

## Drama in Transition: A Study of Modern Indian English Theatre

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### Abstract

The article acknowledges the evolution of Indian English Drama as a significant part of English Literature that has garnered global attention. It notes that this form of literature has made substantial progress by addressing various issues prevalent in India, drawing inspiration from Indian sensibilities, philosophies, myths, and religious beliefs. Indian English Drama has managed to captivate audiences beyond geographical boundaries due to its connection with indigenous elements. Despite its significance, the text suggests that Indian English Drama has progressed at a slower pace compared to Indian English Fiction and Poetry. It attributes this lag in progress to certain inherent challenges. Unlike Fiction and Poetry, Drama demands a live performance setting, including a theatre, an engaged audience, proficient dialogue delivery, skilled actors, and effective stagecraft. These requirements may have posed obstacles to the genre's advancement. However, the text highlights that Indian English Drama has undergone various phases of development and eventually witnessed the emergence of a new wave of playwrights. These playwrights have made diligent efforts to elevate Indian English Drama, striving to secure its rightful place in the literary landscape. The paper aims to scrutinize Indian English Drama comprehensively, examining its flaws while emphasizing the contributions made by modern Indian English playwrights.

**Keywords:** Indian English Drama, Natyashastra, Vedic Aryans, Indianism etc

The history of drama in India has a rich and illustrious tradition, primarily rooted in Sanskrit plays. This tradition is preserved and documented in the Natyashastra, one of the oldest texts that expounds the theory of drama. According to this ancient text, drama was considered to have a divine origin and a profound connection with the sacred Vedas. The roots of Indian drama can be traced back to the ancient customs and seasonal celebrations of the Vedic Aryans. In the ancient era, there were several highly acclaimed and talented dramatists who significantly contributed to Indian theatre. Names such as Ashwaghosh, Bhasa, Shudraka, Kalidas, Harsha, Bhavabhuti, Visha-khadatta, Bhattanarayana, Murari, and Rajeshkhora stand out in the annals of Indian drama. Their works, including plays like "Madhya Mavyaayoda," "Urubhangam," "Karnabharan," "Mrichkatikam," "Abhigyana Shakuntalam," "Malankagnimitram," "Uttar Ramacharitam," "Mudrarakshasa," "Bhagavadajjukam," and "Mattavilasa," enriched Indian theatre with their brilliance and depth.

The trajectory of Indian English Drama commenced during the 18th century, coinciding with the period when the British Empire consolidated its political control in India. The emergence of Indian English Drama can be traced back to Krishna Mohan Banerjee's "The Persecuted" in 1813. This social play aimed to portray the conflict between Eastern and Western influences. However, the true genesis of Indian English Drama is often credited to Michael Madhusudan Dutt's "Is This Called Civilization," which made its appearance in 1871. Noteworthy figures in the realm of Indian English Drama include Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo, revered sage-poets of India, who are among the earliest Indian dramatists in English literature. While Tagore primarily wrote in Bengali, many of his Bengali plays have been translated into English. His significant plays such as "Chitra," "The Post Office," "Sacrifice," "Red Oleanders," "Chandalika," "Muktadhara," "Natir Puja," and "The Mother's Prayer" resonate deeply with Indian themes, characters, and ethics.

Similarly, Sri Aurobindo's plays like "Perseus the Deliverer," "Vasavadutta," "Radoguna," "The Viziers of Bassora," and "Eric" are each composed in five acts and reflect an inherent connection with Indian ethos and cultural values in their themes and treatment. Harindranath Chattopadhyaya made significant contributions to Indian English drama, akin to Mulk Raj Anand, by expressing empathy and understanding towards marginalized groups. His collection of social plays, including "The Windows," "The Parrots," "The Santry Lantern," "The Coffin," and "The Evening Lamps," reflected social realities and concerns prevalent at that time.

The phase of Post-Independence or Post-Modern Indian English Drama saw the emergence of various playwrights and themes. D.M. Borgaonkar's "Image-Breakers" (1938) presented a problem play aiming to challenge entrenched societal conventions like the caste system, reliance on horoscopes, dowry practices, and more. S. Fyzee's "Rahamin's Daughter of Ind" (1940) portrayed the clash between love and social barriers, depicting the story of a lower-caste girl in love with an Englishman. Balwant Gargi, through plays like "The Vulture," "Mung-Wa," "The Fugitive," and "The Matriarch," delved into themes relevant on a global scale, captivating the attention of diverse audiences.

T.P. Kailasam, renowned as the father of modern Kannada drama, showcased his brilliance not only in Kannada but also in English plays such as "The Burden" (1933), "Fulfillment" (1933), "The Purpose" (1944), "Karna" (1964), and "Keechaka" (1949), offering profound narratives and perspectives. Bharati Sarabhai, a significant woman playwright during the colonial era of Indian English drama, gained recognition for her plays "The Well of the People" (1943) and "Two Women," which achieved considerable success, illustrating varied facets of society. J.M. Lobo Prabhu, another eminent figure in pre-Independence Indian English drama, penned over a dozen plays. However, only "Mother of New India: A Play of Indian Village in Three Acts" (1944) and "Death Abdicates" (1945) were published before Independence, yet they bore testament to his artistic prowess and thematic diversity.

The era of Indian English drama saw the utilization of blank verse as a significant literary tool, with plays like P.A. Krishnaswami's "The Flute of Krishna" (1950), M. Krishnamurti's "The Cloth Of Gold" (1951), S.D. Rawoot's "Immortal Song," "Karm," and "The Killers" (1959), Satya Dev Jaggi's "The Point Of Light" (1967), Pritish Nandy's "Rites for a Plebian

Salute" (1969), and P.S. Vasudev's "The Sunflower" (1972) among others. These verse plays, through their distinct narrative styles, contributed to the diverse landscape of Indian English drama. Nissim Ezekiel, renowned for his poetry, ventured into playwriting, offering "Three Plays" (1969), which include "Nalini: A Comedy," "Marriage Poem: A Tragi-Comedy," and "The Sleep Walkers: An Indo-American farce." His foray into dramaturgy marked a welcomed addition to Indian English drama. Girish Karnad, a multifaceted personality in Indian theatre, made significant contributions as a writer, director, and actor. His notable plays such as "Yayati" (1961), "Tughlaq" (1962), "Hayavadana" (1970), and "Nagmandala" (1972) drew inspiration from history, mythology, and ancient legends, enriching the tradition of Indian English theatre. Vijay Tendulkar symbolized a new wave of awareness among Indian dramatists, reflecting the agonies, suffocations, and struggles of individuals within middle-class society. In plays like "Silence! The Court Is In Session" (1968), "Ghasiram Kotwal" (1972), and "Sakharam Binder" (1972), themes of oppression, human violence, and societal complexities were powerfully depicted, making strong dramatic statements about the human condition. Gurucharan Das is recognized for his widely acclaimed play "Larins Sahib" (1970), portraying the political journey of a British Resident in Punjab. Vera Sharma's collection includes one-act plays such as "Life is Like That" (1997) and "Reminiscence" (1997), shedding light on the struggles faced by women. Badal Sircar is a pivotal figure in contemporary theatre, emblematic of the New Theatrical Movement in India. His plays like "Evan Inderjit" (1962), "That Other History" (1964), and "There Is No End" (1971) delve into political, social, psychological, and existential issues.

The post-Independence era saw the emergence of numerous one-act plays, including works by R. Raja Rao, T.S. Gill, V.D. Trivedi, Prema Sastri, Gieve Patel, Dina Mehta, and Uma Parameswaram. These plays covered diverse themes such as homosexuality, historical figures like Gandhi, societal norms, and personal struggles. The post-modern era introduced notable changes in Indian English drama, marked by the prolific playwright Mahesh Dattani. His plays like "Where There's a Will," "Tara," "Bravely Fought the Queen," "Final Solutions," "Dance like A Man," and "Thirty Days in September" tackle profound issues such as communalism, gender, domestic abuse, and societal norms, highlighting the complexities of Indian society.

However, despite the significant contributions, Indian English drama falls short in comparison to poetry and fiction in India. Challenges such as the nature of drama as a composite art, limitations of English as a conversational medium, the absence of a thriving theater culture, and the playwrights' oversight of India's rich dramatic traditions hindered its growth. Nonetheless, Indo-Anglican literature continues to expand, attracting more writers, and despite resistance against English as a foreign language, it retains a promising future in the Indian literary landscape.

The evolution of Indian society has greatly influenced the nature and essence of Indian drama, particularly English drama, which has significantly departed from its earlier forms. Contemporary Indian English drama stands as a post-colonial representation that reflects the cultural identity of the nation. This genre aligns itself with modern Western cultural influences, marking a notable transformation in Indian English drama. The shifts and

developments within society inherently shape the artistic expressions and characteristics of drama.

In conclusion, India has a rich tradition of drama dating back to ancient times, contributing immensely to world literature. Indian English drama has dynamically altered its characteristics over time, adapting to various dimensions and reflecting the changing societal landscapes. The diversity within Indian drama, crafted by Indian playwrights, holds substantial recognition on a global scale due to its distinctiveness and its portrayal of Indian society, depicting the shifts and evolutions inherent in the trends of the time.

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