for the dramatists of that time and encouraged them to use theatre for social reformation and struggle for freedom.

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SWAMI VIVEKANAND
PLATE :03
1.2 EVOLUTION OF MODERN THEATRE FROM A SOURCE OF ENTERTAINMENT TO A STRONG WEAPON FOR FREEDOM STRUGGLE

As pointed earlier, in 1795, Indians showed their deep urge in having a theatre of their own which was fulfilled by Mr. Lebedeff and Golak Nath Das. Later the reformers motivated the dramatists to use theatre as a weapon for creating awareness among people but this was achieved in its true sense only in 1860, when “Nil-Darpan” was staged. Meanwhile, how theatre grew from 1795 to 1860 from a source of entertainment to a source of propaganda for awakening masses to achieve freedom is analysed below.

In 1831, forty years after Lebedeff’s first venture, another genuine theatre effort to start a theatre movement took shape in Bengak when Prassana Kumar Tagore built ‘The Hindu Theatre’. As this was spearheaded by an upcoming, new educated middle class, full of English and western ideas, the majority of plays produced were in English. Following this, theatre buildings came into existence where plays of Shakespeare and other dramatists were staged. In 1833, Mr. Nabin Chandra Basu established a theatre in his own house for staging Bengali plays [1]. Most of the plays in Bengali were translations of either English or the ancient Sanskrit plays. Lebedeff’s theatre had created a desire in the audience for plays whether a translation or an original. An attempt was being made to blend tradition and modernity. New plays were being written in the regional languages to satisfy the new educated class. Although new theatres were coming up and more and more plays were being written but their contribution in nurturing the love for theatre among the people in general was far from negligible. Some scholars and social leaders also started preaching social reform through the theatre. The first play giving expression to these new ideas was a Bengali play called “Kulin-kul Sarbasava”, written in 1854 by Ram Narayan Tarkaratna dealing with the problem of polygamy. In 1853, Parsi Nata Mandli was established and in the same year, an Urdu play called “Inder Sabha” was written and staged in Lucknow. It was a combination of an opera and a costume play. It had no theme but its tuneful music and eye-filling spectacle made such a great impact that

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many others got inspired to write their own ‘Inder Sabhas’. In 1858, the Sanskrit play ‘Ratnavali’, by Sri Harsha was produced in Bengali and Michael Madhusudan Dutt was requested by some Englishmen to translate the play into English. After this, plays were written which were interpretations of old mythological stories to suit the contemporary situations. This inspired many dramatists of India and gave a new direction to theatre movement. The war of independence of 1857 was lost by the Indians but India was provided an administrative unity by the British after that and according to Adya Rangacharya [1], Indian theatre forged this unity. Dramatic literature was being produced in abundance and dramatists were protesting against the contemporary conditions through their plays.

Many plays were written during a decade or so after the war of 1857, but two plays deserve special mention. In 1860, the first original Marathi play called “Thorle Madhavrao Peshwe”, written by Vinayak Janardan Keertane which indirectly expressed the political urge that met a defeat in the war of 1857. But the first play with a contemporary theme and a spirit of revolt which shook both Indians and the British was a Bengali play called “Nil-Darpan”, written by Dinabandhu Mitra in the same year. It was the earliest play of protest with the theme as the name “Nil-Darpan” (mirror to indigo) conveys, the exploitation of the people by the British indigo planters. It was an attack on the British rulers of the day. The play evoked a sharp reaction. When this play was staged in National Theatre of Lucknow, the British got so angry that some of them went up the stage to beat the actors [8]. After this, the play was banned and in 1876, the ‘Drama Act’ was passed according to which any play could be banned by a magistrate and he could also issue warrant against the actors and the team. As a result, any play having words like ‘Bharat Mata’ or ‘Freedom’ was censored [3]. After ‘Nil-Darpan’, dramatists realized strongly that a play should hold mirror to social conditions. Many plays were being written to arouse social conscieneness of the
COVER PAGE OF THE PLAY 'NILDARPAN'
PLATE :05
people but censorship was a major problem and to escape this problem, the dramatists started reinterpreting mythology, folk theatre forms and Sanskrit Drama to arouse the sense of nationalism. How these were used as tools to convey contemporary ideas will be discussed in the two subsequent chapters.