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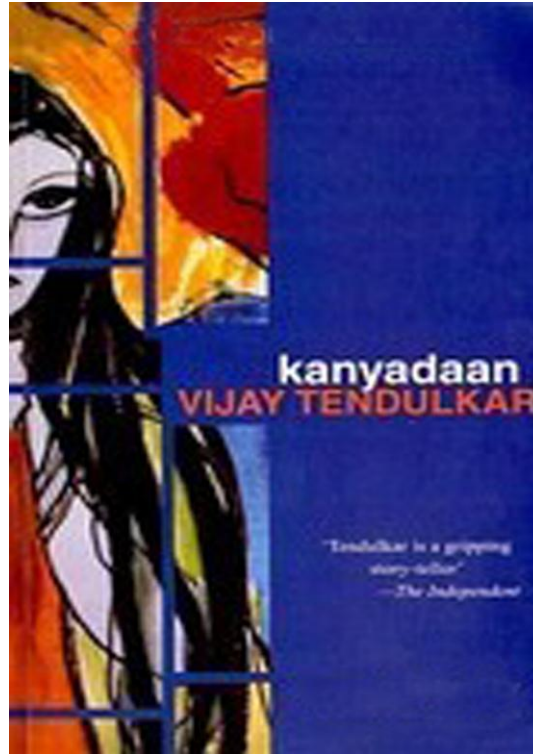
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Vijay Tendulkar – A Great Indian Playwright

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Vijay Tendulkar is one of the four great Indian dramatists of the twentieth century - Mohan Rakesh in Hindi, Badal Sircar in Bengali, Girish Kennard in Kannada and Vijay Tendulkar in Marathi. His plays like *Shantata! Court Chalu Ahe* translated into English by Priya Adarkar as *Silence! The court is in session!* has brought him an international fame and recognition. For the past four decades he has been the most influential dramatist and theater personality in Marathi, the principal language of the state of Maharashtra, which has had a continuous literary history since the end of the classical period in India. Marathi has nearly seventy-five million speakers today.

A life long resident of the city of Mumbai, Mr. Tendulkar is the author of thirty full-length plays and twenty-three on-act plays, several of which have become classics of modern Indian theater. Ghashiram Kotwal (1972), a musical combining Marathi folk performance style and contemporary theatrical techniques, is one of the longest-running plays in the world, with over six thousand performances in India and abroad, in the original and in translation.

Mr. Tendulkar's output in Marathi also includes eleven plays for children, four collections of short stories, one novel, and five volumes of literary essays and social criticism, all of which have created for Indian Drama a remarkable modern literary landscape. He is an important translator in Marathi having rendered nine novels and two biographies as well as five plays in to the language. He is the author of original stories and screen plays for eight films in Marathi, including *Umbartha (The Threshold)* (1981) a ground breaking feature film on woman's activism in India. Vijay Tendulkar is the father of actress . New York's Indo-American Cultural Council dedicated October 2004 as a tribute to Tendulkar's prodigious literary contributions, presenting in English a wide range of his plays and films. Nobel Laureate V.S. Naipaul has called him India's best playwright.

Tendulkar's Journey

Beginning from *Grihastha* (1955) Tendulkar has traveled a long way. A journalist by profession, he has penned daily columns in newspapers, started his career as a creative author by writing short stories, composed children's plays, diverged later into screen playwriting, translated and adapted novels and plays both from English and from Marathi. His creativity has prismatic quality and a multitude of colors seem to emanate from it. The greatest quality which Tendulkar can claim as a creative writer and dramatist is the ability to simultaneously involve and distance himself from his creation.

Tendulkar's first major work that set him apart from previous generation Marathi playwrights was Manus Nava Che Bet 1955 which gave expression to the fomenting solitude and alienation of a modern individual in an urbane industrialized society. A number of plays followed Manus Navache bet. These were Madhlya Bhirti (1958) Chimnicha Ghar Itota Menacha (1958), Mee Linklo Mee Harlo (1963) Kavalanchi Shala (1963) Sari Ga Sari (1964).

Against Established Values of Fundamentally Orthodox Society

Vijay Tendulkar emerged as a rebel against the established values of a fundamentally orthodox society. He was known as angry young man of Marathi theatre at time of the production of *Shantata! Court chalu Ahe* (*Silence! The court is in session*) in 1967. With this production, Tendulkar became the centre of general controversy. The depiction of harsh

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social attitude towards a woman, Lella Benare, was greatly appreciated. The judge and the witnesses expose the private life activities of Miss Benare. Also their attitude exhibits the basic hypocrisy and double standard of society. However Leela Benare boldly defends herself against the onslaught of the upholders of social norms.

Variety of Themes and Methods of Presentation

Tendulkar employs a variety of themes and ways of presentation. His play, Dambadwipcha Mukabala (Encounter in unbagland), produced a year after Silence! The court is in session, is political allegory designed to attain position of authority and the corruption involved in holding on to them. His Ghasiram Kotwal is another political play that raised storms in literary and political circles.

Sensationalism, Sex and Violence

Gidhade (The vultures), chronologically the next play produced in 1970 and published 1971, after Dambadwipcha Mukabala, was actually written fourteen years before. This is an entirely different kind of creation. It exhibits the astonishing range of Tendulkar's dramatic genius. With the production and publication of Gidhade, Tendulkar's name became associated with sensationalism, sex and violence. He has successfully created a sensitive, naturally kind and good hearted individual in Rama, Ramakant's wife. However she has been depicted as a helpless, submissive, tender little bird among the vultures. Her illicit relationship with her half-brother-in-law Rajaninath is strictly frowned at by the conservative heads of the social set-up.

Real Life Situations

His Sukharam Binder is probably the most intensely naturalistic play Sukharam, the book-binder, is a Brahmin by caste, but his actions and temperament are portrayed different from the traditionally assumed and/or sanctioned characteristics of the member of that particular caste. Sukharam has been depicted as crude, aggressive and a violent man. He has framed his own laws of personal morality; and he follows them strictly and maintains his moral standards in all conditions.

Tendulkar's Kamala (1981) is another thought-provoking play in the galaxy of Indian drama. It was inspired by a real life incident reported in the *Indian Express* by Ashwin Sarin, who actually bought a girl from a rural flesh market and presented her at a press conference for his popularity and position in his profession.

Jaisingh Jadav, a self-seeking journalist, in the play Kamala, purchases a girl from the flesh-market and uses her as an object that can buy him a promotion in his job and a reputation in his professional life. He is one of those modern day individuals with a single-track mind, who pursue their goal unquestioningly. Jadav never stops to think what will happen to Kamala after this expose. Through the story of Kamala, Tendulkar exposes the selfish and immoral trends and approaches that have crept in modern journalism.

The above-mentioned prominent and popular plays show that Tendulkar has been a writer with a purpose. He dauntlessly exposed the hidden realities of court, politics and

journalism. Beginning his career as a journalist, Tendulkar has penned daily columns in newspapers, has written short stories, composed children's plays, diverged later into screenplay writing, translated and adapted novels and plays both from English and from regional languages.

Drama in India and Elsewhere

Drama being an audiovisual medium of expression, has been a very and development of drama in Greece, Rome, England and India emphasizes upon the fact that it has always been an integral part of culture, highlighting and evaluating moral commitments religious convictions philosophical approaches, social and political changes in various countries. A drama in action is a common feature. A drama in action is a combination of dance and music along with the spoken word. The Indian theatrical production is marked with the quality of the inspiration that flows as vocabulary and this vocabulary is conditioned directly by the outer manifestations. In Indian drama the dialogues get improvised as the action moves along because drama is but the reflection of life, working out the relationship between individuals, and as also between individuals and the community.

The total theatre of India had been the inevitable form of the Indian community. Earlier, this community was a close knit one and its functioning was largely in unison. But periodically, there have been great emotional upsurges, some strongly interwoven with spiritual elements, like Buddhism, Jainism Sikhism, Vaishnavism, Shivism, each with its myriad offshoots, flowering into its own aesthetic forms including literature, for all these had been closely interlinked. Periodically, there have also been patriotic upsurges, all through our history that have given birth to passionate out pouring contributing to virile verse, song, dance and drama.

New Search for Indian Identity

Many new dramatists have been influenced by the medieval, folk and the classic and are stirred to introduce attractive and meaningful elements in the current, as an antidote to the complexities and anxieties which are an inevitable part of today. There seems to be a new search for the Indian identity.

Marathi, a language spoken by more than fifty million people in the western parts of India, can trace its literary history to 11th century but in spite of such a long literary history, Marathi literature and language began to change with the British expansion and domination in western India. The decline of the Maratha empire, degeneration during the latter part of the Pesewa rule, and British colonization have had an impact in shaping educated Urban, middle-class Marathi culture and character during the 19th and 20th centuries.

Early Modern Drama in Marathi

To go back in to the history of Marathi Literature (drama), the period from 1890 to 1920 was a period of revolutionary changes in Marathi literature. In fiction H.N. Apte laid the foundation of realistic social novel. It was during this period that four major Marathi dramatist came up G.B. Deval, K.P. Khadilkar, K.P. Kothatkar and R.G. Gadkari.

Marathi drama is always considered important in India after Bengali dramas. Marathi theatre rose in full swing in Poona by Vishnupath Bhave who used amorous and tragic themes. There were many experimental plays, which were written in such a way that they rationalized the old medieval performance. This led to the formation of the professional Bhave Company. Aryodharaka Company in Poona, the Maharashtra Company and the Shanungaravasi Company followed it later. Thus the Marathi drama was still a dominant feature of western India and it soon became imbued with national self awareness.

Influenced by Yakshagana, the traditional dance drama of rural Karnataka, the Marathi drama achieved a clear regional form by the middle of the 19th century. Natak Companies were then floated with an addition of the Hindustani classical music and dance in Marathi plays that contained mythological and social themes, which became popular instantly. Historical plays about the famous Marathi heroes like Shivaji and others began to be written and presented. The Marathi dramatists invented subtle stratagems to present their point of view in allegorical fantasies or in farcical comedies.

Thus the Marathi plays left a powerful influence on the masses in the field in the decades of this century stage songs based on Hindustani classical ragas, are though yet famous, do not last for about 4-6 hours. Marathi drama is still very popular with the urban and rural masses, mainly due to nostalgia. People also feel that theatre today has comparatively fewer biases, prejudices, and influences. No body imitates great mature plays like Ghashiram Kotwal, Gochi, Uddhwasta Dharmashala, Begum Barwe, Mahanirwan, or even Holi and Atmakatha.

However, the description of the Marathi parallel drama will remain incomplete without the mention of two competitions. The full-length play competition organized by the state government in centers all over Maharashtra has given productions like Shantata! Court Chalu Ahel, Ghashiram Kotwal and Mahanirwan

Recently, however, non-competitive drama flourishes; at least in Bombay and Pune, and the qualitative output of the state competitions has decreased considerably. However, it still provides a platform and about 500 plays are staged every year with about 15,000 people participating. The second platform is the intercollegiate one-act competitions: Unmesh and INT in Bombay and Purushottam Karandak in Pune. Innumerable one-act competitions are conducted all over Maharashtra, the important ones are held at Kankavli and Wai.1

The period from 1920-1945 was devoid of any noteworthy changes in life and literature in Maharashtra. All the drama companies were in financial difficulties. They could not attract new actors, nor could they get dramatists of worth to give them their new plays. The actors of some distinction who made their career during this period were Chintamanrao Kothatkar and Nana Phatak and the only dramatists worth mentioning were P.K. Atre and M.G. Rangnekar. By this time drama had become only a form of entertainment. It did not exploit the social advantages of the theatrical art. The audience sought another entertainment at this time, which was not worse than drama but cheaper. It was the film.

However, the period after India's independence may be called the modern period of Indian drama for several reasons. The Second World War had started serious rethinking of Language in India www.languageinindia.com

the basic norms in all fields and given a Joint to the sensibility of the educated people. The Marathi writers became conscious of a wider reference to their works. The educated people become conscious of problems of the entire world. There was thus a widening of horizons. Though the middle class still remained the centers of culture, it moved further away from the political and financial centers. Two social and political changes a majority, however, tried to keep aloof. This was the reason why no political drama of any literary merit was written for quite a long time. The means of keeping oneself aloof were several. One of which was of be content with one's own lot, to imagine one's domestic worries as universal problems, to talk about ones petty sorrows as the sorrows of humanity. The approach of this group was sentimental. A quick philosophization was its characteristic. Plays like Vahato Hi Durvanci Jude (I offer the sacred grass 1964) Bal Kohatkar and Dive Chau De Sari Rat (Let The Light Burn All Night, 1965) by Madhusadan Kalelkar were in this category.

In modern time literature has not remained any more the common heritage of a speech community and educated speech communities by being multilingual are exposed to the literary taste, the degree of literary sensibility social attitudes and world - views, speech community is again divided in to different groups that appreciate a particular kind of literature. Broadly speaking, there levels; the highbrow literature, the popular literature and the footpath literature. Marathi drama, in modern times, functions at all the three levels.

Emergence of Vijay Tendulkar as a Playwright

It was in the midst of this theatrical era amongst these contemporaries Vijay Tendulkar came up as a modern playwright who ushered modernity in Indian drama and theatre. Tendulkar did not accept the traditional set up and aspired to find and project something challenging and new. Basically what set him apart taking him beyond his illustrious contemporaries has been his deep concern for the contemporary issues and his experimental techniques that have made all his plays unique. "Tendulkar's plays are very tightly constructed and display tremendous control over dramatic structure" says Nemichandra Jain, a theatre critic. 2

Vijay Tendulkar abandoned formal education in 1943 to join the freedom struggle. He started working at the age of 15 in a bookshop, rising to the position of proof reader and eventually managing a printing press. He took up journalism and was an assistant editor of Marathi dailies Navbharat, Maratha and Loksatta. His stint as an editor of literary magazines like Deepavali and Vaudha fanned his creative urge which first expressed itself in a short story Amachyadavar Ken Prem Karnal (Who loves me 1948). He started his career as a creative writer writing short stories, and plays. Later, he took to screenplay writing, translation and adoption of plays from English and regional languages and TV serials in Hindi.

"Creative writing has never been my first Love; my primary interest has always been life itself. I would rather play with child or meet and interesting person or learn a new skill than write. Writing to me is like talking and I'm not the one to fall in love with my won voice. I am more interested in other people's voice."3

Debut and Reputation

Tendulkar made his debut as a dramatist with Grihastha (House Holder 1955) a full length play, followed by shrikant. After these two plays, Tendulkar was first noticed for his shock value three years later, when he penned the play Manus Navache Bet (An island called man, 1958). It was hailed as a powerful expression of the existential quest and alienation of an individual in a materialistic world. With these three plays, Tendulkar came to acquire the reputation of a man of theatre, a writer who understood both the stage and its language requirements.

Writer of the most critically acclaimed plays which brought modernism to Marathi theatre, Vijay Tendulkar has been the recipient of many prestigious awards. To make a note of them: Maharashtra stage Govt. Award (1956,1969,1972), Sangeet Natak Academy (1984), Saraswati Sammaan (1992), Maharashtra Gaurav puraskar (1991) Jansthan Award (1991), Katha Chudamani Award for life time achievement (2001), Maharashtra foundation Award (1998), Pandit Mahadev Shastri joshi Award (1999), Deenanath Mangeshkar Award (2000), Nehru Fellowship (1973-74), Honorary Doctorate from Rabindra Bharati University, Calcutta (1992) and life-time fellowship from National Academy of Performing Arts, New Delhi (1998). He is a fighter for cultural freedom, the freedom that is stifled at present by various forces. Although being a modernist, Tendulkar, an uncommon artist, never negates the common man's world, getting lost in modernistic subjective islands.

Tendulkar's Themes

Thematically his plays have ranged from the alienation of the modern individual to contemporary politics, from socio-individual tensions to the complexities of human life, from the exploration of man-woman relationships to reinterpretations of historical episodes. The unenviable status of woman in the male dominated urban middle class society, the hypocrisy, lust and violence latent in the Indian psyche, the unmistakable ambivalence inherent in the words and deeds of both the promoters and beneficiaries of the Dalit upliftment programmers, the Machiavellian manipulation and absurd hero worship that characterizes Indian politics and cut throat competition and resultant foulness that permeates sensational journalism, come under the arena of Tendulkar's Theatrical works.

To quote his words:

“I have writing about life around me, who I fill the need to say or to something, I do it, otherwise I will be able sleep.”⁴

An Ability to Involve and Distance Himself from His Creation

That Tendulkar's work has such a wide canvas reveals the multifacetedness of his creative genius. The greatest quality that Tendulkar can claim as a creative writer and dramatist is an ability to involve and distance himself from his creation. This endows his work with infinite subtlety. None of his creations are ever simplistic. Like his genius they too have the same prismatic quality of giving forth new meanings.

Two other hallmarks of his creation are his keen sense of humors and intense compassion, which are sometimes difficult to detect because of their imperceptible quality.

No Blind Allegiance

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Tendulkar has always appeared as a keen observer. He portrays India in its natural life in a world of absorbing passions without declaring a blind allegiance to an outworn tradition, which does not practice the morality it professes. So, in the absence of any such allegiance to tradition or morality, for some people his plays become the citadels of immorality. Totally uninhibited about the past heritage and glory, Tendulkar never lingers to look behind. Original, subtle and daring, he holds the banner of man not as formidable and venerable but appallingly hideous. His intelligence may rightly be categorized as radically oriented, supplemented with neither reflection nor sentiment. He discouraged, assailed and condemned an exaggerated self-righteousness and distorted historical perspective. Adulation of anything in conformity in blindness is not acceptable to him. He challenges the upholstered morality. In none of his plays there is any patriotic or nationalistic consciousness with its search for roots of self-respect or a pride in one's ancestral heritage. So, there is no built in conflict or growth, no spiritual revelation, in any of his characters.

Sex, Aggression and Power Grabbing

Although he has too often been attacked for his flair for crude sensationalism, as a committed artist he attempts to delve deep into characters and to know how life functions at different levels, providing a deep insight into the great jigsaw puzzle of human existence, and enrich our understanding of life around us, as said by him. 5 He depicts sensitive issues in the contemporary society with a touch of imaginative realism.

Vijay Tendulkar deals with the unconventional theme of sex and violence and makes it a viable subject on the Indian stage. Thus, his major plays, Sakharm Binder, The Vultures and Silence! The court is in Session expose the uglier side of human passions. But a shift in his concerns is evident when he professes emphatically that man is constantly and violently seeking after positions of power and he would work on his 'basic theme'. Therefore, in fact, it is the machination of power and digression of moral values in the modern political system that comes up in their true colors in his plays.

Experimentation

Tendulkar has experimented with all aspects of drama content, acting, stage direction and audience communication, the innovation of a new experimental theatre, which has cross-culture manifestations. He always adopts the model of naturalistic drama and is deeply concerned with the presentation of existing reality or human condition, as he perceives with his own naked eyes. He has always shown interest in depicting the agonies and suffocations, tensions and turmoil of common man. His central concern has been to reveal the confrontation of the individual with the hostile society, exposing the hypocrisy inherent in the accepted social norms and values. With the use of irony, satire and pathos, Tendulkar brings out the hollowness of the middle class morality. He believes that theatre is a serious medium and not like a sitcom,

“If nothing is happening through theatre, then there is something wrong with the medium itself. The lure of television can not be faulted for the decline of theatre. I do not think that the ill effects of one medium can be trust on another medium.” 6

Recognizing the Need for Novelty

Tendulkar has always been aware of the need for novelty on the stage, and as a result he has come up with constant experimentations with the 'form'. And that is also the reason why perhaps there have been controversies about several of his plays and film scripts. Owing to his eagerness to expose the socio-cultural phenomena eating into the vitals of society, the plots of his plays sometimes appear to be unconvincing or exaggerated, though a close analysis proves the point otherwise.

The fierce controversy of many of his censored plays is perhaps an obvious indication of the actual currency of incidents used in the plays, and their strong rootedness to their socio-political context in which they were written. At the same time, the magnetic quality reflected in the frequency with which these plays continue to be performed in different parts of India and abroad, suggests a certain universal quality, which jolts audiences out of their complacency every time the plays are enacted.

Power in Patriarchal Society

According to Urvashi Barat, a literary critic, the most obvious and persistent theme in the plays of Tendulkar is 'power', its effects on people and their relationships with each other, and the way it dehumanizes and brutalizes those who live in it.⁷ Power politics, the battle for supremacy in society and inhuman relationships are demons treated in his work through gender. The role of gender in power game is unveiled in plays like *Silence!* The court is in session and *Kamala*, and *Ghasiram Kotwal*, which focus directly on the status of women in a patriarchal society. These plays suggest how gender and power are inter-linked in society.

In his plays Tendulkar has underlined the dark ambiguity of the cardboard figures of power. He believes that playwriting is an endless learning by experimenting and committing mistakes. It is not mere grammar, it is expression. ⁸

Screenplays of Tendulkar

Tendulkar has always been at ease in the medium of films also. Fieldwork and travel gave him a deep understanding of the way violence expresses itself in society and the working of the power structure in the rural and urban India. Out of this experience were born the following screenplays: *Manthan* (1977), *Ardhasatya* (1983), *Nisant* (1975), *Sardar* (1993) and *Akrosh*. He also wrote dialogues for films in Marathi - *Sinhasan*, *Saanma*, *Askiet* and *Umbarta*. All these films won awards for direction and for Tendulkar who emerged as an eminent screenplay writer.

Short Stories

Tendulkar believes in posing the problem in a proper perspective. The same social awareness encompasses his short stories in five volumes, his journalistic writings on people and events collected in *Raatrani* and *Kovali* (both in 1971) and *Phage Sobanche* in 1974. As early as the 60's, his sketches, profiles, and his daily column in the *Maharashtra Times* established his status as an essayist of considerable caliber. He is also an excellent photographer and his album *Chehare* is an eloquent comment on the personalities he has met.

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As a Translator

Tendulkar has enriched Marathi literature by translating several plays from other Indian languages like Mohan Rajesh's Adhure and Girish Karnad's Tughlaq and plays from American theatre also.

Critics and Tendulkar

According to Manisha Dixit and Shanta Gokhale, eminent theatre critics, experimentation and novelty in expression that revolutionized Marathi theatre, characterize Vijay Tendulkar, the dramatist. Tendulkar has been placed at the helm of a revolting generation that overthrew the established norms of script writing and created a legacy of experimentation. Such a non-conformist is often met with no response or non-acceptance by the audience of critics. This is a curse on novelty. A similar fate beset Tendulkar's Sakharam Binder and Ghasiram Kotwal. His two more recent plays, Safar (1991) and Kanyadaan also belong to this category of significant but misunderstood plays. The fact that he uses various themes and employs a great variety of forms i.e. from naturalism and stark tragedies to farces, from musicals set in traditional folk modes to absurd drama is indicative of the magnitude of his creative genius. Gowrie Ramnarayan aptly observes, "With his exposure to Marathi theatre from childhood, and journalistic background, Vijay Tendulkar turned contemporary sociopolitical situations into explosive drama." 9 Talking about the sorry state of Indian today Tendulkar says,

"Now as I watch life I get restless, upset, even murderous, when I see the change that have come. I fill agitated and helpless because I can do nothing except watch sometimes I want to walk out..... I can't take it anymore. I asked my self, whether our playwrights actors and audiences or aware of the serious, complex changes that are going to affect our fat in a big way? Because, unless we are deeply concerned with life, what we write or stage or film, whether they are seen, read are discussed, don't really matter..... I continue to watch film and plays but they don't move me anymore." 10

Tendulkar has always been ahead of his times, existing in a zone, which is neither real nor pure imagination. He is a thinker and this thinking precedes all his creation. "I think a lot before I write and from my point of view, every word has its importance." 11

Growth, Change and Activity

Topical themes and timelessness together create an enigma around his plays. Growth, change and activity are the three major criteria with which a person's age can be measured. By these standards, Vijay Tendulkar at seventy four is still a young man. His multifaceted creativity continues to experiment and explore the potentials of the dramatic genre, his primary area of creation. A milestone in the development of the Marathi drama, Tendulkar has said a few years ago "Like a seagull, I have flown over the ocean of life patiently, calmly, without discussion, without a purpose. There is only one curiosity. How deep will this ocean be? How will the bottom look like?" 12

Tendulkar has always written with his uncompromising and merciless style about human frailties, and hypocrisy inherent in man. And having an insatiable interest in humans Tendulkar would continue writing “fresh texts for the stage” and experimenting with new forms.

Tendulkar, the most prolific Indian playwright, has enriched the Indian theatre by picturing the varied problems in Maharashtra, problems that are applicable to India at large as well. He does not copy or imitate the western dramatists, and also he takes up typically Indian, especially Hindu, problems which are deep rooted in the Indian culture - including music, theatre, religion and philosophy. Curiously enough, he is at once a much admired and severely castigated dramatist. With an unflinching integrity, he diagnoses the contemporary reality.

A Leading Star

Thus, we can say that Vijay Tendulkar is such an impressive writer that he commands the attention of his readers as well as audience. He is known as the most turbulent and controversial dramatist among the modern Marathi playwrights. Tendulkar is a pioneer who changed not only the external framework of the Marathi drama but also the limits of the picture of life at the core. His plays helped to refine the Marathi drama that was so far polluted by propaganda for political awakening, social reforms and cheap and vulgar entertainment. The only reason for this being that he began writing plays after delving deep into human relations. He did not indulge in painting superficial conflicts in bright colors; on the other hand, he presented the egoistic tensions, effectively. Tendulkar has not only written plays but also inspired the young genuine talented ones to become dramatists. He has guided the Marathi drama that seemed to have lost its proper track, and has kept leading it for over two decades. Tendulkar's place will remain permanent in the history of Marathi and Indian drama.

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