

**Girish Karnad
(1938-2019)**

**Obituary by Vidyanidhee Vanarase, President of the Indian Centre of ITI, Executive Council
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India lost a questioning mind, a creative performer and a distinguished man of letters. The force of his ideas was felt across cultures, languages and countries.

Girish Karnad was an eminent playwright. But this was only one aspect of his life. He was an actor, director, playwright, screen play writer, film maker, arts administrator and Rhodes Scholar.

He was born in 1938, nine years before independence. The post-independence period in Indian theatre was emerging with new thoughts and ideas. Fifties and sixties was the time when playwrights were writing with modern sensibilities. Badal Sircar was writing in Bangla, Mohan Rakesh in Hindi and Vijay Tendulkar was writing in Marathi. In sixties, Girish Karnad started writing in Kannada. This was the time when regional language theatre was becoming prominent and the idea of Indian Theatre was emerging. Girish Karnad belonged to the same generation of playwrights.

His first play was Yayati. He was one of those rare playwrights who have looked at and analyzed the creative processes behind one's own artistic creation. In his own words, "When I wrote Yayati, I wanted to be a poet. I didn't want to be a playwright. I was interested in theatre, but there was never any intention to become a playwright. Then I got the Rhodes Scholarship and in those years, it took three weeks to reach England. My father couldn't afford to bring me back if I wanted to come back before the stipulated three years. There was the concern that if I go away I'll marry a white girl and so on. Suddenly one day, I knew I had to write Yayati. I was reading Rajaji's (C. Rajagopalachari) Mahabharata and from that I got both the stories, Yayati and The Fire and The Rain. I read the Yayati story and the play happened in front of my eyes. With The Fire and the Rain, I had to go through 30-odd years. That work waited. I knew there was a superb story but I waited and worked on it and didn't want to waste it by writing it in haste. Yayati just came to me, like a dictation."

He went on to write several plays which not only gave him accolades, but paved a new path for the development of Indian Theatre. Most of his plays have been translated into English by himself. He used to say that one can translate a novel sentence by sentence, but a person who translates a play in English must be able to speak those lines on stage! His plays have been translated in several other Indian languages as well. His plays have been directed by directors like Ibrahim Alkazi, B V Karanth, Alyque Padamasee, Prasanna, Satyadev Dubey, Shyamanand Jalan... some of the stalwarts in Indian Theatre and extensively performed, not only in India but also in other countries.

He was the recipient of the Gyanpeeth Award in 1998, which is the highest literary honor awarded in India. He was awarded Padmashri and later Padma Bhushan, two of the highest civic awards given by the Government of India.

He shaped thinking about arts and culture by his understanding and analysis of Indian traditions, colonial influences and the depth of search for finding new meaning and idiom in his times. The main dimensions of shaping the culture in free India were scientific attitude, being

rooted in the great tradition and keeping up an alert questioning attitude of a critical insider. He was the torch bearer for the first generation of post-independence Indian thinkers.

His influence in the cultural field will be felt in the works of later generations. Several younger people, who aspired to learn from him, would now have to depend on the words and images he left behind. And a large circle of artist friends will miss him.