Theatre in Education in India: A Critical Reflection on Its Journey and Contrasts with International Practices

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the trajectory of Theatre in Education (TIE) in India from 2000 to 2025, situating it within a broader discourse of educational development and international practices. It explores how TIE has been integrated into Indian education policy, notably through the National Curriculum Framework and National Education Policy, and its impact on fostering creativity, critical thinking, and socio-emotional skills among learners. Comparative analyses with the United Kingdom's "Mantle of the Expert," Norway's institutionalized drama education, and Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed in Brazil highlight structural gaps in India's TIE ecosystem, including the lack of teacher training, curriculum frameworks, and policy implementation. Empirical findings reveal that while community-based theatre initiatives address social inequities and enhance resilience, they remain fragmented and unsustainable without systemic support. Additionally, the paper considers the interplay between education, human capability enhancement, and regional disparities in India's development. The analysis argues for embedding TIE within teacher education and leveraging global best practices to create equitable, holistic, and participatory education systems in India.

Theatre in Education (TIE) has emerged globally as a significant pedagogical approach that promotes creativity, empathy, and critical thinking. While nations such as the United Kingdom, Norway, and Australia have systematically embedded theatre into their educational systems, India's trajectory has been less structured, despite its rich cultural heritage of performative arts. This paper critically examines TIE in India from 2000 to 2025, juxtaposing it with international practices and interrogating the socio-political and institutional factors shaping its evolution. Drawing on studies by Mahajan and Godbole (2024), Crossley et al. (2024), Rangarajan (2025), Hafize & Nami Guner (2012), and Singh (2008), among others, this analysis considers the integration of TIE into Indian education policy, its community-based implementations, and challenges to scalability.

Globally, TIE has matured into a critical pedagogical and social instrument with robust institutional frameworks. In the United Kingdom, Dorothy Heathcote's "Mantle of the Expert" approach positions learners as experts in fictional contexts, fostering deep engagement and critical thinking (Heathcote, 1991). Comparisons with Scandinavian countries, such as Norway, have institutionalized drama as part of early childhood and secondary education, emphasizing democratic citizenship and emotional literacy (Baraldsnes & Lyngstad, 2021).

India's performative traditions, from classical Kathakali and Yakshagana to folk forms like Nautanki and Tamasha, have historically functioned as community pedagogies, blending entertainment with moral, spiritual, and social education (Panda & Gupta, 2004). Yet, the colonial imposition of text-centric, examination-oriented education marginalized these indigenous forms in formal schooling. Post-

independence theatre movements such as Jana Natya Manch and Rangayana revitalized the idea of theatre as a vehicle for civic engagement and critical consciousness (Chatterjee, 2004). However, formal integration into mainstream education remained peripheral until the 21st century. The National Curriculum Framework (2005) emphasized arts education, recognizing its potential for holistic development and socio-emotional learning. This laid some groundwork for TIE but fell short of providing structured frameworks for curriculum integration and teacher training (India Foundation for the Arts, 2005). The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a more ambitious effort, calling for "experiential, holistic, integrated, and learner-centered education" and explicitly foregrounding the arts as a core component of pedagogy (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Mahajan and Godbole (2024) conducted an extensive qualitative study to assess how theatre exercises such as role-play, storytelling, and improvisation could transform primary school classrooms under NEP 2020. Their findings demonstrate that integrating theatre practices enhances student confidence, collaborative learning, and critical inquiry. Students engaged in theatre activities displayed improved socio-emotional skills and creative problem-solving. However, systemic issues remain pervasive. Mahajan and Godbole highlight the lack of structured curricula, insufficient teacher training, and limited administrative support as key barriers to scaling up theatre pedagogy in Indian classrooms. Teachers often resort to superficial uses of drama for annual day performances or moral storytelling, failing to engage with its transformative pedagogical possibilities.

A contrasting yet complementary study by Crossley et al. (2024) provides insights into the therapeutic and community-oriented dimensions of applied theatre in India. Their systematic review documents community-based theatre projects designed to address mental health and resilience among urban slum populations. Drawing on Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, these interventions have created participatory spaces where marginalized communities can express themselves, process trauma, and envision alternative social realities. Hafize & Nami Guner (2012) similarly argue for theatre as a means of promoting student agency, civic engagement, and social change. In their work with primary school children in Istanbul, students not only engaged with performance but also took part in community initiatives, demonstrating theatre's potential to extend beyond classroom boundaries.

Globally, TIE has matured into a critical pedagogical and social instrument. In the United Kingdom, Dorothy Heathcote's "Mantle of the Expert" approach positioned learners as experts in fictional contexts, fostering deep engagement and critical thinking within classrooms (Heathcote, 1991). Similarly, John O'Toole's DRACON project in Singapore integrated drama into conflict resolution curricula, demonstrating measurable reductions in bullying and improvements in peer relationships (O'Toole & Burton, 2005). Scandinavian countries such as Norway have institutionalized drama as part of early childhood and secondary education, emphasizing democratic citizenship and emotional literacy (Baraldsnes & Lyngstad, 2021). In Brazil, Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed redefined theatre as a rehearsal for social change. His participatory, dialogic methods empowered communities to critique and transform oppressive social structures, aligning closely with Paulo Freire's concept of critical pedagogy (Boal, 1979; Freire, 1970).

The relevance of education to human development is further highlighted by Singh (2008), who emphasizes that education serves as both a means and an end in itself. Drawing on Amartya Sen's capability approach, Singh argues that education enhances individual freedoms and societal opportunities, enabling citizens to make use of economic, social, and cultural possibilities. In India, despite constitutional provisions and programs like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, access to quality education remains uneven, with significant

regional disparities in literacy, enrolment, and educational outcomes. Singh's analysis resonates with the challenges faced by TIE in India, where structural inequalities often impede the full realization of theatre's transformative potential.

In comparison, India's TIE landscape remains fragmented and heavily dependent on isolated initiatives and community theatre groups. Rangarajan's (2025) study on relational pedagogy in rural schools underscores the lack of infrastructural and human resources to meaningfully engage with theatre pedagogy in these contexts. His research demonstrates how theatre-based relational encounters can disrupt hierarchical teacher-student dynamics, nurturing inclusion and relational learning even in resource-poor settings. Yet, such initiatives often struggle with sustainability and replication.

Indian TIE also draws upon theoretical insights from critical pedagogy, cultural psychology, and performative ethnography. Busby's (2024) applied theatre projects with Dalit youth in Mumbai's informal settlements illustrate how co-created performances foster cognitive justice and community resilience. Her work highlights theatre as not merely a pedagogical tool but as an embodied method of participatory research that validates local knowledge systems and empowers marginalized voices. These examples demonstrate how TIE in India often operates at the intersections of education, social justice, and community development.

The strengths of Indian TIE lie in its rich indigenous traditions, grassroots adaptability, and emerging academic frameworks for impact evaluation. Performances rooted in folk theatre provide culturally resonant pedagogies that connect with diverse student populations (Panda & Gupta, 2004).

Looking forward, several strategies are critical for advancing TIE in India. Institutionalizing TIE through integration into B.Ed. and M.Ed. curricula can ensure that future educators are equipped with the necessary skills to implement drama-based pedagogy. Drawing lessons from UK and Scandinavian models, India could establish national centres for drama education, standardizing curricula and supporting research and practitioner development. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the potential of digital and hybrid theatre models to extend access to rural and marginalized communities.

However, significant challenges persist. The policy-implementation gap between NEP 2020's aspirations and actual classroom practices remains wide. Equity concerns are also pressing. Digital theatre initiatives developed during the COVID-19 pandemic often excluded low-income learners due to the digital divide, exacerbating existing educational inequities (Samanta et al., 2024). As Samanta et al. (2024) caution, these must be designed with equity and accessibility in mind to avoid reproducing existing socio-economic divides.

Sustainability is another major challenge, as most TIE projects rely on NGO funding and lack long-term institutional support or policy alignment. Teacher preparedness for TIE is minimal, with most educators lacking exposure to drama pedagogies during their training (Jain & Sharma, 2024).

Longitudinal research is also essential to assess TIE's cognitive, emotional, and social impacts on learners. Such evidence-based approaches would strengthen advocacy for policy integration and resource allocation. Finally, cross-cultural collaborations can enrich Indian TIE by introducing global innovations while maintaining sensitivity to local cultural contexts.However, as Samanta et al. (2024) caution, these must be designed with equity and accessibility in mind to avoid reproducing existing socio-economic divides.

India's journey with Theatre in Education reflects both promise and precarity. While international practices offer robust institutional frameworks and empirical validation, India's TIE landscape is characterized by grassroots ingenuity and policy aspirations yet to be fully realized. The policy initiatives

like NEP 2020 provides a fertile ground for the growth of TIE. Realizing theatre's transformative potential requires investment in teacher training, curriculum development, infrastructural support, and equity-driven innovations. If these challenges are addressed, theatre can emerge not merely as an adjunct educational tool but as a foundational component of holistic, inclusive, and socially just education in India.

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