



## Between Page and Stage: A Study of Contemporary Indian English Drama

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**Abstract :** *The present study is related to the prevailing trends in Indian English Drama and the difficulties faced by the dramatists. It seeks to find out how many of their plays were staged, what problems they faced and how effective they were in their reception by the audience. How much has the drama has evolved through decades of trial and error and where it stands today is the basic question.*

**Keywords:** *Indian English Drama, Plays, Playwrights, Stage.*

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### Introduction :

When one talks of 'Indian theatre', one enters a vast and intricate arena, both idiomatically heterogeneous and polyglot in character. Dance, drama, mime, songs, instrumentation, puppetry, the orally delivered narratives all combine almost seamlessly in performance arts. Indian English drama, nonetheless, is decidedly influenced by, and draws inspiration from many of the indigenous traditions of Indian theatre. In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the English plays written by playwrights were hardly 'stage worthy' and were mere literary exercises because India at that time was under British domination and the masses refused to accept English as a medium of staging plays.

**Asif Currimbhoy, Gurucharan Das, Cyrus Mistry, Nissim Ezekiel, Gieve Patel, Dina Mehta, Partap Sharma, G.V. Desani, Mahesh Dattani, Girish Karnad and Manjula Padmanabhan** are the prominent writers of Indian English plays in contemporary literature. Their works are notable and worthy to be discussed, collaborating with the directors/performers who bring the text to life. Few Indian writers in English have become playwrights and fewer still have been able to achieve literary/critical acclaim.

The history of Indian English drama bears evidence to the fact that more plays have been written than performed. The research article entitled, "Between

Page and Stage: A Study of Contemporary Indian English Drama”, attempts to study the place of modern Indian drama in English- a language introduced to us by colonial masters-that is predominantly urban, manifestly influenced by Western traditions. The problem of the journey of the written plays to the theatre and their reception is the major concern of this study and it seeks to highlight this very fact and the reason behind this trend.

#### **Pre-Independence Indian English Drama :**

In the plays that were written before independence, **Indian English dramatists, like their counterparts in other genres, were involved in constructing an ideal India. For this they mined the epics and Puranas, the lives of saints and history.** They explored and reinterpreted their chosen texts in order to create the India and Indian who could stand shoulder to shoulder with the British. The India they constructed was necessarily Hindu because of the past that they were uncovering in its glory. They were actively engaged in constructing a new society, one that went beyond their specific locations in terms of caste and region. **Their India had a Sanskrit past and English present, their regions had other histories and other needs. This is perhaps why Indian English Drama never took off while theatres in other languages flourished during this time.**

Indian English dramatists could not serve or create any needs among audiences. The audience that wanted theatre in English could see European productions or even Indian productions of English/European plays. The audience that wanted Indian theatre could watch in Indian languages. **The only way Indian English theatre could have succeeded was to become theatrically provocative and interesting, address local realities in local ‘Englishes’. This was hardly ever done.** Not only do they make no theatrical innovations, and write mainly short plays, they do not even look to Indian dramatic techniques even while they look to ancient epics for characters and episodes. The plays written before independence did not amount to anything substantial like a tradition of play writing, nor did their staging lead to the emergence of a tradition of Indian theatre in English. The major dramatists of this period were T.P. Kailasam, Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore and Michael Madhusudan Dutt.

#### **Post-Independence Indian English Drama:**

In post- independence Indian English drama too, we can see the repetitions of older attempts to create an India through the exploration and construction of Hindu historical figures. Indian English theatre still feels part of the construction of the nation and national identity. Still in many important ways post- independence Indian English theatre has differed from the pre-independence theatre. It is in the depth of individual forces and focussed contemporary concerns and in the evolution of an acceptable and accessible spoken language. This has been done by many playwrights who focus not on the nation as a whole, or even make the construction of the nation an overt part of their theatrical agenda, but those who focus on certain communities, classes and local situations.

#### **Challenges faced by the Playwrights :**

English is usually associated with certain functional spaces- certain offices or academic institutions. In this circumstance, how is the Indian English Dramatist to create convincing theatre? **The Indian English playwright has to write in a language that is recognisably Indian, and recognisably belonging to the social milieu portrayed.**

The fact is that English plays, just like English films, do have their audiences. Perhaps the audiences for English plays will never be enough to sustain independent theatre but that is true of almost all language theatres in India. English is seen as the language of the elite, mostly those living in the urban areas who are necessarily a minority. And thus, **English theatre seemed to be associated with light amusement for the elite.**

Writing is only one aspect of theatre, the other predominant one is performance. The problems here are enmeshed with the reception of the play. **To actually translate the text into a living performance that a given Indian audience is to watch and relate to is quite another thing. This is the crux of the problem that posed and still poses the major obstacle for Indian dramatic performances in English.** The entire spectacle rings false. The great majority of Indians still communicate in the vernacular. Hence, the audiences find it difficult to come to terms with English as the language of performance.

A valid point would be the **lack of trained actors in English**. Official patronage, whatever there has been, has always been extended to theatre in Indian languages. Theatre costs money and private patrons like industrial houses have to be persuaded to sponsor shows by theatre groups who do not have official patronage. **There is as yet no accepted Indian English for the writers to use confidently and consistently.**

The biggest challenge is to write **credible dialogues**. The playwright has to write dialogues which sound like it could be spoken by the given character in the given circumstances. The audience of a play sees everything in linear progression and there can be no action replay. **So the language spoken has to be clear and must have immediate impact.** The **limited reach of English theatre** is also a cause of concern. English is still a city-based language and the only way to reach the common man is to make the language and content more accessible. Hence, Indian English drama hasn't grown in the way drama in other Indian languages has.

#### **Major Dramatists :**

**Asif Currimbhoy** is India's first authentic voice in English theatre. He has been very prolific as a playwright dealing with social, political, religious and psychological issues in his plays. He has written about thirty plays. Rich in theatrical devices his work incorporated monologues, choruses, chants, songs, mime, slide projections and filmed footage. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar rightly states, **"Variety and versatility are the other obvious distinguishing 'marks' of Asif Currimbhoy as a dramatist."** (244) His plays were ignored by Indian directors, but had a successful run in the USA. His career and output illustrate the deficiencies caused by the lack of a living Indian English theatre. He did not play around with spoken Indian English very much because he did not get to work with Indian actors very often. As he was performed less and less, his plays began to be written to be read rather than performed. Walter Meserve remarks: **"Currimbhoy's plays are concerned with the problems of man everywhere. He lends breath to his thought...even when he deals with India, he becomes the voice of universal revolt and anguish screaming itself hoarse at the seemingly immovable societies around the world."** (ix) His successful plays include- *The Doldrums* (1960), *The Dumb Dancer*

(1961), *Goa* (1964) and *The Hungry Ones* (1965) and others.

**Girish Karnad** is one of those dramatists who gave a distinct silhouette to drama in India. His plays written in Kannada have been widely translated into English by himself and into all major Indian languages by others. Iyengar, commenting on the dramatic techniques of Karnad, says: **"In all his three plays- be the theme historical, mythical or legendary – Karnad's approach is 'modern', and he deploys the conventions and motifs of folk art like masks and curtains to project a world of intensities, uncertainties, and unpredictable denouements."** (736) In the words of Karnad himself, he clarifies- **"If I write a play I want it to be read 200 years from now... so I put everything I have: study, concentration, imitation, stealing ideas and everything."**(web) His originality as a dramatist lies in his extraordinary skill of using myth, history and folktale to make the drama lively and thought-provoking. In the words of Aparna Dharwadker, Karnad **"employs traditional Indian narrative materials and modes of performance successfully to create a radically modern urban theatre"**. He thus belongs to a formative generation of Indian playwrights who **"collectively reshaped Indian Theatre as a major national institution in the later twentieth century"**. (Karnad 73) Karnad has been one of the vanguards who aided the audiences by using Indian English, mythical references in theatres that is at once internalized and voiced without any traces of premeditation. He had once observed, **"We keep acrobating between the traditional and the modern, perhaps we could not hit upon a form which balances both."** (Karnad 73) **He returned the gaze, as a vehicle of resistance and gave Indian drama, a form, and an identity that is truly Indian.** Karnad found a new approach of drawing on historical and mythological sources to tackle the contemporary themes and existentialist crisis of modern man through characters locked in psychological conflicts. His plays became rich contributions to Indian English drama. His plays received universal praise, in India, in the European countries as well as in the USA. All his plays have been staged namely *Tughlaq* (1964), *Hayavadana* (1971), *Bali: The Sacrifice* (2002), *Naga-Mandala* (1988), *Tale-Danda* (1993), *The Fire and the Rain* (1998), *The Dreams of Tippu Sultan* (2000) and others.

**Mahesh Dattani** is the first playwright in English to win the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award. His plays have been directed by eminent directors like Arvind Gaur, Alyque Padamsee and Lillette Dubey. All his written plays are first acted out by Playpen (his own company), where he puts the concluding touches on his dialogue in rehearsal, using the input from actors. **“Dattani’s focus is the Indian family. Social issues such as marriage, violence against women, homosexuality and communal violence, are shown through the prism of the family.”** (Das, 242) Yet the element of drama- storyline, suspense, action and climax make the play gripping theatrically as well. **“I am certain that my plays are a true reflection of my time, place and socio-economic background.”** (Dattani, xv) As they deal with the modern urban milieu, Dattani is able to show how this section of India’s populace inhabits a life that is a weave of the east and west, of tradition, modernity, but in a negative sense. **Man of multiple roles, Dattani has always succeeded in making his audiences sit up and listen with such involvement that they forget that they are watching a play in an ‘alien’ tongue. He has carried forward the traditions of Indian theatre through the necessary dynamic of change and innovation.** Not having to repeatedly revisit his roots, he works instinctively and meticulously, anchored to contemporaneous urban realities, collaborating with artists to put up his shows pushing the frontiers of his art, and nudging his audiences into acknowledging it. In an interview Dattani observed, **“Theatre to me is a reflection of what you observe. To do anything more would be to become didactic and then it ceases to be theatre”** and that **“the theatre is a collective experience and the audience have to finish in their own heads what the playwright began.”** (Nair web) His plays include- *Where There’s a Will* (1988), *Dance Like a Man* (1989), *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991), *Final Solutions* (1993), *Tara* (1990), *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998), *Thirty Days in September* (2001), *Seven Steps Around the Fire* (1999) and others.

#### Conclusion :

This research article studied the prevailing trends in Indian English drama, how it has evolved through a series of developments and where it stands today in the Indian literary scene. More than three hundred plays were written in the pre-independence era but unfortunately a large number of them remained unnoticed. When we look at the picture of post-independence Indian English drama and theatre, even here we find that all the plays written by the playwrights could not be staged (for example: Asif Currimbhoy’s plays). But when one talks of the success of Indian

English drama and theatre in recent times, Girish Karnad and Mahesh Dattani are the two pillars that we look up to. All the plays written by them have been staged and hence they stand out as the pioneers of English drama in India. **Nissim Ezekiel, Guruchan Das, Dina Mehta, Partap Sharma, G.V. Desani, Manjula Padmanabhan, Cyrus Mistry and Gieve Patel** are some of the minor dramatists who wrote less and even lesser of whose plays were put on stage. The gap between ‘page’ and ‘stage’ is glaring one.

The need to make contact with, to speak to one’s audiences in their own terms, and yes, in their own language is the paramount condition for the playwright’s success. Speaking of the audience for the English theatre in India, we have already located and rationalised the ambit of their identity in postcolonial India. Important questions of audience pragmatics come in here and, in some sense, dictate the content and form of a writer writing for the stage. These will shape the identity of his/her corpus finally and ‘place’ the writer of drama not only in terms of literary merit, but also in terms of stage history and context, as the plays will be performed, interpreted in a sense, ‘re-written’ again and again- in performance. **Although things have started changing, but there is a lot of room for greater change. It’s time universities open up to the idea of an English theatre in India as a bona fide literary venture.**

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