

Rituals and Folk Traditions in Indian English Drama

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how Indian English drama—comprising both original English-language plays and widely circulated translations—engages with India's rich traditions of ritual and folk performance to interrogate themes of history, identity, and power. Focusing on key dramatists such as Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sircar, Mahesh Dattani, and selected contemporary practitioners, the study explores how traditional forms like Yakshagāna, Tamāshā, Koodiyāttam, Saang/Swang, and regional village liturgies are adapted into hybrid dramaturgical frameworks. These frameworks transcend mere aesthetic fusion, creating a space where indigenous narrative structures interact with global theatrical idioms. Anchored in Nāṭya Śāstra aesthetics and postcolonial performance theory, the analysis argues that ritual and folk elements function not as ornamental “local colour,” but as critical, subversive instruments. They enable dramatists to challenge colonial legacies, dismantle caste and gender hierarchies, and resist the centralising force of state authority. In doing so, Indian English drama positions itself as a site of cultural negotiation and political resistance within both national and transnational contexts.

KEYWORDS: *Indian English drama, ritual performance, folk theatre, Girish Karnad, Nāṭya Śāstra, hybrid dramaturgy, postcolonial resistance*

INTRODUCTION

India boasts a rich and diverse spectrum of traditional performance practices that have evolved over centuries and continue to thrive in various cultural contexts. These range from the highly codified, temple-based art of Koodiyāttam, recognized by UNESCO as an intangible cultural heritage, to community-driven performances such as Pandav Līlā, a ritualistic re-enactment of the Mahabharata that can span several days and deeply involves the local populace. Rooted in the rasa-bhāva aesthetic principles outlined in the ancient treatise Nāṭya Śāstra (circa 200 BCE–200 CE), these traditions transcend the boundaries between religion, performance, and communal engagement. They function not merely as entertainment but as dynamic, lived experiences that merge storytelling, devotion, and social cohesion.

Contemporary Indian playwrights—particularly those writing in or translated into English—have increasingly turned to these indigenous forms to craft a uniquely Indian dramaturgy that challenges and moves beyond the conventions of Western theatrical models. These writers and directors view folk and

ritual traditions not as relics of the past, but as fertile artistic resources capable of addressing modern socio-political concerns. By integrating ritual elements such as choral narration, symbolic gestures, processional staging, and cyclical narratives, these dramatists reframe performance as a site of resistance and reflection. In doing so, they utilize folk songs and dances not only for cultural authenticity but as tools of critique—questioning caste oppression, gender roles, and postcolonial identity. Similarly, mythic structures drawn from epics like the Mahabharata or Ramayana are reinterpreted to interrogate contemporary issues, such as ecological crisis, marginalization, and fragmented identities in a globalized world.

Thus, the use of ritual and folk performance in Indian English drama is far more than aesthetic appropriation—it becomes a politically charged artistic strategy that bridges the past and present, tradition and innovation, local knowledge and global discourse.

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Theoretical and Methodological Framework

This research draws upon a multidisciplinary framework that integrates classical Indian aesthetic theories, contemporary performance studies, and postcolonial critical thought to analyze the use of ritual and folk elements in Indian English drama.

From the lens of classical aesthetics, the study refers to the foundational principles of *rasa* theory and the dramaturgical guidelines articulated in the *Nāṭya Śāstra*. These include concepts related to emotional resonance (*rasa*), expressive gestures (*abhinaya*), musicality, and the dynamic relationship between the performer and the audience, all of which continue to influence traditional and modern Indian theatrical practices.

Incorporating insights from performance studies, particularly Richard Schechner's concept of "restored behavior," the study interprets ritual not as a static or archaic form, but as a flexible, repeatable mode of performance that can be adapted and recontextualized to generate new meanings in contemporary settings. This theoretical perspective allows the analysis to consider how ritualistic structures persist and transform within dramatic texts and stage practices.

The research also engages with postcolonial theory, particularly Homi K. Bhabha's notion of hybridity and the "third space," to examine how the blending of folk traditions with modern dramaturgy creates a liminal cultural space. This space resists binary oppositions such as tradition/modernity or indigenous/Western, allowing for the emergence of alternative identities and narrative forms within Indian English drama.

Methodologically, the study relies on close textual analysis of selected plays, focusing on structural elements, language, themes, and embedded folk motifs. Where available, it also involves the examination of archival recordings, production notes, stage directions, and aspects of choreography and spatial dynamics—particularly the interaction between actors and audience. In cases where plays exist in both vernacular and English versions—such as those by Girish Karnad—the research gives critical attention to the authorized English texts, considering them integral to the canon of Indian English drama and representative of cross-cultural dramaturgy.

Case Studies and Analysis

1. Reimagining Folk Narratives: Girish Karnad

In *Hayavadana*, Girish Karnad draws inspiration from a tale in the *Kathāsaritsāgara*, transforming it into a layered theatrical experience influenced by the traditional performance style of *Yakshagāna*. The play is structured akin to a *prasanga* (episode) and

employs a Bhagavata-style narrator, known as the *Sutrādhār*, who weaves through the plot with musical interludes and commentary. The narrative's open-ended conclusion mirrors the incompleteness often found in ritual enactments, encouraging audiences to engage in deeper introspection beyond the performance itself.

Similarly, *Nāga-Mandala* showcases Karnad's innovative use of folk narrative. It unfolds through a story-within-a-story format reminiscent of oral storytelling traditions in southern India. The central motif of a serpent-marriage, symbolically staged with flickering flames, invokes ancient fertility rituals while exploring deeper themes of female desire, autonomy, and mythic identity. Through these plays, Karnad not only preserves folk and ritual elements but reshapes them to reflect contemporary issues.

2. Ritual as Political Satire: Vijay Tendulkar

Vijay Tendulkar's *Ghashiram Kotwal* (1972) is a powerful example of using folk performance techniques for political critique. The play weaves together *lavani* songs, *abhangas*, and *kirtans*, borrowing from the *Tamāshā* tradition of Maharashtra. These elements, interspersed with stylized movements and satirical chorus commentary, create a hybrid theatrical form that reflects both traditional aesthetics and Brechtian distancing.

The ensemble of twelve Brahmin actors, who act as a Greek-style chorus, functions not only as narrators but as active participants who guide and influence audience perception. Their presence evokes the Sanskrit prologue tradition while adding a layer of irony and detachment. The fast-paced transitions and fluid scene changes mimic *Tamasha*'s open-air vibrancy, bringing viewers into the heart of the political allegory. Through this folk-infused structure, Tendulkar critiques both 18th-century authoritarianism and contemporary socio-political decay.

3. Minimalist Ritualism and Existentialism: Badal Sircar

Pagla Ghoda by Badal Sircar unfolds in a symbolic space—a cremation ground, serving as a site of transition, reflection, and purification. In this liminal setting, four men engage in emotionally charged recollections of lost love and regret, while a funeral pyre burns offstage. The location itself resonates with ritual overtones of impermanence and transformation.

Sircar's minimalist approach is marked by subtle choreographed gestures, deliberate pauses, and rhythmic silences, evoking the processional aesthetics of Bengal's *Jatra* theatre. In recent adaptations, gender role reversals have been employed to further

explore issues of fragile masculinity and performative grief, demonstrating the flexibility and continued relevance of ritual in theatrical storytelling.

Findings and Discussion

1. Ritual as a Dramatic Framework

Rather than serving merely as aesthetic embellishment, ritual and folk elements function as foundational components of dramaturgy in Indian English drama. These elements shape the structure of narratives, character development, and audience engagement. Unlike the linear progression typical of Western plays, these works often adopt cyclical or episodic structures, mirroring the repetitive and process-oriented nature of ritual performances.

2. Cultural Subversion Through Familiar Forms

By incorporating recognizable folk idioms, songs, and performance techniques, playwrights make their work accessible and emotionally resonant for local audiences. These familiar forms create a sense of cultural comfort, which in turn enables powerful critiques of entrenched societal issues such as gender inequality, caste discrimination, religious orthodoxy, and authoritarian politics. The folk framework acts as a subversive vehicle, delivering serious commentary under the guise of tradition.

3. Hybridity as a Strategy of Resistance

The fusion of English-language dialogue with traditional Indian performance aesthetics produces a hybrid theatrical space. This space challenges binary classifications like East vs. West or modern vs. traditional. Through this blending, Indian English drama resists cultural homogenization, asserting indigenous voices and alternative narratives within global theatre discourse. Such hybridity allows for both local rootedness and transnational relevance.

4. Collaborative and Living Performance Ecology

The vitality of ritual-infused drama lies in its collaborative production process, involving not only playwrights and directors but also folk artists, musicians, and community performers. This interaction fosters a dynamic and evolving performance ecology, where traditional art forms are neither statically preserved nor passively appropriated. Instead, they are actively revitalized and recontextualized, sustaining both artistic integrity and cultural relevance in contemporary settings.

5. Balancing Tradition and Modern Themes: Mahesh Dattani

Mahesh Dattani's *Final Solutions* (1993) effectively integrates ritualistic devices into a modern urban

narrative. The play addresses the theme of communal tension, using a chorus that resembles the form and energy of Garba, a traditional Gujarati folk dance. This chorus encircles the action, chanting in repetitive rhythms that echo prayer songs, thereby symbolizing the cyclical nature of prejudice and conflict in Indian society.

While the play is rooted in a contemporary urban setting, its dramatic architecture is shaped by folk ritual forms—including stylized laments, circular movements, and deity-inspired processions. These elements not only enhance the emotional impact of the performance but also invite the audience to reflect on the inherited and repeated nature of social divisions.

Conclusion

Indian English drama's dialogue with ritual and folk traditions exemplifies a creative strategy that is both aesthetic and political. As global anglophone circuits increasingly stage these plays, the embedded folk grammars travel with them, challenging colonial hierarchies of form and reminding audiences that modernity and tradition are not binaries but braided performances. Future research might examine how digital technologies further re-ritualise online theatre spaces and how sustainability movements harness folk ecological wisdom within dramaturgy.

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