Chapter - 2

THEATRE: HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENTS
"India has a long and rich tradition in theatre. It has a tradition tracing back to at least five thousand years" (The Cambridge Guide to Theatre, ed. By Martin Benham, pp. 471-482). The origin of Indian theatre is closely related to the ancient rituals and seasonal festivities of the country. The traditional account in ‘Natya Shastra’ (The grammar or the holy book of theatre by Bharat Muni) gives a divine origin to Indian theatre. According to legend, when the world passed from one age to other, and people became addicted to sensual pleasures, jealousy, anger, desire and greed filled their hearts.

God Indra with the rest of the Gods, approached Brahma, the creator of the universe and begged for a mode of recreation accessible to all classes of the society. Brahma acceded to this request and decided to compose a fifth Veda on Natya. From the four Veda’s he extracted the four elements of speech, song, mime and sentiment and thus created Natya Veda, the holy book of dramaturgy. Thus, when the dramatic art was well comprehended, the first drama was enacted in the presence of Indra. Natya Shastra is the only light available on many subjects of importance to a comprehensive understanding of the theatre in ancient India. The greatness of Natya Shastra lies in having given to Indian drama not only a form and objective but also a definite place in the social and cultural life of the people.

The Natya Sastra legend indicates an intimate relation between the idea of dancing and dramatic representation. Dance has an important role in the birth of Indian Theatre. Theatre in India started as a narrative form, i.e., reciting, singing and dancing which became integral elements of the theatre. This emphasis on narrative elements made our theatre essentially theatrical right from the beginning.
That is why the theatre in India has encompassed all the other forms of literature and fine arts into its physical attention: Literature, Mime, Music, Dance, Movement, Painting, Sculpture and Architecture all mixed into one being called ‘Natya’ (Theatre).

After understanding this basic nature of Indian theatre, we can elaborate further on its development in India. Roughly it can be divided into three distinctive periods:

a. The Classical period (Sanskrit theatre)

b. The Traditional period (Rural theater)

c. The Modern period

a. The classical period (Sanskrit theatre)

This period includes the writing and practices of theater up to about 1000 AD and is almost based on rules, regulations and modifications handed by Natya Shastra. They apply to the writing of plays, performance spaces, and conventions of staging plays. Playwrights such as Bhasa, Kalidasa, Shudraka, Vishakadutta and
Bhavabhuti contributed in a great measure through their dramatic pieces in Sanskrit.

It is difficult to affix an exact date or even to determine the precise century of the origin of Sanskrit theater. Fragments of the earliest known plays have been traced to the 1 century AD (Ibid, pp. 471-482).

Sanskrit Classical drama reached its zenith during Gupta’s golden age. Literally hundreds of plays were written from 1 century to the ten century AD, the high point of the Sanskrit dramatic outpouring. Relatively few plays from this period have survived. The earliest are those of Ashvaghosha whose fragmentary works of the first century AD came to the attention of scholars in the early part of our own century.

The classical sanskrit theatre is closely related to religion. In India religion is an inseparable part of life and all the arts-music, painting and literature were in the past dedicated to proclaim the glory of god. Hence most of the plays had religious themes and plots, especially taken from two great epics the Ramayana and Mahabharata.

After the tenth century, Classical theatre began to decline and folk theater of the masses in various regional languages showed a greater sign of prosperity. So the Tenth century marks the end of the Sanskrit theatre as an active force in Indian art.

b. The Traditional Period (Rural Theatre)

This period involves in that practise of theatre which was based on oral traditions, which was being performed from about 1000 AD onwards upto 1700 AD. Even today it continues almost in every part of India. Emergence of this kind of theatre is linked with the change of political set-up in India as well as the coming into existence of different regional languages in all parts of the country.
The whole period is known as **folk or traditional** i.e., theatre being handed over from generation to generation through an oral tradition.

The Classical theatre which is based on *Natyashastra* was much more sophisticated in its form. Whereas this traditional theatre evolved out of rural roots, though the other elements of theatre remained almost the same, i.e. use of music, mime, movement, dance and narrative elements. So, after the tenth century theatre emerged again in India with a dazzling array of rural theatre forms, each with its own unique manner of presentation and more importantly, in the vernacular language of a particular region to serve the needs of the people of that region.

A brief write up of the rural theatres would suffice as an example to make things clear. For instance; Bandinatta, Bharat lila, Dadanata, Naqal, Tamasha, Veedhinatakam, Yakshagana etc.

**Bandinata**

A regional theatre form in central and western Orissa, takes its name from Bandi, the nick name of the sister of Chandrasena, Radha’s husband in the mythological tales surrounding the life of Krishna. The stories concern Bandi’s self sacrifice for her husband Krishna so that he may sport with Radha. The form is acted by members of the untouchable community. The actors mix with the spectators and only join in the action when their turn comes. They are accompanied by the dhol drum. Performance lasts about three hours. Dances, songs, actions and humour are freely mixed to keep the spectators entertained.

**Bharat lila**

Also known as dvara nata. A folk theatre of Orissa that dramatizes episodes from the epic Mahabharata, particularly those concerning Arjuna and his wife Subhadra. The character of Dvara interprets the events to the audience. Three
actors play the main characters, exchanging remarks and adding considerable humour to the events. Performance takes three to four hours.

**Dandanata**

Thought to be the oldest form of drama in the state of Orissa, northeast India. The evening performance begins in an open arena with dances, music and dramatic episodes. Mythological and religious figures, including gods such as Shiva and Krishna, are introduced through song and dance. Loosely connected episodes link characters that appear during the evening. Moral lessons and religious messages are reinforced by the exalted nature of the characters.

**Naqal**

A rural theatre form of Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Kashmir states in north India. *Naqal* plays stress farce and clowns mercilessly satirize the audience and provide fast-paced entertainment through their witty words and actions. Men play all roles. A troupe performs for weddings and other household celebrations in towns and villages.

**Tamasha**

![Fig. 2.2. A scene from Tamasha](image)
A major form of rural theatre in the state of Maharashtra, in West-Central India. *Tamasha* satirizes and pokes fun at contemporary society, often at the expense of politicians and businessmen, priests and prophets, clothing its barbs in the guise of historical or mythological stories.

**Veedhi natakam**

Veedhi means 'street', natakam, 'drama', hence a street theatre. At one time veedhi natakam was the most popular form of traditional theatre in Andhra Pradesh in South India. Artists moved freely among the people of the country side where they found patronage. A rural form of theatre, its roots are uncertain. Scholars believe it was in vogue at the height of the Vijayanagar Empire during 16th century. Stories performed in Veedhi natakam are drawn from the epics and the Puranas.

**Yakshagana**

![Yakshagana](image)

**Fig. 2.3. A scene from Yakshagana**

Yakshagana is a generic term identifying a variety of theatre forms of South India, the best-known of which is found in the South Kanara region of Karnataka. *Yaksha* are the demigods associated with Kubera, god of wealth, and *gana* is a
song. Thus Yakshagana means ‘songs of the demigods’. Historical evidence suggests that the Yakshagana of south Kanara originated in the 16th century or earlier. Yakshagana is popular with rural audiences. Companies are itinerant organizations managed by temple authorities. Yakshagana is a lively, fast-paced form in which songs, dances and improvised dialogue mix according to a prescribed structure.

c. Transition to Modern Theatre System

The seeds of Modern Indian Theatre were sown in the late 18th century by the British. During the colonial period, modern theatre developed. It continues to develop in all major regional languages as a reflection of the ideas and concerns of urban Indian audience. To achieve their ends, the British introduced the English system of higher education as a means of developing a class of Indians educated in British ideas, tastes, morals and values. The theatre became an extension of that aim—a tool for conveying the British way of life. The Origins of this theatre (Modern theatre), are found in 19th century Calcutta and Bombay in the works of Tagore, Aurobindo, T.P. Kailasam etc. These writers and artists were inspired by the examples of European (particularly British) theatre.
Before Modern theatre, Dramatic performance took place at the time of religious festivals or other special occasion (pre-modern). These Modern playwrights after 1960 helped to shape a theatre which was regular in the sense that shows could take place anytime throughout the year. Modern Theatre in India is created by and primarily for people who may be regarded as middle and upper middle class.

The 1960-70 period is a turning point in the history of the Modern Indian theatre. These playwrights, when they began to write or produce their plays in the early part of the 1960s, hardly imagined that they were laying the foundation of a Pan-Indian modern theatre. Aware of the surrounding reality these Playwrights were writing about certain common concerns-political, social, individual that affected every sensitive Indian at that time.

Modern Indian drama is firmly located in the Post-Second World war period. Drama today has become the most contemporary form of art in India. It is contemporary, it is also Pan-Indian. During the 1960s – the names of Tendulkar, Karnad, Badal Sarkar, Mohan Rakesh strikes one immediately. This is the launching pad of modern Indian drama.

A new perspective on what constitutes a drama-community has emerged. Lights and Music matter as much as the Text matters. The new perspective reorganizes the theatre as a collective art, a social business. This has changed the view of the theatre altogether. In a peculiar way theatre has now gone beyond hierarchy (not controlled by any particular group). Now Drama is for everybody.

Contemporary theatre has used languages in a new, innovative way. The early dramatic language was greatly influenced by the Elizebethan drama, especially Shakespeare. Some of our mainstream theatre still shows rather pale and pathetically pompous imitations of Shakespearean or allegedly Shakespearean dialogue. The economy of words was unknown to several theatre traditions in
India. The language earlier had come close to actual speech. What the new theatre has done is to explore the Silence. Speaking the economy of speech and near-abundance of silence was unknown to Indian theatre. Contemporary theatre has given it prime place. There is certain dialect of sound and silence in our theatre. New use of the word, a new acting style emerged as well. In recent plays, word is the center. Contemporary theatre is of words. Modernity changes the world of words. The New theatre is word-oriented.

Contemporary Indian theatre has shown concerns of many different kinds, issuing from and related to the lives of people belonging to different regions, economic classes and social positions. These concerns are immediately of sections of Indian people and ultimately of all India. Also it has moved away from mythology as also altered or subverted mythology, historical plays. It follows, therefore, that the dramatic self-expression of the peoples of different social, economic and regional locations are ‘Indian’ concerns.

Themes and Techniques

In the modern western theatre, the text usually serve as the guide to the production concept. Modern Indian theatre is similar to western theatre in this respect, in that it depends on the creative interpretation of the playscript. The urban theatre of the recent past was dominated by playwrights, whereas now it is controlled by actors. Modern Indian playwrights are concerned with a multitude of themes that center on the family, social life in general, the plight of the individual in a modern mechanized society and contemporary political and social events.

The generation gap is a favourite theme among these playwrights. Many of the Contemporary plays show older, tradition bound parents attempting to come to grips with the new life styles and changing values of their children, Dattani’s ‘Where There is a Will’ could be cited as an instance.
The technical virtuosity of trained talents in different spheres of theatre, no doubt, led to streamlining of stage techniques and presentation. In structure and form, many modern Indian plays simply echo the cinema (Indian plays adopted some of the techniques of cinema, as in Lighting, Staging etc.). Techniques of Realism seems to dominate the settings, "stopaction" - over which the recorded thoughts of a character are played.

Modern stage techniques owes its origin to the changing conditions of nineteenth century urban India, which followed English patterns of theatrical organizations like fusing characters and developing a central consciousness, lighting up and fading out scenes and characters, devising a circular plot, creating a dramatic language that is marked by repetitions, rapidity, quick exchange, stichomythic lines, exploiting comic techniques like farce, caricature by miming and tableau, over thought, broken images.

The predominant style of acting in India is realist. Actors are very much aware of the principals of the West's so called method of acting and Stanisloviskis's observations about acting, use of micro-phone, use of western realist models like "fourth wall", naturalism and prosenium arch theatres. The actors, their interpretation of material, the space and the audience these are the major components of theatre. Plays are designed to appeal to the joys and sorrows and problems and potentials of this small but influential segment of Indian society (middleclass) stage techniques like roller, flood scene, the appearance of a giant monster, snake, swords flying trick shorts, Scene painting on the flats, turntable stages etc., are commonly and effectively used.

**Lighting**

Stage lighting in India may not be as technically advanced as it is in west. Variable transformer dimmers and tungsten hallogen lamps, fresnels, spotlights, colored gels are still imported from abroad. The construction of platform about
eight feet high, behind and to the right and left of the proscenium arch, is where the spotlights are mounted and operated.

The pattern of the development of modern theatre differs from region to region. In Calcutta, Bengali was language of the new and thriving theatre, in Madras it was Tamil and in Bombay, which was more cosmopolitan than the other cities, plays were composed in Marathi, Gujarathi, Hindustani, Urdu and sometimes in a blend of all these languages, plus English i.e. plays written in English by Indian (Indian in origin) called Indian Drama in English.

The journey of Indian English Drama, from its beginning till date is a story of silent walk, striving hard for its identity to liberate itself from the clutches of conventional taboos and with an urge to be observed in the west apart from setting an indigenous tradition.

There is a long tradition of English plays on Indian stage. College and Club production of Shakespeare and Sheridan from days of yore, down to efforts of the likes of Joy Michael and Barry John of our times. Niel Simon, Woody Allen and Tom Stoppard, to choose 3 names at a venture, are great hits with the glitterati. Many such productions are of pretty high standard and quite enjoyable theatre. But these are largely metropolitan monitory interests.

Theatre in English has a long and impressive history in Bombay dating back to the mid-18th century when British plays were first performed by English actors for the entertainment of British soldiers and merchants eventually to the delight of local citizens. After Independence in 1947, English language theatre produced by Indian actors and directors actually grew in size and influence, partially because English remained a major medium of communication.
The English plays in India are enjoyed by a restricted part of the play's society. This suggests a certain type of person, a fairly bookish person, perhaps cultivated. Hence, drama is dependent on a minority audience.

The works of post-independence Indian English playwrights typically profile contemporary situations sometimes chronicling and reflecting upon the affairs of the upper middle class. They also mirror in a satirical way the decadence of social values which are dominated by hypocrisy and ethical retrogression. They try to stage the familial conflicts and present a splendid study of contemporary consumeristic Indian society.

As far as the English theatre in India was concerned it was a copy of the London theatre of those days mainly because it was meant for the Englishmen in India. The theatre activities were limited to Calcutta, Bombay and Madras only, which were the centres of the Englishmen. The English theatre in India instigated the enthusiastic dramatists to write plays for their people with an appeal of contemporaneity as well as something original.

From amongst the different forms of Indian English literature, if we consider drama in particular, we mark the same coming to light in the latter half of the 20th century and that too by way of translation channel. The dramas were basically written in various Indian languages are being translated into English and other languages as they are produced and appreciated in the various parts of the country. A closer contact is being established between the theatre workers from different regions and languages through these transactions. Plays translated to English follow western model with few traditional accessories if necessary. The issue they dealt with are set in an Indian context.

"Mohan Rakesh, Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sircar and Girish Karnad show clearly that they are the children of the new resurgence in their own areas and have established that by translating and performing the translated plays in other
languages areas other than their own, they are marching towards the possibility of building a national theatre movement\(^1\).

**Mohan Rakesh** was one of those rare literary personalities who never accepted the traditional setup and always aspired to find and project something which is challenging and new. His plays *One Day in Ashadha*, *Great Swans of the Waves*, *Half-Way-House* show that his dialogues have a smooth flow, a meaningful depth and elemental naturalness suitable to his characters. They express the character's mental conflict, frustration, dissatisfaction and the resulting anger in a unique manner. One aspect of his plays is that he pays much attention to the integral conflict in the minds of his characters. He has made an effort to come to grips with the problem of man-women relationship. The depiction of the complexity of the human heart, man's helplessness and the chains of relationship attract the audience and keep them enthralled.

**Badal Sircar**, the great Bengali playwright uses contemporary situations and social problems to project the life-in-death attitude of modern life and a strong sense of the frustration of the intellectual aspiration.

Sircar's early plays *And Indrajit*, *The Other Side of History*, *There is No End* are based on political, social and psychological problems. *And Indrajit* is about the residue of the middle class who have failed to adjust, align and cease to aspire among the intellectually alive urban middle class.

*Badal Sircar's Third Theatre* gradually minimized its use of sets, costumes, background, music, tape recorders and projectors. The body of the actor and its relation to the space on stage were Sircar's most immediate concerns as a director\(^2\).

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While Badal Sircar makes the society, specially the middle class, feel guilty for being indifferent towards men and his problems, Vijay Tendulkar, the avant-garde Marathi playwright, harps upon the theme of isolation of the individual and his confrontation with the hostile surroundings.

Tendulkar is influenced by the plays of Ibsen and Shaw, and also by little England Theatre Experimental plays. A profile and versatile Marathi playwright, Tendulkar presents the complexities of middle-class man in an urban industrialized Indian society. He has written 28 full-length plays, and some of them have been translated into English. He follows the pattern of the realistic drama. His most significant plays "Silence, the Court is in Session" won him national acclaim. His play "The vultures" originally written in Marathi latter translated into English is a two act play. "Ghasiram Kotwal" and "Sakharam Binder" which made Tendulkar a popular playwright are experiments of an intense and deeper impulse and not just a matter of superficial innovation. A kind of new freedom and conviction is seen in these plays.

Girish Karnad, recipient of the Jnanapith Award, is a living legend in the arena of contemporary Indian English drama. His journey from Yayati to The fire and the rain holds a mirror to the very evolution of Indian theatre during nearly four decades. He represents a synthesis of cultures and his formal experiments have been far more rigorously conceived and have certainly been far more successful than those of some of his contemporaries. The likes of Girish Karnad enable us to pretend that there is such a thing as a truly Indian theatre which can be true to its traditions and at the same time responsive to contemporary concerns. Tughlaq, Hayavadhana, Tale-Danda and Anga-Mandala are some of his wonderful dramatic creations. His technical experiment with an indigenous dramatic form here is a triumph which was opened up fresh lines of fruitful exploration for the Indian English playwright.
It was believed for quite sometime that Indian English drama has failed to strike roots in the Indian soil. The feeling and experience of the ordinary men engaged in the day-to-day struggle of life or the desires, dreams and despairs of an average Indian were yet to be truly reflected in an Indian English drama. In comparison to other literary genres Indian English drama had achieved little but in the changing perspective the realm is full of fruit bearing possibilities. In this connection it will not be an exaggeration to quote R.K. Dhawan who observes: “Very recently Indian English drama shot into prominence. Younger writers like Mahesh Dattani and Manjula Padmanabhan have infused new life into this branch of writing” (50 years of Indian Writing, pp.19).

Manjula Padmanabhan is the great voice in the recent Indian English drama. Her pioneering play Harvest bagged the Onassis Award and got tremendous popularity throughout the world. She portrays a mean and moribund world where mothers sell their children for ‘the price of rice’. Harvest deals with a miserable family dwelling in a single room in a chawl of Mumbai. Population explosion is responsible for the increasing pauperisation and dehumanisation of the city people. Om Prakash, a young man of twenty, driven by hunger and unemployment, makes up his mind to become an organ donor and ultimately mortgages his body to a white First World buyer.

Needless to say, Mahesh Dattani, a young man of only thirty-eight, is a promising playwright.

Mahesh Dattani (b. August 7, 1958) is a leading figure in English theatre today and the only Indian English playwright with a consistent body of works in English. Born and brought up in Bangalore, he studied in Baldwin's High School and St. Joseph's College of Arts and Science, Bangalore, while basking on the affection of his parents and two older sisters. Throughout his academic career, he was never a student of literature. He led a
stunningly ordinary life - a significant part of which was spent in working as copywriter in an advertising firm and subsequently helping his father to run the family business, an agency for machinery to make corrugated boxes. His experiences did not make Dattani melt 'into the backdrop; instead, in one of life's dramatic twists, he started writing plays. Once he did so, there was no stopping him.

Mahesh Dattani's creative career began quite late in life; yet, the passion for the theatre seems to have been there in his blood. His gratification derives from his birth in a family where the theatre happens to be something of a community event. From his very childhood, when he made clocks and little carts out of cardboard, creativity has been a part of his life. He would invent stories, enact short plays, and do a good amount of the scripting. In recalling, his first impression on the theatre, Dattani mentions a Gujarati play, Madhu Rye's Koi Pun Ek Phool Nu Naam Bolo Tho (Tell Me the Name of a Flower) that mesmerised him when he was no older than twelve years. In the earlier part of his life, Dattani was also fond of dancing, taking keen interest in learning Bharatnatyam, ballet, and other dance forms. Though he started taking interest in the theatre quite late in life, his childhood exposures influenced and helped him to a considerable extent (Mahesh Dattani and Anjum Katal, Of Page and Stage: An Interview with Mahesh Dattani, Seagull Theatre Quarterly 24, Dec. 1999, pp. 4).

It was only during his college days when Dattani became a member of the Bangalore Little Theatre that he was initiated into the theatre. He got more intimately acquainted with the works of Tennessee Williams, Alan Ayckboum, Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Elkunchwar who all along with Madhu Rye exerted considerable influence on him. Dattani recalls his early years in the theatre in the following terms: ' ... Initially I did not get selected for many of the parts but activities like backstage setting | costumes etc. were quite' exciting for a boy of 17-
18 years. The first assignment came with David Compton's *In Committee*, followed by a role in *Hunting the Sun* directed by C. R. Simha.' (Mahesh Dattani and Surabhi Tewari, The act goes on, Zeenext.com.online, 19 September 2000). It was also during this period of his life that Dattani directed a play, *God* by Woody Allen for the first time. The play turned out to be a major success, and he eventually formed his own theatre group, *Playpen* (1984). From then onwards, Dattani has continued to write plays besides acting and directing those plays. Once he started, he never looked back, and became in 1998 the first Indian playwright in English to "win the Sahitya Akademi Award - an honour he received for, his first collection of plays, *Final Solutions and Other Plays*.

Apart from writing, acting and directing plays, Dattani also teaches at different universities and conducts workshops regularly at his studio (established in 1998) and abroad. Anita Nair says,

'... Mahesh Dattani had done it all. From acting to writing his plays to directing it to maintaining creative control when others produce/direct it. Rather like a chameleon he has changed shades as he shifted from one role to another... .' (Anita Nair, Dattani brings honesty into his plays, Zeenext.com.online, 28 August 2000).

Interestingly, Dattani considers himself an all-round theatre personality, not merely a playwright, though he confesses enjoying directing to play-writing and preferring acting the least. Apart from writing for the stage, he has also written scripts for the television and the cinema. His *Special Season* is supposed to be the first Hindi feature film dealing with AIDS as a human rights issue. Dattani's *Mango Souffle*, the first feature film he made as a director, is based on his play, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*. It has been honoured with the best motion picture award at the Barcelona film festival, 2003. Dattani is now busy with his *Morning Raaga*, a film based on the life of a classical music singer. It will be his second film as a director. In other words, he is 'a complete man of theatre, familiar with all aspects of stagecraft (Carmen Kagal, A Bright, Particular Star, pp. 15).
Mahesh Dattani has three volumes to his credit - *Final Solutions and Other Plays* (1994), *Collected Plays* (2000), *Collected Plays. Vol. II* (2005). He has so far written fifteen plays. Seven among them are full-length stage plays - *Where There is a Will*, *Dance Like a Man*, *Tara*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *Final Solutions*, *On a Muggy-Night in Mumbai*, and *30 Days in September*. Dattani has written several radio plays - *Do the Needful*, *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, a one-act *Night Queen* (published in *The Telegraph*, Autumn-Collection, 1996).

Mahesh Dattani's plays deal with contemporary issues and address in a complex and compelling manner the various concerns and anxieties affecting modern India. His plays appear as chronicles of our modern lives and times. As Dattani says, "I am certain that my plays are a true reflection of my time, place and socioeconomic background" (Dattani, *Collected Plays: Preface*, pp. 15). He makes extensive use of the Indian setting tradition, mythology, social problems, dance forms, even Indian English to create his themes, plots, characters, situations, images, etc. However, the issues that his plays addresses are universal in their appeal search for individual identity, need for love, happiness and sexual fulfilment disintegrating relations, cultural tensions, the difference between appearance and reality, the emptiness and loneliness of the modern civilized man. His plays have a powerful appeal and make audiences in Britain, Brazil, Burma or Bangalore to think.

The Playpen Performing Arts Group first performed Mahesh Dattani's first full length play, *Where There's a Will*, on September 23, 1988, at Chowdiah Memorial Hall, Bangalore, as a part of the Deccan Herald Theatre Festival. It exudes delight and is, at the same time, thought provoking and introspective in nature; it reconstructs the mythical father figure of Dasaratha who dominates the family members even after his death through his "-will". The playwright describes it as the 'exorcism of patriarchal code' (Sita Raina,

The two-act play is set in a Gujarati family. Hasmukh Mehta, the dominating and oppressive father collapses after a heart attack but reappears as ghost to observe the squabbling in the family. As the play progresses, the ghost of the autocratic old man finds that the family members have joined hands with Kiran Javeri, his mistress and trustee, to undermine his patriarchal values. The play ends with their decision to chop off the tamarind tree, which is the abode of the ghost of Hasmukh Mehta. The playwright presents all these events with warmth, clarity and spontaneity tinged with trite humour and clever repartee.

Dance Like a Man, a stage play in two acts (first performed at Chowdiah Memorial Hall, Bangalore, on September 22, 1989, as a part of the Deccan Herald Theatre Festival), examines prejudices against the traditional dance form, Bharatnatyam, and explores the conflicting demands of marriage and career thereby exposing the duplicity of moral standards in the society. The action links three generations by continually moving from present to past. Amritlal Parekh, a wealthy landowner, businessman, freedom fighter, philanthropist and social reformer, is a representative of the orthodox past; Jairaj and Ratna, a couple, were born in British India but matured in an independent nation; Lata and Viswas, are the new generation of Indians who are transcultural (Angelie Muttani, On Mahesh Dattani's Dance like a Man: The Politics of Production and Performance, Seagull Theatre Quarterly, 11 September 1996, pp. 59). The play makes a defence of Bharatnatyam as an art form through a projection of the story of Bharatnatyam dancers. But Amritlal, who considers his son's artistic efforts to be effeminate and sick, prevents Jairaj from being a dancer. In a way, the play questions conventional
male stereotypes and shows that gender roles are conditioned by social norms and expectations.

_Tara_, a two-act play (first performed as *Twinkle Tara* at Chowdiah Memorial Hall, Bangalore, on October 23, 1990 by Playpen Performing Arts Group), centres on the emotional separation that grows between two conjoint twins following the discovery that their physical separation was manipulated by their mother and grandfather to favour the boy (Chandan) over the girl (Tara) (Erin Mee, _A Note on the Play_, Dattani, Collected Plays, New Delhi, Penguin India, 2000, pp. 319). Tara, though smarter, is denied the opportunities given to Chandan and she eventually wastes away and dies. To suppress the guilt that begins to gnaw at him, Chandan leaves for London, changes his name to Dan, and strains himself to live a life without a personal history. By linking the boy and the girl in one unit, the playwright tries to blur gender distinctions. The mother is forced to choose her son's welfare over her daughter's, which ultimately leads to discontentment and breach of trust among the family members. To Dattani, _Tara_ is a play about 'the gendered self, about coming to terms with the feminist side of oneself in a world that always favours what is "male"' (Ibid, pp. 320).

_Bravely Fought the Queen_, (first performed at the Sophia Bhava Hall, Mumbai on August 2, 1991), which echoes Alan Ayckbourn's _Table Manners_ (the first English play that Dattani saw on a public stage), questions male and female roles in the society and the family unit. The playwright takes cue from the English translation of the Hindi poem 'Jansi ki Rani', to deal with issues like sex, drink, homosexuality, in 'a cascade of dramatic revelations (Kusum Haider, Essentially a Comic Muse, The Book Review, 22.3, March 1998, pp. 25). The play depicts the troubled lives of the members of a joint family and the disintegrated relationships that result from hypocrisy and dishonesty. 'Like Lolitha's bonsai,' as says Kasturi Kanthan, "the characters in the play are stunted,
gnarled, and grotesque" (Kasturi Kanthan, The Strongest Fragrance, The Book Review, 19.3, March 1995, pp. 33). The play is also about 'performance' and reveals how in a world, which maintains double standards, people assume masks, and acting becomes a part of life.

*Final Solutions*, a three-act play (first performed at Guru Nanak Bhavan, Bangalore, on July 10, 1993), is one of the 'the most noted and most grandly presented' (Kusum Haider, Essentially a Comic Muse, pp. 25) plays of Dattani. It exposes prejudices about religious faith and shows that feelings of communalism lie hidden within a man. It also examines how the seed of communalism is transferred from one generation to the next, and strikes a note on transferred resentment. Alyque Padamsee aptly remarks, 'The demons of communal hatred are not out on the street... they are lurking inside ourselves' (Alyque Padamsee, A Note on the Play, Dattani, Collected Plays, New Delhi, Penguin India, 2000, pp. 161). The events take place in the house of Ramnik Gandhi. Two Muslim boys seek refuge from a frenzied mob. Ramnik gives them shelter and saves their lives. He tries to show off and prove to others that he is a liberal-minded individual free from any communal bias. As the action develops, the powers of prejudice, abhorrence and umbrage, so far lying in a state of hibernation, break out of the shell and take over Ramanik's secular attitudes. Nevertheless, the play ends with a redemptive note as intolerance, insensitivity, and resentment ultimately paving the way for liberalism and faith in humanism.

*On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (first performed at the Tata Theatre, Mumbai, on November 23, 1998), is 'not simply the first play in Indian theatre to handle openly gay themes of love, partnership, trust and betrayal. It is a play about how society creates patterns of behaviour and how easy it is for individuals to fall victim to the expectations society creates. The play portrays 'a society which not only condones but encourages hypocrisy, which demands deceit and negation, rather than allowing self-expression, responsibility and dignity (Ibid, pp. 46). Thus, it questions the role of the society and shows that
individuals are compelled to follow the established norms. The characters in the play are all gay; trying to solve their problems in their own way. However, the play reaches its extended height as Dattani uses multiple theatrical spaces and shows his originality in the use of lighting.

30 Days in September, 'an honest story, told honestly,' (Manisha Vardhan, Thirty Days in September: 3 to 6.com.Online, 3 September, 2003) (first performed at Prithvi, Mumbai, and directed by Lillete Dubey) is a gripping tale of love and betrayal. It focuses on the sensitive issue of child abuse. The play, which endeavors to lift the veil of silence that surrounds child sexual abuse, has been commissioned by the Delhi-based sexual rights organization, RAHI (Recovering And Healing From Incest). The play 'couches Dattani's searing indictment of the social hypocrisy that stunts the adult lives of psychologically scarred children, brutally disrupts families and renders love impotent' (Secrets Unveiled, Mirror Magazine, The Sunday Times Online, 17 August 2003). 30 Days in September revolves round the story of the child victim Mala who is raped by her maternal uncle at the age of seven. Mala's mother, a witness, strangely remains mute over the incident, which results in a fragile relationship between the mother and the daughter. Mala's sense of guilt leaves her with a low self-esteem that affects every relationship in her life, and it is ironical that nothing in her life lasts beyond thirty days. However, when Deepak, Mala's latest lover, refuses to end their relationship after thirty days and helps Mala to confront her past, her self-destructive journey comes to an end. At the fall of curtain, the mother, who has so long been silent, finally vocalises her own story of self-abuse and guilt, thereby doing away with the barrier that separated her from her daughter.

The two radio plays that Dattani wrote, Do the Needful and Seven Steps Around the Fire, show his ingenuity to deal with soundscapes rather than landscapes. As he explains, 'On radio, the performance happens in the listener's mind, so the playwright has to evoke the landscapes and the
characters' (Samara Bhatia, Hard at Play, Graphiti 2 April 2000, pp. 9). His first radio play, *Do the Needful* (first broadcast in August 14, 1997 by BBC Radio 4), is a 'somewhat unconventional romantic comedy' (Sally Avens, A Note on the Play, Dattani, Collected Plays, New Delhi, Penguin India, 2000, pp. 115) in which Alpesh, a gay, is forced to live within the norms of a heterosexual society, while Lata falls in love with a married man. Alpesh and Lata, however, marry each other and utilize the relationship to scoop up individual benefits. But a question remains unanswered - Are they not cheating themselves while trying to befool the society?

Dattani's other radio play, *Seven Steps Around the Fire* (first broadcast as *Seven Circles Around the Fire* by BBC Radio 4 on January 9, 1999), fits well within 'an established pattern of detective fiction (Jeremy Mortimer, A Note on the Play, Dattani, Collected Plays, New Delhi, Penguin India, 2000, pp. 3), though it exposes at the same time the prejudices and the hypocrisy present in the society. Uma, a researcher who has taken up a study on the hijra community for her thesis, goes on to unveil the mystery surrounding the murder of Kamala, a hijra. Through the eyes of Uma, the playwright exposes the harsh fact that one may show outward contempt for the hijras but the same individual may not always hesitate to utilize them as objects of sexual gratification. Dattani's ability as a playwright is evident once again in his radio plays, which are as powerful and appealing as his stage plays.

Indian English drama, moreover, has registered a remarkable growth and maturity through English translation of Hindi, Marathi and Bengali plays in the 1980s and 1990s. A study of Vijay Tendulkar, Mohan Rakesh, Muktibodh, Badal Sircar and Girish Karnad amply reveals that they have added a new dimension to Indian drama through their substantial contributions. It is a matter of satisfaction that some of the Indian English plays have been and are being staged in the European countries. In our country, too, English plays are occasionally staged in metro cities like Delhi, Calcutta, Chennai and Mumbai.
Fig. 2.6. Mahesh Dattani

Fig. 2.7. Mahesh Dattani's Amphi theatre in Bangalore
Fig. 2.8. Scenes from *Dance Like a Man*, Production: Lillete Dubey
Fig. 2.9. Scene from *Where There is a Will*

Fig. 2.10. Scene from *Tara*

Fig. 2.11. Scene from *30 Days in September*