Nil-Darpan was the first play that chose contemporary rural life as its theme and made drama an instrument of protest to awaken the masses. It greatly helped to augment the national agitation that shook the then province of Bengal from one end to another. Theatre by then had become a powerful tool for protest and for the propagation of ideas. In 1876, the British passed the ‘Dramatic Performance Control Bill’ to check the use of theatre against their rule [9]. The sword of censorship was now hanging on the heads of the dramatists who wanted to bring a revolution through their plays. Therefore they started looking for other sources to find solution to the newfound problem and discovered that it is safe to reinterpret Classical Sanskrit drama and folk and traditional theatre to serve their purpose. They thought of reinterpretation of this source to reflect the contemporary social and political reality.

2.1 POLITICAL INTERPRETATION OF CLASSICAL SANSKRIT DRAMA

The theatre became a live institution in the hands of Kalidasa, Shudraka, Bhavabhuti and Vishakadatta and their plays represent the golden age of Sanskrit drama. Although Sanskrit plays were written even after that till 17th century but they were either imitations of Kalidasa or Bhavabhuti or sheer literary exploits. The subject matter to classical Sanskrit drama was provided by epics like Mahabharata and Ramayana and had attracted appreciative audiences for centuries. The contemporary dramatists, who were looking to conveying their message in a disguised manner, chose plays from the ancient classical Sanskrit drama and reinterpreted them. The British couldn’t raise any objection on such plays since they were the cultural heritage of India. Epics like Mahabharata and Ramayana and plays like Abhijnanashakuntala, Mudra-Rakshasa and

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Chapter Two  An investigation of various trends of the existing theatre in India during British rule

Mricchakatika etc. were chosen and reinterpreted according to socio-political conditions of the time. The classical Sanskrit drama drew its material from ‘Mahabharata’, a short heroic epic narrating the quarrels and ensuing battle between the two families of brothers, the Kauravas and the Pandavas. All the vedic mythology and, all the existing folklore, legends and even the various forms of religion and philosophy are found mentioned and described in Mahabharata. The other epic ‘Ramayana’, which depicts the story of Lord Rama and his victory over the demon king Ravana also provided a source material for the Sanskrit dramatists. Bhasa wrote thirteen plays, six out of which deal with episodes of Mahabharata and two with the story of Ramayana [1]. The theme conveyed by both the epics is victory of good over evil. So, the contemporary dramatists used these plays to awaken the masses. The demon ‘Ravana’ in Ramayana and ‘Kauravas’ in Mahabharata represented the evil (the British) and ‘Lord Rama’ in Ramayana and ‘Pandavas’ in Mahabharata represented the good (Indians) and the theme ‘Good always should fight against the evil and that the good always wins over the evil’ was conveyed to the audience through these epic-based plays.

Another dramatist whose work was used for interpreting the then contemporary conditions was Vishakadatta. He wrote one and the only political play called ‘Mudra-Rakshasa’. The theme of the play was founding of the Magadha Empire by Chandragupta under the guidance of Chanakya. The words of Chanakya, “As long as the Nanda kings were ruling, the country was never safe. Now, it has been united under one sovereignty”, conveyed the message to the audience that India was not safe as long as the British would rule it. The play gave the message of unity, sovereignty and revolt against British. Again, ‘Mudra-Rakshsa’ was of immediate contemporary interest since it was the story of an Indian king having defeated and driving away a foreign conquerer [1].

One of the greatest plays in Sanskrit is ‘Mricchkatika’ whose authorship is ascribed to the legenndary king Shudraka. The play is full of politics and cleverness. The play is about the winning of the kingdom by a poor shepherd which was a great source of inspiration for the Indians [3].

HIGHLIGHTS:
- Epics like Mahabharata and Ramayana and plays like Abhijnanashakuntala, Mudra-Rakshasa and Mricchakatika etc. were chosen and reinterpreted according to socio-political conditions of the time.
2.2 SOCIAL INTERPRETATION OF CLASSICAL SANSKRIT DRAMA

If Bhasa was a natural dramatist uninhibited by rules and regulations, Kalidasa was a cultivated and refined artist. Bhasa was influenced by epics and he went to 'Puranic' literature to find themes of his plays. Kalidasa wrote three plays- 'Vikramorvashiya', 'Malavikagnimitra' and 'Abhijnanashakuntala'. All the three dealt with the love story of a king who already had a queen. Out of the three plays, Abhijnanashakuntala is the most famous. The play narrates the story of love between King Dushyanta and Shankuntala. They both get married according to Gandharva form of marriage and Shankutala becomes pregnant. Because of a sage's curse, Dushyanta forgets about Shankuntala and refuses to accept her. It is only when he sees the ring that he gave earlier to Shankuntala that he was reminded of her and then they both are united again. The play has a universal appeal. It depicts through powerful emotions the plight of women in society. Helplessness of her family is depicted through the character of Shankuntala's hermit foster father Kanva. The various productions of this play clearly focused to convey the social conditions of that time.

Another play Mricchakatika, which was, as already mentioned, written by King Shudraka. The plot of the play revolves around the love affair between a poor Brahmin called Charudatta and a rich courtesan, Vasantsena. Charudutta was accused of murder of Vasantsena. He was condemned to death and only at the last minute, Vasantsena revived from her swoon and rushed to court. Meanwhile, a shephered won over the kingdom. He released Charudutta and Vasantsena and allowed them to get married. The play is full of romance besides politics and cleverness.

All the above-mentioned plays made the Indian audiences conscious of the darker side of the society and their existence. In Kalidas's Abhijnanashakuntala, they saw the plight of women in their own family and society and in Bhavabhuti's plays, they found the institution of marriage being questioned and Mricchakatika provoked them to rebel against the existing political conditions. They also used songs and poems to underline the hidden message in the vast body of the Classical drama.

HIGHLIGHTS:
- In Kalidas's Abhijnanashakuntala, they saw the plight of women in their own family and society and in Bhavabhuti's plays, they found the institution of marriage being questioned and Mricchakatika provoked them to rebel against the existing political conditions.
2.3 USE OF FOLK AND TRADITIONAL THEATRE

Sanskrit drama had ceased to exist after 10th century A.D. because Sanskrit language was no more the language of the common people. At this juncture, regional languages were developing and the knowledge of Sanskrit language became restricted to the educated few. It became impossible to reach the masses through Sanskrit. After the decline of Sanskrit drama till the rise of modern Indian theatre during 18th and 19th centuries, theatre and drama were considered to have disappeared entirely. But, according to Adya Rangacharya [1], that meant only the absence of written plays due to the decline of Sanskrit language and due to the incomplete development of the regional languages, and it does not mean the absence of theatre. Socially and politically, this period was one of the greatest chaos and disintegration and modern dramatists wanted to convey these social and political contemporary themes to the common man. But, they had to circumvent British censorship and the use of folk theatre gave the only solution to this problem. Folk theatre had certain characteristics which drew the attention of contemporary dramatists. The disadvantages of Sanskrit drama are not found with Folk and traditional drama. Folk plays were written and performed in people's language so they had the potential to reach the masses. The presentation style, costumes and props used were simple. They could be performed anywhere because of no requirement of a proper stage. Contemporary dramatists used to mould the structure of the play according to the message to be conveyed and interest of the people. How modern dramatists used these characteristics for their purpose will be discussed later but first it is equally important to know when and how these characteristics evolved and inculcated into the folk theatre.

At this juncture it is worthwhile to have a close look at the characteristics of the folk forms that were given shape by the Bhakti movement as these very forms were used later by the theatre movement during freedom struggle to propagate the concepts of political and social reform. In a period of social and political

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disintegration, a new cultural awakening was induced in the Indians by Bhakti movement. Many philosophical schools and theatre forms came into existence. Bhakti movement played a major role in shaping the Indian theatre in the form of script, style of production and presentation as exemplified by the folk theatre forms like Jatra, Bhavai, Bhagwat Mela, Harikatha, etc. which later became a source of inspiration for the theatre practice in 18th and 19th centuries by modern dramatists. Bhakti movement laid stress on the employment of people’s language and the technique of Sanskrit drama. These were the elements that went into the making of folk drama. In addition to this, Bhakti School of Drama also showed the necessity of direct contact between the audience and the play. The link between them was the Charanas, the Harikatha artists and the Sutradhars. It was these developments that laid the foundation of folk stage.

The influence of Vaishnava Bhakti doctrine was responsible for a new trend in folk theatre. The main themes of folk plays were taken from epics. Earlier, they were sung by poets and saints but now, dialogues were introduced. These were like commentaries on the original themes in context of contemporary society of the time. Secondly, to convey the contemporary themes, realism was introduced in folk plays. This was done by the introduction of ‘Krishna plays’. These were the first social plays of Indian stage because Krishna could do all the things that ordinary men do. This tradition enriched the folk stage with the pastoral songs and group dances of various regions. The Vaishnava saints who had a good knowledge of Sanskrit started writing plays according to rules of Natyashastra to enrich style of production and presentation. A revolutionary change was brought about by Charanas who moved plays from temple yards or palaces to the cross-roads or open spaces to reach larger number of audience and performed the plays regularly except the seasons of sowing and harvesting. In due course these plays became the source of livelihood for the Charanas.

Inspite of these common features, there were regional differences so that local people could understand the play better. But the soul was the same. The Bhakti cult gave folk theatre a place in social life of the people. Interwoven with the traditional themes, the folk dramatists conveyed the problems concerning

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contemporary life like ‘Bhands’ in Punjab make use of satirical commentary of contemporary interests. ‘Jatra’ in Bengal, ‘Tamasha’ in Maharashtra, ‘Bhavai’ in Gujarat and ‘Nautanki’ in Uttar Pradesh presented a delightful satire on men and morals [8]. How these forms helped the modern dramatists to convey their contemporary themes during British rule is discussed below.

Originally, Jatra in Bengal meant the ritual of songs and dances that formed part of religious festivals and in the wake and rise of Vaishnavism in fifteenth century, it gained wide popularity. It also acquired a set of conventions and a style of its own. The modern dramatists changed the traditional themes of Jatra to the altered social context. By spreading the theme of love and bhakti through the medium of Jatra, Chaitanya and his followers had brought about national integration in many parts of India at cultural level at a time when all the regions had known much political and economic devastation. Moti Lal Ray gave old hindu epics a contemporary relevance and wrote Jatra plays having link with religion and folk culture but conveying contemporary themes. Mukunda Das made Jatra a powerful instrument to spread nationalist message. This way Jatra was revitalized and a distinct form of Jatra called ‘Swadeshi Jatra’ came into existence. Mahatma Gandhi’s movement of non-cooperation and the removal of untouchability were the favourite themes of these Jatras [8, 11].

Like Jatra, the modern dramatists changed other folk forms also to convey the contemporary themes. In Maharashtra, Vishnu Das Bhave, in 1843, and his successor Anna Saheb Kirloskar were responsible for revitalization of Tamasha. Similarly, Bhavai and Nautanki and the other forms of folk theatre were used by modern dramatists to convey the nationalist sentiments in their respective regions.