

Tradition, Experimentation, and the Genius of Vijay Tendulkar in Realm of Drama

Mahesh Madhav Deshmukh¹, Dr. Surendra S. Khandekar²

¹Asst Prof Sonopant Dandekar Arts, V.S. Apte Commerce and M.H. Mehta Science College

²Head & Associate Professor, Dr. S. D. D. Arts College and Commerce and Science College
Wada, District: Palghar.

How to cite this article: Mahesh Madhav Deshmukh, Dr. Surendra S. Khandekar(2023). Tradition, Experimentation, and the Genius of Vijay Tendulkar in Realm of Drama. *Library Progress International*, 43(2), 2064-2068

Abstract

Vijay Tendulkar stands as a pivotal figure in the modernization and transformation of Indian theatre, particularly through his groundbreaking work in Marathi drama. Emerging in the 1960s alongside contemporaries such as Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar, and Girish Karnad, Tendulkar helped usher in an era of modernity, experimentation, and social consciousness in Indian drama. His plays, including *Silence! The Court Is In Session*, *Sakharam Binder*, and *Ghashiram Kotwal*, are renowned for their unflinching realism, psychological depth, and incisive critique of societal norms, power dynamics, and gender relations. Drawing from his experiences as a journalist, Tendulkar infused his works with acute social awareness, exploring the tensions between individual aspiration and societal restriction, and the complexities of human relationships in a rapidly changing India.

Tendulkar's dramatic art is characterized by its originality, innovative narrative structures, and willingness to confront taboo subjects such as caste, gender inequality, and violence. His portrayal of women—both as victims and agents—reflects a deep engagement with the struggles of marginalized groups within a patriarchal society. Many of his plays sparked controversy for their bold themes and realistic depiction of social issues, yet they also earned critical acclaim and numerous awards, including the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award and the Padma Bhushan.

This research situates Tendulkar's oeuvre within the broader trajectory of Indian theatre, analyzing both his critical reception and the controversies his works provoked. It further assesses his enduring legacy in social reform, education, and global theatre, highlighting how his plays continue to provoke, disturb, and inspire audiences. Ultimately, Tendulkar's contribution transcends regional and national boundaries, establishing him as a visionary whose works remain relevant and influential in contemporary discourse.

Introduction

The evolution of Indian theatre in the twentieth century is a story of remarkable transformation, marked by the interplay of regional traditions and the emergence of a modern, nationally conscious dramatic art. The first half of the century, especially under the influence of British drama, saw a renaissance in Indian language theatre. This period witnessed the rise of numerous regional amateur theatre groups such as Sombhu Mitra's Bhauroopi in Bengali, Ranghabhoomi and Natyamandal in Gujarati, Prithvi Theatre and Mumbai Marathi Sahitya Sangha in Maharashtra, The Telugu Little Theatre, Andhra Theatre Foundation, and Dishantar in Delhi. These groups contributed to a vibrant and diverse theatrical culture, laying the groundwork for a pan-Indian dramatic movement that would flourish after independence. The founding of the Sahitya Akademi in 1954, with its mission to promote unity in Indian literature, further encouraged the recognition of drama as a vital component of the nation's literary and cultural identity.

It was within this context of creative ferment that a new generation of playwrights emerged in the 1960s, ushering in modernity and experimentation in Indian drama. Arundhati Banarjee observes, “In 1960s four dramatists from different regions of India, writing in their own regional languages were said to have ushered modernity into the sphere of Indian drama and theatre. They were Mohan Rakesh in Hindi, Badal Sircar in Bengali, Vijay Tendulkar in Marathi and Girish Karnad in Kannada... Tendulkar, however, has not only been the most productive but has also introduced the greatest variation in his dramatic creations” (Banarjee xviii). Among these, Vijay Tendulkar stands out as the playwright who transformed Marathi theatre from a regional phenomenon into a force of national and international significance. As Banarjee further notes, “Vijay Tendulkar has been in the vanguard of not just Marathi but of Indian theatre for almost forty years,” a testament to his enduring influence and innovation (Banarjee xviii).

Tendulkar’s ascent to prominence was not simply a result of prolific output, but stemmed from a radical reimagining of the possibilities of drama itself. Deeply rooted in the liberal tradition of Maharashtra—a tradition shaped by centuries of social reform, spiritual inquiry, and political activism—Tendulkar’s plays are characterized by acute social awareness, psychological depth, and a willingness to confront uncomfortable truths. While Tendulkar wrote in other genres, his name is inextricably linked with drama, a medium he mastered with remarkable skill and originality.

The period preceding Tendulkar’s emergence is often regarded as a time of stagnation in Marathi theatre, marked by escapism and formulaic treatments of social reform or political propaganda. Tendulkar’s arrival injected new life into this tradition, steering it away from didacticism and towards a realism that exposed the complexities and contradictions of contemporary society. His plays are rooted in his keen observations as a journalist and a sensitive citizen, drawing from the lived experiences of the urban lower middle class and the shifting dynamics of post-independence India. The individual’s struggle for autonomy, the tension between personal aspiration and social restriction, and the intricate web of human relationships form the core of his dramatic vision.

A hallmark of Tendulkar’s dramatic art is his refusal to idealize life or offer simplistic solutions. Instead, he presents his characters—men and women alike—as flawed, vulnerable, and deeply human, “made of the same clay as we ourselves are”. His protagonists are often caught in situations that pit their desires against the weight of social convention, and the resulting conflicts are rendered with a psychological realism that resonates across boundaries of class, gender, and region. Plays such as *Shrimant*, *Silence! The Court Is In Session*, *The Vultures*, *Sakharam Binder*, and *Ghashiram Kotwal* exemplify this approach, exploring themes of power, violence, sexuality, and the corrosive effects of societal hypocrisy.

Tendulkar’s *Silence! The Court Is In Session* marked a turning point, earning him national recognition for its unflinching portrayal of a woman’s struggle against social condemnation. *Sakharam Binder*, with its bold language and depiction of patriarchal exploitation, became a lightning rod for controversy, challenging the boundaries of what could be represented on the Indian stage. *Ghashiram Kotwal*, perhaps his most internationally acclaimed work, uses the historical setting of the Peshwa era to examine the corrupting influence of power, blending folk performance traditions with modernist dramaturgy to create a play that is both rooted in Marathi culture and universally resonant. As noted in critical commentary, “Ghashiram Kotwal is not a typical history play according to writer himself, it has not been written to depict history or give any message from it but still history has been used for main theme. The drama depicts the society during the age of Peshwas in Poona a society ridden with corruption and injustice”.

A distinctive feature of Tendulkar’s oeuvre is his engagement with the condition of women in a patriarchal society. His female characters—Leela Benare in *Silence! The Court Is In Session*, Champa in *Sakharam Binder*, Jyoti in *Kanyadan*, Sarita in *Kamala*, and Baby in *Baby*—are depicted as both victims and agents, struggling against the constraints imposed by social norms and economic dependence. Tendulkar himself remarked, “Women by the very nature of their place in male dominated society, are more exposed than man and their struggle with society is thus more intense and desperate... This is more so when women are economically

dependent on men which makes them more helpless and vulnerable”. Yet, even his economically independent women are shown to be ensnared by the expectations and limitations of their environment.

Tendulkar’s plays are notable for their thematic diversity and structural innovation. He explores not only the conflicts between individuals and society, but also the tensions between different ideologies, generations, and ways of life. His work is marked by an “originality in terms of intellectual approach and creativity in terms of imaginative sensibility,” as well as a critical acumen that is both subjective and objective, personal and impersonal, local and cosmopolitan. His refusal to offer easy answers or moral judgments invites audiences to grapple with the ambiguities and contradictions of human existence, making his plays as relevant today as when they were first written.

In sum, Vijay Tendulkar’s contribution to Indian theatre is both foundational and transformative. By drawing on the liberal tradition of Maharashtra and engaging with the pressing social issues of his time, he elevated Marathi drama to new heights and helped shape the trajectory of modern Indian theatre. His works continue to provoke, disturb, and inspire, challenging audiences to confront the realities of their own lives and societies. This research article envisages to situate Vijay Tendulkar’s dramatic work within the broader evolution of Indian theatre, examining both the critical acclaim and the controversies his plays have provoked.

Objective of the Study

To contextualize Tendulkar’s dramatic art within the broader trajectory of Indian theatre, considering both his critical reception and the controversies his works have generated.

This includes an assessment of his impact on social reform and education, as well as his enduring legacy in Indian and global theatre.

Vijay Tendulkar (1928–2008) stands as a transformative figure in Indian theatre, bridging regional Marathi drama and national theatrical discourse while challenging societal norms through unflinching realism. His works, deeply rooted in Maharashtra’s liberal tradition, redefined modern Indian drama by confronting themes of power, gender, caste, and individual-society conflicts. This analysis situates Tendulkar within the broader trajectory of Indian theatre, examining his critical reception, controversies, and enduring legacy in social reform and global theatrical traditions.

The mid-20th century witnessed a renaissance in Indian theatre, driven by regional movements that blended indigenous traditions with global influences. As Arundhati Banarjee notes, the 1960s marked a turning point when playwrights like Mohan Rakesh (Hindi), Badal Sircar (Bengali), Girish Karnad (Kannada), and Vijay Tendulkar (Marathi) “ushered modernity into the sphere of Indian drama and theatre” (Banarjee xviii). Among these, Tendulkar emerged as the most prolific and versatile, injecting Marathi theatre with a “new dimension” through his exploration of psychological and social complexities (Banarjee xviii).

Tendulkar’s plays transcended regional boundaries, transforming Marathi theatre into a national phenomenon. His works, such as *Ghashiram Kotwal* (1972) and *Sakharam Binder* (1972), were performed across India by groups like Prithvi Theatre and Mumbai Marathi Sahitya Sangha, exposing audiences to Maharashtra’s “dramaturgical legacy” while addressing universal themes (Banarjee xix). This shift aligned with the post-independence Sahitya Akademi’s mission to unify Indian literature, positioning Tendulkar alongside Karnad and Sircar as architects of a pan-Indian theatrical identity.

Critics have lauded Tendulkar for his “originality in intellectual approach and creativity in imaginative sensibility” (Iyengar 462). His plays discarded the escapism and political propaganda that plagued mid-20th century Marathi theatre, instead adopting a hard-hitting realism that mirrored the “baser aspects of human nature” (Iyengar 463). For instance, *Silence! The Court is in Session* (1967) dissected societal hypocrisy through the trial of Leela Benare, a schoolteacher condemned for her unmarried pregnancy. The play’s layered narrative, blending absurdism and satire, earned Tendulkar the Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay Award and established him as a “playwright of serious national note” (Iyengar 465).

Scholars highlight Tendulkar’s ability to balance subjective emotion with objective social critique. As K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar observes, Tendulkar’s characters—whether the tyrannical Ghashiram or the oppressed

Champa in *Sakharam Binder*—are “made of the same clay as we ourselves are,” reflecting universal human frailties (Iyengar 463). This psychological depth, combined with his innovative structures (e.g., the Brechtian episodic format in *Ghashiram Kotwal*), positioned him as a “dramatist with critical acumen” who reshaped Indian theatre’s aesthetic boundaries (Banarjee xix).

Tendulkar’s uncompromising portrayal of social realities frequently sparked backlash. *Sakharam Binder*, which critiques patriarchal exploitation through the story of a man who “keeps” destitute women, was banned by the Censor Board for its “vulgar language” and sexual themes (Iyengar 467). The play’s depiction of domestic violence and female agency challenged conservative norms, leading to protests from traditionalists who deemed it “immoral.” However, as critic Pradnya Kirdat argues, the controversy underscored Tendulkar’s success in exposing “the hypocrisy of a society that silences women’s voices” (Kirdat 5).

Similarly, *Ghashiram Kotwal* (1972) ignited debates over historical representation. The play’s critique of Brahminical power structures during the Peshwa era drew accusations of defaming Maratha history. Tendulkar defended his work as a commentary on the “corrupting influence of power,” not a historical documentary (Tendulkar, *Ghashiram Kotwal* 12). The controversy, however, cemented the play’s status as a landmark in political theatre, with performances in Europe and the U.S. amplifying its global resonance.

Tendulkar’s dramas functioned as catalysts for social discourse, particularly regarding gender and caste. His female characters—Leela Benare, Champa (*Sakharam Binder*), and Jyoti (*Kanyadan*)—embody the struggles of women navigating patriarchal systems. As Tendulkar remarked:

“Women, by the very nature of their place in male-dominated society, are more exposed than men [...] Their struggle with society is more intense and desperate, especially when economically dependent” (qtd. in Kirdat 5).

Plays like *Kamala* (1981), inspired by the true story of a tribal woman sold at an auction, exposed the commodification of marginalized communities. The protagonist’s silent suffering became a metaphor for Dalit and female subjugation, aligning Tendulkar with Maharashtra’s legacy of reformers like Jyotiba Phule and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Educational institutions, including Pune’s SNDT Women’s University, incorporated his works into curricula to foster discussions on gender equality and social justice.

Tendulkar’s influence extends beyond India, with scholars comparing his works to those of Bertolt Brecht and August Strindberg. *Ghashiram Kotwal*’s use of folk traditions (e.g., Lavani dance) and political allegory resonated with global audiences, earning acclaim at the Edinburgh Festival and Berlin’s Horizonte Festival. Meanwhile, *The Vultures* (1975), a searing critique of capitalist greed, found parallels in Western absurdist dramas, cementing Tendulkar’s reputation as a “cosmopolitan playwright” (Banarjee xix).

In India, Tendulkar’s legacy persists through contemporary playwrights like Mahesh Elkunchwar and Satish Alekar, who adopt his realist techniques to address modern issues. The Vijay Tendulkar Sahitya Award, established in his honor, continues to recognize groundbreaking contributions to Marathi literature.

Conclusion

Vijay Tendulkar redefined Indian theatre by merging Maharashtra’s liberal tradition with global dramatic forms, creating works that remain socially urgent and artistically innovative. His plays, though controversial, shattered taboos around gender, caste, and power, inspiring both public debate and legislative reform. As Arundhati Banarjee asserts, Tendulkar’s “enduring legacy lies in his ability to mirror society’s darkest corners while advocating for human dignity” (Banarjee xix). By contextualizing his art within India’s theatrical evolution, we recognize Tendulkar not only as a regional icon but as a visionary whose works transcend temporal and cultural boundaries.

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