

**Elements of Literature and Creative Communication**  
**Prof. H S Komalesha**  
**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur**

**Lecture - 57**  
**Modern Indian Drama**

Hello there. Welcome again to this ongoing discussion on Indian Drama. Let us quickly recap what we did in the previous class. We began with Bharata's Natyashastra and how Natyashastra proposes a distinct rasa theory. We identified the Navarasas and how the dramatic performances or performative arts, in general, can also be called rasa-abhinaya based on their ability to evoke certain rasa in the audience. And how modern psychology also makes use of these various rasas. We discussed all of them. And we also discussed major Sanskrit dramatists - Kalidasa, Bhasa, Ashvaghosha, Shudraka, Vishakhadatta and others. So, we began our discussion of these playwrights with Kalidasa. So, in this class, we discuss another major playwright, Bhasa, and probably after that, we can go to Indian English Drama. We can trace the origins of Indian English Drama generally to the folk theatre and we can begin thereafter by discussing Bhasa.

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## BHASA



- Bhasa is one of the most celebrated ancient Sanskrit playwrights who predates Kalidasa, and whose entire extant works have been uncovered as recently as early 20th century
- Bhasa's plays do not follow the treatises in Natyashastra - this has been interpreted as a proof of its antiquity
- His most famous plays include Madhyamavyayoga and Urubhanga - both are based on events from the Mahabharata and having been the subject of numerous modern adaptations



So, here is Bhasa. Generally, Bhasa is another important playwright who predates Kalidasa. You have, of course, Ashvaghosha too. We have identified Ashvaghosha as probably the first playwright. Remember, this is based on intelligent academic guesswork right because

unfortunately, we do not have any important plays that Ashvaghosha seem to have written though we find references to that in some of his contemporaries' works. Like Kalidasa and Ashvaghosha, to a certain extent Bhasa, too borrows his plots from Mahabharata, especially his Madhyamavyayoga and Urubhanga they are, of course, his well-known plays. They are borrowed, they are taken from Mahabharata, especially Urubhanga discusses the last battle between Duryodhana and Bhima. A very beautiful rendition of some of these wonderful sub-themes from the Mahabharata. And well it is said that Bhasa did not have much regard for Bharata's Natyashastra therefore, many of them consider Bhasa to even predate Bharata, right. But again as we said there are no solid historical proofs for us to argue that Bhasa existed before Bharata. These are some things that can be kept in mind. Remember, we also have Shudraka, Mricchakatika especially the little clay cart along with Shakuntala, Mricchakatika is also another well known or essential Sanskrit play that many of us may have heard of, by Shudraka. So, and when it comes to the second generation or the later playwrights of Sanskrit, you have Bhavabhuti, especially Uttararamacarita and all that. But for want of space and time again, we are not discussing all of them. So, from Sanskrit drama, let us move on to what triggered Indian English Drama. Of course, the only step before that is Indian folk theatre. We need to identify Indian folk theatre.

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## Popular Folk Theatre

- Following the decline of Sanskrit theatre, folk theatre emerged in the 15th century AD.
- Popular Folk Theatre quite explicitly drew on the plural religious values of the subcontinent and exhibited a syncretic community of artistes hailing from extremely diverse religions, castes, and creeds.
- Jatra in Bengal and Orissa, Bhavai in Gujarat, Nautanki in Uttar Pradesh, Tamasha in Maharashtra, Ankiya Naat in Assam and Yakshagana in Karnataka are few examples of regional folk theatres in our country



Following we have identified that Sanskrit drama declined after the eleventh century. So, probably by the time the 15th-16th century Sanskrit drama as we understand it almost dried up. The essence of Sanskrit drama begins flowing in the regional languages that is why you

have some extraordinary and very rich theatre traditions and dramatic traditions in many of our regional languages. And in the meanwhile sometime towards the end of the 18th century or some mid-19th century, you have folk theatre emerged in various parts of the subcontinent, which added the religious and the rural touch to these dramatic performances. So, as part of that folk dramatic tradition, it has a diverse branching. In Bengal, you find folk theatre in the form of Jatra, and in Gujarat, they call it Bhavai, Nautanki in Uttar Pradesh, Tamasha in Maharashtra, Yakshagana in Karnataka and all these things. So, you find the emergence of folk dramatic traditions in regional flavours, in the flavours of the bhasa languages. So, accordingly, you find all these variations there. So, this is something that can be kept in mind.

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**Commercial Theatre** - Most of these folk theatres tapped into popular forms and performed for the masses in **makeshift stages**, in **liminal urban spaces** and **rural festivals** and fairs

Indian Folk Theatre has its origins in itinerant bards travelling across the **hinterlands** singing religious and epic **ballads** - its early modern manifestations were the same, consisting of **travelling groups** rooted in rural spaces and **oral traditions**

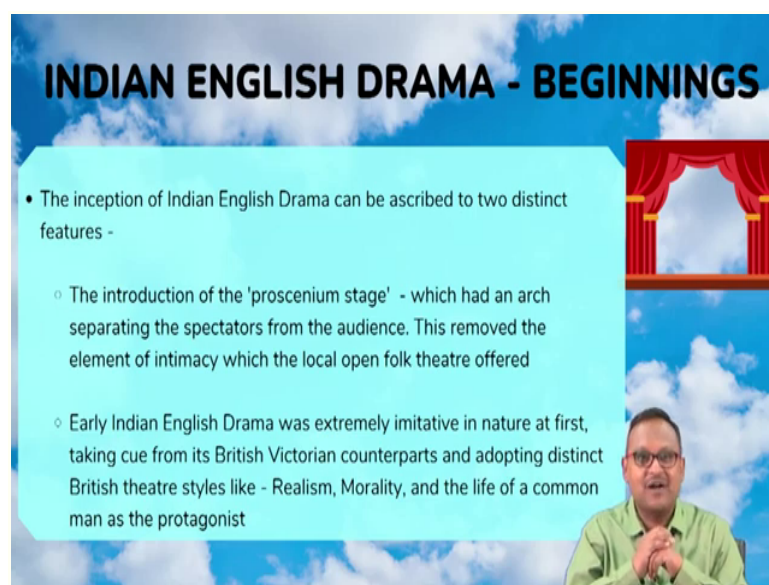
It served **ethical, political and social functions**. Most plays contained a plethora of social and political messages and ideals aimed at **educating the masses**. It served **radical** purposes too, especially during the **anti-colonial movement** when these plays served crucial patriotic purposes

**Elements of Indian Folk Theatre**

And this folk theatre provided of course, a rich playground for Indian English Drama to trace its roots, and from there you can discuss the origins of Indian English Drama from there. But, an important offshoot of folk theatre is commercial theatre. So, commercial theatre makes use of the makeshift stages. In fact, these are not full-fledged stages or theatres remember, usually, they were performed during various religious festivals maybe using the makeshift ground of various government schools or village fairgrounds and all that. So, this is how commercial theatre ran. So, when you talk of Indian folk theatre, another important characteristic they had was they are all touring groups, they are all travelling groups. In fact, these folk theatres went on travelling across the regions in which they were located from place to place, maybe when they come up when they take up a play, they perform it, they identify 4 to 5 different centres. And they go there and perform it. Perform it there maybe for

about let us say 20 shows, 30 shows and afterwards once the number of shows is exhausted they go to some other city and identify another makeshift stage and start performing there. So, these are something that can be found in folk theatre. Well, during the anti-colonial times, of course, the folk theatre also acted as a great anti-colonial vehicle. Because remember what happens is theatre was also like literature theatre was also predominantly used by many well-known thinkers to ignite nationalist consciousness. Therefore, you also find folk theatre contributing to furthering the national consciousness in India. So, these are some things that we can, of course, keep in mind.

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**INDIAN ENGLISH DRAMA - BEGINNINGS**

- The inception of Indian English Drama can be ascribed to two distinct features -
  - The introduction of the 'proscenium stage' - which had an arch separating the spectators from the audience. This removed the element of intimacy which the local open folk theatre offered
  - Early Indian English Drama was extremely imitative in nature at first, taking cue from its British Victorian counterparts and adopting distinct British theatre styles like - Realism, Morality, and the life of a common man as the protagonist

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Now, when it comes to Indian English Drama, we have already identified that folk theatre is a kind of, it provides a rich cornucopia out of which Indian English Drama also emerges. But Indian English Drama, with the Indian English Drama you have the Greek proscenium stage appearing here. In fact, remember Indian English Drama itself is a product of a certain class. We have already identified when discussing Indian English poetry, right, that the people who write in Indian English whether it is poetry or drama belong to a certain class, they belong to a certain background. Therefore, by virtue of their exposure to the west they know how to, they are aware, they are absolutely aware of the theatre traditions of the west. Therefore, you find the proscenium stage getting introduced into India, which was absolutely not there in the folk theatre. That is something that can be kept in mind. Of course, you have various Victorian ethos, and elements like realism because that was the time when these Indian English playwrights also were aware of plays written by George Bernard Shaw, plays written

by Henry Gibson. They had an active understanding of European drama and more than that Shakespearean drama and Greek drama too. Therefore, you can find influences from all those rich diverse dramatic traditions in Indian English Drama. So, these are something's that we can keep in mind.

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**EARLY INDIAN ENGLISH DRAMATISTS**

- Michael Madhusudan Dutt - *This is called Civilization (1871)* is one of the first Indian English Plays to be staged in the British India. The play was a conservative satire, modelled on English forms, on Young educated Bengal and their apparent descent into vices in the name of reformism. He is also credited with introducing Blank verse to the Indian dramatic scene
- From the late 19th century onwards: Sri Aurobindo, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, T.P. Kailasam, Lobo Prabhu, Bharati Sarabhai published and staged their works. However, it was not until Tagore that Modern Indian Drama was given the validation it deserved



When it comes to early Indian English Dramatists, in fact, remember the very genre of Indian English Drama is slightly problematic because like you have a distinct Indian English poetry tradition, you have like you have Indian English fiction tradition, but we do not have a very distinct Indian English Drama. In fact, most of the time when we say Indian English Drama all that we deal with are plays written in regional languages. That is the reason why if you ask any student of literature to name Indian English playwrights, all that they can come up with are Girish Karnad, Badal Sircar and Vijay Tendulkar. Interestingly, all of them wrote in their regional languages and their plays were later translated into English. But today, of course, we consider them as part of Indian English Drama. So, it does not have the kind of solid identity that Indian English poetry or Indian English fiction has. So, that can be kept in mind. So, during colonial times, we have Michael Madhusudan Dutt. In fact, we have discussed Michael Madhusudan Dutt in a rather detailed manner while discussing Indian English poetry. Recall, that he is also called the father of the Bengal renaissance. So, again he plays a significant role in reviving the dramatic tradition. So, you have this is called civilization, kind of the first Indian English play that you can call off written in 1871. From there you have even Sri Aurobindo who also experiments in Indian English drama, and you have



Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, TP Kailasam, again who wrote in Kannada. TP Kailasam is a very major name in Kannada's dramatic tradition. But he has also written a couple of English plays, you have Lobo Prabhu and Bharati Sarabhai, these are some names. But it was not until Tagore that modern Indian drama got the kind of recognition it deserved. Therefore we go to discuss Tagore.

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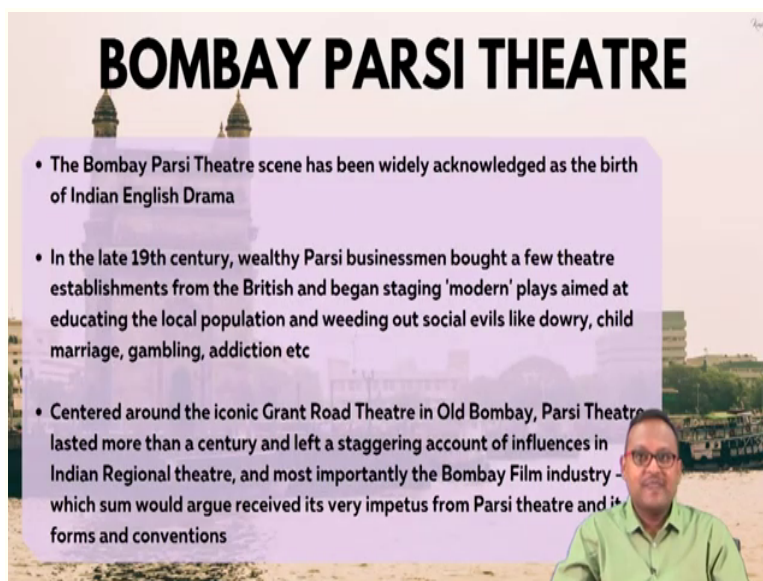
## RABINDRANATH TAGORE

- Rabindranath Tagore was a prolific playwright throughout a literary career where his poetry and songs took centre-stage
- Tagore had a long list of influences from **both Western and Indian aesthetic traditions**. He was heavily influenced by the Sanskrit playwright **Kalidasa** - and his **heroic themes, lyrical language and imagery**.
- He was primarily influenced by **Shakespeare**, and the **symbolism** of Belgian playwright **Maeterlinck** - both of whom he tried to adapt to Indian contexts/
- His major plays include - *Balmiki-pratibha* (*Valmiki's Genius*, 1881), *Roktokorobi* (*Red Oleanders*), *Malini*, *Chitrangada*, *Natir Puja*, *Muktha Dhara*, *Chandalika* (a dance drama; 1938)

In fact, even in the case of Tagore, he wrote in Bangla and many of them, maybe most of his plays were translated by others. Maybe he must have also contributed to the translation of the play. But Rabindranath Tagore is a significant name when it comes to Indian English Drama. And Tagore was greatly influenced by the dramatic works of Kalidasa. Therefore, in many of his works, he recalls the contribution of Kalidasa and even Bharata's *Natyashastra*; that is why even while discussing *Natyashastra* we discussed Tagore's opinion on that particular place. So, Tagore was also significantly exposed to the western tradition and his native eastern tradition, he was aware of the pros and cons of both Indian drama and western drama. In an article that he wrote in Bangla called *Natya Manch*, he seemed to discuss the embellishment and the excessive importance given to embellishment. Especially, in the form of rich stage probes, rich stage employed in western drama and somehow come to favour the Indian folk drama because there because he for one as a playwright he did not really approve of the kind of division that existed in the western drama. Because remember when you talk of a proscenium stage, there is a well, I mean there is a kind of a gap between the audience and the stage. Whereas, in most of our Indian folk theatre, folk dramatic traditions do not make

use of that kind of a gap between the audience. In fact, most of our plays begin from the middle of the audience, right. So, therefore, he seems to have favoured that, he seems to have favoured that kind of an elegant simple stage, the message needs to reach because he believes that when there is a divide between the audience and the stage, well it may create a distance, even in terms of the emotions the play exuberates there may be a kind of a gap. On the other hand, when there is no gap between the audience and the stage probably, the effect is a little more something like that. You have some well-known plays by Rabindranath Tagore called Balmiki Pratibha. In fact, that is supposed to be his first play written in 1881, Valmiki's Genius, or Valmiki Pratibha is supposed to be his first play. And he seemed to have written more than 25-30 plays, probably many more than that. And sometimes it so happened that some of his works have also been turned into plays, some of his works have been turned into plays. Some of his well-known plays include Raktakarabi, or Red Oleanders, and it is also called Blood Oleanders depending on the translation. And you have some solid female protagonists in many of his plays including Malini, Chitrangada, Natir Puja, Muktha Dhara and Chandalika, especially Chandalika which is a dance drama. Probably, it must have come towards the end of his dramatic tradition, I mean dramatic writing, so in 1938. And of course, Chandalika is one of his well-read plays in translation even to this day. A major figure as far as Indian English Drama is concerned. Of course, even for Indian English poetry, his contribution is immense. We have discussed Rabindranath Tagore too, in great detail while discussing Indian English poetry.

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## BOMBAY PARSI THEATRE

- The Bombay Parsi Theatre scene has been widely acknowledged as the birth of Indian English Drama
- In the late 19th century, wealthy Parsi businessmen bought a few theatre establishments from the British and began staging 'modern' plays aimed at educating the local population and weeding out social evils like dowry, child marriage, gambling, addiction etc
- Centered around the iconic Grant Road Theatre in Old Bombay, Parsi Theatre lasted more than a century and left a staggering account of influences in Indian Regional theatre, and most importantly the Bombay Film industry - which sum would argue received its very impetus from Parsi theatre and its forms and conventions

So, now from the pre-colonial times, in fact, the first stage, the first step towards discussing theatre in the post-independent stage is Bombay Parsi theatre. Bombay, I mean the Bombay Parsi theatre scene played a major role in the birth of Indian English Drama because by the end of the 19th century these wealthy affluent Parsi business communities bought a few theatre establishments left behind by the British who were leaving. Of course, their express concern was to educate the local population. And of course, they used it in order to in their zeal to reform society, in order to weed out certain social levels such as dowry, child marriage, gambling addiction and all that they made use of theatre. Therefore, the theatre was pressed into the service of social transformation you could call it. And of course, therein Bombay you have grant road theatre, in Old Bombay, that also plays a very major role in establishing Indian English Drama. These are a few stops that we need to make in order to understand the roots or the moorings of Indian English Drama as such.

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## Vijay Tendulkar

- Vijay Tendulkar (1928 - 2008) is one of the most celebrated dramatists; recipient of Padma Bhushan, Sangeet Natak Akademi Fellowship & Award
- Over a career spanning four decades, he wrote **28 full-length plays** - primarily in **Marathi**, and has been extensively translated and staged in other languages as well
- Tendulkar was known for his **radical political stances** which he reflected in his plays - based on contemporary socio - political scenarios, he advocated a **plural society free of religious, caste, and gender based discrimination**
- *Shantata! Court Chalu Ahe* (1967), *Sakharam Binder* (1972), and *Ghasiram Kotwal* (1972) are his most renowned plays - dwelling on the harsh but real complexities of modern life

Now, I already said that in Indian English Drama when we say, we invariably think of Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad, and Badal Sircar. Asif Currimbhoy and of course, Mahesh Dattani and others. So, out of these 5-6 names that I have taken only 1 or 2 of them wrote actually in English, right. The rest of them whether it is Karnad who is a Jnanpith Award and a very well-known Indian English dramatist or even Vijay Tendulkar and Badal Sircar too, are extraordinary names in Indian English Drama, they basically wrote in their regional languages. And they found a place in Indian English dramatic tradition through translations.





When it comes to Karnad, translated most of his plays himself into English. And he did some extraordinary experimentation there. In fact, he changed a lot of things and from there when he went to revising his works in Kannada he brought in the changes that he made while translating them into English. So, it was a kind of a very dynamic drama making or playwriting that Karnad did. Vijay Tendulkar is again a very important name. Recipient of the Padma Bhushan Award, Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, and Sangeet Natak fellowship, he also is the recipient of the fellowship. Vijay Tendulkar is said to have about 30 approximately full length plays, but he wrote all of them in Marathi. And many of them if not all of them, most of them were translated later into English. Vijay Tendulkar is known for mixing his strong political views in his plays. In other words, Tendulkar used his plays to further his secular credentials, in order to further his secular political themes he used his plays. Therefore, you can say that his plays are radical literary spaces through which he highlights the plural fabric that defines our country. Some of his well-known plays include *Silence! The Court is in Session*, that is his English translation. It was in Marathi it was called *Shantata court Chalu Ahe*. And then you have *Sakharam Binder* written in 1972, and *Ghasiram Kotwal* almost during the same time. Both of them have also been translated into English. Very important playwright when it comes to Indian English Drama.

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## Badal Sircar (1925 - 2011)

- One of the leading and most influential playwrights and directors in modern Indian theatre movement. He is the writer of more than fifty plays and recipient of Padma Shri, Sangeet Natak Akademi Fellowship and Sangeet Natak Akademi Award.
- He constructed a new form called the 'Third Theatre' - a kind of avant-garde theatre movement that embraced diverse social and political ideas and perceived itself as a emancipatory cultural institution that tried to refine training and performance methods through new forms and techniques.
- Most importantly it was a form of public theatre that sometimes ditched the proscenium stage for a kind of raw, ritualistic Street Theatre.
- More than 50 plays; *Evam Indrajit* (1963) *Basi Khabar*, and *Saari Raat* are his well-known plays



We have Badal Sircar here, writing almost during the same time, but here in Bengal. Again, a very important playwright and recipient of the Padma Shri Award again bestowed with Sangeet Natak fellowship, Sangeet Natak Akademi Award as well.

In the case of Badal Sircar, again, he used theatre to further his radical views of theatre. In fact, he almost proposed a new form of theatre called the 'third theatre'. The first theatre was Sanskrit theatre, he called it the first theatre; the folk theatre is the second theatre; and of course, that is why his views on theatre were slightly different from though they were closer to the folk theatre, he further stretched the unconventionality of folk theatre and proposed a new form of a theatre movement called the third theatre. And generally, it is considered today as an emancipatory cultural institution because of the way it brought the audience or people closer to drama or drama closer to people. And it involves various production techniques and performative techniques and all that. These are some of his contributions to Indian English, especially to the theatre. So, when it comes to his plays *Evam Indrajit* is considered a remarkable play written in 1963. Remember, he is a very prolific playwright Badal Sircar, he is credited with more than 50 plays. Some of his other plays apart from *Evam Indrajit* are *Basi Khabar* and *Saari Raat*, these are some of his other well-known plays. So, these are some major playwrights that we can keep in mind. Of course, Girish Karnad we are going to discuss in detail while we are discussing his play. I said that we are going to take up Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* for a detailed discussion. So, therefore, during that time we can think of it.

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## Indian Street Theatre

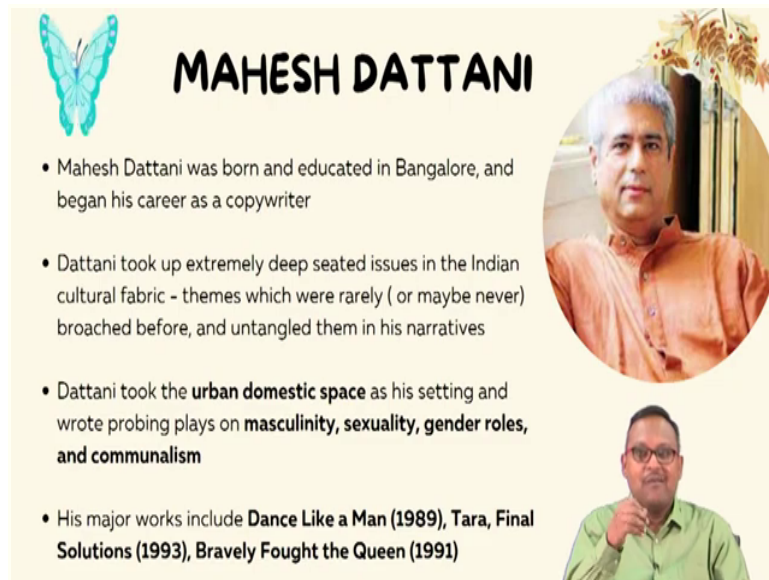
- Indian Street Theatre had its roots in strong anti - colonial **political mobilization in the 1940s**, carried out by progressive and socialist theatre practitioners - **influenced by agitprop**
- They saw this **shift from the proscenium theatre to the Streets as symbolic of drama's potential as a liberating medium** for the oppressed classes
- Under the canopy of the **Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA)** and **Jan Natya Manch**, street theatre emerged as an apt medium to address issues such as hunger, famine, poetry, communal violence, and exploitation in a society deeply divided by class, caste and religion - in the form of '**Nukkad Natak**'
- Stalwarts like **Habib Tanvir, Utpal Dutt, and Safdar Hasmi** were at the forefront of Street theatre in India



So, I am slightly skipping all these important names, we have stalwarts like Habib Tanvir, Utpal Dutt and Safdar Hashmi who play a major role in especially popularizing street theatre

and all that. Then, you have contributed to the Indian People's Theatre association which again brings theatre closer to people, the masses.

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**MAHESH DATTANI**

- Mahesh Dattani was born and educated in Bangalore, and began his career as a copywriter
- Dattani took up extremely deep seated issues in the Indian cultural fabric - themes which were rarely ( or maybe never) broached before, and untangled them in his narratives
- Dattani took the **urban domestic space** as his setting and wrote probing plays on **masculinity, sexuality, gender roles, and communalism**
- His major works include **Dance Like a Man (1989), Tara, Final Solutions (1993), Bravely Fought the Queen (1991)**

Mahesh Dattani and probably you have the recent Manjula Padmanabhan, these are very well known playwrights who actually wrote in English. So, in a very technical sense, you can call Mahesh Dattani an original Indian English playwright without, of course, discounting the importance of playwrights like Badal Sircar and others. Mahesh Dattani works basically in the broad areas of gender consciousness, sexuality, masculinity, femininity, communalism and all. These are some kind of the keywords that you can find in his plays. And one of the very well-known playwrights especially his, *Dance Like a Man* written in 1989 is one of the well-read plays. In fact, the moment you talk of Indian English Drama like Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq*, *Dance Like a Man* is very well discussed. Again, here, he tries to break the gender stereotypes. There is a protagonist who is very much interested in drama, but his father opposes him. He thinks that drama and dance, are especially these are for women. So, the moment by virtue of practising dance, makes a man effeminate - all this coming from a man who considers himself progressive. So, all this for in the name of progressive thinking. So, the kind of troubles, our protagonist faces in the hands of his father and society at large form the crux of *Dance Like a Man*. Again, *Tara* discusses gender stereotypes and how you have the story of conjoined twins *Tara*, and how when the twin is separated how they are separated in such a way that the boy survives and the girl dies. And now the boy has to live through the guilt and of course, it ends in a very tragic way. Some of his other well-known plays include

*Final Solutions*, and *Bravely Fought the Queen*. And afterwards, we have another important name, Manjula Padmanabhan. Of course, she is a very important name because she won the well-known Onassis Award, a very big international award, Onassis Award for her work *Harvests*. Almost a kind of a futuristic play makes use of various I mean technological advancements and all that. Again, discusses gender stereotypes and the gaps between the third world and the first world, very many other things, and the concept of sexuality. These are some of the concerns in the play. So, this is in general Indian English Drama. Kind of a bird's eye view of Indian English Drama. So, I hope you enjoyed this class. In the next class, we come up with a detailed discussion of Hayavadana and Girish Karnad. In the meanwhile, please pick up the play and start reading. I am sure you will enjoy that, alright. See you in the next class.