

Bharata's Natya Shastra was the earliest and most elaborate treatise on drama written anywhere in the world. India has the longest and richest tradition in theatre going back to at least 5000 years. The origin of Indian theatre is closely related to ancient rituals and seasonal festivities of the country. The growth in drama took place with the introduction of "curtain" in the kushanas era.

The great harvest of Sanskrit drama by pre-eminent play-wrights like Bhasa, Kalidasa, Shudraka, Vishakadatta, Bhavabhuti and Harsha started om 1st millenium. This body of works compares in its range and power with the dramatic output of other rich theatre traditions of the world ancient Greek theatre and Elizabethan theatre. The glory of ancient Sanskrit drama ended with the first millennium.

Traditionally the theatre consisted of the auditorium, stage and the backstage which is behind the stage. Curtain separates the stage and backstage. The drama was performed without scenery and decorations. It was more of acting and gestures by the actors. Costume and make-up was regulated by convention so that roles were immediately recognizable. Most type of drama had a hero , a heroine, a villain and a "vidushaka" as a comedian. Themes were mainly based on love.

The drama generally opened with a benediction song followed by a prologue in the form of a dialogue/ discussion between the chief actor and his actress giving the title , nature and occasion of the play. Violence and death were forbidden to be performed in the stage. At the end of the play came a concluding verse- a virtual vote of thanks. Here we are discussing some famous folk theatres of India.

Folk Theatres

1. Bhand Pather(Jashin) - Kashmir

- It is a unique combination of dance, music and acting.
- Satire, wit and parody are preferred for inducing laughter.
- Music is provided with surnai, nagaara and dhol.
- Since the actors are mainly from the farming community, the impact of their way of living, ideals and sensitivity is noticable.

2. Swang - Haryana

- It is mainly music-based.
- Gradually, prose too, played its role in the dialogues.
- Softness of emotions, accomplishment of rasa along with the development of character can be seen
- Two important styles are from Rohtak and Haathras.
- In the style belonging to Rohtak, the language used is Haryanvi (Bangru) and in Haathras, it is Brajbhasha.

3. Nautanki - Uttar Pradesh

- Most popular centres - Kanpur, Lucknow and Haathras.

- The meters used in the verses are: Doha, Chaubola, Chhappai, Behar-e-tabeel.
- Nowadays, women have also started taking part

4. Raasleela

- It is based exclusively on Lord Krishna legends.
- It is believed that Nand Das wrote the initial plays based on the life of Krishna.
- Dialogues in prose are combined beautifully with songs and scenes from Krishna's pranks.

5. Bhavai - Gujarat

- Main centers - Kutch and Kathiawar.
- Instruments used are: bhungal, tabla, flute, pakhaawaj, rabaab, sarangi, manjeera, etc.
- There is a rare synthesis of devotional and romantic sentiments.

6. Jatra - Bengal

- Fairs in honour of gods, or religious rituals and ceremonies have within their framework musical plays are known as Jatra.
- Krishna Jatra became popular due to Chaitanya prabhu's influence.
- Earlier form of Jatra has been musical & dialogues were added at later stage.
- The actors themselves describe the change of scene, the place of action, etc.

7. Bhaona (Ankia Naat) - Assam.

- Cultural glimpses of Assam, Bengal Orissa, Mathura and Brindavan can be seen in it.
- The Sutradhaar, or narrator begins the story, first in Sanskrit and then in either Brajboli or Assamese.

8. Maach - Madhya Pradesh

- Maach is used for the stage itself as also for the play.
- Songs are given prominence in between the dialogues.
- The term for dialogue in this form is bol and rhyme in narration is termed vanag.
- The tunes of this theatre form are known as rangat.

9. Tamaasha - Maharashtra

- Evolved from the folk forms such as Gondhal, Jagran and Kirtan.
- Female actress is the chief exponent of dance movements in the play. She is known as Murki.
- Classical music, footwork at lightning-speed, and vivid gestures make it possible to portray all the emotions through dance.

10. Dashavatar - Konkan and Goa

- Personify the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu-the god of preservation and creativity. The ten incarnations are Matsya (fish), Kurma (tortoise), Varaha (boar), Narsimha (lion-man), Vaman (dwarf), Parashuram, Rama, Krishna (or Balram), Buddha and Kalki.
- Apart from stylized make-up, the Dashavatar performers wear masks of wood and papier mache.

11. Krishnattam - Kerala

- It came into existence in the middle of 17th century A.D. under the patronage of King Manavada of Calicut.
- Krishnattam is a cycle of eight plays performed for eight consecutive days.
- The plays are Avataram, Kaliamandana, Rasa krida, kamasavadha, Swayamvaram, Bana Yudham, Vivida Vadham, and Swargarohana.
- Episodes are based on the theme of Lord Krishna - his birth, childhood pranks and various deeds depicting victory of good over evil.

12. Mudi yettu - Kerala

- It is celebrated in the month of Vrischikam (November-December). performed only in the Kali temples of Kerala, as an oblation to the Goddess.
- It depicts the triumph of goddess Bhadrakali over the asura Darika.
- There are seven characters in Mudi yettu-Shiva, Narada, Darika, Danavendra, Bhadrakali, Kooli and Koimbidar (Nandikeshvara) are all heavily made-up.

13. Theyyam - Kerala

- 'Theyyam' derived from the Sanskrit word 'Daivam' meaning God hence it is called God's dance.
- Performed by various castes to appease and worship spirits.
- Distinguishing features - colourful costume and awe-inspiring headgears (mudi) nearly 5 to 6 feet high made of arecanut splices, bamboos, leaf sheaths of arecanut and wooden planks and dyed into different strong colours using turmeric, wax and arac.

14. Koodiyaattam - Kerala

- It is based on Sanskrit theatre traditions.
- characters of this theatre form are Chakyaar or actor, Naambiyaar, the instrumentalists and Naangyaar, those taking on women's roles.
- The Sutradhar or narrator and the Vidushak or jesters are the protagonists.
- Vidushak alone delivers the dialogues.
- Emphasis on hand gestures and eye movements makes this dance and theatre form unique.

15. Yakshagaana - Karnataka

- It is based on mythological stories and Puranas.
- The most popular episodes are from the Mahabharata i.e. Draupadi swayamvar, Subhadra vivah, Abhimanyu vadh, Karna-Arjun yuddh and from Ramayana i.e. Raajyaabhishek, Lav-kush Yuddh, Baali-Sugreeva yuddha and Panchavati.

16. Therukoothu - Tamil Nadu

- It literally means "street play".
- It is mostly performed at the time of annual temple festivals of Mariamman (Rain goddess) to achieve rich harvest.
- There is a cycle of eight plays based on the life of Draupadi.
- Kattiakaran, the Sutradhara gives the gist of the play to the audience
- Komali entertains the audience with his buffoonery.

17. Karyala- Himachal Pradesh

- It deals with serious question of life & death briefly and with simplicity of expression & diction, all enveloped in humour.
- Indeed, audience is given essence of our cultural heritage of viewing the world as a stage and as an unsubstantial pageant which is to be negotiated and lived by rising above it.
- There is often stylistic diversity, which strengthens their identity from Swang, Nautanki, Bhagat, etc..

Modern Theatre

The medieval period witnessed the emergence of regional language literatures which did not produce dramatic works comparable to ancient classics. Some innovations happened in religious drama, thanks to socio-religious reform Bhakti Movements, which engulfed the subcontinent during the medieval era.

Against the background of this rich tradition, Indian drama was reborn during British colonial interregnum in 18th and 19th centuries. The impetus came from two sources: the rich heritage of Indian drama and the exposure to Western dramatic classics through English. Translations started appearing simultaneously of Sanskrit classics and Western classics, particularly Shakespeare. Till now drama had not developed as a major literary genre in Indian languages. Drama now began to flourish as a cherished literary genre alongside the modern genre of fiction, also a response to Western influence.

There was corresponding unprecedented development in theatre: **the rise of urban entertainment theatre**. This arose in order to provide entertainment to the increasing population of big cities consequent upon industrialization. The new urban theatre is popularly known as Parsi theatre. This genre was an interesting mixture of Western Naturalistic drama, opera and several local elements. Spectacle based on huge settings and colourful backdrops was an essential part of it. The stage was normally divided into front and back for the staging of main and subsidiary action. Music was its life-breath. The actors of this theatre were also great singers. The acting became naturalistic and melodramatic in contrast to the stylized techniques of traditional Indian theatre. Parsi theatre productions chose their story-lines from diverse sources: popular mythological, folklore and contemporary life.

There were also adaptations of Western classics like Shakespeare and Lessing. Unlike traditional folk and tribal theatre Parsi theatre was acted out in interior spaces, now called proscenium theatre. Geared to amuse urban middle and working classes this theatre produces a pot pourri of melodrama, humour, romance and social criticism. Having developed in newly emerging big cities like Kolkata, Delhi, Mumbai and Chennai from late 19th century, this form of professional theatre performed by professional groups, sometimes travelling, was the only source of mass entertainment before the emergence of cinema. With their emphasis on music, spectacle and melodrama, their productions became the paradigms for Indian cinema. Except in some states like Maharashtra and Assam, entertainment theatre was gradually supplanted by popular cinema by 1970's.

Though entertainment theatre thrilled masses, it elicited criticism from sensitive sections of modern Indian population, particularly from educated people. This paved the way for literary drama and amateur theatre. Literary drama was the output of great Indian language writers in different parts of India. The most famous of such playwrights was Rabindranath Tagore, who enriched the genre of drama as much as he enriched poetry and fiction. Disillusioned with contemporary popular drama, Tagore created his own drama and theatre with no precedents in East or West, though borrowing elements from both. Some of his plays like *Chitrangada*, a musical play and *Post-office*, became internationally well-known and performed in Europe and North America. His plays, which are the classics of world drama, were orchestrations of rich poetry, symbolism, socio-political criticism and cosmic vision. They were also prophetic in his understanding of experience as they critique excesses of technological development as in plays like *Muktadhara* and *Roktokoribi*.

There were Tagore's counterparts of Tagore in other languages also. The greatest poets on different languages produced a rich harvest of drama: *Samsa* and *Kuvempu* in Kannada, *Subrahmanya Bharathiar* in Tamil, *Sreekanthan Nair* in Malayalam, *Bharatendu Harishchandra* and *Jaishankar Prasad* in Hindi.

A parallel development was theatre of social criticism which coalesced into urban amateur theatre. This was the drama of ideas influenced mainly by Ibsen and Bernard Shaw addressing social evils. We can further discern two streams of this genre: critical realism and socialist realism.

An archetypal work of socialist realism is the Telugu classic *Kanyashulkam* by *Vireshalingam Pantulu*. This play is an attack on dowry-system that part of Indian marriage. It became immensely influential because of its reformatory appeal. Another prolific author who wrote plays on social evils like caste system, exploitation of women, religious hypocrisy was the Kannada playwright *Adya Rangachary (Sriranga)*. The elements of social criticism were also present in entertainment and literary theatre though mixed with several other elements.

Socialist realism was associated with IPTA (Indian Political Theatre Association) experiments. IPTA was a group of artists belonging to Leftist intelligentsia. Though its manifestations were varied from region to region they were all wedded to the view of theatre as a means for social change. The regions where this movement was strongest were Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Maharashtra, Bengal, Punjab, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala. The North Indian versions of IPTA were mostly influenced by socialist realist works of Howard Fast and Maxim Gorki. *Bhisham Sahani* is an example of this kind of drama. In the South, efforts were made to reconcile social message with traditional forms. The most renowned of such plays is a Malayalam work, *Ningal Endai Communist Akki (You Made Me a Communist)* by *Toppil Bhasi*. The legendary production of this musical play is said to have paved the way for the first ever elected Communist government in Kerala.

Amateur theatres not owing direct allegiance to Communism but at the same time wedded to social change also came into being in different regions. Though not popular like entertainment theatre, it kept alive the role of drama as a criticism of life. One such theatre was *Prithvi Theatre* founded by the movie star *Prithviraj Kapoor* in 1944. After 1962, it became a full-fledged theatre house and is still active.

Theatre after Independence

Soon after India's Independence in 1947, the theatre scene began to change radically. The impact of IPTA began to wane. Entertainment theatre received a set-back due to the challenge of the more popular genre of cinema. Amateur theatre continued to flourish in big cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Bangalore.

In Kolkata two important theatre stalwarts emerged: Utpal Dutt and Shambhu Mitra. The former made significant contributions to political theatre after the waning of IPTA. A playwright, director, actor and producer, who had parted ways with IPTA, he did several memorable productions like *Teen Talwar* and *Surya Shikari* which made a deep impression. The influence of Socialist Realism was clearly discernible in his works. His another important contribution was the reworking of the popular folk theatre *Jatra* and making it a vehicle of communicating contemporary political messages. Shambhu Mitra, on the other hand, focused on finetuning the aesthetic form of Theatre. His production of Tagore's *Rakta Korabi* was a widely acclaimed work.

After independence, the first Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, who was also a great votary of culture, wanted to ensure that the arts flourish without state interference in the new democratic order. He therefore established several national academies which, though funded by the state, would function with autonomy to preserve and nurture the growth of the arts. *Sangeet Natak Akademi* (Music and Performing Arts Akademi) was set up to further performing arts including theatre. This institution has been conferring awards annually on talented artists who have enriched different aspects of theatre. It also organizes from time to time seminars, workshops and festivals to encourage theatre. Many leading directors, actors and playwrights have been the beneficiaries of the prestigious *Sangeet Natak Akademi* award. Particularly in 80's SNA played the key-role in giving a new shape to Indian theatre through a popular scheme of financial assistance to those theatre directors who revive traditional forms, both folk and classical, on modern stage. In this milieu, two important directors Rathan Thiyam from Manipur and KN Panikkar from Kerala came out with productions which put traditional material to creative use in modern theatre. Ratan Thiyam's productions like *Chakravyuh*, *Uttara Priyadarshika* and *Karnabharam* have charmed audiences the world over thanks to their fascinating spectacular quality deriving from colourful Manipuri folklore. K N panikker's productions like *Karnabharam*, on the other hand, employ elements deriving from ancient Sanskrit theatre. Both these directors have exercised deep influence on younger directors.

Another important development in post-Independence theatre was the emergence of drama school theatre following the establishment of National School of Drama, an autonomous institution funded by state, in Delhi. The grooves of this unique theatre institution were set by Ibrahim Alkazi, the first director of NSD. Inspired by the example of RADA in UK where he received training, he set up the curriculum and conceived the training and production of the new school along the rigorous lines of modern Western theatre aesthetics. On the other hand his successor, BV Karanth, trained in Yakshagan traditions of Karnataka, Indianized theatre practices by pressing traditional techniques into the service of Modern theatre. In effect, the dialectics between Western and Indian techniques has characterized the work of several generations of theatre artists trained in NSD. Apart from offering a 3-year residential training to young students selected from across the country, NSD also runs a full-fledged theatre repertory which comes out with new productions annually and organizes different kinds of theatre workshops for different classes of learners in Delhi and the rest of India. The organization of annual theatre festival, *Bharat Rang Mahotsav*, is another highlight of NSD. Begun as a national festival, it has now become an important international festival in which the whole gamut of productions from all over India and the rest of the world take part.

Alongside NSD, other drama schools and repertories have emerged from all over the country. After his tenure ended in NSD, BV Karanth set up two drama schools and repertories, The first, *Ranga Mandal*, was set up in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh. Funded by Madhya Pradesh state government, it was very vibrant during 80's. He set up the second repertory, the state government-run *Nataka Karnataka* in Mysore in. It is still active, coming out with innovative productions and organizing annual international festivals.

Aside from central and state government-run drama schools, self-supporting drama schools have emerged in several states. Neenasam, a drama school and repertory, established in Heggodu in Karnataka by the towering theatre stalwart, late KV Subbanna, has become the hub of theatre and culture drawing theatre and culture workers from all over the state and elsewhere. Unlike other drama schools it has placed theatre in the context of allied arts and humanities-literature, dance, culture and history of thought all of which figure prominently in their annual cultural appreciation course. Further, Neenasam has demonstrated that innovativeness can come not just in capitals, but also in margins. The other leading theatre repertories in the country are Kalakshetra and Chorus Theatre in Imphal, Manipur. They are run by two great virtuosos of Indian theatre, Kanhailal and Ratan Thiyam respectively. Under the guidance of Kanhailal, a very active drama school involving Rabha tribals, Badanguppa, has emerged in a remote village of Rampur in Assam. Bharatendu Harischandra Drama School in Lucknow and Rang Bundeli in Bhopal are also notable drama school in the country.

While amateur movement has mostly given way to drama school theatre by the turn of the century, some of the active troupes have turned into semi-professional drama schools involving amateurs. They continue to keep the theatre scene active. Prayoga Ranga, Bangalore and Lokadharmi, Kochi and Sopanam, Trivandrum are examples of this trend.

Other institutions fostering Indian theatre today are departments of culture both at national and state levels. State government-run academies are playing an active role in keeping theatre alive and growing by conferring awards, organizing festivals and providing funds.

Supported by the state and private sources from India and abroad but always invigorated by individual talents, inspired by influences from West but also returning to native resources, Indian theatre has gone through different avatars in the post-independence period. During the phase of modernism, it produced internationally acclaimed play-wrights like Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sarcar, Dharmaveer Bharati, Mohan Rakesh and Girish Karnad, Chandrashekhara Kambar, P Lankesh and Indira Parthasarati, whose works have been widely performed and discussed. These play-wrights brought to theatre great formal precision and the thematic preoccupation of modernist angst. Younger playwrights in different regions are now addressing problems like identity crisis and effects of globalization. Contemporary directors, heirs of a glorious tradition, are remaking the idiom of theatre by drawing on resources of old traditions and of the electronic age. Performed in 24 major languages and in many tribal languages and in English, Indian theatre today has infinite varieties and potentials, which is still attracting audiences in spite of the overwhelming popularity of its rivals-cinema and television. It is therefore one of the most potent expressions of contemporary India and the world.