

Myth, Memory, and Modernity: Folklore Adaptation in Anglo-Indian and Postcolonial Indian Drama

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Abstract:

This paper examines the adaptation of myth and folklore across two distinct but historically linked traditions of Indian theatre in English: the Anglo-Indian drama of the colonial period and the postcolonial Indian drama that emerged after 1947. It argues that folklore functions in both traditions not as decorative ornament but as a contested site where colonial anxiety, nationalist recovery, and postcolonial critique intersect. Beginning with colonial theatre's constrained engagement with indigenous story-forms, the paper traces the "theatre of roots" movement's deliberate return to myth, ritual, and folk performance as a strategy of decolonization, before turning to close readings of Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* and *Naga-Mandala*, and a briefer discussion of Tughlaq, Taledanda, and the plays of Mahesh Dattani and Vijay Tendulkar. Drawing on Aparna Dharwadker's account of postcolonial dramatic genres and Erin Mee's study of the theatre of roots movement, the paper contends that myth in modern Indian drama functions simultaneously as cultural memory and as a modernizing device, allowing playwrights to stage unresolved tensions of gender, history, and national identity. The paper concludes that folklore adaptation in Indian drama constitutes an ongoing negotiation between inherited memory and contemporary modernity rather than a simple recovery of a stable past.

Keywords: myth; folklore; postcolonial Indian drama; Anglo-Indian theatre; Girish Karnad; theatre of roots; cultural memory; modernity

Introduction

Indian drama in English occupies a peculiar double inheritance. It emerged, in its earliest form, from the colonial encounter between British theatrical models and Indian audiences and performers, and it matured, after 1947, into one of the most vigorous vehicles for postcolonial cultural expression in South Asia. Across this long historical arc, myth and folklore have remained a constant, if continually reinterpreted, resource. Playwrights writing under colonial rule and those writing in the decades of independence alike have turned to inherited narrative material—epic story, local legend, ritual performance, oral tale—not

merely to lend their work a recognizably "Indian" texture, but to think through the pressing questions of their moment: the legitimacy of colonial authority, the shape of an emergent national culture, the place of gender and caste within tradition, and the unfinished business of modernity itself.

This paper asks how the adaptation of myth and folklore functions differently, and yet continuously, across Anglo-Indian drama and the postcolonial Indian drama that followed it. "Anglo-Indian drama" is used here in its literary-historical sense, denoting the corpus of English-language theatre written in and performed for India under British rule and in the years immediately surrounding independence, largely shaped by British theatrical conventions even where its subject matter remained Indian. This body of work has generally been treated as a minor and derivative episode in the larger history of Indian theatre, overshadowed on one side by the classical Sanskrit dramatic tradition codified in the *Natyashastra* (Rangacharya, 2003) and on the other by the postcolonial renaissance associated with Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sircar, and Mohan Rakesh. Yet its treatment of folk material, however constrained by colonial theatrical expectation, prefigures many of the strategies that postcolonial playwrights would later deploy with greater confidence and more explicit political purpose.

The postcolonial period, by contrast, saw a deliberate and theorized "return" to myth and folk form. Aparna Dharwadker (2005) has argued that the postcolonial dramatic canon in India took shape through genres whose origins lie in myth, history, and folk narrative, reworked for the conditions of a newly independent, multilingual national culture. This return was neither simply nostalgic nor straightforwardly nationalist; it was, as Erin Mee (2008) demonstrates in her study of the theatre of roots movement, a considered aesthetic and political project aimed at decolonizing the very structures of theatrical representation inherited from the colonial period. Where Anglo-Indian drama had largely to accommodate folklore within forms dictated by European realism and the proscenium stage, postcolonial playwrights reclaimed folk and mythic performance modes as structuring principles rather than as decorative allusion.

This paper proceeds in five stages. It first considers the colonial theatrical context and the constrained place of folklore within Anglo-Indian drama. It then outlines a framework for understanding myth as a form of cultural memory in postcolonial performance. It examines the theatre of roots movement as the pivotal moment of reclamation, before turning to close analysis of Girish Karnad's major mythic plays and briefer consideration of Mahesh Dattani and Vijay Tendulkar. It concludes by arguing that the adaptation of folklore in Indian drama is best understood not as the recovery of a stable past but as an ongoing negotiation between memory and modernity.

The Colonial Encounter: Anglo-Indian Drama and the Displacement of Folk Forms

Theatre in India did not begin with British rule; the *Natyashastra*, the foundational Sanskrit treatise on dramaturgy attributed to Bharata Muni, had theorized performance, myth, and aesthetic experience many centuries before the arrival of European traders and administrators (Rangacharya, 2003). What colonial rule introduced was a specific institutional and architectural apparatus—the proscenium playhouse, the paying urban audience, the printed English-language script—that reorganized how mythic and folk material could be staged. English-language drama produced in India during the colonial period and its immediate aftermath was written largely for, and in dialogue with, this apparatus. Its writers, whatever

their subject matter, worked within conventions of dialogue-driven realism and linear plot that were themselves imports.

Within these constraints, folklore did not disappear from Anglo-Indian drama so much as it was displaced and domesticated. Mythic allusion frequently entered as reference or backdrop rather than as structuring principle: a play might invoke the Ramayana or a regional legend to establish moral context or local color, without adopting the presentational, non-illusionistic performance conventions—song, dance, direct address, stylized gesture—through which such material was traditionally enacted in folk and ritual theatre. Rustom Bharucha (1993) has argued that colonial theatrical culture in India was characterized by exactly this kind of asymmetry: indigenous content delivered through borrowed form, producing a theatre that was recognizably Indian in subject but Western in structure and address.

This is not to say that Anglo-Indian drama was without value or interest; rather, its relationship to folklore was one of partial and uneasy incorporation. The colonial stage rewarded plays that could be legible to English-speaking, and often expatriate or Anglicized, audiences, which meant that folk material was frequently smoothed into recognizable dramatic types—tragedy, melodrama, comedy of manners—rather than allowed to retain its ritual density or performative excess. The effect, as later postcolonial critics would argue, was a kind of double distancing: folklore was already once removed from its oral and communal context by the act of scripting, and removed again by its subordination to an imported dramaturgical grammar.

It is against this background that the postcolonial "return" to myth and folk performance takes on its full significance. What followed 1947 was not simply a continuation of Anglo-Indian drama's occasional use of mythic reference, but a self-conscious reversal of its formal priorities: a move to make folk and ritual structure, rather than European realism, the organizing logic of the modern Indian stage.

This shift also has to be understood against the multilingual and regional plurality of Indian theatrical culture, which colonial-era English drama tended to flatten into a single national or pan-Indian address. G. N. Devy (1992) has argued that Indian literary and dramatic tradition is characterized at its root by multilingualism and cultural heterogeneity, rather than by a single continuous line of development, and that the colonial period disrupted this plurality by privileging English-language and Anglicized dramatic production over the many regional folk and performance traditions from which Indian theatre actually drew its resources. The postcolonial recovery of myth and folk form, discussed in the sections that follow, was therefore also a recovery of regional and linguistic specificity that Anglo-Indian drama's English-language, urban orientation had tended to obscure.

Myth as Cultural Memory: A Theoretical Framework

To understand why postcolonial Indian playwrights turned so insistently to myth, it is useful to treat myth not simply as narrative content but as a form of cultural memory—a repository of shared story through which a community renegotiates its relationship to its own past. Homi Bhabha's (1994) account of cultural hybridity is instructive here: for Bhabha, postcolonial cultural production rarely returns to tradition in an unmediated way, but instead produces hybrid forms in which inherited material is reframed by the

pressures of the colonial encounter and its aftermath. Myth, on this account, is never simply retrieved; it is always adapted, and the adaptation itself becomes a site of meaning.

This has particular consequences for drama, a form that stages memory rather than merely narrating it. When a playwright sets a folk tale or an episode from the epics on the modern stage, the audience is asked to hold two temporal frames simultaneously: the mythic time of the story and the contemporary moment of its performance. Aparna Dharwadkar (2005) describes the postcolonial Indian dramatic canon as having formed through exactly this kind of layering, in which myth, history, and folk narrative are reworked alongside sociopolitical experience to produce genres address the conditions of a newly independent nation. The mythic plot becomes a vehicle through which the play can address present anxieties—about gender, about the state, about the meaning of tradition itself—without appearing to speak directly and therefore riskily about them.

Myth's capacity to carry present concern under the cover of the past also gives it a distinctive relationship to modernity. Rather than standing in simple opposition to the modern, as a certain popular understanding of "tradition versus modernity" might suggest, myth in postcolonial Indian drama is frequently the very instrument through which modern anxieties are dramatized. Girish Karnad, discussing his own practice in an essay on Indian theatre, observed that the dramatist's task in India involved reconciling the demands of a modern, urban stage with performance traditions that had never been organized around realism in the first place (Karnad, 1998). Myth, in this sense, is less a retreat from modernity than one of the primary means by which Indian playwrights have staged its arrival.

It follows that the "memory" invoked in this paper's title should not be understood as a fixed archive that drama simply consults. Memory, staged, is selective and reconstructive: a playwright choosing to restage a particular episode of the Ramayana, or a particular regional folk tale, is already making an argument about which parts of the past remain usable and which demand revision. This selectivity is not a distortion of an otherwise pure tradition; it is, on Bhabha's (1994) account, characteristic of how cultural memory works in any postcolonial context, where inherited narrative is always encountered through the mediating pressures of colonial history and its aftermath. The plays discussed in the remainder of this paper make this selective, argumentative use of myth their explicit subject, rather than treating it as an incidental feature of adaptation.

The Theatre of Roots: Reclaiming Folk Performance

The clearest institutional expression of this reclamation is the movement that came to be known as the "theatre of roots." Coined by Suresh Awasthi, longtime general secretary of the Sangeet Natak Akademi, the term named a deliberate effort by post-independence theatre practitioners to build an Indian theatre aesthetically distinct from the Westernized, realist theatre established under colonial rule, by returning to classical dance, ritual, martial performance, and folk entertainment (Awasthi, 1989, as discussed in Mee, 2008). Erin Mee's (2008) study of the movement focuses on three principal exemplars—K. N. Panikkar, who drew on the martial art Kalaripayattu and the Kathakali tradition of Kerala; Girish Karnad, working from Yakshagana and other Kannada folk forms; and Ratan Thiyam, who drew on the ritual and martial

traditions of Manipur—to show how each combined structural elements of traditional performance with the demands of a modern, urban stage.

The theatre of roots was not without its critics. Dharwadker (2005), while acknowledging the significance of the movement, has questioned whether its emphasis on folk and ritual form risked an anti-modern nostalgia, a charge Mee (2008) explicitly contests. For Mee, the theatre of roots does not reject modernity but redefines it on Indian rather than exclusively Western terms, challenging the assumption that modern theatre must necessarily be realist, text-centered, and organized around the proscenium relationship between performer and spectator inherited from the colonial period.

This debate matters for understanding folklore adaptation because it clarifies what was actually being reclaimed. The theatre of roots did not simply reintroduce mythic subject matter that Anglo-Indian drama had once treated gingerly; it reclaimed the performative apparatus—song, stylized movement, ritual address, non-linear structure—through which such material had traditionally been enacted. Myth and folklore, in other words, stopped being content layered onto an imported dramatic form and became, once again, structuring principles of the form itself. It is within this reclaimed space that Girish Karnad produced the plays for which he remains best known.

Girish Karnad: Myth as Modern Allegory

Girish Karnad occupies a central place in any account of folklore adaptation in modern Indian drama because his major plays draw so directly, and so self-consciously, on myth, folk tale, and history, while remaining formally attentive to the concerns of a modern audience. Hayavadana (1975), Karnad's best-known play, is drawn from a story in the Kathasaritsagara, the medieval Sanskrit story collection, concerning two friends whose heads are accidentally transposed after a ritual self-beheading, leaving each man's head attached to the other's body. The same tale had earlier been retold by the German novelist Thomas Mann in *The Transposed Heads*, and Anand Mahadevan's (2002) comparative study of Mann's and Karnad's versions demonstrates how Karnad reworks the folk tale's exploration of identity, embodiment, and desire into a specifically theatrical meditation on incompleteness, using the conventions of Yakshagana performance—masks, a sutradhara or narrator figure, song—to stage questions that a purely literary retelling could not.

What is significant about Hayavadana for the argument of this paper is that Karnad does not simply borrow the plot of a folk tale; he borrows its performative frame. The play's outer story, involving the horse-headed Hayavadana of the title, is itself drawn from folk material concerning incomplete or hybrid beings, and Karnad uses this frame narrative to comment reflexively on the inner story of the transposed heads. Julia Leslie's (1996) reading of Karnad's plays emphasizes precisely this reflexive quality, arguing that Karnad's engagement with myth is never merely illustrative; the mythic material is restructured so that its internal contradictions—here, the impossibility of ever fully reconciling mind and body, self and other—become the play's central subject rather than a problem the plot resolves.

Naga-Mandala, first performed in the mid-1980s and published in Karnad's *Collected Plays* (Karnad, 2005), draws on two Kannada oral folk tales concerning a woman, Rani, trapped in a loveless marriage, who is visited nightly by a cobra that has taken the form of her husband. The play stages the folk tale's

ambiguous treatment of female desire and social judgment through the frame device of a group of oral stories literally personified and given voice on stage, a device that foregrounds the communal, performative origin of the material rather than concealing it. Scholars examining Naga-Mandala's treatment of gender have connected its snake-husband narrative to broader currents in Indian goddess traditions and the folk association of serpents with fertility, secrecy, and transgressive female power (Kinsley, 1986), reading the play as using inherited folk material to stage a critique of the very patriarchal structures the folk tale, in its traditional telling, might seem to endorse. The play does not resolve this ambiguity; Rani's fate is left suspended between vindication and continued confinement, and it is this refusal of closure that marks Karnad's version as a distinctly modern intervention into folk material rather than a simple retelling.

Karnad's engagement with the past extends beyond folk tale into history, though the same logic of reflexive reworking applies. Tughlaq (1964) dramatizes the fourteenth-century reign of the Delhi Sultan Muhammad bin Tughluq, using a historical rather than mythic source to explore the gap between idealism and political failure, in ways widely read as an oblique commentary on post-independence India's own political disillusionment (Dharwadker, 2005). Taledanda (1990) similarly returns to twelfth-century Karnataka and the reformist Lingayat movement associated with the philosopher-saint Basavanna, using the historical material to interrogate questions of caste, equality, and religious orthodoxy that remained unresolved in contemporary India. Aparna Dharwadker has argued that Karnad's historical plays transform history into an active discourse rather than a fixed record, treating the past, much as his mythic plays treat folklore, as material to be reopened and reargued rather than simply commemorated. Across both his mythic and historical work, then, Karnad's characteristic move is the same: to take inherited narrative—whether epic, folk tale, or chronicle—and restage it so that its unresolved tensions become legible as contemporary questions.

Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri (2008) situates this practice within Karnad's broader dramaturgical formation, arguing that Karnad's generation of playwrights grew up immersed in overlapping "great" and "little" traditions of myth, poetry, history, legend, and folklore, an inheritance that shaped his creative imagination well before he began to write for the stage. What Chaudhuri's account clarifies is that Karnad's eclecticism—his willingness to draw simultaneously on Sanskrit dramaturgy, Yakshagana and other regional folk forms, Kannada oral tale, and European playwriting technique—was not an interpretive strategy imposed on otherwise neutral material, but an extension of the way myth, history, and folklore already coexisted, largely without hierarchy, in the cultural environment from which his plays emerged. This helps explain why Karnad's mythic plays so rarely read as antiquarian: the myths he stages were, for him, part of a living and still-contested cultural vocabulary rather than a closed inheritance requiring reverent preservation.

Beyond Karnad: Dattani, Tendulkar, and the Persistence of Myth

If Karnad represents the most sustained engagement with myth and folklore among postcolonial Indian dramatists, he is not alone in this practice, and the range of his contemporaries suggests both the durability and the flexibility of mythic material on the modern Indian stage. Mahesh Dattani, generally recognized

as the first English-language Indian playwright to receive the Sahitya Akademi Award, writes in a mode more indebted to contemporary social realism than to folk performance conventions, yet mythic reference remains a persistent resource in his work. In *Tara* (1990), Dattani draws on the figure of Ardhanarishwar, the composite Shiva-Parvati form representing the union of masculine and feminine principles in Hindu iconography, to frame the play's central concern with conjoined twins who are surgically and socially separated along starkly unequal lines, using the mythic image of androgynous wholeness to underscore the arbitrariness of the gendered inequality the play depicts. Elsewhere, in *Where There Is a Will*, Dattani draws on the folk motif of the returning ghost—a device with deep roots in Indian tale collections such as the Vikram-Betal cycle—to stage a comic and pointed critique of patriarchal control that persists even after death.

Vijay Tendulkar's *Ghashiram Kotwal* (1972), written in Marathi and widely translated and staged in English, offers a further instance of folklore's structural rather than merely thematic presence in postcolonial Indian drama. The play adapts the conventions of *Dashavatar*, a traditional folk theatre form from coastal Maharashtra built around the ten incarnations of Vishnu, to narrate the historical rise and fall of a corrupt police chief in eighteenth-century Pune. As with Karnad's use of *Yakshagana* in *Hayavadana*, Tendulkar's borrowing is formal as much as thematic: song, chorus, and stylized folk-performance rhythm structure a narrative that is otherwise historical and political rather than mythic in content, demonstrating that the reclamation associated with the theatre of roots was not confined to explicitly mythic subject matter but extended to the performative grammar of folk theatre more broadly.

The choice of *Dashavatar* for *Ghashiram Kotwal* is itself significant, since the form's traditional subject—the incarnations of a preserving, world-ordering deity—sits in pointed tension with the play's depiction of a corrupt and ultimately self-destructive machinery of state power. By housing a cynical political narrative inside a devotional folk structure, Tendulkar makes the gap between the form's traditional function and its new content part of the play's meaning: the audience is invited to notice that the reassuring cyclical order promised by *Dashavatar* performance does not, in fact, arrive, and that the folk form's own conventions are being turned against the comfortable expectations they would ordinarily satisfy. This kind of formal irony, in which the borrowed folk structure is placed under visible strain rather than smoothly inhabited, recurs across the plays discussed in this paper and marks a further way in which postcolonial Indian drama distinguishes its use of folklore from the more accommodating, illustrative borrowings characteristic of the Anglo-Indian stage.

Taken together, these examples suggest that folklore's function in postcolonial Indian drama cannot be reduced to a single strategy. In Karnad's hands it supplies plot and philosophical problem simultaneously; in Dattani's it supplies resonant image within an otherwise realist frame; in Tendulkar's it supplies performative structure for material that is historical rather than mythic. What unites these divergent uses is a shared refusal to treat folklore as settled cultural inheritance. In each case, myth or folk form is reopened, its internal contradictions foregrounded rather than smoothed over, so that the inherited material can speak to contemporary concerns it was never originally designed to address.

Memory, Nation, and the Politics of Retelling

The pattern that emerges across these plays clarifies what is at stake in describing folklore adaptation as a negotiation between memory and modernity rather than as either straightforward continuity or straightforward rupture. Cultural memory, as staged in postcolonial Indian drama, is rarely presented as a stable inheritance available for simple retrieval. It is instead treated as contested and incomplete, requiring active reconstruction on stage. Dharwadkar's (2005) account of the postcolonial dramatic canon is again useful here: the genres that took shape after independence did not simply continue folk and mythic traditions but reformed them under the pressure of new sociopolitical conditions, producing a body of drama that is postcolonial precisely because its relationship to tradition is critical and reconstructive rather than reverential.

This reconstructive relationship to myth also carries an explicitly political charge, particularly around questions of gender and social hierarchy. Naga-Mandala's ambivalent folk tale of the snake-husband, Tara's invocation of Ardhanarishwar, and Taledanda's return to Basavanna's caste-egalitarian movement all use inherited narrative material to interrogate structures of power that persist in contemporary Indian society. In each case, the myth or folk tale is not treated as a repository of timeless wisdom to be affirmed, but as a text with its own internal tensions and silences, which the playwright's adaptation makes newly visible. This is consistent with Bhabha's (1994) broader argument that postcolonial cultural production characteristically works through hybrid reformulation rather than pure recovery: the "return" to tradition that critics have associated with the theatre of roots and with Karnad's mythic plays is, on closer examination, always already an intervention into tradition, conducted from a vantage point shaped by the very modernity it is sometimes assumed to resist.

Read this way, the apparent opposition between "myth" and "modernity" that structures much popular discussion of Indian drama dissolves. Myth in postcolonial Indian theatre does not stand outside modernity as its traditional other; it is one of modern Indian drama's central instruments for thinking about the unresolved legacies of colonialism, the unfinished work of national integration, and the persistence of social hierarchies that independence did not automatically dissolve.

Conclusion

This paper has traced the adaptation of myth and folklore across the constrained conditions of Anglo-Indian colonial drama and the more expansive, formally reflexive practice of postcolonial Indian theatre. Where colonial-era English drama in India tended to incorporate folk material as reference within an imported dramaturgical frame, the postcolonial theatre of roots movement, and the major plays of Girish Karnad in particular, reclaimed folk and mythic performance as a structuring principle, restoring to myth its performative density even as it redirected that material toward distinctly modern concerns. Hayavadana and Naga-Mandala demonstrate how folk narrative can be reopened rather than merely retold, its internal contradictions made to carry contemporary questions of identity, embodiment, and gendered power. The historical plays Tughlaq and Taledanda extend the same reflexive logic to chronicle rather than legend. Dattani's and Tendulkar's more varied engagements with mythic image and folk performance form

confirm that this reflexive, reconstructive relationship to inherited narrative is characteristic of postcolonial Indian drama more broadly, not confined to a single playwright or genre.

The larger claim of this paper is that folklore adaptation in Indian drama should not be understood as a pendulum swing between tradition and modernity, in which playwrights either preserve inherited myth or abandon it for contemporary realism. The plays examined here suggest instead that myth functions as a form of cultural memory that is continually renegotiated on stage, and that this renegotiation is itself one of the primary ways Indian drama has articulated its own modernity. Future work might extend this analysis to regional-language theatre beyond the English-language and English-translated corpus considered here, and to the more recent generation of Indian playwrights working in English who continue to draw on myth and folklore under altered political and technological conditions. What the plays discussed in this paper make clear, in any case, is that myth, memory, and modernity in Indian drama are not opposing terms but interdependent ones, each shaping how the others can be staged.

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