



## Role of Theatre in Indian Nationalism During the Colonial Period

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**Abstract:** *Theatre has constituted an important part of the cultural life and public entertainment in India with its varied manifestations. The material state of literacy during the colonial era makes the study of theatrical activities very important. Being an oral cultural form, it provides platforms for political awareness as well as a means of representing the views of the general public. The study emphasizes how, throughout the colonial era, theatre underwent a transformation that made it a crucial arena for social and political activities. Through artistic forms, it questioned and resisted the authoritarian framework, eliciting a range of reactions. This essay illustrates how Indian theatre evolved during the colonial era. Since the late 19th century, theatre has played a significant role in social and political movements. Through the employment of artistic forms, it challenged and questioned authoritarian structures. However, while being a crucial platform for progressive authors and political activists, theatre's position in Colonial studies is characterized by ambiguity and marginality.*

**Keywords:** *Entertainment, Awareness, Cultural Life, Literacy.*

**Introduction:** The most appropriate literary genre and vehicle for the dissemination of reformatory ideas is theatre, in all of its manifestations. Because of its capacity to draw in and engage a large audience via entertainment. It synthesizes many forms of art, including dance, theatre, music, poetry, and literature, making it a dynamic and mature manifestation of the creative spirit. The many illusions created by spoken words, written words, expressive gestures, dramatic displays, riots of colour, and music somehow bring the theatre to life, instantly appealing to the human mind. (Srinivas,1961)

The performance of plays and musicals is the focus of the performing arts category known as theatre. It has a global reach and a significant impact. In theatre, live performances by actors are almost entirely focused on creating a meaningful and cohesive sense of drama within a time-space-audience framework. These performances are carefully choreographed. Through human action, theatre takes on a variety of forms and topics that are approved by the socio-political and geographic context. Divergent views have been expressed on the proper purpose of theatre. While some have emphasized theatre as a serious, goal-oriented art form, others have focused on theatre as a means of amusing people, and yet others see no reason why theatre cannot be both serious and entertaining at the same time. (Chatterjee;1980). All the components that go into creating a dramatic performance are included in the broad word "theatre."

The purpose of the study is to demonstrate how, throughout the colonial era, theatre changed and became a crucial platform for social and political activities.

## **Brief History of Indian Theatre:**

- The second part of the 18th century saw the emergence of theatre in India in Calcutta and Bombay.
- Elites ruled theatres during the whole of the 1860s. They performed a variety of plays that tackled modern problems including polygamy, widow remarriage, and discrimination based on race and class, among many others.
- Because these theatres were so constrictive, public theatre emerged as a result of the fervour and tenacity of educated, middle-class youth who saw great potential for expression of their thoughts and amusement.
- The plays' reflection of Bengal's socioeconomic situations and the core of nationalism dates back to the second half of the nineteenth century.

**History of Theatre Movement in India with Special Reference to Bengal:** Great plays from the eras of Kalidasa and Bhasa abound in Indian history, yet the societal context in which this classical culture emerged did not last until the present day. Due to the cultural effects of British rule and English education in the 19th century, contemporary play first appeared in Bengal, Maharashtra, and South India. Even yet, “social realism” was still a long way off, with most of the plays being costume dramas based on historical romances, Puranic tragedies, and love tales from Indian epics.

“Navanna” was a watershed in Bengali cultural movement history. Under the direction of Shambhu Mitra, the drama portrayed the terrible tragedy of the Bengali peasants during the 1943 famine in four parts. As Professor D.P. Mukherjee of Lucknow University put it, he had only “imagined the presence of social realism in art,” but he was filled with optimism for the future after viewing “Navanna” at the People’s Theatre. Many theatrical organizations arose as a consequence of the IPTA’s efforts in the late 1950s and early 1960s. They started the Group Theatre Movement, which expanded the scope of the New Drama movement and brought Bengali theatre up to speed with Western developments. However, since its primary goal was to introduce Bengali audiences to the greatest Western plays—Ibsen, Chekhov, Pirandello, Brecht, Wesker, Miller, and others—instead of producing its own, New Drama did not generate as many original writers. Nonetheless, the prolific writers who translated foreign plays also produced a number of noteworthy original works.

**Changing Trend of Theatre:** Reverend Krishna Mohan Banerjee wrote the first modern Indian play in English in 1831. It was about the state of Hindu society in Calcutta at the time and was never performed, but it was the first time in Indian drama that the author openly criticised the conditions in which he lived.<sup>8</sup> Madhusudan Michale The foundation of the literary tradition of indigenous (Bengali) dramatic writing in the western style was set by Dutta. Dutta penned an article titled “The Anglo-saxon and the Hindu” in 1854. In it, he translated a beautiful passage from Aenied to celebrate the advent of the English in India.<sup>9</sup> “Who is this stranger who entered our home? .. Who is this, to terrorise us into submission and humbleness to the dust? In the last section, Dutta advises being cautious with colonists. Furthermore, some political ambiguity and ambivalence are permitted by the creative Colonial arrangement. It creates tension in both substance and form by both allowing and resisting. The ambiguity of Colonial discourses took on several forms in the works of playwrights after to Dutta. Over time, they evolved to support and contribute to the Nationalist discourse that was presented on the Bengali stage. Between the 1850s and 1857, Ram Narayan Tarakratna’s Kullin Kulasarvaswa and Naba Natak (1857), an original Bengali play criticising the Kulin sect of Brahmins’ prevalent polygamous behaviour, were performed, sparking a significant social theatre movement. A plethora of writers emerged with social concern plays. The plays Ram Navmi (1857) and Kania Kirtan (1861) were written by Assami playwrights Gunabhi Ram Barua and Hemchandra Barua, respectively.

Kania Kirtan was an opium addict, and Ram Navmi was an assault against child marriage. across the 1860s and 1870s, performances of this kind were seen across the remainder of India. The hardship of women was represented in Ranchchodbhai Dave's "Lalitadukh darshak" (1878) in Gujarat. This preference for social dramas eventually gave way to the use of theatre to express political views.

Moreover, after urban theatre established itself as an institution, it progressively, although erratically, became a theatre of resistance as opposed to cooperation. Theatrical productions and performances, as a cultural force for the community or greater geographic area, were a platform for imperialist resistance and expression.

Nildarpan (The Mirror of Indigo), a political drama exposing the exploitative conditions of Bengali British Planters' Indigo plantations, was written in 1859 by Dinbandhu Mitra, a government official from Bengal. Nildarpan was the inaugural show in 1872, when the Calcutta stage transitioned to a professional, democratic, ticketed theatre. It was obviously anti-British and politically charged. Contrary to common assumption, Nildarpan was not nearly as revolutionary a protest as was previously believed. The political structure of the story is more like to the notion of rebellious behaviour held by the middle class than it is to the planned but ultimately futile rebellion that the indigo movement of 1860 truly was. Nildarpan, whether in its Bengali translation by Mirtra or its English translation by James Long of the Church Missionary Society, acted as a catalyst for social change and established a precedent when it was translated, published, and distributed in England. This version created controversy and led to subsequent reforms. More so-called social protest plays that mirrored the oppressive flaws in society started to appear; many of them were in the darpan style. Among them were the notable works "Zamindar darpan" (Landowner's mirror) by Mir Massarraf Hosan (1873), which described the peasant rebellion against the land-owning class, "The Tea Planters" mirror (1857) by Dakshinaranjan Chattopadhyay, and Jeldarpan, which discussed the appalling conditions of British-owned jails and the dreadful conditions of prisoner life. All of these plays denounced the crimes committed by the Colonial Government agencies on the bulk of Bengal's rural working class and subaltern population, while; unfortunately, the urban elite also had a direct hand in them. Though the conversation and visuals were clearly romanticizing concepts of revolt and freedom, they were more heavily laced with political than intellectual devotion. The Colonial authorities were so incensed by Bengali public theatre within four years that they created the Dramatic Performance Act in 1876 to suppress its provocative, seditious, and patriotic tendencies<sup>18</sup>. The Act served as a clear indicator of the conflict between theatre as an urban institution and the Colonial state. According to Nandi Bhatia, it is feasible to discuss the emergence of Nationalist drama after 1860, and by 1876, Indian theatre had really evolved into a platform for staging critiques of the injustices and tragedies inflicted upon the colonial subjects as well as an expression of political struggle against colonial rule. As a result, it started to serve as an anti-colonial medium at least a decade before the Nationalist Movement was formally started in 1885 with the establishment of the Indian National Congress.

Furthermore, in the 1880s, Parsi theatre groups with a rather cosmopolitan style and Hindustani as their language franca began touring all throughout India, as well as south-east Asia and east Africa, giving rise to the Pan-Indian Indian populist theatre that had a national reach. Contemporary theatre operated along commercial lines, accessible to everyone regardless of location, caste, or class. Despite its economic goals, it did, in many respects, contribute to an unconscious, uniting nationalist goal that peaked between the 1880s and the 1930s. Instead of openly advocating for political causes, the majority of plays presented by commercial theatres portrayed imaginary national identities that might exist even during the colonial era. There was always a patriotic undertone when historical plays were staged. This potential nationalism is shown even in the play's marketing, which was directed and produced by Giris Ghosh, the creative director.

In addition, Hindi theatre (in Banaras and the surrounding areas of Northern India) made a significant contribution starting in 1881, when Bhartendu Harishchendera—the man credited with creating modern Hindi theater—infused all eighteen of his plays with nationalistic and reformative themes, departing from the

Parsi theatrical tradition. He broke with convention and wrote the satirical play *Ander Nagri* (Lawless state), a way to express his beliefs via creative theatre. Even yet, he used western theatrical elements as well as traditional Sanskrit into his Hindi theatre. Hindi historical drama representatives Jay Shanker Prasad and Radheshyam Kathavachak extolled the virtues of the glorious Hindu past. Indian history was discussed and referenced in Jayshankar Prasad's historical dramas on Chandergupta (1931) and other ancient Indian empires.

Similar to Hindi theatre, national and mythological plays gained popularity in Marathi theatre. These plays emphasised religious principles and "dharma" for the country, calling for the abolition of colonialism. In addition, Tagore—a key character in Modern Indian theatre—promoted and pioneered cultural nationalism and opposed cultural imperialism via the creative use of theatre. He overthrew the bulwark of picturesque entertainment and home realism, which both followed the western model and suggested more inventive stagecraft based on Sanskrit aesthetics. In his groundbreaking essay *Rangmanch* (1902), he rebelled against cultural imperialism. The creative richness of the poet and performer is overwhelmed by the capitalist's money in the excessively elaborate theatre that we have put up in imitation of the West, the author said. Thus, a talented performer of his kind need to discard the pricey junk of the western style stage. Tagore's selection of topics focused mostly on declining issues, such as attacking orthodox Hinduism and criticising Malini's main religion (1869); *Chandalika* (1933) addressed untouchability, while *Jasher Dash* (1933) was a critique of Hinduism. In *Shanti Niketan*, he wrote a number of plays between 1908 and 1934 that were performed on outdoor stages. His masterpieces *Muktadhara* (1922) and *Rakta Karvi* (1924), which appeal for peace with nature, respectively addressed ecological and environmental consciousness and issued a warning against the exploitation of natural resources. Furthermore, Tagore's 1913 Nobel Prize victory indirectly modernised Indian theatre by making it known to a global audience with the translation and world premiere of his play *Dakghar* (The Post Office). This also made it easier for regional Indian language plays that had not gotten much attention before to be translated internationally.

Many local theatre organizations in south India followed the trend of commercial and nomadic play companies of Parsis and Marathis by presenting performances and attempting to attract a larger range of audiences after the 1920s. This pattern sparked a renewed interest in educated city-dwelling adolescents joining the theatre as writers and artists, along with a rising interest in English literature and the study of Sanskrit Classics. By the 1920s, theatre had become the most popular form of mass entertainment with a significant number of local nomadic groups. However, it remained for more than just leisure. The national fight for independence became the focus of popular theatre with the start of the national movement and the escalation of political activity. Nationalists found in them a vital weapon for successfully and extensively disseminating their message. This resulted in popular theatre during this time being politicised. Additionally, the social reform movement—a crucial component of the country's development—was underway. Gandhiji's Belgram Congress proclamation (1924) said that the Congress needed to aggressively pursue a social reform plan because it was crucial to achieving Swaraj. Theatre was another tool employed by social reformers in their effort to eradicate social problems. Following the 1919 Jallianwalah Bagh massacre, the nation-wide opposition to the Rowlatt Act and the Non-Cooperation movement sparked a surge in political activity that led to the politicization of popular theatre, the integration of stage performers into mainstream society, and the start of a new era in the mass entertainment industry.

**Conclusion:** Indian theatre revealed the underlying units and connectivity beyond temporal regional language barriers, and its many forms and genera, which are part of a broader multiple whole, expressed all types of connections and interrelationships, and highlighted core cultural identity. Its astounding richness and heterogeneity sustained Indian identity and Indianness.

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