Matrix of Decolonization: Tradition and Modernity in Indian Theatre

Before discussing on the point of decolonization, to understand it properly and enquire several questions such as: (i) What are the causes of decolonization? (ii) What was the need of its taking place? (iii) How did it take place? (iv) What are the purposes of it? (v) What kind of atmosphere was created for the growth of Indian theatre, after the achievement of decolonization? One needs to have the whole idea of the British colonialism or imperialism, as what it does exactly mean.

If one looks at the whole structure of colonialism and discusses various aspects of it, step by step, one gets the answer to all such questions quite convincingly. Hence; the phenomenon known as colonialism can be checked in the following manner:

Colonialism is now defined by the *OED* as ‘an alleged policy of exploitation of backward or weak peoples by a large power’. In postcolonial studies it has a clear pejorative meaning, being synonymous with oppression, inequality, racism, and exploitation. Colonialism is not merely the political control of Asian, African or South American (the three continents which became ‘colonies’ of European powers during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) regions. It is the context in and through which non-European cultures and knowledge were destroyed, modified, or ‘disciplined’ by colonial rulers. Colonialism cannot be seen merely as a political or economic ‘condition’: it was a powerful cultural and epistemological conquest of the native populations. The Europeans
acquired knowledge over native cultures through translations, commentaries and academic study before either destroying it or modifying native systems of thinking.¹

In this way, Oxford English Dictionary provides one with the clear definition of colonialism as being an exploitative agency of some powerful nation working against a weak one in the form of dominating the later. The post-colonial works display the intrinsic nature of colonialism which is oppressive, exploitative, racist and basically partial. It is not just the political control of a European nation on a non-European one but also its cultural destruction and modification at other’s hands. It is clearly evident in the case of India, where the British colonists not only got the Indian writings translated into their own language to get aware of them, and later on modified native’s thinking regarding their own culture, but they did also introduce here the British model based theatre with the performance of their own plays. It shows the strategic move of the colonialists as how they first tried to marginalize native’s culture and then imposed their own.

As imperialism consists of the ruling of a non-European nation by a European one, it tries to justify such a rule. In order to do so, imperialism presented the ruled countries or the nations in their written production and in their own language as brute, savage, primitive, uncivilized and worthy to be ruled by some master authority; having the potential to tame and emancipate such so-called untamed people. This is the factor which Said explores quite perfectly as mentioned by Pramod K. Nair:

Said demonstrates how a range of texts – literary, philological, philosophical, administrative, ethnographic – functioned as the lens through which the Orient was viewed preliminary to being ruled. Stereotypes – the ignorance of the natives, their effeminacy and indolence, their over-sexed nature, their essential untrustworthiness, the superiority of the European and his knowledge – helped justify and even necessitate Western presence as the masculine, strong, and rational protector in various guises and roles – of the protector (police, army), educator (teacher), administrator, (bureaucracy and political presence), and savior (missionary).²

Thus, Said’s views need to be paid attention on regarding the colonialists that they present the natives worthy to be ruled in their different areas of writing whether they are of literature, philology, philosophy, administration or ethnography. Such writings present the image of the native as one who is ignorant, effeminate, indolent, over-sexed by nature and untrustworthy. Therefore, he is required to be protected and controlled for his betterment at the hands of the colonial power which comprises masculinity, strength and rationality. In this way, by presenting the superiority of the Europeans and the inferiority of the non-Europeans, the colonialists dominate the native in various fields as those of education, administration and religion etc.

The histories, produced by the colonial master, also serve his particular purpose of justifying his presence. Historiography works as a weapon of the colonial master because it is displayed as a record of native’s crimes presenting his barbarism. As:

Perhaps the best examples of such pseudo-evidentiary history – which could then circulate as justifications for colonial tyranny, much as discourses of non-white despotism and threat have been used recently to justify wars against ‘terror’ – are available in the white narratives about American Indians. The captivity and battle narratives from the sixteenth century downwards depicted the Indian as vicious and the White immigrant (to the New World) as the innocent victim. Recorded history of the New World immigrant narrativized either European heroism or their suffering at the hands of the ‘villainous’ Native, and said nothing about the massacre of thousands of Sioux or Micmac people.³

With the expansion of their colonies the Europeans also produced history presenting the brutal picture of the natives against the innocent white immigrants to the New World. In such histories they simply project either the heroic acts or the sufferings of the European immigrants through cruel and barbarous natives without making any illustration of a large number of killing of the native people. Such historical records are one-sided, which present the so-called brutal native’s despotism imposed upon the innocent Europeans. Productions of such histories expose the falsity of imperial

construction of native history. As the purpose of the post-colonial writings has been the resistance and rejection of the colonial presentation of the native as savage, primitive and ancient, they need to and they do retrieve their pre-colonial past. Such a retrieval of one’s original past works as a tool to reject colonial misrepresentation of native culture, thus, an attempt to decolonize oneself.

In guise of an emancipator the imperial power tried to serve its purpose of benefitting itself by exploiting the native and making full use of their sources. Two contradictory figures are seen in the whole context: One of the imperial master and the other of the colonial native slave. The imperial master always presents the colonial natives as slave and thus, relegates them to a lower status and subordinate to the master. Nair also refers to such views of Frantz Fanon regarding colonialism as:

Frantz Fanon argued that colonialism drives the colonized to madness by rejecting any individuality-claims of the native. This was achieved by the emphasis on psychic difference, where the native’s psyche was repeatedly represented, savaged, and ‘treated’ as inferior. Fanon points out that the European descriptions of the native are invariably couched in zoological terms, emphasizing his ‘reptilian’ motions, the stink of the native quarter, of foulness and bestiality. The universal category of ‘Man’ now begins to mean ‘white man’. Fanon argues that the white man comes to stand in for the father. The child cannot associate himself with others of his community or his family with a nation. In the colonial context, the
native community and the nation are both controlled by the white man. The colonizer thus becomes the father, and the colonized the child who has to obey the ‘law of the father’.

According to Frantz Fanon, the colonialists hit the very psyche of the native being presented as quite brutal. They look down upon them as insignificant creatures being excluded from the community of human-beings which is made just of the Europeans. The colonialists always place themselves at a higher status in comparison to the natives whom they relegate to a lower status. For instance, the colonialist presents himself as father and the native as child under his dominance. Thus, the dependence of the native on the colonialist takes him to the state of madness, without having any individual choice or recognition.

This long continuing chain of exploitation, oppression and injustice, in which the natives themselves were made to believe to be inferior to the imperial force, is interrupted by a change of mentality, when the natives protested and tried to claim and regain their rightful position. This protest takes place in the form of the revival of native’s own cultural past. As a result of it, the writings of the post-colonial period display historical and pre-colonial cultural themes, as: “Anti-colonial struggles were about liberating themselves, at both individual and communal levels, from colonial attitudes and forms of thinking. Postcolonial obsession with history is thus closely linked to the overarching goal of decolonization.”

Historical themes in post-colonial literature deal with several issues as the interrogation of colonial effects on native culture, the

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5 Ibid., 36
appropriation and misinterpretation of native’s history by the colonizers and in reply to it, the retrieval and rewriting of native’s pre-colonial history by their own selves.

A close relationship is seen between the two terms ‘imperialism’ and ‘colonialism’ being almost equivalent or synonymous to each other with just a slight difference. Colonialism is considered as an unintentional settlement in a country and then the governing of that place, while imperialism is taken to be an intentional and deliberate control. Colonialism, on one hand, takes place with the requirement of possessing another place to settle in, while Imperialism, on the other hand, takes place with the requirement of acquiring strong capitalism. Thus, the concept of imperialism is carried out by the practice of colonialism, which can more clearly be understood in the following way:

Imperialism is the ideology that recommends, furthers, and justifies colonial rule. It is the concept that proposes the conquest of newer regions for the sake of economic exploitation. Imperialism is often the political theory behind colonial conquest. It originates from European centres of political, military, and economic power and spreads outwards to take in the whole earth. It justifies conquest in the name of evangelicalism (uplift of the pagans), economy (for the economic good of the European nation) or politics (the defence of democracy). It situates the non-European region on the periphery and controls it mostly through economic measures (slave labour, capitalism, trade restrictions), but may be accompanied by political
and military control. Imperialism is the theory and colonialism is the practice.⁶

Hence; the rule of a non-European nation by a European one is seen as imperialism, an idea which promotes colonialism. The characteristic feature of imperial governance is evident in the form of a distant controlling rule, in place of being practically settled in that particular non-European ruled country. In this way, without any actual settlement of the imperial power in that ruled country, all the financial, cultural, military and political activities of that country are controlled by the ruling European country, staying at a long distance. It is a kind of power expansion of a European nation on the non-European nations. Such powerful European nation is seen at the centre controlling the peripheral Asian, African or South American nation. The purpose of Imperialism, in the form of colonialism, is the economic exploitation of a non-European nation with the help of military and political domination to strengthen the position of a European nation.

Most of the post-colonial writings are replete with a feeling of national pride giving reverence to the rich traditional past. A past with a glorious culture, higher values and a dignified self-identity, is revived and rejuvenated in such writings. They project a severe protest against the colonial domination, which misrepresented the native culture, being a wretched one. This kind of resistance in such writings displays the liberty of self-expression and an emotion of national consciousness. Colonialism has been a tricky

action, having a potential, if not forever than for a long time to project itself as a just and required phenomenon even in the eyes of the native, as:

A central feature of colonialism was its ability to generate convincing images of itself. Projecting itself (and the colonizing culture) as superior and benevolent, as Edward Said has shown (1978) colonial self-representation managed to convince the native culture that this image was true and authentic. In short, natives began to agree with such images as superior Westerner/primitive native, benevolent Westerner, colonialism as development and so on.⁷

Edward Said presents his views about the very basic nature of colonialism as with what subtlety it portrays the picture of itself as being superior to the native, quite benevolent towards the inferior and the backward natives, and also working in their favour for their advancement. This self-portrayal of colonialism was so perfectly presented before the natives that they were bound to believe it to be true.

Gradually; there is seen such a deep impact of colonialism on the native that they convincingly started considering the colonial master as their patron, protector or benefactor. Such mental state of the native is culminated into what Homi K. Bhabha has termed as ‘mimicry’. In this state, the native starts imitating his colonial master, for example; his language, his culture, his life style and so on. And doing this he considers himself as being equal to him. This means, according to him, being better than the other

native. A good example of mimicry in the form of westernized native can be taken from Mulk Raj Anand’s novel, Untouchable, written during colonial period presenting the then condition of colonial India. The protagonist from the novel, Bakha, an eighteen year old boy, sweeper by profession, being in contact with British army, is tempted to adopt English culture. He prefers using blanket to quilt. He likes to wear coat, jacket, trousers, breeches and boots. He tries to behave like the Englishman as smoking cigarette. On the whole he tries to adopt English life-style to be equivalent to them, as is seen in the following:

Bakha had looked at the Tommies, stared at them with wonder and amazement when he first went to live at the British regimental barracks with his uncle. He had had glimpses, during his sojourn there, of the life the Tommies lived: sleeping on strange, low canvas beds covered tightly with blankets; eating eggs, drinking tea and wine in tin mugs; going to parade and then walking down to the bazaar with cigarettes in their mouths and small silver-mounted canes in their hands. And he had soon become possessed with an overwhelming desire to live their life. He knew they were white sahibs. He had felt that to put on their clothes made one a sahib too. So he tried to copy them in everything, to copy them as well as he could in the exigencies of his peculiarly Indian circumstances.⁸

Such a fascination of Bakha towards all the activities of the British soldiers shows his high considerations about them. He earnestly desires to adopt their life-style to get equal to their so-called higher status. It suggests that the colonized native people look to the colonial master for their approval, and, in order to receive this approval, they turn mimics. In the words of Homi K. Bhabha, Bhakha can be called a ‘mimic man’. But such mimicry may be taken to be quite dangerous for the native as neither it provides him with English identity nor with his own cultural one. This whole process results in identity-crisis. This adoption of the colonial master by the native transforms him into such a westernized native who suffers from the crisis of his own identity as he has just a borrowed one.

Here a reference can be made of H. N. Chattopadhyaya’s *The Sleeper Awakened*, an allegorical playlet presented in the form of a nightmare, which seems to present the very spirit of colonialism through modern civilization. As here in this playlet, in place of the colonial master, modern civilization is presented tempting the simple living people with the alluring descriptions of atheism and the material world. Out of this temptation, the Young Man, one of the characters of the playlet, tastes some whisky, resulting in his entry into the palace of Nightmare under the supervision of the grand Vizier of the ‘civilized’ world, where he comes across the characters as Modern Education and Degradation, who try to civilize him by rejecting the ways of his life, being based on agriculture and spinning wheel. Being based on allegory, this playlet symbolically presents the affinity of the very nature of civilization, with that of the
colonialism. “The theme is the triumph of the ancient life of simplicity over the transient spell of luxury derived from the artificiality of modern civilization.”

It would be quite justifiable to make a comparison between modern civilization and the self-portrayal of colonialism as how the former tries to corrupt the simplicity of the ancient life-style, similarly, the latter tries to tempt the natives to adopt its ways of life presenting itself as superior to the natives’. In the manner, Bakha of Untouchables is attracted towards the English life-style, which is presented by the colonialism as superior to the natives’, similarly, in Chattopadhyaya’s, *The Sleeper Awakened*, the simple young man gets attracted towards atheism and the material world which are fascinatingly presented before him by modern civilization. In this way, both of them are tempted to abandon their own life-style and adopt one prescribed by the colonizers or the modern civilization. But *The Sleeper Awakened* ends with a positive note when the young man ultimately is taken back to his house with his previous way of life. “The playwright has allegorically projected the image of the illusory benefits of modern civilization and also the shams practised in its name.”

This return of the young man to his previous way of life suggests the signs of the upcoming changes to be marked in the writings of the post-colonial period, which could stress the need of the revival of one’s traditional values, by rejecting any colonial influence and, thus, to bring decolonization. Before the coming of the post-colonial period during the colonial era, the colonial forces continued to dominate the natives as:

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10 Ibid., 46
The straightforward destruction of native culture apart, colonialism also induced damage of a more permanent kind. It induced the natives to abandon their culture and way of life and imitate the colonials’. This meant that the native ended up as a pale imitation of the white man.\textsuperscript{11}

Apart from making a cultural demolition of the native, the colonialists also made a deeper blow on their roots in the form of turning the former into the imitator of the latter. Thus, the colonial rule in India, indoctrinated the natives with the superiority of the western colonial master with the negation and rejection of the native traditions, culture and individual identity. Then, the transformed westernized native or mimic calls other natives or the non-westernized natives with such terms as brutes, beasts, animals, savages, etc. attributed to them by the colonial master. In this way:

Projecting itself as a benevolent and humanitarian enterprise – the ‘civilizing’, evangelical component was integral to colonialism – iconoclastic European masters rejected native cultural systems. Tribes and individuals were influenced and coerced into turning to the white master’s culture and religion. By locating itself at the peak of the human evolutionary structure, the colonizer’s culture set itself up as the definitive goal of the colonized. The colonized began, therefore, to abandon his/her culture in favour of the white man’s.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{11} Nayar, Pramod K. \textit{Postcolonial Literature}. New Delhi: Dorling Kindersley (India) Pvt. Ltd. 2008. 40. Print
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 39
Presenting itself as a benevolent and humanitarian agency, working for the upliftment of the natives, colonialism believing in evangelism, also contains an oppositional attitude towards the religion of the natives based on idolatry. Thus, several measures were employed as either by influencing or by forcing the natives to follow the cultural and religious beliefs of the colonial master. The colonial culture’s self-projection as being the ideal one and the ultimate goal of the colonized to be achieved, makes the native to adopt the colonial cultural practices by abandoning their own.

Post-colonial literature displays a multifarious transformation as in the realm of society, politics, psychology and culture. Social and political change is clearly evident with the reception of political freedom only. Just with this political independence is seen the advent of change in mentality. As of now, the native had started rejecting the colonial master’s binary constructions of master/slave, civilized/uncivilized with the conversion in state from being dependent to independent but the most significant transformation, causing decolonization, takes place in the area of culture. Decolonization is characterized by a re-claiming of one’s original cultural system. As the European culture during colonialism had superseded the native one, decolonization looks to a regaining of a pre-colonial uncontaminated native cultural values, evident in the post-colonial decolonizing works, as:

The first body of postcolonial writing in the 1950s and 1960s was explicitly decolonizing, working with new concepts of national identity, critiquing the former colonial ruler, seeking to retrieve their pasts and looking forward to the future (projected as glorious,
It harnesses folklore, myth, intellectual debates, and epistemologies in combating the colonizer's culture.\textsuperscript{13}

The postcolonial writings, replete with a decolonizing spirit, criticize the misrule of the colonial rulers and present the novel ideas of possessing a national identity with the revival of the natives' past being used as the basis of the ideal democratic future.

Going back to pre-colonial culture, or retrieving it, means reviving the old traditional myths and folklores as they keep a place’s cultural identity alive. Its projection and promotion is attached to a native’s recognition. Keeping these local and indigenous folktales and myths as the basis of one’s writing, a post-colonial writer is able to present one’s original culture, without being contaminated by the colonial efforts of its misrepresentation. In this manner:

Postcolonial cultures’ reliance on myth and local legend is an effort at de-contamination, a process of freeing their cultures from colonialism’s pervasive influence. The return to roots – while running the very real danger of fundamentalism, reactionary nativism, and chauvinism – is an attempt to gain a measure of self-affirmation that is not tainted by colonialism.\textsuperscript{14}

Every action has a reaction and the reaction mostly is found in a furious form. So is the case with cultural revival taking place during the post-colonial period. Thus, going

\textsuperscript{13} Nayar, Pramod K. \textit{Postcolonial Literature}. New Delhi: Dorling Kindersley (India) Pvt. Ltd. 2008. 83. Print
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 234-235
back to one’s roots may take the form of fundamentalism, reactionary nativism and
chauvinism against colonial oppression to assert one’s claim of the uncontaminated
original culture.

As everything has a particular meaning in a particular context, so modernity in
the context of Indian theatre is suggested by the Western influence on it, and tradition
by the ancient Indian trends and content being revived. Thus, getting free from the
clutches of British imperialism, Indian theatre marked the existence of a theatre, which
was a synthesis of both the elements; tradition and modernity. Such a theatre was not
just an instant evolution but it had started developing even before decolonization, but it
came into its full-fledged form only after independence, being known as modern Indian
theatre. Though it is known as modern Indian theatre, it is not fashioned by only the
Europeans yet also by the indigenous theatrical traditions. Before discussing on its
present state, one needs to have a glance on its whole process of development from
the very starting point to the current state.

The evolution of this urban theatre ranges from its early forms found in Calcutta
and Bombay of the nineteenth century to the multifarious, national and post-colonial
formation, which it occupies at the present time. Considering the notions of the ‘modern’
and ‘modernity’, regarding the Indian theatre, causes a great deal of complexity, along
with raising quite challenging questions. Defining this modern Indian theatre as a
distinct discipline, with its particular inbuilt ideas of modernity, separating it from its
earlier forms, seems to be quite difficult. Despite being influenced by the western
modernity, this modern Indian theatre has based itself on myth, folk, history and legend.
The dramatic concepts and performances, based on the indigenous traditions of music, dance and spectacle, being derived from the Indian classics, such as the rasa theory, are an integral part of this modern theatre, which presents drama as a significant genre which can be taken to study ‘Indian modernity’. The modern Indian theatre comprises several ambiguities and complexities, which require to be analyzed, as Indian modernity pans a great span, ranging from mid-1850’s to the present time, in-between crossing the crucial marker of 1947. The phenomenon, known as modernity, concerning Indian theatre, is problematic. The post-independent Indian theatre, being replete with decolonizing zeal, disapproves of the colonial influence, in the form of western traditions of performance in urban proscenium theatre, which need to be replaced by the revival of pre-colonial and indigenous traditions of representation.

During the eighteenth century when East India Company established in India, theatre development was already in progress. In place of continuing the ongoing development of the existing ancient Indian practices of dramatic performances, the British started foisting their particular ideas of ‘proper’ theatre on the Indian dramatic culture. Dramatic performances on the proscenium stage were evident only after colonization, as before this, theatre was found in India only in homes and villages.

Bombay and Calcutta were two major port cities being developed by the East India Company of the Britain, where the first major theatres were built. The first English theatre, being built in India with the name, Playhouse, was in the city Calcutta in the year 1753, which was later followed by the New Playhouse, built in the year 1775. Bombay’s first theatre house was known as Amateur theatre. The structure of these
theatres, was not inspired by the Indian traditions or the culture, but it completely reflected the contemporary theatre houses of the Britain, as they comprised a large front curtain, back drops and painted scenery, footlights, a pit and a gallery, the essential parts of the British theatre.

These theatres were basically used to provide the British colonists with a homely atmosphere so as to make them feel comfortable in an alien country, and as a means of their entertainment. Initially; these theatres did not prove to be a successful entity, as being quite contrary to Indian cultural setup. Later on, a change is marked in the audience, when an Indian, being one of the wealthiest men in Bombay, buys two tickets to watch the performance of the play, The Rivals, as this encouraged other Indians also to enjoy theatre. The location of the theatre also got shifted, as the ‘Amateur Theatre’ of Bombay was closed after being bankrupt. At this, an Indian named Jugonnath Sunkersett, got a theatre built in his own town containing mostly the Indian people. Gradually; the British concepts and ideals of art began reaching the Indian towns and culture by providing the Indian people with a British definition of the ‘proper’ aspects of art.

The British imposition also caused a great conflict between these two cultures. With their own definitions the British justified their theatrical conventions to be superior to other forms of performance. Thus, a great clash is observed between the urban theatre and the rural theatre which were considered respectively to be high class and low class by the British and the upper classes which were influenced by them.
The British carried on employing the theatre as a means to promote their artistic agenda. Through the performances of the British dramatic creations, the language, habits and manners of the British were so powerfully reflected that they forced the Indian people to adopt their cultural aspects. With the admiration of Shakespeare in Indian theatre, the focus was moved to western dramatic philosophy. A play required to be regarded as a piece of upper grade literature in order to be taken quite valid by the upper class. Jogendrachandra Gupta produced *Kirtibilas*, the first Bengali tragic play, modelled after British tragedies. All the essential characteristics of the English dramatic tradition in the form of a singular or linear narrative, the assertion of language, a plot divided in closely connected five acts, a display of the unity of time and space, the presentation of actions based less on dance and more on emotions and, ultimately, the concept of spectacle were made required to be adopted by the British Indian theatre.

In this way, by the beginning of the twentieth century, there emerged a division of theatre between two classes – the upper and the lower. Still, before independence, a shift was marked in the theatrical unit through a conversion of it, from a piece of art to entertain the British, to a piece of art to protest their rule. The Indian people started employing the imposition of the British conventions on them as a tool to work against the ‘upper classes’. The paradox takes a u-turn. What was once used as a tool to oppress the traditional Indian culture, the same started being used as a means to revive its earlier glory. In 1943, there occurred a dire famine in Bengal through the actions of the British government. At that time, the Second World War was going on in the Pacific, where the government sent the Indian harvest to feed the soldiers. Thus, the lack of grain in the country made around three million people to die of starvation. Meanwhile;
the British government suppressed in the country Gandhi’s Quit India Movement which called for freedom from the British colonialism and caused the occurrence of a number of civil disobedient acts, throughout the country. Consequently, Gandhi along with a few other leaders of the Indian National Congress was put into jail. Such events lit the fire of intense outrage among the countrymen and many of them stood up mutually to fight against the atrocities of the British rule and regain their freedom. A number of rebels took place all over the country, especially in Ballia of Uttar Pradesh resulting in public floggings and the detention of around one lac people. By that time the artists of India had been fed up with the atrocious attitude of the British and started to take action.

The noticeable feature in the history of Indian theatre is that a new association, IPTA (Indian People’s Theatre Association) came into being in the year 1943, with the earnest efforts of those artists, who wanted to show their anger against the atrocious acts of the British rulers. The IPTA held its first meeting in Bombay with the following purpose:

(Its) has been formed to coordinate and strengthen all the progressive tendencies that have so far manifested themselves in the nature of Drama. . .it is not imposed from above but one which seeks to revive the lost in that heritage by reinterpreting, adopting and integrating it with the most significant facts of our people’s lives.15

Several meetings were held throughout the country in which artists from different walks of life presented their ideas, mingled different artistic mediums together, produced theatrical performance extending the political messages, and made people from different parts of India understand their long forgotten artistic cultural heritage. It is to be mentioned here that IPTA permitted the artists, belonging to the lower class society, to actively participate in the theatrical performances, who had never been permitted ever before. The dramas highlighted dominantly the life stories of the ordinary people, in place of those of the elites. The very focus of the IPTA was to lay much emphasis on the Indianness – the zest and zeal for Indian culture and a patriotic feeling condemning highly the British rule. To have a direct communication and creative collaboration with the people, the IPTA wished to make much use of the folk theatre.

IPTA spread its branches all over the country. Its urban theatre group gave its performances at the unconventional places like the streets and buildings particularly amidst the uneducated people to make them aware of the British misrule and other issues of great political concern. Devoid of the accessories of the western stage, they created several productions with immense simplicity. The actors of these performances used to play both the roles – the role of the characters and that of the social activists, encouraging the viewers for their active participation in the political field, by which the naturalistic theatre of a completely different shape came into being.

On one hand, the Indian artists totally discarded the theatrical elements and styles of the British theatre and adopted those which were purely indigenous. On the other hand, they extracted those very elements from western theatre which were of
much use, and got them mingled with the Indian theatrical elements. *Nabanna or New Harvest* was one of the most significant productions of IPTA, in which the story of Bengal famine of 1943 was emphatically narrated. In the play, the real focus was made on the fact that the famine was not a natural casualty but was caused by the British government by sending the harvest to its soldiers of the Second World War. Along with the narration of the Bengal famine, the play exhibited several other social issues, too. The performance of this play stunned the audience with its realism and simplicity of stage setup; and the attire of the characters quite contrary to the sensational and melodramatic performance of the professional theatre.

The IPTA movement gradually diminished and disappeared just after independence. The two basic reasons were there behind this – the mission of achieving independence was over, the very cause of IPTA movement, and the continuing close connectivity of IPTA with the communist party, being disliked by a few artists getting separated from it. The political movement brought renaissance in Indian theatre between 1942 to 1945 and influenced it so much so that it became a vehicle to serve its political purpose of bringing independence. Drama now started reflecting the realistic presentation of society. Simplicity began to be preferred to over-decoration. Consequently; the actors dressed in ordinary attires acted in natural manner. Anything artificial was ridiculed and, therefore, in place of boys dressed in female attires, women themselves started playing the roles of female characters. In regard to language, the actors on the stage freely used the dialects of the spectators. “Having got the freedom from the colonial rule, the post-colonial people thought of having their identity. So they raised their voice against the past exploitations and oppressions and attempting at
establishing their identity." After independence, the dignity and glory of IPTA could not last long. As no art can flourish under any dictation, the artists of IPTA gradually started separating themselves from it. This resulted in the formation of INTA (Indian National Theatre Association) by Mrs. Lamaladeir Chattopadhyaya. This was a well-arranged active theatre group, associated with the theatre wing of UNESCO, issuing a journal of its own. Both the associations were common to oppose the art for art’s sake. The main objective of IPTA was to reveal the ills and evils of the contemporary society and promote the struggle against colonialism to bring about the democratic system, while the aim of INTA was to revive the ancient cultural heritage and impart more and more freedom to artistic conventions. With these activities, this theatrical association prepared a strong foundation for the emergence of the ‘Theatre of Roots’ movement.

The ‘Theatre of Roots’, born in the post-independent era, tried its best to combat the influences of the Western theatrical conventions on the Indian theatre and, thus, produced an innovative perception for the world to be looked at, quite contrary to the western vision. "Because theatre was used (by the British) to disseminate colonial culture and demonstrate cultural superiority, it became a powerful tool with which to challenge that same colonial authority." This earnest effort was made with a view to the decolonization of the Indian theatre. This attempt of bringing about Indianness in Indian theatre was just a part of the national movement being held at a large scale under the inspiration of Gandhi’s goal of reviving complete Indianness. Coincidentally, the main objective of the ‘Theatre of Roots’ and the upsurging desires of the people of

India, along with the Indian government, was to take India to a prestigious position with its unique identity. To get this dream realized, the government took the initiative to establish a national theatre adopting a uniform national theatrical convention comprising a variety of folk elements. This effort of the government was not accepted by most of the artists of the movement, as according to them, the projection of a single theatrical convention could just be the approval of the western vision of India, having one culture, whereas, in reality, India is a country containing a variety of groups, dialects and culture. In real sense, most of the artists of the ‘Theatre of Roots’ wished to rejoice and celebrate the diversity of Indian culture in the theatrical creations.

There came a time when a revival of different folk forms of theatre, dance and story-telling took place. Discarding the five act Aristotalian narrative form, completely a new shape was given to the medium of Indian theatre by including several pre-colonial folk elements into it.

Though the very idea of the roots movement was ardently anti-western, “practitioners were still searching for a theatre that could reflect the complex political, historical, social, and cultural realities of a newly independent nation, which often meant using elements of ‘western’ theatre.”¹⁸ Theatrical performances were still text based following the western tradition of naturalistic drama. There could be seen the reflection of Indianness in the performances but the western theatrical convention was still being followed in the form of using the proscenium stage, playing for the urban audiences, having a fix time for the show and the sale of the tickets. Though, the Indian theatre was

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not completely liberated from making the use of the proscenium which was symbolically reflecting the western influence yet the chief objective of the post-independent Indian theatre has been to revitalize the very spirit of Indianness and attach it to its rich ancient cultural heritage from which it had been detached for long. The artists of the roots movement worked very hard to give modern touch to the theatre in their particular way in place of imitating the western models.

Since the early 1950s, new forms of literary drama and experimental performance have appeared on an unprecedented scale in more than a dozen Indian languages, mainly in metropolitan and urban locations. To a significant extent, the historical origins of this evolving tradition of texts and performance practices lie in the genres, discourses and institutions of theatrical modernity that emerged under European influence in such colonial cities as Calcutta and Bombay during the second half of the nineteenth century. But to an equally significant degree, practitioners of the new drama have forged a reactive cultural identity for themselves by disclaiming colonial practices and by seeking to reclaim classical and other precolonial Indian traditions of performance as the only viable media of effective decolonization.

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Hence; it is well evident that the Western influence on Indian theatre has been quite deep-rooted, bringing modernity in it, even in the post-independence era. Along with the existence of this modern factor, the post-colonial Indian theatrical practitioners turned to their classical Indian traditions to bring about decolonization.

It was the heartiest wish of the first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, due to his being a staunch supporter of culture, that the art and culture should flourish in the country quite freely without any governmental hindrance or interference. It is, therefore, by his earnest efforts that several national academic institutes of autonomous status were established for the development of art and culture. For the promotion and enhancement of theatre and other performing arts, SNA (Sangeet Natak Akademi or Music and Performing Arts Akademi) was opened up. The talented artists, devoted to the enrichment of the different aspects of theatre, have been awarded annually by this academy. To the encouragement of theatre, it has also been organizing several seminars, workshops and many such other inspirative programmes. Many great legendary playwrights, directors and actors have so far been honoured with the prestigious Sangeet Natak Akademi award for their tremendous theatrical upliftment. During 1980s, this academy played an outstanding role to the encouragement of those talented directors, by providing them with the financial aid and assistance, who have been engaging themselves in the revival of traditional folk and classical theatrical forms to be exhibited at the modern stage.

The other outstanding development in the post-independent Indian theatre was the opening of the NSD (National School of Drama), an autonomous institution in Delhi,
funded by state which, too, played an important role in to the huge promotion and enrichment of Indian theatre. The NSD’s first director Ibrahim Alkazi, having received his training from RADA (Royal Academy of Dramatic Art) in UK, introduced a curriculum which rigorously followed the conventions of the modern western theatre; while his successor, B. V. Karanth, having been trained in the Yakshagana traditions of Karnataka, emphasized the Indian traditional conventions to be employed into the performances of the modern theatre. Thus, an amalgamation of both the techniques – Western and Indian went on affecting the theatrical artists being trained in NSD. The Indian theatre now came out with a new form, having the synthesis of the Indian traditions and the western influences. One of such playwrights, reflecting the features of both – tradition and modernity, can be mentioned in the following way:

Girish Karnad (b. 1938), one of India’s leading playwrights, firmly positions post-colonial concerns in his enterprise: he does so by rethinking mythic material and by reshaping it around modernist concerns of subjectivity. Karnad psychologizes myth and produces characters with motivations hidden and apparent, transferred and accepted; self-divisions here are not played out within the heroic mode but within existentialist constrains of love. The divisions – between self and self, between loving and unloving, between two kinds of love, between love and instrumentality – are modern, but the characters within whom they are acted out, are mythic or heroic, taken as they are from traditional materials – from the epics for instance, as also from the Kathasaritsagara. Interesting
modernist contradictions emerge in the writing: myths and epics become, as it were, a civilizational weight on the playwright and that puts in place its corollary, the constant desire to unpack it by modernizing it.20

The post-independent era produced many pioneering playwrights of great international repute. Like Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sircar and Mohan Rakesh, etc., whose dramatic creations made wide ranging performances and discussions. It is said about them that they “make use of mixed eastern and western models”.21 Though written in the regional languages their works got later translated into English to have their accessibility to a large audience. Being the successors of the glorious ancient Indian heritage, these playwrights have recreated the theatrical idiom, amalgamating ancient Indian traditions with the western influence: “Thus, the contemporary Indian drama in English translation has achieved a thorough synthesis of the three traditions – classical, folk and Western – which lead to the discovery of a new form as well as a new style of production.”22

From the whole earlier discussion on colonialism, the causes of the decolonization of Indian theatre can easily be pointed out. Colonialism, being an oppressive, exploitative and partial agency, working for around two centuries in India, misused theatre as a political tool to promote their artistic agenda. Through the performances of the British dramatic creations, the language, habits and manners of the

British were so powerfully reflected that they forced the Indian people to adopt their cultural aspects. Then the native, being fed up with the ongoing oppression and exploitation, at the hands of an external force through their own means, used theatre in their own ways as a tool to protest against the colonial rule and, thus, tried to get it decolonized.

Theatre is such a unit which was deeply influenced by colonialism as the colonial master imposed his own views of ‘proper’ theatre upon those of the Indians through the concept of the proscenium stage. After independence, along with the revival of ancient Indian theatrical trends, the influence of the Western theatre is also visible. Thus, in the contemporary theatre an amalgamation of both the elements, tradition and modern, is evidently visible. As the themes of the contemporary plays are taken from the very Indian sources, whether they are from the ancient mythological histories or the present Indian society, therefore, content-wise, the contemporary Indian theatre is quite traditional, but its presentation on the proscenium stage makes it quite modern.

Thus, it is rightly said about the post-colonial Indian theatre that it “sought to project both modernity and Indianness in its style and subject matter…”

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