



Natyashastra and Modern Theatre: a struggle against British imperialism

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Abstract:

The Natyashastra was one of the foremost text which described the characteristics and qualities of a theatrical plays. However, after this text came into existence for many centuries this text was followed for the theatrical performances. When the Britishers colonised the Indian subcontinent and the era of socio-economic exploitation started the Indian resisted with the cultural consciousness. The rise of nationalism and theatrical movement helps a lot to generate socio-political and cultural awareness against British exploitations. This paper will try to analyse the cultural and theatrical resistance against British empire. And how the theatre artist of that time followed the Natyashastra and classical Sanskrit traditions to resist against British colonisers. The rise of culture nationalism was forced the Indian people to look their ancestors past and search for the classical traditions which has lost with the time being. With the discovery of classical texts, mythology and other types of folk stories they have resisted and tried to aware the Indian masses through their theatrical performances. This paper will also delved deeply to the intricacies of Natyashastra and how the Modern theatre artists have incorporated this text with the slight variation.

Introduction:

The culture of theatre was present in Indian subcontinent from the Ancient times, it evolve side-by-side with the Greek theatrical traditions. However, with the passing of time the classical theatrical traditions witness some changes. The artistic forms changes time to time to suit the socio and cultural environment. The classical Sanskrit theatrical tradition was present and enacted throughout the century. When the Britishers colonized the Indian subcontinent they started plunging all the economic resources. after the revolt of 1857 the Britishers gain control over everything: from the administration to justice, from economy to society, from newspapers to education. With this, they have created a mighty empire which will continue for century's. to rule this vast empire they need the service of

educated man and women who will loyally serve the British empire. As a result the English education were promoted heavily and the upper and middle class Indian went abroad to get education. These nationalist leader after studying western literature, western philosophical thought and scientific development applied the critical thinking in Indian context. They were resolved to aware Indian people of British exploitation and how their freedom were curtail. The main weapon of Indian nationalist to aware masses was the theatrical movement which started after the revolt of 1857. This paper will discuss how after 1857 the theatre was used to struggle against the British empire? How the classical theatrical tradition ascribed in the Natyashastra was used to generate the cultural consciousness among the Indian masses? How the Indian theatre helps to narrate multifold exploiting stories of Britishers? The theatre was used to tell the stories of Indian sufferings through mythological caricature, satirical plays, historical telling's and other form of theatrical performances. How these stories were perceived by the Indian masses and Britishers is the question of exploration.

The Natyashastra is one of the first and foremost text which is considered essential to study the different aspects of Indian theatre. Not only it helps us to construct the beginning of theatre practices in India, but this is also a primary text to study the history of origin of Music and its uses in Ancient India. In terms of theatre this text not go for theory based approach or philosophical preaching's. instead of this, it Dealt many layers of practical implementations related to theatrical performances such as, direction, story, Bhava, Rasa, acting, poetry, music and makeups.¹ The Ancient Indian theatre was primarily based on this text, later the Sanskrit tradition evolve during the British time totally relied upon the description provided in this text.

The classical Indian theatrical traditions later have evolved to different types of theatre forms which were widely performed in the British time. Some of them were: Community theatre, street theatre, guerilla theatre, prison theatre for development, campaign theatre, protest theatre, oppositional theatre etc.²

When the Britishers arrived in India and starts discovering the Ancient Indian texts they extensively discussed the discovered text and its connotation with the formation of Asiatic society of Bengal in 1784. William Jones had played very important role for the most of the discovered texts. In the preface of Shakuntala of Kalidas he wrote:

¹ Shruti Das, Ancient Indian Dramaturgy: a Historical Overview of Bharata's Natyashastra, Journal of Literary Explorations, Vol. 3, Issue III, August, 2015: p. 135.

² Priyam Basu Thakur, Theatre for Development in Indian Context: an Introspection, Global Media Journal, December 2013, Vol.4, No.2 :p. 2.

“The play of Sacontala must have been very popular when it was first represented; for the Indian empire was then in full vigour, and the national vanity must have been highly flattered by the magnificent introduction of those kings and heroes in whom the Hindus gloried; the scenery must have been splendid and beautiful; and there is good reason to believe, that the court in Avanti was equal in brilliancy during the reign of Vikramaditya, to that of any monarch in any age or country”³ after forty years of Jones H.H. Wilson, also confirmed the presence of national theatre in Ancient India, And the theatrical performances were guided according to the instruction of Natyashastra.

Before 1857 the practice of theatre and theatrical performances were limited to the state of Bengal where the Kolkata was the main hub. In one side The British officials promoted and propagated western theatre staging Shakespeare and other English authors to promote western cultural ideologies into the minds of Indian people. On the other hand there were wealthy landlords who were staging the plays based on the classical Sanskrit traditions, their aim was to make aware of the socio-economic problems the Indian’s were facing during the time and to silently protest against the exploitation of colonial rule.

After 1857 the three major cities of that time namely: Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras emerged as the epicenter of theatrical performances. The nationalist aspirations of Indian’s were ready to explode through the writings of plays which were based on satirical takeoff’s, mythological caricature and historical plays. On the other side they were awaking Indian’s through the staging of socially constructive and critical plays related to the social life of British India. Krishna Mohan Banerjee was the first author who wrote fearlessly to the social conditions of Hindu society in Calcutta in 1831.

After 1857 much of the social plays were started coming and performed by the theatre artist: Ram Narayan Tarakratna, Kullin Kulasarvaswa, and Naba Natak (1857) a protest play, attacking on the prevailing polygamous practice of Kulin sect of Brahmins - as a original Bengali play was staged and started strong trend of social drama. Another two social drama titled Ram Navmi (1857) written by Gunabhi Ram Barua and Hemchandra Barua which was based on child marriages and Kania Kirtan (1861) on the opium addiction set the trend of social plays in the theatrical performances. The starting of the performances of these plays begins the long faze of resistive theatrical movements while adapting the classical based theatre ascribed in the Natyashastra with this, the struggle against British imperialism have started

³ William Jones, The Works of William Jones. With the Life of the Author by Lord Teignmouth, Volume 9, Agam Prakashan, (1979): p.370.

and to resist British Imperialism the playwrights were exploring different subjects to write upon.

Due to the rise of cultural nationalism and the attempt to build political and cultural consciousness on Indian's the theatre provided a very good platform to express dissent with a very clever way. The two states namely Bengal and Maharashtra played very important role for fostering the culture: theatre and literature. Other states also played its role: but the effects were mostly visible on these two states. the theatrical arts were used to protest against the British tyranny. Pushpa Sundar argues that the Historical dramas in particular became messengers of nationalist sentiment, with plays such as V.J. Keertane's Thorle Madhav Rao Peshwe (1861).⁴ She further says; Political commentary was also incorporated into folk forms such as powada and tamasha, and into keertans (religious discourses using music and dance).⁵

Later, historical plays was also started to be wrote in the meantime, in Bengal, Girish Chandra Ghosh, one of the first great men of Bengali theatre, wrote a series of historical plays like Siraj-ud-daula and Mir Kasim on the theme of British oppression, using historical figures and situations to convey a contemporary message. Siraj-ud-daula was banned by the Britishers. Similarly D.L Roy in his plays explored not only Indian history in relation to the contemporary situation, but also questioned Indian nationalism, pointing out the exploitation inherent in the caste system and feudal structure.⁶

The major resistance comes from the writings of Dinbandhu Mitra a civil servant by profession he wrote Nildarpan (The Mirror of Indigo) in 1859. this play exposed the imperial British policy and the difficult situations faced by the workers working in the Indigo plantation.⁷ Divided into the several scene this play not only focused the suffering conditions of Indian's in the Indigo plants but it also discuss the social eval's present at that time. In the preface of the play the translator wrote:

"The evils of Kulin Brahminism, widow marriage prohibition, quackery, fanaticism, have been depicted by it with great effect."⁸ The play as highly influenced by the classical Sanskrit traditions ascribed in the Natyashastra. The division of scenes, the characterisation of people, and the styles of plays. While defining styles Natyashastra says:

"Just as the [musical] notes (svara) constitute scales (grāma) due to the Śrutis together with their Jātis, so the [Varieties] of plays (lit. poetical works) come into existence due to Varieties

⁴ Pushpa Sundar, What India's Anti-Colonial Theatre Tells Us About Artful Dissent in Times of Intolerance, Thewire, 19/APR/2017,

<https://thewire.in/politics/dissent-theatre-intolerance-colonialism>

⁵ ibid:

⁶ Ibid:

⁷ Dinabandhu Mitra, Nil Darpan: The indigo planting mirror, C. H. Manwel, (1861): p. 2.

<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/54027/54027-h/54027-h.htm>

⁸ Ibid: p. 3.

of Styles.”⁹ The description of customs, society’s, and cultures were inscribed by following the classical Sanskrit traditions attributed in the *Natyashastra*. when the National Theatre in Calcutta was established this was the first play to be staged on. The contribution of bringing alive this play to public audience goes to James Long who runs the native press. He published many books in Bengali including this play. He firmly believes that;

“vernacular writings were an important barometer of the feelings of Indian people and that they had often been ignored by those in power.”¹⁰ Long mentioned the play to William Scott Seton Karr, secretary to the Government of Bengal, who in turn brought it to the attention of Lieutenant Governor Sir John Peter Grant. He requested for the English translation of this play which was translated by Michael Madhusudan Dutt and printed and distributed to the British officials. When the play got popularised it reached to indigo planters and the pro-planter press, who believes that they have been insulted and defamed through this play. As a result, James Long was taken to court by Walter Brett, proprietor of the *Englishman* newspaper, together with the Landholders Association of British India and the general body of indigo planters.

The trial for libel took place in July 1861 in, and there was much sympathy expressed for James Long. Yet he was found guilty, sentenced to one month in jail and fined Rs 1,000¹¹ which was paid by Kaliprasanna Singha a noted Bengali author. In spite of this, patriotic drama on British injustice continued to flourish and, after 1870, nationalist and political sentiments became more openly expressed.¹²

Before moving further let's discuss some of the themes of this play *Nildarpan* because this play set a precedent and as a result a large number of social-oriented plays were being written on *Darpan* style. The popular ones were *Zamindar Darpan* (1873) by Mir Massarraff Hosan which discussed the peasant rebellion happening against land owning class. *Dakshinarnjan Chattopadhyay*'s “The Tea planters mirror” (1857) and *Jeldarpan* - on poor condition of British owned jails and terrible life of prisoners in jails.¹³ However, in the themes in *Nildarpan* the main emphasis is given on the exploitative nature of indigo plants and the declining condition of living style: in the opening scene the *Sadhu Churn* says that this country is no longer liveable... while replying to him *Goluk Chunder Basu* says that it is not easy to leave a country where you are living for generations. He remembered the old days when prosperity shines, which has declined in the present time thus:

“My family has been here for seven generations. The lands which our fore-fathers rented have enabled us never to acknowledge ourselves servants of others. The rice which grows, provides food for the whole year, means of hospitality to guests, and also the expense of religious services; the mustard seed we get, supplies oil for the whole year, and, besides, we can sell it for about sixty or seventy rupees. *Svaropur* is not a place where people are in want.—It has rice, peas, oil, molasses from its fields, vegetables in the garden, and fish from the tanks;—whose heart is not torn when obliged to leave such a place? And who can do that

⁹ Manomohan Ghosh, *The Naṭyasastra a Treatise on Hindu Dramaturgy and Histrionics*, The Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, (2020) :CH20:5.

¹⁰ Lesley Shapland, How the translation of a Bengali play led to a British priest being convicted for libel in 1861, scroll, Sep 06, 2020. <https://scroll.in/article/972141/how-the-translation-of-a-bengali-play-led-to-a-british-priest-being-convicted-for-libel-in-1861>

¹¹ Ibid:

¹² Pushpa Sundar, What India's Anti-Colonial Theatre Tells Us About Artful Dissent in Times of Intolerance, *The Wire*, 19/APR/2017, <https://thewire.in/politics/dissent-theatre-intolerance-colonialism>

¹³ Sudipto Chatterjee, *The Nation staged*, in Nandi Bhatia (ed.), *The Modern Indian Theatre, A Reader*, Op. Cit., p. 103.

easily?"¹⁴ the struggle for survival, the struggle to eat, the struggle to improve position in the British official's eyes is visible when Gopi says to J. J. Wood:

"My Lord, although I am by caste a Káystha, I do my work like a Keaot (a shoe-maker). The service which I have rendered in stopping the rice cultivation and making the Indigo to grow in the field of the Mollahs, and also to take (lákhrāj) his rent-free lands of seven generations from Goluk Chunder Bose, and to take away the iron crow from the Government; the work I have done for these, I can dare say, can never be done by a Keaot (a shoemaker). It is my ill-fortune only (evil forehead) that I don't get the least praise for doing so much..."¹⁵ How Indians are taring apart each other for the personal growth is also visible in the same scene when Gopi conspired against Nobin Madhab who speaks for the favour of Indian workers working in the plants. The character of gopi is highly visible when he admits that while working for the Britishers he has shed fere, shame, honour, and "the destroying of cows, of Brahmins, of women, and the burning down of houses are become my ornaments, and I now lie down in bed keeping the jail as my pillow (thinking of it)."¹⁶ Thus NilDarpan had played very instrumental role for bringing social and political both roles alive. and beginning of resistive plays against the British imperialism in Bengali and other languages.

The Hindi theatre started in 1881 when Bhartendu Harishchandra wrote plays following the classical Sanskrit tradition. His early plays consist translations from other languages. He adapted plays from the Sanskrit, Bangla, Prakrit, and from Shakespeare's writings. When he starts originally writing the plays he followed the footsteps of Bharata Muni whose foundational text *Natyashastra* was the main pillar of classical Sanskrit tradition. Within the fivefold goals of theatrical performances (comic, erotic, spectacular, social reform, and patriotism) The first three are barely discussed. It is the last two which call for remark: these are to be created by the reinterpretation of old tales, by the creation of a public forum where social issues can be discussed, and where the love of the country is to be generated.¹⁷

Though not entirely just to Bharatendu Harishchandra's multi-faceted agenda, for he himself had envisaged theatre as offering a public forum for thrashing out social and political issues, or even that of Jayshankar Prasad who for all his traditionalism remained deeply concerned with investigating history, the names Bharatendu and Prasad did conjure up visions of a narrow Hindi/Hindu agenda which attempted to cordon off Hindi from all alien influences.¹⁸ While discussing old Sanskrit plays he derives those aspects of Drama which can be adapted in the present time. As the nineteenth century environment was completely different from the royal courts and from the royal personages, the adaption of Bharata's *Natyashastra* has to be slightly changed to suit the modern timeframe. He reviews those conventional aspects of Bharata's *Natyashastra* which can be considered meaningful and can serve a social purpose. The uses of costumes is important to present character and minds of different artists performing in the stage. The *Natyashastra* in chapter 23:4 mentioned four kinds of costumes: "model work (pusta), decoration (alaṃkāra), painting the limbs (aṅgaracanā) and [the use of] living creatures (sañjīva)."¹⁹ But Harishchandra contends for the adaption of modern costumes present in the western theatre and Parsi theatres to suit the modern time. In the Bharata's description the natural (svabhavik) presentation is also key to the plays success. The real life presentation of plays is emphasised by him in order to achieved the ultimate

¹⁴ Dinabandhu Mitra, *Nil Darpan: The indigo planting mirror*, C. H. Manwel, (1861): p. 5.

¹⁵ Ibid: 12-13.

¹⁶ Ibid: 13.

¹⁷ Vasudha Dalmia, *Poetics, Plays, and Performances: The Politics of Modern Indian Theatre*, Oxford University Press, (2008): P. 36.

¹⁸ Ibid: P. 16.

¹⁹ See chapter 23 of *Natyashastra* for the entire details about the uses of costumes in theatrical productions. This chapter is quoted from Manomohan Ghosh, *The Naṭyashastra a Treatise on Hindu Dramaturgy and Histrionics*, The Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, (2020): 23:4.

perfection. with the simple and colloquial language mainly the uses of Brajbhasha for upper character indicates the Krishna Bhakti poetry and the lower characters speaks the Urdu and Khariboli for the conversations, Harishchandra reached the heart of common masses. The translation of Mudrarakshasa and Satya Harishchandra were aware Indian's of their political and ethical characters. Bharat durdasha (1876) is an important play which carries political message. This play It is structured as an impending confrontation between two antagonistic forces, around the symbolic image of Bharat, a tottering figure resting on a stick for support, in tattered clothes, with a worn out crown.²⁰ This play defines the struggle of Bharat and its demise of past.

The passes of The Dramatic Performances Act restricts many play writes for having direct mention of Britishers. It also impacted Harishchandra's writing for some time. Later in 1881 he wrote 'Andher nagari' a play which has folk based characters and lyrics so simple which could turn the audience. The theme of the play was about the tyranny of autocratic government indirectly related to Britishers. The story of this play was so beautifully crafted and satirically set in folk era that it was impossible for the Britishers to recognized and persecute the author. The story is so popular in the present time that it still in flinched into the minds of common man. there once reigned a Raja Harbong, who was known for his dim-witted, whimsical, often cruelly unjust treatment of his people. He was finally trapped into pronouncing his own death sentence, his whimsy ably managed by the equally proverbial, wonder-working yogis, the gurus Gorakh and Machandar.²¹

The story of selling everything in just one Taka was characterised to present British governments ruthlessness towards the common man. The Wenders who cells roasted peas defines the situations thus:

"Very high officials eat chana, those who impose double taxes on us all. 'The kunjari sells her grocery with the quip: 'Here, take your pick of Hindustan's dry fruits, dissension and animosity.' The pachakvala sells his digestives with the remark: 'The Sahibs who eat churan, can digest all of the land of Hind. The police officers, when they eat their churan, can digest all legislation.' The most original vendor of goods is the one who offers jatis, castes, for sale. He is, of course, a Brahman, who is willing to write vyavastha to order, awarding the payee any varna that he asks for—a sweep at the upward mobilization, made possible by British insistence on classification of the varna status of castes—all available for a taka each."²² When the Mahant here this situation of chaos he advised his Shisya to stay away from this place but he refused and whatever happens next is well-known and at the end of this result the king sentenced himself to death.

After the faze of Harishchandra the production of theatrical plays in Hindi was continued and performances were being held in different places, during this time the growth and expansion of Parsi theatre was also visible. But the epicentre of theatre shifted to Bengal where plays written by Girishchandra Ghosh and Dwijendralal Ray was staged successfully with high appraisal from the audience. As a result people started deviating from Hindi theatre.

The arrival of Jayshankar Prasad (1886–1937) in theatre movement give Hindi drama a new life. While bringing historical subjects often in his play he argues for the adaption of classical Sanskrit tradition of Natyashastra instead of imitating the west on characterisation of individual personage he sought to established Indian view of dramatic and literary criticism. For the creation of rasa, (Natyashastra chapter 6-7) which defines classical Indian aesthetics, the manovritti or mental states which exist in vasana or desire were generalized and created

²⁰ Vasudha Dalmia, Poetics, Plays, and Performances: The Politics of Modern Indian Theatre, Oxford University Press, (2008): P. 48.

²¹ Ibid: 53-54.

²² Ibid: 54.

ananda, bliss, thus serving as a corrective for individual desire.²³ Prasad's contribution apart from the Hindi literature is his creation of historically authentic plays. From the time of 1910 to 1933 within the span of 23 years he wrote total 13 plays. While writing he extensively followed new discovery and development of modern historical research and classical Sanskrit tradition. The historical stories contained in the Purana's and ancient Indian rulers was his favourite theme.

Dhruvasvamini (1933) his last play is considered his most compact and mature composition. the theme of this play was the conquest of Shaka dynasty under the leadership of Chandragupta II, his marriage to his brother's beautiful wife Dhruvasvamini. With this play's with the examples of Dharmashastra and historical accounts he argues for the remarriage of women and right to remarry of Dhruvasvamini which was considered taboo during this time. The plot of this play is very short and simple: divided in single act with just three scenes the entire episode of Dhruvasvamini's marriage to Rama Gupta, the demand of her as ransom by Shaka ruler, the killing of Shaka ruler by Chandragupta disguise as Dhruvasvamini, and his accession to Gupta empire were narrated effectively. According to Vasudha Dalmia The three scenes focus on three important agendas, a feminist bid for independence, the exaltation of romantic love, and finally the challenge to constricting Brahminical orthodoxy, all three of which Prasad himself sabotages by the kind of closure he finally finds.²⁴

During his time the number of local theatre organization also launched upside the Parsi and Marathis. During the political struggle against the mighty British empire these companies were instrumental bringing the social change via their performance of Drama. After the declaration of Gandhiji (1924) where he push for social reform in order to get complete Svaraj, the theatre was used to campaign against the social eval's present in the society. The social cultural movement contained with the political messaging was the best weapon India's could have at that time. The formation of IPTA (Indian peoples theatre association). The IPTA was the main force behind the national struggle during the faze of 1942-1947. The teem of IPTA was able to bring radical nationalist consciousness into the minds of Indians. Great artist of that time such as Balraj Sahni, Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, Kaifi Azmi and others were actively involved with the IPTA's movement. Hunger, famine, communalism, caste discrimination, and colonial exploitations were the subjects which IPTA deals during the faze of 1942 to 47 and after.

Thus in conclusion it could be said that the contribution of Indian theatre against the struggle of British empire was immensely vast and could not be ignore. After 1857 with the plays of Dinabandhu Mitra, Harishchandra, Jayshankar Prasad, Parsi theatre and people involved in the IPTA were instrumental of bringing social and political awareness into the minds of Indian masses. The continuation of classical theatre ascribed in Natyashastra gives another dimension to this struggle. While celebrating the seventy-fifth years of independence we should be giving more attention towards the growth of theatre and its problem of finding institutional sources of funding and discovering original playwriting. These problems are not knew, in 1956 while defining the problems of theatre actor-director Shambhu Mitra had said: "How long do you believe we can pull on without a morsel to eat and without a shelter to live in? We are ready to work as professionals, we have qualified ourselves to be such. We believe that theatregoers will see that we live and flourish. But how and where may we show them our mettle and to get from them in exchange our requirements? We need a house of our own."²⁵ While writing for the Caravan Sudhanva Deshpande realistically defines the actual situation which the Indian theatre is facing:

²³ Ibid: p. 82.

²⁴ Ibid: p. 89.

²⁵ Sudhanva Deshpande, Theatre in India continues to be a neglected stepchild of the arts, caravan magazine, 01 March 2010, <https://caravanmagazine.in/perspectives/drama-our-times>

“In India, theatre happens anywhere and everywhere—in badly designed auditoria, schools and colleges, parks and gardens, restaurants, on rooftops, in open fields, street corners, even atop moving trains. A neglected stepchild of the Indian arts, theatre has developed the cunning of the street kid: it forages for morsels and takes any space available and makes it its home; it hoodwinks the cop and outsmarts the bully; and in the hands of someone like Vijay Tendulkar, it becomes brazen, rude, outspoken and blunt.”²⁶

Thus despite giving enormous contribution for the struggle against British empire theatre in India is growing and thriving without support from anyone.

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²⁶ *ibid*: Caravan

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