

Chapter 3

‘Voices in the City’¹: A Study of Contemporary Indian English Theatre

In his study of contemporary drama, J.Chris Westgate has found “two defining socio-spatial narratives that are linked with Harvey’s geographical imagination” (Westgate xi). The first is the ‘initiation narrative’ and the second the ‘transgression narrative’. The ‘initiation narrative’ generally tells the story of a character as he tries to adjust to his urban milieu and the crisis he faces in that journey and how he subsequently counters such a crisis. The ‘transgression narrative’, as the name suggests, is a story of defiance; the defiance could be spatial or social. In other words, such a narrative challenges any form of spatial or social normativity. Contemporary English theatre in India is a sort of ‘transgression narrative’. The transgression is at two levels – first in its use of English as the language for theatre beyond the efforts of earlier theatre-makers of India to canonize Hindi as the language of “Indian” theatre; second, in its attempt to break free from the orthodoxy, hegemony and corruption that has come to be identified with the urban environments they inhabit. Several theatre groups have come up in the theatrical hotbeds, largely coincident with the metropolitan cities of the country, which deal not only with written texts but rely only on performance based plays. Ashis Sengupta writes, “Indian plays written primarily in English have of late overcome many of the above obstacles by addressing the complexity of life in towns and metros using a variety of *Englishes* for a vibrant, live theatre... City plays, predominantly in English, is a significant genre now” (23)

Theatre in the later decades of the 20th century rejected all the homogenising tendencies of the years directly following independence. The Not the Drama Seminar organised in 2007 is a living testimony to such a change. It stood up against the 1956 Drama Seminar organised by the Sangeet Natak Akademi. It was the first comprehensive exercise to recognize, describe and standardise Indian National theatre in independent India. The aim was to identify and establish a singular idea of Indian theatre. It was

¹ Phrase borrowed from Anita Desai’s novel of the same name.

assumed that Hindi Theatre was the rightful heir of theatre in a country with a long history of Sanskrit theatrical heritage. One of the seminar's main propositions was to make Hindi the ultimate linguistic medium of the newly independent nation's National Theatre. Shayoni Mitra says, “the oppositional ‘Not’ in the 2007 seminar then is the key to unlocking the aspirational identities of twenty-first century Indian theatre. It is not in Delhi, the nation’s capital, it is not attempting a singular historiography for Indian theatre, it is not concerned with a Sanskritized classical past, it is not positing Hindi as a key, it is not limited to the very elite of the field. From within this emphatic series of negations, emerges a tentative attempt at heterogenous, and perhaps utopic futurity.” Thus the Not the Drama Seminar took a postmodern approach to theatre and recognised the need to deconstruct, and build a theatre that gains momentum from our own experiences. According to Mitra, “the 1990s have ushered in a far more contingent and contestatory approach, a tactic of surviving in an increasingly neo-liberal and globalized cultural landscape” (74).

Since the 1980s onwards a group of young, dynamic, city-bred playwrights have enlivened the urban stage by portraying new cityscapes and by using English as their medium of playwriting. Bold, new and fresh in its approach, theme and dramaturgy, this theatre smells of the city. Dealing with contextual realities, contemporary Indian English theatre is concerned with city-dwellers who are busy negotiating their lives in the city and facing new challenges every day. The rate of social development in India has not been able to keep up with the rate of mechanical urbanization, leading to huge gap between the rich and the poor. Urban India has become a place where the dictum ‘survival of the fittest’ applies aptly. It has become a mad race for capturing a ‘rightful place’ in the city claimed mostly by wrongful means. Violence, suicide, murder, communal strife, rape, abuse have become tools of subjugating the marginalized sections of the city. The same power politics runs internally within urban households for getting a larger share of the limited amenities and resources the members possess. Indian English theatre today has become a site of re-enactment of the complicated dynamics of city-life. Indian universities have also given English theatre a stable and consistent forum, for showcasing drama in English through several in-house dramatic societies. This long tradition of university-level production of English plays has yielded rewards by creating a fresh crop of mostly self-sponsored playwrights writing originally in English. These plays also stand-out in their choice of being performed in English, rather than only being scripted in English. Mahesh Dattani, Abhishek

Majumdar, Ramu Ramanathan Rahul Da Cunha constitute this coterie of playwrights who portray urban conflicts using an English which is assertive, urban and hybrid. Dattani himself says that there are enough issues and challenges in urban Indian society and these automatically form the content of his work. Theatre groups such as Rage Theatre and MAD (Mad About Drama) are performing plays which are a depiction of the populace of the metropolitan cities in their confusions and conflicts both within and without. The discourses that are produced as the characters speak to each other and to the audience are essentially the discourses that run in the cities. Again it is imperative to state here that contemporary urban theatre in India enjoys the heteroglossia of open linguistic practices and underscores the plurality that signalled its birth. In the words of Quasore Thakore Padamsee, “the new writers are not limited to one language. Abhishek Majumdar writes in English and Hindi and Bangla, Irawati Karnik in English and Marathi, Meherzad Patel in English, Hindi, Gujarati; Annie Zaidi in English and Hindi. India is not monolingual, why should its playwrights be?” Nevertheless, this English theatre remains a marginal trend, characterized in many respects by the privilege loops affecting their employment, education and exposure to the global world. But at the same time it also has its connections with changing lives, language and modes of contemporary Indians. It is essentially the theatre of the new urban India of the late 20th and 21st century.

Mahesh Dattani, an Indian playwright who is the pioneer of this trend of playwriting in English, says, “I think there are enough issues and challenges in urban Indian society (the milieu I am a part of) and these automatically form the content of my work”. Mahesh Dattani, follows in the footsteps of Nissim Ezekiel and Girish Karnad before him, and is a passionate city artist. The character of his plays is the city, in both concrete and abstract senses. In all his works including his radio plays, the city presents itself in multiple forms. In his works, the city space reaches the stage of theatrical representation as place, subject matter and cultural basis in various ways. It is an environment, a carefully planned and organized spatial area, a place with socially nurtured traditions and rituals, cultural norms and beliefs. Edward Soja in his book *The Postmetropolis*, uses the term ‘city space’ referring not only to the “architecturally built-in environment, a physical container for human activities”, but “more of a mutual and ideational field, conceptualized in imagery, reflexive thought, and symbolic representation, a conceived space of the imagination”. This notion as expressed by Soja is complimented by Dattani in his representation of the

contemporary, urban, postmodern Indian city. The city then ceases to be just a 'place'; it has its own spatiality.

Dattani writes in his book "Me and My Plays" that his plays reflect the milieu he is part of. Hence all his plays are set in megapolises of India. *Dance Like a Man* is set in Chennai, *Bravely Fought the Queen* in Mumbai, *Final Solutions* in Mumbai. What appears from a serious study of these plays is that the writer is infatuated with concocting the idea of the city as a spatial reality of post-modern India. Then it becomes the site of action; the city is not just a static geographical location. The urban space in Dattani is about the mindscapes of the characters. He says in his introduction to *City Plays*, "All three plays deal with urban dilemmas. Hidden faces, visible screams that leave the characters in moral dilemmas and the denial of the growing void in their lives. It is an ugly face of the Indian society but a face that has been successfully mirrored through these (city) plays. This holding up to our society is necessary, in order to understand the source of its ugliness, and the beauty that eludes it."(Dattani xi)

Like the setting of his plays, Dattani's choice of language is also urban, urban English, the kind spoken by young people in a city, hybrid, bi-lingual and contemporary. It is the English with which he chose to live, a prototype language with Indian undercurrents, a language naturally spoken, heard in urban India in an unselfconscious way. In his foreword to the script of *Final Solutions*, Dattani writes, "I am practising theatre in an extremely imperfect world where the politics of doing theatre in English looms large over anything else one does." After the initial performances of his play, *Dance Like a Man*, he was greeted with criticism for his choice of language: English. It was, considered, quite "un-Indian". As Indians continue to revise their complex relationship with the language, English theatre in India continues to evolve and forge an identity for itself. As India's theatre capital, Mumbai is home to various theatre groups, both young and formalised, researching new ways in which English can be used as the medium of theatre. From established veteran directors Alyque Padamsee, to less renowned and more experimental theatre groups staging plays in very 'Indian English', the modern, multilingual Indian city plays host to spirited performers who care to find and create their own language to communicate with each other and the audience. As Sunil Shanbag says, "As Indians, there are so many languages our ears are used to." In the theatre too we have to take advantage

of it. There is a cohort of contemporary Indian writers today who challenge the concept that English theatre is not 'Indian'. Mahesh Dattani, who was the whistle-blower of such a change, has inspired many after him to unapologetically choose English as the medium of their expression.

The relationships between characters in plays about the city can tell us about changing urban social relations as most of Dattani's plays do. Dattani tries to investigate the lived space of the city by focussing on the individual and collective experience of the characters. Edward Soja compares the investigation and understanding of the lived space to the writing of a biography, "an interpretation of the lived time of an individual...the attempt to understand and describe the lived time of human collectivities or societies". Dattani does this in his plays and gives us an account of a human travelling through his time and city space. Baudelaire calls such character a *Flaneur*, the gentleman stroller who "confounds dominant uses of the city by casually strolling through it, making his own pathways through it, and so his own version of it through his manner of performing it" (Harvie 49). The city often communicates through its citizens, customs and traditions. The spaces Dattani is trying to construct are inextricably linked to global modes of social and cultural practices centred in the city. Such spaces, Soja says, cannot be called simple "environmental containers" of life but they are "by the organisation and meaning of space, a product of social translation, temperament and experience." Dattani does not want to portray an unfamiliar and remote Westernized culture that could not be easily identified with by the urban Indian population. He is rather fascinated with the family structure embedded in the middle-class milieu, the history that the playwright is a member of, and would like to 'speak' with viewers of similar backgrounds.

Gendering of spaces is an issue that finds place in Dattani's canvas and he subtly challenges the stereo-types of work and gender. His play *Dance Like a Man* shows us the gendered nature of life in the cities where taking up a profession like dance is considered sacrilegious for a man. It is one of those professions which is reserved for women.. Inherently linked with the characters' personal struggles is the issue of whether or not they can live up to the patriarchal, bourgeois society's standards of what constitutes femininity and masculinity. This is seen in the character of "the dancing man", Jairaj who is scrutinised for pursuing his considerably feminine love of dancing. The "rigid questioning of maleness" faced by the

ambitious woman Ratna, money-controlled power structures, and an upcoming city in the grips of a colonial hangover are some of the issues reflected in this play. Dattani in the play strongly comments on gender binaries and highlights the prejudice encouraged by the city against the act of dancing. This is articulated by Amritlal. “A woman in a man’s world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in a woman’s world, pathetic” (Dattani 42). Jairaj tends to be burdened by patriarchy, repressed desires, and conventional role constructs. There are other issues Amritlal has with Jairaj like his interest in growing his hair long. Jairaj needs to have long hair because it will improve his dancing. However, Amritlal says that long hair is a signifier of femininity and that women's attributes are a challenge to Jairaj's masculine identity. Amritlal Parekh is the overbearing father in *Dance Like a Man* who attempts to direct life and choices of his son Jairaj and his daughter-in-law Ratna, despite being considered a socially egalitarian and open-minded person. Jairaj and Ratna are Bharatanatyam dancers. The play starts with Jairaj and Ratna in their sixties, looking back to their earlier hardships during the 1950s when there was a social stigma around *devadasis*. As the play proceeds we see that the city still nourishes this stigma amidst all claims of modernisation and social advancement. The popular perception about this dance form is that it is a prostitutes' dance, and members of "respectable families" do not practise or perform this style. Given that this body of dance has been categorically limited to women, it is twice as difficult for a man to pursue a career in it. Jairaj on the other hand denies to accept dance as a feminine art form and asserts his independence of choosing any profession he likes to choose. Thus, Amritlal appears in the play as representative of the modern, educated, urban elite who appears liberal on the face only to reveal that it was merely a facade. “Where is your dance taking you? I want to see what degree of freedom you achieve through your pranks.” (Dattani 89).

Dattani, however, portrays the women as stronger personalities. Both Ratna and Lata have done well in the masculine world, handling both the appreciators and the detractors with equal ability. Additionally, Ratna has succeeded in creating a supportive environment for Lata, her daughter, to become a successful dancer. After being both unsuccessful and tagged as ‘unmanly’ in his life, Jairaj has found ways to draw attention to Ratna's shortcomings. Hence, he recedes back to the essentialism of defined gender roles in order to reveal Ratna's lack of maternal qualities, for to him it is because of her lack of care that their son

Shankar died. Ratna has married outside her community, and Lata is about to marry a man from a different community. The women are not quite and submissive, but both are confident and vocal. Thus, the play also seems to comment on the reversal of gender roles in the city. Here, Dattani has conceptualised the two as more masculine than the men because both of them act as public space protagonists who effectively control the people. Thus, the play is a legitimate query into the social limits of pre-defined practices and spaces for men and women, gender norms, gender roles, and the resultant gender trouble under the pretext of a dispute at an urban home.

Dattani makes use of certain spatial codes to establish the city's lived experience.

The background coalesces with the central motifs and Dattani's stage also makes special use of the multiple layers to establish dramatic resonance. The stage settings are built to amalgamate multiple layers, the familial, the societal and the historical. The setting of the heritage home in which the characters live in *Dance Like a Man* is a case in point. It is a play set in the unique space of a modern Indian community, nestled between tradition and modernity. One such spatial code used to generate the conflict between tradition and modernity is the stage direction of the very first act: "A dimly-lit room in an old fashioned house in the heart of the city. Up centre is the entrance to the room – a huge arched doorway. There is a rather modern looking rear panel behind the entrance with a telephone and a modern painting on it. The rear panel can be slid to reveal a garden. Upstage left, a dance practice hall. Upstage right a staircase going to the bedrooms. Downstage right, exits into the kitchen. All the furniture in the room is at least forty years old." (Dattani 387).

Amritlal's ancestral home travels over time, changing character with its owners, sometimes dictating to the residents his own terms and conditions. In this sense, the interpretation of space varies with each age. Amritlal carries his own secrets buried within the walls of the house and tries to manipulate the next generation-Jairaj and Ratna-to carry it forward and Jairaj and Ratna do the same to Lata in turn. It obvious from the conversations between Vishwas and Lata that the house is located in a posh locality of the city, "the heart of the city" as they call it. Lata also says that the property is popular among builders many of whom have been eyeing it for a while now. The old sprawling house of Amritlal is a possible site for real

estate development. Earlier in the scene we hear telephonic conversations about the owners' willingness to sell the ancestral property. Dattani subtly addresses the burning issue of the paucity of space in India's cities; the rapid emergence of shopping malls under the effect of widespread urbanization and the proliferation of consumerism in the cities.

The furniture in the room including the old telephone set adds another valuable sign of urban living. The living room is a strange contrast of a modern room with old furniture which Vishwas jokingly says reminded him of a museum. It is actually a miniature version of the Indian city which is alive in all its heterogeneity. Partha Sarathi Dasgupta says, "Dattani's play is symbolic of the urban taste for fakes, the old telephone, now a dummy, being reduced to just a *sign*. It, like the bonsai in *Bravely Fought the Queen*, is a symbol of simulation. However, the dummy phone is a not just a simulation of an archaic model of a phone, it caters to the typical urban desire for the museumisation of the past. As a symbol it attempts at a perfect copy of the past, with the aid of an object – the phone in this case – which at one point of time belonged to a real present." (208). Dasgupta rightly goes on to quote Umberto Eco here who builds upon the 'urban fetish in American popular culture in his book "Theorising the Urban Space". In his work *Faith in Fakes* Eco deals with the concept of hyperreality. Hyperreality as a concept says that "it does not "exist" or "not exist;" it can be thought of as "reality by proxy." Both Baudrillard and Eco believe that, "the world we live in has been replaced by a copy world, where we seek simulated stimuli and nothing more." Dattani's stage also therefore is symbolic of a hyperreal urban existence where the past is just a fake, an "authentic fake".

"Let us not forget that there are eighty million English-speaking Indians and that certainly is not a small number. If at all we have to define the region of Indian English, I would use the word 'urban' and not 'elitist'. Elitism has existed in the country for thousands of years," he asserts. In each of his plays Dattani takes up contemporary issues that plague the cities. Communal tensions, gender politics, marginalised sexualities are some of the issues that find place in his plays. In *Final Solutions* (1993), Dattani takes up the issue of communal strife and speaks for the minority sections of the society. The minorities have been subject to exclusionary politics down the ages. They inhabit the same city, share the common spaces, but still they are treated as outsiders. Areas in the cities are ear-marked for minority populations to live in. Just

as the slum-dweller never becomes a part of the mainstream city-dweller, the minorities are also outcasts. As Deborah Stevenson observes: “our cities are becoming even more sharply divided into ghettos of homogeneity than, previously, was the case. Rather than seeking heterogeneity in their urban lives, people actively seek to avoid contact with difference. The result is the adoption by middle-and upper- class urban dwellers of increasingly elaborate strategies to control their environments and to avoid unexpected encounters with the *other*” (44).

The stage setting mirrors this segregation as three separate places on the stage are used for the Muslim Chorus, Bobby and Javed, and Daksha. The play charts its course around the lives of three generations of an urban, middle-class Gujarati family. Hardika, the grandmother, Ramnik, her son, Aruna, her daughter-in-law, and Smita, her granddaughter. Hardika still lives in memory of the partition of India when her father was murdered by a Muslim. Ramnik is disturbed when he comes to know that his shop actually belonged to a Muslim friend’s father, who was killed by his own kinsmen. Smita, the third generation representative of the family is a city-bred cosmopolitan girl. However, she cannot allow a relationship with a Muslim boy because her family still nurtures the stereotypes associated with Muslims. The problem is that people still chose to live in memory, however, a selective memory of the violence of riots, not the good times the communities have shared in the common space of the city. Around the time of the partition riots, the grandmother is divided into Daksha, her younger, more innocent self, and Hardika, her present more sectarian self, who is wary of Muslims. Her son, Ramnik, gives shelter to two Muslim youths, Bobby and Javed, when they are attacked by a mob after riots erupt around a procession of Hindu chariots passing through a Muslim street, allegedly killing the priest. Ramnik is forced to face the painful constraints of his own liberal consciousness and dig out the violent legacies of India's Independence through his night-long conversations with them. The play is indirectly based on the actual communal conflicts in India, where Hindu religious processions took place in the midst of friction between Hindus and Muslims at both regional and national regions. It was linked to the infamous Ram Rath Yatra in 1989 undertaken by BJP leader Lal Krishna Advani from Gujarat to Ayodhya, which was directly due to the Hindu fundamentalist fanaticism that led to the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992, which was founded on the

alleged site of a Hindu temple in the 16th century. As a final solution to this problem of religious fundamentalism in the city the play proposes to tolerate, accept and forget.

Most of the community clashes, shelter-related violence, protests for basic needs, and political violence have been centred in the cities in the last thirty years or so. The population of a city increases both on account of new births and internal migration. The economy has been unable to provide jobs and income for a large percentage of rural migrants, particularly the urban poor. The vast numbers of urban poor who work in the informal sector have limited ability, less schooling, and lower resources than their comparatively superior urban counterparts. Due to the speed of urbanisation in many developing countries, such as India, many rural areas are increasingly becoming parts of urban areas, where the absence of urban facilities and open spaces, cultivable land, and water bodies remain at least in the initial stages of urbanisation. In order to protect the environment, there is frequently a demand to maintain open spaces like this. Urban India has nonetheless become a site of ceaseless struggle for civic amenities, and a place for asserting caste, class, religious, regional, political and gender identities. Private, social and political disputes have led to the loss of life and property on a large scale in the states of Gujarat, Maharashtra, Delhi, Bengal etc. These are mostly clustered in India's post-independence megapolises. The city witnesses on one hand a rapidly evolving cultural and religious hybridity and on the other hand an effort of traditionalists to preserve a kind of cultural and religious Puritanism. Needless to say, these factors are then exploited by local political forces to water their own vested interests. The play *Final Solutions* is a live example of how theatre has become a place where such facets of city life are represented and highlighting in the process the unique ability of the theatre to create a 'community space' within the urban landscape

“RAMNIK. Nobody is asking you to pray all day.

ARUNA. Who do you think is protecting this house?

RAMNIK. Who do you think is creating all this trouble? (Exits.)” (Dattani 84)

Henri Lefebvre notes: “Any determinate and hence demarcated space necessarily embraces some things and excludes others; what it rejects may be relegated to nostalgia or it may be simply forbidden. Such a space asserts, negates and denies. It has some characteristics of a ‘subject’ and some of an ‘object’ ” (Lefebvre 99).

Spaces in everyday life are well-defined in terms of their purposes, utility, content and qualitative existence. Because of this, citizenship in modern urban areas can become a gateway to a variety of nationalist and authoritarian ideologies. In the plays taken for close study now there is a sense of defined spaces. The overwhelming majority of India's urban and in most cases immigrant population live in slums, the so-called *jhuggi jhopris*, most of them unauthorized and therefore without clean water, sanitation and hygiene facilities. These people never fully become insiders in the city; they are almost perpetually the outsider. They are the ‘other’ to the mainstream of the city. Spaces in the city are also ear-marked for the minority populations. The minorities are not allowed to live alongside the Hindu majority population and are not supposed to enter sacred places of the Hindus. In this regard Sanjay Kumar says, “The nature of the urban spaces and their dynamics of exclusion also creates not only the institutionalised slums but also the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ spaces or even endow the domestic spaces with memory and history as in Mahesh Dattani's significant dramatic text, *Final Solutions* (1990), about communalism and its recurring patterns in India.”(8). The action in this play takes place partly within the urban household space and the other half takes place in ‘actual and’ ‘forbidden’ areas of the city. In terms of the spaces of aggression, the artifacts with which religious groups are identified and also the perpetuation of racial memories are carried out and incidents of reciprocal aggression between Hindus and Muslims post-partition are theatrically re-enacted generation after generation. The city as noted earlier has often been a volatile space where ethno-religious conflict in India has taken place and hence is an important marker of the existence of communalization in it.

As in *Dance Like a Man*, minimal use of characters has been made here. The same actor plays Hardika and Daksha, subtly showcasing the merging of the past and present. A sense of history is created by the use of masks, ramps and spatial delineation. The ramp which is used by the chorus and the masks which the mad mobs wear show the aspects of mimetic crowd behaviour. The mob has no face, it is anonymous, it

has only a religious agenda which it mimics thinking it to be safe because others are doing the same. Such anonymity and mimetic crowd behaviour has become a reality of city-life today. Similarly, the ramp which is a segregated, outside, peripheral space is the place where crucial revelations are made by Smita and Javed. It is here that they raise doubts about the dogmas of religion and the fundamentalism it ensues. It is here that they land up after they go beyond the limits of 'home'. Bobby commits an act of 'desecration' when he picks up Lord Krishna's idol from the puja area. In the background the chorus shouts and violent drum-beating is heard. The use of such background effects is an acknowledgment of the stage's perceived reality and its ability to expose our own secret self. The final scene of confrontation in *Final Solutions* is nothing but pure theatre, as Bobby trespasses into the prohibited area, the sacrosanct *pujaghar* and picks up the idol, showing that all of our conventional ideologies of space and custodianship can be dismantled, simply, with one step.

Dattani says in the Preface to *Collected Plays*, about a comment on *Final Solutions* "Your plays are preaching to the converted! You should do *Final Solutions* in the villages. Such prejudice! How can anyone be so blind to their own remarks? Assumptions galore that the citified English speaking people are all liberal minded and villagers are communal minded and bigoted. Worse is when that particular remark is followed by 'it would make sense in Kannada or Hindi'. Meaning, 'We are not bigots, it's those bloody vernacs who need to think about all this'. That too in the same breath as professing to be liberal-minded people." It is this hypocrisy and complacency associated with the urban populace that Dattani wants to expose through his plays. Be it the Partition of India on religious lines, the Babri Masjid demolition and the Gujarat riots, all of them have been sparked off in urban strongholds of the country as the urban centres are the seats of power. It is from these cities that decisions and policies are taken and such policy-makers make their presence felt. Surprisingly, urban tensions, minor as well as major, often share common bearings with certain dramatic and performance aspects. The highly debated silence of the urban Indian populace, their growing "depoliticization" and connivance in some recent religious conflicts, often refer to the "theatrical" and "spectatorial" facets of urban violence.

While diversity or multiplicity is a major component of urban spatiality, it is at the same time divisive. The Indian city or cities in general are essentially gendered. Deborah Stevenson says that “Women's experiences of urban spaces may be very different from those of men, although it may seem that men and women reside in almost the same areas of the city. Research has shown, however, that in spite of this spatial co-presence, men and women not only use city space in different ways but also experience it differently” (38). Furthermore, since gender roles in Indian society are taken for granted, the gendered nature of urban experience is relatively unnoticed in our country, as opposed to rural communities where conservative diktats leave very little room for divergences. However, Stevenson has a word of caution for such covert discriminations underlying a liberal facade, “the city could be divided (at least at the level of ideology) into discreet male and female zones” (38). She says, “Underpinning this argument is the recognition that men and women traditionally have performed very different roles in society – with men travelling to work each day and women remaining at home to take charge of the household, and care for children and elderly relatives. This segregation is often called the gender division of labour.”(38)

While *Dance Like a Man* discusses such gendering of work in the liberated space of a city, *Tara* (1995) takes up the issue of gender bias through the story of conjoined twins Tara and Chandan. The play subtly brings out the pseudo liberalism of the urban societies. It is a play about gender discrimination. Instances of female foeticide and gender discrimination are common in rural societies. However, the urban elite claim to be progressive and liberal. Contesting the fact through this play Dattani exposes their hypocrisy. Chandan and Tara are conjoined twins born into the elite Bangalore household of the Patels and about to be separated by a surgery. Educated members of the family manipulate this surgery and give the third leg to the male child though it would survive better in Tara's body. Our society prefers everything that is male and subjugates everything that is female. Hence, Tara's own mother fails to protest against this injustice and succumbs to the pressures of her father and her husband. The play uses music, flashbacks and frequent movements into the past to bring out the tragedy of Tara. Ironically enough, Chandan apologises to Tara in the end as she cannot even claim the tragedy to be her tragedy. It is after all Chandan's tragedy.

The Unicef website shows an article on Female Foeticide by Alka Gupta. It says that Bachelors in Haryana fly 3,000 km across the country to find a wife for them. For steadily fewer girls in Haryana, the only way to change their single status is to try brides from as far away as Kerala. The brides, it goes on to say, did not disappear immediately. Decades of sex determination tests and female foeticide that has gained dimensions of genocide in the Indian states. The website further says, “This is only the tip of the demographic and social problems confronting India in the coming years. Skewed sex ratios have moved beyond the states of Punjab, Haryana, Delhi, Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh. With news of increasing number of female foetuses being aborted from Orissa to Bangalore there is ample evidence to suggest that the next census will reveal a further fall in child sex ratios throughout the country. The decline in child sex ratio in India is evident by comparing the census figures. In 1991, the figure was 947 girls to 1000 boys. Ten years later it had fallen to 927 girls for 1000 boys.” As the report suggests it is only a myth that gender discrimination and preference for the girl child are only prevalent in the rural areas of the country. The so called urban elite are equally if not more guilty and harbour the same primitive mindset where the male child is the carrier of the generation. The female child is still a neglected unwanted entity. *Tara* exemplifies this attitude of the urban elite.

Dattani says about *Tara*, “I see *Tara* as a play about the male self and female self. The male self is being preferred in all cultures. The play is about the separation of self and the resultant angst” (129). Culturally in India, women or female children were at the receiving end of both open and hidden oppression in the family and civic spheres of life. This sexism is not only directed at the female body, but is often essentially a kind of aggression that combines the emotional and the behavioral, and therefore has long-standing consequences. This trend can be translated from a primitive desire for dominance powered by colonialism in terms of social, fiscal, political, physical, and psychological fall-outs. Sociologically, 'patriarchy' could be used as a term for suggesting different kinds of patriarchal control of people through forces that have the organization to aid and abet such crimes. *Tara* (1990) has the ability of wide-ranging community engagement that can promote an atmosphere of understanding, opposition and constructive methods of combating such harmful gender bias. Dattani has brought forth the disturbing truth of a female always playing second fiddle to a male child.

The dictionary of critical theory defines abjection as “both the founding and traumatic moment of separation from the child’s archaic and undifferentiated relationship with its mother, and the process of the expulsion from the body of substances such as excrement or menstrual blood (Kristeva 1980). At the same time, the experience of abjection establishes bodily boundaries by facilitating the introduction of a distinction between the inner and the outer, and then between the ego and the non-ego. It encapsulates the memory of the violence of separation from a level of existence prior to the establishment of object-relations, and the memory is reactivated by the expulsion from the body of abjected substances. The abject is also evoked by the ritual ceremonies of defilement and purification that repeat and reinscribe the universal tendency to regress at the archaic level. The process that establishes boundaries also implies the threat that boundaries can be breached, that meaning can collapse and that subject can be absorbed back into a suffocating relationship with an archaic image of the mother, who is feared as a potential cannibal.” In short abjection can be compared to ‘a state of being outcast’ from one’s own environment. Tara can be read as an abject of her brother Chandan. The patriarchy thinks that Tara is a burden on Chandan’s body. They want Tara’s body to be separated or expelled from Chandan’s body even it means sacrificing Tara’s life. All this after knowing fully well that Tara has greater chances of survival than Chandan. Mee herself points out in —A Note on the Play, “ Tara and Chandan —are two sides of the same self rather than two separate entities and that Dan, in trying to write the story of his own childhood, has to write Tara’s story. Dan writes Tara’s story to rediscover the neglected half of himself, as a means of becoming whole” (320). The play shows how the amputated female self colludes with masculinity, and how the feminine self behaves as the masculine gene within the household, bearing its influence and contributing to its sustenance. Tara documents how culture, media science and medicine in the elitist city form an unholy connection to unfairly exploit the female body. The play also highlights the role of manipulative doctors and surgeons in the cities who carry on such illegal trade under the guise of doctors. Such acts involve the exchange of huge sums of money and yet again the female body becomes an object that can be traded and sold off. The cities today abound in shady clinics where prenatal sex determination is practiced illegally. Several touts/agents act as middlemen between these doctors and the rich families who practice female foeticide to save their family’s false sense of honour and pride.

The last decade has seen an upsurge in performance of plays in English. This marks a departure from the Dattani tradition in which written plays would be performed for urban audiences. These young playwrights reflect the cosmopolitan nature of Indian Cities where English is no longer the 'alien' tongue but the language closest to their heart. A growing breed of young playwrights around the country are putting aside the long-established theatrical tradition of performing plays based on established scripts, and instead, reacting to the urban realities in which they live, with their original work using unscripted story-lines, monologues, choosing alternative performance spaces. Themes like road rage, widow remarriage, sex before marriage and homophobia are taken up by them. With expanded incentives and innovative scripts causing a buzz in the theatre community, emerging authors may find it easier to 'break through' the stage than ever before. "Abhishek Majumdar Is the Leading Light of a New Tribe of Urban Story-Tellers", reads the headline of an interview published in The Times of India, Bangalore on 27th November 2011. The young and dynamic playwright Abhishek Majumdar, whose play *The Djinns of Eidgah* (2012) was being staged at London's Royal Court Theatre, quite aptly says that "Indian theatre is going through a cultural boom".² His claims are justified as one sits through his play *The Djinns of Eidgah* (2013) which probes the Kashmir conflict.

The city denies any kind of homogeneity. No two cities are alike even though they are cities in their own right. While some cities sparkle with social, infrastructural and cultural developments some are torn with violence, blood-shed and internal strife. Somewhere peace is a right and in others a luxury. The paradise on earth, Kashmir has become 'a bleeding city'³. Grappling with sectarian strife, insurgency and violence ever since its controversial creation, it is yet to be developed to its full possibility. *The Djinns of Eidgah* is a city play in its choice of such a city which is a reality in India today. It tells the story of Asrafi and Bilal. Ashrafi and Bilal have grown-up in a war zone and lost peace in the process. They have seen the

² See <http://theculturetrip.com/asia/india/articles/abhishek-majumdar-s-the-djinns-of-eidgah-the-ghosts-and-conflicts-of-indian-theatre/>

³ Phrase borrowed from a novel of the same name by British author Alex Preston published in 2010.

extremes of human strife and are torn between “escaping the myths of war and the cycles of resistance... Interweaving true stories and testimonies with Islamic storytelling, the play paints a magical portrait of a generation of radicalised kids, and a beautiful landscape lost to conflict.”⁴ The dramaturgy is also an innovation of sorts in its use of the technique of *Dastaan*, an ancient story-telling technique used in Kashmir, and fusing it with real life accounts. The use of this technique often blurs the distinction between life and death, natural and supernatural and brings out the confusions and conflicts of the Kashmiris. It rightly reinforces the ‘in-between’ness of their existence. Ashrafi cannot get over her father’s death, Dr. Baig tries to reconcile the warring sides and Bilal is the epitome of the confused youth who is at the crossroads of ideologies. Junaid, Dr. Baig’s son becomes a mujahideen and stands for young boys swayed by the wrong ideology. The empty stage with minimal props and occasional sounds of bullet firing creates a curfew-like tensed atmosphere that parallels the atmosphere in the city of Kashmir. In such a state it’s only luxurious to remain sane. Devoid of melodrama and jingoism, the play presents a poignant tale of a lost paradise, to a generation of metropolitan audiences.

Ramu Ramnathan is an Indian playwright who has written many critically acclaimed plays. The Mumbai Theatre Guide’s webpage reads, “Ramu's work bears an urbane testimony to a country that has never been quite easy to decipher. He is a writer who has transformed social and political commentary through the multi-layered tapestry of performance.”⁵ With their words and ideas, Indian playwrights have evolved and reinvented Indian theatre over the years. While the script can disrupt and repair religious intolerance, class inequality, and chauvinism with the use of basic instruments in a theatrical performance, only a few playwrights have effectively used their pen to this effect. Ramu Ramanathan, a dramatist and director, is one of them. Ramanathan is acclaimed as being one of the most politically aware playwrights of his generation, and his plays have accurately portrayed the world we inhabit. His oeuvre contains works about lost histories, incidents, and characters who, despite their major social, political, and cultural

⁴ See <http://www.royalcourttheatre.com/whats-on/the-djinns-of-eidgah>

⁵ Interview with Ramu Ramanathan By Deepa Punjani for Mumbai Theatre Guide,

<http://www.mumbai theatreguide.com/dramas/interviews/27-ramu-ramanathan-interview.asp>

contributions, were never heard. Ramanathan's 2005 play, *Cotton 56 Polyester 84* brought up the highly politicised problems of the teeming mill areas and the subsequent impact on the mill workers in the city of Mumbai. The subtitle of Ramanathan's play *Cotton 56, Polyester 84* (2006) reads, "The city that was Mumbai". The subtitle aptly brings out the theme of the play which focuses on the city of Mumbai, at a time when it was still Bombay; in Ramanathan's words, 'a city which is dying'⁶. The rapid spate of industrialization has diminished the importance of the once booming textile industry of Mumbai, run mainly by mill workers in Girani. Ramanathan says in an interview, "The play is very Mumbai. The city was primarily built by the Girani kaamgars. When we talk of Mumbai as the financial capital, the textile mills have been at the core of it in the last 150 years."⁷ But globalisation, developmental policies of the government, imported machinery has reduced the life of this community to penury. Mumbai is rapidly becoming a place where there is no place for sub-cultures, the working classes. In this case the mill workers were replaced by machines and malls. Ramanathan goes on to say, "The play is also our own understanding of the present in terms of what happened to Mumbai in the last 50 years. There was a decline of the communists, rise of the Shiv Sena, the arrival of Datta Samanth, the mafia came, and then globalisation. If you understand this process, then you will have a clear understanding of why certain decisions are being taken. The play is of course about the working class, but it's also of a city which is dying."⁸ In the play Kaka and Bhau speak out in protest against this capitalist culture but to no avail. Bhau's son eventually joins the mafia because he has no work at home. This was the state of the city of Mumbai

Ramu Ramanathan is undoubtedly quite skilled in the playwright's craft and has been able to offer gripping dramatic frameworks for the research he undertakes for his plays. The play uses drama as a tool to bring to light the highly politicized problem of teeming mill-land area in Mumbai and its impact on the trajectory of the erstwhile mill workers of Mumbai city. The by-line for the play, "the city that was

⁶ Interview given to the Hindu, Published on 3rd August, 2007, 'The Inner Enemy', <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-features/tp-fridayreview/the-inner-enemy/article2273221.ece>

⁷ See <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-features/tp-fridayreview/the-inner-enemy/article2273221.ece>

⁸ See <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-features/tp-fridayreview/the-inner-enemy/article2273221.ece>

Mumbai” hence could not have been more telling. This three-dimensional mural which forms the background of the play is the perfect illustration of the central concern of the play. The towering skyline of the mural hides the spaces that were once the skyline of the city of Mumbai. The audience at once connects to this theme and recognises the essence of the play. Kaka and Bhau are poor mill-workers and act as commentators on this serious socio-political debate. Kaka and Bhau’s stories are interconnected. But for a worn out street light and a round seating area the stage is bare. It is evident almost as soon as the play starts that this space is the space that serves as a meeting point where all voices of dissent can be voiced. Its presence is a source of strength and support for those whose voices differ. The plot, dialogue, and live music emphasises the social histories of the characters. Ramanathan’s research sources include face to face interviews and meetings with beleaguered mill-workers, live courtroom trials and the book, “One Hundred Years, One Hundred Voices” by Neera Adarkar and Meera Menon. “My every play is a response to the times we inhabit. I have written plays about things that needed attention. Some of them are reflective of society. We have been taught about heroes in the history, but we never get the sense of voices that are second in command and the voices in the shadows that have evaporated,” says Ramanathan.

Rage Theatre, based in Mumbai, produces plays written and enacted originally in English. One such play is *Pune Highway* (2004) written by Rahul Da Cunha. Yasmin Alibhai-Brown writing in *The Independant*, London, said “Playwright Rahul Da Cunha exposes the degeneracy of contemporary, moneyed Indian society. The crude, pared down English lacks compassion or grace and becomes a metaphor for India’s fast, thoughtless and furious globalization. It is as powerful and challenging as John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* must have been in 1956, or Pinter’s early work. It is English again, breaking out and starting out a new trajectory in its unending history”. Cunha’s love for the city of Mumbai is proven time and again as it keeps recurring as the background of his plays. *Pune Highway* is the story of four friends who land up in a small, dingy hotel room off Mumbai-Pune highway. They are placed in such a situation where they can save either a friend or themselves. Da Cunha puts to test their nature and integrity by placing them in a complicated situation. The way they react provides an insight into the nature and values held by several others of their generation who live in the Indian cities. The Playwright’s note to the plays says that it portrays the consumptive nature of the present generation who chose betrayal, greed and disloyalty over

childhood friendship, thinking only of their own survival. The language spoken by the characters is a concoction of colloquial Hindi and Indian English that one often overhears while crossing youngsters in coffee-shops, colleges and other hang-outs of young people in the cities. The scene shifts from the Pune Expressway, to shady hotel room on the way serve to remind us that the play is definitely ‘today’s’.

His play *Me, Kash and Cruise* (2012) also tries to capture the changing scenario of the city of Mumbai over a span of twenty-eight years. It is the story of three friends, Pooja Thomas (Me), Rakesh Kashyap (Kash) and Parvez Khan (Cruise). The trio relives their life back from 1984 as they witness Bombay changing into Mumbai. They recall everything, from the blasts, the riots, the rise of moral policing, Bollywood mania, etc. and in the process acknowledge the love-hate relationship they have come to share with the city; almost like a “lover’s quarrel with the past”⁹. The play is a fine specimen of urban drama for it paints a vivid picture of a city coming of age.

Also emerging in the theatre circles is a Calcutta based group MAD (Mad About Drama), set up by Soumya Mukherjee, Sourendra Bhattacharya and Soham Majumdar in 2011. Their play *With Love, Calcutta* (2014) tells several stories in which there is only one common factor –the city of Kolkata. “We (MAD) came together with only one aim — to talk about things that no one wants to, and in the crudest way possible.

Kolkata, the city of joy, has espoused the interest of several artists over the ages. It was once the cultural capital of India. Kolkata is not only for Durga Puja, it enjoys Eid and Christmas as well. Its lanes and by-lanes are smeared with the history of India’s struggle for independence. At the same time it is a metro city inhabited by the urban elite. *With Love, Calcutta* is one of the attempts to talk about such issues in Kolkata. Every short story presents a contradiction that exists in the city, sometimes it’s about a 15-year-old who refuses to be happy during Durga Puja, or through a father-son confrontation on old and new values,” says Aritra Sengupta , the director of the play which was recently staged at the Prithvi Theatres in Mumbai. He adds to it saying, “The contradictions, which are highlighted in *With Love, Calcutta* are such that people

⁹ Title of a book of same name written by Dr.Ranjan Ghosh.

from every city in the world can relate to — be it confrontations between beliefs of older and newer generations, a growing culture of consumerism, globalisation, changing urban aspirations or migration.”¹⁰

With Love, Calcutta is very ‘today’, a play which includes today’s music, selfies, the debate about Calcutta vs. Kolkata, the ‘ghoti-bangal’ conflict and so on; after all these are things that make our ‘City of Joy’. The group also uses alternative spaces to stage its plays. For example, the play called *The Burqa, the Bikini and other Veils* (2014) was staged inside the courtyard of *Baitanik*, a heritage building in Kolkata. The play was also staged in a posh pub in Calcutta, Mocha, with Rs.100 as entry fee and a complimentary cappuccino. Its efforts were successful as it drew young enthusiasts into watching and appreciating the play. Moving on with its innovative spirit and search for alternative spaces, the group plans to organize a pub-theatre festival in Calcutta. The very title of the theatre festival, which sounds oxymoronic to the traditional ear, proves the story of contemporary Indian theatre to be a story of crossing boundaries, undergoing a renaissance of sorts. Soumya Mukherjee says that the group plans to release the sound track of their next play in a bookstore. *Sajano Ghotona* (2012), which was staged in Presidency University on the occasion of Nandigram Diwas, is a stinging political satire. The play foregrounds the dirty politics that political leaders engage themselves in, only to remain in power. The play aroused controversy for its oblique reference to Miss Mamata Banerjee, the Bengal Chief Minister’s comment on the Park street rape case, “*eta sampurno bhabe ekta sajano ghotona*”. The play can be taken as a live example of how the power dynamics mapped in the city comes alive through theatre.

Thus contemporary English theatre in India from 1970s onwards is predominantly an urban phenomenon. The city takes the centre stage for playwrights of the era. The different types of plays undertaken for study when viewed from the perspective of the city are City Plays. They articulate urban *angst*, boost an urban revolution, map the power struggles within the city and in the process give voice to the voiceless. In doing so, they endeavour to bring the margins to the centre. The plays assessed in this chapter revolve around a few evocative experiences with the city and the intricacies of living in them. These texts are charged with possibilities of being acted out on the stage to bring to life the experiences of living in the

¹⁰ Interview given to Hassan M. Kamal, ‘A slice of Kolkata in Mumbai’, for *Midday* published on 30th June 2014.

city. The urban climate in the city erects fences and divisions to segregate different communities in order to establish notions such as “insider” or “outsider”. The city is a site of possibility because it gives us a common ground to interact with others and develop new relationships, and structure our lives; in the present day the city has been opened up in diverse ways by the playwrights discussed in the chapter in their pursuit of a vocabulary of urban experience. All the plays are city plays and the city lives in them. The plays unfold the discourses of the city through debate, disagreement and intervention.