



The Role of Shakespeare Performances in Developing Shakespeare Studies in India

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ABSTRACT

Shakespeare performances preceded Shakespeare Studies in India. Shakespearean plays have been refashioned in Indian folk dramatic forms in the post independent period. The adaptations have made Shakespeare a familiar figure in Indian consciousness. This cultivated familiarity contributes to the development of Shakespeare Studies in India.

KEYWORDS

educational interest, Shakespeare adaptations, re localizations, popularity

Shakespeare's presence in India was formally consolidated with the Indian Education Act of 1835. Shakespearean plays formed the core of the curriculum in Indian educational institutions. Shakespeare occupies the central position in the syllabi of all undergraduate and postgraduate courses of English in Indian universities. It is compulsory to read Shakespeare in General and Alternative English courses too.

The aim of this paper is to focus on how Shakespeare performances both in English and vernacular languages facilitated for inclusion of Shakespeare into the curriculum of English Studies in India. The contextualization of Shakespeare in India through the performances has made the plays immensely popular among the natives.

Shakespeare performances started as early as 1775 in The Calcutta Theatre (1775-1808) and The Chowringee Theater in 1813 in Calcutta. Shakespearean plays were staged in India in imitation of the English masters during the colonial era. Several theater companies performed Shakespeare on the western model for the entertainment of British officers and the Indian elites.

Gilbert Ironside, a colonel in the East India Company wrote to Garrick on 21st August 1775, thanking him for sending Barnard Messink to set up the playhouse, "I have some thoughts of setting at work the happy invention of Machinery...by way of Vehicle for the introduction of the fashions habits dances and music of this Country" (Trivedi 14). Here, Ironside indicates his plan to draw the Indians into the grander scheme of the British 'civilizing mission' through the Shakespeare performances. The elite class in India was in search of a cultural identity to be equal with the rulers. Shakespeare was posited as the supreme exemplum of high and refined culture and offered an avenue for serving the interest of the natives.

Jyotsna Singh puts forward the account of Susil Mukherjee in this context:

When the English came to Calcutta they brought with them the plays of Shakespeare. Early in the nineteenth century Shakespeare was a subject of study in the Hindu College. Much before that Shakespeare's plays had begun to be staged in the theaters that the local Englishman had set up in the city for their entertainment and relaxation. The names of David Garrick...and Garrick's Drury Lane Theater...were familiar in Calcutta among the readers of Shakespeare and the lovers of theater (Singh 448).

It is to be noted that institutionalized study of Shakespeare began with the establishment of the Hindu College in Calcutta in 1817 (Trivedi 14). And the playhouses were set up

before 1817. This shows that the Shakespeare performances preceded Shakespeare studies in Indian syllabuses. Thus, the Shakespeare performances created an appetite in advance, that led to the inclusion of Shakespeare into the Indian educational curriculum. Shakespeare's drama became an indispensable part of English education in India (Singh 450). This in fact reveals that Shakespeare performances have initially prepared the strong ground for Shakespeare Studies in the Indian educational institutions.

Shakespeare performances were indigenized through translations, adaptations and appropriations. Shakespeare was repositioned and refashioned in the post independence period in Indian folk dramatic convention. Poonam Trivedi in her article, "'Folk Shakespeare": The Performance of Shakespeare in Traditional Theater Forms", argues that the adaptations of Shakespeare in the post independence period are not polluting but pollinating Shakespeare performances. Trivedi finds that the cultural collusion in the Indian Shakespeare has infused new energy in the "moribund performative traditions". The orientalized Shakespeare performances are thereby generating protean forms of Shakespeare. Orientalized Shakespeare performance discourses positions Shakespeare as the marginalized "other", and "the foreign Shakespeare" (Trivedi 153).

An early example of post independence Shakespeare adaptations in India was Utpal Dutt's *Macbeth* (1954). Dutt at first staged Shakespeare in English for Calcutta audience but realized the futility of his endeavour. He said, "they sat there with clenched fists---pretending to enjoy it" (Trivedi 158). He realized that a playwright like Shakespeare would not interest the Indians in an alien tongue. Dutt found that Shakespeare would reach the masses only in translation and adaptation. So, he staged *Macbeth* once again in Bengali in the space of the *jatra*. Bengali translation of *Macbeth* in the form of *jatra* toured several villages in rural Bengal transplanting Shakespeare with native stage techniques. This time *Macbeth* became the text of the people Dutt states that his purpose was to "try to shake the audience out of its unthinking stupor by sensation, visual surprise, songs, dances, color on stage" (Singh 454).

Utpal Dutt's *Macbeth* became a prime instance of progressive use of folk Shakespeare to effect a revolutionary means of communication to those audiences in India for whom otherwise Shakespeare was totally unknown (Trivedi 159). This shows that the re localized Shakespeare performances in India increased the interest of natives in drama. This allowed Shakespeare to occupy a unique place in Indian syllabi.

Again, Habib Tanveer produced *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, retitled as *Kaam Dev Ka Apna Basant Ritu Ka*

Sapna in 1995. In this adaptation the play was performed by Tanveer's rural actors in the North Indian folk tradition called *Nacha*. He made an electric use of episodic structures, non illusionism, direct address and choric use of song and dance. The actors were familiar to the rural, rustic life amidst nature. Tanveer gave a local colour to the performance keeping intact Shakespeare's "love of nature and life in general" which included even "little creatures such as spiders, beetles, snails, blind-worms, snakes" (Trivedi 161). Tanveer owes an international reputation for his achieved mastery in integrating folk theater with a contemporary issue. In his own words, this adaptation was "a form that has both folk and musical elements, scope for dance and relate to everyman" (Trivedi 160). The play is marked by its communicative perspectives. In this performance, with the valorization of the forest the contemporary issue of man-nature communication comes to the forefront. Tanveer interfused the contemporary issue with Shakespeare's "love of nature and life in general". Shakespeare in folk Indian form could reach the masses easily. Tanveer maintains "our interest is confined to the limits of our cultural surroundings--which build our thinking. As regards our creation of literature and fine arts performance, it is mostly based on our values ---from our culture" (Naikar 15). Tanveer successfully used "the limits of our cultural surroundings" in recreating a Shakespeare performance. This experimentation provided Shakespeare to permeate to the cultural consciousness of the masses and multiplied the desire to read and reread Shakespeare.

Another successful instance of the fusion of eastern and western performative codes is found in B. V. Karanth's *Barnam Vana* (1979), a staging of *Macbeth* in Hindi. Karanth concretized the world of *Macbeth* on the open air stage by spotlighting a living papal tree--representing a mage of illusion or a *maya-jaal*, as the illusory world of *Macbeth*. The witches, creations of Macbeth's mind, were imaged as creatures of the forest, emerging from the entrails of the trees, covered with drapes painted over with emblematic branchlike shapes (Trivedi 163). In this performance, the theme of the supernatural world in Shakespeare is connected to Indian belief of witches. Here, I would like to draw the views of Amitava Roy. Amitava Roy, in his Presidential Address To The Conference, (Shakespeare Society of Eastern India 2000) posits significant question regarding the 'Indian Shakespeare'. He investigates why Shakespeare is more real and alive in India today and how to make the Indian connection with Shakespeare? Roy believes in teaching Shakespeare in the classroom by exploring him in the Indian context. In the present European world, Shakespeare is a historical writer belonging to the past and a recorder of a vanished age. Today the west lives in a technologically modern age. But India still has the intermingling of ages--the Medieval, The Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the Modern. Roy draws a parallel between Shakespearean plays and Indian society. He relates the witches in *Macbeth* to the superstitious beliefs in India. Witch-hunting is a common scene in Indian villages. Roy opines that establishing such connection with the Elizabethan world and day to day happenings in India can make Shakespeare more familiar in Indian classroom (Roy, Sen, Bandopadhyay)

It is seen that Karanth's adaptation of *Macbeth*, establishes a lively connection between Shakespeare and the Indian context. Such thematic concerns in the adaptation draw the interest of the Indians. They find Shakespeare familiar which makes better learning possible.

Further, Ekbal Ahmed directed Shakespearean plays for children, productions for Chinna Banna, the children's repertory he founded in 1988, by using puppetry. He adapted *Macbeth* as *Gombe Macbeth* in Kanada. He said, "Through *Macbeth* I want to show how greed destroys a person. It is a common enough notion in our own stories" (Chandreshekar 174). In the performance, he treated only the witches as human beings and other characters as puppets. *Macbeth* was like a puppet whose strings have gone limp. The characters were puppet like masks. There was an innovative use of red car-

pet to give a ritualistic dimension. "The play deserves to be shot (on film) and preserved for another fifty years" says Raghunandan, another innovative Shakespeare director (Chandreshekar 177). Shakespeare was relocated and simplified to give a clear view to the students. Ekbal says that he used puppetry instead of realistic theater so that the actors and audience could digest the play better.

Again, Ananda Lal, a Professor of Jadavpur University, Calcutta adapted *The Merchant of Venice* in English, staged by the department of English in February 1997. As the director of the play Ananda Lal considers the adaptation of Shakespeare performance in India to be essential. He believes that only through adaptation the cultural gap between Shakespearean performatory circumstances and ours can be merged. In order to give the performance a contemporary relevance, the subject of communal difference and discrimination was given prominence. In the play Shylock wore a black embroidered *kaftan* with upturned *nagra* footwear and a red shawl around his shoulders, an ethnic Muslim sartorial style that the Indians could easily recognize. On this, Dennis Bartholomeusz in his article, *Shylock's Shoes: The Art of Localization*, marks that "The carefully chosen costume of Shylock has established the native ethos, "the Christian- Jewish conflict" is replaced with a Hindu-Muslim one. The localization of Shylock was fully achieved" (Bartholomeusz 207). This shows that the localization of Shakespearean performance with Indian experience had been achieved. Adaptations were successful in organically localizing as well as inwardly contemporizing Shakespearean plays in Indian context. Ananda Lal states that the literary students can go to repair Shakespeare pedagogy in India through adaptations of Shakespeare. He shares his experience after his production of *The Merchant of Venice* in 1997, that Shakespearean performances have the power to serve as a means to balance the lopsided nature of the educational curriculum. His localization of the play was meant to communicate something of immediacy to his audience, with focusing the issue of communal difference. He admits that his production of *The Merchant of Venice* attained pedagogical gains and became a corrective pedagogical procedure. He staged the play for high school students as it was in the syllabus. The performance eluded pedagogical gains. The students never saw the play in performance before, so it changed their outlook on the play. The performance made a musty classic come alive. It made them recognize its relevance to their lives. One of the audience said "In terms of canonical giants like Shakespeare, (it) drove home the importance of performative (sic) exigencies in the final shape attained. A purely literary study often lets us forget that there is more to theater than so-called 'poetic' considerations. The result was increased sensitivity to matters like 'verbal settings' and exit/entrance timings. Also, we saw beyond contemporary to (almost) universal reasons for its appeal" (Lal 201).

Furthermore, Sunder Rajan demonstrates the privileged status of the Western canonical text, specially Shakespeare, in English Literary Studies.

In India foreign publishing firms had until recently virtually had monopoly over the publication of prescribed texts in English syllabi. Oxford University Press, Macmillans, Orient Longmans and now Penguin have the market in India--large enough--to set up their branches in India--There exists, therefore, a well-established system of funding grants, patronage, publications, libraries, center for advanced studies, seminars and workshops...(Singh 457).

This reveals the extent to which Shakespeare occupies the scenario of English Studies in India. As a result of the performances the aura of Shakespeare is deep rooted in Indian psyche. The syllabi of English Studies in India therefore continue to emphasize Shakespeare.

Ania Loomba explains why Shakespeare is "timeless" even in the upheavals of the postcolonial world. She explains that "the transcendental status of a literary text continued to be

useful in containing the tensions of a society..." (Singh 458).

The adaptations of Shakespeare in India maintained to relate to the tensions of the Indian society. These performances were able to motivate Indians towards learning English. The Shakespeare performances in adaptation popularized English. Such Shakespeare performances played an inevitable role in molding Shakespeare pedagogy in India. The masses knew Shakespeare as someone familiar through the performances. So Shakespeare has been occupying a pivotal space in the curriculum of English Studies in all the levels of Indian education system.

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