UNIT 3   EMERGENCE OF CONTEMPORARY THEATRE

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3.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous two units you were introduced to theatrical practices which were typically Indian in character and completely rooted in the Indian cultural soil. You must have appreciated the fact that we may come from different corners of the country but we have certain unbreakable cultural bonds. We may speak different languages but we all trace our roots in the remote past and yet over the millennia we have managed to cling to our way of life – something no other ancient civilisation has been able to achieve. And yet, no one can deny that our society and culture have been always dynamic and not static. In that any vibrant culture is always open to other influences which are, over time, absorbed and synthesised into the earlier established norms resulting in altered shapes or even totally different shapes.

Over the millennia, various foreign influences came into the country with the invaders – the Aryans, the Greeks, the Hoon, the Muslims and then the Europeans bringing in the Christian culture. These invaders tried to crush our social ethos and religious beliefs as also our fabulous store of all sorts of arts. Nothing could be crushed; the foreign influences were absorbed, many times resulting in a fresher vigour in the original. This happened to our languages, many of the social norms and of course the arts. The emergence of Hindustani music and Kathak dance are shining examples of this manifestation.

Similarly in drama also, we can discern this trend with the advent of the British and their becoming the rulers of India, the western system of dramatic presentation came into vogue. The greatest influence came in the form of drama. From the elaborate costumes and make-up, the highly stylised method of dialogue delivery, use of music and dance oriented movements there emerged a more realistic practice which resembles our everyday life. The greatest impact was the use of the proscenium stage, electrical lighting and other technological aspects.

Yet with the independence movement gathering strength and post independence enlightened theatre personalities once again turned to their original roots but with a great awareness of social problems and evils – resulting in a very vibrant theatre scene today.
Objectives:

After studying this unit, you should be able to:

a) Link our past dramatic practices to the contemporary scene.

b) Be appreciative of the Indian ethos and cultural values.

c) Have the courage and convictions to experiment within the parameters of your own traditions.

3.2 EMERGENCE OF CONTEMPORARY THEATRE

Contemporary theatre is also referred to as modern theatre. We have examined the ancient concept of theatre in India – the tradition that is found in the Natyashastra of Bharata. During many centuries after the Natyashastra the practice of naatya codified in it was firmly established and widely prevalent all over the country. This practice can be termed as classical, the remnants of which are found in the Kuttiyaattam of Kerala.

After the 14th or 15th Century, there arose the phenomenon of the regional theatre which multiplied into a large variety catering to the needs of each region that boasted of its own practice. Though diverse, these regional forms had certain common elements some of which would be traced to the ancient classical practice. One of the major reasons for the sprouting of regional practices was the Muslim invasion and spreading of its authority over this country.

It is in the 18th century that there were changes in the Indian society once again when the British assumed control over the country. With the British came the western way of life – very specially the English language and its widespread ramifications wielded a tremendous influence on the entire fiber of the society including the theatre. There areas – Bengal, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu came very heavily under the influence of the English brand of theatre. The British wanted to bring this vast country of many diversities under their unitary rule and wanted to bring in the English way of life in India. They introduced their system of education which took deep roots and is still prevalent. The theatre became a potent tool in spreading their way of life. Thus the Indian theatre scene witnessed standard English plays being staged.

In the 19th century, the educated young Indians grew restless and were not content to witness the British plays. This resulted in rich Bengalis of Calcutta to establish private theatre troupes in their homes which were very large and could double as theatre halls. Great poet Rabindranath Tagore’s works are a result of this movement. These amateurish experiments were highly successful since they were designed to satisfy the Indian taste. Once again the pattern of development and the mode and style of presentation varies from region to region.

3.2.1 Characteristics of Contemporary Theatre

The Contemporary stage differs from the traditional in many respects. Now the concept of the proscenium stage has been taken over; this very effectively separates the audience from the stage with seating space very properly defined. Just as in the west, now entry is by way of sale of tickets. Modern lighting, sound system and above all painted settings are very prevalent. The delivery of dialogues has undergone a great change with subtle modulation of voice and clear pronunciation of the language being used carrying the message of the production. Excepting in historical or mythological plays, the costuming is very much in tune with that of the social strata. The most telling change is the use of the regional language and the works of renowned regional writers being staged.
Another phenomenon is the stage being used for sounding political dissent or for exposing social evils. That which started as a protest against the alien British rule leading to grave social and political injustice eventually developed into a very potent genre leading to the British introducing censorship.

3.2.2 In the 20th Century and the Independence

Till the early 20th century, modern theatre enjoyed great popularity in the urban areas and smaller towns with the regional theatre entertaining the rural masses. The classical theatre almost vanished from the Indian scene. At this time a great wind of change blew over the Indian entertainment scene in the form of films. The enormous popularity of cinema amongst the huge middle class led to a disregard of the theatre leading to a large number of theatrical companies closing down.

The core of contemporary theatre in India today is in amateur groups where the entire cast works for their love and commitment to the theatre.

But matters and concerns changed after the independence of 1947. For quite sometime the concern was centered towards voicing discontent and rebellion towards the ruling British; but after the independence this particular concern started becoming redundant since the British had left and the country was ours. Another very strong trend was the reverence towards Gandhian values of satya and austerity in private and public life. All this started changing by the mid 1950-s. the inequalities of a caste ridden society were being tackled, women were raising their heads against a male dominated social environ and did not wish to be treated with pitu or looked down upon as oppressed creatures. Social tensions could not be represented eternally as a conflict between the rich and the poor.

By the 1960-s this trend started taking roots in the world of literature and slowly but steadily invaded the world of theatre. Just as ideology was changing, the manner of presenting plays was also changing. Instead of the austere and often stilted, artificial and strait laced manner, there emerged a rather easy going, natural and charming manner which connected the theatre, the audience and the changing society in a right measure.

3.2.3 The shift in 1960s and 1970s

This entire shift appears to have started with the writings of the great Marathi playwright and humorist P.L. Deshpande. He was followed by other playwrights in other languages – Mohan Rakesh in Hindi, Shombhu Mitra and Badal Sircar in Bengali and Girish Karnad in Kannada – his mother tongue – though he himself had freshly returned from Oxford. The method of presenting their plays was also changed to suit their concerns and chief amongst the new brand of directors was Ebrahim Alkazi. Yet the greatest impact was achieved in the beginning of the 1970-s with the emergence of the Marathi playwright Vijay Tendulkar. He exhibited a great corner for the tribulation of the middle class.

All these avant garde individuals also chose to Indianise their mode of presentation even though they had discarded the ancient method of presenting Sanskrit theatre and had adopted and adapted the western methodology. With this was born the national theatre movement. After them came many significant playwrights and directors who, taking inspiration from these pioneers, entered into the world of experimentation creating their own idioms. These newcomers explored local traditions which offered greater flexibility and greater scope for induction of music and dance rather than the conventional plays. Maharashtra already had the ‘sangeet naatyata’ wherein songs based on classical raagas were introduced in the plays. This particular genre received a great phillip with
the presentation of Vijay Tendulkar’s Gashiram Kotwal which used the Maharashtrian folk music superbly blended with Hindustani classical music. The play was set in the Maratha period dominated by Nana Phadanwis (the prime minister). It exposed the decadent society of that era full of intrigue, sexual excesses and superstition. It used elements of the folk theatre khule of the Konkan area of Maharashtra which uses a stunning device of a human wall. The choreographed movements of this human wall made up of the actors who would freeze at one moment to represent plants in a garden or then transform themselves into a frenzied mob and by turning their backs to the audience convey their absence from the action. Though placed in the immediate pre-British era, it has a tremendous contemporary thrust.

Similarly Habib Tanvir, a noted figure in the Hindi theatre world used the folk idiom and music of chhattisgarh in Hindi plays. He has worked for decades with the folk certistes of this region (most are illiterate and poor). His memorable play is Charan Das Chor, a very authentic dialect play with an all-folk cast but with a very contemporary thrust.

Similarly Girish Karnad chose a story from the ancient anthology Kathasarit-saagara and created a play called Hayavadana representing the incompleteness of human personality by transpositioning the head of human being with that of a horse. The remarkable elements of this play was the use of the Baayalata folk tradition of Karnatakta. It also had the traditional Sootradhaara (conductor of a naatya) in the form of a Bhaagvataar (narrator) whose singing and speech linked the various episodes; yet the core of the entire play had a modern approach and concern.

Another creative theatre personality of the 1970-s and 1980-s is Vijaya Mehta who has attempted to incorporate the ancient naatya tradition into the modern theatre practice – notable elements of a Aangika abhinaya in the form of evocative gesture and body movements accompanying the spoken word to enhance the mood and content. She has made an extensive use of the Naatyashaastric tradition by way of hastas; music and dance. She used her method to successfully present two classical Sanskrit plays – Vishakhadatta’s Mudraaraakshasa and Kalidasa’s Shaakuraalam.

### 3.2.4 From 1980s till date

By the close of 1970s through 1980s, political and social conditions prevailing in the country was evoking very strong reaction. The new stark reality which had taken over from the idealised dream world resulted in stark presentation which did away with scenery and other trappings of the popular stage and used the full potential of the human body as the central medium. This new wave presented the stark reality of life.

In the late 1980s arose two significant theatre personalities – Kavalam Narayana Panikkar in Kerala and Ratan Thiyam in Manipur. Both these highly creative personalities have fully tapped the potential of the local theatrical practices to not only represent their own plays but also to represent the ancient Sanskrit classics. Panikkar is also a revered poet who has done deep researches in the indigenous and fabulously rich culture of his state. His noteworthy innovation is the unique way of acting which incorporates the elements of the theatrical tradition of Kerala starting from Kuttiyaattam and Kathakali. The unique costuming very clearly exhibits the influence of the tribal theatre notably Teyyam. He also used the typical Sopaana music and its accompanying taalas supported by local musical instruments. His presentation of Bhasa’s plays is fantastic and puts him at the helm of the current theatre scene.

Equally unique is Ratan Thiyam who uses the fabulous reservoir of Manipur’s dance and ritualistic arts to a great advantage. Relying upon the Raasa and Sankeertana traditions, his presentations reflect the ethereal beauty of these dances. He has used the
local percussion instrument *Pung* and its breathtakingly beautiful playing to enhance the dramatic elements of episodes. He also uses the martial art *Thang-ta* to represent the forceful element.

The contemporary scene is always in a state of flux. As newer personalities emerge, they stamp their own mark on the scene. But one thing is certain – the indigenous tradition is being very successfully harnessed to ensure growth and acceptability.

### 3.3 QUESTIONS

1. Fill in the blank spaces with the words given below:

   [ disregarded, Tamil Nadu, Gandhian, Girish Karnad, Bengal, cinematic, Shombhu Mitra, Maharashtra, Satya, P.L. Deshpande, shift, Mohan Rakesh ]

   a) ____________, ____________, and ____________ came very heavily under the influence of the English brand of theatre.

   b) The enormous popularity of ____________ led to a ____________ of the theatre.

   c) A very strong trend was the ____________ towards ____________ values of ____________.

   d) The shift in 1960s and 1970s started with great Marathi playwright ____________

   e) ____________ in Hindi ____________ in Bengali and ____________ in Kannada followed Deshpande.

2. Write in 5 to 6 lines on the working of the avant-garde drama personalities of 1960s and 1970s.

3. Who are the leading personalities from 1980s? Briefly write on their work.

   **Answers:**

1. a) Bengal, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu

   b) cinema, disregard

   c) shift, Gandhian, Satya

   d) P.L. Deshpande

   e) Mohan Rakesh, Shombhu Mitra, Girish Karnad

2. These personalities chose to Indianise their mode of presentation though they had discarded the method of the Sanskrit theatre. This led to many significant playwrights towards experimentation. Like Vijay Tendulkar experimented in mixing the “Khele” folk theatre of Konkan area with Hindustani music. Habib Tanvir merged a very modern element with folk music of Chattisgadh in his Charan Das Chor. Girish Karnad chose an ancient story from Kathasaritsaagara and presented it with the elements of the Baayalata folk theatre of Karnataka.

3. They are Ratan Thiyam of Manipur and Kavalam, Narayana Panikkar of Kerala. Both have tapped the potential of the local theatrical practices to not only represent their own plays but also to present the ancient Sanskrit Classics. Panikkar uses elements from Kuttiyattam and Kathakali and Ratan Thiyam uses the elements of dance and ritualistic arts like Raasa and Sankeertana.