Indian Folk Theatre

Instrumental in Independent India’s Socio-Political Transformation

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A Research Paper
Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of Theatre and Dance University of Central Missouri May, 2013
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SOCIO-POLITICAL TRANSFORMATIONS

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WARRENSBURG, MISSOURI
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Julie Mollenkamp, for her helpful guidance.
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The role that the theatre should play in contemporary society has always been a subject of debate around the world. In India, since the late nineteenth century, due to the ever changing social and political conditions, various artists have attempted to use the ingrained folk theatres from different regions of India as a means of reaching vast audiences for purposes of educational, publicity, and propaganda.

An Overview

By the early 1940s independence for the Indian colony for virtually assured but the direction that new nation would take was still unsettled. Left-wing political parties who were eager to exploit theatre as a vehicle of propaganda, and even after sixty-five years they have shown no sign of losing their original appeal or flavor, for political parties and politicians still outcry for ways to gather votes and sympathy for their selfish ideologies.

In the last twenty years or so, a new interest in regional cultural expressions and folklore has developed in India, leading to the rediscovery and re-evaluation of indigenous forms of literature and the performing arts. Nowhere is this more apparent than in theatre. The traditional theatres such as Yakshagana, Tamasha, Ras Lila, Nautanki, Bhavai, Jatra, and Khyal have gone through a remarkable revival since independence in 1947. Considered decadent and largely forgotten during colonial days, these regional theatres have recently received attention and a certain amount of governmental support from the national and state Sangeet Natak Akademi’s (Music Theatre Academy). Their status has been enhanced by an intellectual reappraisal, which views them as the surviving fragments of the ancient Sanskrit dramatic tradition. This is based on common features such as preliminary rituals, stylized acting and gestures, stock characters like the stage director (sutradhara) and clown (vidushaka), and abundant song and dance. Through
annual festivals held in the capital, folk theatre groups from all over India have performed for urban audiences, and Western scholars have also been attracted to study the traditions. As a result, greater familiarity with folk theatre forms has developed in the cities, and the urban attitude has shifted from scorn to curiosity and respect.

Indian theatre and multiculturalism, in all of their complexities, are centuries old, while scholarly research is relatively new to Indian theatre, and methodological modes of enquiry are still in their infancy. Nonetheless, three kinds of theatre in India have been instrumental in mapping out a field of scholarship:

1. Traditional theatre and theatre traditions, which include the study of classical Sanskrit theatre, its traditions and performance conventions, and regional and vernacular theatre. This has also involved considerations of playwriting and the use of performance space.

2. Theatre in the colonial period: English theatre under British colonial rule, theatre of protest, and its commercial offshoots, and theatre during the struggle for independence.


Metaphysical judgments on the artistic assessments of Greek and Indian theatre by philologist and Orientalist Max Muller influenced Orientalist Sylvain Levi’s conclusion of his study of Indian theatre. Muller wrote:

Greece and India are… the two opposite poles in the historical development of the Aryan man. To the Greek, existence is full of life and reality; to the Hindu it is a dream, an illusion. No wonder that a nation like the Indian cared so little for history; no wonder that social and political virtues were little cultivated, and the ideas of the Useful and Beautiful, scarcely know to them. (Muller, 18)
The Hindus were a nation of philosophers. Their struggles were the struggles of thought; their past; the problem of creation; their future, the problem of existence. The present alone, which is real and living solution of the problem of the past and future, seems never to have attached their thoughts or to have called out their energies. But, taken as a whole, history supplies no second instance where the inward life of the soul has so completely absorbed all the practical faculties of a whole people, and in fact, almost destroyed those qualities by which a nation gains its place in history. It might therefore justly be said that India has no place in the political history of the world… (But) it certainly has no right to claim its place in the intellectual history of mankind. (Muller, 30 and 32)

If Muller found the opposition the between Greek and Indian religious philosophy crucial in explaining the singularity of Indian culture, Levi finds the same opposition pertinent to an explanation of dramatic forms: “The Greek drama is the action itself. Whereas the nataka (play) is ‘the imitation of a condition,’ the Greek drama is ‘the imitation of an action” (Sylvain, 126). Aristotle and Bharata contradict each other as Greek loves intense action, while Indian religion and philosophy denounces the error and burden that is action. Levi concedes that under the appearances of “an eternal inertia,” India has transformed, and its theatre has moved away from the Sanskrit model of heroic comedy, towards theatre which is literary, popular, and vital to the region, people, politics, and agenda in its time period.

**Origin of Indian Theatre**

Throughout history India’s political, regional, racial, linguistic, and social divisions have been overpowered by a fundamental cultural and civilizational oneness. From as early as the Aryan period, about 1500 to 1000 B.C.E. an idealized concept of a united India, called
Bharatavarsha, exercised a critical hold on the Indian mind. Foundational civilizational texts from this period clearly enunciate the idea of an Indian nation denned by the entire subcontinents lands and rivers, religion and culture, races and tribes. It would appear from the postcolonial vantage point following Homi Bhabha and Benedict Anderson, which the early Aryans were in fact narrating and imagining their nation into existence.

Various disciplines in the theatre are also closely related to the social structure of Indian society. Indian society was specifically divided into four levels, which developed later on into the caste system. At the uppermost level were the Brahmins, who were responsible for performing religious rituals and imparting knowledge. By virtue of their higher level, they were considered the most respected class. Lower down were Kshatriyas, whose task was to protect the people and the land. This was in fact the ruling class, which produced the kings and warriors. The third level was occupied by the Vaishyas, who owned trade and commerce. This was a rich class of business people who exerted considerable pressure on the state because of their powerful financial status. At the lowest level was the working class, called the Shudras, to which the majority of the population belonged. This was the most deprived sector of society for whose members the recitation of the sacred books and education was out of reach (Hansen 78).

The need for a new stream of education was strongly felt with the goal of rectifying the social imbalance, and this new stream appeared in the form of theatre. In order to make it equal to existing streams of knowledge, the art of the theatre was termed Natyaveda the fifth Veda, a synthesis of knowledge comprising the elements of all the existing books, as well as the art forms. The Natyaveda consists of Natyashastra (literal English meaning is ‘the science of theatre’), which describes the origin of natya ‘drama.’ According to this theory, Lord Brahma created the Natyaveda for the benefit of all the varnas (social levels), since the Shudras could not
be instructed in Veda. The four constituents of this fifth Veda were adapted from the four earlier Vedas, namely, Recitation from the *Rigveda*, Song from the *Samaveda*, Histrionics (*Abhinaya*) from the *Yajurveda*, and Sentiment (*Rasa*) from the *Atharvaveda* (Chaturvedi, Interdisciplinary 166).

**Bharatvarsha, a New Nation**

According to broad scholarly consensus, a brief outline of the main phases of India’s cultural and political history is well-developed since the urban culture of Indus Valley civilization that flourished between about 2500 and 1600 B.C.E. This civilization was superseded by the Sanskrit-speaking Aryans beginning about 1500 B.C.E. The Aryan religious books, the four Vedas, became the foundation of Hinduism. By the fourth century B.C.E. these Vedic Hindus had gradually conquered and assimilated the pre-Aryan peoples of most of India, culminating in the first Indian empire of Chandragupta Maurya. Until the tenth century C.E., Hindu culture with Sanskrit as the language of religion, court, and literature dominated the Indian society. However, it did not replace the numerous regional languages and artistic genres, which charted their own independent course without closing themselves off from Sanskrit influences. This ancient Indian era ended by about 1000 C.E., when succeeding waves of Muslim invaders achieved political supremacy and eventually displaced Sanskrit literature and culture with Persian language and culture. Sanskrit slowly died out as a spoken language while remaining the medium of Hindu religion and scriptures, but the various vernacular languages and artistic genres thrived. This new period, traditionally labeled the medieval era of Indian history, continued up to the rise of British power between the mid-eighteenth and the mid-nineteenth centuries, which in turn inaugurated the modern phase of Indian history (Solomon 113).
Mirroring life and believes around 1000 B.C.E., *Mahabharata*, the massive epic poem of Indian culture, clearly portrays *Bharatavarsha* as one nation and one people bound by a common geography, religion, and culture well before such a pan-Indian nation state ever existed.

Other epic poem, the *Ramayana*, encrypts a similar *Bharatavarsha* an idealized nation under the rule of Rama, the perfect king, martial hero, and beloved avatar of Vishnu. Similarly, the *Natyashastra* speaks of a single nation called *Bharatavarsha*. It advises playwrights that the action of all plays that have celestial heroes should be set in *Bharatavarsha*, because the entire land here is charming, sweet-smelling and of golden color. The ideal nation concept persisted in the medieval period when Hindu religious movements, like Bhakti, swept through an India substantially ruled by Muslim kings, and saint-poets often celebrated *Bharatavarsha*. Resentment against the Muslim rulers, and later against British rulers, only made the idea of a *Bharatavarsha* more potent and more widespread (Solomon 114).

**Storytelling Colored in Language**

Since early ages, storytelling has been deeply rooted tradition of Indian folk and tribal theatre. This does not concern mythological stories in mythological settings exclusively. Frequently, performances of legends about historical characters cleverly blend in commentary on contemporary situations causing a synthesis of ‘old’ and ‘new’ facilitated by the interdisciplinary crossovers within these forms.

During the mid-nineteenth century, the Europeans were discovering ancient Indian culture, while Indian elites were discovering modern European culture. This encounter gave rise to the new theatrical genre called the modern Indian theatre. The designation, modern Indian theatre, refers to a new genre that developed between the late-eighteenth and the mid-nineteenth centuries. Shaped by the imperatives of empire, nationalism, and nativism, this was a
metropolitan genre, created by a bilingual high-caste bourgeoisie, who strategically adapted elements from a gallery of models that included the Sanskrit theatre, traditional theatre, and European theatre. Ironically, it was only after the Orientalists had first championed Sanskrit literature and translated it into European languages that these Westernized Indian elites had turned to Sanskrit drama and revalued it as classical, as a part of their nationalist aspirations. The modern Indian theatre began as renewed cultural consumption for the upper crust but developed into broad-based entertainment for large audiences in cities across the country and thus manifested itself in several different languages.

Irrespective of its language, however, this theatre sought to project both modernity and Indianess in its style and subject matter. It constituted a fundamental component of the Indian intelligentsia’s grand nationalist enterprise to invent an identity that was modern but with roots in an ancient past. In short, like the authors of the ancient Hindu epics noted earlier, they were also trying to imagine, narrate and perform a nation into existence. As a result of this origin the modern Indian theatre enjoyed great prestige among the cultural elites. (Solomon 118).

Europeans keen to investigate India’s ancient past inevitably relied on Brahman priests and scholars who were by tradition the sole preservers, transmitters, and guardians of Sanskrit texts, whether religious or secular. The Brahmans’ pride in Sanskrit culture and belief in its superiority over all other Indian traditions colored the early Indologists interpretations. Many of the Indian Theatre historians have treated Sanskrit drama as synonymous with Indian Theatre, devaluing the existence and influence of traditional public theatre.

The rediscovery of folk theatre had in fact heightened the sense of a rural-urban cultural dichotomy among the educated elite. Urban theatre was perceived more and more as imitative of
the West and non-Indian, while the term rural was acquiring the prestigious connotation of “indigenous.” Badal Sircar, the noted Bengali playwright, expressed this clearly:

Theatre is one of the fields where this [rural-urban] dichotomy is manifested most. The city theatre today is not a natural development of the traditional or folk theatre in the urban setting as it should have been. It is rather a new theatre having its base on Western theatre ..., whereas the traditional village theatre has retained most of its indigenous characteristics. (Hansen 78)

As a result, some dramatists began to reject Western influence and urged a return to village culture and traditions. The Urdu playwright Habib Tanvir stated:

It is in its villages that the dramatic tradition of India in all its pristine glory and vitality remains preserved even to this day. It is these rural drama groups that require real encouragement... it is not until the city youth is fully exposed to the influence of folk traditions in theatre that a truly Indian theatre, modern and universal in appeal and indigenous in form, can really be evolved. (Hansen 79)

By the early seventies, playwrights and directors had begun to incorporate folk conventions and ideas into their productions. Heightened awareness of rural forms was feeding back into the creative process, providing new resources for self-expression. In the Round Table on the Contemporary Relevance of Traditional Theatre, organized by the Sangeet Natak Akademi in 1971, complex questions such as - What is the relation of rural forms to modern values? What the role of the urban author towards unfamiliar regional genre? How the urban audience will react to revival of traditional folk theatre? - were posed. However, the conference’s basic assumption was unchallenged, namely that “as creative artistes we have to confront the traditional, especially in our case where tradition is a continuous living vital force” (Hansen 78).
These discussions made clear that the manner in which traditional and urban theatres were to be integrated depended very much upon the sensibility of the individual playwright or director.

From 1950s until the 1970s, as the period of new economic thinking and a liberalization of sociocultural values, or as a period defined by the conflict between tradition and modernity fuelled by the new economic thinking. During this time, theatre activists and playwrights struggled with how to create a modern theatre that would give expression to an Indian identity, which synthesized the modern with the traditional and the indigenous. Identity issues and the idea of a national theatre were paramount. Post-independence, playwrights and directors of regional theatre in Marathi, Bengali, Kannada, and Hindi experimented with traditional folk forms and rejuvenated the vernacular languages of theatre, such as Gujarati, Assamee, Oriya, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Punjabi or Rajasthani. These practitioners worked with myth, history, folk legend, and religion-centric traditions to try to understand and to reflect on contemporary situations (Chaturvedi, Overview 67).

In her book, *Theatres of Independence: Drama, Theory, and Urban Performance in India Since 1947* Aparna Dharwadker has considered the role of historical fictions in the symbolic construction of the nation. She persuasively argues that these plays offer alternate sources of historical knowledge for audiences ideologically resistant to the dominant narratives of official history. Through deft close readings of Mohan Rakesh’s *Asliatlli Ka Ek Din* (1958), Girish Karnad’s *Tughlak* (1964), and Badal Sircar’s *Baki Itihas* (1965), she contends that these plays narrate ironic counter-histories of the nation for contemporary Indian audiences (Menon 383-84).

Aparna Dharwadker has elaborated Una Chaudhari’s idea of geo-pathology and explored the inter-articulation of caste politics, domestic arrangements, and minority and majority religious dynamics in the indigenized discourse of home in realist drama. She has examined
three social realist plays: Vijay Tendulkar’s *Kanyadaan* (1983), Mahesh Elkunchwar’s *Wada Chirebandi* (1985), and Cyrus Mistry’s *Doongagi House* (1978), and deliberated the ways in which the home would become a figure for the nation. Then she examined the urban folk theatre, including Girish Karnad’s *Hayavadana* (1971), Chandrashekhar Kambar’s *Jokumaraswami* (1972), and Habib Tanvir’s *Charandas Chor* (1974). These so-called folk plays, written, performed, and consumed primarily by urbanites, illustrate the turn toward neo-traditionalism in post-independence theatre. According to Dharwadkar, ontological differences between folk and realist drama regarding gender issues when she comments that “the qualities of antirealism and anti-modernity allow these plays to place women at the center, represent the Indian village as a realm of ambivalent freedom and fulfillment, and offer a serious if not decisive challenge to patriarchy” (Menon 384).

India in the 1970s saw a number of historic and political events: the nationalization of banks, the abolition of the Privy Purse to the ex-rulers of India (before independence there were more than 650 rulers in different parts of the country), the Indo-Pakistan war, the division of Pakistan and the formation of Bangladesh. *Dalit* issues, gender issues, and tribal issues also became the focus of national debate and were widely taken up in literature and the arts. In 1975 Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared a state of internal emergency after opposition parties made a case against her in the Supreme Court about rigging in the national elections. Every single citizen’s fundamental rights were suspended during this period and any kind of protest against the ruling government was banned. It is considered to be one of the most shameful periods in the history of independent India, during which the press was censored, men were forced to undergo vasectomies, and governmental powers were widely abused by the members of the Congress Party (Chaturvedi, Overview 70).
During this internal emergency, in the theatre, several dramatists, directors and actors, along with political leaders and activists, were either arrested or were confined to their homes. Plays by several important playwrights, such as Sarveshwar Dayal Saxena and Mohit Chaterjee, were banned during this period because of their critical approach towards autocratic Congress policies. Many of their scripts, for example *Ab Ghareebi Hatao* (Eliminate Poverty Now) by Saveshwara or *Guinea Pig* by Mohit Chaterjee, along with several other short plays written for street theatre, were either banned or heavily censored. In brief, until 1979, when the state of emergency was lifted, underground theatre and performances took place all over India.

**Restoration of Folk tales**

The 1970s also saw the emergence of several new theatre departments in various universities across the country with enhanced state funding. These departments hosted a series of national and regional seminars, and symposia to debate the identity of a national theatre and a definition of Indian theatre against a social and political backdrop. A growth in theatre research culture saw efforts concentrated in one of two directions: focused either on classical traditions or on contemporary socio-political theatre formations. Additionally, research into the various vernacular languages of regional theatre was innovative and informative for mainstream theatre at this time. Several theatre publications engaged with redefining ancient traditions and with examining the rituals of folk theatre and their contemporary relevance (Chaturvedi, Overview 69-70).

Themes of the *Lok Gathas* (folktales) used in this form are inspired by different religions and historical texts. The purpose of dramatic representation is to instruct through amusement and to affect the minds of the spectators with the sentiments expressed a.k.a. *Rasas*. The popular folk theatres from Western regions of India are *Tamasha, Bhavai* and regional puppetry.
Tamasha

Tamasha, an Indian folk theatre originated in Maharashtra, and flourished during the reign of Bajirao II (1795-1818). Originally performed by all the sections of the society; over time, performing became the right of two low-caste communities of mahars and mangs. During the seventeenth century, another low-caste group of kolhati started performing Tamasha, to entertain Mughal and Maratha military. The traditional Gondhalis, who sang and danced in praise of goddess Parvati, influenced the newly developing form of theatre, Tamasha. The acrobat and tumblers from these communities learned the northern dance style and joined the troupes.

‘Tamasha’ a Persian word traveled to Maharashtra through Mughal armies. It means fun, play, entertainment (Gargi, Tamasha 73).

Tamasha borrowed the traditional musical instruments such as tuntuna (a one-stringed instrument) and manjeera (a pair of small metal cymbals) from Gondhal singers. The musicians also were the refrain singers. When the lead singer pauses, they take up his last with their voices jumping to an astoundingly high pitch. Tamasha picked its vigor from the old ballad form Powada, which the bards sang describing the heroic deeds of a king or a knight.

In the late eighteenth century, Tamasha was spurned by the Brahmins. Popular Tamasha composers of this time, Anant Fandi, Ram Joshi, and Prabhakar were noble Brahmins who were disowned by their community. Ram Joshi formed his own Tamasha troupe and started composing lavanis, sensuous poems unsurpassed even today. Initially, lavanis were only sung by the courtesans like Bayabai, sitting in their baithak (drawing room), Later, lavani developed into a complete dance form in it (Leiter 720).

Tamasha’s lavani dance troupes comprise of refrain female and male singers who are accompanying dancers, male musicians, male lead singer shahir and a female lead singer who is
usually the lead dancer. The first, *lavani* introduced the characters, unfolds the plot, and prepares audiences for the complications. A bit of prose and dialogues follows the *lavani*. The singing comes back at an expected moment. The dance is introduced to heighten the motion. The *Tamasha* dancers punctuate the singing with dancing. A comprises of thirty different *lavanis* (Gargi, Tamasha 80-81).

In the nineteenth-century the *Satya Shodhak Samaj* (Truth Seeking Society) for anti-Brahmin propaganda used *Tamasha*. Established by Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, the SSS was formed to encourage the lower castes to challenge the superiority of Brahmins and curb the caste based discrimination. In the SSS *Tamashas*, the *shahir* would recite propaganda ballads extolling the bravery of sixteenth century Maratha warrior Shivaji the Great, and urging political uprisings in his name against the oppressive Brahmins. The farces within these SSS *Tamashas* depicted stories of Brahmins cheating the poor, innocent peasant. These intended to educate the illiterate lower caste workers about their rights and injustice towards them.

During early 1900s, Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak, who was a Brahmin, a journalist and a political leader of extremist nationalism, used an aggressive, warlike *Tamasha* style. He appropriated Shivaji not as anti-Brahmin, but a symbol of anti-colonial military rule against the British rule. These performances were loaded with satire and double meanings which even attracted the upper class. People were encouraged to take part in a celebration of their heritage, and to unite against the British colonial dominance (Hollander 108-110).

One of the first risk takers of the Post-colonial period, in 19758, Vijaya Mehta, brought in *Tamasha* artists to learn their skills in the theatre laboratory called *Rangayan*, where students contextualized and analyzed each play they produced. She staged Brecht plays in her early experimentation using the *Tamasha* performing style. According to her, modern theatre actors
could learn more about intricate performance movements and keep tact of keeping audience’s attention intact from the Tamasha performers’ process (Leiter 720).

**Bhavai**

_Bhavai_ is the folk theatre of Gujarat, the homeland of Mahatma Gandhi. Recessive, puritanical, inhibited, the people are known for their shrewd business acumen. The rich and the middle class are colorless, which follow conservative traditions. But the farmers, craftsmen, and village artisans, poor and less inhibited, bring color their folk arts such as Bhavai. _Bhavai_ is performed during _Navaratri_- nine nights coinciding with the _Dasara_ festival- in honor of goddess _Amba Mata_. The performers of _Bhavai_ believe that the goddess attends the performance each night. There are several interpretations of the word _Bhavai_. ‘Bhav’ means life, ‘bhava’ mean sentiment and ‘vahi’ means carrier or a diary. Thus, _Bhavai_ could mean ‘carrier of life’ or ‘a diary of life.’ Each night, eight to ten unrelated playlets are performed. They are strung together by the _Naik_, the director, who comments on them and links them with the next one. The performance comprises of interwoven songs, stylized speeches, and dances and is held in an arena at ground level. In spite of the deep devotional significance, _Bhavai_ is secular at its roots. Its jokes, dances, themes, and songs deal life of common people. Mythological heroes are rare (Gargi, Bhavai 51-53).

_Bhavai_ is an inherited art. The Trigula community is a descendant of Asaita Thakar, a fourteenth century Brahman, who offended his caste by rescuing a lower-caste girl by pretending that she too was a Brahman. His generosity cost him his own clan’s identity but earned enduring gratitude from the girl’s clan. In exile, Asaita used his narrative skills for narrating legendary epics, and eventually wrote 360 playlets. The people of Trigula community generally engage in
farming and take *Bhavai* as a part-time profession. They are socially bold, for instance, if a Hindu girl is abducted by a Muslim is recovered, her orthodox family will not accept her, unlike the Trigulas. Because of their unorthodox ways, they were considered low and the Brahmins will not accept their writings literature. Thus, Asiata’s writings, unique in its humor and literary pungency still stand as the chief source of *Bhavai* performance (Gargi, Bhavai 68).

During the reformist movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, *Bhavai* was used as social play form to bring together people belonging to different castes and religion. A thick mixture if Hindu and Muslim culture prevails in traditional *Bhavai*. Muslims, against whom there were religious biases among Hindus, are portrayed as gallant heroes in the *Bhavai*.

A prominent theatre artist Dina Gandhi was responsible for introducing the *Bhavai* element to the modern play in 1950s. Inspired by the folk performances during her work in the left-wing movement for the People’s Theatre in 1945, she wrote *Lok Bhavai* (*People’s Bhavai*, 1953), a satire about social issues in Bombay. During this production, she introduced a new character of Rangali-wife of Rangalo, the jester. The play, which is a strung of song-dance-dialogue drama, described the story of a couple who comes to the new, post-colonial Bombay, meet different characters - a bus conductor, a moneylender, a hoarder, a student- and are disillusioned.

In 1954, Rasiklal Parik’s *Meena Gurjari*, told the story of an abducted milkmaid and her return, dealing with issues social acceptance in orthodox Indian families. Parik used predominant dance steps and rhythms from *Bhavai*. There were innovations, however, with the opening where instead of traditional worship of *Ganesha* (God with the elephant face) they performed worship of *Rangadevata* (God of the stage).
Chandravadhan Mehta, a popular satirist, wrote *Ho Holika* (1956), which describes a crazy judge who smokes opium, barks orders, and makes wrong decisions. The Rangalo and Rangali, in *Bhavai* style, comment and carry the action of the play further. *Aram Raj*, a hilarious propaganda comedy, which was based on the *Bhavai* model, was performed by the Song and Drama division of Government of India. In *Aram Raj*, which literally means ‘Sleeping Law’ a village chief sits on a hammock-like bed and his assistants carry him to different locales in town. The chief smokes hookah, holds rod of justice, and cackles. His decisions are absurd, yet amazingly correct (Gargi, *Bhavai* 70).

These and other *Bhavai* added a new soul to the contemporary plays, which use the traditional characters of the clown and his wife (created by Dina Gandhi) brought the post-colonial, tyrant Indian socio-political systems into public eye and started a dialogue using symbolic new theatre.

**Puppetry**

While in Rajasthan, popular form of puppetry was developed out of artistic expertise. Regional puppetry from west coast of India originated in royal courts of Persian rulers in mid-fifteenth century. A puppetry troupe included street entertainers and rural traditional groups presenting plays for young audiences and adult audiences. While many features distinguished each regional group, some common bonds were apparent. These included the visual emphasis of the art, musical accompaniment to support it, the tendency to present epic stories (especially the Ramayana), and for traditional genres, ritual openings and invocations.

While language holds these puppet genres apart, it also visually draws them together. As many of the touring companies performed in regional languages and dialects, much of the local audience was as dependent upon visuals. It allowed the work to be communicated reasonably
well despite the importance of dialogue (especially within the shadow theatre, where artists are sometimes more apt to tell than show the action). Another common feature is that live music generally accompanies the traditional performances, and potential employment for musicians is sometimes a factor in the decision to form companies. The tale may be chanted by the storyteller (bhagavat) or the singer may present traditional folk songs. Drum and harmonium are often used in areas such as Rajasthan, similar to the swazzle of Punch and Judy, which adds a musical flavor to the puppets’ voices. In many forms, the puppet may either speak to or through this singer, and the music and percussion highlight the movement (Clark, 334).

The Pavakathakali group of Kerala is a hand puppet counterpart to kathakali dance theatre, based primarily upon stories from the Mahabharata. Pavakathakali originally developed in seventeenth century as a kind of kathakali appreciation tool and was practiced by hereditary puppeteers of Telugu descent, who by the eighteenth century were modeling their figures. This group made spectacular kathakali art-costuming puppets like kathakali’s heroes, using their painted facial masks for the puppet’s features and the form’s text and music for the play.

Under the guidance of G. Venu (with initial funding from the Sangeet Natak Akademi) Pavakathakali revived, placing a greater emphasis upon the dance aspects. Dakshayagam (The story of Daksha) tells of the arrogant son of Lord Brahma, who is decapitated for his offenses by the demon Virabhadra but is revived by Lord Shiva and provided with the head of a goat. This was performed with a simple cloth stretched horizontally to form a play board, and featured a magnificent musical accompaniment drawn from kathakali. The company's theatrical sensibility was very sophisticated and well suited to a contemporary audience; it is clear how it has managed to develop an international following.
In the ritual opening, *Pavakathakali* does a figurative representation of Ganesh altogether, invoking his spirit through the use of a sacred flame. Throughout the performance, performers tossed resin into the flame and created spectacular fire effects; one felt an intense blast of heat as the flame ignited. The performances are aesthetically appealing and viscerally exciting as one marveled that kathakali’s theatrical excesses could be condensed into puppet forms. (Clark, 336)

Various practices of traditional folk theatre from India such as Sanskrit drama, regional puppetry, folk and tribal rituals were social reforming tools during nineteenth century colonial India as well as during the post-colonial era. Further traditional Indian theatre was instrumental in social transformation of post-colonial era and crucial to understand and analyze socio-political happenings.

**Urban-Folk Theatre**

Full-length plays that emerged from the experimental works with folk forms in India are defined as “urban-folk” drama. The urban folk dramas have distinguished elements from that of the folk theatre. First, the serious urban folk plays are by-product of individual authorship in a culture in which playwright’s recognition as author adds literary qualities to their theatrical work. Although in the Indian context such prestige translate more in symbolic rather than real capital, it does give recognition to the author’s work, compared to the extreme anonymities of traditional folk performances.

Second, the urban folk plays are more inclined towards the culture of tectuality and print over the culture of performance. A.K. Ramanujan and Stuart H. Blackburn both that “even when they are written, narratives in postmodern traditions are still… usually orally delivered and aurally received” (Dharwadkar, 321). A radical difference between folk theatre and urban folk dram is that the urban folk drama is a transportable entity, while the folk theatre always belongs
to a specific reason, language, ecological cycle, and the participating community. On the other hand, the urban folk drama could be detached from all the specificities and performed, either in the original language or in translation) anywhere an audience is available. These “paradoxical” qualities of urban folk theatre collectively denote a syncretic practice that is inherently problematic because of its fusion on traditional material with contemporary expectations and contexts (Dharwadkar 322).

In an overpopulated, rapidly growing nation with a large middle class populace, up-to-date forms of professional and technological education along with extensive industrialization, urban life defines the living conditions of majority of the theatergoing audiences. The limitation of rural areas as a literary subject suggests that the playwrights incline more toward realism because it is compelling to their audience’s reality. At the same time, the urban folk drama contradicts the direction the nation has taken as a political, cultural, and economic entity. In contemporary India, folk theatre has an aura of exoticism compared to the urban fold drama. Playwright and scholar G.P. Deshpande describes this trend as:

The newly found love for classics and the folk among the urban practitioners as a sign of the search for the roots by an alienated working class. (Comparing folk form with bedtime stories) that put you to sleep with the complacent belief that you have done your duty by Indian culture and towards the other Indian people. (Dharwardkar, 323)

National School of Drama (NSD) was set up in 1957 with the prime objective of the institution was to generate professionals to develop children's theatre and rural theatre. Although there were a wide range of traditional performance cultures throughout the country, from rituals to folk performances and classical performances, the NSD was modeled on the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (RADA.) It is no surprise since the NSD was led by a graduate of RADA,
Professor Ebrahim Alkazi, who put the institution on a functional track (Ananthakrishnan 291). Thus the toolkit used during the initial days was basically Western model, conducive to realism rather than growing organically out of the actual practices of the different forms of Indian performance. This early orientation remains today, emphasizing the creation of referential meanings on the stage through conventional methods and devices, taken as the unshakable organizing principle of theatre practice.

The second leader at NSD, B. V. Karanth introduced the next important paradigm which focused on stylization evolved from traditional practice structures in combination with Western models and contemporary realities. Karanth’s influence at NSD coincided with the postcolonial ‘Indianization’ project in all fields of cultural expression. No further innovations occurred in the area of pedagogy at the NSD, with the exception of some minor refashioning in operational aspects of training.

Mostly, the convergence of new concepts, new thoughts, new principles of performativity and practice structures, including technology, have yet to be formally updated to address the cultural heterogeneity of the country. It is not about abandoning older principles, but an unexamined adherence to these early ideas will result in restricting the diverse modern forms to the familiar classical conventions (Ananthakrishnan 291).

New departments for theatre started in universities in the following decades, replicating the NSD model. However, due to lack of the infrastructure and the funding like that of the NSD, they were unable to hire qualified teachers to train the students at a professional level. Most of these departments were handled by teachers of literature causing the students could to acquire proficiency neither in theatre nor in drama. Majority of the theatre departments were stranded in ways that meant their students were not equipped either theoretically or practically to get into
either theatre research or professional work. As graduates were struggling to successfully enter into the profession, there was no effort made to start completely new departments for theatre studies.

Within this ‘stagnation blocks innovation, which in turn continues stagnation’ circle, modern academic training for theatre practice has been severely restricted. Considering the amount of creative practice happening in Indian theatre belonging to different genres, regions, languages and cultures, the corresponding amount of academic data is not proportionate. Most of the productions by eminent directors simply culminate in a newspaper review, even in urban areas. Any discussion of theatre in the public cultural sector usually ends up referring to traditional performance cultures like Kathakali or Jatra, and not the modern theatre. On the other hand, many written documents available on traditional theatre do not address the socio-political aspects of the performance, nor do they apply any analytical tools from other disciplines (Scenic, lights, sound and costumes) or from theory.

Contemporary productions and different traditional practices are embedded with seminal value in terms of knowledge, but they are not adequately identified and transformed into a body of knowledge through research or study. It is alarming to note that classroom resources available to teach Indian theatre - including all language theatres - are only at a very minimum, even where celebrated works are concerned.

Outside academic institutions, meanwhile, theatre is finding new avenues to negotiate between tradition and modernity. Experiments by young artists are demonstrating the redefinition of tradition, playwright, space and actor. By contrast, no academic efforts are being made to research these new initiatives, to understand the interwoven relationships between
performance and context. Considering the current backdrop, theatre academics in India should undertake following strategies:

1. Develop some leading-edge trends in training, changing practice structures and embracing contemporary Indian cultural diversities to address the above issues;
2. Expand the area of research in respect of different performance cultures and bring in new methodologies, interdisciplinary in nature;
3. Initiate different practice as research models for diverse contexts in order to foster knowledge production of modern Indian theatre practice;
4. Organize workshops for researchers and practitioners on current trends in theory and practice as regular events;
5. Start a new academic departments for theatre and performance studies, as at the moment India has only one national institute and twenty-five university departments for theatre expecting to serve a population in excess of 1.8 billion across India's twenty-eight states. (Ananthakrishnan 292)

During the last decade India as a nation has confronted and persisted through the terrors of natural disasters, extremist outbreaks, exploitation of resources, heavy inflation and recession. Resourceful application and education of the nataka (drama), which is ‘the imitation of a condition,’ artists, playwrights, and activists could be instrumental towards achieving social order.
Work Cited


