Conclusion

In the foregoing chapters I have discussed at length the relevant works of Shaw, Galsworthy, Granville-Barker and some other dramatists in whose works the theme of social justice found its best utterance. In fact, this theme was not something new in the literature of the early twentieth century. It had been a recurring theme of literature especially from the beginning of the nineteenth century. The poetry of social ferment and the novel of social criticism in the first half of the Nineteenth Century faithfully reflected the yearnings and aspirations of the people of England for a better and happier state of society to be achieved by upholding the principles of social justice in various spheres of social life.

But strangely enough, the English drama followed the beaten track of romance and melodrama until a change in the theme of drama was initiated by T.W. Robertson and subsequently followed by Pinero and Jones. The plays of these three masters brought in a new vogue in the dramatic tradition and effectively changed the tastes of the theatre-going public who now learnt to welcome and relish real problems of contemporary society presented on the stage. Propagation of Marxist ideas, growth of Trade Union Movement, the vogue of continental dramatists especially of Ibsen through the establishment of J.T. Green's The Independent Theatre — all these added momentum to the great social upheaval that aimed at doing away with the glaring inequalities in social and economic spheres. Treatment of the problems of social justice in drama became the chief occupation of the dramatists of the early twentieth century. Thus, the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth century witnessed an enormous growth of drama that drew its nourishment from the problems of the contemporary society. These problems were evidently related to the problems of social justice.
Thoroughly conscious of the social situation in their personal lives, the dramatists found the questions significant enough for impulsion into artistic utterances, and their concept of the function of drama did actually admit of such themes. In the Manifesto-like Preface to Mrs. Warren's Profession, Shaw wrote, 'only in the problem play is there any real drama'. In 1895 when a London periodical (1) announced a symposium on the Problem Play, Shaw emphatically wrote:

The material of the dramatist is always some conflict of human feeling with circumstances; so that, since institutions are circumstances, every social question furnishes material for drama. But every drama does not involve a social question, because human feeling may be in conflict with circumstances which are not institutions, which raise no question at all, which are part of human destiny.

And further:

To this day your great dramatic poet is never a socialist, nor an individualist, nor a positivist, nor a materialist, nor any other sort of 'ist', though he comprehends all the 'isms', and is generally quoted and claimed by all the sections as an adherent. Social questions are too sectional, too topical, too temporal to move a man to the mighty effort which is needed to produce great poetry. Prison reform may nerve Charles Reade to produce an effective and businesslike prose melodrama; but it could never produce Hamlet, Faust or Peer Gynt.

But while appreciating the importance of the great poet who comprehends all the 'isms', Shaw champions the utilitarian kind of talent and refers to the social utility of art at the end of his essay:

A Doll's House will be as flat as ditchwater when A Midsummer Night's Dream will be as fresh as paint; but it will have done more work in the world; and that is enough for the highest genius.

1. The Humanitarian, May 1895.
This leads Shaw to assail a Shakespeare and praise a Brieux. More to the point, he assails Shakespeare and praises Shaw.

So many widely different views have been advanced on Galsworthy's approach to his dramatic subjects that it seems desirable to let the author state his own case. He did so very cogently in the Preface to the plays in the Manaton edition of his works:

I do not know if it is a discovery of mine that society stands to the modern individual as the gods and other elemental forces stood to the individual Greek; but one has seen it hinted at so often that one inclines to think it must be. In any case, it can be understood how a dramatist, strongly and pitifully impressed by the encircling pressure of modern environments, predisposed to the naturalistic method, and with something in him of the satirist, will neither create characters seven or even six feet high, nor write plays detached from the movements and problems of his times. He is not conscious, however, of any desire to solve these problems in his plays, or to effect direct reforms. His only ambition in drama, as in his other work, is to present truth as he sees it, and gripping with it his readers or his audience, to produce in them a sort of mental and moral ferment, whereby vision may be enlarged, imagination livened, and understanding promoted.

In "A Novelist's Allegory" in The Inn of Tranquility (1912) Galsworthy allegorises his function as an artist. He means "to disturb good citizens by showing to them without provocation disagreeable sights" and "to endanger the laws by causing persons to desire to change them". Already dealing with the propertied classes in his Forsyte Tales, as a dramatist he concentrated more sharply on certain aspects of their wealth and its making. He wanted to present the problems of the day, mainly social in nature, indicating that there was a good deal of scope for improvement in our human behaviour.
Granville-Barker formulated his views on drama in The Exemplary Theatre or the lecture on Poerty in Drama and the essay on The Coming of Ibsen. (1) But he said less on the subject of drama than on the technique. His conception of drama rests firmly upon his sense of what acting is and what the actor can do. He judged the greatest dramatists to be those who exploit the power of the actor to the greatest extent. Nevertheless, Barker, in following the naturalistic mode had set his eyes upon the contemporary life and society, and as a Fabian Socialist made his plays the vehicle for expressing sociological ideas about betterment of existing social conditions. His plays are discussions of contemporary problems and his themes include amongst other things the marriage-conventions, the inheritance of tainted money, sex, and the position of women.

For the student of drama, the question that ultimately matters does not concern the nature of the political or social ideology that the playwrights may believe in—although our knowledge of their ideology should contribute to our understanding of their plays—but relates to the quality of the drama. As the substance of drama, one ideology may be as good as another; the aesthetic validity of the ideology is in its power to stimulate the creative vision. The contemporary issue of social justice served as a potent and productive stimulus for the dramatic imagination of the major playwrights of the early twentieth century: Shaw, Galsworthy, Granville-Barker, Barrie, St. John Hankin, and others. Though some of the topics they dealt with have lost their relevance in the changed conditions of society and men's attitude to life today, yet these plays have deservedly found place in literature as works of art. In other words, the preoccupation of the dramatists with sociopolitical— economical problems of the age did not impair the artistic excellences of their plays. After all, it is not the theme

that makes memorable art, but the artist.

For example, Shaw, as a dramatist, believed in the theory of "Art for Life's sake"; he was a purposive writer and for him ideas were more important than anything else. The exploitation of the poor through the system of slum-landlordism, the economic causes of prostitution, the present system of marriage with little scope for protection of women's rights and independence, social prejudices about class-distinctions—these and such other topical issues formed the subject of his plays. Already some of his ideas have become dated, but the entertainment value of his plays has not suffered. Borrowing from Ibsen the general outline of his dramas of ideas, Shaw has not often succeeded, like him, in creating such conflicts of tendencies as would set at war human beings roused by the elemental passions of their natures. But his plays fully possess the animation which can rise from the incessant stimulation of intelligence. Shaw displays all the resources of an original art in bringing the characters, or rather the symbols, that confront one another, to join issue; in giving an edge to the expressions of their conflicts, and in striking out flashing formulae from their collisions. Always substituting himself for them more or less, when the time comes, the author addresses us; and then it is that there are unrolled before us in brilliant procession the 'paradoxes' whose effect of surprise, either piquant or revolting or revealing, is the essential element in the scenic life of those comedies. The mode of their rise is still the same: divesting a fragment of reality of its crusted conventions or habits, Shaw suddenly brings to light the new, unexpected, shocking sight of what lay beneath; a vivid contrast is thus made between the traditional image and the new apparition, producing a violent mental revulsion.

Drama depends upon the clash between characters who embody different points of view. If on both sides, the difference is
one of conflicting desires, that is one kind of drama; but it becomes often more interesting when the opposing wills represent whole groups of ideas by which many men hold and live. Such is the interest of the discussion between Sartorius and Trench, of the encounter between Vivie and Mrs. Warren, of the contest between the poet and the Parson over which Candida stands as umpire, of the sharp passage-at-arms between Undershaft and the honest poor man Peter Shirley, and of many other spirited encounters. In all these scenes what impresses us is the hammer-and-tongs vigour with which each contestant stands up for his side, and the natural congruity of his outlook with the sort of person his general behaviour shows him to be. As a social reformer Shaw has theorised upon and analysed the effect of this or that social environment on life and characters; as an artist, he has always been preoccupied with human nature. These two preoccupations working together, have enabled him to seize with extraordinary quickness the traces which a particular manner of living leave on a personality. Shaw proves the contrary of the notion that an artist gets the best of work out of himself when he holds aloof from the social and religious questions of his day; the artist in him owes an enormous debt to the reformer. Prof. Eric Bentley makes an interesting study of the artistic excellences of Shaw's plays. (1).

Like most of his contemporaries Galsworthy wrote his plays to underline some of the incongruities, injustices and problems prevalent in the Society. Though he presents problems in the plays and suggests that solution of these problems is urgently needed, he is never impatient or violent in his denunciation of the evil. He is, first and last, an artist and no reformer. So the violent rage of a reformer or the bitter sarcasm of a misanthrope is absent in his writings. The plays, like other writings

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of Galsworthy, are suable, polished and balanced. Each play is built on a frame of ideas; but these are not put in from the outside; such situations are selected as will, through their spontaneous development, suggest to our minds the terms between which an abstract relation may be established. The plot of The Silver Box is ingeniously contrived to suggest the discrimination between the rich and the poor even in a court of law. The plot of Strife turns on the disastrous consequences of the conflict between Capital and Labour, two forces of production. Justice shows the fatal effect of mechanical application of law and Loyalties deals with the theme of racial prejudices. The situations are such as one might come across any day in contemporary London. The absurdity that marks the situations in Oscar Wilde and the rarefied unreality that marks the dramas of Shaw are conspicuous by their absence in Galsworthy's plays.

The men and women, brought in by Galsworthy to illustrate his ideas are placed in certain special situations of their social life. Interest centres round them as they are related to different social issues or problems. The particular traits or aspects of a character are also treated on the basis of his or her reaction or response to a particular situation or complication in social life. The individual is pitted against social forces and is shown in the light of his struggle against or succumb to the invincible effect of social forces. Yet the characters never look wooden or lifeless. They may lack the greatness of the celebrated heroes and heroines of Shakespeare; they may not resemble the provocative men and women of Shaw. But through them flows the blood of the living people of the age. One may recognise in them one's own shadow, own problems and conflicts. There is something pathetically individual in Falder's love for Ruth, just as in her helpless attachment to Falder. David Roberts, the type of an uncompromising work-leader becomes human in his deep love and affection for his wife Annie. The characters are
thus never deprived of the ordinary tenour of life. They are allowed to lead their own lives with all their duties and loyalties, pride and prejudices, pleasures and pangs. Shorn of their temporal and social backgrounds, these passions of the human mind have an essential, elemental force of appeal. "Art is one form of energy" says Galsworthy himself, "which really works for union and destroys the barriers between man and man". (1) A thing of art is a joy for ever - it has its own dynamism ever replenished. There is this universal quality of art in Galsworthy's dramas.

Granville-Barker's plays are discussions of contemporary problems. Hating sentimentality in any form he is essentially intellectual in his treatment and lacks the sympathetic warmth of the more popular Galsworthy. His tone is generally serious and often heavy, and some of his plays proved to be beyond the understanding of the most penetrating readers and were never produced. His concern with his theme and his fearless attempts to pose his problems fairly and squarely before the minds of the audience without prejudging the issue, often lead to a lack of incident and a surprising neglect of theatrical considerations. The greatest appeal of his plays lies in his wonderful character studies and extremely natural dialogue.

Barker seems constantly drawn on to point the contrast between the outward appearance and inner essence of the scene he is describing. This interest had already emerged in The Marrying of Ann Beete, largely devoted to the endless variations danced by an effete section of Georgian Society. But behind this facade the creative impulse is stirring in the soul of John Abud, the gardener, and it is that impulse which the heroine answers when claiming him for her husband, instead of the brilliant match arranged for her. The same creative impulse can be seen at work in Henry Trebell, a brilliant politician, destined for cabinet

1. The Inn of Tranquility, P-36.
office. Nevertheless, the impulse drives him into the arms of another man's wife, and when she dies trying to prevent the birth of his child, the scandal wrecks his career and stings him to suicide. Clearly the contrast which fired Barker here is between the precise calculations of the politician and the uncontrolled urges of the man. In *The Voysey Inheritance*, there is a cognate contrast between the imposing facade of a solicitor's office and the secret speculation with trust funds which lies behind it. The demolition of this facade by the solicitor's son and successor when breaking the news to his horrified family is one of Barker's most rewarding scenes. For so delicate a purpose, however, he evidently felt the need of precision tools, and to this end evolved his own pattern of elaborately detailed stage business, balanced by moments of insight, expressed in almost visionary terms. Even so, the end of *The Voysey Inheritance* finds him straining towards a point scarcely attainable by theatrical means, as he tries to demonstrate the self-sacrifice behind the younger Voysey's decision to shoulder his inheritance and repay his father's debts at the risk of prosecution.

While the end of this play is ineffective, there is a total lack of cohesion in *The Madras House*. There is the same impulse to show behind the well-stocked windows of Messrs. Huxtable and Roberts the furtive and frustrated existence of those assistants who are compelled to 'live in'; and to contrast the luxury and elegance of the Bond Street Madras House with the barren self-indulgence of its clientele, or the avowed sensuality of its founder, Constantine Madras, who has turned Mohammedan in the process. But neither purpose is reconciled with the demands of Stage presentation and the baffled spectator is left straining eyes and ears in an attempt to follow the elusive thread of argument.

The early twentieth century dramatists were keenly aware of their social responsibilities and yet, in their dramatic practice,
most of them did not pursue the theme of social justice persistently. It is possible to argue that the demand for social justice gained momentum enough to convince the British Government of the urgency of tackling the situation. And the Government rose to the occasion by appointing Commissions to probe into the real state of things in factories, slums, prisons, schools and other spheres where distress and misery of many were reported. Laws were passed in quick succession vindicating the cause of the oppressed and suffering people and with an eye to the amelioration of social conditions. The intensity of the demand for social justice was, thus, gradually diminishing. Moreover, the First World War diverted the attention of writers who, from serious drama of social problems, now turned to compose light farce to cater to the needs of the soldiers back from the battle-front.

It is, however, hazardous to generalise where a number of capable playwrights are concerned. Each major dramatist is a world in himself and what urges a writer to correlate his creative impulse to one particular theme rather than to another is a matter to be understood in terms of his mental processes rather than of the facts of his environment. Granville Barker began to turn his back on the theatre after writing only four plays on some social problems of the time. That he subsequently devoted himself largely to translations from the German and Spanish suggests a mind essentially interpretative rather than creative, just as his graduation from actor to producer led all too soon to his virtually abandoning the theatre for the study. The record of his thirty years of meditation, valuable as it is, confirms the impression already made by his plays: that of a spirit too sensitive to abide by the raw though invigorating atmosphere of the theatre.

Bernard Shaw's philosophy evolved out of his sociological and economic studies in connection with the Fabian Society. Constant examination of the etiology of progress in human society revealed to him a fundamental paradox, that there was no want of
effort but hardly any improvement. Hence after analysing in his early dramas the deficiencies of human nature and the defects of human institutions arising therefrom, Shaw proceeded in his later dramas to formulate a gospel in terms of which in his view, man might move onward and upward to an ideal condition of being when his passions would not neutralise the dictates of his reason nor his prejudices befog the radiance of truth.

Such a state may be achieved by evolution. Shaw said emphatically: "Our only hope lies in evolution. We must replace the Man by the Superman". (1) The future history of Mankind therefore will be the evolution of the Superman. The idea of the Superman was incipient in the ideology of the nineteenth century. We see it in Carlyle's hero-worship; in the Representative Man of the Victorian Poets, in the vitalistic philosophy of Schopenhauer, in Nietzsche's cry for a race of "free spirits". Shaw related this idea to the theory of evolution and converted it into a gospel of the future. The evolution of the Superman, according to Shaw, is to be the religion of the twentieth century—a religion that will have its intellectual roots in philosophy and science, just as medieval Christianity had its roots in Aristotle. Man by his sentimental subservience to romantic illusions and by his refusal to adjust his life to the requirements of scientific progress will gradually be degraded from his pre-eminence. But there is in man "life's incessant aspiration to a higher organisation; wider, deeper, intenser, self-consciousness and clear self-understanding." (2) This is what Shaw calls "Life Force". It is the creative energy which is behind evolution. It is Nietzsche's Will to Power, Bergson's Vital Eلن: only it is not a blind unconscious urge but purposive and consciously directed. It is the deliberate pursuit of omnipotence and omniscience,— "great power and greater knowledge". Bernard Shaw says in his oracular manner: Man is not God's

last work; God can still create. If you cannot do His work, He will produce creatures who can". How admirably Keats foreshadowed this philosophy in his Hyperion:

As Heaven and Earth are fairer, fairer far,
Than chaos and blank darkness, through once chief,
And as we show beyond that Heaven and Earth
In form and shape compact, and beautiful
In will, in action free, companionship,
And thousand other signs of purer life.
So on our heels a fresh perfection treads,
A power more strong in beauty, born of us
And fated to excel us, as we pass
In glory that old darkness. (BK II, 206-215)

Shaw describes this "Life Force" as "the tremendous miracle-working force of will" which "nerves to creation by a conviction of necessity".

Though Shaw claimed to be a Marxist, he did not accept the Marxist theory of the revolutionary urge that lies behind class-conflict. It is this conflict that will lead exploited humanity to get rid of the romantic illusions with which the hitherto dominant exploiting classes have managed to cloud their understanding. It is not life force but the urge of historical force—of dialectical materialism,—that works behind the evolutionary process and makes it revolutionary,—replaces existing social order by a superior order. Shaw accepted the superiority of the socialist order, but did not understand the historical law that will bring it about. For this reason Lenin called him "a good man lost among the Fabians".

Galsworthy alone pursued his plea for social justice till the end of his career as a dramatist. He had no definite philosophy to preach. Unlike Shaw, he did not raise any fundamental question. His sole plea is for mercy. He is not an optimist like H.G. Wells or even like Shaw who hoped to better their world by propagation of reason and science. In all his works Galsworthy prefers progressive amelioration of social miseries to revolt.
His natural compassion, his delicate sense of social justice, his tenderness for human woes, specially for those woes that are the making of an unbalanced society— these made him a mild and cautious critic who thought it best to point out the problems of human institutions rather than a bold iconoclast or even a zealous propagandist who would be blatantly impressive. Not only does he prompt us to a searching compassion for all humble folk, and all victims of their own weaknesses or of the brutality of the strong; but he unevils sores and points out remedies; he had denounced unjust laws, a summary procedure, an unnecessary cruel penal system, he has demanded a relaxing of the statutory bonds of marriage. He wanted to see a better order of society; he dreamt of sweeter relations between man and man, of more kindliness and consideration, of more happiness and more tolerance. He disciplined himself to the task of instilling into society the startling doctrine of Christ: "Love thy neighbour as thyself". Hence there is little digression but relentless pursuit of the ideal of social justice.

Dramatists of the early twentieth century were really pathfinders in problems that continue to face us today and in most regions of the world. Among nations that have been somewhat recently going the way of democracy, the social conditions to day are more or less comparable to the conditions prevailing in England during the last years of the reign of Queen Victoria. To the impact of democracy on the social organisation, the literatures of such nations have reached along lines more or less similar to those of late nineteenth and early twentieth century England. The pattern of social consciousness in the period under reference has its modern counterpart in many parts of the world. Today's playwright of a newly emerging nation has more often than not, to find himself confronted with aesthetic problems of nature broadly similar to those of the late Victorians and therefore it may be worth his while to draw lessons from, not necessarily to imitate, his British predecessors. Indeed, not only the playwright of
another nation and another language, but the British dramatists of today as well, might find it instructive to study the drama of the social ferment of nearly a century ago.