CHAPTER I
BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES

Theatre constitutes a very important factor in the social and political history of any civilization. Theatre in whatever form, sacred or secular, has never failed to make its powerful appeal to man. The Indian theatre is a genuine reflection of the myriad Indian ways of life. It has a very distinct identity, with its specific aesthetics, artistic objectives and creative methods, many of which are relevant even today. Theatre in India existed from even before the *vedic* period and had established a strong academic position through the Sanskrit language which was the language of the court and scholars. The rural community also had their share of performing arts, sometimes overlapping or contesting Sanskrit traditions.

The encounter with the West and its ideas, the change in terms of industrialization and the resultant demographic shifts, and the experience of imperialism and the freedom struggle, prepared the way for the development of the new kinds of cultural expression that marked a rupture from the past. Modern Indian drama grew out of this milieu of conflict - between cultures and social hierarchies, between economic and political sectors and among ideological groups.

The concerns of Modernity, Nationalism and Theatre in colonial India were obstinately interwoven and developed in response to India’s integration into the world capitalist system. The position of the commercial theatres in establishing the national idiom was not recognized by the traditionalists, who saw commercial theatres as a financial venture whereby traditional conventions and artistic sensibilities of theatre were compromised to entice the audience. Bharatendu Harischandra, who is regarded the father of modern Hindi drama, condemned the
commercial drama as that which appeared to be “poetic but devoid of true poetry”, and therefore classified them as the “corrupt forms” (Dharwadker 56). Tagore avoided contact with the Bengali professional theatre as it had nothing to offer him and dismissed it as “…a fit thing for the market place, not for the place of honour at a royal pageant” (qtd. in Dharwadker 58).

This study attempts to put forward an argument that the ‘hybridity’, established by the commercial theatre by combining in varying degrees, different aspects in performance styles and repertories, has established the identity of the national theatre. The company drama attempted a synthesis of binary concepts of tradition and modernity by borrowing elements from varied sources and transforming them so much so that it left no traces of the original.

Before the emergence of the talkies, the commercial drama companies had been the major providers of a wholesome entertainment for more than half a century and deserve to be recognized as a significant phase in the theatre history of India. Considerable research and critique on the commercial theatres of Bengal, Karnataka and Maharashtra has been published. But not much has been done on regional theatres of Andhra, especially on the commercial company dramas, which prepared and conceived a theatrical idiom.

The present study endeavors at understanding the circumstances that led to the establishment of commercial theatre in colonial India, when theatre provided a very important space, “for hegemonic contest among dominant and powerful sections of society” (Singh 2). Colonialism appropriates, de-contextualizes and represents the ‘other’ culture and legitimizes its authority by asserting its cultural
superiority. The colonizers’ allegation that everything connected with Indian amusement as ‘licentious’ and their assertion in holding their culture as ‘high’ resulted in relegating the indigenous cultural forms to a ‘low’ status. Further, to create a greater appreciation for Anglo-European culture among elite natives, the “colonial authorities encouraged the proliferation of European theatrical activity through the establishment of native theatres patterned after European theatres” (Bhatia 16).

The bourgeois in Bengal adopted the standards of the colonizers to set up their own ‘respectable’ theatre which includes the establishment of ‘the Hindu theatre’ in 1831 and ‘the Native theatre’ in 1833. The newly emerged western educated middle-class provided the requisite support for the sustenance of these theatres. As Bhatia points out, “in contrast to the popular folk drama, this emergent stream of urban drama that emulated European traditions were appreciated as a civilized, sophisticated and cultivated activity that would lead to the moral improvement of Indian society” (Bhatia 18). Adopting western conventions of proscenium, footlights, the drop curtains and prompting from behind, these urban playhouses performed plays for the public through the process of ticketing.

The Great revolt of 1857 marked the beginning of a new era of consolidation under the direct control of the crown. The western educated Indian bourgeois, who were aware of the colonial cultural tradition and education, used the western theatrical conventions and forms to generate the theatre of resistance. Political plays that attacked colonial policies and attempted to expose colonial power structures were perceived by the imperial authorities in India as potentially threatening modes of anti-colonial expression. The Dramatic Performance Censorship Act was passed
in 1876 which empowered the local government authorities to “prohibit dramatic performances which were seditious or obscene, or otherwise prejudicial to the public interests” (Annexure 1).

The colonial government’s attempt to stifle political drama through policing mechanism, enthused a search for techniques and methods that were beyond the reach of censoring authorities. Mythological and historical plays, which evoke national sympathies, were selected to propagate political ideas.

On the other hand, the increasing middle class turned to the Parsi theatre companies which provided a wholesome entertainment with its songs, dances and colourful sets and costumes. In order to restrain the dominance of the Parsi and Marathi theatres in southern regions, several regional theatre companies were established.

The thesis is a study of the origin and growth of the Surabhi theatres (1885), a professional, family theatre company hailing from the Kaddapa District of Andhra Pradesh. The history of the development of the Surabhi theatre from 1885 to 1940 enables us to examine the environment that encouraged the growth of company dramas in the southern states of India. The period between 1900 and 1940 witnessed the golden period of company dramas. Outstanding actors and talented playwrights dictated forms and fashions, and moulded the taste of the people. With the advent of the cinema in 1930s and later television, many professional theatres had to close down as they could not compete with the glamour of the motion picture.

Nevertheless, the Surabhi group survived as it formed a composite unit and believed that theatre which was practiced as their family profession, had given Surabhi the
unique identity. The introduction proposes to discuss the following aspects of Indian Theatre – its origin, classifications, historiography and criticism. A brief note on the history of the literary movement in Andhra is also provided as the group under study is a theatre group from Kaddapa District in Andhra Pradesh, India.

It is possible to trace historically a religious, and to some extent a secular origin for the Sanskrit drama. There are references in the Vedas to music and dance recitals during religious ceremonies. Grammarian Panini’s Pathanjali, which deals with the principles of acting and celestial sage Baratha’s Natya Sastra emphasize that Sanskrit plays were available even before 500 BC.

Historiography of Indian theatre is classified by the three-part model of Sanskrit/Classical theatre, the folk and popular traditions of the medieval period and Modern theatre with its beginnings in the colonial encounter. Theatre in ancient India is characterized by a theatrical unity – combining music, dance, gesture and dramatic expression. The aim of this theatre is entertainment and instruction, inspiring various sentiments (Rasa) in the spectator through dramatic representation. While the exposition of Sanskrit dramatic art is found in the plays of Bhasa, Bhavabhuti, Kalidasa and Vishakadatta, the commentary of Classical dramatic art is found in Bharata’s treatise, Natya Sastra.

The Sanskrit plays were limited by certain conventions. The basic plot in most Sanskrit plays centered on the hero who struggles for (and finally obtains) the object of his desire. Thus there is an opening, progression, development, pause and conclusion. Both time and place were flexible. Sanskrit plays commenced with an elaborate ritual. The Sutradhara (who was the director, the chief actor and the stage
manager), along with his two assistants opened the play with a prologue which announced the time and place of the play and introduced the playwright. The theatre halls were carefully constructed and decorated according to traditional rules of architecture. Masks were not used, and the subtlest interplay of emotions was conveyed through facial expressions, gestures and speech. Certain events were never depicted on the stage, like a battle, death, loss of kingdom and the pronouncment of a curse.

Sanskrit drama was more of dramatic poetry than drama proper and thrived under the patronage of ruling princes and royal houses. Many writers like Kalidasa, Baana Bhatta, Bhavabhuthi and Rajasekhar have been court poets. Some kings like Sudraka and Sri Harsha were themselves poets and dramatists. Royal patronage or contact with political rulers has played an important part in shaping the form and pattern of Sanskrit drama.

The attributes of classical theatre are best seen in contrast to the succeeding form of Folk/Popular theatre. While the former is characterized by formal structure, lyricism, characterization, moral purpose and royal patronage, the latter is marked by the loose construction of incidents from legends and myths, presented in village squares and marked by farcical devices, crude jokes and vulgar expressions (Yajnik 52). The folk performances have their origins in the bhana and prahasana forms of Classical theatre. The bhana performance is marked by music and song and dramatically present topics such as love, war, betrayal, etc. Prahasana is a farcical satire on the privileged classes in the community.
The popular forms incorporate certain features of classical theatre, such as
the dramatization of epics and myths, the character of the Suthradhar, and the use of
a Prologue and Epilogue. In the popular form, these elements are characterized by
intemperance.

By tenth century, the dramatic structure of Sanskrit plays became
increasingly very formal and the language very ornate. Although the masses
continued to understand and appreciate the plays, gradually it became a literary
pursuit for learned scholars who were patronized by the Hindu kings all over India.
The conquest of India by the foreign command brought about the suppression of the
native Indian (Hindu) ruling regions and impeded the development of Sanskrit
drama. Simultaneously, the classical Sanskrit language broke into various dialects
and got assimilated into various regional languages. Farley P. Richmond et al, in
their book Indian Theatre Traditions of Performances, attribute the decline of the
Sanskrit theatre to a combination of factors (83):

a) Successive invasions by Mohammad of Ghazini

b) Division of India into small princely states, each vying with the other for
   supremacy

c) Inability of rich patrons and kings to support the performance of Sanskrit plays

d) Use of regional language instead of Sanskrit when performers started touring
   villages.

e) Tendency of Sanskrit plays to emphasize more on poetry and less on dramatic
   action and dialogue while strictly adhering to the rules of Natya Sastra
Thus, with the theatre in the urban centers completely shut down, theatre for the next thousand years survived only as an activity in the countryside among rural communities.

The hereditary classes of theatre artists, known as the charanas, were the descendants of the Sutas, the bards of the epic days. Patronized by the kings and the nobles of the region these charanas sang the glories of their patrons and their ancestors in addition to the traditional narrative poems taken from the epics Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The introduction of the character called Nati, by the charanas paved the way for the tradition of the dance dramas of the later years. The resurgence of the cult of devotion inspired by the Shaivait and Vaishanavait saints of the bhakti movement provided fresh material for this new form (Rangacharya 64).

These charanas (who are called as Sutradhra in a play, a Bhagavatha in some folk-dramas or a Nattuvan in a dance drama) created a genuine interest in the uneducated mind about the epic stories.

Inspired by the poet-saints of the times whose compositions and retellings of myth provided the alternate frameworks of reference to link the ‘individual’ truth with the ‘universal’ truth, the forms of Jatra, Tamasha, Chhau, Lavani, Bhavai, Nautanki, Khayal, Naqal, Maach, Ramleela, Yakshagana, Koodiyattam, Pandavani, and Raasleela derived their vitality from the communal spirit, and as rituals integral to collective experience, provided a kind of ‘active’ culture.

An important feature of the post-classical traditional theatre in India is its role as the transmitter of values, and as an indispensable mode of communication.
In a society where formal education, reading and writing, were confined to a small privileged class, theatre and the performers were naturally called upon to undertake the responsibility of moral and spiritual education and constant cultural orientation of the common people.

By the end of the 17th century, folk theatre had established itself displacing Sanskrit plays. A stage was set at any cross-road, an audience came into existence, dancers, singers and actors had developed into a professional caste, the saints and the Harikatha artists (story tellers) had given it the technique of the Natya Sastra, and in addition to the traditional themes, contemporary men and ways of life also found a place in the drama (Rangacharya 89).

Modern Indian drama was a direct result of its interaction with colonialism and the influence of the western theatre. British theatre formed a part of cultural life in India as early as 1757 when Bengal came under the rule of East India Company from Nawab Sirajuddualah. Many playhouses were established and maintained by the British officers for the purpose of staging plays in English. Amateur productions (modeled on English tradition) by British officers were performed in playhouses (modeled on the theatres in England). British rulers in India drew on their own experience at home in order to make the theatre in India serve the objectives of colonial rule.

The play house was conducted by amateur performers and was frequented by high officials. The play house as described by Sophia was “about the size of the Bath theatre consisted only of pit and boxes and the performers are all gentlemen who receive no kind of compensation”, and the characters “supported in the manner
that would not disagree any European stage” (Das Gupta 189). The success of the play-houses in Calcutta inspired a Russian adventurer, Mr. Heresim Lebedeff, to organize the first Bengali performances in Calcutta with the assistance of a Bengali linguist, Babu Gokulnath Das, in November 1795. The show was ticketed and *Calcutta Gazette* dated 26<sup>th</sup> November, 1795 announced “Tickets to be had at the theatre, boxes and pit at sicca Rs. 8 and Gallery sicca Rupees four” (Das Gupta 191). Hemendra Nath Das Gupta in his book, *The Indian Stage* acknowledges that,

> the English theatres of Calcutta were not only the fore-runners of the Bengali stage but it also inspired the enlightened Hindus with a love for theatre and with a strong desire for the establishment of the genuine Bengali Theatre … though we had a great past and Bengali drama owes considerably to old Sanskrit play, still there is no gainsaying the fact that modern Bengali Theatre is more an imitation of the English Stage, and to write about Bengali Stage without noticing this evolution and the influences of the English theatres is simply to ignore the source. (193).

The play *Uttara RamaCharita*, translated by Dr. H.H. Wilson, from the original Sanskrit of Bhavabuthi, was the first Bengali play staged by the Hindu Theatre, in 1831, which was set up by the efforts of Prassanna Kumar Tagore.

The colonial dramas created by the British epitomized the conditions of colonial dominance. This culture created by the British and their native collaborators replaced both the Indian classical and folk drama with the Indian version of English theatre which under the patronage of the elite natives, who acted
as ‘buffers’ aimed at a kind of social reform that would pave the way for an easy acceptance of modernity in terms of the English rulers (Bhatia 13).

In Maharashtra, theatre developed against the backdrop of folk theatre of Karnataka in early stages, and was later influenced by the Parsi companies. The Yakshagana of Karnataka was a source of inspiration for the composition of plays in Marathi. Kathryn Hansen in the book *The Parsi Theatre* observes that the plays presented in the Bombay Theatre (1776-1846) comprised of Victorian melodramas and farces exclusively for the entertainment of the British officers. The stage was modeled after the Renaissance Italianate theatrical style of painted perspective scenery. The ‘Hindu theatre’ under the name Khetwaddy Theatre, had been active even before 1846 and performed plays translated from Sanskrit. This theatre was not built in the English style, but was an open air theatre, with the stage constructed after the traditional folk style (Hansen 28).

Hansen observed that the accomplishments and deficiencies of The Bombay Theatre were inherited by the Parsi theatre which was founded in 1852. The Parsis Dramatic Society comprising of affluent and enlightened Parsis became the patrons of Bombay theatre. Dadabhai Tooti, Dadabhai Patel, Kuverji Nazir Khor, Khatau, Balivala and others established different drama societies and toured the country staging dramas in Gujarati, Urdu and Hindi. This touring theatre combined European practices of stagecraft and commercial organization with Indic, Persian and English stories, music and poetry.

The court musician of Sangli, Vishnudas Bhave with the play *Sita Swayamwar* in Marathi in 1843 initiated the modern Marathi Stage. Initially Bhave
modeled some of his plays on the *Yakshagana* but later he along with his troupe moved to Bombay and started imitating the Parsi theatre companies. The first known Hindi play to be performed in Bombay and recorded in *The Bombay Times* on 9th January 1854 was *Raja Gopichand and Jalandar* by Vishnudas Bhave (Hansen 204).

The potential of theatre to interact with the audience, to create immediate response and to incite the spectator, made it the vehicle of anti-colonial polemic during the colonial period. Dhinabhandu Mitra’s *Nildarpan* (1875), dealing with the tyranny of indigo planters is an instance of theatre as “a forum for social and political ideas designed to influence opinion and raise social consciousness” (Richmond 388).

The imperial authorities in India perceived theatre and drama as potentially threatening modes of anti-colonial expression. The Indian Mutiny of 1857, the official transfer of power from the East India Company to the crown in 1858, and the Indigo Revolt in 1860, created a certain anxiety about theatre and its social role which finally resulted in the passing of the Dramatic Performances Act in 1876, prohibiting drama as it was “likely to excite feelings of disaffection to the Government established by law in British India”, laying down a penalty for all those participating in the performances, including the spectators of a prohibited play. As Nandi Bhatia reflects, “the complex mixture of imagery, stage design and dialogue launched attacks on colonial policies and practices, which further sharpened concern about the genre” (Bhatia 2).
The political content of the plays was not the only reason for the growing panic among rulers, the performative aspects of theatre which could generate immediate response from its viewers further worsened existing situations. As Lata Singh observes, the rhetoric of ‘obscenity’ and ‘morality’ used by colonial discourse, bourgeois nationalists, and social reformers imparted dubious reputation to theatre, declaring most kind of popular theatre depraved and lacking in theatricality and thereby projected the indigenous theatre groups as ‘low’ culture as against the sophisticated and civilized ‘high’ English forms.

Censorship of the indigenous drama led to the revival of mythologies, folk forms and translations of Anglo-European drama (basha plays). In their search for modernity early playwrights formulated many ways to establish a tradition. The new form established by the increasing English educated Indian bougouise was quickly absorbed “into the material, social and ideological structures of the literate culture with a long standing theatrical tradition in many indigenous languages” (Dharwadker 3).

Between 1857 and 1890 many plays were written and performed. This was possible one, because of the growing desire of the educated audience for new plays, two, by the construction of play-houses, and three, the birth of groups for performing plays.

The formation of groups, the construction of the play-houses and the itinerant activities of the dramatic groups introduces a new feature in the theatrical tradition in India- the establishment of the commercial theatre. Dramatic performances in the past (both private and public) were patronized and supported by
the kings and the temple authorities. The actors had settled down in society as a caste of their own. However, in the pre-modern period, the actors performing in groups did not belong to any of the hereditary castes. The play-house, implied rent to be paid and travelling from town to town meant expenditure. For all these reasons admission to a performance was necessarily either by invitation or on payment of an admission price (Rangacharya 107). The theatre depended mainly on the newly emerging middle class of the industrial age who were willing to pay for their entertainment. Therefore when ticketing became imperative, theatre moved indoors, playhouses, under the proscenium arch.

The recognition of this entrepreneurial enterprise development led to the birth of the modern theatre movement in India leading to the establishment of the commercial theatre of the country. The advent of the proscenium was a radical change in Indian Theatre. The elevated stage, the front and drop curtains, and the wings serve to separate audiences from the performers. The stage was lit, while the spectators sat in darkness. As Deshpande remarks, “the theatre became a showcase for the actor, further, ‘the proscenium stage changed the nature of the spectatorship from that of a ‘participant’ to an ‘on-looker’. The stage brought with it a new set of protocol which contrasted perceptibly with the behavior-norms associated with other theatric phases” (Deshpande Sudhanva 25).

By the late nineteenth century the texts for performances in urban Indian theatre included plays in English, English translations of European plays, translations of English and European plays in Indian languages, adapted and indigenized versions of western plays, translation of Sanskrit plays into modern Indian languages and the new Indian language plays performed both in the original
language and in translation. Greatly influenced by Shakespeare, a new prose style, with long, flowing sentences, ornate speech, and Sanskritization of speech developed.

In Karnataka, the Parsi touring theatre companies swept all other theatre forms before them. Novel stage equipment, dazzling illumination, improved costume, decor, captivating stage music, realistic acting, newer and yet newer plots significantly fascinated the spectators that the Yakshagana of the sea-coast began to lose its attraction. In order to revive the theatre tradition of Karnataka, Sakkari Balacharya started a company named the ‘Karnataka Nataka Company’ in 1874. Many plays performed by this troupe were successful and proved that they were not inferior to the Marathi plays. Balacharya inspired the formation of several dramatic troupes. In 1880, the Mysore Palace Company was established, staging several successful plays. In 1884 Gubbi Veeranna started his drama company. The Madras Dramatic Society, which started in 1875 in Madras, staged a number of English plays. In 1891, Dharmavaram Krishnamachryulu presented Telugu dramas in Madras, after which P. Sambandam Mudaliar, launched the Suguna Vilas Sabha in Madras. The company drama was in fact the first theatre movement, which brought in a common ‘national’ idiom of theatrical presentation, with songs, painted curtains and so on. It is to this trajectory that Surabhi belongs.

The frequent visits of commercial troupes from Maharashtra inspired many theatre aspirants to start their own theatre companies. Company drama never entered into the debate of tradition and modernity and attempted a synthesis of these
two stands. The company drama, borrowed elements from varied sources and transformed them so much so that it left no traces of the original.

The growing leftist movement in India, particularly the impact of Marxism in the early 1930s widely attracted the intelligentsia and creative people. The new awareness about the role of literature and art in social transformation, especially in the struggle against the British rule resulted in a theatre movement launched by the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA). With its emphasis on immediate everyday experience of common people rather than the upper classes, the IPTA sought to introduce realism in themes and simplicity and authenticity in presentation. The playwrights wanted old art forms to be enthused with new and vibrant themes and established alternative tradition of activist theatre – a theatre which not only went beyond the western model of the proscenium stage but also beyond the urban and middle class notions of modernity in theatre. The experimental and improvisational nature of the association helped in creating a heterogeneous corpus of plays and performances. Facilitated by the concept of traveling theatre, the artists were able to reach remote areas, villages and working-class settlements and had a direct access to interact with their audience. By interweaving the popular and the political through socially realistic plays the IPTA “took the plays beyond the confines of the profit-oriented commercial theatre in cities to its target audience-‘the people’ – and made their struggles open for intervention” (Bhatia 85).

Three major strands could be distinguished in the IPTA:

i. Remodeling of traditional folk-theatre forms for contemporary purposes
ii. Experiments on the urban proscenium stage

iii. Modern ’epic’ theatre – street theatre or political theatre

Though IPTA declined after Independence, its legacy is kept alive in the traditions of political drama and street theatre even today.

**History of the Telugu Literature**

The literature of the Andhra (the Telugu speaking regions in India) in many respects is a continuation of Sanskrit literary thought and tradition. Having a Dravidian origin in its basic vocabulary and structure, Telugu imbibed the vigour of Sanskrit thought and expression and thus created a new style with the best elements of both.

Centers of Sanskrit studies moved from Kashmir and Kanouj, Ujjain and Benares to Warangal and Vijayanagara, Rajahmundry and Nellore so much so that every Telugu poet felt himself a descendant of Vyasa or Valmiki, Bhasa or Kalidasa and translations of great Sanskrit works, by eminent poets who had an excellent command over both Sanskrit and Telugu were made and read out to vast audiences who heard with rapt attention. The Telugu poet took his inspiration from, and looked for guidance to Sanskrit masters and, the Telugu epic or Kavya, Nataka or Champu was shaped after the Sanskrit models. Telugu grammar followed the Sanskrit method while Rhetoric was a complete importation from Sanskrit. Telugu poetic thought is almost a logical continuation of that of Sanskrit poets and in fact many of the descendants of the Sanskrit masters rendered their thought into Telugu. In all technical studies, dance and music, art and science the Sanskrit marga system formed the basis for the later desi superstructure, the terminology and guiding rules
being Sanskrit while the execution i.e., way of expression or presentation, was moulded by the local or regional styles.

Though Telugu poetry appears to have had its start at about the seventh or eighth century A.D., as found in inscriptions, the first available book is that of Nannaya’s, *The Andhra Mahabharata*, composed in the middle of the eleventh century (A.D. 1050-1061) based on the Sanskrit original. Metrical form of writing was the only mode of expression and, writing in prose was not thought of. As the regional languages gained in strength and popularity, the dramas of the Sanskrit stage soon went into the background and lingered in small pockets of the earlier tradition. The *Yakshagana* or the street dance drama, as it is popularly called, gained ground and is clearly seen from the Vijayanagara period onwards.

Apart from the translations or trans-creations or adaptations from the Sanskrit masters, there is a species of composition peculiar to Telugu, known as *Prabandha*, which came into vogue during the Vijayanagara period woven around the lives and loves of heroes and heroines, wholly or partly imaginary, it is marked by a wealth of description, exuberance of imagination, and variety in metrical form. *Manucharitra* by poet Allasani Peddana and *Kolaapoornodayam* by poet Pingali Soorana are the two most outstanding works in this category.

Just as there are *Pancha-mahakavyas* (or five great classics) in Sanskrit, there are also *Pancha-mahakavyas* in Telugu, viz. *Manu-charita* by poet Peddana, *Aamukta-malyada* by Krishnadevaraya, *Vasu-charitra* by poet Ramarajabhushana, *Sringara-Naishadham* by poet Srinatha and *Viiaya-vilaasam* by Chemakura Venkatakavi.
The Telugu *Kavya* style began to decline after the fall of Vijayanagara while *Yakshagana* spread and improved both in music and dramatic element, reaching its heights, in the seventeenth century in the South (Tanjore and Madura) besides many parts of Andhra. Early attempts at writing prose are also seen in Tanjore and many parts of the South in the eighteenth century and it is only from the nineteenth century that modern prose began and developed quickly.

During the 17th and 18th centuries Telugu poetry and other forms of literature flourished under the patronage of the *Nayaka* rulers of Thanjavur, Madurai and Pudukottai, as also in Mysore as the Southern School of Telugu Literature. It covered a wide range and variety of compositions, including *Dvipada Kavyas*, *Yakshaganas* and other works, marked by *Bhakti* (Devotion) and *Sringara* (Love). This period saw the rise of talented women poets like Madhuravani, Rangajamma and Muddupazani. About this time also flourished the great musical composers, Kshetraiya, Tyagaraja and others.

While the classical tradition (*Marga*), with Sanskrit domination and Royal patronage, was being fostered by the educated elite of the day, the popular tradition (*Desi*), with the aid of folk meters, was utilized by the Saivite poets, like *Palkuriki* Somanatha and other saints and singers, who sought to establish contact with the masses.

The latter part of the nineteenth century saw the renaissance of Indian culture in the shape of new social and political movements all over the country and also marked the beginnings of modern Telugu literature. The new trends in Telugu literature, owe their origin and development to the influence of English literature.
Scholars well versed in English experimented with the new patterns of literary expression. *Kandukuri* Veeresalingam *Pantulu* (1848-1919), regarded as the founder of this new school wrote books which represented almost all new patterns of this age- novel, drama, farce, essay, short poems, biography, literary criticism. An intrepid social reformer, who initiated the campaigns for women’s education and widow-remarriage, was a pioneer in many of the art forms in modern *Telugu* literature as well.

In 1906, J. A. Yates, Inspector of schools, noticed the difference between the spoken living language and the archaic and obsolete language of the books and commissioned *Gidugu* Ramamurti *Pantulu* to address the issue. This led to a series of debates between the sponsors of the movement and the orthodox pundits, who felt threatened, that the purity of the classical language was attacked. Ramamurti emphasized that modern Telugu is mainly intended for prose writing and the refined speech of the educated in society and never discouraged the study of the classics. This movement was only a revival of the tradition of writing prose that existed in the 18th century. This movement encouraged writers to write their compositions in modern Telugu. *Gurazada* Appa Rao's social play *Kanya-sulkam* (1897), marked the beginning of a new era as it was the first stage play to be written entirely in the spoken dialect, the language of real life (Sitapati 139).

Prior to 1870 A.D, there were no Telugu dramas, either original or translation. Sanskrit scholars among the Telugu were well acquainted with Sanskrit dramas, but never attempted to write dramas on the model of Sanskrit plays. There were Telugu poets who translated the *Mahabharatha*, the *Ramayana* and the *Bagavata* but none of them translated any Sanskrit play. As a substitute for drama,
there had been *Yakshaganas* or performances by Bhagavata parties, also known as *Veethi natakas* or street-plays. In the beginning, the theme selected was exclusively from an episode from the *Bhagavata*, but in course of time, stories from the *Mahabharatha* and the *Ramayana* were also selected as suitable themes. They were composed with a large addition and combination of songs and verse, and provided for dancing as an essential part of the dance-drama. Conceivably, as G.V. Sitapati muses, “the Telugu poets felt that a play resembling the Sanskrit drama would not attract the masses, unless they were combined with singing and dancing as in *Yakshagana*” (Sitapati 260).

Close contact with the West through English had triggered off a new wave of renaissance and a spirit of rejuvenation in the *Telugu* region just like it did elsewhere in the country. Parsi theatrical companies from Dharwar and Poona toured (1881) the Telugu country and their performance of the Hindi or Marathi plays created a favourable impression. Ananda Gajapati, the Maharaja of Vijayanagaram, a versatile scholar and patron of arts, organized a Dramatic Association and built a theatre inside his palace and staged Sanskrit plays before select audience and learned scholars.

It is commonly believed that Modern Telugu drama had its beginnings when *Korada* Ramachandra Sastry, a Sanskrit pundit of Machilipatnam, a port town, wrote *Manjari Madinikareeyam* (1860), a four-act *natika* on a love theme written in sanskritized diction. As there is no evidence to prove the veracity of this claim, it is believed that the first play in modern Telugu dramatic literature is *Kokkonda* Venkataratnam Pantulu’s translation of *Narakasura Vijaya Vyayogam*, a Sanskrit play by Varanasi Dharma Suri written and published in 1872. From 1872 to 1880
Sanskrit and English plays were translated and a beginning was made to write
original plays on contemporary social themes.

Influenced by the touring theatre companies from Karnataka and
Maharashtra, many professional theatres started mushrooming in the Districts of
Rajahmundry, Eluru, Mylavaram, and Machilipatnam. At that moment, the
enthusiasm of teachers working in schools and colleges, mainly, Sanskrit and Telugu
scholars worked towards the Telugu theatre.

Important Telugu Dramatic Associations to be founded around the turn of the
century were the Sarasa Vinodini Sabha (1879) in Bellary, Surabhi Natyamandali in
Surabhi (1888), Summanorama Sabha (1902), Chintamani Nataka Samajam in
Rajamundry and Andhra Hindu Nataka Samajam in Rajamundry (1883). These
dramatic associations contributed immensely to the emergence of the Telugu drama
into a distinct genre and the popularization of performance in Andhra.

The early phase of Telugu drama was marked by adaptations of mythological
plots for theatrical performances. The partition of Bengal in 1905 provided the
impetus to awaken the historical splendour of the nation. The dramatic associations
drew plays written on the lives of saints/poets, as they embraced themes which had
both puranic and historical elements. The moral purpose championed by saints like
Kabir and Ramdoss along with their fortitude to destroy the evil and the maya in
order to attain sublime happiness became popular in North Andhra. Later plays
based on the exploits of patriots who sacrificed themselves for the sake of the
country came to be staged. Almost all groups staged plays, in which episodes from
the history of the land were recreated in all its grandeur that stirred the people against alien rule, *Bobbili Yuddam* (1909) for example.

The plays and production followed a definite prototype:

1. The proscenium stage with the audience entirely on one side.

2. The stage had wings and front curtain, back drop with painted scenery, and divided into three locales: a road, inside of a house and an open ‘forest’, represented by rolling curtains.

3. The sets attempted an imitation of reality.

4. The plays were divided into four categories: mythological, fairy, historical and social (contemporary).

5. The plays had a definite structure. Characters had distinct identities and each scene indicated a definite location and definite sequence of time.

6. Mythological plays used blank verse. Whereas social plays never used verse. Some plays used both prose and verse, usually by different characters.

7. The plays did not claim the authorship of any recognized writer as all the companies were performing the same plays.

8. Songs and dances were introduced not because of their relevance but for their entertainment value.

The popularity of the professional companies lay in the singing abilities of their actors, as it was the era of ‘*Padya Natakam*’ or the music-drama. A *Padyam* (vrittas) is a metrical stanza in Sanskrit and Telugu literary tradition. Usually of four
The earliest playwright to introduce songs along with padyam in Telugu plays was Dharmavaram Ramakrishnamacharya, a playwright-director of Bellary. Influenced by the performances of the Parsi theatre companies, he wrote his first major play *Chitra Naleeyam* (1886) a play in which poems and songs abounded. The songs were accompanied by a violin (or in the later years, a harmonium) and a tabla, whereas the poems were sung to the accompaniment of a violin or harmonium. A standard padya nakam contained songs in various carnatic ragas to create an atmosphere, poems set in different ragas for dramatic purpose and prose for connecting passages.

Other important playwrights whose plays were well received were Chilakamarthi Lakshminarasimham and Vaddadi Subbarayudu of Rajahmundry and the twin poets Tirupathi Venkata kavilu, whose puranic plays, (eg. *Pandavodyoga Vijayalu*) with verse and songs enthralled the audience. The success and popularity of the padya natakam had both its positive and negative results. The padyams were mainly responsible for drawing huge crowds. Actors who were proficient in singing were popular and were sought after by many professional companies. The mythological plays began to add the prefix ‘sangeetha’ to their titles as the plays were crammed with songs and poems: *Sangeetha Harichandra, Sangeetha Savithri*. A stage play in the first quarter of the 20th century usually had eighty to hundred songs and twenty to thirty Kanda and Vrtta (padyams).
The first professional theatre in Andhra, The Hindu Nataka Samajam was established in 1908 in Rajamundry, by S. Gunneswara Rao and Kirthiventi Nageswara Rao. This company employed a director, designer, a music director and several well-known actors. Other professional companies like the Mylavaram company, Mothe company followed the tradition and employed versatile music directors who used popular Hindustani ragas with *gamakas* (variations of the note in a scale) which became fashionable (Sarma 77).

The economic recession after the First World War and the emergence of the cinema, resulted in the closure of many professional theatre. Enterprising contractors, who served as managers in the professional companies, started a new system called the ‘contract dramas’. The contractors ‘contracted’ only *padya natakams*. A contractor who wanted to stage a play in a town would first book a hall, and then contact the actors from different parts of the State, book the ‘best’ known actor for each role and sell tickets. On the specified date actors would arrive from different places, assemble at the hall, insist on being paid before the performance and do their roles (Sarma 79).

These contract dramas considerably damaged the progress of theatre in Andhra. As there were no rehearsals, the performance was a kind of hotchpotch affair wherein only the singing abilities of individual actors were exhibited. Every actor in order to oblige the requests of his ‘fans’ compromised the over-all composite dramatic performance. Since actors came from different parts of the state, and since there were no rehearsals, each actor mutilated the text as he required, by introducing several additions to elevate his or her own character.
In spite of experiments and periodical success the company dramas seem to have taken a downward bend in the thirties. Causes for the decline could be grouped under external influences and internal set-backs. The most formidable of the external influences was the advent of the talkie film which became an overpowering competitor with the stage which had remained for decades, the single medium of entertainment in cities.

Play-houses got converted into film-houses. Reputed artists gave up the stage in favour of the screen as it enhanced their lifestyle and popularity. The commercial theatre gradually receded from the cities and tried to find its patronage in villages. However, even there, it soon came to be displaced by the touring talkies. Excepting a few of the well-to-do concerns like the Gubbis and Surabhi all the other groups disintegrated.

The steady importance gained by the amateur stage, with its intellectual plays and refined method of production became a serious competitor to the company drama. But when the company dramas withdrew to the villages, they found that social plays were not appreciated as much as the mythological ones. These companies had to negotiate between the city and the village with social and mythological plays alternately.

In addition to the external influences, various internal reasons forced the decline of company drama. The company drama never reacted quickly to the changing times and tastes. It usually repeated the same old hackneyed plays for years at length. The artist was always discontented, for, excepting the leading and economically viable troupes, others did not pay him properly and regularly, and so,
he always thought of breaking away and opening his own troupe. The allegiance of
the artist was therefore undependable.

With the beginning of National movement, and intensification of political
activities, national struggle for independence became the concern of the popular
theatre. Nationalists saw in them a much needed tool to spread their message
effectively. This led to the politicization of popular theatre in this period.

The Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA) through indigenous theatre
forms challenged existing hegemonic structures, both colonial and those intrinsic to
Indian society. The ruling British Government, through policing mechanism
subdued political drama which inspired a search for techniques and methods that
were beyond the reach of censoring authorities. In their pursuit IPTA turned to
mythologies and histories to evoke “nationalistic sympathies” (Bhatia 21).

Though not audaciously, company dramas also indulged in exposing the
colonial atrocities and misrule. Mythologies, especially the Ramayana and the
Mahabharatha formed the basis of most of the plays and aroused the patriotic favor
in people. Theodore Baskaran in his book Message Bearers discusses the dramatic
techniques used by the revolutionary company drama playwrights, who with the
help of dialogues, characterization and language successfully camouflage their
message and implanted in people the spirit of freedom. Most ingenious methods
were used by the actors to defeat censorship. In a seemingly harmless mythological
or historical play, there would be a good deal of adlibbing unrelated to the story,
insinuating sentiments against the colonial rule. For example, epic characters like
Sita and Draupadi were seen as embodiment of Mother India, who under foreign
The hybrid nature presented in the commercial theatre attracted and entertained the rural and urban audience for more than three decades. By combining different aspects in performance styles and repertories, company dramas have been rightly called as the forerunners of Indian cinema. Many plays that were successful on stage entered movies. Early Indian cinema heavily depended on the stage for plots and themes. Mythologies and histories which were popular on stage found place in the silver screen. The film industry reflected the theatre tradition of the early twentieth century incorporating entertainment forms of song, dance, mythic themes, elements of political and social protest plays and the folk drama. In the year 1931, the pioneer of South Indian movies, Hanumanthappa Muniappa Reddy, who worked with D. G. (Dundiraj Govinda) Phalke, the founder of Indian Cinema, sought Surabhi Company’s assistance for the first Telugu movie Bhaktha Prahlada. Music which was an important segment of the company drama became an essential part of the early Indian cinema, with films advertising more than fifty songs in it. Versatile actors and skilful technicians migrated from the stage to the film industry.

The post-Independence practitioners of drama attempted to create a distinctive identity for themselves, by disclaiming colonial practices and reclaiming classical and pre-colonial Indian traditions of performance.
The Sangeet Nataka Akademi established in 1956, with the objective to “provide patronage and conserve tradition” and to “study the past, help the present and encourage the future” organized the first drama seminar in 1956 which Aparna Dharwadker calls “the first sustained exercise in historical self-positioning”(37). The seminar initiated many discussions on the ‘structure of thoughts on theatre’ including the entity called ‘Indian theatre’, categorization of theatre (folk, commercial, amateur, experimental) and the theatre of roots.

Some of the influential interventions were by Mulk Raj Anand, Balraj Sahni and Prabhakar Machwe who argued that colonial and late colonial theatre institutions are no longer usable and anticipated a future theatre radically unrelated to its colonial past. This attack on the colonial theatre forms was the outcome of the view that they were “imperialist impositions, destructive of the indigenous aesthetic and performance traditions that had prevailed for more than a millennium” (Dharwadker 38). In Mulk Raj Anand’s words, “The most important problem of the modern era in the theatre is the basic contradiction between the symbolism of the Indian heritage in drama, with its poetic realism, and the naturalism of the Western theatre which percolated into India, devoid of its own organic sensibility, poetry and mechanical perfection” (qtd. in Dharwadker 38).

Theatre in post-independent India was engaged with creating a new idiom of national theatre combining linguistic and performative forms of indigenous theatre with the narratives of classical and modern tradition. The round table on ‘The Contemporary Relevance of Folk theatre’ organized by Sangeet Nataka Akademi in 1971 set the ground for the syncretic theatre. The practitioners of the theatre in the seventies sought a “reinvigorated and syncretistic modernity, internationalism and
cosmopolitanism” (Dharwadker 4). In an attempt to compete with the realism offered by the cinema industry and the renaissance of the Indian folk theatre the playwrights of the 1970s emerged with what is called the ‘Theatre of Synthesis’.

Christopher Balme in his essay ‘Indian Drama in English: Trans-creation and the Indigenous Performance Tradition’, defines syncretic theatre as:

…those theatrical products which result from the interplay between the Western theatrico-dramatic tradition and the indigenous performance forms of a post-colonial culture. Syncretic theatre is in most cases a conscious, programmatic strategy to fashion a new form of theatre in the light of colonial or postcolonial experience. It is often written and performed in a Europhone language but almost manifests varying degrees of bi- or multi-lingualism (6-7).

A number of converging influences from the west and from the past have been eagerly adopted as the innovations and a response to the established practice of the proscenium theatre. Classical and rich folk theatrical traditions of the different regions have been rediscovered and used effectively and imaginatively. The most potent of the western influence has been Brecht and his anti- Aristotelian revolution in the theatre practices in the West itself.

The encounter with Brecht’s theatre provided the freedom to the urban dramatist, who became sensitive to the potentials of non-naturalistic techniques available in Indian theatre (Dalmia 192). Brecht’s theatre had a catalyzing effect on Indian playwrights, who transformed production modes and made fresh interpretation of classics. In G. P. Deshpande’s words, “Modern Indian directors
seem to have used Brechtian techniques more as a celebration of Indian national forms. In a way we depoliticized Brecht and turned his penchant for using pre-modern forms and techniques for modern, political purposes on its head” (xvi).

Ancient legends, folk tales and stories have been summoned by the playwrights to make contemporary political and social statements and critiques. Historical and pseudo – historical episodes have been used to find parallels with modern history. Discursive plays in the Shavian model of the contemporary ideological bearing and the street theatre with its day-to-day problems were handled with imagination and depth.

In his anthology ‘Modern Indian Drama’ G. P. Deshpande draws upon the basic difference between the theatres of the West which heavily depends on the ‘text’ in contrast with the early Indian theatre where the ‘primacy of the word’ was deep rooted. The Indian folk theatre was significant for having rejected the hegemony of time and linear history just as it rejected the authority of the written text. The relationships between the text and the performance and the interpretation are always arbitrary. The pluralistic nature of the text suggests that no one - the director, actor or the audience - has exclusive propriety rights over the ‘meaning’ of the play.

Having been an important part of human culture for more than two thousand years, theatre has evolved a wide range of different theories and practices. Some are related to political or spiritual ideologies, while others are based purely on artistic concerns. Some readings focus on the plot, some on theatre as event, and some on theatre as catalyst for social change.
The varied approaches to the narratives of theatre in contemporary India are reflected in the critical perspectives in print that encompass both dramatic text and performances. The plurality of theatre languages and the perceived continuity of the Indian drama and performance since the classical period have led to an ahistorical or fragmentary approach which has rejected the Western modernity as ‘alien’. The survey of the historiography of Indian theatre criticism reveals that each instance examines and foregrounds an aspect of Indian theatre, such as, its continuous tradition, or generic categories, with regard to a study of its play-text.

In its “historical self-positioning” exercise the ‘Drama Seminar’ organized by the Sangeet Natak Akademi in 1956, associated “the complex legacy of theatre to the aesthetic, social and political needs of the new nation” and to develop a program for “the future Indian drama” (Dharwadker 37). This seminar in a ‘space-clearing gesture’ disclaimed the forms, conventions and institutions of Westernized modernity that had initiated modern urban theatre of colonial India such as:

a. The commercial proscenium theatre
b. The Parsi theatre
c. The political theatre of the colonial period

The Parsi theatre was seen as an Indian equivalent of Victorian spectacular theatre, which yielded high profit for private enterprises based on “a historical new relation between theatre, popular culture, and the sociology and demographics of the colonial city” (Dharwadker 39). Commercial theatre was critiqued as a financial endeavour wherein traditional conventions and artistic sensibilities of theatre were compromised to entice the audience. The mass cultural medium of film ‘uprooted’
both the Parsi and its off-shoot, the commercial theatre, which made the theatre scholars believe that the death of the Parsi commercial superstructure might allow the true spirit of the theatre to assert itself.

It was not until the late twentieth century that serious scholarship was taken on by scholars on the much neglected commercial theatre. Aparna Dharwadker in her book *Theatres of Independence* (2006) defines “post-independence period ashistorically demarcated”, as it had expediently forgotten to acknowledge the existence of the ‘hybridised’ company dramas. Susan Seizer in her book, *Stigmas of the Tamil Stage* (2006) had deliberated on the lives of the popular theatre artists of ‘Special Drama’, a genre of performance unique to the southern most Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Seizer’s sensitive study on the fate of popular cultural practices in an age and society dominated by the norms and prescriptions of bourgeois modernity explores the social relations that shape the production of Special Drama. *Theatre in Colonial India: Play-House of Power* (2009) edited by Lata Singh is a collection of essays on the pre independence practices in colonial India and is an important step towards creating a body of scholarly material of in subject.

This study attempts to put forward an argument that this ‘hybrid’ theatre, by combining in varying degrees of synthesis, different aspects in performance styles and repertories, has established the identity of the national theatre. Before the emergence of the talkies, these drama companies had been major providers of wholesome entertainment for more than half a century and deserve to be recognized as an important phase in the theatre history of India. Considerable research and writing on the regional theatre has been made in Bengal and Maharashtra. But not
much has been done in on regional theatres of Andhra, especially on the commercial company dramas, which began and conceived a theatrical idiom.

**Scheme of the Report**

This research takes a multi-methodological approach, but draws predominantly upon the biographical accounts of the Surabhi artists.

Surabhi Theatres which was established in 1885 consists of members belonging to the same family. Highly professional, this theatre group was able to withstand the furor of the early decades of the twentieth century and has contributed to the development of the theatre movement in Andhra Pradesh. A living legend, Surabhi theatres have developed during the most dynamic period of modern India. A study of the functional aspects of this group will enable the understanding of the evolution of modern theatre.

The first chapter ‘**Background and Perspectives**’ forms an introduction to theatre in India and traces the development of the Sanskrit/classical theatre through the ages with special focus on the Telugu context. A bird’s eye view of the history of the literary movement in Andhra is also provided as the group under study is the theatre group from Kaddapa District in Andhra Pradesh, India.

The second chapter ‘**Beginnings and Legacy**’ describes the origin and growth of the Surabhi theatre group. The history of Surabhi dates back to around seventeenth century when some Maharashtrian families namely “Aare Marathas” or “Aare Kshatriyas” migrated from Maharashtra to south India and decided to make *Tolu Bommalata*, the Shadow Puppet Play, an art which was very popular in their days, as their profession.
Govindappa, the adopted child of the Vanarasa family, excelled in the art of puppet making and leather puppetry and was instrumental in changing the course of the family profession from puppetry to theatre. In 1885, the family performed its first stage play *Keechaka Vadha*, an episode from *Mahabharatha* in a village called Surabhi in Andhra region. Under the guidance of Raptati Subbadasu, a Hari Katha (spiritual discourse) exponent, the members of the first Surabhi group, Sarada Vinodini Nataka Sabha, trained in singing and music excelled in the *Padya Natakam*, which was in vogue in the early decades of the twentieth century.

In the third chapter ‘Performance and Repertoire’, an attempt has been made to understand the Surabhi stage and its environs, and the other components that form a part of a Surabhi production.

Influenced by the three distinct performance traditions, the folk theatre tradition of Andhra, especially the tradition of puppetry, the modern dramatic experiments in Andhra, and the *Parsi* theatre, Surabhi theatres had been the pioneer of the modern theatre movement in Andhra.

Surabhi’s popularity today depends more on the several performance strategies it adopts: fast-changing scenes, appropriate stage-area division, trick scenes and transfer scenes which reflect its abilities in technical perfection.

In the course of the five generations of Surabhi companies, more than hundred plays have been performed. Plays from *Mahabharata* have dominated the repertoire of all the Surabhi companies. Even as puppeteers, stories from the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, were performed; occasionally stories from local
legends, which are extensions of the epics such as *Lakshmana Moorcha* and *Mairavana* were included.

The fourth chapter ‘**Aesthetics and Practice**’ lists some unique features of Surabhi theatres and describes the Surabhi way of life, both artistic and social. At Surabhi, theatre is an inseparable and integral part of the artist’s life, right from birth to death. It is a combination of a ‘gurukulam’ and a workshop. Leading a simple life, the Surabhi members learn all skills not just for the stage but for life too.

In Surabhi, theatre is a hereditary family profession, similar to the practice followed by many folk forms until recently. The success of Surabhi theatres has been attributed to their firm and established family togetherness which has been the binding force that unites all the members and also unites the actors to the manager. As true professionals, they are devoted to their work and are always ready to undertake any job on the stage during a performance and any work concerning their company outside the performance hours.

This chapter describes the Surabhi stage which is constructed to enable Surabhi plays in which curtains, music and light play a major role to produce the desired effect of *arbhuta* (awe and astonishment).

The final chapter ‘**The Present and the Future**’ is a discussion on the current scenario of Surabhi. A living theatre, Surabhi has stood the test of time. The rise and fall of the commercial theatre in India, has been studied by several scholars who have attributed the new forms of entertainment that have entered the Indian homes to the change in the taste of the masses. The Surabhi theatres, have entertained the rural masses for more than a century, and in recent times enjoyed a
nationwide popularity owing to its interaction with various cultural and performing institutions. Though the desire that ‘the show must go on’ is strong, the future of Surabhi in the times obsessed with cinema is disheartening. The Central and State governments have recognized the potential of Surabhi to be the representative of the cultural artifacts of the dramatic heritage and are striving to protect this living heritage.

The rationale for this study

Within the academic literature, a broad range of disciplines include discussions on Indian theatre and provides different perspectives of theory and assumptions.

Historiography studies of Indian theatre based on the various genres of performances have examined Indian theatre in terms of classical, folk or street theatre forms. Comprehensive accounts of the various genres have tried to establish a continuity of Indian theatrical tradition. Critical anthologies on specific playwrights have explored and presented a scholarly analysis of the plays and performance contexts. Post-colonial deliberations between those who reject the legacy of colonial structure entirely and advocate the revival of pre-colonial traditions of performance and those who want a “reinvigorated and syncretistic modernity, internationalism and cosmopolitanism” (Dharwadker 4) have led to significant analysis of the various forms. Contemporary studies on the “forgotten stories of theatrical resistance” (Bhatia 3) have tried to examine theatre in the colonial India. The position of Parsi theatre which has been “a vital component of India’s cultural heritage, but one that has often been dismissed and misunderstood”
(Hansen viii) has brought to light its influence on the company dramas which had been one of the chief means of entertainment of the early decades of the twentieth century and later the film industry.

The modern Indian theatre helped mass audiences across India to imagine and invent a modern nation-state into existence - by dramatizing it in widely circulated published play scripts and performing it in spectacular productions on the public stage in the years leading up to Independence (Solomon 336).

The role of the professional/commercial theatre in the making of the early modern Indian theatre needs to be examined while attempting to establish the continuity of the theatre tradition of India.

1. At a time when the performance tradition of the country awakened under the adverse socio-economic conditions, commercial theatre played a vital role in continuing the theatrical tradition of this land in rural and semi urban bases.

2. The presumption of the British about the ‘immorality’ of the traditional Indian entertainment and the polarization of the theatre around categories of ‘low’ and ‘high’ cultures lead to the campaign against popular culture which dramatically diminished the number of practitioners, leading to their exile from urban society. This left the commercial theatre to challenge and battle with the westernized Indian theatre.

3. With the popular forms entertaining the rural audience and the westernized urban theatre being patronized by the elite, it was left to the travelling commercial theatre to entertain the majority of the industrialized semi urban or hinterland audience.
4. The role of commercial theatre in making available the past to the discourse of identity, selfhood, culture and nation cannot be denied. The commercial theatre through its encounter with the colonizers has invented a new identity; a paradigm of hybridity was fashioned out of the binary strands of Sanskrit revivalism and westernization.

5. Commercial theatre has been a forerunner to the Indian Film industry, using the inputs available from stage.

6. Commercial company dramas have contributed to the Nationalist movement through ‘camouflaged’ messages.

7. Finally, commercial theatre has been responsible in bringing respectability back to theatre.

The researcher in this thesis has attempted an ethnographic understanding of the Surabhi community and hence a brief history and development of its theatre has been included. Multiple methods of data collection have been employed to facilitate a bond with the informants (Surabhi artists) for a more personal and in-depth portrait of the community. They include participant observation, field notes, interviews, and surveys. Surabhi artists belonging to different generations were interviewed. The informants include senior artists, musicians, technicians, and child and women artists. The researcher did not deal with linguistic difficulty as the common language between the researcher and the Surabhi artists was Telugu.

Prof. Nagabushana Sarma’s book *Surabhi- the Living Legend* portrays the origin and growth of Surabhi theatres and provides an index of all the important people associated with Surabhi, which includes the playwrights, actors, actresses,
technicians and managers. Prof. Sarma also lists out the characteristic features of Surabhi theatres, which had formed the basis for the sustenance and success of Surabhi for more than hundred years. While drawing on the historical details from Professor Sarma’s work, the present study, tries to comprehend the development of a family from the tradition of puppetry to stage performance in the most dynamic decades of the late nineteenth century when colonialism was trying to consolidate itself through art and culture. Incorporating certain new theatrical features, into a regional performance, and creating an amalgamation; Surabhi is definitely a living legend whose saga provides us the essence to understand the contribution of commercial theatre in the pre independence era.

Rakesh H. Solomon in his essay “Towards a Genealogy of Indian Theatre Historiography”, demonstrates that the new theatre, that emerged in the end of the nineteenth century, through “deft negotiation with the forces of transnational economics” and “the forces of local culture and tradition interspersed with anti-colonial resistance” employed hybridized plotlines, acting conventions, and production methods and has claimed for itself European modernity, ancient historical roots, vibrant vernacular performance traditions, and a self-assertive nationalist present. This thesis reiterates the pivotal role played by the early modern Indian theatre during the early decades of the twentieth century- a role that both Western and Indian theatre historiographies have failed to fully document, analyze, or appreciate.

The present study on the commercial theatre group like Surabhi is an attempt to establish that, the role of commercial theatre in the development of modern Indian theatre cannot be ignored and traditionalists cannot pretend that there was no Indian
theatreworth documenting during the colonial period. As Aparna Dharwadker reasons, any claim to restore the continuity of the pre-colonial tradition without acknowledging the commercial theatre of the colonial period is being “selectively historical” (146). G. P. Deshpande emphasizes the need to recognize the plurality of the linguistic and theatrical idiom currently at work in the subcontinent “Each mode is uniquely important. There are several, equally valid and legitimate Indian theatres” (Deshpande 1999: 93). To compress these to the categories of folk, classical and modern Western is to deny the very history of modern Indian theatre,

This approach dismisses nearly two hundred years of modern proscenium theatre in India. It rules out contemporary experience and therefore contemporary sensibilities. All this has political meaning. Quite often they are unintended but their impact cannot be avoided. Modern Indian theatre is a victim of a particular kind of politics – the politics of cultural nationalism which is monolithic, blind and anti-creative (96).

All colonial cultures will generate new cultural forms by negotiating between the indigenous performances and imported imperial culture. In India, in the process of negotiation, professional theatre had borrowed its organizational structure, performance conventions from its colonial masters, however they have superseded it with its own popular indigenous performance genre and have successfully reached out not only to cities and towns but several rural areas as well. It should not be forgotten that the commercial or the company theatre of the colonial period apart from being the first and the only professional theatre in the country belongs, to “the wider cultural world to which the art belongs”(Sitapati 265).
Notes

1. Madras Presidency (also known as Madras Province and known officially as Presidency of Fort St. George), was a province of British India. At its greatest extent, Madras Presidency included much of southern India, including the present-day Indian State of Tamil Nadu, the Malabar region of North Kerala, Lakshadweep Islands, the Coastal Andhra and Rayalaseema regions of Andhra Pradesh, Brahmapur and Ganjam districts of Orissa and the Bellary, Dakshina Kannada and Udi districts of Karnataka. The presidency had its capital at Madras (now known as Chennai).

In 1956, the Act abandoned the British system of provinces and princely states. In its place, new states were drawn based on ethnicity and language. Surabhi theatres hailed from the Kaddapah District which was part of the former Madras Presidency.
The Gubbi Company, founded by Gubbi Veeranna, was established in the year 1886 in Gubbi, Karnataka. The Gubbi Company was a trend-setter of the practices originally implemented by the Parsi Theatres. The Surabhi theatre drew many of its inspirations from the Gubbi theatres. After the death of Gubbi Veeranna in 1974, Gubbi theatres gradually set in for a closure.