

# Treatment of Themes in Indian English Drama

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Among the various forms of Indian writing in English, drama seems to lag far behind poetry and fiction. However, ever since the English language struck firm roots in the country, plays in English have come to be written in spite of their generally poor stageworthiness. Though it is difficult to account for all the plays and playlets published in book form or in periodicals to date, some 400 plays have been included in the bibliography compiled by the present writer published a few years ago in *Perspectives on Indian Drama in English* (OUP) under the auspices of Karnatak University, Dharwar.

The survey then made of both the pre-Independence and post-Independence phases of Indian English drama—the basis of this paper—dealt with the themes, models and techniques employed by various playwrights. So far as themes are concerned, playwrights have variously drawn from the Vedas, the epics, myths and legends (mostly Indian, some alien), Indian history and society. But in truth they have hardly scraped the fringe of this rich area.

As revealed by the study of playwrights from Sri Aurobindo to Tagore and Karnad, there have been different kinds of experiments (though on a small scale) in drawing themes from the ancient lore of the country. While playwrights like Kailasam try to highlight the greatness of legendary and epic characters, Sri Aurobindo, Karnad and a few others successfully interpret ancient myths and legends from a contemporary angle. To recall a few instances, Sri Aurobindo makes use of the legend of Perseus to interpret the contemporary urge for freedom; in *Siddhartha, the Man of Peace*, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya deals with Siddhartha's enlightenment, and at the same time tries to project the present crisis caused by the nuclear race; while *The Well of the People* and *Two Women* bear testimony to Bharati Sarabhai's ability to give realistic touches to some age-old customs and beliefs and thereby elevate them to a higher plane. While V.V.S. Aiyangar incorporates some modern political ideas in his *Ramarajya*, Mathuram Bhutalingam extends her

imagination in *Alone in Ayodhya* and makes her Sri Rama more human than divine. Girish Karnad achieves greater success in this regard: while *Yayati* retells the Indian myth on the theme of responsibility, *Hayavadana* interprets the myth to attempt a solution of the problem of man's identity in a world of complicated relationships.

There is a strong romantic impulse in the writings of playwrights like Sri Aurobindo and Kailasam. Ekalavya and Karna are idealised by Kailasam; but in idealising Keechaka, he perhaps gives undue liberty to his imagination with the result that the original hero of the epic is entirely lost. But playwrights like Chattopadhyaya seem to be well in control of their imaginative impulses when they deal with hagiological themes, as in *Raidas*, *the Cobbler*, *Jayadeva* and *Siddhartha*. Ramaswami Sastri's *Draupadi* and Sadar-Joshi's *Acharya Drona*, where all the events chosen centre round the main characters, also belong to the same category.

My analysis of some plays on themes like these has shown the author's general failure to adapt them adequately for the stage. To illustrate, Nalini Mohon Chatterjee's *Krishna* and Swami Sivananda's *Radha's Prem* (whose themes are drawn from *The Bhagavata*) look like a series of conversations about Krishna's life, and thus, though they satisfy the didactic intention of the authors, they lack dramatic art. Trivikram's *Zero B.C. or Christopinishad* is another such failure.

On the whole, the plays of both the phases reveal the playwrights' limited success in employing themes from the ancient classics and legends of the country. Compared to the rich material available in ancient lore, the output is inadequate both in quantity and quality.

This is true in the case of historical themes also. With a few exceptions, the major playwrights of both phases do not seem to have shown much interest in drawing themes from the history and contemporary politics of our country. Among latter-day playwrights Asif Currimbhoy shows some interest in recent history and politics. But as we see in some of his plays like *Goa*, *The Refugee*, *Sonar Bangla* and "Om Mane Padme Hum!" he dramatises some events, but does not achieve full-fledged historical drama.

Though their work is poor both in output and quality, the credit for tapping the resources of the history of our country must go to some minor playwrights of both phases. Of course, few seem to be

inclined towards ancient history. So far as medieval history is concerned, there are playwrights who have drawn from the Mughal and Rajput periods, to illustrate, Annayya's *The Bride of God*, A.S.P. Ayyar's *A Mother's Sacrifice*, V.V.S Aiyangar's *At Any Cost*, *The Beggar Princess* by Dilip Kumar Roy and Indira Devi, Lakhan Deb's *Tigerclaw* and Dilip Hiro's *To Anchor a Cloud*. While Ayyar handles the theme of Punna's noble sacrifice, Roy and Indira Devi highlight the conflict between the limited power of man and the infinite grace of the Lord as seen in the paradoxical life of the princess-saint Mira. In dramatising the episode of Aurangzeb's killing of Dara, Annayya employs suspense and action at the right places; but the political intrigues of another Mughal Emperor are handled in an immature way by Dilip Hiro in *To Anchor a Cloud*. Unlike these full-fledged plays dealing with the entire life of a historical personage or a particular period, there are plays like *Tigerclaw*, *At any Cost* and *The Siege of Chitor* where playwrights concentrate on a single incident.

If playwrights have not tapped to advantage the resources of ancient and medieval history, fear of consequences may have deterred some playwrights of the pre-Independence phase from employing theme from the British period; as a result the output of this period is very poor. Yet we come across two plays about the freedom movement written during British rule. Mrinalini Sarabhai fails to achieve organic coherence in plot-construction in her *Captive Soil*, the first of these, while Deobhankar gives a melodramatic twist to his theme in *The Absconders*. Even post-Independence playwriting does not show much improvement in this regard. *A Passage to India* by Santha Rama Rau is just a dramatisation of Forster's novel; the theme is not her own. On the other hand, *Larins Sahib*, a historical play of considerable importance, presents the political career of a British Resident in Punjab whose principled life gradually yields to a craze for power, finally leading to his downfall; and Gurucharan Das tries to throw more light on the essential human elements in his historical characters though the development of his plot is not quite convincing. Rangappa and Shivakumar Joshi employ themes from the political career of Gandhiji in their own ways. While the former in *Gandhiji's Sadhana* deals with Gandhiji's boyhood and his South African struggle, the latter employs the myth of the Bhagavata to dramatise the death of Gandhiji in *He Never Slept So Long*. Thus even in the post-Independence phase, playwrights do not seem to have evinced much interest in drawing themes from history. But they show some inclination towards presenting the need for national

integration and dealing with the problems of the post-partition period. V.K. Gokak's *The Goddess Speaks* gives a picture of a worried patriot and his optimistic vision of the future of the country. *My Sons* by Mrs Billimoria and *Vikramjeet* by Sozrekashme are also about the need for national integration. But while Mrs Billimoria indulges in excessive idealisation of her characters, the theme in Sozrekashme's hands is more of an essay on his symbolic hero than a play. Though Javanthinathan's *Guardianship of 'India'* is only a mock-trial and thus cannot be called a play in the true sense of the term, its allegorical characters dramatically present the post-Independence politics of our country. Also, we come across a few plays (like Borgaonkar's *The Refugee*) which directly deal with the partition. Thus, as in the case of epic and mythological themes, so also in the context of history or current political problems facing the country, Indian English playwrights have not fully exploited the various available materials to them.

The case of social themes employed is quite different. Playwrights of both the pre-Independence and post-Independence phases seem to have evinced much interest in drawing themes from our society, the variety of our age-old customs, religions, languages, etc., and the consequent problems and complications confronting the people. Of course, the treatment of such themes is not all alike. There are plays and playlets (like those of V.V.S. Aiyangar's) mainly written for light entertainment. Such plays are mostly farcical representations of social problems and have melodramatic endings. There are plays wherein these problems are seriously dealt with. Whatever the mode of treatment, the playwrights do not appear to have lost sight of the major problems of our society—poverty, untouchability and other problems of caste, the dowry system, widow-marriage, exploitation of the poor.

A study of such plays tells us how these themes have been employed. For example, the problem of widow-marriage is the theme of three plays: Krishnaswami's *The Two Twice-Borns*, Narayanan's *The Lawyer and his Daughter* and A.S.P Ayyar's *Sita's Choice*. Krishnaswami handles the theme lightly bringing in unnatural sequences and excessive talk. But the last two playwrights seem to bring some serious thought to the problem. There are also a few plays dealing with the problems of inter-religious and inter-caste marriage: Michael's *Nation-Builders*, Borgaonkar's *Image-Breakers*, and Lobo Prabhu's *Flags of the Heart*. But the development of plot in these plays is not logical, and the writers seem to exploit only

melodrama from themes with full tragic potential. Narayanan's *Beauty is a Leveller of Castes* deals with the problem of untouchability—the heroine is a Pariah girl, the centre of various complications. Bharati Sarabhai employs the theme in a different way; influenced by Gandhian doctrine, she makes the old woman with her age-old faith in pilgrimage to Hardwar see the sacred Ganga in a well to be used by Harijans (the 'untouchables'). The same theme becomes a tragedy in the hands of Borgaonkar, who in *The Temple-Entry* tries to expose the hypocrisy of priests.

Poverty in general and the sufferings of workers in particular provide themes for several playwrights. Chattopadhyaya deals with the problem in his own way and, as already seen, he shows all sympathy for the poor. His play *The Window* gives a realistic picture of a poor worker's family and strikes an optimistic note in the end; while *The Sentry's Lantern* presents the pragmatism of a worker confronted by the world of misery. Gargi gives more importance to suspense in handling a similar theme in *The Vultures*, where he exposes the cruelty inflicted on the poor by landlords. Niranjana Pal presents the theme of exploitation in another way. In *The Goddess*, he takes a corrupt priesthood to task for exploiting people's weakness in the name of religion. But he does not achieve desired success in handling the theme on account of his over complicated plot and the introduction of some incredible sequences. Another weakness of the people, belief in the existence of devils and witchcraft, forms the theme of *In the Clutch of the Devil* by A.S.P. Ayyar, who achieves some success in plot construction in spite of his fondness for a scholarly discussion of the topics on hand. Similarly, the evil of prostitution catches the attention of Partap Sharma; but in handling the theme in *A Touch of Brightness*, he fails to avoid excessive dialogue. The play also lacks suspense.

Some playwrights seem to experiment with the handling of such themes in still more different ways. For example, there are allegorical plays and mock-trials, and plays and playlets which concentrate on psychological portrayal. While Mrs Ghosal resorts to allegory in *Princess Kalyani* in trying to present a picture of the demoralised India of the pre-Independence period, Krishnaswami makes an allegorical presentation of the theme of service to mankind in *Kailash*; and the need for reconstruction of our educational system forms the theme of Gopal's *The Eastern Farce*. Their stage-worthiness apart, the allegorical mode of presenting the themes in these plays is significant so far as indirect impression on the minds

of the audience is concerned. While the dark side of the impact of science on mankind is directly and effectively dramatised in Borgaonkar's *Bhasmasura*, the theme gets a different treatment in the hands of Ayyar who makes it a witty and thought-provoking mock-trial entitled *The Trial of Science for the Murder of Humanity*. Playwrights like Nissim Ezekiel seem to be content with giving vignettes of a cross-section of contemporary society. Further, there are plays where the psychology of characters is given more importance than conventional plot construction. To illustrate, Rajinder Paul's *Ashes Above the Fire* analyses the minds of man and woman so far as sexual relationship is concerned. Some mini-plays also provide good examples of this.

Thus, on the whole, playwrights of both the pre-Independence and post-Independence phases have not fully used the rich material available in the ancient lore and history of our country; and yet, with regard to the themes drawn from these sources, there are attempts of considerable importance (though only partially successful) in dramatising situations, highlighting epic characters and presenting the tragic hero. As regards history, playwrights could not for practical reasons have ventured too far to draw themes from the contemporary politics of the British period. But how the history of the ancient and medieval period failed to attract them sufficiently is inexplicable. However, greater success is seen in treating of social themes like the dowry system, widow-marriage, corruption in priesthood, inequities of the caste system, exploitation of the poor, and other problems of contemporary society. The post-Independence phase brought before playwrights some new problems like the need for national integration; but their handling of such themes is mostly inept and melodramatic. On the whole, Indian English drama does not evidence thematic richness or depth, with a few exceptions. □

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