

HISTORICAL ROLE OF EUROPEANS IN REVIVING DRAMA IN SOUTH ASIA

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Abstract

Drama as a performing art in India had its origin in the Sanskrit Drama which saw its apogee in the Gupta period. After the Muslim conquests the drama suffered a decline because drama as such was not part of the 'Arabic or Persian repertoire. Subsidiary forms of drama appeared after the formative phase such as Ibn Daniyal of the 13th century Hijri. Drama could see a revival in South Asia only due to European seafarers, mainly the Portuguese and the British. The Portuguese at least, were initially as anxious to spread Christianity as they were for trade and conquest. For the purpose of proselytization, the Portuguese staged religious plays in Urdu, in the early Deccan idiom which as entertainment proved popular. After British rule was firmly established, theatres were built and plays performed, first in Bengal and then in Bombay. The earlier theatre drew upon the English classics because the audience was exclusively European. Later their success gave an impetus to local patrons, writers and performers, especially in Bengali and the more modern Urdu. During the colonial period itself, vernacular drama had established its foothold and a fusion of themes occurred due to translations. The evolution of drama proved to be a significant social index as one could see which class chose to perform in public and which class did not. It left a lasting impact on Urdu literature

Keywords: *Natya,, Calcutta Theatre, Chowinghee Theatre, Chidma Desh, Vidya Sundar*

Introduction

The history of theatre in India dates back around 5,000 years and has created his own culture and tradition. In early forms, the performances were often narrative including recitation, singing, and dancing. From Sanskrit dramas to folklore to Western influences to

contemporary works, we will take a journey through history to view the development of Indian theatre.

The earliest contribution to the Indian theatre, dating between 2000 B.C.E. and the 4th century C.E., comes from Bharata Muni, who wrote the 36 books of the *Natyashastra*. The title of the text is composed of two words, "Nāṭya" and "Śhāstra". The root of the Sanskrit word *Nāṭya* is *Naṭa* which means "act, represent". The word *Śhāstra* means "precept, rules, manual, compendium, book or treatise"¹, and is generally used as a suffix in the Indian literature context, for knowledge in a defined area of practice who puts forward a theory of theatrical performance based on style and motion, rather than psychology.

According to Bharata, the god Brahma leads him to write the *Natyashastra*, and Bharata professes that theatre stems from the gods and teaches about duty. The text encompasses all aspects of production from theatre architecture to make-up to the performer's movements.

The Muslim conquests also caused decline since drama as such was not in the 'Arabic and Persian repertoire. *Hakwati* (story-teller) *Khayal -al -zil* (Shadow plays) and *Karagoz* (puppet shows) were known, but did not belong to mainstream drama and their influence was limited. Later, village theatre was encouraged across the subcontinent in an attempt to reassert indigenous values and ideas, developing in a large number of regional languages from the 15th to the 19th centuries. When the British displaced the other contenders the Portuguese and the French, modern Indian theatre developed. Indian theatre has three specific periods: the classical period, the traditional period, and the modern period. The arrival of Western races in India is attributed to the famous Portuguese sailor Vasco da Gama (1498 A.D), who landed at the site of Calikut in Malabar and was a guest of Raja Zamorin there. The Portuguese then began a series of conquests in the East in (1509 AD) when the Portuguese General Afonso de Albuquerque captured the *Fortress* of Ormuz. This conquest gave the Portuguese full control of the trade between India and Europe passing through the Persian Gulf and they captured the port of the Indian state of Bijapur and made it their capital. They further conquered Dave's Fort in the Gulf of Khambhat. In a short period of time, the Portuguese captured the Red Sea and many important places in the Arabian Sea.

In 1533 Bombay was obtained from the Sultan of Gujarat but before that, Portuguese missionaries had arrived here. After the conquest

of Goa, the “Portuguese sent Indians to preach so they started using Urdu. Since the purpose of their arrival in the subcontinent was both commercial and religious, they were also preaching Christianity at the same time. The Portuguese had taken a new path and preached in Indian or Urdu in the name of spectacle (approximately one act plays that dramatically illustrate some aspect of Christianity) in certain buildings”². These spectacles were shown in Urdu which was rapidly evolving in the Deccan at that time.

The fervour for the promotion of their religion, the feeling of patriotism and the passion for displaying one’s wealth were very prominent among the Portuguese. As a result, Urdu drama and theatre were founded. Their elders are presented in Indian language as working for the welfare of the people highlighting important aspects of the living conditions of the region; The theatres in Europe, especially the French and Spanish, were the first to introduce reforms and inventions on the Indian stage. In “1572 and in 1577 when they reached the court of Akbar in Agra, they also started preaching on a large scale and started public performances of spectacles (A translation of spectacle was *tamasha*). The extent of preaching can be gauged from the fact that in only Basin in the area from 1534 till 1600, seventeen churches had been built, these plays were popular in general.”³

At the same time, in 1620 a college was founded, called Jewish College, Agra. The community bought two areas and dedicated them for college expenses. This was the time when the stage in the subcontinent was evolving and from Bombay to the capital Agra along with the Portuguese. The Dutch and the British also wanted to trade with India, so the English East India Company was established in 1600 AD and then in 1608 AD a regular trading factory was established in the Surat area.

“British domination began in 1668 when Bombay was transferred from Charles II to the English East India Company for an annual rent of £10.” Sir George Oxenden (1620–1669) became the first Governor of Bombay under the regime of the English East India Company”⁴.

Bombay was then a major port and military establishment. Attempts were made to develop it as a business hub, for which they began to contact businessmen and workers. The most important promise made was of religious freedom and protection from any external attack. The peaceful environment was conducive to the continuation of business activities and attracted the business class and other wealthy people

Theatre and Drama in Bengal

Historically, British merchants had started a series of spectacles for their entertainment during their stay in Bengal. Before the Battle of Plassey (1757) in Calcutta, there was a Mandwa (মন্ডা) in the central city founded in 1753 “Its location is said to be opposite the present St. Andrew’s Church, east of the intersection of Red Bazaar Street and Mission Row, opposite to the site where the old court house originally stood.”⁵

In 1756 it turned into an auction house. It was eventually replaced by the Calcutta Theatre or "The New Playhouse", which was founded by the auctioneer George Williamson in 1775. It was situated near the northern section of Clive Street and to the north of Writers Building, and it was built by the subscriptions of share-holders of one hundred rupees each. Among the share-holders was the Governor, Richard Burwell as well.

It was exclusively for the English people and featured only English plays. Later in 1776 AD another theatre called Calcutta Theatre was built in Clough Street and Lane Range localities.

Its historical significance is also significant because "Garrick David, a well-known English actor, sent Mr Messinc to direct plays here and to be the stage manager under whose supervision the plays could be performed here

1. *She Would and She Would Not*
2. *Richard III*
3. *High Life below Stairs*
4. *Hamlet*
5. *The School for Scandal*

In this sense, we can say that there was a connection between the theater of India and London, when people were sent here to train artists, but it is not known what its nature was? Was it due to the cooperation of the company or was it made possible by the theater’s own efforts?

“The theatre was founded in 1787 by Emma Bistow, married to an English merchant. It was situated in Bistow’s residence at the junction at Chowringhee and Theatre Road. Formally named Chowringhee Theatre, it was normally referred to as Mrs. Bistow’s Theatre after its founder and managing director. [Mrs. Bistow was considered a competent manager and also as a good actress on her own stage,

particularly noted within “comedy and humorous singing”⁶[Subsequent passage omitted—S.S.Kazmi]

It was the third theatre in the city of Calcutta. The most notable feature of this theater was that it featured female characters. It is known as the first theatre in India to employ actresses. In 1790 Mrs. Bistow’s Theatre was closed when Emma Bristow returned to England.

An important character in Bengali theater was Herasim Stepanovich Lebedeff Lebedev (1749 – July 27, 1817), a Russian writer, translator, and musician who publicly presented a Bengali play in the European style. He came to Madras as a bandmaster after taking a job at the Foreign Office. With assistance from local intellectuals, and Warren Hastings as one of its patrons, Lebedev founded the first European-style proscenium drama theatre in India. And later he came to Calcutta in 1795 AD. He founded the Bengali Theatre in Dharmtalla or Domtala (Ezra Street) which was commonly known as U Theatre on 7th November, 1795 with the help of a Bengali theatre lover and linguist Golucknath Das, he translated two English comedies ‘Disguise’ and another play “Love is the Best Doctor” by the English writer Colley Cibber into Bengali”.⁷

In Bengali it was called *Chidma Desh* and it was performed twice. The first time it was presented on November 27 1795. This is considered the first performance of the modern Indian theatre and for the first time Bengali actors and actresses performed, and again on March 21, 1796. All the styles of the presentation were Indian. Music and instruments were also Indian but some European instruments were also used. Along with this, songs were composed on the lyrics of Bharatiya Chandra's *Vidya Sundar*, but the important aspect in this regard was that for the first time in centuries, women had played female roles in this play. Before then it was only in ancient Sanskrit drama. The Governor-General, Sir John Shore, gave Lepdev permission to present plays on a regular basis. The popularity of the play was such that a ticket was sold an *ashrafi* (guinea) for performance and there was no place to sit, but only after the second of the play did Lepdev say goodbye to the theatre for unspecified reasons. He had compiled a small Bengali dictionary, wrote a book on Arithmetic in Bengali and translated part of *Annadamangal* into Russian. His Dictionary was published in 1801.

He wrote to the Russian ambassador in London about publishing Bharatchandra Ray’s works in Russia. However, the British administration was not supportive of Lebedev’s activities and was annoyed by his sympathetic stance towards the Indians on the other

hand became bankrupt. Finally, the British authorities expelled him from India in 1797. His financial condition was miserable, possessing only a small bag of belongings valued at Rs. 295.8. He was forced to stay for a few months in Cape Town to earn money for the ticket to Europe. He stopped in London on his way back to Russia in 1801.

The Private Subscription Theatre, more commonly known as the Chowringhee Theatre, Calcutta and it was located on the corner of Theatre Street and Lower Chowringhee Road. It was built on by raising funds by private donations on subscriptions by shares of Rs100 each. It was able to accommodate 300 people and was thereby the most spacious theatre in Calcutta at the time. It was protected by the Governor-General and became one of the leading theatres in Calcutta even India. Reviews of performances at the theatre were regularly published in the press.

A number of short-lived theatres had been founded in the city since the Calcutta Theatre, but the Chowringhee Theatre was to be the first permanent professional public theatre

It was inaugurated on November 25, 1813 and the maiden play held here was a tragedy named *Castle Spectre*. In 1835, Prince Dwarakanath Thakur purchased it and made some drastic renovations. Unfortunately, in May 1839, the building was destroyed by fire and replaced by the Sans Souci Theatre (1839-49).⁹

A super star of that time and the hugely popular actress Esther Leach was the daughter of a British soldier, “Mr. Flatman”, stationed in Meerut. She married a non-commissioned officer John Leach. Esther Leach was given scholastic training by the regimental pedagogue in Berhampur. She performed in amateur theatrical performances given for the army, and attracted great attention and popularity for her performance. The officers presented her with the works of William Shakespeare. She was arguably the first professional actress in India. She suggested the construction of a new theatre to replace it. She was supported by the art connoisseur Mr. Stocqueler, and funds collected from the British and elite Indian theatre enthusiasts of Calcutta, such as Governor-General Lord Auckland and Prince Dwarkanath Tagore (1794–1846) grandfather of Rabindranath Tagore.

She opened the Sans Souci Theatre on 21 August 1839. It was by that time situated on the bottom floor of St. Andrew’s Library at Waterloo Street, which was converted in to a theatre

hall until a proper theatre building could be constructed. The theatre hall had room for 400 seats and was described as an elegant and sufficient locality.¹⁰

The new building of the Sans Souci Theatre was inaugurated on No. 10 Park Street on 8 March 1841. The playhouse was a large building designed by J. W. Collins. The Sans Souci Theatre enjoyed remarkable success during its first years, when Esther Leach was its manager and director. It attracted both British as well as the elite Indian Bengali audience of Calcutta. There were important exhibitions in this theatre till 1826-28. The English elite also took part in plays. The spirit behind this theatre were Professor Wilson and Captain Richardson.

In 1841 theatre presents Sheridan Knowles' play, *The Wife* but three years later, on November 2, 1843, Esther Leach clothes caught fire she suffered severe burn injuries onstage and died

Only a few weeks before her death she transferred the ownership of the theatre to her colleague Nina Baxter but, the theatre had lost its lustre. However, it continued to operate until 1846, when it was later sold by Archbishop Carew.

Nina Baxter was a skilful actress, but she had no success. James Barry took over the theatre in 1844. It was on Sans Souci Theatre that Esther Leach's daughter "Mrs. Anderson" debuted in 1848. The perhaps most significant occasion on the Sans Souci Theatre was on "19 August 1848, when Baboo Baishnab Charan Addy performed the lead role of *Othello*, which was the first time an Indian actor performed in an English role in an English theatre on stage"¹¹

Despite adaptations, European drama did not have a deep effect on Urdu drama, Agha Hashr, for example translated *King Lear* as *Sufeid Khoon* or white blood denoting disloyalty. However, he turned the tragedy into a comedy due to which the dramatic impact was blunted. Only the plot remained, without the essence of drama. It was in the mid Twentieth Century that stage drama and then media drama developed high dramatic content.

Hindi Theatre

"Inspired by Professor Wilson's movement, Kumar Tagore with other city notables, including Shri Kishan Singh, Kishan Chandra Dutta,

Ganga Narain Sen, Madhab Chandra Malik and Tara Chand Chakravarti, launched the Hindu Theater on 28 December, 1831.”¹²

English plays were also shown in this theater but the special thing about it was that no play performed in it had been performed at any other theater earlier. Another function was that it was to teach acting to the people. A school for drama had English employees. Two years later, in 1833, a Hindu Seth, Nain Chand Basu, set up a theater at his residence in Shyam Bazaar, and in 1835, he translated Vidyasandra’s play into English. English drama was very popular in the subcontinent at that time among the English, but the natives were not much attracted to it.

The first traces of Bengali drama that we find in 1857 are Bhadar Arjun, which was written by Tara Charan Makdar in the style of English drama, but in it the tradition of ancient Sanskrit drama, Sutradhar Vadushka, Nandi, etc., was abandoned. For some reason, it was exhibited. later, in 1852 AD, a Hindu nobleman named Tosh Deo translated Kali Das’s famous play *Shakuntala* into Bengali and performed it at his residence in Bengal. This patronage of the princes proved to be a good omen for the drama because of this hobby of one Seth, others also started adopting it. In the same year, another *Raees* Ram J. Bisk also performed a Bengali play at his house. Kali Parsan Singh also saw these two plays and was impressed.

Later, the Bengali translation for the Veni Sabha was done by Ram Narain in April 1857 and later the Bengali version of Kali Das’s play "*Vikram Arusi Malti Madhu*" was presented by Kali Parsan. She became interested in writing and acting plays and gradually Bengali drama became popular.

Originally, Bengali writers based their plays on Sanskrit and Leela and Yatra, and experiments were carried out there, and fifty years after its inception, the series progressed and formed the basis of modern Bengali drama.

The main purpose of recounting facts here is to show that in India there was a strong and ancient tradition in Bombay, on the other hand Bengal was far from Bombay though was an important British outpost. In both places the dramas started with English dramas but Indigenous languages had already become a tradition in Bengal at the hands of a Russian on 27 November 1795 by 1853 the fame of Amanat’s *Inder Sabha* spread from Oudh and its vicinity to other parts of the subcontinent, the stage in Bengal had developed considerably and the

Urdu language had become quite popular in Dhaka, later the capital of East Bengal.

When in Lucknow and Murshidabad Nawabs and other literary personalities saw *Inder Sabha* and other plays. The fame that the *Inder Sabha* of Amanat had gained in that period gave an impetus to drama itself. Common people and elite were all in his grip. A gentleman from Kanpur, Shaikh Faiz Bux who had been living in Dhaka for a long time and was a knowledgeable and literary man, started the Urdu stage after consultation with the Nawabs of Dhaka. With Hindu chiefs joining in, in fact, in all the major areas of Bengal, especially, it was a common custom of Hindu families that in the house of every Hindu chief, there was a room reserved for a dance hall or a staff room, the decoration of which was like a regular stage".¹³

He prepared plays in Urdu and they were performed in the dance halls of these Hindu houses. In this connection, the prostitutes of Sanchi temple who came from Kanpur and Lucknow and had settled in Dhaka, played roles in the beginning of Urdu theatre, they rendered their services with great pride and joy.

For the role of women, it is obvious that only women were suitable but in Oudh and Bombay, boys had to play the role of women, but the biggest problem in Dhaka was that there were no professional Urdu speakers for the role. On the contrary, these prostitutes were willing to play any kind of role.

Initially, only minor translations were offered in Bengali, by small drama companies. They used to perform these plays. Most of them played Amanat's *Inder Sabha*. Among these companies, Sheikh Faiz Bakhsh's company Farhat Afza Theatrical Company was the most famous and it was based on commercial style. The same company called Munshi Nawab Ali Nafees Kanpuri from Kanpur who wrote plays here. There were some play-writers exclusive to this company but they had the imprint of *Inder Sabha*. Sheikh Pir Bakhsh's famous drama *Nagar Sabha* was also staged by the same company first for the presentation, the author first spoke to the actresses who performed *Inder Sabha* in a private gathering in Lucknow. And seeing their performance Sheikh Faiz Bakhsh wanted to write and present *Nagar Sabha*, then he wanted to invite Lucknow courtesans Ano Bai, Chhoti and Badi Pana, Achhan Bai, Sundar Bai and Nawab Bai to participate, They apologized by saying that "we are the singers of Dera. We are unable to appear on the public stage." In fact, these artists were unique in their art. They thought it was indecent to perform in front of the common public After their refusal, on the

advice of Pir Bakhsh, Sheikh Faiz Bakhsh chose Moti Kumar and Panu Kumar for his play. The biggest and real reason for their choice was that they were both very handsome and having beautiful voice. They also used to take part in *Sawang* and *Yatra*. After proper rehearsals, the play was staged with great care at Holi Maidan. As soon as *Nagar Sabha* appeared, the company's fame & reputation had increased and the interest in watching Urdu drama simultaneously increased among the people.

This was the time when the passion for Urdu stage had developed considerably in Bengal and Urdu dramas were being seen in other regions and towns of Bengal besides Dhaka. Little plays were performed in the form of mobile were theaters, travelling from village to village and performing plays where broken Urdu was spoken and understood. Hindus and Muslims were equally involved in this development of drama and stage. Leading names were Nawab Dhaka, Mirza Wali Jan Qamar, late Nawab Ahsanullah Bahadur. He wrote several plays and staged them. Nawab Wajid Ali Shah had been deposed. There were Sangeet Mandals or Musical Groups in Lucknow but they were of a very low quality. Bengal the kind of stage and drama that was taking place in Bombay and its adjoining areas was not available to the public in any other place. In such a situation, people associated with the performing arts and Urdu poets and play writers turned to Bengal, because the talk of Bengal's artistic development was now talk of the town, but at the same time the stage was being set in Bombay.

During the British occupation of India, their main entertainment was theatre. British regiments also lived and staged plays in Colabar, Matunga and Poacher Island, suburbs of Bombay because when he arrived in India, it was a time when plays by Shakespeare and his contemporaries were being staged in Britain.

In India, British civil and military employees began staging plays on open fields, military stores, and bungalows as needed. These companies continued to perform until they were transferred elsewhere. They would need permission when approval was given by the military officers, a group of playwrights would be formed and plays would be performed. When there were many stages in Bombay, the number of the audience would increase.

Conclusion

We need to see the development of stage drama in Colonial India, in two phases. First the Portuguese who in order to propagate Christianity wrote

¹⁰[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sans_Souci_Theatre_\(Calcutta\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sans_Souci_Theatre_(Calcutta)).

¹¹The Theatres in Calcutta since 1755

https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/158411/4/04_chapter%202.pdf.

¹²Aslam Qureshi, *Dramay ka Tareekh o Tanqeedi Pas Manzar* (Lahore: Majlis e Taraqqie Adab, 1971), 324.

¹³Ishrat Rehmani, *Urdu Drama ki Tareekh o Tanqeed* (Lahore:Urdu Markaz,1957),108.

¹⁴Sayyid Abdul Latif, *The Influence of English Literature on Urdu Literature*, London, Forster Groom & Co.,1924,pp100,101