

Lecture – 01

Sanskrit and National Theatre

Welcome to you all. Welcome to the first session of the introduction to, Modern Indian Drama. This is again Dr. Kiran Krishnamurthy. And I will be offering this, 20 hour lecture course, this semester for January to May. To begin with. Right?? We need to try and understand this phenomenon of modern Indian drama. Right? Where does it come from? Why is it called modern? What makes modern Indian drama, modern? If you look at the early history, of modern Indian drama, it, a lot of it comes from the encounter, with the colonial regime, the British. Right? And in the early histories of Indian theatre. Right? by Horace Hayman Wilson's, three volume, select specimen to the theatre, of the Hindus, published in 1827, in Calcutta and Sylvain Levi's two-volume, the Indian theatre. We will notice that, a lot of what came to be understood, as modern Indian theatre, was the product, of the cultural encounter, between the British and the Indian natives. A lot of the early scholarship, the early understanding of modern Indian theatre, came from, was clearly influenced by, Orientalism. Right? Which became, a style of thought, a style of stereotyping, the East, as in this case, Sanskritic. Right? Aryan, Sanskritic and so on. And a lot of the scholarship that was produced earlier, by colonial missionaries, colonial scholars, Orientalists scholars, Indologists, equated Indian theatre, with Sanskrit theatre. They assumed, that all of Indian theatre, was a product, of the, what they call, the classical, Sanskritic transition, of music, dance and performance. And this was done at the cost of, dismissing the very multilingual nature of Indian theatre. Be it Sanskrit or even non Sanskritic forms, of theatre and performance.

If you look at the colonial historiography, of Indian theatre, it and of course, the historiography, I mean the way, the histories of Indian theatre were written, at the cost of excluding, other histories, other categories. Right? So if you look at the colonial historical historiography of Indian theatre, it clearly follows, Western chronological, categories, of ancient medieval and modern. Where, ancient theatre was equated with, Sanskrit theatre, which lasted roughly from, 200 BC to 1000 BC. Medieval or traditional theatre, which lasted from 1000 CE, to the present. And modern theatre, which lasted from the, late 18th century, to the present. And in these categorizations, there was an assumption, that Indian theatre could be equated, with Sanskrit theatre, with the aesthetic, performative traditions, of Sanskrit theatre. And Sanskrit theatre itself was modelled on, the ancient text, the Nati Shastra, by Brother. It was, the naughty Shastra was, an ancient text, on dramaturgy, which provided, copious data, on theoretical and practical aspects of theatre, from acting and dancing, to Music and Prosody. The sizes and shapes of playhouses, costumes and makeup, theories of emotions and sentiments and even requirements, of for critics and audiences and so on. So it was actually a very, very, technical, prescriptive text, which laid down the rules, the norms, the rules and regulations, of performance. And of course, these perform, early performances were not strictly speaking, only, did not involve just acting, Right? But also involved a great deal of, music and performance and dance. One of the earliest Sanskrit plays, to be translated and studied by Orientalist, mysteries and scholars, were of course, Kalidasas, Abhigyan Shakuntala. Right? which of course, was the story of Shakuntala. And, it was translated by the missionary scholar, William Jones and published in Calcutta, in 1789. But this play and I think in the process of translating the play, what was very conveniently forgotten, was the fact, that this play was, not just in Sanskrit, it was also in many other languages. Like Sauraseni, Maharashtri and Magodhi.

The other early play that was to be translated and studied and disseminated, was, Sudraka's Mricchakatika which translates as the, 'Little Clay Cot'. Which again comprised of, many other languages. Which were lost in translation? Right? So the whole politics of translation comes here. Where in the process of translating these early texts, missionary scholars and later on, even students, began to believe that these early plays were, purely in Sanskrit. Which is not true? Right? So the assumption that these colonial missionaries were making and, and a lot of the theories, on Indian theatre that, the colonial, missionaries and scholars came up with, was also borrowed and incorporated into a lot of, by a lot of Indian, theoreticians and practitioners, of theatre. Right? What many of them actually forget, is, that this tradition of performance in theatre, was not an uninterrupted, essential, tradition. Right? From the age of Sanskrit theatre, to the mid or the late 18th century. Right? There were lot of other, local, native, performative, traditions, especially for performances. Right? In pre-colonial India, which also overlapped a lot, with dance and music? Right? But many of these traditions, I'm talking about, these local, regional traditions, of dance and folk dance and theatre music were dismissed or overlooked, by colonial scholars, as crude and low forms of performance art. Colonial era theatre, drew largely on, Western, conventions of theatre, in terms of, lighting and Scenography, while shunning, these local forms of theatre, as crude. But there was a turn back, to pre-modern, Sanskritic models of theatre, which came to be re-valued, as classical, because of certain nationalist aspirations.

So there were a lot of, early Indian, all-male, playwrights and practitioners of theatre, who looked back to Sanskrit theatre, as models of, Indian / Hindu, performative culture. So there was an attempt to try and build an Indian nation, especially in the wake, of the freedom struggle, that was both, traditional and modern, through a return, to Hindu, Puranic traditions. Thus the creation of Indianess, of what came to be called as, 'Indianess', was a very political issue. And what enabled this equation of, Sanskritic theatre, with, Indian, modern Indian theatre. Right? Was of course, as I mentioned earlier, the establishment of Indology, in the mid 18th century. Right? As a field of scholarship that, presented the value, that Sanskrit texts had, both religious, as well as secular text had, to European scholars. Right? And lot of the understanding that European Scholars had of, India's ancient past was also being borrowed or incorporated, by many of the early Indian playwrights and practitioners, of theatre. Even later histories of Indian theatre, like, Hemandranath Das Gupta's, 4 Volume, 'The Indian Stage', which is published in, Calcutta, between 1944 and 1946. And Ramanlal Kanaiyalal Yajnik's, 'The Indian Theatre', did not acknowledge the presence of, other theatre performance traditions, in India. Many of these later histories of Indian theatre were written, after independence, but continued to emphasize, the lasting importance of, Sanskrit theatre, on Indian theatre. And of course the irony was that many actors, did not have a sense of, these Western conventions, of theatre acting. Right? Because, it's not like as though the local traditions, local folk traditions, of theatre, were completely forgotten or superseded, by colonial, Western, models, of theatre. Right?

I think a lot of these, conventions, of theatrical acting, be it, dance and performance and music. Right? Were incorporated, incorporated by these actors, into what became modern Indian drama. Right? So modern Indian theatre became a confluence of, Western models, of

theatre. Especially in terms of, a certain kind of naturalist, realism, in terms of Scenography. The fact that you could have, shifting backdrops. Right? Behind the actors on stage, which signified, different scenes or lighting, the fact we have lighting, instead of using natural light. All these things were incorporated into modern Indian drama, along with many local, traditions of, dance and sing and music. Right? And you see this in the ways in which, many of our local, regional traditions of performance, like Yakshagana or Jathra. Right? Were of course, meant to be performed out, in natural surroundings. Right? They were itinerant or travelling troops, who performed, night after night. To a varied, maybe largely, rural audience, across, different towns and villages. That was a very different scene, let's say, then from the idea of modern Indian theatre. Right? Designed on Western models of theatre. Which were being performed in, what is, what is known as, 'The Proscenium Theatre', the proscenium is, this raised stage, in, an enclosed space. Right? So the actors, who are actually on stage, become the subject of a spectacle. Right? It's a spectacular sight to be able to see them, perform, by the audience. Right? So it's no longer a performance, which is being performed, at, let's say, the, the, the eye level of, the, the audience, who's watching. Right? But it becomes a raised platform, in an enclosed space.

So this is, this is, there is certain degree of intimacy and privacy, that's in, that's, that's associated with, Western, modelled, Indian theatre. Right? And it was under the rule of the, East India Company, where, when you had the early playhouses being set up, in, Calcutta, because Calcutta was their first capital. In 1775, was Calcutta Theatre, in 1813, came up, the Chowringhee theatre, the Sans Souci Theatre, in 1839, which were all patronized by, Colonial Officials. So when, when Colonial Theatre was first performed, in these play houses, it was not meant, for the common masses. It was largely an elite form of entertainment and a performance art, which was not open to everyone. And they were also patronized, by Colonial Officials. Right? And as well as the, native elite, these native elite comprised of, the Parsi's', mostly the Parsi's', who had benefited from the advantages of, colonial education. They also dressed up in a fairly, Westernized fashion. And they owned, many businesses, they owned many of these theatre production houses. Right? And they also, sponsored these, theatre productions. Right? So in some sense, they also had connections with, a lot of these British officers and the East India Company. So it became theatre under the British. Became a commercialized event, it became a ticketed event. So it was only in the late 19th century, that theatre spread, as a form of mass entertainment, in Calcutta Bombay and Madras and then to schools and colleges. Theatre, as I said earlier, became a commercial, ticketed event and there was now a new distinction, between, the actor manager and the director, Right? Initially you had an actor, who was also the manager, of that, the troop and he managed the funds and this, the, the, the, the performance spaces and so on. But now you also had, a director.

A director who was autonomous, who wouldn't necessarily act in the play. But was able to direct the play and create perhaps, a certain kind of, performance aesthetic. So in some sense the phenomenon, of modern Indian theatre, represents an unprecedented, historical transition, from the early days of, Sanskrit theatre. Because it became, a highly institutionalized and commercial performance art. It was it was institutionalized, through these play houses. It was institutionalized, in terms of having several crew members, who are engaged with lighting

and makeup and costumes. You had professional actors, who had to be trained, in these conventions of acting, who are also paid actors. They performed in these, highly intimate, enclosed, spaces. Right? They were also ticketed events. And you also had the circulation of, texts. Lots of texts, these plays were transcribed, transmitted, written, published, as printed books that could be read and disseminated. And it's because of this, that morning in theatres became, institutionalized, in a way that it had never been before. Okay? But it's also, it's also important to remember that, the mere importation, of the Proscenium theatre, did not modernize Indian theatre. Indian theatre in the 1770s was still an elite form of entertainment that was limited to small British populations, the three presidency cities or towns, then, of Madras, Bombay and Calcutta. The only place that was staged, in the latter decades of the 18th century, addressed social issues like, Polygamy, Child Marriage, Opium Addiction, Faith Sanctioned Violence, the Plight of Indian Women and so on. The most famous play, or perhaps, infamous play, to be banned was, Dinabandhu Mitra's, 'Nildarpan', which was a very polemical attack, on, the exploitative, British, Indigo planters. Okay? Because, the whole play, the plantation of indigo, the mass, monoculture, of Indigo in Bengal, had actually caused, widespread poverty and famine and disease. So, this was a play that directly attacked, the exploitative, policies, of British planters. And it was then banned, seditious, as going against, the British state, Indian state.

And this play, in some sense was crucial, in precipitating, the passing of the, Dramatic performances act, in 1876, to curb seditious and patriotic tendencies. Theatre scholar, Ananda Lal, argues that, Rabindranath Tagore, who was born 1861 and dies in 1941, was, in some sense, the pivotal figure, in modern Indian drama. In terms of his imaginative stage craft, which was modelled after, Sanskrit aesthetics, that attempted to transform, Western, Theatrical, modes, of domestic realism and picturesque entertainment. His plays were also controversial for the time, because, they dealt with issues like, Female Sexuality, the Orthodoxes of Hinduism, untouchability, anticipate and they also anticipated in many ways, environmental concerns and revisited Buddhism, as a specific faith. What Tagore was also known for, was for introducing women, to the stage, which was completely unheard of. Because the longest time, you only had, men performing on stage. Either as men or cross-dressing as, women. Right? And, it's because of Tagore, that if you, you see, first few women, especially those who came from, hoot and hoat, respectable families, at a time when, male actors impersonated, women. Right? So, what's also interesting is, the conspicuous absence, of, female playwrights and female actresses, on stage. Because, the history of Indian theatre, had largely, if not only seen, men perform on stage. Right? So for the first time, you have women performing on stage, as women. And there was a large stigma attached to women, who performed at stage. Because the moment a woman was visible, on stage, performing, it was seen as, a mark of her loose character. Because she suddenly became accessible to the male gaze and it was not something that, women from respectable families, were expected to do. Right? So it became a problem, when women were then introduced on stage. So it's important to then, try and understand modern Indian theatre, the early beginnings, of modern Indian theatre, in terms of, the colonial equation, of modern Indian theatre to Sanskrit theatre. Right? The classical model of, Sanskrit theatre.

And the fact that this. the impact. of Sanskrit theatre, lasted even well into the post-independence era. when some of the early post-independence, playwrights and theoreticians and critics, still emphasized, the impact of Sanskrit theatre, on Indian theatre. Right? But on one hand, if on the one hand, our Indian practitioners of theatre, incorporated, these Western, Colonial, Scholarly accounts, of Sanskrit theatre, they also used Indian theatre to, agitate, against, the British. Right? Because theatre also become a space for protest, especially towards the, mid and the later, at the latter half of the, 19th century. Right? When Indian theatre, became a form of protest. It was not always possible for Indian theatre practitioners and actors, to perform plays that were explicitly, against the British state. But they were still ways in which, one could indirectly, probably through allegories symbolism, through a certain form of acting and performance, insinuate, the indignation and injustice, that the British had, perpetuated and meted out on to the native population. Right? So it's, it's important to then, think of, how Indian theatre, was modelled on certain, Colonial, Western, idioms of Theatrical Conventions. But, was used precisely in order to actually work against, the exploitative, policies, the unjust policies, of the British state. Right? So one needs to look at, modern Indian theatre, especially in its early beginnings, as a sight of a paradox. Right? Where you borrow, you incorporate, certain Western, models, of acting and dramaturgy and performance and you use those models, those very models, to actually argue and critique colonialism. Right?

Thank you.