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All the extra-literary characteristics essential for drama like dance, song, colourful costume, celebration, spectacle and varied expressions, form an inherent and integral part of life in India. India is a country with glorious past, harbouring countless myths, living traditions, plurality of culture, rich archetypes, symbols, rituals etc. that impart endless expressions and meanings to life. Despite this prosperity there has been a paucity of dramatic expressions in Indian English drama. Compared to other literary genres the Indian English drama has lingered and slumbered like ‘Kumbhkaran’ for nearly two centuries now. The Indian English novel has advanced and matured with the passage of
time. Indian English poetry, likewise, has grown, both in style and stature. But when it comes to Indian English drama even K. R. S. Iyengar could not restrain from asking an awkward question—"Indo-Anglian Drama": isn’t it like talking about ‘snakes in Iceland’?" ¹

The fundamental difference between drama and other literary genres arises from the dependence of drama on theatre and audience. Unlike poetry and novel [a] play, in order to communicate fully and become a living dramatic experience, thus needs a real theatre and a live audience.²

As drama evolves and survives primarily through performance it also requires an immediate connectivity between character and audience through living language of cultural significance. The arrested growth of Indian English drama owes a great deal to the lack of meaningful communication between the author and the audience. The Indian dramatists writing in English, initially, found themselves in a dilemma. They were not very sure about their target audience. They wrote plays either with the hope of performing on an English stage or being read by the ruling British. Lack of patronising audience, might have encouraged them to imitate Shakespeare and the other western models. But even while playing to the foreign gallery the Indian playwrights possibly could not visualise Samuel Johnson’s advice:

The truth is that the spectators are always in their senses, and know from the first Act to the last, that the stage is only a stage and
that the players are only players (Cited in DIEL: 162).

Creating living characters in living situations was the biggest hurdle, the dramatists faced. The elite admired the English language but could not appreciate its relevance in dramatic portrayals of the Indian situations on stage. Drama can not appeal if it loses its link with life. P. V. Rajamannar aptly points out:

If the theatre is to be really potent and great, it must be an embodiment of the contemporary life of the nation . . .

contemporary life includes not merely the present which is current but everything in the past which has a meaning for and influence in present. It includes the seeds which sprout eventually in the future.³

Thus Indian drama, whichever language it may be written in, will always fail on stage if it does not have its roots in the Indian ethos. Indian drama can be traced back to the Vedic times. Around 2000 years ago, there existed a developed theory of drama in India. It is not unlikely that the dramatic tradition of ancient India was fully formed even before Greek drama came to their knowledge. It avoided the severe austerity and simplicity of Greek tragedy. Drama was expected to unravel the whole arch of life ranging from the material to the spiritual. Sanskrit drama, as against the Greek drama was essentially
romantic in its impulsion and expressions. It generally ended on a note of calmness, felicity and peace.

This does not mean that the ancient Indian drama was wanting in the expression of life through other dramatic types. Examples of tragedy can be found in *Urubhangam* and *Duta Vakya* by Bhasa, historical drama in Visakhadatta’s *Mudra-Rakshasa*, realistic drama in *Mrichchakatika* and moralities like *Sankalpa Suryodaya* by Venkatanatha. The sordidness of intrigue and extra marital relations of women were generally avoided by the Sanskrit playwrights. Kalidasa’s *Abhijnana Sankuntalam* remains one of the richest and completely satisfying romantic dramas that present the supreme example of Indian dramatic type. Mere realism in incident, characterisation or acting was not the aim of Sanskrit dramatists. They intended to get behind the appearance and not simply imitate portrayals. Drama was not limited to the preoccupation with the portrayal of outer forms, sequences and mechanics. It also endeavoured to reach at the truth behind appearance by the use of gestures and symbols. It did not hesitate to employ supernaturalism and the interference of extraterrestrial forces in human affairs. Ancient Indian drama had evolved and developed a long and cherished discipline, a world rich with symbolism, multitudes of conventions and interpretations and a rich philosophy of life and art that provided this ancient drama an individuality and beauty and power of its own.

But the richness of ancient Indian drama eluded the British rulers. They were also not amused with the themes and techniques inspired by the traditional modes of dramatic conventions like the Ram-Lila, the Jatra, Tamasha etc. The
hiatus between the author and the audience widened. The appreciation of early Indian English plays required a cultural transgression or at least a comprehension of the other culture. The colonial masters did not appreciate the plays written and performed by the Indian playwrights. The Indian public, at large, did not comprehend and appreciate plays that drew inspiration largely from the then contemporary British stage and society. They joyfully looked the other way, towards drama in Indian languages, where the life and emotions portrayed on stage were closer to the heart.

Indian English drama, even the modern drama in regional languages, owes its inspiration and initiation to the West. The impact of western civilization on Indian life stimulated the latent critical impulses and paved the way for fruitful cross-fertilization of ideas and forms of expressions. The Portuguese brought a form of dance-drama to the western coast of India, in the sixteenth century. But the real advent of drama was preceded by the establishment of the theatre. The British rulers, for amusement, built theatres at important centres namely Bombay, Calcutta, Madras and Simla. All these places were strategically important during the British rule and happened to be, coincidentally, in the four directions i.e. West, East, South and North. Thus the establishment of theatres in all the four directions must have ignited the desire for dramatic writings and theatrical performances in Indians across the country. Early theatre in India, thus, was not confined to any particular geographical area and soon gained a visible impact in the important metropolitan centres of the country. It is also a fact that the early endeavours by Indians to write plays and
perform on the English stage were met with discouragement. But soon they diverted their energies towards plays in Indian languages.

The first theatre in Bombay, 'The Bombay Amateur Theatre' was built in 1776. The plays presented here had no relevance to the Indian social realities. In fact, they provided an escape to the British rulers through comedies of later Georgian playwrights. This theatre was sold by public auction in 1835 owing to financial difficulties. The year 1846 witnessed the opening of the 'Grant Trunk Road Theatre', in Bombay. It was also designed to lure and entertain the alienated British population, living in Bombay. Mrs. Deacle, in her inaugural address, said that the theatre would provide:

Old wines made mellow and improved by age
New fruits but late from the London Stage.

Touring companies from Europe visited and performed in Bombay during the later half of the nineteenth century. The plays performed were mostly comedies, farce, and opera. Some of the dramatic companies that toured Bombay were the Fairclough Company, the Lewis Dramatic Company, Norvilles, Our Boys Company, The Loftus Troupe, The Willard Opera Company and Dave Carson Troupe. The plays presented by these touring companies catered solely to the needs of entertainment of the British dignitaries. Dave Carson and troupe was the only exception that attempted to use Indian material for farcical comedies. The popular items in his repertoire included Scenes in the Bombay Court and The Bombay Palkhewala

The early theatre provided little scope for the original English drama written by Indians. Lack of appropriate opportunities and patronage on the
central English stage, by the ruling British, must have encouraged the enthusiastic Indians to create a peripheral space. Initial endeavours, during the eighteen-sixties and seventies, helped in the sudden sprouting of amateur drama groups bustling with dramatic activities. The Parsi Elphinstone Dramatic Society, the Kalidas Elphinstone Society, the Shakespeare Society of Elphinstone College, the Bombay amateur dramatic club, the Thespian club, the Orphean Dramatic Club and the like are of notable significance, primarily for their pioneering efforts. Pestonji Pranji started the theatre company named Original Theatrical Company, sometime in the eighteen-sixties. The company performed plays from the Indian epics and Persian romances. But even this eruption of many sided theatre activity did little for the development of Indian English drama. It can however be termed as a catalyst that created and enhanced the atmosphere of modern drama in Indian languages. Marathi and Gujarati Theatre gained instant popularity while Indian English drama on the Bombay stage slowly declined.

Another important centre of early British influence was Calcutta, in the East. It witnessed the development of theatre and drama on similar lines as in Bombay. The British built a playhouse in Calcutta, in 1753. It was closed down in 1756. Later, in 1779 the ‘Calcutta Theatre’ was built again with the sole view of entertaining the homesick British. Like the Bombay Theatre, it too had no intention of staging drama with Indian material. With the passage of time more theatres, namely, the Wheler Place Theatre, the Dum Dum Theatre, the Sans Souci Theatre, the Baitaconah Theatre and the Chowringhee Theatre came into existence. All these theatres performed mainly English plays like farce,
comedies and problem plays. The first Bengali play entitled *Chhadmabesh* was staged in 1795. It was adapted from an English drama called *Disguise*. A Russian music director, Lebedoff produced this play with the assistance of one Golckenath Das.

The Bengali theatre began with the endeavours of Prosanna Kumar Tagore. He initiated to stage Bengali plays based on Sanskrit literature. The period between 1832 and 1851 saw the production of numerous Bengali plays rooted in the Indian social ethos and milieu. Bengali Drama was well established by the end of the nineteenth century while drama in English, in Bengal, had to remain content with a solitary play *Is this called civilization?* by Michael Madhusudan Dutt.

Even the Southern part of India experienced the fervour towards the establishment of dramatic activity. In 1875 the Madras Dramatic Society was established. It created space for dramatic enactments through the performances of amateur Europeans. Soon the ‘Oriental Drama Club’, was founded in 1882. The first Indian amateur dramatic society in Southern India, the Sarasa Vinodini Sabha came into being in 1890. But the Indian English drama failed to find any firm footing even in South India.

Similarly, Shimla, in the North, was an important centre during the British rule. It witnessed a great deal of experimentation in theatre activity and dramatic productions:

Many of the directors skilfully exploited Western technical know-how and ideas of design and polished production.5
The importance of the ‘Amateur Club’ in Shimla, as an important English language theatre, can be gauged from the fact that it staged plays by Chekhov, Eliot, Camus, Ibsen, Fry, and Brecht among others. Unlike the other centres namely Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras, the theatre in Shimla did little to advance the development of Indian drama both in Indian as well as English language.

Initial endeavours of writing drama in English by Indians can best be termed as the first drizzle of monsoon. The drops drop and dry leaving hardly any impact on the surrounding. But the fragrance emanating from the soil lingers in the memory for long, inducing the possibility of rain. The first Indian English drama, *The Persecuted* or *Dramatic Scenes Illustrative of the Present State of Hindoo Society in Calcutta*, by Krishna Mohan Banerji, appeared in 1831. If we analyse the theme of the play it seems to have been written with a reformative zeal. But a closer look reveals the undercurrents of the compulsions under which an enthusiastic Indian would have deliberately chosen a theme that would suit and please the ruling class. His immediate prospective audience and readers were the British and the Indians influenced by the Whiteman’s supremacy. Banerji claims in his preface:

... the inconsistencies and the blackness of the influential members of the Hindoo community have been depicted before their eyes. They will now clearly perceive the wiles and tricks of the Bramins [sic] and
thereby be able to guard themselves against them.\textsuperscript{6}

The conflict between the orthodoxy and the new ideas ushered in by the Western education was somewhat crudely presented in this play. It remained a solitary dramatic effort by an Indian for more than three decades until Michael Madhusudhan Dutt translated three of his own Bengali plays into English – *Ratnavali* (1858) *Sermistra* (1859) and *Is This called civilization?* (1871). *Nation Builders* was another play by Dutt published posthumously in 1922. *Manipura Tragedy* (1893) by Ramkinoo Dutt was another effort to keep the Indian English drama alive. Even elsewhere in India, isolated contributions were adding droplets into the empty bowl called Indian English drama. *The Indian Heroine* (1877) by D. M. Wadia, based on the revolt of 1857 and P. P. Maherjee’s *Dolly Parsen* (1918) were the only noteworthy contributions from the Bombay presidency.

However brief, a chronicle of the early Indian English drama can not be complete without a mention of contributors from Madras. V. V. Srinivas Iyengar remains the most productive dramatist during the early phase of Indian English drama. *Blessed in a Wife* (1911), *Wait for the Stroke* (1915), *The Point of View* (1915) are some of his better known plays. *The Bricks Between* (1918) is a thesis play while *At Any Cost* is an attempt at writing historical play. The idea of ideal kingship and government is discussed in his *Ram Rajya* published in (1952). His contribution to the Indian English drama requires dedicated academic research and analysis. His depiction of South Indian urban middle class life, through comedies with a farcical touch, have great entertainment
value along with an understating of the then contemporary society. *Vitchu's Wife* and *The surgeon-General's Prescription* are two of his better known light comedies. He was a rare breed amongst the Indian English dramatists and remained active throughout his life producing plays bearing immediate social relevance. His range as a dramatist becomes evident from his plays that use different dramatic forms to discuss different social issues. He has written serious plays, light comedies, historical plays and even problem plays. His understating of drama, as a literary genre, and the Indian society helped him in writing plays that appealed to the contemporary generation.

Other dramatists who kept the flame alight by their discontinuous contributions include P.V.R. Raju, J. Virbhadra Rao, A. Srinivasacharya, Krishna Iyer, S. Ranga Iyer, J. S. R. Sharma, K. S. Ramaswami Shastri, R.S. Narayanswami, T.B. Krishnaswamy and the like. Most of these playwrights have not survived in memory. The performance history of plays written by these playwrights awaits research. But their plays did provide the occasional momentary boost to the much ignored genre of drama. Recognising the limitations of the milieu Naik observes:

Owing to the lack of a firm dramatic tradition nourished on actual performance in a live theatre, early Indian English drama in Bengal, as elsewhere in India, grew sporadically as mostly closet drama; and even later, only Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore and Harindranath
Chattopadhyaya produced a substantial corpus of dramatic writing (HIEL:98).

Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, and Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, popularly known as the 'big three' amongst English-knowing Indian audience, made an epoch-making and abiding contribution to the development of Indian English drama. Rabindranath Tagore was a versatile genius. K.R Srinivasa Iyengar very aptly sums up his multifaceted and exceptional talent:

He was a poet, dramatist, actor, producer; he was a musician and a painter; he was an educationist, a practical idealist who turned his dreams into reality at Shantiniketan; he was a reformer, philosopher, prophet; he was a novelist and short-story writer, and a critic of life and literature; he even made occasional incursions into nationalist politics, although he was essentially an internationalist (IWE:99).

Tagore had an intimate knowledge of Indian epics. He was also alive to the European dramatic tradition. An ardent admirer of Kalidasa, Shakespeare and Ibsen, he tried to emulate these great forerunners. Yet he wanted his plays to be different. He adapted themes from Indian mythology, legends and classics. He also employed astounding imagery and symbolism to reveal his poetical temperament and outlook. His rare ability, artistic capability and poetical bent of mind have been aptly analyzed by K.R Srinivasa Iyengar:
Tagore could start the play, strike the opening chords, name the characters, – and memory and imagination would do the rest. Not the logic of careful plotting but the music of ideas and symbols is the ‘soul’ of this drama (IWE:123).

A thematic study of Tagore’s plays reveals reading of life and aspects of human existence that include love, death and religion. Two kinds of love – youthful romantic love between man and woman and parental love – figure predominantly in his plays. The King and the Queen depicts King Vikram’s romantic infatuation for his queen, Sumitra. The excessive passion of the king for his queen makes him neglect his duties towards the citizens. It shows how excessive passion and neglect of duties can ruin both the king and the kingdom. Similarly, parental love appears as a great transforming force in his plays entitled Sacrifice and Sanyasi. Both these plays depict cases of adoptive parenthood. Raghupati, the fanatical priest in Sacrifice is a staunch believer in live sacrifice. Raghupati realises the futility of the practice and becomes a completely changed man when his adopted son Jaising immolates himself at the altar of the Goddess. Tagore gives prominence to the projection of his thought in his plays. “His dramatic work is a vehicle of ideas rather than expression of action”7

Tagore wrote more than forty plays in his career spanning more than five decades. His plays include social comedies, allegorical plays, and symbolic plays. Some of his better known plays are Chitra (1892), The King
of the Dark Chamber (1910), The Post Office (1912), Mukta-Dhara (1922) and Red Oleanders (1925). In The King of the Dark Chamber and The Post Office the theme is man in relation to God. Both plays are symbolic. The Post Office is autobiographical in the sense that through Amal, the boy-hero, Tagore projects his own boyhood. Tagore's romantic play, Chitra, was inspired by the Mahabharata. It presents a succinct version of Kalidasa's Shakuntalam. In Chitra Tagore incarnates the evolution of human love, from the physical to the spiritual. Mukta-Dhara is sometimes referred to as Tagore's greatest play. It analyses the onslaught of industrialisation and modernisation on human civilization.

Tagore's plays have variety but there is repetition of themes in some of them. The characters speak the same language and they are lack pluralistic dimensions. In his English translations of the original Bengali plays, however, Tagore has severely cut down many of the humorous and farcical dialogues and situations. Thus problems of language and translation have affected some of his plays. Moreover, Tagore's English translations lack the flavour and spirit of the originals in Bengali. Tagore himself used to say that future generations would remember him by his songs, short stories and paintings. He was right. Today, Tagore is chiefly remembered more for his poetry than for his plays.

Sri Aurobindo, in all wrote eleven verse drama. Five of them, The Viziers of Bassora, Perseus the Deliverer, Radogune, Eric, and Vasavadatta are complete five-act plays. But The Witch of Ilni, Achabo and Essarhaddon, The Maid in the Mill, The House of Brut, The Birth of Sin and Prince of Edur remain incomplete. Sri Aurobindo's complete plays include four comedies and
one tragedy, *Radogune*. These plays exhibit his distinctive love for romance along with encyclopaedic knowledge of world history and culture. *Perseus the Deliverer* is the longest play written by Sri Aurobindo. It was inspired by his participation in the Indian struggle for freedom.

Most of Sri Aurobindo's plays are mythological or legendary. As regards the theme and its setting, *Perseus the Deliverer* has a theme drawn from Greek mythology, *The Viziers of Bassora* from the stories of the *Arabian Nights*. Only *Vasavadutta* has a genuinely Indian theme and setting. This variety of themes, on the one hand, exhibits Sri Aurobindo's wide range of knowledge, and on the other, the global consciousness gradually entering into the contemporary educated world. Writers like Yeats, Emerson, Romain Rolland, Tagore and many others were trying to create the images of universal brotherhood and world culture. This is undoubtedly the positive aspect of the literary sensibility of that time. Sri Aurobindo, largely owing to his western education was greatly influenced by the World Classics. He was voracious reader and had studied European history, Latin and Greek literatures, and several other works in different languages.

Sri Aurobindo firmly believed that the superiority of Indian drama lies in its civilized approach to the main issues of life. His plays have predominantly happy endings which is an attribute of ancient Indian drama. He takes up old themes and legends and infuses them with new meaning and vision. He was of the view that one should not waste one's energy and time in finding a plot, which can be easily taken up from
myths and legends. He says:

If you exhaust your powers on the
invention of a plot, you are a spent bullet
when you come to the treatment of it.⁸

According to Sri Aurobindo, in a good drama, the external must not be
over emphasized. He envisages future drama as the interpretation in
dramatic form of the innermost psychic truth of man, on one hand, and the
infinite active in the universe, on the other. He writes:

Dramatic poetry cannot live by the mere
presentation of life and action and the
passions, however truly they may be
portrayed or however vigorously and
abundantly pushed across the scene. Its
object is something greater and its
conditions of success much more onerous. It
must have, to begin with, as the fount of its
creation or in its heart an interpretative
vision and in that vision an explicit or
implicit seeing idea of life and the human
being; and the vital presentation which is its
outward instrument, must arise out of that
deeper sight harmoniously, whether by a
spontaneous creation, as in Shakespeare, or
by the compulsion of an intuitive artistic will, as with the Greeks.\(^9\)

Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, last of the great Indian playwright trio, has been more eminent as a poet than a playwright. His dramatic output could be classified as devotional plays, social plays, historical plays and miscellaneous plays. His devotional plays are biographical in nature and deal with the lives of saints from Maharashtra. These plays include *Raida*, *Chokhamela*, *Eknath*, *Pundalik*, *Saku Bai*, *Jayadeva* and *Tukaram*. *Tukaram*, is said to be the best in terms of characterization as well as the development of plot. The distinction of this play is that it is effective both as a 'closet play' and a 'stage play'. The most important social plays of Harindranath Chattopadhyaya are to be found in his collection entitled *Five Plays* (1937). It includes *The Windows*, *The Parrot*, *The Sentry's Lantern*, *The Coffin* and *The Evening Lamp*. *The Windows* and *The Parrot* throw light on the playwright's acute social awareness. *The Sentry's Lantern* has for its theme the evils of imperialism. *The Coffin* is the study of a bourgeois artist and his hollow world while *The Evening Lamp* is about a narcissistic youth who has fallen in love with his own shadow. Sympathy for the exploited, revolt against a stultifying code of morality, insurgence against the brute forces of imperialism, and a plea for purposeful writing constitute the themes of these plays. Hence, they may be called symbolic, didactic or propagandistic plays. K.R.S.Iyengar describes them as "manifestoes of the new realism" (IWE:234), as they belong to an era when 'the Progressive Writers’ Movement’ was gaining momentum in India and elsewhere.
Tyagaraja Paramasiva Kailasam (1885-1946), popularly known as T.P. Kailasam was both a great playwright and a talented actor. His plays present lively representation of themes taken mostly from ancient Indian literature. Kailasam's English plays include *The Burden* (1933), *Fulfillment* (1933), *The Purpose* (1944), *The Curse or Karna* (1946), *Keechaka* (1949) Apart from these, he is said to have about thirteen more English plays, unfinished and unpublished to his credit. Kailasam, being a great genius and an outstanding actor, cared least for the publication of his plays and other works. He even never wrote down his dramas. It was always his friends who could persuade him to dictate the dialogues and take them down and prepare the manuscript. When inspired, he would perform the whole scene before his friends. It was up to his followers and friends to systematically arrange the dialogues and situations so as to assume the shape of a complete play. He never relied on the printed page and, therefore, went on changing the dialogues from one performance to the other. Thanks to his sincere well-wishers who took down his plays and tried to present them faithfully. Thus, his plays have reached us through his friends but with little loss of quality and significance. Commenting upon it S. Krishna Bhatta observes:

It appears that his knowledge of ancient Indian literature and his long stay in England urged him to contribute something concrete to this sparsely cultivated field. In spite of their
limitations, his plays breathe, throughout, a deep reverence for our ancient culture with a modern critical approach. We also find in him a blending of genius and intuitive vision, a fertile imagination, ready wit and subtle humour and a serious presentation of the theme.  

In spite of the fact that Kailasam was a performing artist and an experienced actor his plays are difficult to stage because of their lengthy dialogues. But like Shaw, Kailasam has a tendency to indulge himself in elaborate stage directions, a fact that highlights his stage sense. His English plays present certain gushing of sentimentality. His quest for greatness relies largely on his attempts to idealize the characters of the Indian epics. His main purpose in dramatising the myths seems to analyse and evolve a more comprehensive moral order directing human life than the contemporary. M.K. Naik very amicably points out his limitation:

Kailasam remained content with only limited innovation and never progressed further in the much more challenging direction of harnessing ancient myth and legend to a revelation of contemporary life (DIEL: 161).

On the contrary his Kannada plays make an earnest attempt to reflect the contemporary society in the best manner possible. The situations presented in
these plays very skillfully portray daylight scenes reflecting everyday life. As Kurtkodi remarks in *Perspectives on Indian Drama in English*:

He brought various specimens of society on the stage – hollow students even with university degrees, empty-handed lawyers who boast of themselves, boy-scouts unconsciously showing nobility, widows who were subjected to bitter suffering, hen-pecked husbands impoverished by their wives.\(^\text{11}\)

In fact, Kailasam and Adya Rangacharya revolutionized Kannada drama which was deeply entrenched in the mythological tradition, far removed from real life situations. Kailasam blends the best of both the Indian and Western traditions. Drama in Indian languages succeeded and secured a vital leverage. In this context the confession and warning inherent in Adya Rangacharya’s statement came too late for the early dramatists to benefit:

I was one of those who first opened the doors of the Indian theatre closed for centuries. In my enjoyment of the fresh breeze that suddenly started blowing in from the West, I forgot that the breeze could give me only fresh energy. Unthinkingly, we opened our theatre and bewitched by the breeze we forgot it and just walked over to
the Western theatre. It would make me happy if youngsters learn from our mistakes.

.... My plea to lovers of modern Indian drama is first, to study classical Indian drama and make a reassessment of it. 12

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the theatre movement in the Indian languages had already gathered momentum whereas the theatre in English received little support. Several dramatic organizations were launched from 1940 onwards but none devoted themselves exclusively to drama in English. Notable among these were the Indian National theatre, established under the leadership of Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya during World War II. Its first production was a ballet based on Nehru's The Discovery of India, Ebrahim Alkhazi's theatre unit, and Bhartiya Natya Sangha were affiliated to the World Theatre Centre of UNESCO.

Several regional amateur theatres also flourished from time to time. These include Sombhu Mitra's Bahuroopi in Bengali, Hindi Natya Parishad, Kalakendra, Rangabhoomi and Natyamandal in Gujarat; Prithvi Theatre and Mumbai Marathi Sahitya Sangha in Bombay, Telugu Little Theatre and Andhra Theatre Foundation; Seva Sangha in Madras and Dishantar in Delhi. It is highly significant that the Little Theatre Group was established in 1947 as an English theatre, but eventually changed to Bengali in 1953.
In the Post-Independence period, performing arts were employed as an effective means of public enlightenment during the First Five years Plan (1951-54). As a result, the National School of Drama was established under the directorship of Alkhazi. Institutions for training in dramatics were founded in big cities. Rukminidevi Arundale’s Kalakshetra at Adyar, Madras, and Mrinalini Sarabhai’s Darpana in Ahmedabad are notable examples for this kind of theatre. Drama departments started functioning in several universities. The Annual Drama Festival was started in New Delhi by the Sangit Nataka Akademi in 1954. Visits of foreign troupes were arranged from time to time by the British Council and the US Information Service. With so much support coming from so many quarters, drama began to prosper. But plays in regional languages seem to have taken all the stimulus while Indian plays in English were still staged very occasionally even in big cities like Bombay and Delhi.

After independence a glitter of hope was perceptible in Indian theatre in English. G.V. Desani’s solitary play *Hali* published in 1950 and performed at Watergate Theatre London in the same year is an exceptional Indian English play. Due to the adept handling of its theme, technique and presentation Desani acquired a prestigious place in the realm of Indian English drama. The play experiments with new theatrical modes in which action develops through voices. Commenting on the play M.K. Naik remarks:

*Hali* finds peace in the thought that man
must transcend human love; go beyond life
and death and even leaving his limited idea
of godhead, develop in himself a godlike love and detachment.\textsuperscript{13}

S Krishna Bhatta in his book entitled \textit{Indian English Drama: A Critical Study}, published in 1987, lists more than 200 plays written after 1950. But most of these plays were neither performed nor published. Noteworthy and affirmative change was visible with the arrival of Asif Currimbhoy on the Indian English drama scene. He was one of the first playwrights to produce plays that could be performed for the Indian audience. With more than thirty plays to his credit, Asif Currimbhoy wrote mainly on social issues that bothered his generation. He gave up a lucrative job and a senior position to devote more time to writing. He started writing plays in his early thirties, but was not very successful, initially. University of Michigan staged his first play entitled \textit{Goa} in 1965. It was only in 1969 that his plays began to be staged in India. His plays present themes related with Indian history, contemporary socio-political and economic issues, East-West encounter, partition, religious debates, to name only a few. Some of his better known plays include: \textit{The Clock} (1959), \textit{The Doldrummers} (1960), \textit{The Dumb Dancer} (1961) \textit{The Hungry One} (1965), \textit{An Experiment with Truth} (1969), \textit{Inqualab} (1970), He died of a massive heart attack in 1994.

Nineteen sixties was an important decade for Indian drama in English. The impact of innovations and experimentations carried out by exponents of drama in other Indian languages provided the much needed stimulus to Indian English drama. The freshness and energy emanating from the experimentations of playwrights like Dharmavir Bharati, Mohan Rakesh, Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sirkar and Girish Karnad, among others, was so invigorating that even
dramatists writing in English endeavoured to write plays primarily for the stage. It established a new genre of writing namely; Indian drama in English translation. Plays translated from Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, and Kannad, among other languages, had a far reaching effect on audience and extended the reach and influence of Indian dram beyond regional and national frontiers. It was largely due to this momentum in Indian theatre that Indian English drama slowly emerged out of the colonial influence. Nissim Ezekiel with his *Nalini* and *The Sleepwalkers*; Gieve Patel with his *Princes* and *Savaksa* and Pratap Sharma with his *A Touch of Brightness* and *The Professor Has A War cry* provided the Indian audience with real drama woven around Indian socio-political reality. Towards the end of this decade, in 1968, the Bombay Theatre Group announced the Sultan Padamsee Award for Indian plays in English. This award was won by Gurcharan Das’s *Larins Sahib* which was staged in Bombay in 1969. Gurcharan Das was born into a middle-class family and his plays depict the angst and anxieties of the Indian middle-class. He graduated from Harvard, was Vice President and Managing Director, Worldwide Strategic Planning with Proctor and Gamble. He gave it all up and returned to India. He is the author of three plays, which he wrote in his twenties; one novel *A Fine Family*, and two works of non-fiction *India Unbound* and *Elephant Paradigm*. At the age of 24, while travelling as a salesman Gurcharan happened to read the history of Punjab. It is here that he came to know about Henry Lawrence and was impressed by Lawrence’s friendships with the Sikh noble families. Reading the history of the Punjab was for him also a search for identity. A combination of all these forces led to the birth of *Larins Sahib*. Gieve Patel’s *Princes* and
Dina Mehta’s *Myth-makers* also competed for this award. Other plays that made a temporary impact on stage include Shiv K. Kumar’s *The last Wedding Anniversary* and Snehalata Reddy’s *Sita*.

Cyrus Mistry’s *Doongaji House* won the second Sultan Padamsee award, in 1978. This play dealt with the declining fortunes of a Parsi family living in the Parsi heartland – Bombay. His latest play, *The Legacy of Rage*, also located in Bombay, deals with the Christian community. Dina Mehta is also an award-winning playwright. Her play *Brides Are Not for Burning* won an international award from the BBC, in 1979. This play, as the name suggests, deals with the social evil of dowry and the harassment of brides. Her later play, in 1989, *Getting Away with Murder*, was also short listed by the BBC for their World Playwriting competition. It was one of the seven specially commended radio plays out of nine hundred and two entries. Her latest play, *Sister like You* (1996), a play on domestic violence, was also short-listed for the ‘British Council New International Playwriting Awards’. Poile Sengupta was also short-listed for her play, *Keats Was A Tuber* (1996) for the same award. Her first full-length play, *Mangalam*, was written in 1993.

Manjula Padmanabhan is another important and talented contemporary playwright. She was born in Delhi. Her childhood was spent in Sweden, Pakistan and Thailand. She went to a boarding school in Kodaikanal and college in Mumbai. She now lives in New Delhi. A playwright, a cartoonist, a novelist and an artist are different facets of her personality. She wrote *Getting There, a personal travelogue*, in 2001. Her cartoon strip *Suki* has been published in book form and her etchings have featured at several shows. She has published a
collection of short stories entitled *Kleptomania – Ten Stories*, in 2004. Her latest book is a set of three profusely illustrated short stories for children, entitled *Unprincess!*, published in 2005. She has written about half-a-dozen plays. Her play *Harvest* was selected from around 1500 entries from almost 75 countries to win the first prize in the Alexander S. Oasis Award for Theatre, in Athens, in September 1997. *Harvest* has been performed and appreciated in several countries, most notably in Greece and America. Another play by Manjula Padmanabhan, *The Mating Game Show* was performed in September 2004 in New York by SALAAM (South Asian League of Artists in America). SALAAM also organised readings from *The Sextet* in June 2001.

Some of her plays have also been made into television serials and films. *Lights Out* was made into a TV film by Nissar and Amal Allana. *The Mating Game Show* was shot for television by Govind Nihalani though it has not yet been aired. *Harvest* was also made into a movie called *Deham*, again by Govind Nihalani. It deals with the exploitation of human body in the twenty-first century. *Lights Out* was first performed in 1986 at Prithvi Theatre in Mumbai. It was published in a collection called *Body Blows – Women, Violence and Survival–Three Plays* in 2000.

Another support for contemporary Indian playwrights is the Royal Court Theatre, (RCT) London. It encourages the performance of contemporary drama in London. The attention and critical acclaim received by Mahesh Dattani’s *Bravely Fought the Queen* when it was staged in the UK initiated a collaboration that has helped new dramatic talent from India. Elyse Dodgson, Associate Director of the RCT and Head of the theatre’s International
Department, who set up the collaboration with India, during an interview revealed:

We found a refreshing energy in Indian-English theatre and decided to embark on a long-term relationship with the Indian playwrights.¹⁴

The RTC, with the support of the British Council, organises workshops in India to spot budding playwrights and unexplored talent in India. Seven plays written during the first workshop organised in Bangalore were published by Samuel French in a book entitled *Stage Rite Seven First.*

Ninaz is one of the upcoming writers discovered during this workshop. Her first play, *Insomnia* was developed by her through the Royal Court Theatre. It was included in the seven plays published by Samuel French. This play was performed in Bangalore, Mumbai, Pune and London. It won critical acclaim and appreciation for the writer. Ninaz has passion for the world of theatre. She has written three plays, all of which have been produced. She was ‘Writer in Residence’ at Oval House Theatre, London, from July 2005 to March 2006, where she directed her recent play *Strangers.* She has acted professionally in eighteen productions and also studied film. She is the founder of ‘Unknown Waters,’ a London-based arts company. It encourages the creation of works transcending the boundaries of nation and form. Brought up in Mumbai, she was trained under Pandit Satyadev Dubey and Pearl Padamsee, among others. She refers to herself as a director rather than a playwright. This transition is perceptible in other contemporary Indian artists as well. They refuse to be
labelled and branded in conventional categories. They experiment with many forms of art and writing plays probably gives them as much satisfaction as they get by directing and acting.

The Royal Court Theatre, and British Council organised their second workshop in Mumbai in September-October 2002. Rahul D'Cunha's *Class of 84* and Vikram Kapadia's *Black with Equal*, are two important plays written and developed during this workshop. These plays have toured all over the country with well-acclaimed performances. Recently Rahul has written another play called *Pune Highway*. Prithvi Theatre and the Experimental Theatre NCPA in Mumbai organised a festival in April 2004 and produced plays from the second workshop.

Zubin Driver and Ramu Ramanathan are two noteworthy present generation writer-directors. Zubin Driver is one of the most prolific playwrights. His reputation in the theatre world also rests on terms like 'the-theatre-of-the-absurd-guy!' Zubin has gained myriad experiences in the electronic media and advertising world. He heads CNBC's in-house creative agency. After finishing his Masters in Literature and Aesthetics from Mumbai, Zubin joined the arena of advertising, where he has worked with many reputed agencies. He also does a lot of freelance writing on drama.

Zubin set up a theatre group called Spontaneous Assembly, in 1991. This group performs in various alternative spaces, like art galleries and restaurants with a view to encourage new talent in arts. Zubin's play *Missing People* presents a collection of powerful and moving monologues exploring the lives of a television presenter, a lonely housewife and a madman against
Mumbai’s unforgiving urban landscape. Zubin and his theatre group have also experimented with the ‘Theatre of the Absurd’ with plays that have no formal plot or characterization, emphasising the purposeless monotony in life and the uniformity of human affairs.

Ramu Ramanathan also belongs to this new breed of writer-directors that make up the current scene in Indian plays in English. He was born in Calcutta but grew up in Mumbai, where he started schooling in the early seventies. One of his most powerful plays is Mahadevbhai (1892-1942). This play endeavours to reinstate Gandhian ideology and its relevance in contemporary times. Ramu has written more than six plays and directed many more. His play Collaborators won the ‘BBC Radio Playwriting Regional Award’ in 2003. It was further developed into a stage production and premiered in Mumbai in August 2004. His play entitled 3 Sakina Manzil is set in 1944. It moves back and forth in time and deals with the Bombay harbour blast. His recent plays include Medha and Zoombish, Cotton 56 Polyester 84 and Three Ladies Of Ibsen.

Mahesh Dattani is the only Indian dramatist to have won the prestigious ‘Sahitya Academy Award’. ‘Sahitya Akademi’ was set-up in 1954 to promote unity of Indian Literature amidst social, political, geographical, and linguistic diversities. The recognition of Dattani’s plays by the ‘Akademi’ should usher Indian critics and academicians to remove the false distinction of drama in English translation and drama originally written in English by Indian writers. It is essential to incorporate plays belonging to these categories into the corpus of Indian English literature, as Indian drama in English. Such a move can
immensely contribute to the growing harmony of contemporary creative consciousness. Drama in English translation has registered a remarkable growth during the last few decades. A cumulative theatrical tradition evolved by Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar, Girish Karnard, and Vijay Tendulkar also prepared the backbone of the contemporary Indian drama in English. Mahesh Dattani identifies with this tradition of Indian drama in English. During an address Dattani very clearly puts forward his views:

I would like to make it clear that I am not speaking here today as a representation of English language theatre in our country. I am here to move beyond this very limited definition . . . I see myself as a part of contemporary society and therefore I see myself as a contemporary theatre artist. In this way I feel less excluded from some of the Indian theatre artists whom I admire and identify with.15

Dattani’s advent on the Indian stage is the result of one of life’s dramatic twists. Throughout his academic career neither was he a student of literature nor did he show any signs of literary creativity. The stage was set for a stunningly ordinary life spent in helping run his father’s business. His passion for theatre was initiated by his occasional visits to view Gujarati plays with his parents so that the family living in Bangalore may relate to their roots in Gujarat. His
experience as a conscious and contemplative audience of Kannada and Gujarati theatre made him realise the depth of Indian dramatic tradition and its difference from the Western drama and theatre tradition. He joined Bangalore Little Theatre, learnt Ballet and Bharatnatayam, participated in workshops acting and directing plays. He acknowledges:

I did not know the world at my footstep. I got involved in theatre and for a long time continued to do European plays in translation. [...] Seeing] Gujarati theatre in Mumbai I realised I had to unlearn a lot that I learnt in school. That is when my true education really began.

Mahesh started his career in the advertising and later joined his father in the family business. He formed his theatre group called Playpen in 1984. This group put up several plays from the Greek classics to Shakespeare to more contemporary works. Mahesh wrote his first play Where There's A Will in 1988. Dattani wrote this play owing to the lack of genuine English plays representing the Indian milieu. He wanted to direct a play for his theatre company. Unable to find an appropriate play he decided to test his own ability and stage his own taste, and eureka! India discovered a world class dramatist. The last two decades have witnessed the Indian English drama soar high on world stage. The portrayals of urban and contemporary Indian life, on stage, has become agreeable and palatable for audience at home and abroad. Dattani has won
critical acclaim for his plays on the international arena. Two volumes of his plays have been published by Penguin books, India.

Mahesh's endeavour to capture human emotions did not end on stage. He has moved on to direct meaningful, bold and relevant movies. Mango Soufflé adapted from On a Muggy Night in Mumbai was the first film directed by Dattani. It was followed by Morning Raaga, a women-oriented script, starring Shabana Azmi, Lillette Dubey and Perizaad Zorabian. Talking of moving into films Dattani says that he is exploring yet another medium of expression. Dance like a Man has also been made into a movie. Pamela Rooks, the director of the movie, also assisted in writing the screenplay, based on Dattani's play. This film has won the National Award in the category of best film in English, in 2004. Mahesh is now trying his hand at comedy and has written a play called Arre! Mad About Money. This play awaits publication. It was translated into Hindi by Paritosh Painter and staged in Mumbai.

Mahesh is an active dramatist and trots the globe. He likes to work with actors and directors from other countries and experiment with stage and theatrical settings. Dattani directs his own plays. He makes appropriate amendments, during rehearsals, before publishing his plays. He also provides enough space to other directors to experiment with his plays. Alyque Padamsee, Lillette Dubey, Erin Mee, Michael Walling, Salley Avens, Jeremy Mortimer are only a few names from a host of world-class directors and theatre personalities who have cherished their experience of working with Dattani and his plays. Jeremy Mortimer confesses:
I saw a production of *Bravely Fought the Queen* at the Battersea Arts Centre in London, and was immediately taken by the strength of Mahesh Dattani’s language and characterization. Here was a playwright who was not afraid to work within a relatively conventional dramatic structure to tell a story that was bold and powerful without ever being melodramatic.  

There seems to be a dramatic revival, especially with young people turning to the stage again. It is comforting to note the self-assurance with which writers use English today and the fluency with which English mingles with other Indian languages. *India Today* in its January 26, 2004 issue has an article entitled “Dramatic Revival” written by Nirmala Ravindran. She talks of this generation moving away from malls and Play-Stations towards theatre, seeking “the archaic thrill of the stage” which “the culture watchers are calling the second coming of theatre.” Towards the end of her article she aptly concludes:

It is a generation that refuses to stay in the wings. As it takes its passion centre stage, theatre aficionados can sit back and relax. It seems the show, after all, will have a happy ending.
Thus the journey of Indian English drama started like a toddler with tiny steps. Initially it could neither pace like the Indian English novel and Poetry nor leave any firm footing for others to follow. But the scene seems to be changing for the better now. With the advent of the new breed of dramatists successfully presenting plays on the Indian stage it would not be wrong to say that Indian English drama/Indian Drama in English has finally walked out of the two hard covers of a book to the centre stage amongst appreciating audience in India and all over the world.
NOTES


11 Ibid. p.9.


