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## Questions of Modernity and Postcoloniality in Modern Indian Theatres: Problems and Sources

In an essay titled “Theatre in India”, Indian playwright and actor Girish Karnad (1938–) reminisces about his childhood, when he would accompany his father to performances put-up by travelling theatre troupes on make-shift proscenium stages (Karnad: 332).<sup>1</sup> He contrasts these experiences with those of watching *Yakṣagana* performances held in the open under the light of kerosene torches, in fallow fields in the countryside after the harvesting season was over (Karnad: 332).<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, he juxtaposes with these his first experiences of watching plays in urban theatres in Bombay (now Mumbai), he recalls watching Ibrahim Alkazi’s (1925–) staging of August Strindberg’s (1849–1912) *Miss Julie* (1888) and being very overwhelmed by the experience (Karnad: 332).<sup>3</sup> The experience of the urban proscenium stage, with its technologies of sound, lighting and

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<sup>1</sup> Girish Karnad is an Indian film and stage actor, director, playwright and screenwriter. Studying at Oxford on a Rhodes Scholarship, Karnad is considered one of the foremost modern Indian playwrights known particularly for adapting content from Indian mythology for the modern proscenium stage.

<sup>2</sup> *Yakṣagana* is a dramatic performative tradition indigenous to the Southern Indian state of Karnataka. The form incorporates the use of elaborate facial make-up, dance, dialogues, songs and instrumental music, and culls most of its content from Hindu mythology.

<sup>3</sup> Ibrahim Alkazi is an Indian theatre director and drama teacher who served as the Director of the National School of Drama between 1962 and 1977. Alkazi trained at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, London graduating in 1947 and continued to work in England till the early 1950s. Upon his return to India, he got involved with the Bombay chapter of

trained professional actors was as far removed from the travelling theatre troupes of semi-professional actors, and even farther removed from the traditional “folk” performances of *Yakṣagana* held under torch-light in open fallow farmlands. Karnad even goes as far as stating that it was probably the experience of watching a play like *Miss Julie* on an urban proscenium stage that made him decide to be a playwright (Karnad: 333). He describes his experience of theatre and that of his contemporaries as emerging from the world of “mythological plays lit by torches or petromax lamps straight into Strindberg and dimmers” (Karnad: 333).

Karnad tells a story of a seemingly incommensurable chasm that existed between the indigenous performative traditions of his childhood; spent in the countryside of the southern Indian state of Karnataka, and the urban theatres he was exposed to in Bombay where he attended college. He states that it was in the midst of such tensions and incommensurabilities that he found the inspiration for his first play based on a story from the epic of the *Mahabharata* (Karnad: 333). His protagonist was King Yayati, a character in the *Mahabharata* who was cursed to age prematurely, and seeks a young man who would willingly give up his youth to break his curse (Karnad: 333). Ultimately Yayati’s son takes pity on his father’s plight and willingly trades places with his father, but Karnad puts his own spin on the tale. He gives his play a tragic end prompted by his new-found admiration for the works of Strindberg and Anouilh (Karnad: 333). The “tension” that Karnad alludes to was not unique to theatre alone, in the context of colonial and postcolonial India, this “tension” lay at the heart of what was defined as “modern” (Karnad: 334). Karnad traces, the tensions at the heart of the modernity in India to the rise of colonial urban centers in nineteenth century British India (Karnad: 334). Such causal progression in documenting a history of modernity in India though not uncommon, questions surrounding modernity in complex postcolonial contexts such as South Asia, at least the way we understand it today, is conventionally and conveniently aligned with a colonial legacy. Consequently, the operational and functional assumption here is one of a complete alignment of the values of “modernity” with European values or in some cases the re-evaluation of the pre-colonial

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the Progressive Artists Group, a collective committed to a “modernist” aesthetic in Indian arts, becoming a crucial figure in the modernist movement in Indian theatre.

in light of the colonial encounter. While one cannot deny the impacts of the colonial moment in the history of a postcolonial context, as Indian comparatist Amiya Dev calls it, present a moment of “rupture” (Dev, 2000: 144). However, as Dev also stresses, one cannot in retrospect contemplate such moments of rupture without also contemplating the processes of “renovation” and “renewal” that immediately follow “rupture” (Dev, 2000: 144). In this study I propose to explore a historiographical approach to understanding modern Indian theatres in the contexts of such moments of “rupture” and the inherent plurality of “renovations” or “renewals” that ensue thereof. Such an approach to the historiography of literary and cultural production has significant implications in understanding postcoloniality. In doing so I will be using Karnad as a point of departure, examining the works of two playwrights in particular, Bharatendu Harishchandra (1850–1885) and Habib Tanvir (1923–2009), who as I will later argue are representative of two distinct phases in the history of modern Indian theatres. Through exploring the continuities and emergence of new trends in the conceptions of modern Indian theatres through the works of Harishchandra and Tanvir, I hope to argue for a framework for an understanding of modern Indian theatres in terms of the larger pluralities of modernity in postcolonial India.

In his first famous work, a collection of essays titled *The Location of Culture* (1994), Homi K. Bhabha defines postcolonial cultures in terms that are very similar to the chasms that Karnad outlines in his historiography of Indian theatre. Borrowing from and extending Edward Said’s theorizations on coloniality and postcolonialism in works like *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Bhabha goes on to describe postcolonial cultures in terms of a hybrid third space. It is a space that is neither wholly colonial, nor wholly precolonial. For Bhabha, the location of a postcolonial culture is in the “betwixt and beside” (Bhabha: 65). One can see how this conception dovetails rather seamlessly with Karnad’s poignant descriptions of the mutually reflexive alterities of the worlds of “torches and petromax lamps” and of “Strindberg and dimmers”. It is then, the postcolonial subject, in this case Karnad and Bhabha, who is defined by such a location in the “betwixt and beside”. The question is then the following: what comes first; the hybrid space or the hybrid subject? If we follow the trajectory of Karnad’s career in theatre and in the Indian film industry, it would seem that the hybrid subject seeks the creation of a hybrid space, or in

this case a stage. If one follows the trajectory of his plays, starting with *Yayati* (1961); which was written for the world of “Strindberg and dimmers”, and onwards through plays like *Nagamandala* (1972) or *Hayavadana* (1988), or more recently *Bali: The Sacrifice* (2002), one observes this constant struggle around staging plays with content culled from Indian history and myth in a proscenium format. In *Hayavadana*, for example, we see the use of masks and half-curtains, and Karnad uses the character of a “stage-manager” who conducts the proceedings of the play while also commenting on the dramatic action. To have a “stage-manager” as a character in a play derives from conventions of Sanskrit drama and was a common practice in several indigenous Indian language performative traditions, like the *Yakṣagana*.<sup>4</sup> One might surmise the incorporating of such elements within his staging in the proscenium format, is an expression of Karnad’s “hybrid” subjectivity. Alternatively, one could see such syncretism as one of the many approaches within larger processes of, what Dev has called, “revival” and “renovation”.

In his critique of postcolonial theory Aijaz Ahmad defines such subjectivities in terms of a “postcondition”. Central to any “postcondition” is finding a means, language, or lexicon for its expression. In his essay titled: “Postcolonial Theory and the Postcondition”, Ahmad explores the influences of the postmodernist and deconstructivist “*fin de l’histoire*” aesthetic in postcolonial scholarship and theory (Ahmad: 353). I am not going into a fuller analysis of Ahmad’s thesis. In the interests of space, I choose to dwell briefly on a statement he makes about the “postmodern philosophical consciousness” and how it potentially extends to the postcolonial predicament.

Furthermore, the postmodern is posthistorical in the precise sense of being a discourse of the end of meaning, in the Derridean sense of infinite deferral of all meaning in language and philosophical labour alike, as well as in the Lyotardian sense both of what he calls ‘incredulity toward the metanarratives of emancipation’ as well as the assertion that there can be no criteria for choosing between

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<sup>4</sup> The character of the Stage Manager, often referred to as the *Sūtradhāra*, is structurally integral to classical Sanskrit drama. The word *Sūtradhāra* literally translates to “the bearer of the thread”, and the character is seen as carrying the narrative thread of a play. The *Sūtradhāra* always opens a play with an invocation to the gods. He introduces the audience to the play and reappears through the dramatic action of the play to provide commentary and guide the audience through the plot.

different ‘language games’ that are external to the respective ‘games’ as such. Characteristically, this postmodern philosophical consciousness distinguishes itself from an earlier, largely existentialist sense of meaninglessness and the Absurd by positing its own discourse of the end of meaning as a happy liberation from the Logos as such. (Ahmad: 355)

In a postcolonial context, the “liberation” from “*Logos*”, can be understood in terms of a freedom from colonial knowledge systems; and by this conjecture, I mean all structures both discursive and otherwise that frame and inform the apprehension of “Being” and “being in the world”. In this essay, I propose to focus on a very functional understanding of “being in the world”; through the ways in which the act of inhabiting an historico-socio-political context manifest themselves in modes of cultural expression, in this case, Theatre. I choose therefore the Heideggerian notion of “being in the world”, less as an ontology proper, but rather a quest for one, or what Kenyan author, poet and playwright Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1938–) calls, “A Quest for Relevance”. Speaking from an otherwise located postcolonial context, that shares some resonances with India, Ngũgĩ defines this quest for relevance in his book, *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986), as the strivings of recently independent postcolonial nations, and colonized nations struggling for independence, towards defining a national culture. This quest usually manifests itself as a search for sources to a national culture outside of the history of colonization.

However, such a quest comes with its own set of locationally specific problems. Vasudha Dalmiya’s 2006 book *Poetics, Plays and Performances: The Politics of Modern Indian Theatre*, foregrounds one such aspect in particular, and that is the locating of cultural sources for modern Indian theatres in a “Hindu-Sanskritic” precolonial past (Dalmiya: 29). This problem of erroneously conflating the “Hindu-Sanskritic” tradition with an Indian nationhood, Dalmiya argues is not unique to present-day revisionist Hindu fundamentalist historiographies alone, but was also prevalent in the scholarship of Indologists like Sir William Jones (1746–1794) (Dalmiya: 29).<sup>5</sup> Basing his

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<sup>5</sup> William Jones was an Anglo-Welsh philologist and Indologist. Besides his native Welsh and English, he acquired proficiency in Greek, Latin, Persian, Arabic and Hebrew early on in life, and later went on to study Sanskrit. He appointed puisne judge to the Supreme Court of Judicature at Fort William in Calcutta, Bengal in 1783. There Jones studied Sanskrit and

deductions on Brahminical sources, rather than from close observations on the widely varied performative traditions in the region, Jones' formulations on the subject unproblematically align the history of Indian theatre with a Brahminical Hindu past (Dalmiya: 29).<sup>6</sup> Such a singular or monolithic vision of nationhood and thereby a national theatre, as Dalmia points out, was a late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century European phenomenon (Dalmiya: 29). Given the overlap between the emergence of European nationhoods – defined by the unities of language, culture, and in some cases religion, and the beginnings of European colonial enterprises, the extension of a similar logic to colonial territories was natural. Therefore, I am less inclined to share Dalmia's surprise at orientalist scholars like Jones who, despite "being trained as a Persianist", perpetuated the conflation a Brahminical and Sanskritic Hindu past with an idea of Indian history, literature, poetry, culture etc. (Dalmiya: 29). Doing so was perhaps the only means to making the pluralities constituting each of these categories in a plurilingual and pluricultural context such as India somewhat manageable. However, Dalmia is also right in pointing out the lasting manifold impacts of colonial historiographies on the categories that constitute modern Indian nationhood (Dalmiya: 29). Colonial British orientalist scholarship concretized an understanding that applied the qualifier, "classical", unquestioningly and exclusively to the Sanskrit tradition. One observes the continued use of "classical" as a qualifier in Indian dance forms and musical traditions. For example, dance forms like *Bharatanatyam* in Southern India and *Kathhak* in Northern India are distinguished from others as "classical", based on their structural and aesthetic grounding in Sanskrit dramaturgy.

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founded the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784. As a philologist and linguist, he studies and postulated a close relation between Indo-European languages. Jones translated extensively from Persian, Arabic and Sanskrit, and also wrote poetry.

<sup>6</sup> Standardized from Old Indo-Aryan or Vedic, the grammar of classical Sanskrit was first explicated in a treatise by Pāṇini called the *Aṣṭādhyāyī*. The *Ṛgveda* composed in pre-classical Vedic forms the oldest extant body liturgical writings that would become foundational to Hinduism. The ritualistic system outlined in works like the *Ṛgveda* were presided over by the priestly cast called the Brahmins, and therefore early Hinduism is also often described as Brahminism or Brahminical Hinduism. Based on such a relational rationale, early Orientalist and Indological often tended to treat Sanskrit as the language of Hinduism, despite the fact that Sanskrit was outside the context of Hinduism and for secular writings as well.

As we also observe from Dalmiya's study of early modern Indian playwrights such as Bharatendu Harishchandra (1950–1985), the seeming alignment between Indologist scholarship and the early historiographies of modern Indian theatres. Harishchandra, as Dalmia informs us, belonged to the commercial aristocracy of the old city of Varanasi: a sacred city for the Hindus of Northern India located on the banks of the river Ganges. Varanasi, besides being a city of commercial importance, was populated by centers of Sanskrit-Brahminical learning and was also where Buddhism was founded. In colonial times, Varanasi would also equally become a focal point for British and European Orientalist and Indological scholarship. Therefore, when Harishchandra expounds on the *prachin* and *navin* or the old and the new in his 1833 long theoretical essay on Hindi drama, he naturally associates the *prachin* or the old tradition with Sanskrit Drama: the works of Kālidāsa (c. 4<sup>th</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> century CE), Śūdraka, Viśākhadatta, Bhāsa etc. (Dalmiya: 35).<sup>7</sup> While, he sought to rehabilitate drama in the Hindi language through a dynamic engagement with the “classical” tradition, to ultimately generate a theatre that was reflexive and integral to the society and culture of his time, Harishchandra equally acknowledged the role played by the *navin* or the new in this process (Dalmiya: 36–37). For him, the new was the western European tradition that came with the British colonizers (Dalmiya: 36–37). Harishchandra, like his contemporaries in Hindi and other Indian languages at the time, attempted translations of William Shakespeare's (1564–1616) plays into Hindi. He successfully translated and staged a translation of *The Merchant of Venice* (1605) under the title *Durlabh Bandhu* (1880) (literally translated; “the invaluable friend”). The primary goals in Harishchandra's literary and theatrical enterprises were social reform and the strengthening of patriotic sentiments (Dalmiya: 36–37). The latter becomes particularly clear in his historical plays such as *Mudrarākṣasā*; adapted from a Sanskrit play with the same title by Viśākhadatta, and *Satya Hariśchandra*; based on the legends of King Harishchandra that appear in various Sanskrit texts including the epic of the *Mahābhārata*. As Dalmia observes, such plays facilitated a view of historical national (Hindu) past that was filtered through the lenses of then contemporary influences (Dalmiya: 49). For writers like

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<sup>7</sup> There is no consensus within Sanskrit scholarship over the dates of Śūdraka, Viśākhadatta and Bhāsa.

Harishchandra, this imagination of a Hindu national past, that was partly catalyzed by British and European Orientalist and Indological scholarship, would ultimately go on to become a means of political satire and nationalist resistance, as seen in his immensely successful 1881 satirical farce; *Andher Nagri* (*The Lawless State*). Shortly following his scathing criticism of the grand reception thrown by the Maharaja of Varanasi for Lord Mayo's visit, *Andher Nagri* could be read as a critique of certain sections of India's urban elites who uncritically accepted all things British as superior (Dalmiya: 60–61).

In the case of playwrights like Harishchandra, the “hybridity” specific to later Indian playwrights like Karnad and Alkazi seem to hold little currency. Also, the extent to which the brand of Indological scholarship Dalmiya describes in her study actually affected Harishchandra's work is largely open to speculation. As Dalmiya informs us, Harishchandra's early dramas comprise primarily translations of plays from Sanskrit, Prākṛit and Bengali and attempts at translating Shakespeare into Hindi (Dalmiya: 33). He had reasonable success with his adaptations from Sanskrit plays and from Shakespeare. However, he also adapted these texts to suit the tastes and sensibilities of Hindi audiences in nineteenth century Varanasi (Dalmiya: 35). Therefore, while Harishchandra sought to revive aspects of Sanskrit drama and aligned himself with a Hindu vision of Indian culture and history, he also worked towards contemporarizing Sanskrit drama for his audiences (Dalmiya: 44–45). Even when adapting from Shakespeare, he sought to “indianize” the Bard's plays through his own frameworks of staging and dramaturgy (Dalmiya: 64).

Except for his adaptations of Shakespearean plays, like *Durlabh Bandhu*, one would assume there was very little “postcolonial” about Bharatendu Harishchandra. His postcoloniality, one might argue, does not quite align with Karnad or Bhabha's understanding of the same cultural category. This only goes to corroborate the view, that there is no one singular way of understanding or lens through which one can read categories such as “modernity” or “postcoloniality” even within the corpus of a single national language literature. And therefore, by extension, in beginning to understand a category such as modern Indian theatre, one would have to look towards a larger historical *longue durée* within which markers such as modern and postcolonial have, both diachronically and synchronically, come to function as signifiers. In doing so one might find

a model in the work of the Indian comparatist and literary historian Sisir Kumar Das, whose *A History of Indian Literatures* published initially in two volumes by the Sahitya Akademi, continues to be one of the most comprehensive historiographies of modernity in Indian literatures. The two volumes are aptly titled, *Western Impact: Indian Response 1800–1910* and *Struggle for Freedom: Triumph and Tragedy 1911–1956*.<sup>8</sup> In my understanding, the two titles could potentially represent two phases in Indian literary modernity; a modernity that was both forced and mediated through colonial contact. I realize this assertion is somewhat problematic, in that it attributes the advent of modernity in Indian literatures to colonization. Therefore, it becomes important to emphasize that the sense in which the word “modernity” is used here, is more a matter of historical periodization, and has less to do with an idea or a spirit of “modernity”. I use a brief example from Sanskrit drama to clarify my point. The *Mṛcchakaṭīka*; often translated as *The Little Clay Cart*, is a play attributed to the Sanskrit playwright Śūdraka who is believed to have lived anywhere between the third century BC to the fifth century AD. Śūdraka was perhaps the least prolific of the three most important and widely translated classical Sanskrit playwrights; the others being Bhāsa and Kālidāsa, with only three plays attributed to him. However, his *Mṛcchakaṭīka* continues to capture the imaginations of readers, with its unusual female protagonist serving as an inspiration for the trope of the courtesan with a heart of gold.<sup>9</sup>

The narrative kernel of the play follows the story of a wealthy courtesan Vasantasenā living in the ancient central Indian city of Ujjayini, who falls in love with a virtuous but impoverished young Brahmin man by the name of Chārudatta. The *Mṛcchakaṭīka* is unique for a variety of reasons, but primarily

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<sup>8</sup> The Sahitya Akademi is India’s National Academy of Letters, founded in 1954 through the efforts of the Ministry of Culture, under the Government of India. It works towards the promotion of literary production and scholarship in 24 Indian languages, including English. The Akademi provides fellowships and scholarships to support literary artists and scholars working in these languages.

<sup>9</sup> In 1984, Girish Karnad adapted the *Mṛcchakaṭīka* for the screenplay of an immensely popular Hindi period-film called *Utsav* starring several super-stars from both the theatre and the Indian film industry, while more recently there has been some speculation over whether or not the play might have inspired in part the script for the 2001 Hollywood musical, *Moulin Rouge* (Kabatchnik: 110).

because of the central role played by Vasantasenā's character in the dramatic action of the play. While courtesans were revered as a part of elite society at the time, it was not conventional for a courtesan to be the heroine of Sanskrit plays during Śūdraka's time (Ghosh: 174–175). Courtesans at the time were referred to as *nagaravadhu*; women of the city or town, as contrasted with the more traditional roles of wife and mother inhabited by the *kulavadhu* or the woman of the household. Unlike the *kulavadhu*, it was not uncommon for courtesans to be well-versed in the arts of music, dance, poetry and conversation they were, however, not welcome within the spheres of domestic life. Vasantasenā, besides also being the heroine of the play also transgresses the boundaries set for her by society. Her love for Chārudatta awakens in her a desire for the life of a *kulavadhu*. When she sees his impoverishment, she gives her gold and jewels to him, in the hopes of alleviating his poverty. Through twists in the plot brought about by people maliciously inclined towards Chārudatta, particularly due to Vasantasenā's affections for him, he is accused of theft and murder. In the resolution of the play, Vasantasenā overcomes many perils, and rushes to his defense, testifying before the king that the gold had in fact been a gift from her and, as evidenced by her presence there, he had clearly not murdered her. Grateful for Vasantasenā's timely intercession Chārudatta's wife welcomes her as part of the family, thus allowing a courtesan to cross the line that conventionally separated the *kulavadhu* from the *nagaravadhu*.

Such a moment was arguably unprecedented in the history of Sanskrit drama, and would perhaps in a certain light qualify as “modern”. However, when we ascribe such qualities of modernity, we do so retrospectively and retroactively, and we are in fact speaking of “modernity” as a quality or a spirit. Also, our recognition of the “modern” or potential for “modernity” in the “Classical” past, stems from our familiarity with a modern idiom from our location in the present. Such a quest for the potential sources for modernity in a precolonial past is not uncommon in a postcolonial context. As Dev argues, modernity in colonial and postcolonial India, adopted a “Janus” like stance, gazing simultaneously towards two separate temporalities for inspiration (Dev, 1984: 3). For Dev, this predicament of the modern writer/poet in colonial India was best exemplified in the writings of the Bengali poet Michael Madhusudan Dutta (1824–1873). Dutta is most famous for his modern Bengali epic titled the *Meghnādvadhkāvya*,

wherein he renders the story of the *Rāmāyana* fashioned in the manner of the Homeric epics. Dutta was, according Bengali literary historian Sukumar Sen's account of his early literary career, unparalleled in his Anglophilia (Sen: 212). Gaining admittance into the Hindu College in Calcutta in 1837, where he would go on to become D. L. Richardson's (1801–1865) star pupil, earning the expat British Shakespeare professor's admiration for his mastery over English prosody (Sen: 212).<sup>10</sup> He wrote highly stylized English verse and even drama, until he discovered his next great literary love in Greek literature. He learnt Greek in order to read Homer in the original, while also learning Hebrew, Sanskrit and Latin (Sen: 214). When Dutta started to write in Bengali, he was always trying to meld his facility in the classics and modern European literatures with his appreciation for *rob-stoffe* and literary techniques closer to home – the epic, lyric and drama from Sanskrit. Kālidāsa was one of Dutta's favorite Sanskrit poets, and he attempted translations Kālidāsa's work from Sanskrit into Bengali, before writing the long dramatic poem the *Tillotamāsambhava* modelled after Kālidāsa's *Kumārasambhava* (Sen: 216). Similarly, he attempted a translation of the *Iliad* before writing his most celebrated work the *Meghnādvadhkāvya*, a tragic epic modelled after the *Iliad* focusing on the story of Meghnād from the epic of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.<sup>11</sup>

Following Dev's argument of the Janus-like nature of Indian literary modernities, one could not reduce the writing of a work like the *Meghnādvadhkāvya* to the French School's model of comparison based on an “analysis of dual impact/influence/effect” (Dev, 1984: 5). As Dev observes, many early modern Bengali poets held advanced degrees in English literature and taught English literature in schools, colleges or universities for most of their

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<sup>10</sup> The Hindu College, that later became the Presidency College and is now the Presidency University in Kolkata, India, was established in 1817 by the initiative Scottish philanthropist and watch maker David Hare, who came to India in 1800 to find a fortune at a watchmaker. The Hindu College was founded with the intentions of providing higher education in English to the colonial urban elite. The College attracted luminaries like D.L. Richardson, an expat Englishman and former officer in the East India Company turned Shakespeare Professor, and Anglo-Indian poet and educator Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809–1831), through the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>11</sup> Dutta modeled Meghnād; Rāvaṇa's son, after Hector's character in the *Iliad* and the epic tells the story of Meghnād's tragic death in the war between Rām and Rāvaṇa over Rāvaṇa's abduction of Rām's wife, Sītā.

lives (Dev, 1984: 7).<sup>12</sup> Like Dutta, their familiarity with western literatures; both classical and modern, shaped their literary aesthetic. Their aesthetic sensibilities, however, found expression not in English or the other western languages they had a fair command over, but rather in their native tongues. Therefore, to read a work like the *Meghnādvadhkāvya* only in terms of its Homeric inspiration or its Sanskritic legacy, would indeed be doing both the work and its poet a great disservice. Understanding moments such as these, in the context of modern Indian language-literatures, requires a more holistic approach in negotiating the composite interculturality of Indian modernities. Hence, Sisir Kumar Das' proposes that moments and manifestations of modernity in Indian language or the *bhāṣā* literatures occur in phases and are reducible neither to the impact of western cultures nor to the continuity of India's many diverse poetic and literary traditions (Das, 2006a: 78).

As of 2003, the Indian constitution recognizes 22 official languages, including English, in the Republic of India, there are however standing demands for the recognition yet several more. One of the Sahitya Akademi's duties is to award annual prizes for literatures written in these various Indian languages. Given the plurilingual and pluricultural nature of an Indian nationhood, it is difficult to imagine a uniformity in the experiences (hybrid or otherwise) that have come to define modernity and postcoloniality in all of these language literatures and cultures. As Das observes in his history, the period between 1835 and 1857 witnessed the rapid expansion and consolidation of British military and political power in the subcontinent (Das, 2006a: 83). While responses to this increased consolidation were varied in the various regions of the subcontinent, the increasing impact of colonial culture was perhaps felt more pervasively in British strongholds such as the Madras presidency in southern India and the Bengal Presidency in the East. As Das observes, the responses to colonially mediated influences of western cultures were first observed in zones of proximal contact. Das terms the *bhāṣā* literatures of these zones as "prophanic" or literatures in which modernity through responses to colonial culture manifests earlier than in zones of later contact or "metaphanic" literatures (Das, 2006b: 180). This very "phase-lag" in a historiography of modernity across Indian

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<sup>12</sup> The great exception, of course, being India's first Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore.

*bhāṣā*-literatures, produces these diachronic gaps in contacts, influences and responses to colonially mediated contact with European modernities (Das, 2006b: 180). What is unique about Sisir Kumar Das's attempt at an inclusive and comprehensive historiography of Indian literatures, is not only the variety of literatures and cultures studied over such a vast period of time, but also that the various literary cultures and genres are investigated both individually and in conjunction with one another. When Das examines, for example, the rise of modern drama and theatre in the *bhāṣās*, he does so in their socio-literary, politico-cultural, linguistic and historical contexts – diachronically and synchronically, and in terms of the diverse body of literary and performative traditions upon which these new modern theatres draw.

Das emphasizes that, the response to colonial contact and modernity was not uniform across all “prophanic” zones. The response was usually determined by factors such as the nature of colonial contact and the “resilience” to colonial “rupture” (Dev, 2000: 144). As Dalmiya informs us in her study of Harishchandra's work, that the Hindi playwright and poet was often vexed by the lack of a metropolitan center for theatre in the “Hindi-belt” of central and north-eastern India (Dalmiya: 39–40). Unlike Calcutta, one of the strong-holds of British power in the nineteenth century and a growing colonial metropolis, Varanasi was still a city of temples and declining feudal nobilities. In terms of a colonial cultural life, the city of Varanasi mostly attracted scholars and researchers who came to study Sanskrit or the birth of Buddhism (Dalmiya: 32). It was in such an inhospitable context that Harishchandra wished to create a national theatre in the Hindi language. There were similar attempts made in other languages as well, but as we have seen from Das's evocation of the “phase-lag”, such attempts in the various *bhāṣā*-literatures, though stemming from similar impetuses, would develop differently due to the time and nature of their contact with colonial modernity. Literary modernity, therefore, becomes a useful contextual analogy to the rise of modern Indian theatres.

Examining the beginnings of yet another regional modern Indian language theatre, might elucidate the similarities and differences that are accounted for in Das' configurations of the “prophanic” and the “metaphanic”. Theatre in Calcutta (now Kolkata), for example, as Sushil Kumar Mujherjee observes in *The Story of Calcutta Theatres: 1753–1980*, began with Shakespeare. Appearing

in the Bengal and Madras Presidencies (“prophanic” regions in Das’ schematic) in the hopes of bringing comfort to the sizable number of nostalgic expat British civil servants, administrators and their families, English Theatres also catered to the Anglophilic upper classes in these places (Mukherjee: 1). The first theatre established in Calcutta was called The Playhouse (Mukherjee: 2). Located in the heart of the colonial city, it was rumored to have been built with help and guidance from none other than David Garrick – the famous eighteenth century British thespian and Shakespeare enthusiast (Mukherjee: 2). The most famous of the English theatres in Calcutta, however, was the Chowringhee Theatre, inaugurated on November 25<sup>th</sup>, 1813. It was established by the united efforts of Professors Horace Hayman Wilson (1786–1864) and David Lester Richardson (1801–1865), both high ranking officials of the British East India Company, the former a renowned Sanskritist and the latter the aforementioned Shakespeare professor at the Hindu College (Mukherjee: 3). The Chowringhee Theatre staged plays by Shakespeare and other contemporary British playwrights, until its demise in a disastrous fire on the night of May 31<sup>st</sup>, 1839 (Mukherjee: 4). During its life spanning over two decades, The Chowringhee Theatre brought the affluent Anglophilic intelligentsia in Calcutta up to speed with the latest theatre trends in London, expanding the repertoire of their Anglophilia well beyond Shakespeare (Mukherjee: 5). Shakespeare, however, like a first love, was never forgotten. For many who studied at institutions established by the British in the Bengal and Madras Presidencies – the Presidency Colleges of Madras (now Chennai) and Calcutta and the Universities of Madras and Calcutta both formally established in 1857, English drama and theatre were embodied in Shakespeare. Professors like Richardson, and Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809–1831) continued to instill a love for British literature, culture and theatre in the minds of urban youths in colonial India.

However, parallel to the Shakespearean English theatres in Calcutta, there was also a growing Bengali theatre scene, that drew its inspiration also from the performative traditions and cultures of Bengal. Here too, the impetus came from the colonial contact, albeit slightly obliquely. Herasim Steppanovich Lebedeff (1749–1817), the Russian musician, translator and writer, who found himself in India through his employment in the British military, established the first Bengali theatre in Calcutta. In 1795 Lebedeff staged a Bengali adaptation of

Richard Paul Jodrell's play *The Disguise*, a comedy in three acts, on a public proscenium stage in Calcutta – the first of its kind in any Indian language (Mukherjee: 8–9). He also founded The Bengally Theatre in 1759, with support and encouragement from local patrons like Prasanna Kumar Tagore (Mukherjee: 8).<sup>13</sup> What was so unique the performances of *The Disguise* in Bengali, was the opening musical interlude called “The Indian Serenade” featuring Indian vocals and instruments (Mukherjee: 9). Lebedeff was helped in this effort by his Bengali tutor Goloknath Dass, a school teacher in Calcutta, who gathered for the production a band of players and performers from local *Jātrā* groups (Mukherjee: 9)<sup>14</sup>. This production was perhaps the earliest incidence of the kind of interculturality one speaks of in the context of modern Indian theatres.

Lebedeff's “Indian serenade” becomes a crucial moment in the history of modern Indian theatres, because it was one of the earliest documented instances of the co-mingling of western drama and Indian “folk” performative traditions. Such instances would become increasingly common and popular in development of modern Indian theatres. As Das observes in the context of the reception of Shakespeare in modern Indian literatures. Dominant approaches to translating Shakespeare into Indian languages involved adapting the playwright's work to suit the sensibilities of Indian audiences, while striving to preserve the integrity of original work (Das, 1998–1999: 118–119). The rationale for such an approach, Das proposes, was the target audience for such translations. Translators of Shakespeare's plays were part of the urban western-educated elite,

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<sup>13</sup> Prasanna Kumar Tagore was a member of the Pathuriaghata branch of the illustrious Tagore family of Calcutta and a lawyer by profession.

<sup>14</sup> *Jātrā* is a performative tradition indigenous to parts of Eastern India and Western Bangladesh. As Pabitra Sarcar points out, *jātrā* has close ties to the *mangal-kāvya* – a genre of narrative poetry in Bengal dating back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century that narrativized the acts of non-Vedic Hindu deities (Sarcar: 88). Sarcar postulates *jātrā* to be a *vaiśnava* audiovisual derivative of the *mangal-kāvya* tradition (Sarcar: 88). The bulk of the older *jātrā* repertoire is dominated by the feats and miracles of Kṛṣṇa, who was believed to be an incarnation of the Hindu deity Viṣṇu and was the primary divine godhead of the *vaiśnava bhakti* (*vaiśnava* literally meaning a devotee of Viṣṇu) movement in Eastern India headed by Chaitanya – the fifteenth century mystic, spiritual leader (Sarcar: 87). These performances that included the use of music, song and dance often enacted dramatized narratives of the feats and miracles of Kṛṣṇa (Sarcar: 87–88). More importantly, the *jātrā* was immensely popular and continues to be a part of the living performative and oral traditions of Bengal.

and could therefore read the plays in the original. They were, Das observes, primarily translating for sections of society where readers had little or no access to English (Das, 1998–1999: 118–119). Such approaches towards “Indianizing” Shakespeare, would lead to some fascinating experiments in staging Shakespeare’s works in Indian languages. Das mentions the Parsee Theatre of Bombay (now Mumbai), whose extravagant staging techniques drew large audiences to their adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays (Das, 1998–1999: 120–121). The greater part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in colonial India, as the titles of Sisir Kumar Das’ historiographical *magnum opus* suggests, was marked by responses to contacts with European modernity mediated through British colonization, while the turn of the century marked a struggle for freedom. The struggle for freedom was not limited to the striving for political independence from colonization. It galvanized what I earlier referred to as a “quest for relevance”, or a search for national identity outside of a colonial past. It is this quest for a national identity that marks a new phase in the history of Indian modernity and in the search for a new modern Indian theatre.

While we do often treat the search for a “national identity” separate from the ones ascribed by the colonizing culture or an essential “Indianness”, as Indian historian Romila Thapar argues, with the era immediately following independence from British rule, however, the historical processes that inform such a quest date much farther back (Thapar: 3). Therefore, while for the purposes of historiography, we might treat such a search for a national identity or a “quest for relevance” as the epoch to a new phase in Indian modernity, one cannot also deny continuities between a post-independence sense of nationhood and earlier articulations of anti-imperialist nationalism dating back to the First War of Indian Independence in 1857.<sup>15</sup> The earlier mentioned play, *Andher Nagri* (“The Blind City”, in a literal translation) by Harishchandra provides an example of such anti-colonial nationalism. Scathing in its critique of the colonizers and their sycophantic Indian followers alike, the play was in direct

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<sup>15</sup> The First War of Independence; often also referred to as the Revolt of 1857, started off as a mutiny within the Indian sepoy regiments on account of the British using rifle cartridges greased with beef and pork fat – as the wrappers of these cartridges often had to be ripped off with one’s teeth and the consumption of beef and pork was against the dietary codes of Hindus and Muslims respectively, the mutiny soon took on the form of a nation-wide movement against the colonial rule.

response to the Dramatic Performances bill; still insecure from the events of 1857 the British government resolved in 1876 to prohibit the performance of any plays that might incite “feelings of disaffection” towards itself (Dalmiya: 60). Harishchandra drew inspiration for the play from an old North Indian folktale about a whimsical and imprudent king Raja Harbong in the mythical town of Jhuosi (Dalmiya: 60). The parallel the play implicitly makes is between the mismanagement of his kingdom by Harbong and the Indian princes and kings who foolishly believed in the benevolence of the British (Dalmiya: 60).

The nationalist sentiment of the struggle for independence from British governance largely translated into the quest for a national identity in post-independence India. As already evidenced by Das’s historiography, the imagining of a uniform national identity is, to say the very least, problematic in the Indian context for at least two reasons. Firstly, India is a pluricultural and plurilingual nation and therefore any conception of a functional national identity would have to emerge out of such a plurality, rather than being imposed from above. Secondly, as Das outlines, there is the problem of navigating an unevenly distributed colonially mediated modernity. In endeavoring to find an accessible idiom for Indian culture and modernity, the government of the independent Republic of India established bodies like the aforementioned Sahitya Akademi and shortly afterwards the Sangeet Natak Akademi or the National Academy for the performing arts. Since its inception in 1952, the Sangeet Natak Akademi strove consistently to support not only the “classical” performative traditions, but emphasized its support for the many living “folk” performative repertoires in the various regional languages across the country. The parallel drawn earlier with Ngũgĩ’s thesis, becomes particularly relevant when examining the trends post-independence. The concerns raised by Ngũgĩ regarding the nature of postcolonial modernity are particularly significant in the context of the development of modern Indian theatres. The question is rather simple: how can one truly claim postcoloniality, when the very structures foundational to one’s nationhood; like language, culture and governmentality, entirely uphold a colonial *Logos*? It is in this context that the work of a playwright and thinker like Habib Tanvir (1923–2009) becomes emblematic of this new phase in the history of modern Indian theatres.

Tanvir started his career as an actor and later a playwright and director with the Indian Peoples' Theatre Association (IPTA), before starting his own independent company in 1959. The IPTA was a collective founded by leftist/communist artists in India during the Second World War. The organization held its first official congress in Bombay in 1943 (Dalmiya: 160). Bringing together artists and performers from across different Indian languages and indigenous performative traditions, it was the IPTA that first argued for the privileging of the Indian "folk" repertoires over the "classical" (Dalmiya: 161). While the organization was officially disbanded in 1947, its proponents carried forward its legacy into post-independence Indian theatres. In an essay titled, "Theatre is in the Villages", Tanvir (like Ngũgĩ in the context of Kenya) criticizes the dominant urban cultures for being overwhelmingly colonialist and elitist (Tanvir: 32). In his estimation, urban theatres in India represented only a miniscule fraction of the nation's vast and diverse cultural wealth (Tanvir: 32). He includes in his critique of urban theatres playwrights like Karnad, who wrote primarily for the western proscenium stage. Tanvir noted that plays like *Hayavadana*, although interesting for their syncretism and the ways in which they included elements of indigenous performative traditions, were not unique in doing so, and that this trend could, in fact, be traced back to the IPTA (Tanvir: 33). He credits IPTA producers from the late 1940s like Balraj Sahni, Shombhu Mitra and Dina Pathak for finding "contemporary purposefulness" in "folk" performance traditions. It was possible that despite existing in the remotest rural parts of the country, these performative traditions were still accessible within the fringes of an urban consciousness. In this respect Tanvir's view seems to corroborate Das's thesis regarding the uneven distribution of colonial modernity across Indian languages, literatures and cultures. Due to their larger accessibility, these "folk" repertoires of orature and performance would go on to serve as a basis for defining a more open and universally accessible sense of national identity and modernity. Tanvir's work, embodies just such desires for decolonization.

In 1959 Tanvir founded an independent theatre production company called *Naya Theatre* (New Theatre) was in many ways an extension of the legacy of the IPTA. The company worked primarily with the indigenous performative

traditions in the central-eastern region of India called Chhattisgarh.<sup>16</sup> Tanvir's new conception of Indian theatre included the 'folk repertoire' in Indian performative traditions – within the otherwise predominantly urban and western sphere of colonial and post-colonial Indian theatre. However, to say that Tanvir's *Naya Theatre* accorded the dignity "folk" performative traditions in India would be a gross misrepresentation. His vision functioned on the premise that the "folk" **was** art, and, as such, demanded a radically inclusive model that Tanvir sought to realise through his endeavours in *Naya Theatre*.

For whatever it may be worth, State support to theatre in this country, both direct and indirect, has had an overwhelmingly urban-elitist orientation. This is strange, considering that this vast sub-continent, still mostly agrarian, represents a multi-lingual people, still by and large illiterate. So, Indian culture is like a crystal reflecting a myriad shades. The elitist orientation of our cultural policy does not take into account this fact. (Tanvir: 32)

Tanvir, at the very start of his essay, "Theatre is in the Villages", outlines his objectives in absolutely unambiguous terms. He articulates the need for a change in the system within which he too had been an active functionary. His association with the IPTA, no doubt, contributed to his vision of theatre and performance. This new vision was more a product of necessity rather than innovative genius – not to say that innovation and individual genius were not contributive factors. The veteran actor Zohra Segal captures these necessities quite succinctly: "Sometimes, if we were lucky, we performed in regular theatres but most of the time the performances took place in halls, since they were cheaper to hire" (Segal: 32). Thus, this moving away from the proscenium – a mode of production popularised and standardised in western inspired urban theatre by organizations such as the Parsee Theatre, and continued to be a trend first brought into vogue by the IPTA. Regular theatres in the

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Pai7G4JCfQ>. In speaking at a memorial gathering commemorating the life and works of the then recently deceased Indian dramatist, Habib Tanvir, late veteran actor Zohra Segal remembered him as a great Indian intellectual. She also pointed out, that besides being an intellectual and a master of the dramatic art, he was an artist most sensitive to the pulse of the masses – communities whose existences have been marginal in every sense of the term. Segal ascribed Tanvir's greatness to the fact that he had achieved what he had set out to do – define a "New Indian Theatre", his production unit was also aptly named *Naya Theatre*.

urban India then were most commonly structured as prosceniums. Thrust and transverse arrangements were also fairly popular, while the arena was seldom seen. As Segal's comment indicates, structured theatres were usually a good deal more expensive to hire. Given budget constraints, dramatists were forced to explore "non-traditional" staging techniques. These staging techniques, as Tanvir and others like himself would discover, were closer to the "traditional" modes of performance and production in the "folk" repertoires of India than the western modes of theatre and dramatic production.<sup>17</sup>

During his eight-month long stay in Berlin in 1956, Tanvir was exposed to the works and techniques of Bertolt Brecht. This experience would go on to have a lasting impact on his artistic sensibilities. His belief in the 'epic approach to storytelling' discernible in Indian folk theatres and his reference to Brechtian borrowings from German folk traditions of theatre and orality, seem to corroborate this fact (Segal: 32). Although influenced by Brecht, Tanvir's work is firmly rooted in vast and varied body of performative traditions – both dramatic and narrative, found across the Indian subcontinent. This rootedness becomes clearer in his engagement with the apparent or perceived dichotomy between the categories of "folk" and "classical" in the context of Indian theatres (Segal: 36–38). He refutes the claim that an irreconcilable chasm exists between these categories. He points to not just the interrelatedness of these two categories, but to a history of sustained and ongoing transactions between the two. The relevance of "Indian Folk Theatre" is indicative of the general temper of Nehruvian nationalism in post-independence India. The first two decades after independence from British rule – under the leadership of the first Prime Minister of the free Republic of India, Jawaharlal Nehru – were geared towards realising the dream of becoming a developed nation. Progress in every sphere was the guiding principle behind all matters of national policy, and

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<sup>17</sup> He mentions Bengali playwright-producer Utpal Dutt's use of the *Jātrā* in his play *Leniner Dak* (Tanvir: 33). This is interesting because the orientation of space in the performance of *Jātrā* comes closest to an arena – without the actual structural and physical paraphernalia of an arena. *Jātrā* is most commonly performed on a make-shift raised platform with audience on all four sides of the platform. It is, however, also not uncommon for *Jātrā* to be performed in the absence of a raised stage. One can see how this might be a useful technique to deploy while tailoring performances to spaces that, despite being cheap to rent, were most certainly not conducive to western modes of staging.

manifested itself in the promotion of endeavours aiding scientific, industrial, agrarian and economic growth. Tanvir makes a specific reference to the launch of India's first television satellite (Segal: 35). He expresses his concerns regarding the impact this new medium will have on community life, and the cultural processes associated with traditional art forms that depended almost entirely on community life and interactions. He also expresses his concerns regarding the loss of "cultural roots" and practices in the wake of this march towards industrialisation (Segal: 34). He feels a sense of deep anxiety in the development of the Indian education system along western lines and the impact this would have on the already "dwindling folk arts" (Segal: 34).

Tanvir concludes his essay by sharing his experience of organizing the first "two-week Workshop" on *Nacha* – a traditional performance form from Chhattisgarh" (Segal: 39). The workshop, as he states, was production-oriented. The outcome was an improvised play that was presented in the *Nacha* form. He mentions that the production that borrows its title from an old proverb and becomes a powerful instrument of critique and social satire (Segal: 40). Tanvir also stresses the versatility and adaptability of this form. Once all the participants were familiar enough with the form, the rest was primarily improvisational.

A situation was discussed and developed, its characters were evolved and fixed, the roles were distributed to match the characters, and the rest was all improvisation. The dialogues got crystallised through rehearsals, and songs were altered or rewritten to suit the situation whenever necessary. The result was an entertaining musical comedy about a rich old man marrying a young girl and in the end losing her to a poor but clever young rogue, her lover. (Segal: 40)

The point being emphasized here is not just the versatility of the form itself, but also the impact this kind of an open structure has on the content and the final production. Being a primarily oral form, *Nacha* is highly adaptable. It can range from entertainment and slap-stick comedy routines to serious and socially conscious drama. It allows for the performers to modify or change the content to suit the needs of the performance and the audience. All of Tanvir's approaches in his work with *Naya Theatre* were completely alien to the urban Indian theatres he evoked earlier on in this essay. Given his association with the IPTA and the theatre of social critique it practiced, it is possible to understand the allure and the vast possibilities he finds in a form like *Nacha*. These features

become mainstays in all of Tanvir's *Naya Theatre* productions. *Zehreli Hawa* (adapted from Canadian playwright Rahul Varma's *Bhopal*), captures the horrors of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy of 1984 involving the Union Carbide India Limited factory where a gas leak exposed over 500,000 people to Methyl Isocyanate and other poisonous gases, killing many and permanently debilitating even more. The play, however, goes beyond a mere portrayal of the horrors of the tragedy and functions as a harsh indictment of the authorities and functionaries who allowed a tragedy of such magnitude to happen and were refusing to take the appropriate measures to account for it. *Charandas Chor*, his first major success, was also a strong social and political satire.

It is no doubt true that the IPTA had had strong political allegiances with the Indian Left, but to view these revivals of Indian folk theatres, especially in Tanvir's case, as only a furthering of political agendas and ideological propaganda would be wholly imprecise. Tanvir's revival of folk theatres is tied to his vision of Indian theatres. His vision of a modern Indian theatre is one that is not only firmly rooted in the performative traditions closest to the Indian masses, but also one that is culturally, socially and politically aware of its surroundings. His endeavours were based on the premise that the "folk" aesthetic was the source of India's most vibrant artistic expressions. It is this vibrancy that allows theatre to realise its full potential as an active and living part of the society and culture from which it stems. It is exactly this vibrancy that Tanvir found sorely lacking in western-inspired urban Indian theatres. It was this vibrant liveliness that would allow theatre, especially in the case of plays like *Zehreli Hawa*, to take on the dimensions of activism.

If we consider Harishchandra and Tanvir as exemplary of two phases in the history of modern Indian theatres, an idea of the kind of historiography I define at the start of this essay begins to emerge. It is a history that traverses many stages, each comprising a diverse set of responses to the conditions and postconditions of colonization. One arrives at an understanding of these historical processes as being simultaneously diachronic and synchronic at every juncture; a modernity that Indian comparatist Nabaneeta Dev Sen, has characterized as a cohabitation of, "the ancient, medieval and the ultra-modern all within the reach of one another" (Dev Sen: 101). Like Tanvir, Dev Sen also argues for an opening-up of the conceptions of national literature and

culture. In her essay, “The Concept of Indian Literature: Today”, she states that “literature” in India was the domain of only the “literate”, who comprised only a miniscule 30% of the entire country’s population (Dev Sen: 106). Therefore, any conception of a “national literature” that did not take into account the diverse corpus of oratures in the various Indian languages would per force be incomplete (Dev Sen: 107). It is also equally important to acknowledge that these divers cultural expressions were not relics of a time gone by, but rather living parts of the nation’s cultural milieu.

It is such a contemporaneous cohabitation of temporalities and localities that “being in the world” within a postcolonial context such as India constantly navigates. The process of inhabiting such pluralities of history, language, literature and culture is one of functional complexities that are irreducible to a dialogic or dialectic reasoning. Modernity in India and, by extension, modern Indian theatres, are not entirely reducible to a hybridity wherein an encounter between the pre-colonial pre-modern and colonial modernity gives rise to a third stage or hybrid space. The location of modernity in India, lay neither in mimicry, ambivalence nor in hybridity. To return the earlier cited postulations of Sisir Kumar Das and Amiya Dev, modernities in Indian languages and cultures, were less about the impacts and influences from the West, and more about the reception of European modernities within Indian language literatures and cultures. The literary and cultural modernisms in India can be seen as a “quest for relevance” in a rapidly changing reality, in both colonial and postcolonial times. Although the story of modern Indian theatres may have started with the establishing of playhouses in colonial urban centres for the entertainment of British civil servants, regional language theatres in India soon became institutions in their own right, and very early on in their histories started to search for an idiom to express a unique national, linguistic and cultural character and heritage. One cannot deny the existence of approaches that “aped the west”, or ones like Karnad’s that aimed for a harmonious syncretism. Mimicry and attempts to fashion a hybrid reality conducive to subjectivities that were seemingly split between two cultural realms, like those encountered in Karnad or Bhabha, are just as much part of the processes of “rupture” and “renovation” identified by Dev. Like other approaches within the practices of

modernity and modern theatres in India, they form fractals within the larger geometry of history and culture in India.

Therefore, when one makes the case that the onset of modernity and the cultural institutions of Indian modernities were catalysed by colonial contact, the sources for such modernisms and their institutions represent a plurality that is irreducible to the grand designs of colonial modernity or classical antiquity. Read against the context of Dev Sen's comment regarding the contemporaneous cohabitation of multiple historical and cultural temporalities within a single reality, such pluralities take on an even deeper significance in the history of modern Indian theatres. Looking for historiographical potential within such a frame, provides newer and more nuanced ways of understanding the processes and processualities operational within categories such as postcolonial modern Indian theatre. Such an approach to understanding postcolonial realities points towards an end to conflicting cyclical ontologies of influence and reception. It accords due respect to the burdens of memory, while also allowing the muses of forgiveness their renewals of song.

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## Questions of Modernity and Postcoloniality in Modern Indian Theatres: Problems and Sources

### Summary

This essay seeks to address both the category and phenomenon of modern Indian theatres. While the rise of the theatre in India was tied to the cultural forces of colonization, however, very early on in the history of Indian language theatres, we see practitioners struggling to define for themselves and for their audiences a sense of identity in both modernity and nationality. In the years following India's independence from British dominion, the need for a national identity becomes more pressing. Such articulations of what it means to be "Indian", manifest in the theatre, literature, and the various cultural discourses of the time. However, though a unity was sought in an independent nationhood, the inherent pluralities in a multilingual and multicultural context like India could not be ignored, in crafting this discourse of nationhood. In this study, I wish to, therefore, contextualize conversations around the history of modern Indian theatres within such a longer history of pluralistic responses to colonially mediated modernity and the quest for a modern national identity. I have hence, in my study, chosen to focus on two Indian playwrights, Bharatendu Harishchandra (1850–1885) and Habib Tanvir (1923–2009). Harishchandra's career ends well before India's independence in 1947, while Tanvir represents the first generation of playwrights who came of age in a nascent nationhood. Borrowing from Indian Comparatist Sisir Kumar Das' theorizations on the phases of Indian modernities in his *A History of Indian Literature* (1991), I explore Tanvir's and Harishchandra's views on theatre as indicative of distinct phases in the history of Indian modernities, and thereby hoping to arrive at a less linear and more pluralistic view of the history of modern Indian theatres.

**Keywords:** comparative literature, Indian theatres, multilingualism, multiculturalism, Bharatendu Harishchandra, Habib Tanvir

**Słowa kluczowe:** komparatystyka literacka, teatry hinduskie, wielojęzyczność, wielokulturowość, Bharatendu Harishchandra, Habib Tanvir