THEMES, MODELS AND TECHNIQUES:

The survey made so far of both the pre-Independence and the post-Independence phases of Indo-Anglian Drama has dealt with the themes, models and techniques employed by various playwrights. So far as the themes are concerned, they have variously been drawn from the Vedas, the epics, the myths and legends (mostly Indian and some alien), Indian history and society. But, as already pointed out, playwrights have hardly touched even the fringe of this rich area.

As revealed by the study of the playwrights from Sri Aurobindo to Tagore and Karnad, there have been different kinds of experiments (though on a small scale) in drawing themes from the ancient lore of the country. While playwrights like Kailasam try to highlight the greatness of legendary and epic characters, Sri Aurobindo, Karnad and a few others successfully interpret ancient myths and legends from a contemporary angle. To recall a few instances, Sri Aurobindo makes use of the legend of Perseus to interpret the contemporary urge for freedom. As already shown in Siddhartha, the Man of Peace, Chattopadhyaya deals with Siddhartha's enlightenment, and at the same time tries to project the image of the present crisis caused by the nuclear race; while The Well of the People and Two Women bear testimony to Bharati Sarabhai's ability to give realistic touches to some age-old customs and beliefs and thereby elevate them
to a higher plane. While V.V.S. Aiyangar incorporates some modern political ideas in his Ramarajya, Mathuram Bhutalingam extends her imagination in her Alone in Ayodhya and makes her Sri Rama more human than divine. Finally, Girish Karnad, whose plays are discussed under 'Translations', gets a greater success in this regard. While his Yayati retells the Indian myth on the theme of responsibility, his Hayavadana interprets the myth so as to solve the problem of man's identity in a world of complicated relationships.

As already shown, there is a strong romantic impulse in the writings of playwrights like Sri Aurobindo and Kailasam. Ekalavya and Karma are idealised by Kailasam; but in idealising his Keechaka, he perhaps gives undue liberty to his imagination with the result that the original hero of the epic is entirely lost. But playwrights like Chattopadhyaya seem to be well within the bounds of imagination when they deal with hagiological themes, as in Raidas, the Cobbler, Javadeva and Siddhartha; so in the case of plays like Ramaswami Sastri's Draupadi and Sadar-Joshi's Acharya Drone, where all the events chosen centre round the main characters.

The analysis of some plays on themes like these has shown the authors' general failure to adapt them adequately for the stage. To illustrate, Chatterjee's Krishna and Swami Sivananda's Radha's Prem (whose themes are drawn from The Bhagavata) look like a series of
conversations about Krishna's life, and thus, though they satisfy the didactic intention of the authors, they lack dramatic art. Trivikram's Zero B.C. or Christopanished is another such failure.

On the whole, the plays of both the phases reveal the playwrights' limited success in employing themes from the ancient classics and legends of the country. But, compared to the rich material available in the ancient lore, the output is totally inadequate both in quantity and quality.

This is true in the case of historical themes also. As already discussed, with a few exceptions, the major playwrights of both the phases do not seem to have shown much interest in drawing themes from the history and contemporary politics of our country. Among them, Asif Currimbhoy shows some interest, that too, in recent history and politics. Further, as already shown in some of his plays like Goa, The Refugee, Somar Bengla and "Om Mane Padme Hum!" he treats his themes in such a way as to dramatise some events, but not to achieve full-fledged historical drama.

Though their work is poor both in output and quality, the credit of tapping the sources of the history of our country must go to some minor playwrights of both the phases. Of course, few seem to be inclined towards ancient history. So far as medieval history is concerned, there are playwrights who have drawn from the Mughal and the Rajput periods; to illustrate,
Annayya's *The Bride of God*, A.S.P. Ayyar's *Mother's Sacrifice*, V.V.S. Aiyangar's *At Any Cost*,
The Beggar Princess by Dilip Kumar Roy and Indira Devi,
Lakhan Deb's *Tigerclaw* and Dilip Hiro's *To Anchor a Cloud*.

While (as already shown) Ayyar handles the theme of
Fumna's noble sacrifice, Roy and Indira Devi highlight
the conflict between the limited power of man and the
infinite Grace of the Lord as seen in the paradoxical
life of the princess-saint Mira. In dramatising the
episode of Aurangzeb's killing of Dara, Annayya
employs suspense and action at right places; but, as
already explained, the political intrigues of another
Mughal Emperor are handled in an immature way by
Dilip Hiro in *To Anchor a Cloud*. Unlike these full-
fledged plays dealing with the entire gamut of the
life of a historical personage or a particular period,
there are plays like *Tigerclaw, At any Cost* and
*The Siege of Chitor* where playwrights concentrate on
a single incident each.

If playwrights have not fully tapped the rich
sources of the ancient and medieval history, fear of
consequences may have deterred some playwrights
of the pre-Independence phase from employing themes
from the British period; as a result the output
pertaining to this period is very poor. Yet we come
across two plays about the Freedom Movement during the
British rule. Mrinalini Sarabhai fails to achieve
organic coherence in her plot-construction in
Captive Soil, while Deobhankar gives a melodramatic treatment to his theme in The Absconders. Even the performance in the post-Independence phase does not show much improvement in this regard.

A Passage to India by Santha Rama Rau is just a dramatised version of an Englishman's novel and thus the theme is not her own. On the other hand, Larins Sahib, a historical play of considerable importance presents the political career of a British Resident in Punjab whose principled life gradually gives place to his craze for power finally leading to his downfall; and, as already explained, Gurucharan Das tries to throw more light on the essential human elements in his historical characters though the development of the plot is not quite convincing. Rangappa and Shivakumar Joshi employ themes from the political career of Gandhiji in their own way. While the former's Gandhiji's Sadhana deals with Gandhiji's boyhood and his South African struggle, the latter employs the myth of The Bhagavata to dramatise the death of Gandhiji in He Never Slept So Long. Thus, even in the post-Independence phase, playwrights do not seem to have evinced much interest in drawing themes from history. But they show some inclination towards presenting the need for national integration and dealing with the problems of the post-partition period. Gokak's The Goddess Speaks gives a picture of a worried patriot and his optimistic vision about the future of the country. My Sons by Mrs. Billimoria and Vikramjeet by Sozrekashme are also about the need for
national integration. But, while Mrs. Billimoria indulges in excessive idealisation of her characters, the theme in Sozrekashme's hands looks more like an essay about his symbolic hero than a play. Though Javanthinathan's *Guardianship of India* is only a mock-trial and thus cannot be called a play in the true sense of the term, its allegorical characters dramatically present the post-Independence politics of our country. Also, we come across a few plays (like Borgaonkar's *The Refugee*) which directly deal with the partition. Thus, as in the case of epic and mythological themes, whether it is history or current political problems facing the country, it is certain that playwrights have not fully tapped the rich sources available to them.

The case of social themes employed is quite different. The playwrights of both the pre-Independence and the post-Independence phases seem to have evinced much interest in drawing themes from our society, the variety of our age-old customs, religions, languages etc. and the consequent problems and complications confronting the people. Of course, the treatment of such themes is not alike in all the plays. As already discussed, there are plays and playlets (like those of V.V.S. Aiyangar's) mainly written for light entertainment on some occasions. Such plays mostly contain a farcical representation of the social problems and have a melodramatic ending.
There are plays wherein these problems are seriously dealt with. Whatever be the mode of treatment of such themes, the playwrights do not appear to have lost sight of some burning problems of our society like poverty, untouchability, the evils of the caste-system and the dowry system, widow-marriage, and exploitation of the poor.

The study already made of such plays gives us an idea as to how the themes have been employed. For example, the problem of widow-marriage forms the theme of three plays, viz., Krishnaswami's The Two Twice-Born, Narayanan's The Lawyer and his Daughter and A.S.P. Ayyar's Sita's Choice. As already shown, Krishnaswami lightly handles the theme by bringing in unnatural sequences and excessive talk. But the last two playwrights seem to bring some serious thought to the problem though they could perhaps have made their plays still more effective with a tragic ending. There are also a few plays dealing with the problem of inter-religious and inter-caste marriage: Michael's Nation-Builders, Borgaonkar's Image-Breakers and Lobo Prabhu's Flags of the Heart. But the development of plot in these plays is not logical, and the writers seem to exploit only melodrama from themes with full tragic potential. Narayanan's Beauty is a Leveller of Castes touches the problem of untouchability as the heroine of the play is a Pariah girl who is sketched as the centre of complications. Bharati Sarabhai employs the theme in a different way; influenced by the Gandhian doctrine,
she makes the old woman with her age-old faith in pilgrimage to Haridwar see the sacred Ganga in a well to be dedicated for use by the Harijans (the 'untouchables'). The same theme becomes a tragedy in the hands of Borgaonkar, who in his *The Temple-Entry* tries to expose the utter hypocrisy of some priests.

Poverty in general and the untold sufferings of the workers in particular form the theme of some playwrights. Chattopadhyaya deals with the problem in his own way and, as already seen, he shows all sympathy for the poor. His play *The Window* gives a realistic picture of a poor worker's family and symbolically strikes an optimistic note in the end; while *The Sentry's Lantern* presents the pragmatic approach of the worker to the world of misery. In handling almost a similar theme, Gargi gives more importance to suspense which is clear from *The Vultures* where he exposes the cruelty inflicted on the poor working class by their landlords. Niranjan Pal presents the theme of exploitation in another way. In *The Goddess*, he takes the corrupt priestcraft to task for trying to exploit people's weakness in the name of religion; but, as already shown, he does not achieve much success in handling the theme on account of his over-complicated plot and the introduction of some incredible sequences. Another weakness of the people, viz., belief in the existence of devils and witchcraft forms the theme of *In the Clutch of the Devil* by A.S.P.Ayyar, who (as already shown) ... achieves some
success in his plot-construction in spite of his fondness for a scholarly discussion of topics on hand. Similarly, prostitution, one of the abominable social evils catches the attention of Partap Sharma; but, in handling the theme in *A Touch of Brightness*, he could have avoided excessive dialogue and lack of suspense.

Some playwrights seem to experiment with the handling of such themes in still more different ways. For example, there are allegorical plays and mock-trials, and plays (including mini-plays) which concentrate on psychological portrayal. While Mrs. Ghosal resorts to allegory in *Princess Kalyani* in trying to present a picture of the demoralised India of the pre-Independence period, Krishnaswami makes his presentation of the theme of service to mankind allegorical in *Kailash*; and the need for the reconstruction of our educational system forms the theme of Gopal's *The Eastern Farce*. Their stageworthiness apart, the allegorical method of presenting the themes in such plays is significant so far as the indirect impression on the minds of the audience is concerned. While the dark side of the impact of science on mankind is directly and effectively dramatised in Borgaonkar's *Bhasmasura*, the theme gets a different treatment in the hands of Ayyar who makes it a witty and thought-provoking mock-trial entitled *The Trial of Science for the Murder of Humanity*. As already discussed, playwrights like Nissim Ezekiel seem to be content with giving vignettes of a cross-
section of the contemporary society. Further, there are plays where the psychology of characters is given more importance than conventional plot-construction. To illustrate, Rajinder Paul's *Ashes Above the Fire* analyses the minds of man and woman so far as their sexual relationship is concerned; and, as already seen, some mini-plays also provide good examples of this.

Thus, on the whole, the playwrights of both the pre-Independence and the post-Independence phases have not fully used the rich material available in the ancient lore and history of our country; and yet, with regard to the themes drawn from these sources, there are attempts of considerable importance (though partially successful) in dramatising situations, highlighting epic characters and presenting the tragic hero. As regards history, playwrights could not have ventured much to draw themes from the contemporary politics of the British period for practical reasons. But, how the history of the ancient and medieval period failed to attract them sufficiently, is inexplicable. However, a greater success is seen in employing social themes like the dowry system, widow-marriage, corruption in priestcraft, inequities of the caste-system, exploitation of the poor by the rich and other burning problems of the contemporary society. Further, as already expounded, the post-Independence phase brought before the playwrights some new problems like the urgent need for national integration; but their handling of the theme is mostly
rather sketchy and melodramatic. On the whole, Indo-English drama does not evince much thematic richness and depth, with a few exceptions.

**Models and Techniques**

Regarding the models and techniques employed by the playwrights, it is clear from this study that some playwrights like Sri Aurobindo rather unnecessarily allowed themselves to be influenced by the Elizabethan drama and did not make use of the traditional Sanskrit theatre and folk-stage of our country; while there are also examples like the plays of Karnad, Nagarwalla, Sharma and others where some techniques of our ancient dramatic tradition are employed with advantage.

As already seen in the discussion of *Perseus*, *The Viziers* and other plays, Sri Aurobindo strictly resorts to the Elizabethan model — particularly the five-plot structure, sub-plots and lengthy speeches in verse.

Though Kailasam shows a better stage sense than Sri Aurobindo, he too does not evince much technical innovation. He does not demonstrate the same liking towards the models and techniques of our classical drama and folk-stage as he has for drawing his themes from our ancient lore. Though he does not fully follow Sri Aurobindo in adopting Elizabethan models and techniques, he is not completely free from their influence. In fact, as already shown, he tries—though
unsuccessfully — to cast the lives of his her
Karna into the Elizabethan mould of a tragic
and, while the portrayal of Karna fails for what
major tragic flaw of his own, that of Keechaka suffers
from excessive idealisation. Further, the five-act
structure employed in The Curse bears little relevance to
the development of the plot. Even in the playwright's
much-admired piece The Purpose, he ignores the utility of
our dramatic tradition: for example, a Sutradhara would
well introduce the powerful theme to the audience, and
folk-motifs could have been effectively employed to
present Ekalavya's forest abode in a natural setting.

Compared to Sri Aurobindo and Kailasam, other
major playwrights like Chattopadhyaya and Bharati
Sarabhai are less influenced by Elizabethan drama.
Chattopadhyaya presents the lives of the Indian saints in
an almost traditional manner, though he does not
directly follow the models and techniques of our classical
as well as folk stage; at times we see a shadow of the
Sutradhara in the form of a Preface (as in Jayadeva).
There are also examples like Siddhartha where he overdoes
the use of the Prologue, the Epilogue, the chorus and
modern stage-techniques like light and sound effects.
As already illustrated, Sarabhai too shows a greater
inclination to Indian techniques than the Western. In
fact, though the chorus in her The Well of the People
(employed for indicating change of scene) reminds us
of the similar technique in Greek plays, she is obviously
influenced by the folk-stage of our country; and in
her *Two Women*, she brings out the tragic effect without resorting to the use of typically Elizabethan lengthy speeches and sub-plots. As regards Currimbhoy, the success of his one-act plays is mainly due to western influence. But, as already shown, most of his plays would fail on the stage on account of his excessive dependence on cinematographic techniques and other stage gimmicks.

So far as the minor playwrights of both phases are concerned, it is (as already said) rather difficult to trace the influences regarding the models and techniques employed except in the cases of a few; but many do not seem to have taken the problem seriously at all.

Of the western influence, the compact one-act play form appears to have been a more dominant influence than Elizabethan drama. Regarding the latter, the five-act structure is employed in only some plays like V.V.S. Aiyanger's *Ramasriya*, Sadar-Joshi's *Acharya Drona*, Prabhu's *Apes in the Parlour* and Gaffoor's *Dr. Lover*. But, as already indicated in the study of these plays, the mere division into 'five acts' is deceptive for the Acts are only scenes. There are also examples of a few plays like Krishnaswami's *The Flute of Krishna* wherein the Elizabethan lengthy speeches and verse-form are employed (of course, marring the stage effect) in addition to the five-act structure. On the other
hand, the western one-act play form serves as a model to many playwrights: but it is rather difficult to trace the influence of short compact plays by Sanskrit dramatists like Bhasa in this regard. Anyway the compactness of the form must have been a major attraction to these playwrights in their attempts to dramatise an episode or focus light on a particular aspect of one's life. This can be observed in some of the plays already considered: Abbas's Invitation to Immortality, Borgaonkar's Phasmawara, Currimbhoy's The Refugee and The Miracle Seed.

As this study reveals, only a few authors have attempted employing the full-fledged play form with some success. Apart from the plays of Sri Aurobindo and Kailasam, Ramaswami Sastri's Droupadi, Mrinalini Sarabhai's Captive Soil, Mrs. Ghosal's Princess Kalyani, Fysee-Rahamin's Daughter of Ind are some examples worth mentioning. As regards two-act and three-act play models, there are quite a good number in both the pre-Independence and the post-Independence phases. As already discussed, there are cases where these structures are suited to the requirements of the plot; to illustrate, Kailasam's The Purpose, Chattopadhyaya's The Coffin, Bharati Sarabhai's Two Women, Currimbhoy's Incullath, Gurusaharan Das's Larins Sahib. But, in some cases like Lakhan Deb's Tigerclaw, the compact one-act play structure would have been more suitable than the three-act structure.
Even in employing western techniques such as the Prologue, the Epilogue etc., there is a marked difference between playwright and playwright. While Sri Aurobindo employs the Prologue in *Perseus* to introduce a conversation between the goddess Athene and the god Poseidon and thereby indicate the future conflict between the good and the evil, Chattopadhyaya's Prologue in his *Siddhartha* presents the image of the present crisis caused by the nuclear race. The Prologue and the Epilogue serve as two terminal props to the sequences of the plot in Mrinalini's *Captive Soil*, while Shanti Jhaveri makes these techniques useful in linking the past and the future with the present in *Deluge*; and, in Fyze-Rahamin's *Daughter of Ind*, they are used to expound the love-theme. There is a prayer to the Goddess of Learning in Mrs. Ghosal's prologue, which partly performs the function of the Sutradhara (who could have been directly introduced with advantage in many such plays). Also, the flashback technique has been occasionally employed by some playwrights. As already illustrated, the flashback employed in Swami Sivananda's *Radha's Prem* to present an episode in Lord Krishna's life infuses some dramatic effect into a prolonged discussion about the Lord.

According to the detailed study already made, some playwrights like Sri Aurobindo do not seem to rest content with adopting the Elizabethan model and technique; and they make their theatre reverberate with numerous echoes of the Elizabethan drama also.
As shown in the case of Sri Aurobindo, the selection of titles like *The Vagabond of Bassora* (similar to *Timon of Athens*), the sequence of raising the dagger and lowering it by Aslaugh in *Eric* (like Macbeth) and Cleopatra's mistaking her son Thimocles' flattery for real love in *Rudogone* (like *King Lear*) — are some of the Shakespearian echoes heard. Kailasam makes a deliberate attempt to impart the colour of Shakespearian tragic heroes to his Karna and Keechaka. Moreover, as already explained, Prabhu makes his character Benny (in *Apes in the Parlour*) repeat Mark Antony's words. The effect of all such echoes is to emphasise the derivative nature of these plays.

There are many instances where our classical and folk-stage techniques would have been more useful to the playwright than the western ones. One can imagine the stage effect in *The Beggar Princess*, had Dilip Kumar Roy and Indira Devi employed an Indian setting and a Sutradhara (instead of the Prologue and the Epilogue) to dramatise the life of the Indian princess-saint Mira; and the employment of a few folk-songs and dances indicative of her popularity among the masses would have made the presentation far more realistic. There are plays like *Smt. Thakur's Mother and Child* where the Pravesaka (reporting) technique would have filled the wide gap existing between the first two acts: Act 1 presenting the maiden Kunti's curiosity to test the effect of the sage's boon and the consequent
birth of Karna; and Act 2 showing Kunti as the mother of the Pandavas.

Instances are not totally lacking where the playwrights have looked to our classical and folk-stage techniques. The reportage-technique of the Classical Sanskrit Drama comes to the help of Arati Nagarwalla in her attempt at making the audience know the particulars about the killing of the tiger in her The Bait. While Gurucharan Das resorts to the 'voices'-technique (different voices behind the stage) to depict the troubled mind of Lawrence in Larins Sahib, the technique of an obscure figure's speech (a sort of asamiravan, a voice of the invisible) solves Sadar-Joshi's problem of presenting Drona's mental conflict (in Acharya Drona) between his ideal and the practical worlds. To show the reaction in the minds of his characters in The Professor Has a Warcry, Partap Sharma employs a mimic demon of our Indian folk-dance Kathakali; but its connection with the situation is so loose that one gets confused about the symbol.

It is in the authors' translations of their own plays that we can find better instances where the Indian folk and classical stage-techniques have been successfully employed. Dalal employs the Sutradhara-Nati technique of the Classical Sanskrit Drama in Victory.
Karnad leaves many playwrights far behind by making a dexterous use of our folk-stage conventions and techniques like the Bhagavata, prayer to Lord Ganesha, masks, curtains, dolls and story-within-a-story in his Hayavadana and the comic pair of Akera and Makara type in his Tughlaq.

Thus it is clear from the survey that the playwrights in both the phases have by and large ignored our ancient dramatic tradition comprising both the Classical Sanskrit stage and folk-theatre (though here and there we find a few experiments in this regard). This is perhaps an important reason why Indian drama in English has remained mostly derivative and imitative.