Vijay Tendulkar is one of the finest playwrights in Indian theatre. His plays express his deep concern for society. He did not choose the subjects of his plays or wrote with a view to their commercial success. He dealt with the themes that genuinely interested him and were vital, i.e. the several ills the Indian society was beset with. He makes us restless and prods us to think by portraying these problems in a frank and objective manner. Instead of aiming at making the audiences laugh or weep, he aims at forcing them to think. He has expressed his vision of the rottenness in contemporary society with an unflinching realism. He does not mince words while portraying the stark reality as it is. He has shown a mirror to the society while expressing his heart-felt feelings and sincere reactions to the contemporary situation.

Tendulkar put the Marathi drama on the international map with his intensely thought-provoking and socially significant plays. He appeared on the scene of the Marathi theatre in the mid-1950s. The Marathi theatre had witnessed the decline of the verse play and the rise of the prose drama after 1920. The glorious days of the Marathi verse play were followed by a long period of decline for the Marathi drama. Tendulkar began his dramatic career against this uncongenial background. He had imbibed a love for theatre from his father and elder brother who were amateur actor-directors. As his house was full of books and his father encouraged him to read, Vijay Tendulkar became a voracious reader at an early age. Vijay became aware of the sufferings and tribulations of life because of the tragic incidents around him such as one of his uncles’ suicide and
another one’s derangement. He became aware of the violence and vices inherent in human nature due to his visits to the liquor dens in order to bring his alcoholic brother back to home. These incidents seemed to have shaped and conditioned his vision of life. He began to look more closely at the people around him and found various defects in them. All these experiences entered into his plays later.

Due to his participation in the Quit India Movement, 1942, as a courier and the resultant neglect of school and studies, young Vijay became alienated from his family and friends. He found an outlet for his feelings of loneliness and sadness in writing. The performance of Marcel Marceau, the French mimic, had a profound influence on him. He realized the unlimited possibilities of the visual and began to reflect on how to combine the visual with words to convey more out of his playwriting. During his career as a journalist, Tendulkar got an exhaustive knowledge of society and human life. He toured the various nooks and corners of India after receiving the Nehru Fellowship for a project and observed the social problems and the oppression of the poor and the down-trodden from close quarters. His observations and experiences of life found expression in his plays.

Tendulkar’s predecessors such as G.B. Deval, K.P. Khadilkar and R.G. Gadkari had dealt with contemporary social issues in some of their plays. With the exception of B.V. Varerkar, P.K. Atre and M.G. Rangnekar, the other playwrights in the post-independence era were mostly writing farces and melodramas in order to entertain the audiences. Tendulkar’s socially and politically significant plays revolutionised the Marathi drama which was trapped in a melodramatic mode. He forced the reader-audience to confront the brutal realities of life through his portrayal of society and human life with all its ugliness and crudity.
The major themes of Tendulkar’s plays under the present study are: the society’s oppression of an individual who violates its traditions, the treacherous ways of selfish and corrupt politicians, the effects of power on human nature, the immense lust, greed, violence and the desire for revenge latent in human nature and its disastrous effects, the plight of women in our male dominated society and the obstacles in the way of creating a caste-less society. A thematic study of Tendulkar’s plays brings to light the fact that he made the reader-audience face the brutal realities of life through his portrayal of its harsh realities. While handling the social problem of unwed pregnancy, Tendulkar’s play *Silence! The Court is in Session* portrays the plight of Leela Benare, a spinster. The society is hostile towards her as she has refused to follow its conventions. The play also draws our attention towards the gender discrimination in our society which allows a man to go scot-free, whereas a woman gets punishment for having committed the same act of immorality i.e. having extramarital relations. Tendulkar’s play *Encounter in Umbagland* depicts the transformation of Vijaya, a princess, from an innocent girl into an ambitious and cunning politician, through her encounter with the cut-throat world of politics. Tendulkar has exposed the hypocrisy and treachery of the political leaders and the sordidness and futility of the power game in this play. There is a horrifying depiction of human viciousness and the evil consequences of man’s avarice in Tendulkar’s play *The Vultures*. In this play, the wicked members of the Pitale family inflict inhuman violence upon their own family members, including their pregnant sister, for the sake of money.

There is an extraordinary portrayal of the immense capacity of lust and violence inherent in human beings through the eponymous character of Tendulkar’s play *Sakharam Binder*. Sakharam satisfies his lust in the name of
giving shelter to the women who have been deserted by their husbands. Though Sakharam is in the habit of changing his mistresses frequently, he expects their complete faithfulness to him. He murders Champa in a fit of anger when he realises that she is being unfaithful to him. In his play *Ghashiram Kotwal*, Tendulkar exposes the corruption in contemporary society by drawing parallels between the decadent eighteenth century Poona society and the present conditions. Through Ghashiram’s heinous act of offering his daughter as a mistress to an influential politician in order to become the Chief Inspector, the playwright points out the bestiality in human nature. While portraying Mitra, the protagonist of his play *A Friend’s Story* as a lesbian, Tendulkar sheds light on society’s oppression of a person suffering from an abnormality. Manya Dalvi, a womaniser, exposes Mitra’s abnormality in front of the society to settle an old score with her. Mitra commits suicide out of loneliness and despair.

Tendulkar’s play *Kamala* reveals his keen insight into the pitiable status of women in our male dominated society. The playwright exposes the hypocrisy of Jaisingh, a journalist, who purchases a woman from a flesh-market to prove the going-on of the flesh-trade. Jaisingh’s callous manner of treating that woman proves that he is just using her as a means of getting money and fame for himself. In his play *Kanyadaan*, Tendulkar shows how a girl who ventures into an inter-caste marriage becomes a victim of casteism. Jyoti, the female protagonist, suffers untold miseries as a result of the excessive idealism of Nath, her father, in allowing her to marry a person belonging to the backward class in spite of the incompatibility of their lifestyles and cultures.
Tendulkar has given a graphic and vivid picture of the Maharashtrian middle class through the varied characters that he has created in his plays. He has explored many areas of human experience through them. The male protagonists in Tendulkar’s plays such as Ramakant in *The Vultures*, Jaisingh in *Kamala* and the eponymous characters of *Sakharam Binder* and *Ghashiram Kotwal* are bound by the common thread of their arrogance and disrespectful attitude towards women. They do not think of women as anything more than objects of utility. Ramakant and Jaisingh have no regard for the feelings of their wives. Sakharam ill-treats his mistresses. Ghashiram agrees to make Gauri, his daughter, Nana Phadnavis’ concubine in return of the post of Poona’s Chief Inspector. Even Nath, the protagonist of *Kanyadaan*, ends up exploiting Jyoti, his daughter, while trying to bring his dream of a casteless society into existence. Thus all the male protagonists in Tendulkar’s plays appear to be exploiters of their female counterparts.

With the exception of Vijaya in *Encounter in Umbagland*, Tendulkar has depicted his female protagonists such as Ms. Benare in *Silence! The Court is in Session*, Rama in *The Vultures*, Lakshmi in *Sakharam Binder*, Mitra in *A Friend’s Story*, Sarita in *Kamala* and Jyoti in *Kanyadaan*, as abject victims of male domination and unscrupulousness. Ms. Benare, Mitra and Sarita revolt against the traditions and conventions of society, whereas Rama, Lakshmi and Jyoti bow down meekly to the hostile societal forces. Both the conformist as well as non-conformist women characters are crushed by the society and end up as defeated individuals. Thus Tendulkar exposes the pitiable condition of women as well as society’s apathy to their misery.
Tendulkar sheds light on the exploitative and oppressive nature of society through the constant switching of roles between the victims and victimisers. His characters such as Mrs. Kashikar and Rokde in *Silence! The Court is in Session*, Manik in *The Vultures*, Lakshmi in *Sakharam Binder*, Mitra in *A Friend’s Story*, Arun in *Kanyadaan* and the eponymous characters of *Sakharam Binder* and *Ghashiram Kotwal* are themselves victims of exploitation. Instead of showing kindness to other unfortunate beings who are in a similar situation, they take their hidden anger out on these persons for the exploitation which they have suffered in the past. The victims prey on others with great ardour when they get a chance. Thus the playwright shows that exploitation is an inexorable fact of life.

Tendulkar has supplemented the conventional dramatic technique with modern innovations in order to express his themes and vision more effectively. He chose different forms of presentation in his plays on the basis of their ability to deliver his message to the reader-audience effectively. He used the medium of theatre to its fullest by manipulating all the component parts in his plays skilfully. His preoccupation with contemporary reality made naturalism a suitable form for the expression of his content. He used the visual element of theatre in a deft manner. The meanings in his plays emerge not only through the dialogues but through what is shown on the stage. He gives detailed stage directions to avoid ambiguity with regard to his intention. The valuable instructions in brackets in Tendulkar’s plays are immensely helpful to the readers as well as actors to grasp his plays better. The spells of silence and the dramatic pauses during dialogue are the strong points of Tendulkar’s style. He employs the device of indirect satire to evoke scorn and contempt in the minds of the reader-audience over the evil actions of his wicked characters. He succeeds in avoiding the reader-audience’s
identification with the characters and situations by bringing about the distancing effects in his plays. Thus he has given a new direction to modern Indian theatre by his innovative experimentation with the form and technique of drama.

Tendulkar is regarded as the ‘angry young man’ of the Marathi theatre due to his rebellion against the established values of a snobbishly orthodox society. He defied traditions and violated taboos throughout his dramatic career. In *Silence! The Court is in Session*, Tendulkar exposed the latent violence and cruelty in the middle class through the inhuman mental torture of Ms. Benare by her colleagues during the mock-trial conducted against her. He brought out the inhuman face of the selfish politicians in *Encounter in Umbugland* through the treacherous conduct of the ministers of Queen Vijaya. He gave a horrifying picture of domestic violence in *The Vultures* by depicting the cruel man-handling of the father by his own children and the maiming and forcible abortion of sister by her own brothers. He attacked the institution of marriage through the eponymous character of his play *Sakharam Binder* who practises contractual co-habitation with his mistresses. He angered the Brahmin community with his portrayal of the moral degradation of Nana Phadnavis, a historical figure and the Brahmin society in the late eighteenth century Poona in his play *Ghashiram Kotwal*. He dealt with the theme of lesbianism while shedding light on society’s oppression of a non-conformist in *A Friend’s Story*. In *Kamala*, Tendulkar showed that the position of an Indian house-wife is no better than that of a slave. Jaisingh’s utter indifference to the feelings of Sarita, his wife and her servile attitude towards him justify Tendulkar’s stand. In *Kanyadaan*, Tendulkar brought out the schism between the words and deeds of both the promoters of casteism abolition movement and its beneficiaries. Thus Tendulkar is an iconoclast who shook the foundations of traditions,
conventions and beliefs of society. He seems to suggest that the condition of society cannot be improved unless we get rid of the various evils infesting it and the inborn evil tendencies in human nature.

Tendulkar has exposed the society’s hostile attitude towards and inhuman oppression of women who do not conform to the traditional image expected of them through his characters such as Ms. Benare in *Silence! The Court is in Session* and Mitra in *A Friend’s Story*. By portraying the victimisation of Ms. Benare and Mitra due to their violation of patriarchal norms, the playwright gives vent to the gender discrimination in society and the resultant plight of women. Tendulkar shows that even the sensitive and liberal men are exploiters of women. In his play *Kamala*, Tendulkar exposes Kakasaheb’s biased attitude towards women through his justification of Jaisingh’s ill-treatment of Sarita, his wife. Kakasaheb criticises Jaisingh’s exploitative journalism, but turns a blind eye to his oppressive treatment to Sarita. Thus the playwright highlights the deep-rooted gender discrimination in society. By showing the meek submission of his women characters to the injustice and violence inflicted upon them and their sad fate, Tendulkar implies that women should be more courageous and determined in dealing with their problems. Thus the playwright has played his part in the movement for women’s emancipation by urging them to change their conservative mind-sets.

The bitter experiences of human beings are made the subjects of his plays by Tendulkar. Most of the characters in his plays have been portrayed as failures. The persons who put up a good fight against the hostile circumstances win the sympathy and admiration of the playwright. Tendulkar has a knack of making his characters bare their inmost selves through their speeches. Through the long
speeches of his characters such as Rama in *The Vultures*, Ms. Benare in *Silence! The Court is in Session*, Bapu in *A Friend’s Story*, Sarita in *Kamala* and Jyoti in *Kanyadaan*, Tendulkar gives vent to their distress and hopelessness. The playwright makes us conscious of the utter helplessness of his characters and the severe conflict that goes on in their minds through their speeches. Thus the loneliness of an individual arising out of his conflict with society appears to be one of the recurring themes of Tendulkar.

Tendulkar has endeavored to understand life with all its pains, conflicts and contradictions. He has striven to describe it truthfully through his plays. He has presented a true picture of life incorporating an interplay of both the positive as well as the negative aspects of life. He does not fight shy of expressing the cruel and dark side of life. Though he has painted life in dark and gloomy colours most of the time, his love of humanity and his commitment to human values is unquestionable. The virtuous and tender-hearted characters in Tendulkar’s plays such as Rama in *The Vultures* and Jyoti in *Kanyadaan* suffer due to their association with the vicious characters such as Ramakant and Arun respectively. In addition to his penetrating insight, Tendulkar brings a touch of tenderness to the depiction of these characters who suffer for no fault of theirs. The humanistic attitude of the playwright comes to light through it.

Tendulkar displays an acute awareness of the loss of traditional values and the resultant tendency towards cruelty and violence in modern times. We find the lowest level of human behaviour in the beastly actions of the wicked characters in his plays. The shocking incidents in Tendulkar’s plays such as the forcible abortion and maiming of Manik in *The Vultures*, Arun’s kicking of Jyoti, his pregnant wife in *Kanyadaan* and Sakharam’s strangulation of Champa in
Sakharam Binder are no different from the incidents one reads about in the newspapers. Thus Tendulkar seems to have correctly guessed the direction in which society is moving and tried to give a timely warning through his plays. He appears to suggest that we cannot improve the condition of our society unless we get rid of the inborn tendencies in human nature such as lust, selfishness and violence. The playwright’s commitment for the betterment of society and his sympathy for the oppressed people is revealed through it. Through his plays, Tendulkar seems to convey that the social inequality, exploitation and oppression which have been in existence since ages, continue unabated till today. The Maharashtrian society which had a tradition of social reformers and thinkers like Gopal Ganesh Agarkar, Jotiba Phule and Lokahitawadi, had become indifferent towards the change in its attitude and bowed down to traditionalism and orthodoxy. Tendulkar tries to reawaken it through his plays. By attacking the economic, political and gender discrimination in society, he attempts to bring a change in people’s mentality.

A distinguishing feature of Tendulkar’s plays is his preoccupation with the portrayal of the dark side of life. He forces us to accept the unpleasant realities of human existence by giving a gloomy picture of the unsuccessful human efforts to get happiness. An atmosphere of violence and cruelty characterises Tendulkar’s plays. He believes in the permanent presence of animal in man along with all the basic animal instincts. He shows that human beings behave just like animals under the impact of lust, greed and self-interest. His plays bring out man’s wolfish cruelty to man and his malicious and revengeful attitude towards his fellow beings. His portrayal of the evils rampant in human nature is profoundly thought-provoking, almost disturbing. Tendulkar reminds us that man is unable to conquer
the beast inside himself in spite of having progressed from barbarism to civilization. Thus the playwright gives a new way of looking at the self and society.

Tendulkar displays an extraordinary sensitivity to human suffering which is one of the prominent themes in his plays. While expressing the thwarted desires, unsatisfied longings and undeserved sufferings of individuals, he has painted a world full of disappointment, disillusionment and misery. Most of the characters in his plays end up on the losing side in the battles that they face in their lives. Ms. Benare in *Silence! The Court is in Session* undergoes inhuman mental torture, Rama in *The Vultures* is reduced to being a corpse-like existence, the eponymous character of *Sakharam Binder* becomes a frightened and dependent creature after murdering Champa in a fit of anger, the eponymous character of *Ghashiram Kotwal* loses his daughter and then his own life while treading the path of revenge, Mitra in *A Friend’s Story* commits suicide, and Jyoti in *Kanyadaan* chooses a path of willful self-destruction by submitting herself to her husband’s cruelty. None of these characters get what they really want in their lives. They are totally helpless and suffering seems to be their lot in life. The playwright seems to suggest the futility of a person’s efforts to become happy, if faced with the evil. The suffering of these defeated individuals results from a combination of their sordid environment as well as the wrong decisions taken by them in their lives. Thus Tendulkar implies that in some cases human beings are themselves responsible for their misery and should be extremely careful in deciding the course of their lives.

The misery and despair of an individual resulting from either his conflict with the hostile society or his own failure to fulfill his dreams is revealed by the
playwright effectively. Most of Tendulkar’s protagonists admit defeat in their conflict with society. They end up as failures in life. Their sad fate suggests that Tendulkar believes in suffering being an inseparable part of the human condition. Many of Tendulkar’s vicious characters end up as losers in the struggle of life. By showing that the evil persons do not prosper and succeed in life, the playwright expresses his disapproval of their wicked ways.

Tendulkar is acutely conscious of the ills of life. He has brought out the evils in man and the world with the purpose of making the people aware about the prevalent maladies in society. He has satirised the shams and snobbishness of society and the vices and follies of human beings with a view to help man get over his defects. Instead of giving solutions to the social problems that he has raised, Tendulkar tries to awaken people’s conscience and create awareness about the defects of society. He satirises the ills of the society with an intention to correct them. He envisions an ideal society, free from exploitation and oppression, in which there is equality, freedom, happiness and peace for everyone. A sick society with decaying standards of morality cannot hope to prosper and flourish. Thus Tendulkar has attempted to eradicate the obstructive forces that stand in the way of a healthy growth and development of human life. It is an effort on the part of the playwright towards the creation of an ideal society.