

Indian Drama and Social Realities

Parvathy Elatthualappil¹, Dr. Shiva Chaudhary²

parvathy.nmkrv[at]rvei.edu.in
dr.shiva_c[at]cms.ac.in

Literature can be looked at as a study of society. Society is often reflected in the works of literature. The author draws the picture of the society that she/he is part of knowingly or unknowingly. "We have to investigate the literature of any given moment in connection with the then existing society" W.H Hudson. Everything that man creates happens within the society or at least happens with the influence of society. When a writer writes a particular work, she/he is deeply influenced by the conventions which were inculcated at one point in time. These are reflected in her/his works. One can find the author either abiding by these social and cultural conventions or one can find her/him revolting against it. The revolt and rebellion through works of literature are often thwarted and become relevant only after a period of time when we revisit them.

"Society is a group of persons who cooperate for certain purposes." (Dr. Rishi A Thakar)

The Indian society was divided based on caste system in ancient times and still is, just not so obvious. The society was divided into four major categories, the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, the Vaishyas and the Shudras. The vedic hymns were only open to the upper castes, the Shudras were not allowed to study or hear the vedic hymns. Women surprisingly had equal rights as men during that period. The system soon degenerated and led to determination of caste based on birth. A fifth category was soon introduced, they were called the Untouchables. The rigidity of the system led to social inequality which can be found in today's Indian society.

Women and the Indian society

To be precise during the vedic period women were given an honourable position in the society and it is during the post-vedic period that women began to be considered lesser than men. As the caste system became stricter the matrimonial rules also became tighter and women were soon home bound and were not exposed to education. While men were allowed to marry beneath them, women were not allowed to do so. Practices such as polygamy and sati were becoming rampant. Sri Aurobindo had remarked that "the increasing tendency to deny the highest benefits of the common life and culture to the women and the Shudras resulted in the decline of our society" (104)

Women's position in society deteriorated to the extent where they were taught to be slaves to men and give priority to the satisfaction of men. The daughter was regarded as a burden. Widows were not allowed to remarry and were thrown into a life deprived of joy or happiness. What is worst is that some women imbibed these patriarchal norms and passed it on from generation to generation. Soon the yardsticks that were used to measure the woman started changing, especially

during the second half of the nineteenth century. Marathi drama shows this transformation through their strong, assertive women characters.

The British Impact on Indian drama cannot be ignored. It has definitely led to the emergence of great writings and writers from the country. The literature that originated from India is called Indo-English literature. Before Indian writers began contributing to the world of literature, the Englishmen or the Englishmen fascinated by the Indian culture wrote about India. This literature was termed Anglo-Indian literature. It was Sir William Jones who began including India in his writings in the eighteenth century. The aftermath of this type of literature that emerged from the empire was not an authentic representation of the Indian culture. This is due to the sense of racial superiority that existed among the anglo-Indians and the Englishmen. The literature that is written by Indians in English is called Indo-Anglican English.

K.R Srinivasa Iyengar, who is widely known as the "doyen of Indo-English scholars" and the "pioneer of the study of Indian writing in English" has played a huge role in bringing the Indian literature in English to the world. He wanted to prove to the world the capabilities of Indian writers in English.

One's personality is developed through interactions with various elements in the society. People are trained to play these roles from a very young age. This can lead to issues such as underdevelopment of certain fragments within the self and overdevelopment of certain others. Six types of deformities are formed as a result of six maladies of our culture. These deformities influence and reinforce the other. For example gender roles in a society, men are told that they have no nurturing power hence they grow up believing that, similarly women are taught from a young age that they have nurturing ability. Gender is a social construct. The conventions associated with gender which is again created by the society is what leads to oppression of various kinds by using tools such as violence and manipulation. This in short can be called gender deformity. Social inequality is formed due to the division of labour that exists in the society. Social inequality in our Indian society has taken the form of a caste system and class system. Socio-economic inequality and socio-cultural inequality coexists in society and they influence each other.

Marathi Drama and society

Literature and society are closely interlinked. Marathi drama is considered to be reformative. It has brought out great revolutionary writers who have questioned the restricting conventions of the society. These writers and their writings

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have also brought in the opportunity for the spectator to look into themselves and then make the necessary changes to make a better society. G.B Deval's *Sharada* (1899) can be considered as one of the first realistic plays in Marathi. The female protagonist and her mother opposes the marriage of the young protagonist with an old man. This shows how women need to raise their voice or that they have begun to raise their voice against the patriarchy. Kolhatkar in his play, *Guptamanjush* tries to remove the misconception that women will be spoiled with education. In Mativikar he hailed widow remarriage. *Keechak Wadh* by Khadilkar talks about the unjust rule of the Lord Curzon, it was an allegorical play. Through *Vidyaharan* Khadilkar criticised the increase in liquor conception in the society. Marathi drama thus became a medium through which socio-political issues were brought to the society, it became a powerful weapon against the social evils.

Thyagaraja Paramasiva Kailasam was a playwright and prominent writer of Kannada. He was given the title Pahasana Prapitamaha (the grand old man of humorous plays) He was born into a tamil family in southern Karnataka and was educated in the United Kingdom. He led a nomadic life and moved away from his father's "white house" into the outhouse. He refused to let fresh air or light into the room because he believed that, it was the right kind of atmosphere for his creativity to flourish. Kailasam moved away from the company theatre's obsession with mythology and royalty. He did not use music much in his plays as well. Early twentieth century witnessed influence of Parsi theatre, they toured India. It is their influence that created a demand for music and spectacle. This was done to make it more realistic but somehow it did not reach the audience. Kailasam drifted away from this and created simple realistic stages. Kannada theatre during those times were dominated by professional troupes who drew inspiration from mythology. The plays were staged for reinstatement of traditional values and customs. Kailasom's plays had colloquial Kannada and he often talked about the common man. He also criticized the society of that time period. The traditional theatre emphasised spectacle while the new theatre focused on themes. For example, Kailasam's play *The Purpose* talks about the caste system that existed in the society. He shows how such beliefs are instilled in children from a very young age. These kinds of customs and believes will lead to discrimination that will only harm the society. Kailasam used humour in his plays to talk about the perils that existed in the society in the form of conventions and beliefs.

Drama in India started officially with *The Persecuted*, written by Krishna Mohan Banerjee in the year 1813. There was a need to differentiate the true culture of India from the Western representation of the same by Englishmen in their literary works. This particular play presents the conflict between the east and the west. *Is This Called Civilization* by Michael Madhusudan Dutt is considered to be the play that set the wheels in motion for Indian Drama. Harindranath Chattopadhyaya wrote several social plays such as *The Windows*, *The Parrots*, *The Santry Lantern*, *The Coffin*, *The Evening Lamps*.

Post independence era also saw several writers talking about social issues that prevailed in society. D.M Borgeonkar's *Image Breakers* (1938) is a problem play that talks about caste system, horoscope, dowry etc, he wanted to break these practices through his plays.

Rabindranath Tagore in his plays depicts gender deformity. In *Malini*, the female protagonist's unperturbed grace shocks the Hindu brahmins and changes their mind regarding her banishment. In *Ama and Vinayaka*, Tagore brings to light the practices such as Sati, caste system and even honour killing. The daughter marries a muslim, the father kills the husband and the mother forces her own daughter to commit sati. Tagore is definitely trying to bring to light the practices that existed in society during that time period and his writing can be seen as a form of projecting the realities of the period and also an attempt to open the minds of the readers or spectators, make them aware. In *Karna and Kunti*, he talks about the ill effects of patriarchy and how it affects the woman. T.P Kailasam's *A Monologue* again sheds light on patriarchy as something that exists in the society. *The Parrot* by Harindranath Chattopadhyaya talks about how the ideals of culture restricts women and leads to their suffering. V.V Srinivasa Iyengar in his play *Blessed in a Wife*, talks about a wife who is neglected by the husband. Balwant Gargi's *The Matriarch* brings to light the authority that some mothers have over their sons and its ill effects. There are several other playwrights who have brought gender issues into light. These gender issues are a result of the gender deformity created by the society.

T.P Kailasam speaks about social inequality and the resulting social deformity created by the existence of caste systems in society. In *The Purpose and Fulfillment*, Kailasam brings to light how people belonging to lower castes and classes lose opportunity in areas where they would shine better than those belonging to the upper caste and classes. R.G Roshni remarks "Kailasam chose the characters from the Mahabharata and tried to interpret them in the light of human values". In *The Window* and *The Sentry's Lantern*, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya exposes the effects of capitalism and imperialism. These are some of the major issues the society was facing during their times. They used literature as a medium to expose the realities of the society. Several plays written by Asif Currimbhoy speaks about people and their rebellion against the oppression practised by the rich upon the poor. *Darjeeling Tea* speaks about the oppression faced by the tea workers, *Inquilab* speaks about the Naxalite movement against oppression by the landlords. His play *The Dissident MLA* reflects the contemporary Indian political scene. He talks about the dissolution of the Gujarat Legislative Assembly in 1976. *The Refugee* and *Sonal Bangla* speaks about the atrocities during the BanglaDesh war in 1971. He talks about the violence that was inflicted upon women. They were raped, their breasts cut off and so on.

Sri Aurobindo shows how power struggle makes a person against love and makes people loveless through the play *Rodogune*. Harindranath Chattopadhyaya's *The Window* talks about how the concept of karma and social hierarchy are used by the rich to oppress the poor. The worker believes that the rich are rich because they buy God and the wife

believes that it is their fate to be poor. These kinds of beliefs are influenced by the practices in society. These are all norms created by the powerful institutions in society to maintain the positions of power.

Mohan Rakesh is a famous hindi short story writer, novelist and playwright. He belongs to nai kahani (new short story), which was part of the modern literary movement. Most of his short stories were later made into plays. He moved away from traditional symbolism to drama of non-communication. The drama of non-communication deals with the fact that the modern man doesn't really understand himself nor does he understand others. According to Mohan Rakesh this is the real tragedy of modern life, lack of understanding of oneself and one another. Rakesh believed in Marxism but did not quite fit into the category of progressives. He was criticised for the progressives and the non progressives equally.

Girish Karnad was a great artist, film director, bureaucrat, and a successful playwright. He originally wanted to become a poet but ended up being one of the greatest playwrights of India. He wrote *Yayati* in kannada from his personal experiences. The responsibility that was thrust upon him by his parents suffocated him and that led to the play *Yayati*. Karnad's plays were a rebellion against the cultural hegemony. He employs the technique of classical and folk theatre and borrows his themes from myth, legend and Indian history. Like Mohan Rakesh, Karnad also shares his disillusionment with the modern man and his disbelief in Marxism. He borrows his themes from history in *Tuglaq* and *Tale-Danda*, from myth in *Hayavadana* and from folk-lore in *Naga-Mandala*.

Badal Sircar is a great Bengali playwright. During the late fifties he wrote humorous plays and moved on to existentialism during the sixties. He eventually formed the third theatre. The third theatre is different from the folk theatre and the urban proscenium theatre. It is free theatre. His focus shifts from individual to the society in his existential plays and it is on the society in his plays of Third theatre. He wanted to create awareness among his audience and did not want to focus on plot or characterization. He believed that it was too limiting. Like Vijay Tendulkar, Sircar doesn't really provide any solutions to the problems that he presents through his plays.

In *Half-Way House*, Mohan Rakesh talks about gender deformity. The play is about a middle class family and their half lived lives. Mahendranath marries Savitri. He has ventured into business but since his wife wants to furnish the house he removes his capital part by part to satisfy his wife's desires. Eventually he loses his business. Instead of supporting him the wife keeps nagging him. He gets frustrated and takes it out on his wife. Savitri finds him impotent since he is not able to be the masculine man. She goes after several men but is never satisfied. She takes out frustration on her children. Through this play he is talking about how gender deformity can be created by women and not just men in a society. Savitri in the play is obsessed with the idea of a masculine man, as a result of sexist culture, she is unable to find a man who is a perfect masculine man. The entire family is affected because of this. Badal Sircar's miniplay marital presents the disharmonious lives of the

middle-class family. He concentrates on the social rather than the individual.

The social inequality of the Indian Hindu society has not changed much. Atrocities have been committed by the upper caste upon the lower caste in the modern day. Playwrights such as Badal Sircar, Girish Karnad, and Mohan Rakesh expose the social inequality created in the society due to the caste and class system through their plays. In Karnad's *Tale-Danda*, he exposes the inequality in the Hindu society by talking about the twelfth century communal struggle in the city of Kalyan in North Kanara. In king Bijjala's court there were great scholars and poets. Basavanna, king's officer and great poet-philosopher united all of them, they shed their castes to become Lord Shiva's devotees. Karnad tries to trace the failure of Basavanna's movement. As time passed the sharanas lost their drive and they had to depend on their high caste again for survival. He feels that this particular play is relevant even in today's world because we have religious fundamentalism happening in our country that has led to the demolition of a mosque and fight for a temple. Badal Sircar also talks about this in his play *Stale News*. The social inequality, oppression and exploitation has not changed a bit in today's world. In this play Sircar talks about the Santhal Revolt that took place more than a century ago when the British were ruling India. He juxtaposes the exploitation and oppression of colonial India and the post-colonial India. The dead man in the play symbolises the dead humanity. The play has got neither characters nor story. Sircar believed that these factors would have limitations. ONE is a middle-class urban man exposed to various news items, historical accounts etc narrated by others. ONE constantly repeats "Man is the greatest creature on Earth" throughout the play. Sircar wants to expose the irony of those words. Sircar exposes the exploitation of the Santhals. The Indian Government was as bad as the British Government. It has done nothing to improve the condition of the poor. The play not only exposes social deformity but also how education and mass media brings about false consciousness among people.

One Day in Ashadha by Mohan Rakesh shows how social inequality can lead to the weakness of human love and relations. Rakesh was criticised because he uses the great Kalidasa in this play to talk about the ill effects of social inequality. Rakesh like Karnad believed that it is okay to use such personalities to bring some light to the problems of contemporary lives. The play makes the character of Kalidasa represent a writer who cannot resist the temptations offered by the state and other agencies and who ignores his commitment to the people. All the characters in the play ruin their lives trying to climb the social ladder. Through this play he is also trying to break the idea of how great artists are considered to be superman. Here he projects the great writer like Kalidasa with all his weakness.

Gender and social deformity will eventually form physical deformity. Gender and social hierarchies are transferred to psychosomatic illnesses in human beings. For example, the part of the body that is being used the most will become the strongest. The Brahmins were busy studying the scriptures that their brains become stronger while their body became weak. Similarly when a labourer works all day long in the

field her/his body becomes stronger while the mind not so much. When a woman is confined to her house chores alone, and not exposed to education her knowledge about other things will not expand. The body and mind were believed to be undifferentiated unity at one point in time. We lost this unity in the process of civilization. The alienation between the mind and the body eventually will lead to physical deformity. Karnad's *Hayavadana* talks about this incompleteness through the characters. The play begins with an introduction to Lord Ganesha. Lord Ganesha is looked at as deformed and hence incomplete. The character Hayavadana who enters the stage also looks deformed with a horse's head. Hayavadana has been trying to achieve completeness all his life and Bhagavata advises him to seek the blessings of Goddess Kali. In Tendulkar's play *Sakharam Binder*, the cruel nature of Sakharam is because of his self-alienation. As a result of this he indulges in tobacco, alcohol and sex.

Devadatta and Kapila are two best friends. But we find that there is a caste hierarchy between the two. Devdutta is a brahmin and Kapila a blacksmith, hence Devdutta sits on the chair while Kapila always squats on the floor. Karnad is trying to show that their friendship is not real. Where there is no equality there can never be true friendship. Devadatta's mind is sharp but he neglects his body while Kapila does physical labour hence his body is fit while mind is not. Padmini, who Kapila helps Devadatta marry, is fascinated by Kapila's body and Devadatta's mind. When Devadatta finds out about this he beheads himself in front of Goddess Kali. When Kapila finds out he does the same. Padmini's wish is granted by Goddess Kali but in a hurry she transposes the heads. She chooses to be with Devadatta's head and Kapila's body. Since the head is considered to be superior in the society, the one with Devadatta's head becomes Devadatta. And so they enjoy the status of Brahmins. Soon Devadatta, being a brahmin neglects his body. Padmini is once again attracted to Kapila because Kapila began to work on Devadatta's body. Towards the end of the play they both kill each other in a duel and never achieve completeness.

Badal Sircar's *Procession* talks about how man loses himself in civilization. Man was close to nature before civilization. During that time she/he had greater clarity because there was a clear separation of the body and the mind. After civilization man seems lost. The characters in this play are representative and symbolic. The characters are Khoka, an Officer, and Old Man, a Master and a Chorus. The city in the play represents civilization and the procession represents various rituals of our civilization. Sircar tries to bring to light the reason for the existence of various elements of our civilization or rather the devices. Those in power need to make sure that these devices stay intact in order to maintain their position of power. These devices make sure that the powerless believe that without the powerful they will simply cease to exist. As mentioned earlier, the characters in the play are representative and symbolic. There is a scene where there is load shedding and people here shout. Once the police arrive, he says that there is nothing, nobody is hurt. Suddenly Khoka appears and he tries to draw the attention of the officer towards him but he is unable to grab his attention. Khoka then exclaims that he

dies everyday. This death of Khoka and the police officer's ignorance shows modern society and its hypocrisy. The powerful does not care about the powerless. The modern man dies everyday, it also points at existentialism. Like this each of the procession represents each aspect of civilization. Sircar uses very powerful tools such as newspapers in the form of a fool's cap which sheds light on the fact that the media manipulates people and they are making the citizens fools. The people living in the city, leading their busy lives do not have time to think about the things that she/he is reading. They just absorb everything they read without questioning it. Sircar points out how dangerous it is to have citizens who follow without questioning. The Old man in the play is searching for the real road to his real home. This symbolises the search of mankind for the right road to their lost paradise. Towards the end of the play Khoka finally joins the Old man in trying to find the real road to real home. Old man sees a real procession approaching. This procession is real because it is just men participating in it as human beings. There is no reference to any party or ideology. This perhaps indicates man's need to separate himself from ideologies and just have self awareness. Liquor is also provided by the Master to the people so that they can forget their pain. This shows how political parties or leaders manipulate the citizens by bribing them. That they don't really care about the people but themselves. Khoka's repeated death in the play represents death of truth and the Old man's inability to find his real home is due to the cultural deformity caused by the society. In short, Badal Sircar through this play is pointing at how the devices in civilization function. The powerful and the powerless are all victims of these man made devices.

Human beings are born into nature and they share a very intimate relationship with nature. As time passed, when civilization began they lost their touch with nature and became deformed. This deformation happened as a result of the conventions created by the society and those in power. Discrimination of various kinds emerged such as patriarchy, casteism and hierarchy and so on. Karnad's *Nagamandala*, *Tendulkar Silence! The Court is in Session* exposes the effects of patriarchy. In Mohan Rakesh's *Half-Way House* he exposes the effects of the society's creation of the ideal masculine man. When Savitri feels that her husband is not masculine enough, she leaves him for other men. This ideal concept of both men and women are highly toxic in society. The writers also expose the idea of the Rescuer, victim and persecutor. The hierarchy that people assume in the society again leads to disharmony in the society. The above mentioned playwrights expose the society's reality through the themes and the characters. When the British colonized India, the playwright concentrated on writing about the kings and queens, they gave importance to music and spectacle. Soon the need to speak about the society emerged and these types of plays were not accepted by the society. The people in power did not appreciate criticism against them. Playwrights like Tendulkar and Badal Sircar talked about relevant social issues, they gave importance to the depiction of the vices that were present in the society. Such plays continue to shake the common man from his state of complacency and question the conventions.

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