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## The Changing Landscape of Indian Theatre: Dramaturgy, Audience Psychology and Creativity in the Digital Age

Vijay Bhayyaji Jathe

PhD Scholar

Amity University, Raipur (Chhattisgarh)

Mobile: 9922904192

Email: vijayjngp@gmail.com

### Abstract

Indian theatre has a long, rich, and diverse history. Over centuries, it has evolved according to cultural, social, political, and technological transformations. In recent years, digital platforms and changing audience expectations have significantly reshaped the nature of performance, dramaturgy, staging, and the artistic process. This research paper analyses the transformation of Indian theatre in the contemporary era, highlighting new trends in performance, emerging technological influences, changing audience psychology, and the opportunities and challenges posed by the digital age.

### 1. Introduction

Theatre has always reflected the society in which it thrives. As a synthesis of body, voice, movement, and narrative, it remains one of the oldest forms of human expression. India's theatrical journey—from the classical era of *Natyashastra* to folk theatre, regional theatres, and the modern experimental stage—has witnessed constant change.

In today's world, technology, digital communication, OTT platforms, online productions, hybrid staging, and multimedia integration have made a lasting impact on theatre. These influences have not only expanded the theatrical language but also shaped new forms of creativity.

This paper attempts to study the evolving nature of Indian theatre, its changing artistic approaches, audience preferences, and the impact of the digital environment on performance practices.

### 2. Classification of Indian Theatre Traditions

#### 2.1 Classical Theatre

Indian classical theatre is deeply rooted in aesthetic philosophy, particularly the theory of *rasa* as articulated in Bharata Muni's *Natyashastra*. Emotional expression in classical theatre is not incidental but forms the very core of performance. The objective of performance is to evoke *rasa*—an aesthetic relish experienced by the audience through the actor's portrayal of *bhava* (emotion). This systematic engagement with emotion distinguishes classical Indian theatre from purely narrative or entertainment-based forms.

Classical theatre traditions demonstrate a high degree of integration among movement, music, speech, and poetic literature. Acting (*abhinaya*) is classified into *angika* (body movement), *vachika* (speech and sound), *aharya* (costume and décor), and *sattvika* (inner emotional state), thereby ensuring a holistic performance language. Such integration creates a multi-sensory experience that transcends spoken language.

Furthermore, Indian classical theatre follows a scientific and codified approach to performance. Gestures, movements, postures, rhythms, and emotional transitions are governed by detailed rules and classifications. This codification ensures continuity of tradition while allowing space for mastery, interpretation, and improvisation within an established framework.

#### 2.2 Folk and Traditional Theatre

Folk and traditional theatre in India evolved as a people's medium, emerging from local socio-cultural contexts and community practices. Unlike classical theatre, which followed textual and codified traditions, folk theatre developed organically and remained closely connected with everyday life, rituals, festivals, and social commentary.

Forms such as Tamasha, Dashavatara, Swang, Jatra, Yakshagana, and Nautanki served as powerful tools of mass communication in pre-modern and colonial India. These forms combined dance, music, dialogue, satire, and spectacle to engage large and diverse audiences, often performing in open spaces without elaborate stage infrastructure.

Folk theatre kept theatrical traditions alive among the masses by addressing social issues, moral values, humour, and mythological narratives in a language accessible to ordinary people. Its participatory nature—where audiences actively responded through applause, dialogue, and emotional engagement—made it a vibrant and enduring cultural practice that reinforced collective identity and local traditions.

### 2.3 Modern Indian Theatre

Modern Indian theatre emerged during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, shaped significantly by colonial encounters, Western dramaturgy, and the rise of regional literary movements. Theatre in languages such as Marathi, Bengali, Gujarati, and Hindi flourished, resulting in new forms of scripted drama, realism, and social critique.

The post-independence period witnessed further transformations, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s. This era saw the rise of experimental theatre, wherein practitioners questioned conventional narratives, stagecraft, and acting styles. Modern adaptations of classical myths, Western plays, and literary works became common, allowing artists to reinterpret tradition through contemporary lenses.

Alternative performance spaces also gained prominence during this period, as theatre moved beyond traditional auditoriums to intimate studios, streets, and community spaces. This shift enabled closer interaction between performers and audiences while expanding theatre's social and political engagement.

### 3. Transformations in Contemporary Theatre

The landscape of contemporary theatre is dynamic and multi-layered, shaped by cultural hybridization, technological change, and evolving audience expectations. Theatre today is no longer confined to fixed aesthetic or ideological frameworks but continually reinvents itself.

#### 3.1 Changing Acting Styles

One of the most significant transformations in contemporary theatre is the shift in acting styles. Performances have moved away from overtly stylized expression toward naturalistic, psychological, and internally driven acting. This transition reflects changing audience sensibilities that favour emotional authenticity and relatability.

The influence of Method Acting has encouraged performers to explore personal memory, psychological depth, and emotional realism. Additionally, contemporary actors increasingly integrate practices such as yoga, body-mind training, breath control, and voice culture into their preparation. These techniques enhance physical awareness, emotional control, and expressive subtlety, allowing actors to convey complex emotions with minimal external expression.

#### 3.2 New Directions in Directing

Contemporary directing practices reflect a clear departure from elaborate realism toward minimalist and symbolic staging. Directors often employ sparse sets and suggestive visuals, allowing imagination to play a greater role in audience interpretation.

The use of multimedia has become increasingly prominent, with projections, soundscapes, and digital lighting enhancing narrative and emotional layers. Directors frequently reinterpret classical and modern texts, adapting them to contemporary socio-political contexts.

Moreover, collaborative and ensemble-driven processes have replaced hierarchical models of theatre-making. Directors now function as facilitators, encouraging collective creativity, improvisation, and shared authorship in performance development.

### 3.3 Shifts in Playwriting

Modern playwriting has evolved to engage directly with contemporary reality. Themes such as gender dynamics, identity, political power, mental health, social inequality, and marginalized voices have become central to dramatic narratives.

Many playwrights draw upon real-life experiences, oral histories, and documentary material, blurring the distinction between fiction and reality. Narrative structures have also transformed, with non-linear timelines, fragmented storytelling, and symbolic dramaturgy replacing traditional plot-driven formats.

The increasing use of colloquial and everyday language enhances authenticity and emotional immediacy, making theatre more accessible and relatable to modern audiences.

### 4. Audience Psychology in the Digital Era

The psychology of contemporary theatre audiences has been significantly shaped by digital media consumption. Constant exposure to films, web series, short-form videos, and social platforms has altered attention spans, visual literacy, and narrative expectations.

Today's audiences prefer performances that are visually stimulating, fast-paced, and conceptually layered. Many viewers engage with theatre-related content through trailers, reviews, behind-the-scenes clips, and social media discussions even before attending a performance.

Audiences expect theatre to address socially relevant themes and encourage critical reflection. Additionally, instantaneous feedback through online platforms has transformed spectators into active respondents rather than passive consumers, compelling theatre-makers to remain responsive and adaptive.

### 5. Theatre in the Digital Age

Technology has profoundly redefined the grammar and reach of contemporary theatre, reshaping modes of performance, production, and reception.

#### 5.1 Online Theatre

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the shift toward online theatrical formats. Performances staged on video conferencing platforms, YouTube channels, and OTT services allowed theatre to survive during periods of restricted physical gathering.

Online theatre expanded theatrical reach beyond geographical boundaries, enabling global viewership and intercultural exchange. Smaller theatre groups and independent artists benefited from reduced production costs and digital visibility, leading to the emergence of hybrid formats that combine live and recorded elements.

#### 5.2 Technological Enhancements

Technological advancements have enriched theatrical design and performance. LED walls, 3D projection mapping, digital sound processing, and advanced lighting systems contribute to immersive and adaptive scenography.

Emerging technologies such as augmented reality (AR) and interactive media offer new possibilities for audience engagement and spatial storytelling, enabling theatre to evolve beyond conventional stage limitations.

#### 5.3 Impact on Theatre Artists

The digital age has transformed the working conditions of theatre artists. A strong online presence has become essential for visibility, outreach, and audience engagement. Performers must adapt their expressions to suit camera-based formats while retaining stage presence.

Rapid feedback cycles, experimentation, and interdisciplinary collaboration have become defining features of contemporary practice, providing both challenges and opportunities for artistic growth.

### 6. Challenges and Opportunities

Contemporary theatre faces multiple challenges, including declining physical audiences, increasing production expenses, competition from digital entertainment, and reduced attention spans. However, these challenges coexist with significant opportunities.

Digital platforms enable global access, new economic models, interdisciplinary experimentation, revitalization of regional traditions, and innovative technological applications that can redefine theatre's relevance.

### 7. The Future of Indian Theatre

The future of Indian theatre appears vibrant and transformative. Emerging trends include increased participation of women directors and playwrights, greater representation of LGBTQIA+ narratives, revival of folk and indigenous forms, and growth in international collaborations.

The establishment of theatre laboratories and partnerships with academic institutions is likely to encourage research-driven performance and experimental pedagogy. Indian theatre will continue to blend tradition and modernity, live performance and digital innovation.

### 8. Conclusion

Theatre has always evolved in dialogue with society. In the contemporary era, technological advancements, changing audience psychology, and experimental aesthetics are reshaping Indian theatre in unprecedented ways. As practitioners embrace hybrid forms and interdisciplinary creativity, theatre remains a resilient and powerful medium—capable of reflection, resistance, and renewal in an increasingly interconnected world.

### Dramaturgy: Innovations in Storytelling

Digital technology has become an integral component of the dramaturgical process, enabling new ways to create and present narratives.

- **Multimedia Integration:** The use of LED screens, projection mapping, and digital backdrops allows for dynamic, immersive stage environments. These tools facilitate rapid scene changes and complex visual storytelling that blend the physical and the virtual, enhancing the narrative's emotional impact.
- **Non-linear and Experimental Structures:** Playwrights and directors are increasingly experimenting with non-linear timelines and fragmented narratives that reflect the nature of contemporary, digitally-saturated life. This challenges traditional three-act structures and encourages the audience to actively participate in constructing meaning.
- **Hyper-local and Devised Theatre:** There's a growing emphasis on creating authentic, hyper-local narratives often through devised theatre, where the script is developed collaboratively. This approach uses digital platforms for research, documentation, and even remote collaboration, amplifying diverse regional voices and shedding light on marginalized experiences.
- **Hybrid Forms and Interdisciplinarity:** Artists are merging traditional theatrical elements with cinematic techniques, animation, and game design, leading to interdisciplinary performances. The stage language now incorporates camera angles, screen composition, and digital editing principles, pushing the boundaries of conventional performance.

### Audience Psychology: Active and Diverse Engagement

The audience's role is evolving from passive observers to active participants, driven by the interactive nature of the digital world.

- **Desire for Immersion and Interactivity:** Audiences, accustomed to the engagement levels of digital media, seek more immersive experiences. This has led to the rise of site-specific and immersive theatre, where the physical barrier between performers and viewers is broken, and audience choices can influence the narrative's progression.
- **Global Accessibility and Diverse Reach:** Live-streaming and recorded performances on online platforms have made Indian theatre accessible to a global audience, breaking down geographical and socioeconomic barriers. This reach allows regional and grassroots theatre, which often addresses pressing social issues like caste discrimination or environmental awareness, to find wider visibility.
- **Shifting Viewing Habits:** The time flexibility offered by new media influences viewer decisions, with many appreciating the ability to watch theatre on demand. However, the shared, ephemeral experience of live performance remains a distinct draw, leading some to prefer the 'liveness' of traditional theatre.
- **Post-Show Community Building:** The experience often extends beyond the performance itself through online platforms that facilitate post-show discussions, Q&A sessions, and community building, reinforcing theatre's role as a space for civic discourse and shared cultural experience.

#### **Creativity in the Digital Age: Opportunities and Challenges**

The digital age presents a landscape of innovation, while also posing critical questions about the essence and sustainability of theatre.

- **Opportunities:**
  - **Enhanced Creative Tools:** Digital technologies like AI-controlled performances, VR, and AR offer a wealth of new creative possibilities for scenography, soundscapes, and visual effects.
  - **Wider Platforms for Exposure:** Social media and online platforms provide artists with new avenues to showcase their work, connect with global audiences, and build their brands, bypassing traditional intermediaries like galleries.
  - **Remote Collaboration:** Digital tools facilitate easier collaboration among artists across different locations, fostering international partnerships and inter-cultural exchanges.
- **Challenges:**
  - **Maintaining the "Liveness":** There is an ongoing debate about whether the integration of technology compromises the authentic human connection and shared presence that is central to the definition of live theatre.
  - **Digital Divide and Economic Viability:** The high cost and technical complexity of advanced technology can create a divide between well-funded urban theatre groups and independent or rural artists. Not all artists and audiences have equal access to technology, creating disparities between urban, well-funded theatre and rural or folk traditions.
  - **Remuneration:** The shift to digital distribution raises questions about sustainable business models and ensuring fair compensation for artists in an online ecosystem.
  - **Technical Reliance:** Logistical challenges such as internet connectivity issues, software glitches, and the rapid obsolescence of technology pose new risks to productions.

In essence, Indian theatre is in a dynamic state of flux, using digital tools to innovate its forms and reach, while staying true to its ancient tradition of reflecting the complexities of human life and society.

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