Dinabandu Mitra's play "Nil-durpan" was the first play written to arouse the social conscience of the people. Although plays based on contemporary themes were written even before that but it was this play that actually shook the British government. Freedom struggle and social reform were at its peak at that time and after the revolt of 1857, the whole nation was fighting unitedly with a common spirit of nationalism. The Western education had introduced new techniques of dramaturgy and staging methods to Indians. More and more plays were being written on contemporary themes. The British realized the power of theatre which could be used as a strong weapon against them and as a consequence of which they passed the 'Dramatic Performance Control Act' in 1876 which led to the arrest of actors and banning of plays and destruction of manuscripts in the ensuing years. Theatre also underwent commercialization during this period and there was a fear of the real essence and spirit of reform and liberation being lost. This forced the dramatists to look for new modes of expression. At this time many Sanskrit plays were being translated and staged. So, the contemporary dramatists thought of introducing new staging methods and modes of presentation and performance imbibing the techniques of Sanskrit drama. They also found novel forms of expression in theatre also by the fusion of the elements of Sanskrit and Western theatre.

3.1 CONTRIBUTION OF CONTEMPORARY DRAMATISTS:

It was discussed earlier the spurt of activity in terms of writing and production. The theatre saw many versions of plays from Shakespeare to Kalidasa to Shri Harsha. However, a new audience constituting educated middle class was coming into existence and urged the theatre to search for new theatre.

HIGHLIGHTS:
*The contemporary dramatists thought of introducing new staging methods and modes of presentation and performance imbibing the techniques of Sanskrit drama. They also found novel forms of expression in theatre also by the fusion of the elements of Sanskrit and Western theatre.
forms. Western and Sanskrit plays were not sufficient to satisfy the hunger of this new emerging audience. They wanted something more. During this time, social reformers were very active and the contemporary dramatists who were influenced by their ideas found this as a perfect time and opportunity to propagate their ideas through the medium of drama. They were inspired by techniques used in Western and Sanskrit drama. The knowledge of these techniques led them to find new methods of presentation as evidenced in the 1843 Sangli experiment in Maharashtra when a play called ‘Dashavatara’ was performed in front of the Raja of Sangli. The Raja appreciated the play but wanted to reform and modify its presentation. This job was assigned to Vishnu Das Bhave who prepared a mythological play called ‘Sitaswayamvara’ and staged it in 1843 before the Raja and his courtiers [1]. An account of the presentation described in the book ‘The Marathi Theatre’ by Naik Bapurao is as follows [14]:

“The stage setting of the play was very simple. It consisted of a piece of red cloth hung at the back and a few wooden properties. The Sutradhara was present with his chorus of singers and musical accompanists throughout the play. He occupied a corner on the right side of the actors in front of the back curtain. The play opened with benedictory songs in honour of the presiding deities. The first player to enter was the clown, or Vidushaka dressed like a jungle creature with green leaves tied to his head-dress. The Sutradhara entered into a humorous repertoire with the clown and enlisted his help in the performance. The God Ganapati then entered and assured the Sutradhara that the performance would be a success.

The Goddess of learning, Saraswati, then enters dancing on a wooden peacock. Ganapati and Saraswati were entertained to dance and music by the Gandharvas and the Kinnaras. The play started, after the departure of Ganapati and Saraswati, with a short description of the Sutradhara.

At the beginning of every scene, the same procedure of giving a resume was followed. The Sutradhara sang a song giving in outline of the events to be acted and the player spoke the dialogue, which was not written but roughly decided beforehand. A few leading actors including the clown were allowed more liberty to depart from the set lines.

The actors were subject to the direct and vigilant control of the Sutradhara who promoted them in dialogue as well as movements. All the characters, except
the demons sang songs appropriate to the mood of the scene. The Sutradhara and the members of the chorus not only provided instrumental music but often joined in the singing. The entries of the demons were a noisy and spectacular affair. The red-painted faces of the inhuman characters looked fierce when lit up by naked torches" [12].

Though Bhave improvised the techniques but still his contribution was not enough because the story element was nil. The educated class was not satisfied with its content. So, attempts were being made to write plays which were strong both in terms of their content and technique [1].

*The movement of the new resurgence was a great source of inspiration for the modern dramatists and the reformers who inspired them, in turn, were inspired by the ‘Bhakti movement’ of earlier times. The Vaishnava cult had united the whole nation and spread the message of devotion or Bhakti. Inspired by the Bhakti movement and learning from the experience of social reformers in the other part of the world through English education, the Indian reformers tried to bring about a radical change in the static Indian society. They wanted to reaffirm the values that were Indian. Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Kesava Chandra Sen wanted to reshape Hinduism and established Brahmo Samaja giving a new interpretation to the Hindu philosophy. Swami Dyananda formed Arya Samaj based on the Vedanta. Ishwara Chandra Vidyasagar pioneered the movement of social reform in Bengal and the most important contribution was the movement of widow remarriage [13]. In the field of drama, Ramnarayana Tarakratana (1822-1878), Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-1873) and Dinabandhu Mitra (1830-1874) took the lead. They wrote plays for social purpose. Their basic approach was painting the then conditions with harsh lines and pointing to a better future either directly or by implication [8].

Ramnarayana Tarakratna is regarded as the first Bengali dramatist. He wrote a play, 'KulinKulasarbasava' in 1854. It was the first ever Bengali play of merit in the theatre sense. The characters were conceived as individuals and the slot revealed through various actions compartmentalized into acts and scenes. It
was first performed in March, 1857 in the house of Ramjay Basak. After it, Ramnarain wrote a number of plays many of which like ‘Kulin-kula-sarbasava’, dealt with the evils of caste system. He wrote a very famous social play based on polygamy called ‘Naba Natak’ which was adjudged as of “adequate quality” to merit the prize by a jury having among its members such illustrious persons as Pandit Ishwara Chandra Vidyasagar and Raj Krishna Bannerji. His Bengali adaptation of the Sanskrit play called ‘Ratnabali’ was first performed in 1858 in Belgachia Natyasala. Thereafter Madhusudan Dutt, famous Bengali poet, was requested by some Englishmen to translate ‘Ratnabali’ into English.

This was the first time when Michael Madhusudan Dutt’s attention was drawn towards writing plays. He wrote his first Bengali play called ‘Sarmistha’ which was produced at Belgachia Natyasala on 3rd September, 1859. Though he wrote plays for the newly educated class as evident from his letter to his friend Gourchandra Basak in which he wrote, “I was writing for that portion of my countrymen who think as I think, whose minds have been more or less imbied with Western ideas and modern thinking”, yet, for the material of his first play, ‘Sarmistha’, he chose a story from Mahabharata. This play was an instant success. He wrote two comedies called ‘Ekei Ki Bole Sabahyata?’ and ‘Buro Shaliker Ghare Ron’ which dealt with such themes as controlling the sexuality of widows, the flamboyant life style of the class of Zamindars or the foolishness of those Bengali youth who aped everything British. Full of down to earth humor, racy dialogue and sharp cameos of persons from different strata of society, the two comedies had the additional advantage of being easily stageable.

**Dinabandhu Mitra, a contemporary of Ramnarayin and Madhusudan Dutt, reacted to the social milieu with greater perception than earlier. His two social plays ‘Sadhabar Ekadashi’ and ‘Nil-Durpan’ were very popular. ‘Sadhabar Ekadashi’ was based on the youth who could not differentiate between liberty and licence in their personal lives. ‘Nil-Durpan’, as already mentioned, brought a revolution in the history of modern Indian drama. It was based on the theme of exploitation of Indians by British indigo planters.**

---

**HIGHLIGHTS:**

1. He wrote a very famous social play based on polygamy called ‘Naba Natak’ which was adjudged as of “adequate quality” to merit the prize by a jury having among its members such illustrious persons as Pandit Ishwara Chandra Vidyasagar and Raj Krishna Bannerji.

2. Dinabandhu Mitra, a contemporary of Ramnarayin and Madhusudan Dutt, reacted to the social milieu with greater perception than earlier. His two social plays ‘Sadhabar Ekadashi’ and ‘Nil-Durpan’ were very popular.
MICHAEL MADHUSUDAN DUTT
PLATE :07
DINABANDHU MITRA
PLATE :08
The work of Ramnarain, Madhusudan Dut: and Dinabandhu Mitra had some common characteristics. Firstly, all of them wrote plays based on contemporary social issues. Secondly, they introduced characters from lower strata of society and they used colloquial language. The third characteristic was the exaggerated humor. These ingredients made the three playwrights popular among common folk.

Bhartendu Harishchandra and Hindi theatre: The Hindi theatre movement owes much to Bhartendu Harishchandra (1850-1885), playwright, actor, poet and journalist, for his pioneering work in that language. It is said that probably, after Tulsidas, he was the best communicator of Hindi world. Bhartendu’s creativity and his insight into social conditions can be judged from his composition ‘Kavi Vacana Sudha’ in 1879 in which he wrote:

“Great sons of the soil are thinking of ways and means for the uplift of the country. I would like to add one. Articles and poems are published on the subjects but they do not reach the masses. For this purpose, I think small pamphlets of national songs should be brought out and they should be given wide publicity in the villages...Everybody is aware that education by means of songs is much more effective than general education...for this purpose I intend to collect such songs and publish them on small pamphlets. I would like to solicit the help and cooperation of creative talent and request them to send such works to me. I will publish them and they can be handed over to singing parties...Those who are rich should resolve that they would give patronage to only those singers who sing such songs...I would like such songs to be composed in simple metric patterns and in a very simple language so that they can be picked up by the women and the common men”[13].

He was very much aware of the social conditions of the time and was very conscious of the means to be adopted to communicate his message to the audience. He adopted an approach which was meant not only to satisfy his creative urge but also to provide a means for social reform. He drew freely from classics. He utilized the folk forms and went to the extent of adapting certain forms of European drama to suit his requirements. His ideas about play-writing...
can be easily understood from his article “Nataka (Drama)” in which he wrote:

“In the past, the plays were written according to the tastes and inclinations of the then poets and audience and thus entertain them. But the tastes and inclinations of poets and for that matter of the audience are different in ways more than one. Hence these days, it doesn't seem to be logical to write plays on old theories and values. Dramas should be written after due consideration and evaluation of the emotional trends of the audience, depending upon the then period and the values thereof. It is not at all necessary to discard everything that is old. Whatever reflecting the present trend, if properly presented, will be acceptable to the audience. In order to present the artifact of writing drama to the best advantage, special attention will have to be paid to elements of time, place and character” [13].

He not only wrote plays but also translated some of the old Indian plays. Some of his translations/adaptations were: ‘Vidya Sundara’, ‘Ratnavali’, ‘Pakhanda-vidambana Nataka’, ‘Dhananjaya-vijaya vyayoga’, ‘Mudra Rakshasa’, ‘Karpura-manjarí’ and ‘Durlabha-Bandhu’. During this time, emphasis was shifting towards elaborate cut-scenes and painted curtains. The success of a production depended on the stage-sets, trick scenes, quick changes and singing and dancing. *Bhartendu also showed the way how foreign plays should be adapted to the Indian milieu as exemplified in his adaptation of Shakespeare’s “The Merchant of Venice”, which though follows the Shakesperian format but fits perfectly well in the Indian context. His adaptation had the flavour of Indian culture yet the format was of Shakespeare. His original works include plays like ‘Pravasa’, ‘Vaidiki Himsa Himsa na Bhavati’, ‘Satya Harischandra’, ‘Prem Jogiini’, ‘Visasya Visamausadham’, ‘Sri Chandravali’, ‘Bharata Janani’, ‘Nila Devi’, ‘Andhera Nagari Chaupata Raja’, ‘Sati Pratapa’. In his original plays, he used the nomenclature of Sanskrit dramaturgy and added new varieties derived from the impact of Western plays. He redefined the nomenclature ‘Nataka’, formerly used as a variety of the category ‘Rupaka’in Sanskrit dramaturgy. He divided plays into two groups- “Nataka” and “Giti Rupaka”. The former was the one in which story elements and

HIGHLIGHTS:
*Bhartendu also showed the way how foreign plays should be adapted to the Indian milieu as exemplified in his adaptation of Shakespeare’s “The Merchant of Venice”, which though follows the Shakesperian format but fits perfectly well in the Indian context. His adaptation had the flavour of Indian culture yet the format was of Shakespeare.
dialogues predominated and the later had the predominance of songs. His plays ‘Satya Harischandra’ and ‘Sati Pratapa’ were powerful indictments of social evils of that time. His plays ‘Bharata Durdasa’ and ‘Bharat Janani’ focused on the degradation of the then Indian society and in the process educated the audience. Thus, Bhartendu’s plays had a more realistic social relevance. He was the first to write a modern Prahasana, a form of Sanskrit d'ama which can be loosely termed as farce. His play ‘Vaidiki Himsa Himsa na Bhavati’ depicted the methodology adopted by false teachers in misleading the common man and ‘Andher Nagari Chaupat Raja’ exposed the idiosyncrasies of the aristocracy and their utter ignorance. Bhartendu’s contribution was all encompassing from giving expression to the social urges of his time through his creative writings to building a language of presentation and thereby creating new living traditions. He did a monumental service to Hindi by chiseling the language and giving it a purposeful direction, synthesizing the great tradition of Sanskrit plays and the folk forms by bold and imaginative experiments and providing an alternative to the vilifying tendencies emerging with great force in Parsi Theatrical Companies and their performances.

**The Emergence of Marathi Theatre:**

Another dramatist of significance was the Marathi playwright, Anna Saheb Kirloskar. He formed his own company called ‘Kirloskar Natak Mandli’. He adapted Kalidas’s ‘Abhijanshakutala’ and in his adaptation, he completely gave up the traditional Dashavatara pattern prevalent at the time. He introduced songs in simple Marathi at appropriate places. As his plays were a combination of prose and music. They also came to be called as ‘Sargits’ or ‘musicals’. He used dramatic prose for dramatic narration and the songs for the entertainment of the audience. The finest example being the play ‘Sangeet Saubhadra’ a song-studded mythological play with slyly humorous social undertones [15].

KakaSaheb Khadilkar, a disciple of Lokmanya Tilak, was another dramatist who put Indian politics on the stage. He expressed nationalistic aspirations through his plays [1]. His early mythological and historical plays showed the strong influence of Shakespearean tragedy [15]. The first play that

**HIGHLIGHTS:**

*Bhartendu’s plays had a more realistic social relevance. He was the first to write a modern Prahasana, a form of Sanskrit drama which can be loosely termed as farce*
Khadilkar wrote was a historical tragedy based on the enmity of the Bijapur and Vijaynagar kingdoms. Another play of his “Bhao Bandaki”, like his earlier work, dramatized the tragedy of an internecine feud and strongly pleaded for unity of all Indians against the British government in India [3]. Written in 1907 his ‘Keechak-Vadha’, based on the Mahabharata episode of Bhima killing Keechaka for the latter’s attempted molestation of Draupdi, was an intelligent and forceful allegory satirizing Lord Curzon’s regime. It was banned by the British government till the time it was resurrected by the Congress Ministry in 1937. His play ‘Manapman’ was a musical play based on the inequality between the classes [15].

Following these, there emerged many other dramatists who in different Indian languages or socio political themes wrote to create awareness among audience. At this juncture commercialization entered the theatre which though gave an impetus to the commercial aspect, brought about the downfall of a sort to the serious theatre with socio-political context.