The background to the drama of Shaw, Galsworthy and Granville-Barker.

The relation between literature and society is a commonplace truth of social life and literary history. Literature chronicles and reflects the possible occurrences of society and the standards of social thought and morality, albeit in an idealised form. The spectacle of contemporary society in its flow of life and ripple of emotions, in its everyday conflicts and its rare moments of visionary idealism, grows into a potent influence upon literature and a perennial source of its inspiration. The perception of the world around the artist sets in motion his creative energy; his most soaring and high-pitched imagination rests upon a core of reality. The social experience of the writer is often transmuted into matter for speech and song.

I propose to apply this principle of correlation between society and literature to a study of the British Drama during the last decade of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth. During this period a radical change in and revival of British Drama was made possible by the impact of the drama of Ibsen and some other continental playwrights. The theme of the New Drama became a close reflection of changing social values, especially the demand for social justice for all sections of the society. The spread of education, attempts at better distribution of national income, growing importance of women and the spread of socialistic ideas heightened a demand for social justice. Dramatists as well as some novelists and even poets of the period, in their attempt to identify themselves with the problems of the age, took up the issue of social justice as the motif of their plays. Thus the concept of social justice infiltrated into British Drama very frequently during the
early decades of the present century. My aim is to examine how the idea of social justice infiltrates into British Drama of the early twentieth century, with particular emphasis on the works of George Bernard Shaw, John Galsworthy and Harley Granville-Barker.

This examination will necessarily involve quick glances at the treatment of the theme of social justice in earlier forms of literature. Langland's *Piers Plowman* is a social document of the fourteenth century England that witnessed the peasant's Revolt and reaction against papacy and feudalism. Modern criticism has tended to judge Shakespeare's plays in terms of the state of society in Elizabethan England. In his satirical comedies - *Volpone*, *The Alchemist*, *Everyman in His Humour* - Ben Jonson pointed out the follies and vices of London life, 'the time's deformity' exposed and satirised in the category of 'humour'. Comparable concern with the social theme we can find in the poets and dramatists of the Restoration period too. The plays of Etherege, Wycherly and Congreve reflect the social ethos of the exclusively limited fashionable world of the contemporary court. Dryden and Pope remain unrivalled as painters of their own ages. The political ferment of the time, literary jealousy and rivalry, extremely artificial manners of fashionable society - these are the subjects of *Absalom and Achitophel*, *Mac Flecknoe*, *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*, *The Rape of the Lock*, *She Stoops to Conquer* and *The School for Scandal*.

The great bulk of literature of the first half of the nineteenth century reflected the turmoil and commotion in the social life of Western Europe especially of England under the impact of the French Revolution that was a unique upheaval proclaiming the natural rights of man and the abolition of class distinctions. Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* and Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* added fuel to the flames kindled in England by the French Revolution. The social ferment of the age stimulated Cobden's fight (1) for

1. In his *Rural Rides* Cobden describes the misery of the poor.
parliamentary reform and for justice to the poor, Owen's lead in the Co-operative movement, Francis Place's service to Trade Unionism, Ashley's tenacious steering of a series of factory legislations and Chadwick's Public Health Act.

As early as 1820, Walter Scott referred in a letter to the unhappy dislocation which has taken place between the employer and those in his employment. (1) In 1842, Sidney Herbert spoke thus at a church meeting:

There is too little communication between classes in this country. We want, if not the feeling, at least the expression, of more sympathy on the part of the rich towards the poor and more personal intercourse between them. (2)

Mrs. Gaskell held up a vivid picture of the deplorable economic conditions of the English working classes during the early Victorian period:

The disparity between the amount of earnings of the working classes and the price of their food, occasioned in more cases than could well be imagined, disease and death. Whole families went through a gradual starvation. They only wanted a Dante to record their sufferings. And yet even his words would fall short of the awful truth. (Mary Barton, Ch.viii)

Such demands for social amelioration deepened, broadened and coloured the literature of the time. A considerable body of English literature of the time dealt with the ideal of Social Justice. William Blake sang of the Chimney Sweeper and Coleridge proposed the establishment of an egalitarian community which he and Southey christened Pantisocracy. In The Age of Bronze Byron attacked the stay-at-home, land-owing profiteers who made money out of the high price of corn during the Napoleonic Wars. Thomas Hood throws brief

1. Quoted by A.V. Dicey, Law and opinion in England, P. 119
2. Speech of Sidney Herbert quoted by Mrs. Norton after the title page of her long poem The Child of the Islands.
light on the weary woman who made shirts in her home:

With fingers weary and worn,
with eyelids heavy and red,
A woman sat in unwomanly rags,
Plying her needle and thread—
Stitch! Stitch! Stitch!
In poverty, hunger and dirt.

("Song of the Shirt").

Some of Shelley's earlier works are in part poetical renderings of Godwin's book *Political Justice*. In *Queen Mab*, for example, Shelley speaks of the time,

When reason's voice
Loud as the voice of Nature, shall have waked
The Nations.

His passion for justice and his intolerance of the despotic power of capitalism grew into a fine fury of indignation against tyranny of every kind. In his Song he thus addresses the Men of England:

Men of England, wherefore plough
For the lords who lay ye low?
Wherefore weave with toil and care
The rich robes your tyrants wear?

His advice to them goes thus:

Sow seed— but let no tyrant reap;
Find wealth,— let no impostor heap;
Weave robes— let not the idle wear;
Forge arms, in your defence to bear.

A practical inducement to revolt.

According to A.V. Dicey, the Chartist agitation was the inevitable consequence of the unstable condition of contemporary society. *(1)* The limited scope of the Reform Act frustrated the proletarian expectations and whetted their hatred of the aristocracy. Angry outbursts of hate alternate with pathetic narrations of the miseries of the poor— as in the following extracts from Ebenezer Elliott:

1. *Law and Opinion in England*, pp. 211-12,
Why are ye called My Lord and Squire,
While fed by mine and me,
And wringing food, and clothes and fire,
From bread-taxed misery?

Child, is thy father dead?
Father is gone!
Why did they tax his bread?
God's will be done!
Mother has sold her bed,
Better to die than wed!
Where shall she lay her head?
Home we have none!

Earnest Jones's verses on the contemporary demand for social justice are Battle Bay and other Poems (1855), The Song of the Lower Classes (1856), Songs of Democracy (1856) and The Revolt of Hindustan (1857).

The land is the landlords',
The traders' is the sea;
The ore the usurer's coffer fills,
But what remains for me?
I pay for all their learning,
I toil for all their ease;
They render back, in coin for coin,
Want, ignorance, disease;
The hour of leisure, happiness
The rich alone may see;
The playful child, the smiling wife—
But what remains for me?
The coming hope, the future day,
When wrong to right shall be done,
And hearts that have the courage, men,
To make that future, now.

Here are grievances which were expressed in more or less similar language by a host of poets. Owenites, Chartists and Corn-Law Repealers were fulminating against the aristocracy and demanding immediate social equality. The humanitarian spirit of the age stimulated by Evangelicalism, ideals of enlightened democracy and Benthamite faith in progress demanded justice for the weak and the oppressed, wherever they might be. We meet with poems exulting
over the abolition of slave trade, poems sympathizing with convicts, poems on the fallen women, poems emphasizing the sorrows of factory children. Thus the ideal of social justice was kept steady before men's minds by a multitude of books and pamphlets—all proclaiming the dignity of common life and uttering the same passionate cry against every form of class or caste oppression.

Pressure from the lower classes beginning with the Chartist Movement in 1848 produced another Reform Bill which extended the suffrage to them. More reforms followed in 1885 and social legislations in the form of factory and mining acts ameliorated the most glaring abuses of laissez-faire industrialism while the Trade Union Movement wrested further concessions regarding wages, hours and sanitation from employers. The publication of Das Capital by Karl Marx in 1867 and the writings of Engels served as powerful inspiration to the common people uniting for the cause of political and social justice. Socialist agitations cropped up frequently and the working classes found intellectual allies such as Carlyle, Ruskin, Arnold, Morris and the members of the Fabian Society. In the literary field discontent, criticism and rebellion were becoming increasingly audible. Tennyson's The Princess, Elizabeth Barret Browning's 'The cry of the Human', 'Casa Guidi Windows' and Aurora Leigh, Thomas Hood's "Song of the Shirt", "Bridge of Sighs" etc; William Morris's "Chants for Socialists" and even an Art for Art's sake poet D.G. Rossettii's "Jenny" show the concern of the time for social problems. Morris's reaction to the contemporary social scene is summed up in a letter written to a friend in 1883:

......the contrasts of rich and poor are unendurable and ought not to be endured by either rich or poor.
Now it seems to me that feeling this I am bound to act for the destruction of the system which seems to me mere oppression and obstruction, such a system can only be destroyed, it seems to me, by the united discontent of number......

(b) On convicts: Mrs. Buddington, "The Convict Mother". Poems

2. Letter to Mr. C. Maurice, July 1, 1883 included in G.W. Mackail's Life of William Morris. ii, 105.
The Victorian novel was abundantly aware of the social situation. Though Dicken's novels embody no systematic social or political theory, they aroused public interest in many of the evils of his day—boarding schools, work-houses and child-labour, the new manufacturing system and the court of chancery. George Eliot gave prominence to social struggles in Felix Holt—the Radical and Daniel Deronda. Elizabeth Gaskell's Mary Barton and A Tale of Manchester Life are sociological studies based on her experience of the conditions of the labouring classes in the new industrial cities. Charles Kingsley's novels Alton Locke and Yeast deal with social questions of his day.

The literary conscience of the age was deeply and widely stirred by the social unrest and the theme of social justice came to be a recurrent theme of literature. But strangely enough, there was hardly any reflection of the social commotion in the drama of England until the last decade of the century. English Drama from Sheridan's The School For Scandal (1777) to Robertson's Caste (1867), inspite of its popularity in limited urban circles, evaded the harrowing issues of socio-economic disparity. The theatre during this period was fed on pirated versions of Parisian farces or plays of the Scribean mould or the slavish imitation of Shakespeare. Dramatic penmanship was not remunerative and the dominance of actor-managers had turned the playwright of average merit to a hack writer who eked out a miserable existence by pilfering from French pieces as advised by actor-manager. The middle class people of England were puritans who looked at the stage. Their seriousness of character found greater satisfaction in the study of poetry in which great poets interpreted their views of life or in novels which drew attention to contemporary problems. The fashionable upper class sought in the Theatre an occasional relief and diversion from costly social parties and 'at-homes'. They wanted only romantic sentimental stuff in the Theatre—a pleasure for
the eye and ears rather than food for the mind. Again the uneduca-
ted masses who flocked to the play houses for an escape from the
worries of daily life also wanted melodrama requiring no mental
exertion. To suit their tastes, "the drama acted on the stage was
all sensation, all sentiment and all emotion, failing to bring
life to the theatre and the theatre to life". (1) Douglas Jerrold,
Bulwer Lytton and Dion Bouiccault supplied highly spectacular mel-
drama with effective parts for leading actors. Jerrold's The Rent
Day (1833) introduced the miserable life of the peasantry. But the
essential theme of an eviction had to be submerged in gallons of
melodrama.

Some great poets attempted their hands at drama. But the grea-
ter part of their work never saw the stage. They had not enough
technical knowledge of the stage to employ poetry rightly for the
stage. Besides, they were all doctrinaire and often used the stage
as a platform for delivering sermons. Hence they failed to embody
social issues in the frame of plays. The Fall of Robespierre, a
work of collaboration between Southey and Coleridge, Byron's Venetian
tragedies Moreo Faliiero and The Two Pescari, Shelley's Cenci
and Prometheus Unbound, Keat's Otto the Great, Milman's Fazio and
Ivan, Landor's Count Julian, Tennyson's Harold, The Cup and Becket
and Browning's Strafford, A Blot on the Scutcheon - none of these
reflected any social problem.

The credit of a pioneer in the movement for dramatic revival
of the last years of the nineteenth century should go to T.W.
Roberton. Son of a Lincolnshire actor-manager and himself a child
actor before taking up writing, he could sense, with an amazing
insight, that drama "had no more semblance to life than in stature
a flea has to an elephant". (2) His play Society rejected by Mr.
Buckstone of the Hay Market as 'Rubbish' but ultimately produced
at the Prince of Wales' Theatre on Nov. 11, 1805 proved a phenome-
nal success and earned for the author the distinction of an

Similar comments occur also in A. Nicoll's British Drama and
John Gassner's Masters of World Drama.
2. A.W. Pinero. The Theatre in the Seventies vide The Eighteen
innovator who strove to introduce serious thought and living types into the theatre. In a series of plays e.g. Ours, Caste, Play School - he broke with romantic traditions, holding up the follies, the foibles and vulgarities not only of the 'nouveaux riches' but also of the proletariate. His School written in 1869 is an anticipation of the Ibsenian theme is A Doll's House written ten years later (1879) and first seen in London in 1883. But for all these Robertson was not a revolutionary. He carefully maintained the Victorian compromise and left the status quo alone. He was convinced that the stratification of classes in England was sound and that classes should never mingle. Robertson introduced some changes in style. In place of Rhetorical Blank verse, he approached the language of everyday life, the crisp, staccato dialogue in prose, of the conversational type.

The superficial realistic movement initiated by Robertson came to a halt with his death in 1871. His successors H.J. Byron and James Albery dared not leave the beaten track. They dealt with various social problems but their treatment was always sentimental. It took two more decades for the New Drama to flourish in England in the hands of Henry Arthur Jones, Arthur Wing Pinero and Bernard Shaw. Meanwhile the thought-leaders of the country paid attention to the improvement of theatre and in 1879 Matthew Arnold declared with absolute literalness, "In England we have no modern drama at all". (1) He gave a clarion call to his countrymen, "The theatre is irresistible, organise the theatre". (2)

The organisation of theatre was made possible under the tremendous impact of Ibsen. He made known in England by William Archer who met Ibsen in Rome in 1881 and in Scandinavia in 1867, translated his Pillars of Society as early as 1880 and printed it in 1883. Mrs. Eleanor Marx Aveling, Karl Marx's gifted daughter followed suit with translations of Ghosts and An Enemy of the People. A volume containing the three translations in 1888 won

---
2. Ibid.
many adherents. Next year *A Doll's House* appeared in another Archer-translation and was staged at the Novelty Theatre on June 7, 1889 by Charles Charington and Janet Archer. J.T. Grein defied the censor by giving a single performance of *Ghosts* in his Independent Theatre on March 13, 1891. Both plays aroused spirited controversies (1) that brought Ibsen to the foreground. Archer wrote in his defence and Shaw contributed the literary artillery of his *Quintessence of Ibsenism* to the cause.

Ibsen drew the theatre aside from the conventional dramatic materials of romantic love and awful death, of sublime heroism and infernal villainy. He provided the dramatic world with newer materials, based on social reality, and a bold technique that discarded the old stage tricks and introduced natural discussion and normal action. He made drama alive with real human passion and familiar problems of social life. He based his drama on a conflict of 'unsettled ideas' and showed man not as helpless victim of an overweening villainy, but as one tragically pitted against the social forces of the age. He wove together the tragedy of the individual soul with the tremendous forces which move in social life.

Under the influence of Ibsen the drama of England began to treat more intimately and elaborately the serious problems of actual life. With the treatment of actual life, the drama became more and more a vehicle for the propagation of ideas - social, political, economic and religious. H.A. Jones and A.W. Pinero wielded their pen to prepare the ground for the new drama of social purpose. Flouting a non-conformist background which had barred him from even entering a theatre, Jones learnt to construct effective melodramas notably *The Silver King* (1882). Popular success, however, spurred him on to proclaim the Renaissance of English Drama, in a series of lectures delivered between 1883 and published in 1894. In the preface to *Saints and Sinners* (1884) he gave out his views that drama should present real life.

1. In the Daily Telegraph of the 14th March, 1891, there appeared Scott's review of the London production of *Ghosts*.
In a series of good plays - The Triumph of the Philistines, The Middleman, Michael and his Lost Angel etc. he proved himself a skilled workman with a real sense of the theatre and an ability to create effective scenes. But though he had the urge to deal with big social and moral issues, his plays seldom, if ever, rose above the level of well-made topical melodrama. Better educated than Jones, having been trained for the law and even more at home in the theatre owing to his five years' apprenticeship in Sir Henry Irving's company, Pinero learnt his craft by adopting pièces bien faites for the Kendals and constructing the series of farces (like The Magistrate) which still hold the stage. His efforts to write domestic dramas with strong pretensions to realistic characterisation and social analysis were crowned with success in the epoch-making The Second Mrs Tanqueray written in 1893 after England had already had a taste of Ibsen and after Shaw had written his Widowers' Houses. Pinero allowed much of the heroine's unhappiness and some of the play's complications to stem directly from her character and this application of the formula that 'character is destiny' was a sign of realistic dramaturgy. But conventional morality is here left untouched with Paula Tanqueray poisoning herself. Though sometimes the play rises to a height of emotional tension, it fails to stir those soul-consuming passions that make tragedy an energizing experience rather than an exhibition of simply regrettable incidents. Notwithstanding his failings, Pinero was held by his admirers as the British Ibsen. William Archer pronounced that on May 27, 1893 "Arthur Pinero planted a new milestone on the path of progress in the shape of The Second Mrs Tanqueray". (1)

The Notorious Mrs Ebbsmith, Iris, Midchannel, The Thunderbolt - all these are intimate treatments of life's problems in the theatre presented through a dialogue, vivid and realistic.

1. The Old Drama and the New.
With the plays of Pinero and Jones and the subsequent change in the taste of the audience, the British Theatre became an admirable breeding ground of drama of social issues and the dramatists became increasingly interested in presenting the problems of contemporary society. It was against this background that some playwrights tried to dramatise the issues that agitated the public mind deeply.

In the present dissertation I have concentrated on three major playwrights of the first quarter of this century - George Bernard Shaw, John Galsworthy and Harley Granville-Barker, in whose plays the concept of social justice found vigorous utterance.