

## Sparkles of National Awakening in Hindi Theatre during British Rule: Insights into Bhartendu Harishchandra's Plays *Bharat Durdasha* and *Andher Nagari Chaupat Raja*

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**Abstract:** No doubt every society requires a cultural mechanism through which social and political conflicts are analyzed, and it is in this sense that the popular drama assumed a political dimension in India during the oppressive colonial rule. With a special focus on Hindi playwright Bhartendu Harishchandra's plays, the present paper attempts to trace the role Hindi theatre played in the emergence of a national consciousness, as well as the influence that an emerging national consciousness had on the evolution of national theatre. It was with the motive of awakening the public consciousness that Bhartendu brilliantly exposed the pathetic condition of the country in his theatrical productions. Kafka's well known quote: "Every book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us", provides the theoretical stimulus to my paper. How the sensitive soul of a literary artist responded to the vibrations in the political and social horizon? How Bhartendu attempted to break 'the mind-forged manacles' with the theatre of the masses? How he succeeded in making the stage a pulpit to educate the masses? What made this acknowledged social reformer to mobilize the masses with allegorical plays? These are the underlying questions which propel the present paper. My humble endeavor is to address these issues in the light of Bhartendu's well-known plays, '*Bharat Durdasha*' and '*Andhernagari Chaupat Raja*'.

**Keywords:** Bhartendu, National Theatre, Masses, Oppressive rule.

The events following the Battle of Plessey and culminating in the revolt of 1857 had stirred India to its depths. It threatened to reduce the glorious Indian society not only to political subservience, but also to the status of an economic colony and a cultural province of British Empire. Against this political dependence and intellectual slavery, there arose a protest which gathered momentum as time passed. The Indian theatre and literature gave voice to this protest against the oppressive colonial rule. It attempted to revive ancient glory to make people oppose against the sordid story of the perennial assertion of the imperialist superiority. It is only through theatre and literature of the time, the common people recognized that "Almost all colonial schemes begin with an assumption of native backwardness and general inadequacy to be independent, 'equal' and fit" (Said 96). Indian theatre have always catered to the need of making people aware of the social happenings through innovative and interesting play scripts and narratives. The origin of Indian theatre can be traced to the ancient rituals and seasonal festivities of the Vedic Aryans. To quote A.L. Basham, a well-known historian, "The origin of Indian theatre is still obscure. It is certain, however that even in the Vedic period

dramatic performances of some kind were given, and passing references in early resources point to the enacting at festivals of religious legends, perhaps only in dance and mime'' (434-435). Bharata Muni's *Natyashastra*, Sanskrit treatise on dramaturgy claims for the drama divine origin and a close connection with the sacred Vedas themselves. The most celebrated dramatists of the ancient era are Ashwaghosh, Shudraka, Kalidas, Harsha, Bhavabhuti and Vishakhadatta who enriched Indian theatre. The beginnings of Loknatya (People's Theatre) can be noticed in every state of India from the 17th century onwards. We see 'Yatrakirtaniya' in Bengal; 'Paol' and 'Gaan' in Madhya Pradesh; 'Bhavai' and 'Ramleela' in Northern India. There were 'Nautanki, Bhand, Ramleela and Rasleela' in Maharashtra 'Tamasha' in Rajasthan and so on. As a manifestation of our national sensibility, Indian drama came into existence as a means of exploring and communicating the truth of things and was popularly hailed as the "fifth Veda" (K.Venkata Reddy, R.K.Dhawan 7). The rise of the modern drama dates back to the 18th century when the British Empire strengthened its power in India. The modern Indian drama owed its first flowering to the foreign grafting. With the impact of Western civilization on Indian life, a new renaissance dawned on Indian arts including drama. Furthermore, English education gave an impetus and a momentum to the critical study of not only Western drama, but classical Indian drama. In 1852-1853, the famous Parsi Theatre was launched in Bombay which influenced the whole country in no time. With its moving troupes, they travelled to different parts of the country and made a tremendous impact on their audience. But Parsi plays were mostly commercial and cheap. In fact, modern Indian theatre grew mainly as a reaction against its initial crudity and superficiality. Bharatendu Harishchandra (Hindi), Girish Chandra Ghosh (Bengali), Dwijendra Lal Roy (Bengali), Dinabandhu Mitra (Bengali, 1829-74), Ranchodhbhai Udayram (Gujarati, 1837-1923), M.M. Pillai (Tamil), Balvant Padurang Kirloskar (Marathi, 1843-1885) and Rabindra Nath Tagore delved into our folk tradition to create plays to protest against colonialism, social injustice and westernization. Meanwhile the nineteenth century saw the emergence of new literary genres in the modern vernaculars of India. Sanskrit was not accessible to the masses. During this period of literary renaissances in various vernaculars of India, Bhartendu Harishchandra of Banaras (1850-1885) made the most important contribution towards the development of modern literary genres in modern Hindi language. His creative output was not limited to any particular genre as he wrote poetry, essays, dramas, travelogues, and newspaper articles. He edited the magazines *Kavi Vachan Sudha*, *Harishchandra Patrika*, *Harishchandra Magazine* and *Bal Bodhini*. He entered in theatre activity as an actor and soon become director, manager, and playwright and used theatre as a tool to aware Indian society. His major plays are-'*Vaidiki himsa himsa na bhavati*' (1873); '*Bharat Durdasha*' (1875); '*Satya Harishchandra*' (1876); '*Neel Devi*' (1881); '*Andher Nagari Chaupat Raja*' (1881) Hence, his most important contribution has been in the field of Hindi drama which was boosted with the joint strength of journalism, poetry and drama. Talking about the budding of Bhartendu's dramatic talent, Freitag

reports, "Bharatendu's literary talents and role as cultural patron appear to have been inherited from his father, who composed a number of poetic and dramatic works, including what some call the first modern drama in Hindi, *Nahushnatak*" (79). He created a repertoire of dramatic works in modern Hindi.

The late nineteenth century was also a period when many regions of the country were engulfed by a wave of social reform and revivalist movements. The Indian social reform movement produced a multifaceted intellectual expression of the social and cultural transformations which took place under the impact of British rule. "No other coherent body of intellectual thought so sensitively and profoundly exposed the mental processes of Indians as they formulated the ideas underlying the structure of their modern society as did the literature on social reform" (Hemisath 3). This period of new awakening in India began with the rise of consciousness among newly educated intellectuals, lead by Raja Rammohan Roy by the beginning of the nineteenth century and blossomed by the middle of the nineteenth century in the form of a new form of renaissance in literature which had a great bearing of the revolt of 1857. The Hindi intellectuals, including Bhartendu Harishchandra, were acutely aware of these currents, and also of the fact of relative backwardness of their own region in this regard. To quote Frantz Fanon, "The native intellectual who takes up arms to defend his nation's legitimacy and who wants to bring proofs to bear out that legitimacy, who is willing to strip himself naked to study the history of his body is obliged to dissect the heart of his people.." (154) No doubt every society requires a cultural mechanism through which social and political conflicts are analyzed, and it is in this sense that the popular drama assumed a political dimension in India. Evidently, theatre could not be disentangled from the idea of the national; rather, it became deeply entrenched in nationalist thought .we can trace the beginnings of a 'national' theatre in the latter half of the nineteenth century with the production of a number of anti-colonial plays in Bengali theatre such as the *Nil Darpan* (The Indigo Mirror, 1860), written by Dinabandu Mitra and with Bhartendu's Hindi plays. Nationalism in Hindi theatre has resulted in awakening of the masses. According to Partha Chatterjee, " Anticolonial nationalism creates its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society well before it begins its political battle with the imperial power" (6). To add further, Chatterjee talks about two domains through which this process takes place: "the material and the spiritual." The material is the domain of the "outside", of economy and of state craft, of science and technology, a domain where West had proved its superiority. The spiritual on the other hand, is an inner domain bearing the essential marks of cultural identity. "Nationalism declares the domain of the spiritual its sovereign territory and refuses to allow the colonial power to intervene in that domain". National theatre and stage forms an important part of this inner domain. Bhartendu possessed a revolutionary spirit and made known all his nationalistic feelings through his writings. With the slogan of "Desh vatsal" and "Smaj Sudhar", his writings spoke about the exploitation which existed in the Indian society during his times, the inhuman

conditions that the poor and needy had to live in and the subjugation that the lower and middle classes of the society had to face in the hands of the elite ruling class. In an era in which patriotism was mistaken for rebellion, affinity for Hindi was misconstrued as ignorance and drama was considered rustic, Bharatendu glorified Hindi and introduced 'Khadi Boli' as a valid literary and dramatic language. And in the words of an eminent Hindi critic, Dr. Dashrath Ojha, "Partikool pristhitiyon me anukool vatavaran ka sarjan vyakti ki mahanta ka dhotak hai" (177) (Creation of congenial ethos amidst uncongenial circumstances is a sure mark of greatness of an individual). Bharatendu's entire work concretizes the rebounding force of life sustenance. It is also to be noted that he never applied revolutionary pressures to garner the interest of nation, religion, society or language. He instead like a gentle skilful physician feels the pulse of the patients and arranges for the requisite dose of medicine accordingly. Speaking in the same vein, an eminent historian Dr. B.B. Majumdar comments: "A devout patriot that he was, political consciousness of Hindi speaking people was roused by Bharatendu and he made drama his vehicle to convey his message to his compatriots" (228). Bharatendu expended considerable effort toward spreading his theatre movement among the educated elite. His organizational talents and probably his financial resources were instrumental in the founding of theatrical societies and literary clubs not only in Banaras but in other nearby cities. He was director of the Hindu National Theatre (Natak Samaj) of Banaras, which consisted of a group of Bengali and Hindi speakers who met at Dashashvamedh Ghat, and it was for this society that he wrote *Andher Nagari*. He also organized the Kavita Varddhini Sabha, which staged play performances at his own residence, and he founded the Penny Reading Club in Banaras, which engaged in regular play-reading and skit performances among its activities. In Allahabad, Bharatendu helped form the Arya Natya Sabha, and a number of performances took place in the Railway Theatre. In Kanpur he inspired Partap Narayan Mishra to organize the Bharatendu Mandal; five dramas written by Bharatendu had been staged under its auspices by 1885. Similarly, Lucknow too had a theatre hall, the Vidyant Natyashala. Patna had its own Natak Mandali as did Ballia, Muzaffarpur, and Agra (McGregor 92–93). These societies were sustained by a group of Bharatendu's disciples, who, like him, were at once amateur playwrights, actors, and organizers. Performances were held occasionally in members' residences or in the few auditoriums that existed. In addition to the performances mentioned above, Bharatendu's own plays were performed at his residence and in the court of the Maharaja of Banaras (Anand 54).

One of the inherent characteristics of the stage is its use as a pulpit from where ideas and value systems are disseminated, even though the audience looks upon it mainly as a recreational form. The popular theatre, in the process of helping the nationalist movement, assumed a political character and emerged as a popular political theatre. Hindi theatre in northern part of the country arose out of an interaction between the stage and the society. Such a stage not only serves as an entertainment form,

but does something more to the community. It is likely that the members of an audience watching a drama are not merely escaping from the pressures of their day-to-day life, but are also escaping into a kind of understanding of their own society, an understanding that is necessary for them to participate in society in a meaningful way. By watching a drama, they may be learning how to react to certain new factors that they have to encounter as society gets more and more complex, and how to anticipate what is most appropriate for social behaviour in the changing circumstances. The entire corpus of Hindi drama before Bhartendu had consisted of a dozen works on mythological themes. In a short span of 33 years, he worked wonders by bringing new themes; synthesizing folk and Western forms by translating from various languages, at the same time writing new plays, he established the genre on a firm footing. Most of his writings were an urge to the people of India to join hands in an effort to better the living conditions in the country. The condition of India would only be improved by the joint endeavours of its people. In the Balia speech (November 1884) Harischandra emphasized the need of unity and exhorted the people to change their attitude towards untouchables and depressed classes (Bhartendu 895-903). *Bharat Durdasha* and *Andher Nagari Chaupat Raja* are scintillating satires which reflect his lamentation and his message of revolutionary upsurge for social awakening. In his play *Bharat Durdasha*, written in 1870, the grief-stricken soul of this nationalist author pathetically cries in the song of Yogi at the very outset,

*Rovau sab mil ke aavhoo bharat bhai. | Ha ha! Bharatdudasha na dekhi jai.* (ACT I, pp.21) | (Let us lament Brother India! | Alas! One can not see the miserable plight of India)

The plays and articles of Bhartendu show how the sensitive soul of a literary artist responded to the vibrations in the political and social horizon. Being conscious of the evil nature of British rule, the new authors wrote against British rule in emotion-soaked language. Fanon observes: "while at the beginning the native intellectual used to produce his work to be read exclusively by the oppressor, whether with the intention of charming him or denouncing him through ethnic or subjective means, now the native writer progressively takes on the habit of addressing his own people." (155) In the latter half of the 19th century, when British rule was at its climax or peak in India, the exposure of its evil nature, without the expression of loyalty would have been a foolishly dangerous thing. It was impossible to challenge the mighty British Empire then. What they could do was to sing the glory of the achievements of the ancient Indians in the domains of arts, science, literature, religion and politics. And they could bewail the miseries of 19th century India. The way of India salvation was not clear. In fact, Bharat Sudev (India's good fortune) has been shown as committing suicide in the drama of *Bharat Durdasha*. Bharat Sudev laments in dejection:

*Soi bans rudhir wahi soi man biswas. | Wahi vasna chit wahi aasya wahi vilas. | Soi bharat ki aaj yah durdasha hai Kaha kare kit jayen nahi sujht kachu upai.* (ACT VI, pp.47) | (Same clan, same blood,

same faith , Same indulgence, mind and subsistence | That India has, but come to such a plight.)

*Bharat Durdasha* is an allegorical play. More than half of the characters are allegorical abstractions. India in rags, Naked Shamelessness, Hope as young maiden, Bharat Durdev as half Christian half Muslim, Destruction as Military Chief, Sloth, Wine, Darkness, disloyalty and Bharat Baghya are personified But Chairman, Bengali, two native poets, editor, a Maharashtrian appeared as representative of their respective communities. His play reflects the anguish of the tormented soul of a true nationalist. He has allegorically dramatized the condition of contemporary India. The new authors like Bhartendu exhorted the people to reform themselves and appealed to the conscience of the British rulers of the good governance of the country. They could do no more and they did what they could. This introduces the question of Bharatendu's relationship to both the British political presence in India and their social, educational, and cultural values. Bharatendu made manifest his loyalty to the British Crown on a number of occasions, as when he played host to the visiting Duke of Edinburgh in 1870, publicly expressed his grief at the assassination of Lord Mayo in 1871, submitted poems to the Prince of Wales during his visit in 1875, celebrated the birthday of Queen Victoria each year, or commemorated in poetry her victory in Egypt in 1882. Bharatendu used the time-honored genre of panegyric verse to express an attitude that he shared with many of the people of India, who in his own words, "have a kind of superstitious reverence for their Sovereign, so much so that they regard their Sovereign but next in reverence to God only" (Gopal 181). This attitude was not disinterested but was part and parcel of a feudal code of obligations that bound the subject and the sovereign to each other. Bharatendu, like his ancestors before him, undoubtedly expected a return on his loyalty to the ruling power, and after the Duke of Edinburgh's visit he was indeed rewarded by being appointed Municipal Commissioner and Honorary Magistrate at the unusually young age of twenty. Yet Bharatendu was given to satirizing the pomp and ceremony of British rule. He frequently tangled with local British officials and was under some sort of ban in 1880, apparently as a result of offensive editorials he had written (Gopal 145). Later in his career his writings focused more frequently on the economic ruin of India, especially the outflow of cash for manufactured goods, as a result of British policies. He supported the Swadeshi movement and held that the imitation of English fashion and social behavior would lead to moral decadence as well as economic ruin for India. In an article in *The Kavi Vachan Sudha*, Benares, June 8, 1874.) Bhartendu warned as early as 1874 that if this attitude was not checked and changed the bliss of starvation (Phakamasti) would be followed by the bliss of death (Maranmasti) and that the Punjab and North-West Provinces would be absolutely bankrupt. In *Bharat Durdasha* (the miserable plight of India), British rule had been represented as Bharat Durdev (India misfortune) and was made to speak to the following effect:

*Mari bulao des ujadu, mahnga karke Ann | Sab ke upar tix lagao,  
dhanya hai mughko dann.* (Act III, pp.25)

(I invite disease and devastate the country by making corn dearer, I tax all. Hail me! I am demon.)

Writing on the Bengal Famine (1874), Harischandra contended that famines were the result of the Government's bad policy. In another article on Indian poverty, he castigated British rule for famines, cholera and other diseases (Kavi Vachan Sudha, Benares, February 16, 1874). His plays present glimpses of the sad plight of Indian society. Bharat Durdash, the main anchor of the play shamelessly recounts the factors which he promotes:

*Foot bair o kalh bulauon, lauon susti jor | Ghar ghar me aals failauon, chauon dukh ghanghor. | Kafir kala neech pukaraun, todun paeir aur hath. | Duun inko santosh khushamad, kayarta bhi sath.* (Act III, pp.25)  
(I spread dissensions, rivalry and conflict | Spread lethargy everywhere and hence gloom | Dubbed as mean by all and sundry, render them aloof | And invalid, boost them with sycophancy and cowardice.)

These social evils had bred a peculiar attitude in the masses. They had become fatalist and contented even in poverty. These vested interests in religion and society had helped to extol the people's laziness and poverty to the height of spiritual contentment. The prevalence of such attitude in the society had dangerous political and social implications. Alesia or sloth is the other personified character seems to be reveling under the umbrella of Bharatdurdasha:

*Dunia mea hath-per hilana nahi achcha. | Mar Jana pe uthke kahin Jana nahi achcha.* (ACT IV, pp.32)

(Not at all pleasant to move | Better to die than to move.)

Suffering was increasing day by day. Seven elite citizens discuss the miserable condition of Bharat and plan for handling the situation. Contemplating on the strategies to counter the curse of Bharat Durdasha, the Editor suggests:

“Hamne ek dusra upay socha hai. Education ki ek sena bnai jaye. Committee ki foz. Akhbaron ke shastr aur speechon ke ole mare jaye. Aap log kya khatay hain? (ACT IV, pp.39)

(I have hit upon another idea. An army of education be called, an army of soldiers with weapons of newspapers and bombs of speeches be hurled. What do you say?)

Bharat Baghya makes its appearance only in the VI Act of the play. It seems as if he laments at the miserable plight of India. Towards the end, he stabs himself with a dagger when he finds that there is no hope for the life of Bharat. Bhartendu intentionally gave a tragic end to the play to make his people leave the Fatalist attitude. He opines that sufferings hone the people. The tragic end does not intend to spread any disillusionment. The writer is motivated to inspire a new awakening, be it by hope, zeal or pathos.

*Andher Nagri Chaupat Raja*, (written in 1881) the magnum opus of the social reformist Bhartendu has survived all the onslaughts of unparallel satire on the maladministration of the political head. The dialect of middle class artists and scholars is used on *Bharat Durdasha* whereas the simple rustic language comprises the dialect of *Andhernagri Chaupat Raja*. The churanwala through his simple words lays bare the illegal and

atrocious plans of the government:

*Churn sahib log jo khata. Sara Hindustan hajam kar jata. | Churn police wale khate. Sab kanoon hajam kar jate. | Churn Hakim jo khate sab per duna tix lgate.* (Scene ii) | (Whosoever takes this churn devours the whole land. | Cops are also fond of this churn and wash down the laws of the land. | And the officers take this churn to doubly tax the poor.)

And so, each and every section of tyrannical British rule has been laid exposed to the satirical scalpel of Bhartendu. This play presents a Guru/Mahant (a hermit) and his Shishyas (disciples), Govardhan and Narayan Das who have reached a new city during their journey to know the ways of the world. While walking through the city, they find that all the shops are closed during the day, but at night, all the shops get opened, people start working. They are more surprised to know that everything is being sold at one standard price. The hermit warns his disciples that it is a dangerous place to live, so they must leave the city immediately:

*“Andher nagri chaupat raja | Take ser Bhaji Take ser Khajja | Set set sub ek se, jhan kapoor kpaas | Aisie des kubes men kabhun n keeje bass.”* (Scene iii) (The anarchic rule by hapless rulers; | Eyes the petty and noble alike. | Never abide in that hellish place | That fails to tell good from evil.)

Bhartendu traces the root cause of the misery to the lack of wisdom on the part of the king. As the one of the disciples was adamant because he thought that it was a wonderful place to live. So the teacher left him there and continued his journey alone. The city is being run like an experiment of social equality by the eccentric King. There is one fixed price for everything in the city. One can have the run of the mill Bhaji (a simple, inexpensive, vegetable dish) or premium sweet like Khaja (delicious sweet made with wheat flour, refined butter, sugar) at the same price. The citizens are not allowed to question these eccentric rules or the officers who come up with these stupidities or even to talk about irrational and unjust policies of the King. In the VI scene, Govardhan is arrested and the king orders to hang him. His teacher appears to save him and plays a trick. He says that it is the lucky time, whosoever will die at this moment, will surely go to heaven. In the meantime the news had reached the stupid King. Used his ultimate authority as a King of the City, he decides that it is he who should be hanged. Such an incapable and impudent king invited his own doom. The Mahant present there is relieved to note that:

*Jhan na dharm na budhi nah neeti na sujan smaj. Te aisehi apphu nase jaise chaupat raj. (Raja ko log tiksi per khada karte hain)* (Scene vi). (Where there is no religion, no sense, No polity, no wisdom; Being doomed, it dooms others too. Such is a ruinous state! (The king is led to the gallows))

Thus the play ends injecting the public consciousness with the spirit of nationalism the end of empire is the end of all misery. The condition in the Andher Nagari, under Chaupatraj (the reckless king) closely resembles British rule. The king lives in a foreign country; the government is being run by bureaucrats. There is no discrimination between religion and heresy. The Chaupat Raj claims to be civilized but is

cheat inwardly. Everything is topsy-turvy in the country. Bhartendu provided the contemporary society a cultural mechanism, a theatre of ideas to analyze socio-political conflicts. His plays appeared in an age when the dissemination of ideas and information was crucial to the emergence of nationalism and it soon came to be used as an instrument in the nation's struggle for freedom. The mass appeal of his plays proves that these theatrical productions have within them the possibility of unlocking the closed chambers of the hearts of contemporary Indians, in Kafka's wonderful phrase, of "melting the ice within, of awakening dormant cells, of making us more fully alive, more fully human, at once more individual and more connected to each other." He proved to the English-speaking elite class of the pre-Independence era that meaningful and serious playwrights can emanate from within the country. He devoted his life to the development of Hindi literature. It was with the motive of awakening the public consciousness that Bhartendu brilliantly exposed the pathetic condition of the country in plays. Mahesh Anand rightly states, "The theatre invented by Bhartendu was a theatre of the common people (Janmanas ka rangmanch)" (58). Later on, this living tradition of the theatre of the masses breathed life into Hindi drama and theatre as Habib Tanveer's Naya Theatre and Safdar Hashmi's Jana Natya Manch.

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