

MODERN INDIAN DRAMA:

Historical Characters, New Contexts

Dr. Preeti Gupta



MODERN INDIAN DRAMA:
Historical Characters, New Contexts



Dr. Preeti Gupta, *Ph.D*



Himalaya Publishing House
ISO 9001:2015 CERTIFIED

© **Author**

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording and/or otherwise without the prior written permission of the author and the publisher.

First Edition : 2021

-
-
- Published by** : Mrs. Meena Pandey for **Himalaya Publishing House Pvt. Ltd.**,
"Ramdoot", Dr. Bhalerao Marg, Girgaon, Mumbai - 400 004.
Phone: 022-23860170, 23863863; **Fax:** 022-23877178
E-mail: himpub@bharatmail.co.in; **Website:** www.himpub.com
- Branch Offices** :
- New Delhi** : "Pooja Apartments", 4-B, Murari Lal Street, Ansari Road, Darya Ganj, New Delhi - 110 002. Phone: 011-23270392, 23278631; Fax: 011-23256286
- Nagpur** : Kundanlal Chandak Industrial Estate, Ghat Road, Nagpur - 440 018. Phone: 0712-2721215, 3296733; Telefax: 0712-2721216
- Bengaluru** : Plot No. 91-33, 2nd Main Road, Seshadripuram, Behind Nataraja Theatre, Bengaluru - 560 020. Phone: 080-41138821; Mobile: 09379847017, 09379847005
- Hyderabad** : No. 3-4-184, Lingampally, Besides Raghavendra Swamy Matham, Kachiguda, Hyderabad - 500 027. Phone: 040-27560041, 27550139
- Chennai** : New No. 48/2, Old No. 28/2, Ground Floor, Sarangapani Street, T. Nagar, Chennai - 600 017. Mobile: 09380460419
- Pune** : "Laksha" Apartment, First Floor, No. 527, Mehunpura, Shaniwarpeth (Near Prabhat Theatre), Pune - 411 030. Phone: 020-24496323, 24496333; Mobile: 09370579333
- Lucknow** : House No. 731, Shekhupura Colony, Near B.D. Convent School, Aliganj, Lucknow - 226 022. Phone: 0522-4012353; Mobile: 09307501549
- Ahmedabad** : 114, "SHAIL", 1st Floor, Opp. Madhu Sudan House, C.G. Road, Navrang Pura, Ahmedabad - 380 009. Phone: 079-26560126; Mobile: 09377088847
- Ernakulam** : 39/176 (New No. 60/251), 1st Floor, Karikkamuri Road, Ernakulam, Kochi - 682 011. Phone: 0484-2378012, 2378016; Mobile: 09387122121
- Cuttack** : New LIC Colony, Behind Kamala Mandap, Badambadi, Cuttack - 753 012, Odisha. Mobile.: 9338746007
- Kolkata** : 108/4, Beliaghata Main Road, Near ID Hospital, Opp. SBI Bank, Kolkata - 700 010. Phone: 033-32449649; Mobile: 07439040301
- DTP by** : Urwashi
- Printed at** : SAP Print Solutions Pvt. Ltd., Mumbai. On behalf of HPH.

PREFACE

Reading books on our Indian historical figures has always been a fascinating one for me since childhood. Right from my happy reading of Amar-Chitra Katha stories to watching stage plays has charmed me well to take up the writing of this book which was extremely fascinating and nonetheless an arduous task. This interest provokes me to understand and explore the elements that play well in making of our Indian past. The book here tried to struggle with those multiple versions and look at the thought-provoking interplay. Now, choosing a few figures from such a colossal Indian history was definitely challenging for me. Yet the book settled on to explore the three representations of Mira, Tipu Sultan and Gandhi that begin with questions on history, reasoning out some of its elements and gradually creating enough space to fit in the people's version using individual dramatic techniques. All the three figures of past are seen moving from the historical towards the hagiographical though in varying degrees and different veins. Modern Indian drama thereby offered opportunity to explore the people's version of their past along with the documented recognized ones. The use of literary with the historical or the hagiographical helped in restructuring the past that further provides some alternate possibilities to the dominant ideology and to the so-called authentic accounts. Co-operation of several people helped me in the successful completion of this project, and I take immense pleasure in thanking them all. My deepest gratitude to Prof. Akshaya Kumar, whose guidance, support and insightful comments and criticisms were of great help in the writing of this book. I am grateful to my spouse Raman who constantly goaded me to meet critical deadlines, my mother who has been a great moral support throughout my endeavour and to my children for their patience and co-operation towards me.

Dr. Preeti Gupta



CONTENTS

- 1. Introduction** **1 – 47**
Re-configuring History; Hagiography; Re-writing the Past; Poetics of Dialectics; 'Indianness' of Modern Indian Drama and A Survey of Works Done.
- 2. Mira: Rebel versus Saint** **48 – 97**
The Hagiographical Mira; The Historical Mira; Mira in Contemporary Theatrical Imagination
- 3. Tipu Sultan: Tyrant versus Martyr** **98 – 144**
Tipu in Hagiographical Imagination; Tipu in Historical Imagination; Tipu in Contemporary Theatrical imagination
- 4. Gandhi: Mohan versus Mahatma** **145 – 194**
Mahatmization of Gandhi; Gandhi as a Historical Character; Gandhi as Sammy.
- 5. Conclusion** **195 – 204**
- 6. Bibliography** **205 – 217**



1

Introduction

I. Re-configuring History

History is not just a record of past in narrative sequence, it is as much an enterprise of its critical reinterpretation and revision. Increasingly we have to realize that any act aimed at The re-construction of our past cannot be left with professional historian alone. As creative writers, hagiographers, folk singers and artists dig past to cull out their plots, metaphors and tropes, multiple layers of the past begin to unfold. The past which is often taken as a settled aspect of life, suddenly appears diverse and discursive. Contemporary Indian writers make a resourceful use of the past and questioning its orthodox representations. Thus, the 'past' that we seek to understand involves complexity and ambiguity, carrying little authenticity. The concept of truth has become immeasurably more complex in the course of recent critical thought. The postmodernist and postcolonial studies endeavour to unravel the contours of 'authentic' Indian past by a sustained process of multiple narrations privileged through an array of diverse narrative modes.

It is still a popular misgiving that Indians were ahistorical as they kept no records of history. Though academic history writing in India, with its methodological procedures, its search for practical orientation and its conceptualisation of temporal change did not differ much from the west, however post-1970's the quest for specific Indian approach to history intensified. There is a qualitative change between traditional writing of history as known to us it today. The approach to the writing

history is influenced by the new post-structuralist thought process, according to which past need not be continuous, linear or sequential. The awareness of subversive post-structural practices of writing history impel the contemporary historian to free the past from erstwhile colonial controls, thereby dismantling hegemonic assumptions of 'Euro-centric' historical discourse.

History is a way of ordering, recording and retaining the past. It has morphed enormously from a mere reconstruction of battles and icons into a social science with multi-dimensional tropes. As no writing can be objective because the subjectivity of the writer is bound to appear in whatever is written, be it history; in postmodern era, the political positions of historians have been questioned while studying the element of objectivity. C.H. Carr points out: "In the first place, the facts of history never come to us 'pure', since they don't exist in a pure form: they are always refracted through the mirror of the recorder" (16). Hans Keller also argues, "History therefore is not 'about' the past as such but rather about our way of creating meanings from the scattered, and profoundly meaningless debris that we find around us" (qtd. in Mcculagh 63). Keller holds that any claim by historians to represent reality on the authority of documentary sources must be seen as essentially rhetorical in character.

Furthermore Keith Jenkins argues that the discipline of history which is widely held tantamount to the category of 'past' only carries a section of it. Like other versions, history's object of enquiry is also the 'past'. The subject matter of history is not the past as such but a portion of it for which we possess historical evidence. History as a discourse is thus a different category to that it discourses about. 'Past' has occurred and gone and is brought back by historians in a form different from what it originally existed. Therefore it becomes an intertextual and linguistic construct. Jenkins further argues that though many events/people have made the past but only few of them appear in history. Thus "the sheer bulk of past precludes total history" (14). Because history cannot possibly embrace the whole of the past, the totality of what happened, so it becomes necessary for historians to choose, serve and carve up the past in such a way as

to make it coherent and manageable. This further implies leaving out certain things. For such reasons history has been called an “enormous jig-saw with a lot of missing parts” (Carr 7). Since history is less than the ‘past’, and a historian can only recover fragments therefore, it inevitably remains partial and incomplete. Herein we find that our identities are consequently constructed and confirmed on the foundation of a history as we want it to be. It makes us aware of only the big strokes that are manifested by the power of circumstances, and does not make us penetrate into the intimate impressions which by exerting influence of the will of certain individuals, has determined the fate of everyone. In context of this argument, the historian’s way of knowing the past is seen crucial in determining the possibilities of what history is and can be.

In postcolonial India where the ‘past’ now appears to be largely an orientalist mis-(construction) appropriated by discursive ideological formations, history has become problematic both in itself and in terms of the past it constructs for the nation. Legitimised histories coexist and often collide with non-historiographic, overtly fictional forms of historical writing and performance. It performs complex epistemological functions and intervenes significantly in the discourse of history. Due to this, bias becomes an essential element in the writing of history, several problems have been faced in interpreting the Indian history of the past centuries. The historian has to deal with the scarcity of parish registers, individually written artefacts and in addition has to question the reliability of other quasi-official documents. There are ways in which history can be biased. One, when the evidence is misinterpreted or the historian’s reliance on evidence is necessarily incomplete as the account might omit significant facts about the subject making it imbalanced. Another is when the evidence itself is false or is supported by providing causal explanation to historical events where only some and not all important causes are mentioned.

Since history as a representation of events carries impression of the person narrating the event, therefore it is considered closer to fiction by many critics and scholars. They consider historiography (the process of writing history) as a way

of fictionalising the facts. Carr holds, “study the historian before you begin to study the facts” (17). He further states that “facts of history are nothing, interpretation is everything” (21). History writing is thus understood primarily as a form of ideology. According to Keith Jenkins, “no matter how verifiable, how widely acceptable or checkable, history inevitably remains a personal construct, a manifestation of the historian’s perspective as a ‘narrator’” (14). The process of selection and omission of events in historical narratives is tacitly guided by the general principles of inclusion and exclusion sanctioned by the community for which and within which the narrative is being constructed. Further, the narrative is conditioned by the conscious or the unconscious ideology of race, class and gender within which the historian’s intellectual sympathies are engaged. To some extent historiography of an epoch is regarded as a political factor where the historians reflect on the embeddedness of their own work in social, political contexts. A postmodern historian here attempts to identify and criticize certain residues of ideology in contemporary historical imagination, questioning the very validity of established standards.

In postmodern times all history is deemed as contemporary history i.e. history consists essentially in seeing the past through the eyes of the present and in light of its problems. The main work of the historian is not to record but to evaluate, for, if he does not evaluate, how can he know what is worth recording. For Keith Jenkins, “history is a shifting discourse constructed by historians and that from the existence of the past no one reading is entailed” (16).

W.H. Walsh too finds ambiguity in the word ‘history’ on the grounds that language which constructs history is itself ambiguous and involves complexities. The problem with historical narrative as Hayden White and other recent theorists of history have pointed out is that while history proceeds from empirically validated facts/events; it necessarily requires imaginative steps to place them in a coherent story. This further enables the entry of fictional elements in all historical discourses. Hayden White thus concentrating on the rhetoric of historical writing offers certain relevant claims. He argues that history

writing must be understood as a poetic art. The adoption of a particular mode of emplotment is neither a technical decision, nor it is imposed by nature of material with which the historian is dealing. According to him, a narrative in fact already possesses content, prior to any actualization of it in speech or writing. Therefore rhetoric is concerned particularly with the effect of a discourse on its audience. White's analysis thus displaces attention from the question of how well a historian succeeds in representing the past to that of the nature and role of historical narrative. Furthermore, because a historical narrative reveals to us a world that is putatively finished, done with, and not yet dissolved, therefore the fullness of this history can only be imagined and never experienced. Rightly articulates Homi K. Bhabha, "history may be half-made because it is always being made" (3).

We need to re-examine our epistemological assumptions and biases if we are to expand the range of our history and deepen our understanding of its implications. Modern history begins when more and more people enter into social and political consciousness becoming aware of their respective groups as historical entities and enter completely into the process of history. The problem with historical narrative as Roland Barthes and Hayden White and other recent theorists of history have pointed out is that while it proceeds from empirically validated facts/events; it necessarily requires imaginative steps to place them in a coherent story. Therefore fictional elements enter into all historical discourse¹. A serious historical 'fiction' both emerges from and returns to history, making all historical narratives fundamentally intertextual. Intertextual connection has important interpretive implication because fictionalised histories always stand in determinable ideological relation to the textualised history – confirming, repudiating or radically reshaping its message. In many ways the scope of historical writing has expanded enormously in the past few years. The newer histories indeed challenged the traditional ones which have concentrated on political and social elites, and demanded the inclusion of those segments of the population that have long been neglected.

Attending to this hybridity of historical consciousness raises questions about the relation among history, memory, myth and fantasy. History because of its nature of ambiguity is also understood as a mythic perception of reality.² Myth too represents people's memories of past events. When myth becomes common to all cultures it converts into history. However, the past that constitutes history for one may be untrue for another in view of lack of empirical facts. In this sense, myth may or may not be related to historical truth, though those who rely on the narrative generally believe that it is. Myth and history are close kins in as much as both explain how things got to be the way they are by telling some sort of story. But our common sense parlance reckons myth to be false while history is or aspires to be true; the two are generally considered antithetical mode of explanation, one distrusting the data of the other. Some even suggest that there can be no real distinction between the discourses of myth and history, as between fact and fiction. According to Claude Levi Strauss:

The gap that exists in our mind between mythology and history can probably be reached by studying histories which are conceived as not at all separated from myth but as a continuation of mythology. (37)

However, such turning of history into an ideology of communalism and mythification of the historical accounts at times becomes a shortcoming in the process of accounting for a consistent and reliable history. Like myths; religion and theology too has used history to confirm some of its most central tenets as herein the historians try drawing right lessons from the past and show its proper relevance. History can turn into theology by making the meaning of the past depend on some extra historical and super rational power or one can turn it into literature – a collection of stories and legends about the past. While acknowledging the importance of reviving our past in more empirical terms, Romila Thapar in her work *The Past and Prejudice* pointed out that the Indian past is unavoidable preface to an understanding of the present.

II. History and Hagiography

Since a substantial part of our past memories and identities remain open to reinterpretation and reworking, it is here that the figuring of hagiographies (a popular genre form of writing the past) takes place. Despite something of a hiatus in life-histories, recent years, especially since mid 1990's, have seen the publication of a number of person-centered studies or to be more specific, hagiographies. Hagiography, as yet another form of adaptation of our past is too important to be dismissed lightly or ignored. Such narratives reveal insights not just into the attitudes and experiences of an individual but also of wider society, or social segment of which they are part of. This genre is seen as historically persistent and socially pervasive form of cultural expression. One can define hagiography as the writings on the subject of revered persons in society whom we accord the status of being holy or saints. The term is derived from greek roots; 'hagios' meaning 'holy' and 'graphe' meaning writing. It refers to the concept of sanctity and to the practise of the cult of saints formed by and in turn helped to form the history of the changing ideals of sanctity. The tradition of hagiography dates back centuries in India³, with hagiographical accounts not just from Hinduism, but also Buddhism including Jataka tales (stories on Buddha's past lives), Jainism, Sikhism and Islam. The genre continues to thrive both in regional languages of India as well as in English, from comic book accounts of saints lives geared towards children (such as the popular *Amar Chitra Katha* series) to lengthy studies of the lives of the saints past and present, and hagiographical collections recounting the lives of many saints. The term has also come to be used as affirmative of the works of contemporary biographies and historians whom critics perceive to be uncritical and even reverential in their writing.

For many, hagiography constituted an important literary genre, providing informational history as well as inspirational stories and legends coming from the popular culture. When we question as to why texts and narratives use life-histories as a vehicle for storytelling, we realise that it is natural to choose life histories to narrate stories because they closely resemble our

personal experiences. Imitation of the lives of the saints was the benchmark against which the general population measured itself. Nearly all of us at some stage have been fascinated by other people's lives. Life stories have been told to us from childhood and we have heard them or read them for ourselves or seen them enacted on stage or screen. They may have been life of historical men and women, or no less influential characters in folktales, novels and myths intended to entertain or admonish us, to encourage emulation or inspire repugnance and fear. Narratives of hagiography embrace acts of martyrs with the accounts of their trials and deaths, biographies of saintly monks, princes, bishops and accounts of miracles related to saints and icons. Indeed in popular usage, hagiography has come to refer to a glowing, completely uncritical description of a person. Due to this, many critics argue that the hagiographies intend to convey a moral message rather than historically accurate information. Each hagiographer adapts a traditional pool of somewhat standardised stories to the needs of a narrative at hand and the use of such modes aided the moral and didactic purpose of hagiography. Nevertheless one reason for the broad appeal of life-histories to the scholars as to the wider public is precisely that they straddle the elusive divide between personal narrative and objective truth.

The recent upsurge of interests in hagiographical form of history-writing seems to follow from a growing distrust of metanarratives, a new-found scepticism towards sweeping generalisations and grand theories of social change. Contemporary thinkers move towards a more nuanced, multi-stranded understanding of society and a greater recognition of heterogeneity of human lives and lived experience. A majority of premodern life-histories were hagiographical – oral and written accounts of the lives of the deities, kings, cultural heroes and saints. These hagiographies are characterised by a tendency to praise their subjects and to place the narrative within a culture of orality or popular imagination. Here events related to life of a hero/saint are even explained by reference to supernatural events, drama's, predictions, vows and divine intercession. The lives of kings, heroes and saints form no small part of the Indian life

histories and tradition, and provide important exemplars for others. A variety of hagiographical works both literary and non literary have been witnessed until now. It includes works written on the lives of many saintly figures, as Buddha, Jesus, Raidas, Ramananda; Kabir, Surdas and Mira – the medieval bhakti poets; also on the greatness of several figures of heroic display as Asoka, Akbar, Tipu and Rani Lakshmibai. In the postmodernist phase however, the critical analysis of such hagiographical writings produced in the past and practised even today is attempted by various scholars and writers as Robin Rinehart, W.L.Smith, David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn. Tracing the development of hagiographical tradition allows us to investigate the dynamics of this blending of the real and the imaginary with a precision not always possible for earlier traditions.

For many subordinated and marginalised groups, telling through the singing of devotional songs or the recounting of the legends – the lives of those who defied feudal or patriarchal authority might serve as a weapon of the weak. Stuart Blackburn in *Telling Lives in India* discusses life-histories possessing some bewildering variety of forms. Either they are imbued with the veracity of spoken word or chronicle the experiences of the marginalised, or are seen as expressions of new emerging individual self. However biased and incomplete these personal reflections may be, such hagiographies open up an experience of self in society unrecorded elsewhere and are a means of negotiating, expressing and imagining an individual's existence. Life histories are generally governed by local social practices and literary conventions. Since 1920's anthropologists have acknowledged life stories as powerful and riveting data for personalising cultural, historical and social forces. These various classes of hagiographic works – historical memoirs, literary compositions and liturgical texts existed first as monographs.

Values that inspired the writing of the Indian past were more spiritual than material. Within such leaps and gaps in the model of historiography, hagiography dropped in conveniently. Like histories, many Indian hagiographies too owe more to ongoing social processes, to popular reinterpretation or the cultural accretions of generations, than to an actual life lived or

an ontological and rational account of past events. However when India entered the colonial era, the earlier hagiographical tradition was beginning to be supplemented and supplanted by a new form of biography in which greater attention was paid to complexity of character and personal motivation and to their role in shaping and explaining individual lives than to the specific places and events. Callewart and Rupert Snell's work on the subject observes that while hagiographies have a slight historical basis, it incorporate a large proportion of traditional material drawn from Hindu epics and puranas. Though hagiographies are seen as the writing of the holy; it is essentially about experiencing the holy in memory and text.

Robert Rinehart in his work *One Lifetime, Many Lives* posits three basic phases in the hagiographical form of narrating the past. First is of the earliest hagiographies which were written by eye witnesses and acquaintances of historical figure displaying a clear and overriding concern for facts. Second is a stage of scepticism and reassessment which challenges the earlier conclusions of earliest hagiographies, balancing all the while the need for both an accurate bios and an inspiring and developing mythos. Third is the mythicization phase in which the process of mythos clearly takes precedence over the construction of bios. In this phase no further historical research into a life is attempted. Instead the hagiographers rely on the previous lives to construct an increasingly elaborate and grand vision of a saint. Rinehart demonstrates the mythicization process that transformed Swami Rama Thirtha into a modern avatar. She depicts how the later hagiographers took some thread of historical truth to weave an elaborate text of myth and ideology and to suit their own institutional needs. She writes: "Thus when hagiographical traditions record mythical or legendary information, they nonetheless reveal what are indeed historical facts – not necessarily about the historical figure of the saint, but about the situation of the community the hagiographer addresses" (Rinehart, 8). She clearly and convincingly separates historical probability from mythical and ideological processes.

Hagiographies are often frustrating for scholars seeking historical facts. Despite their mutual concern on such figures, the

hagiographer's aim is much different from that of the scholars seeking the facts that constitute a critical historical biography. Where some scholars seek the facts constituting true-life account of the saint's life, the hagiographer often blend those facts into an intricate mix of myth and legend. The primary function of hagiography as the historian's belief is instrumental and not historiographical – it rather aims for religious edification and not historical documentation. Some scholars argue that there is no historical value at the basis of tradition; that the heroes and narratives of tradition are purely hagiographical, not based either upon historical facts or imaginative fiction but upon ritual acted out in the form of drama. They try emphasising that the tales are imaginative and mythical; structure is also of myth but given historical form and therefore the content we receive is a constructed narration⁴. Although the challenging task of separating the historical elements from the hagiographical one has been the goal of many scholars yet the elements of legend in history seems to them as central to the purposes of hagiography. It reveals its readers a great deal about how the followers of a saint or legendary hero construct and preserve his/her memory.

Despite scholars attempt to separate the two, hagiography is at times seen as a mix of history and myth. The role of hagiographical narrative as a form of social and cultural argumentation is an issue worth analysing. Historians in India are generally inclined to consider life-histories as sources and they seldom pause to consider them as genres worthy of systematic analysis and it is only through postmodernist techniques of new historicism that we are obliged to do this. My study here intends to look at a variety of life-histories that sheds fresh light on the way we perceive and analyse the past. It is clearly not the purpose to present these life-histories as self evident accounts of social or historical truth. They are also subjected to the same level of editorial strategies as other cultural and historical representations. The question that arises is whether there are significant differences in the ways in which scholars from different disciplines approach life historical material, and that whether they can profitably learn from each others' techniques. Undoubtedly there are some worries involved