

‘Modern’ Theatre in India: Middle Class Quest for Respectability

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Theatre was an important site of representation of dominant political forces and counter-hegemonic struggle during the colonial period. It was linked up with the broader question of class, gender, nationalism and colonialism. This paper is an attempt to understand the emergence and character of one of the streams of ‘modern’ theatre, that is, middle class elite theatre of the colonial period in India. Culture can be seen as a very important aspect of the constitution or formation of a class. This has been highlighted in works like E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the Working Class*. Thompson emphasizes class as not merely an economic criteria but a historical phenomenon; not a thing but a set of forms in human relationships. A view of class in objective and economic terms provides the basis or the general parameter, within which classes individuate themselves in social and political terms. It offers a set of structural and economic givens, but cannot provide any real insight into how classes exist as concrete sociological existences or actualities or even as particular political entities, nor into the relationship between cultural practices. To understand class, Thompson argues, it is essential to see it “as a social and cultural formation, arising from processes which can only be studied as they work themselves out over a considerable historical period. Thus, rather than the solely economic nature of class, one need to establish and emphasize the social and the mediatory nature of class. Social relations of classes have to be organized socially and practicalized, mediated culturally. Cultural activities play an important role in the development of social subjectivity or a common sense of classes. Such activities organize and express the existing social relations.”¹

Class formation is also simultaneously linked to the hegemonizing process, and in building the social hegemony, cultural production (both in the process of production and through the final product) plays an

important role. Culture, according to Gramsci, is one of the key sites where struggle for hegemony takes place. In fact, hegemony produces a situation in which the interests of one powerful section of the society are 'universalized' as the interests of the society as a whole. The dominant elite have expressed their power by giving legitimacy and exposure to their cultural forms and practices—by projecting their 'fields of value'.² The importance of cultural activities lies in creating practices and ideas which organize some semblance of internal coherence of a class, though not complete homogeneity, as well as mediate the relation between classes either for the purpose of domination or resistance. This internal and external organization of social relations, in terms of norms and forms of those social classes, are two signal moments of class struggle.

This paper establishes the linkage of nineteenth century theatre, middle class formation and class consciousness in India. It assesses the role played by theatre in the development of social subjectivity or common sense in classes in terms of how these activities organize and express the existing social relations and the forms of class struggle. Theatre practices of the middle class in the nineteenth century were part and parcel of their assumption of hegemony in the production of culture and politics. The political content of theatre was part of the development of a hegemonic status for the middle classes that allows them to represent first the province and then the nation as a whole. The process was impossible without assuming a moral and ideologically directive role for all other classes, that is, society as a whole.

Theatre as a Middle Class Social Pageant

The elite 'modern' theatre's origin in—and socialization within—capitalism mirrors the formation of the new classes in India. It had its base among the new middle classes. The middle class, being organic to the colonial capital and its state, was breaking away from the older social modes, and whose self-definition encompassed both disjunction and continuity. In the initial phase at the time of origin, the middle class was only conscious of their own exclusive, particularly social and cultural needs. The 'modern' theatre developed out of the awareness and cultural need of the new class; a class disruptive of an older social order and in need of comprehensively binding social and cultural practices and ideologies. They experienced the need for new cultural forms, different ways of expressing and organizing pleasures and leisure.³

The new middle class was being influenced by the Western theatre.

It was trying to copy their forms of theatre although these performances in the initial stage were private. They were held at wealthy landlords' and businessmen's private houses. The general public was denied admission. There was no sale of tickets. The directors, producers and actors were non-professionals. All these theatres were a part of the life-style of the richest of the new rich in society. These wealthy gentlemen, who were often titled Rajas as a mark of social and financial distinctions, were able to pay for the lavish cost of production of the theatres and competed with each other in this. They were also able to involve and patronize the less wealthy, but highly educated genteel intellectual elite and professionals. Quite often the playwright himself did not belong to the world of the rich. Theatre at this time was what could be called a 'high'-society activity, reinforced by the contribution of a modest middle-class new intellectual elite.⁴

In fact, at this stage when organized politics had not developed, theatre was more of a social event. From literature, social and literary histories, one gets a description which does not reflect them as performing arts but rather as social events. New social ambience and interactions were the essence of these private, home-based performances. To quote Rabindranath Tagore, the child of one of the wealthiest and most westernized-liberal families of Bengal, whose home was one of the earliest sites of Bengali theatre:

I used to lean over the bannisters of this building and stare at the house next to us. You could see the dance hall next door flooded with light. The big compound was crowded with huge horse-drawn carriages. Our older brothers and cousins could be seen greeting the guests at the front door and escorting them in. Rose water was sprinkled from silver containers, and each guest was given a small bouquet.... While in the reception room, under chandeliers and lamps, music and dancing continued, and the grown-up males pulled on the long and coiled hookah pipes, the women were hidden behind bamboo blinds, in a dim light with their own containers of betel leaves and areca nuts. Women from other families also came as guests and gathered there (to watch the show). But they also discussed in whispers their household affairs.⁵

In fact, it is in this fallout effect of the theatre as a social pageant that we see the emerging class consciousness of a section of the new ruling classes, much more so than even any play's content could reveal to us. The significance of these private shows for the new rich who hosted and acted in them can be seen in terms of the cohesion, assertion and fullness of social life. The theatre's capacity of social networking or of organizing social relations is very significant. Each one of these private performances brought together important sections of the local elite, and on occasion, the English ruling elite. Theatre at home, and theatre

in general, was beginning to be seen as a natural extension of the life style of the gentry of the new urban environment. This new form was an essential aspect of civilized (westernized upper class) life. Hence at its inception, when the life of the middle class were socially speaking at an embryonic stage, these private theatricals were heralded as the sign of new times.⁶ In fact, well into the phase of commercial theatre, there were probably no major intellectuals in Bengal who had not come in contact with theatre. The lesser members of the society contented themselves with folk plays and other forms of entertainment, while 'modern' theatre regaled the wealthy and the intelligentsia.⁷

'Modern' theatre was evoked as a respectable cultural domain. In fact, there had always been anti-theatrical prejudice amongst the dominant sections of society although this prejudice quickened in the colonial period. Various colonial government reports assign theatre an active presence. However, their interpretation presents the performance not simply as a performance, a political act, or plain entertainment but also as an 'uncivilized' activity. Government records often refer to songs, tales, histories, in fact everything connected with Asiatic amusements and literature, as more or less 'licentious'. Those attending the performance were presented not as mere spectators but rather as persons of 'loose morality' and 'low class'. Such voices on the one hand reveal what Guha calls 'the voice of committed colonialism' preparing its grounds for a civilizing mission. Yet, on the other hand, they also enumerate elements of a colonial awareness and anxiety that articulates the power of natives and their cultural practices. Theatre was seen as a potentially subversive cultural medium of expression. The *Asiatic Journal* concludes that 'there can be little hope of any striking improvement in the Asiatic character, until the importance of the influence extended by Christian countries shall be fully recognized'.⁸ Clearly, the subtext of such attacks is one that reflects anxiety on the part of the authorities and they assert their own cultural and moral superiority in order to justify their presence.

Simultaneously, to create a greater appreciation for Anglo-European culture among upper-class natives, colonial authorities encouraged the proliferation of European theatrical activity through the establishment of native theatres patterned after their European counterparts. European tradition was appreciated as a civilized, sophisticated and cultivated activity that would lead to the moral improvement of Indian society. Popular folk drama was given low status. Such systematic reorganization of theatre resulted in generating hierarchies that relegated indigeneous theatre forms to a 'low' status, as opposed to the 'high'

and privileged status accorded to European 'high' drama, notably Shakespeare.⁹

Hierarchical stratification was further reinforced by indigenous social reform organizations. The reformist discourse, resulting from the colonial experience, had resulted in producing strong contempt for indigenous theatre. It had pushed indigenous and folk theatre to the margins of respectability. In Bengal, the Brahmo Samaj epitomized the trend toward Puritanism. Meredith Borthwick notes, "It uncompromisingly condemned gambling, going to prostitutes, smoking, drinking, and the theatre".¹⁰ In the North Indian region, the Arya Samaj similarly abolished performances by dancing girls, introduced a purified form of the Holi festival, and condemned local theatrical forms.¹¹ Literary readers like Bharatendu Harishchandra of Banaras declared most kinds of popular theatre 'depraved' and lacking in theatricality. Like other figures of the Indian renaissance, he championed a refined form of drama limited largely to drawing rooms and school auditorium, whose purpose would be to assist in the moral regeneration of the nation.¹² Sumanta Banerjee's research on the popular culture of nineteenth-century Calcutta indicates that the *bhadralok* (English-educated professional elite) increasingly associated popular forms with the 'licentious and voluptuous tastes' of the 'vulgar' populace, from whom they took pains to differentiate themselves. Thus the denunciation of popular culture was simultaneous with the formation of a new *bhadralok* culture.

Hence the rhetoric of 'obscenity' and 'morality' used by colonial discourse, bourgeois nationalists and social reformers had imparted a dubious reputation to theatre. It is against this middle class prejudice that it was differentiating itself from 'indigenous forms' and trying to give theatre a 'respectable' image. *Naba Prabandha*, a newspaper, in 1868 published a long article dwelling on the necessity of a healthy theatre to counteract the evils of vulgar entertainment provided by contemporary Panchalis, Tarjas and Half Akharas.¹³ In Bengal, Amarendranath invited the highest gentry of judges, magistrates and lawyers to the Classic Theatre to improve the credibility of the stage. In August 1901, in an acknowledgement letter to the Chief Justice of the Allahabad 'High' Court Mr. Stanley, he wrote:

The native stage, though yet in its infancy, exerts an educative influence over native society unsurpassed by any other educational institution of this country. To encourage the stage is to encourage healthy education and to develop the fine feelings of the human heart. Your lordship by your kindness and generosity towards me – the manager actor of this theatre, has raised the native stage in the estimation of the public.¹⁴

In Maharashtra, Vishnudas Bhave had sought to perform in front of the intelligentsia.¹⁵ When Vishnudas Bhave had presented the first theatre performance of a Marathi play at the court of the Raja of Sangli, the *Bombay Times* claimed “Bhave’s plays are of native origin – from the early classic dramas of Hindoostan. They are void of everything approaching licentiousness and indecorum and are images of the moralities in which the Christian Church in older times used to rejoice”.¹⁶ The two decades following the 1860s saw several English and Sanskrit plays being translated into Marathi. Maharashtra Natak Mandali was able to secure the good wishes of the intellectuals and social workers of all important centres in Maharashtra. The quarters of the Mandali became the meeting-point of poets. Mandali had made it a practice to invite learned persons to speak before the actors every Sunday.¹⁷ Thus the importance of a body of sound and classical dramas to regulate the national taste was increasingly being highlighted. This is further highlighted by one advertisement of Krishanji Prabhakar Khadilkar’s play, *Kanchangadchi Mohana*, premiered by the Shahungarwasi Mandali (in 1901):

Well-to-do householder (*Sukhavastu gruhastha*): Which play should I see today, that will not make me regret the money spent and the sleep lost?

Student: Which play should I see today, that, rather than make me regret the study-time lost, will teach me about history and morality (*niti*)?

Woman: Which play should I see today, that, rather than making me sad by showing erotic scenes, will imprint upon my mind the noble ideas of fidelity and bravery?

Tattler (*chugalkhor*): People dislike me; in fact, even I feel that of late my habit of tattling has gone out of control. Is there any play that will show me the terrible consequences of tattling and help me get rid of this dangerous habit?

Servant: More than half my life has gone by in serving others. In this period, I have not thought about my country even once. How will I know what is patriotism? It is unlikely that I will ever experience it myself. Perhaps a play will show me a true patriot; but which play can this be?

There is only one answer to all these questions: see *Kanchangadchi Mohana*.¹⁸

In fact, never in the history of colonial India until the influence of communism/socialism began to be felt from the mid-1930s, does one find another such period, when the elite of the middle class consciously

reach out towards the responsibility of shaping a new set of cultural practices and ideologies.

Modern theatre in the formative period consisted of reworking the English theatre form—both in the structure of the play and its presentational devices—in order to specifically suit new social and aesthetic needs. It adopted from the British physical representational devices and forms, the dramatic structure and the specific genres prevalent in British theatre. India joined in the celebration of English theatre. Colonial theatre writing was greatly influenced by Shakespeare. Simultaneously, one also sees the struggle for identity amongst the emerging middle class. Internalization of British bourgeois representational forms is accompanied with a strong emphasis on a new national identity as well the middle class's own need for a creative subjectivity and a historical continuity moved them to produce their own theatre in their own language. The emerging middle class was also trying to draw its legitimacy from the past. They were trying to highlight the greatness of ancient Indian theatre. It was being stressed how the 'romantic' spirit had reached a pinnacle of art not alone in Shakespeare and in Calderon but in the East too. This view of ancient India was partially a creation of European Romanticism. The German translation of Kalidasa's *Shakuntala* was published in 1791. This play was described by Goethe as "an inspiration to poets, a thirst for natural colour, for unspoiled emotion, for the exotic, the supernatural, the gracefully wild". Rousseauism and Romanticism led him to believe that there always was and is an 'Indian' theatre. This theatre was supposed to be the classical theatre. This resulted in a search for an authentic 'Indian' theatre. It also postulated a notion of theatre which is civilization specific. It was being stressed that there is the (and not an) Indian theatre which is timeless. The 'heaven and earth' of theatre was comprehended in terms of 'Shakuntala', i.e., Sanskrit, Indian theatre. The early writers were struggling with classical heritage, Michael Madhusudan Dutt wrote a play on Sharmistha in Bangla in 1856 while Kirloskar narrated the story of Subhadra (again from the *Mahabharata*) in Marathi less than a quarter century later.¹⁹

In the initial phase, theatre was indirectly political in Bengal; the three major playwrights of this period were Ramnarayan Tarkaratna, Michael Madhusudan Dutt and Dinabandhu Mitra. All of them wrote plays which were either social criticism through farces and satires or sometimes epic-scope melodramas with *puranic* themes. It is the former, the social strain, which dominated the scene. Ramnarayan Tarkaratna mainly earned his reputation by writing about the evils of polygamy in the *kulin* sect of the Brahmins. Certain aspects of the new class-

consciousness, marked by confusion, derangement, opportunism and greed, unleashed by this new non-productive colonialist economy with its fast elaborating ruling and legitimizing apparatus, are well portrayed by Girish Chandra Ghosh's *Bellik Bazar* (The Rogues Gallery). This farce is telling about the general state of class formation in Bengal since it involves characters from the petty-bourgeois and professional setting, as well as menial workers. It is set in the death registration office of the Calcutta Corporation, since births and deaths have to be registered according to the new system. This practice had never existed in India before, as was the case with many other British regulations. But it became mandatory and was deeply tied up with the colonial property laws, the medical profession and the legal profession.

Thus, theatre resonated with social criticism, in the shape of satires and farces. The themes of women's role in the family and the society at large, and general tenor of the English educated, anglicized gentry's life kept the playwright busy. One important area of criticism centred on the excessive and sudden use of alcohol, and promiscuous sexuality involving prostitutes. It seems that previously the society was never a drinking society, nor a society where sex outside of marriage was practiced or condoned. In the well-ordered communities and extended families in the countryside, social sexual deviations such as keeping a mistress, fell within the list of a landlord's or a nawab's or noblemans' vices. The liberal ethics of the British settlers and their colonial excesses exerted a destructive influence in terms of consumption of alcohol. A disregard for kinship, caste hierarchy and family and lax sexual morality are also the characteristics of the new rich *Baboo*, along with a self-hating, attitude towards all things indigenous and an adoration of all things foreign, meaning English. In a farce written by Madhusudan Dutt called *Ekeyi Ki Bale Sabhyata?* (Is this Called Civilization?), we have a first hand critical account of this new rich young gentleman or *Baboo* of the educated sort. Madhusudan, no stranger to the excessive libertarianism of the time, however, noticed that without some critical self-respect, the young Bengal stood in danger of drowning in the quicksand of imitation. The plight of these men, he felt, lay in a complete dispossession of their cultural/social heritage and their inability to actually become English, or be accepted as equals by them.²⁰

Theatre as a Site of Middle Class Nationalist Hegemony

Gradually 'modern' theatre underwent a fundamental change in both socio-economic and political terms. It moved from private to public, and was opened to the general public with the sale of tickets. In Calcutta,

the first public theatre was staged in 1872 at the National Theatre. It was produced by white-collar workers rather than the richest families and intellectual dignitaries of the city. The public presentation allowed for the participation of a much broader cross-section of the middle class and removed theatre from the grasp of a smaller fraction of the new ruling classes. The bourgeois underpinnings of this political theatre are revealed by the fact that the device for this greater democratization of theatre should be entrepreneurialism, a mode which had become naturalized enough among certain sections to consider theatre as a commodity. So, in all the areas of content, dramatic presentation and social organization—the new play and its production remained a prototypical political-cultural venture of the middle class.

The law of the market began to operate. As the supply of plays went up, the prices came down. In Maharashtra, companies began to vary ticket prices from town to town, with Bombay naturally registering the highest rates. All these companies were commercial enterprises. The proprietors of the troupes controlled all the artistic aspects—selecting the theme of the play, finalizing the dialogues, training the actors, writing songs, composing the music, finalizing costumes and handling all the other numerous production details. Bhave was one such sole proprietor of a troupe. Other members were paid on percentage terms. There were men to look after administrative affairs and production details. Annasaheb Kirloskar, who gave Maharashtra its full-fledged *sangeet natak*, appointed a full-time secretary in 1884 to look after the administrative affairs of the company. Partnership was introduced and partners were paid on percentage terms. Others received fixed monthly salaries. Allocations towards the Good Conduct Fund and Reserve Fund were specified. There was also a suggestion to start a provident fund for actors to fall back on in their old age. In Maharashtra the trend towards commercialism perhaps reached its highest point when, around 1922, Govindrao Tembe attempted to float his Shivraj Company as a limited concern with share capital. Official recognition of the theatre's earning capacity followed soon after, in 1923, with the imposition of entertainment tax. Commercialism brought with it the star system. Stars demanded and received salary. Actors, playwrights and music composers were paid.²¹

There was an increasing entrance of business people in the entertainment industry, indicating that it was not only entertainment, but an enterprise where capital was invested with a profit motive. This conjured up an idea of business and recreation. In the December of 1880, Pratap Chand Johuree, a Marwari jeweler bought off the National Theatre from its Bengali owner, when it was on the verge of closing

down. Being a wealthy jewell merchant, he was driven to invest in theatre, realizing its great potential for profits. He understood that like any other business venture, theatre too must be given a proper infrastructure to develop as a trade. The first thing he did was to appoint a manager who was well versed in the nuances of this dramatic form. So he persuaded Girish Ghosh, who was still an amateur but had already left an impression on the theatre going audiences, to leave his present assignment as a book-keeper in a mercantile family and join his company. The new theatre owners now hired professionals for their theatre companies against a monthly wage. Theatre acquired the traits of a full time profession. The hired professionals were now engaged as full timers as opposed to their previous part time engagements and everything concerned with the theatre was now organized under a single roof.²²

Soon after ticketed performances began, strategies began to be evolved to get more and more people into the auditorium. Posters were put up, hand-bills were distributed in town-squares, and 'proofs' (synopsis of plays) were distributed to people who bought tickets of higher denominations. Advertisements were inserted in newspapers. Free passes were sent to individuals and organizations of importance. There was now a growing interdependence between theatre and the publishing industry. Major playwrights would announce their forthcoming plays in their published versions. Hoping to boost his sales, in 1877, a certain bookseller advertised tickets for a play at three-fourths the rate if they were bought from his shop a day before the performance.²³

In fact, theatre in this phase became more and more political. By 1865, India became a part of the British empire. European political modalities had begun to be transplanted and transcreated in Bengal. As the political scene began to unfold, theatre and politics began to be linked more closely. The everyday life of the middle classes became less of a concern than the British occupation of India. In fact, a political entity called 'India', so far embryonic in the political discourse of the new classes, had emerged, signaling the beginning of a nationalist movement. The middle classes which had spent the previous century in setting up their social base and space, were getting restive to assume power. Theatre moved from its social criticism and self-reflection about the Hindu Bengali upper class society to criticizing the British rule in terms of India as a whole. The new theatre, in fact, busied itself with shaping the symbolic apparatus of the emerging nationalist movement. Recounting and reinterpreting history areas setting up myths and metaphors which would embody the political aspirations of new

nationalism, formed the cultural politics of the day. The existing social relations and the direction of their dynamics took a directly political cultural form and became dramatic fictions of power.

Theatre, in particular, became a major site for politics. This can be illustrated by giving one example from the play *Nil Darpan* written by Dinabandhu Mitra. This play expressed both the current middle class and popular dissatisfaction with a particular aspect of colonial rule in India, namely the plantation economy. *Nil Darpan* is the story of the plight of a Bengali landlord's family and its well-to-do ryots (tenants) at the hands of the indigo planters. It does involve some poor peasants but never really brings them to centre stage. In many areas there was a tenuous alliance between better-off peasants and landlords against the planters.²⁴ The main thrust of the opposition was not towards colonial rule as such, but its abuses towards planters who are carry-overs of the old East India Company, rather than towards the new administration of the colonial state. This play is essentially at the service of the local ruling classes of Bengal. There was emphasis on the image of class harmony between poor peasants and landlords, or of bridging of fractional rifts between the landlord and well-to-do tenants. It appeals to a feudal social vision of a just, though hierarchical society where envy is absent, but status and hierarchy exist with protection. It establishes the hegemonic or representational status of the middle classes, which show themselves to each other in the light of benevolent, well-supported, legitimate representatives of Bengal and the lower classes. It also presents a powerful utopia of a paradise lost, waiting to be regained; of class harmony, and also shows direction of their nationalist struggle. It gave them an ideology which combined property, hierarchy, and patriarchy with a notion of appropriate justice for all at each level, befitting their proper role and station in life.

'Patriotic' plays continued to be written after *Nil Darpan*. The National Theatre Group enacted a play called *Bharat Mata Bilap* (The Lament of Mother India). 'Mother India' a humiliated, unchained mother of the masses of colonized people, became a central symbol for the nationalist. Many plays attacked discriminatory colonial policies. These included Upendra Nath Das's *Surendra-Binodini* (1875), *Gaekwar Darpan* (The Mirror of Baroda, 1875), *Gajananda Prahasan* (Gajananda and the Prince, 1875) and Dakshina Charan Chattopadhyay's *Chakar Durpan* (The Tea Planter's Mirror, 1875). Running through all these plays was a nationalistic impulse that constituted attacks on the British government in one form or another. *Chakar Darpan* attacked the cruel and licentious behaviour of British planters toward the natives on the tea plantations in Assam. Upendra

Nath Das's *Surendra-Binodini* showed a European magistrate sexually assaulting his maid, who jumps out of the window to save her honour. *Gaekwar Darpan* represented the farcical trial of Malhar Rao and Gaekwar of Baroda, who was forced to abdicate his throne in 1875 on trumped up charges of attempting to poison Colonel Phayre, a British resident of Baroda. And *Gajananda Prahasan* attacked the visit of the Prince of Wales to the house of an esteemed Bengali gentleman, and his visit to the *zenana*.²⁵

While the political content of the plays was the reason for the growing panic among the rulers, the performative aspects of such cultural production further aggravated existing tensions. The colonial administration watched the development from social self-critical plays, which were attempts to construct a new bourgeois social consciousness, to this level of overt attacks on the British presence. The colonial state passed the Dramatic Performance Act of 1876 in response to political theatre. The Censorship Act of 1876 empowered local government authorities to 'prohibit dramatic performances which were seditious or obscene, or otherwise prejudicial to the public interests'.²⁶

As the Dramatic Performance Act made it very difficult to write anti-colonial plays directly, the technique of retelling history or Puranic legends and myths—evoking allusions and analogies—remained a very important contribution for political theatre. The genre would also have popular appeal at a time when revivalist Hinduism recuperated mythological characters such as Krishna, Abhimanyu, Yudhishtir, Prahlad, and others as the ideal men and national builders. In Maharashtra, the evocation of a lost Hindu and Maratha glory found increasing support in the Ganpati Ustav.²⁷

The shift to mythological or history plays, especially the former, has been seen as a sheer retreat into Hindu revivalism. However, to address it like this is to overlook the political character of such plays and to define politics in a very narrow paradigm. Playwrights were looking for such dramas which would elude censorship and at the same time disseminate nationalist ideas. Because of its religiously affiliated characteristics, which made it less susceptible to strict censorship measures, mythological drama seemed quite appropriate for these purposes. Since authorities perceived interference with religious customs as a way of alienating natives, the Censorship Act did not apply to plays associated with religious rituals or ceremonies. To escape censorship, moreover, playwrights could camouflage political plays in the garb of stories from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. And through analytical representations of mythological stories that commented on contemporaneous socio-political events, they could continue to

challenge authoritarian structures and state apparatuses. Given the dangers attached to political dramas at a time when imperialist expansion required the suppression of all politically subversive material, playwrights also found in mythological drama, a means to wrest the theatre from repression and make it a 'free' space to speak out and express themselves.²⁸

The techniques of retelling history or *puranic* legends and myths, evoking allusions and analogies, remained a channel of political theatre. In Maharashtra, for example, Khadilkar's *Kichakavadh* presented a story about the Pandavas taken from the *Mahabharata*, to attack the colonial government. According to Solomon, the molestation of Draupadi at the hands of Kichak, who is eventually killed by Bhim, one of Draupadi's five Pandava husbands, became a metaphor for the policies of the Raj. Kichak represented Lord Curzon, Draupadi represented India, Yudhishtir, the eldest of the Pandava brothers, represented the moderate nationalists, Bhim represented an extremist nationalist. Through such stories playwrights contrasted the aggressive and hateful acts of the enemy (who, by implications, were the rulers) with the resistance offered by those who sought to rescue the nation from colonial evils.²⁹ Thus this facet of religiosity had a nationalist import.

Another consequence of mythological drama was that it helped reinstate the reputation of theatre. As discussed earlier, the rhetoric of 'obscenity' and 'morality' used by colonial as well as bourgeois nationalists and social reformers had imparted a dubious reputation to theatre, including political plays. This also affected attendance by the 'respectable' gentry, resulting in a loss of patronage and support. The sanctimonious character of religious and mythological drama challenged the perception of Indian drama as 'immoral' and 'obscene' and accomplished at the same time its intended political purpose.³⁰

Besides, mythological plays there were also some historical plays. Girish Ghosh staged some historical plays like 'Sirajuddaula' and 'Mir Qasim' to express the nationalist project most directly and politically. Such plays seek to recount the history of Bengal's defeat at the hands of the British in order to inspire a united rebellion by the Hindu and Muslims of Bengal. By iconically posing Bengal's past as glorious and the present as degraded, this theatre made visible the social relations of domination around which the new colonial administration was constructed. It gave a new sense of time and transition to the nationalist struggle. It outlined the mission of nationalism by marking out the stages of past glory and future desire. It showed different incarnations of India's history: 'What mother was, what she has become, and what

she will be.’ However, the historical plays of Girish Ghosh were no different from his mythological plays in spirit and form. Historical characters were icons endowed with a grace and valour reminiscent of the heroes of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. In the historical plays, the remoteness of the events and the needs for nascent nationalism were excuses enough for treating the heroes, tragic or triumphant, as embodiments of valour and heroic virtues.³¹

However, for all its well-intentioned efforts, the kind of nationalism propagated by mythological drama remained a deeply problematic enterprise. One component of the developing features of this aggressively Hindu orientation was an emerging tendency to negate the significance and importance of the rule of the Muslim dynasties. The quest for a nascent Hindu patriotic tradition got inevitably fastened on to the Rajput and Maratha resistance, and naturally against the Muslim dynasties. Representations of the Musalman on stage was shaped much by his absence, as it was by the proliferation of the *Puranic* themes and *Bhakti* plays, and clearly extended with disconcerting ease into perceptions of a Musalman in real life. Girish Ghosh deified the heroic deed of his historical character in narratives that celebrated the remoteness and grandeur of the past. Instead of questioning Indian history, Ghosh chose to idealize. Ghosh’s ideal nation would probably be one embodying unity and political oneness under a ‘Hindu’ *rashtra*, as declared in the play *Chhatrapati Shivaji*. Strong influences of the Shivaji festivals and the worship of Ma Bhawani, were the bases of his nationalism.³²

Besides, the plots and stories of most plays reinforce the superiority of the Hindu race. Plays like *Vir Abhimanyu* declared the supremacy of the Aryans in ancient times. The assertion of an Aryan identity also propagated ideas about Hindu supremacy over other religious groups, at a time when divisions within Indian elites along religious, regional and caste lines were on the rise. Aimed at challenging colonial structure, such Hinduistic revivals consequently fostered the simultaneous growth of a Hindu nationalism. Anti-colonial drama is also part of the story of consolidation of an elite nationalism.

Thus, the above description brings out that even though the religiosity had a nationalist import but such nationalist import was imbued with hierarchy, patriarchy and Brahmanism, which tried to hitch the higher class’s wagon on to the masses—but in actuality had no ‘bread and butter’ programme for the masses. Thus modern theatre was implicated in the larger process of the formation of the middle-class its links with the market, its self-perception and prescription for women.

Representation of Women: Reinforcement of Patriarchal Ideology

Modern theatre was a site for contesting challenges to its hegemonic claim and redefinition of the female was a crucial feature of the hegemony that brought the middle classes into power. If the struggle to represent ideal female behaviour accompanied the struggle of an emergent middle class, then change in the representation of women would be expected to accompany more extensive historical changes.³³ The representation of women as public entertainers and the locus of male desire no longer served the interests of the English-educated elite, which put in her place the Indian equivalent of the Victorian domestic angel, the *sugrihini* or good housewife.³⁴

As the middle class consolidated its position, it exerted increasing pressure on its womenfolk to conform to British standards of ideal womanly conduct. A new kind of segregation was imposed on women, whose identity was now to be defined in opposition to women from lower economic strata. The middle class emphasised the need to eradicate what it was trained to believe were the pernicious influences of certain prevailing literary and cultural forms on women, particularly on women belonging to their own homes. These forms emerged primarily from the lower economic social groups and represented a popular culture that ran parallel to what could be called the 'official culture' propagated by the middle class. The urban audience for such forms had earlier contained large numbers of 'high'-caste women who shared cultural usages, dialects, and idioms with women of lower socio-economic groups. In Bengal, Meredith Borthwick writes how a principal pastime of secluded women was attending *jatra* performances and other theatrical events. In fact, the popular culture had a wide female audience, ranging from the lower caste and lower class self-employed women of the market places, to the wives and daughters of the middle class in the sheltered *andarmahal* or *zenana*. The middle class considered women's popular songs with their robust sense of humour and frank sensuality, as a threat to the new ideal of domestic order and heavily restricted elite women's association with female performers.³⁵ Female performers were getting stigmatized in educated discourse as 'prostitute'. They came under attack in the well-known Anti-Nautch campaign that culminated in 1947 in the outlying of temple dancing and the prohibition on dedicating women as devadasis in South India.³⁶ In fact, *nautanki* and many other forms like *lavani/tamasha* owes their absence from the annals of literary history to their association with a prohibited category of womanhood. The North Indian imagination unflinchingly links *nautanki* with the alluring gestures of the dancer-actress.³⁷

'Respectable' women, because of the stigma connected to acting and the relegation of singing, dancing and other performance arts to a marginalised courtesan class, were at an extreme social disadvantage with respect to the stage and were not only unwilling to become actresses but were ill-equipped for its rigours and lacking in skills. The emergent elite theatre marked its distinction from the folk via a process of desexualisation, so that only men could perform on the stage. The middle class discourse of private and public domain shaped this. In commercial theatres, the paying public consumed the images on stage. The consumption had to be of male actors, because women from the middle class were 'respectable', and exhibiting them in front of a paying public would have undermined the very basis on which the search for respectability was being carried out. In fact, by asserting that female impersonators could perform better than women, it led to the displacement of agency from the represented figure of women, and perpetuated the patriarchal control of not only the material female body but its visual manifestations as well.

However, this respectable cultural project had its inherent tensions and anxiety. Female impersonation caused anxiety as the issue of masculinity and effeminacy was also coming to the forefront in political discourse. Govind Tembe, a very well-known personality in the world of theatre mentioned that young men in our society were beginning to imitate popular actors enacting female roles. He maintained, that at a time when the nation required strong men, this tendency to look effeminate was to be discouraged. Besides, it was the period when more realism was coming in techniques of production which required a different norm of representation. Female impersonation, from being quite acceptable when it was practiced by the gentry in the period of amateur-theatricals, was only gradually found to be 'unreal' and incompatible with the ticketed staging of 'theatre' and the expectations of a larger and more heterogeneous viewing public.

There was a debate in the early twentieth century in Maharashtra in theatre platforms, journals, conferences and newspapers whether women should join the theatre. However, these debates were conducted and participated in primarily by urban middle class men. The direction of the debate, both by those who favoured women's entry and those who resisted, was ingrained with patriarchal ideology. Those who opposed women coming on stage felt that if women and men came together in the 'vulnerable' field of theatre, morals would be adversely affected. However, those who thought women necessary for the 'art of theatre' but who did not want *kulin* women to lose their morality, gave reluctant

consent to the 'prostitutes' but with conditions that they should be '*neeteeman*', that is, fit into the moral standard of the society, or else these 'prostitutes' would spoil the morality of the men in theatre companies. Those who were not very happy with the choice of 'prostitutes' suggested that widows could take up acting, with necessary training in theatre craft. Some tried to put forth the view that the danger of any degradation of moral values was not so acute any more because women joining theatre would be educated, cultured and *kulin*, unlike the women of the earlier period. However, the needs of the modern stage were greater than the members of the *kulin* women available. Therefore a very clever move of expanding the definition of *kulin* to include more women was made after an elaborate, intricate analysis of the concept of *kulin*. According to the traditional concept, *kulin* is linked with 'higher' birth whereas the modified version included women who were not necessarily *kulin* by birth, but by their moral behaviour. It had two expectations, one of being loyal to one man and secondly of having an aspiration of giving birth to a new *kulin khandan*.

Careful scrutiny of the debate highlights that the patriarchy initially justified the exclusion of women from mainstream theatre but later, to retain commercial viability within the changing society, the same system justified the inclusion of women but within narrow and restricted confines. It is clear that at this stage the supporters of women's entry into theatre did not visualise women as independent and responsible persons but as women who fit in the mould of the moral values put across by reformer men, with women only in supportive roles. Natural feminine qualities of women were romanticised to pave their entry into theatre. Besides, the debate only centred around the possibility of women as actresses, to replace male actors enacting female roles. Women as playwrights, company owners and music composers were not considered. There is no mention of women's creativity or of their own inclinations.³⁸

Since respectable women could not be taken, so women from 'loose' backgrounds were assimilated. Thus the project of a respectable domain could be fulfilled with 'loose' women. These actresses were not part of a middle class cultural enterprise but became instrumental in making theatre possible. The Bengal theatre which first took in women actresses from prostitute quarters also employed an intensive advertising campaign to make theatre a form of family entertainment. It did so by secluding special spaces for respectable women viewers and by focusing on domestic dramas. For the first time then, the two poles could be contained within the same space and a large drama unfolded beyond

the stage as the respectable female gaze was turned on to its 'erotic' other. Also for the first time, prostitutes played wife and prostitutes, as well as the dangerous middle term—'fallen' wife.

However, around the performing woman an obsessive discourse of nationhood, regional-national or jatiya identity, sexuality and public morality evolved. There was a strong reaction amongst the *bhadra samaj* when such 'loose' women were taken. It was being said that such a 'loose' class and loose morals of the actresses would corrupt the youth of Bengal. Her visible acting self provided a common locus to Brahma and other social reform movements attacking conspicuous consumption, excessive drinking and womanizing. Christian missionary enterprise and purity movements railed and rallied against all of the above 'vices' as well as stage-sanctioned 'prostitution'. However, the real problem was that public theatre was apparently erasing the boundaries of the *bhadra* and the *abhadra*. The kind of prescriptive that was being defined for women was defied by actresses as they virtually, by definition, lived and worked beyond the boundaries of the propriety.

The middle class modernity project could be fulfilled with such 'loose' women but despite their significant contribution they were considered outside the pale of society. The whole nationalist discourse has negated or erased their creative aspect. Many actresses came from families of traditional singers and dancers and were extremely creative and talented. They brought before the public gaze the complexities of some of the most 'literary' heroines of contemporary novels. They created characters who not only appealed to the public imagination but often exceeded the dramatist, the novelist and the director's conception of his own character. In fact, the position of the professional actresses itself was a creation of the new educated middle class culture, supplying a need produced by the requirements of the new public theatre modeled on European lives. To train these actresses became a remarkable educative project in itself, producing women schooled in the language and sensibilities of modernist literati. However, in the popular imagination, their acting prowess was seen as the continuum to the deception or *chhalana* and artfulness 'natural' to women of their persuasions. No matter how consummate the artists who were pre-eminent, favourites and modest – the woman actress could never supersede the fact that she lived a public life and consented to be hired for amusement by all who could command the price. For an actress and more if she was also a prostitute – all evidence of respectability was ruled out.

Continuous debates centred around the actress's 'immoral' presence

despite public theatre being a space where all issues of modernity, gender roles, caste, education and class were threshed bare. Inherent within the theatre world lay not merely an acknowledgement of the sexual difference between men and women but a 'sub-world' attributed to the sexuality of the prostitute actress. The peculiar configuration of class and gender made actresses a minority within a sub-group, both in terms of their background as well as the world of the stage. In the nation's narrative they were outside the pale of society; and therefore beyond the pale of social reform movements which were targeted primarily at middle class woman. Thus stage actresses were read as 'fallen' women and tell outside the nineteenth century projects being constructed for women.

The core of the nationalist ideology fashioned a conservative identity for women defined according to the patriarchal tenets of Hinduism. Theatrical demands for freedom from colonial rule did not necessarily translate into freedom from patriarchal expectations. Rather, the demands for freedom dramatized social positions that reinforced and reified the roles of women as good mothers and wives. Through theatre, the middle-class taught its women how they should behave, how they should walk, talk, gesticulate, dress up, and so on. Gender depiction in the play reinforced patriarchal ideology – all that is weak is feminine, all that is strong is masculine; female sexuality is dangerous because it weakens men, makes them effeminate, leads them astray and interferes with their work; female sexuality moreover, is like a volcano, forever on the verge of bursting; the virtuous woman not only keeps her own sexuality in check but she also polices others; the virtuous woman never speaks in self-interest, she always speaks in the interest of a larger cause – community and nation; the family is accorded primacy over all else; the reproductive role of women is privileged over any other social or political role they can possibly play and so on. Such identities for women boosted the self-image of Hindus and helped instill nationalist pride.

To conclude, this article brings out how the beginning of elite 'modern' theatre is linked up with the formation of middle class and its quest for respectability. The middle class projected 'modern' theatre as 'high' culture relegating indigenous theatre forms to a 'low' status. The 'high' culture theatre internalized British bourgeois representational forms but was accompanied by a strong emphasis on a new national identity. Theatre was an important site of the nationalist hegemony of the middle

class, a site of its representation. The middle class constructed the nation in its own image. It saw itself as the sole representative of the nation, as its only legitimate voice, and the theatre emerged as an important site for contesting any challenge to its hegemonic claim. Anti-colonial dramas of the middle class were part of the story of consolidation of an elite nationalism, imbued with social and brahmanical hierarchy and patriarchy. The question of 'respectability' of the middle class assumed its sharpest form when the issues concerned women. Representation of women as public entertainers and the locus of male desire would threaten the middle class respectability project. Female performers were stigmatized as 'prostitutes'. Despite the significant artistic contribution of female performers in fulfilling the middle class respectable cultural project, all evidences of respectability for such 'loose' women was ruled out in middle class discourse. Actresses' lives were indicative of the contradictions of a new world of middle class cultural production. Thus modern theatre was implicated in the larger process of the formation of the middle class, its representation, its self-perception, and its prescriptions for its women.

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