

INTRODUCTION TO INDIAN SANSKRIT DRAMA- A CRITICAL EVALUATION

DR.S.S.VIJAYA RAGHAVAN

Abstract: India has had a distinguished theatrical tradition for more than a thousand years. The Gupta Dynasty (AD 320-550?) saw the flowering of Sanskrit drama. The great plays that survive from that time are generally secular, such as *Shakuntala* by Kalidasa, about the court, kings, and courtesans. Classical plays are rarely revived, although modern playwrights have experimented with traditional mythic and historical themes. Theater other than folk theater, which struggles despite government patronage to survive, is directly from the European tradition and is popular only in larger cities. Theater has been eclipsed by the cinema and more recently by television.

Introduction: India has a long history of theatrical activity, yet no clear theatrical centers until recently. The absence of a national language also hindered the development of an identifiable native drama. Sixteen major languages and hundreds of dialects are in use in India today.

Theater in India may have originated as early as the 3rd century BC. It was influenced by the Hindu religion, the caste system, and literature in Sanskrit, the ancient language of India. The earliest theater was patronized by the ruling classes. Two great Sanskrit epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, made up of history, legend, and myth, became the major sources of material for early Sanskrit dramatists. The *Natya Shastra* (The Science of Dramaturgy), a Sanskrit handbook probably completed sometime around AD 200, codifies practices in drama, dance, acting, costume, and makeup. Ancient tradition assigns this work to Bharata, the eldest member of a legendary family, who learned the art of theater directly from Brahma, the creator-god, and passed it down to his many actor- sons. Ancient theater was, therefore, regarded as a sacred art descended directly from a Hindu god to human beings. Women were admitted to theatrical companies when another Hindu deity pointed out that women made exceptional dancers.

The earliest theatrical performances took place in palaces and temples. When theaters were built, the auditorium was divided by four pillars painted white, red, yellow, and blue to indicate social castes, and spectators sat near the pillar that corresponded to their caste. A curtain divided the stage in half, with the front half used for the performance and the rear for dressing rooms or other offstage functions. Although paintings and carvings decorated the stage, there was no scenery, and the actor indicated the locale through spoken description or mime. Attention focused on the actor, whose movements, gestures, costumes, and makeup had been codified by early Hindu writings. Each play was accompanied by musicians and singers.

Sanskrit drama was organized around *rasas* (moods), which ranged from furious to peaceful, and ended with good triumphing over evil. Dialogue was a mixture of verse and prose spoken in classical Sanskrit, the learned language spoken by gods, kings, generals, and sages; and Prakrit, the everyday dialects of Sanskrit used by women, children, servants, and people of low birth. Thirteen plays by Bhasa, written as early as the 3rd century AD, are the oldest surviving complete Sanskrit dramas. *Shakuntala*, written in the late 4th or early 5th century AD by Kalidasa, a court poet and dramatist, is considered the finest of all Sanskrit dramas. Based on an episode from the *Mahabharata*, it recounts a love story with insight and sympathy.

Popular forms of entertainment, including shadow-puppet plays, folk drama, and dance, began to replace Sanskrit drama in the 7th century. By the 10th century, companies were touring and performing plays in regional languages. By the 15th century, many regional theatrical forms had emerged, dominated by folk plays that were performed outdoors, often with spectators surrounding the performance space. Many of these plays featured legendary heroes, along with themes of love and chivalry.

Modern Indian theater owes its origins and development to the growth of urban centers in the 18th and 19th centuries. Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay evolved as theatrical centers, largely because of the British presence in these cities. British theater was imported to entertain British soldiers, business people, and government officials, and proscenium theaters built on British models became centers of urban theatrical activity. Plays were then written in the language of the region, based on historical and mythological sources, and performed by actors of different castes, races, religions, and occupations. Songs and dances popular with Indian audiences were grafted onto dialogue.

Other modern Indian plays more closely resemble Western plays in style. These plays focus on families and on social and political events, including India's

struggle for independence in the first half of the 20th century. Poet Rabindranath Tagore, who won the *Nobel Prize* in literature, successfully blended Indian and Western traditions in such plays as *The King of the Dark Chamber* (1910) and *The Cycle of Spring* (1917). Theater in India has remained highly diverse, ranging from productions of Sanskrit plays and folk drama to modern realistic works.

The *Natya Shastra*, written before 200 AD and attributed to a Hindu sage named Bharata Muni, is the world's oldest, most complete manual for all aspects of performance. It details the requirements for theater architecture, costumes, actor training and performance, music, playwriting, and the emotional exchange that takes place between the audience and the actors. The book relates how the Hindu god Brahma created drama (*Natya*) to entertain and to educate. While priests, musicians, and dancing nymphs were performing divinely created stories, jealous demons attacked the sacred stage. Brahma, however, created purifying rituals to include all beings - even demons.

Bharat Muni's *Natyashastra* is a complete, well organised book on drama that goes deep and discusses each aspect of drama. Drama is a performing art. It is a mimetic presentation of human being with all activities on the stage.

Theatre is life. There is no art, no life, no craft, no learning, and no action which cannot be seen in it.

— Bharat Muni's *Natyashastra*

The playwright approaches the audience effectively through Theatre. Actors go across the bridge of theatre and reach the heart of the spectators. When drama comes on the stage it moves to the audience from the hands of the actors. Life gets unfolded on the stage in all its forms. The theatre envelops the whole of human activities.

Bharat Muni, the architect of Indian drama mentions four parts of drama - Pathya, Geeta, Abhinay and Rasa. Drama is known as *Natya* in our Sanskrit literature. According to Bharat Muni, the word drama is something like *Trailokashyasy Sarvasya natyatn bhavanukirtanam*, meaning each and every performance of audiovisual art contributes towards its final composition.

In India, classical Sanskrit plays were performed in temples to please gods as there was no source as effective as drama itself. Such plays based on religious books, events and Hindu mythology were performed in the temples on different religious occasions. As the plays were performed in temples, they called it Temple Theatres. They praised gods, kings, princes, queens and great heroes of the time, and the demons were cursed orally on the stage.

Close to 200 BC drama and dramatic technique had developed to a notable height. Great poets and

playwrights of Sanskrit literature emerged with their noteworthy contribution and drama blossomed on the classical theatre. Poets and playwrights of this time were Ashwaghosha, Bhasa, Kalidasa, Sudraka, Bhavbhuti, Magha, Dandi and many more. Three Buddhist's plays written by Ashwaghosha are there but they are not available in complete forms, only a part of it is available to us, and it proves that during the time of Ashwaghosha, drama had fully developed. Bhasa is supposed to be the first poet and playwright whose following plays are available in complete form: *Malavikagnimitra*, *Urbhnmasa*, *Swapnavasai'dattn* and others. Kalidas was the most outstanding playwright who is known to the whole world even today.

The greatness of Kalidas and other poets of this time have been beautifully described in the following Sanskrit Shloka:

Upama Kalidasasya, Bharavi arthgaurvam,

Dandinah pad lalityam, Maghe Santi trayogunah.

Kalidas for his comparison, Bharvi for the beauty of his meaning, Dandi for the greatness of his composition and Magha for all these three qualities - thus all these poets are famous for the quality mentioned above.

Apart from Kalidas and Bhasa, the contribution of Sudraka and Bhavbhuti is also great. *Mudrarakshasa*, the play written by Sudraka has all the qualities of a successful play in Sanskrit literature. The great playwright Bhavbhuti was unmatched whose plays - *Uttararamacharit* and *Malatimadhava* represent the culture of the nation. Reading of these plays proves how great and rich are the plays of the past in Sanskrit literature. The treasure of Indian Sanskrit drama is certainly very rich, varied and par excellent.

This was the glory and these were the dramas of India - very rich and great. Of course one thing is worth noting that all these plays written in classical language were not publicly open for all. They remained confined to the elite group only. Unfortunately, a time came when the classical drama witnessed a great setback; Kironmoy Raha observes this setback in the following manners:

Creative involvement with Sanskrit drama, however, was confined to the elitist crust of society, and patronage for production of such play to the princely courts and aristocracy. Classical Sanskrit drama, in any case had declined by the end of the 7th century AD after the Muslim invasion it ceased to have whatever little patronage it might have enjoyed earlier. The plays were doubtless read or recited by successive generation of students of Sanskrit but there is no evidence of their being performed with any regularity before any except cloistered audiences. This blank period did not register any play performance for a long time and hence a big gap.

Drama on the India stage returned after a long gap but this time it covered a large area with the growth of vernacular languages and some other reasons, of course very interesting one. It was a sharp dramatic term and a kind of fresh start unlike classical dramas in Sanskrit. The immediate influence came from two sources, the English theatre of Calcutta, and the traditional folk theatre, the *Jatra*.

Among historians who have specialized in theatre, there is conflict as to which one came first and which one was mere dominant - English theatre or folk theatre or English theatre. For many, the opinion of Brajendra Bandyopadhyay is not acceptable. We have another expert on this issue, Amulyacharan Vidya Bhusan. He favours folk dance and suggests the arrival of folk theatre or *jatra* theatre first.

It was a time when the growth of vernacular languages was very fast almost in every state and every region. Folk theatre became popular as it provided entertainment on a large scale. Folk drama developed in different states on different name narrating the story of the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and other religious books and Hindu mythology. The most famous folk drama at that time was *Jatra* in Bengal and *Ramlila* in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. *Bhavai* survives even today in Gujarat and the people of Gujarat enjoy *Bhavai* as much as the people of Braj enjoy *Raslila*. These folk dramas were performed on folk theatre which was not as rich and expensive as modern theatre of western influence.

From the 1st century to the 10th century, dramas written in Sanskrit, the ancient language of India, were performed in temples and at royal courts. Performance of Sanskrit drama ceased, however, because of foreign invasions and because the language was spoken only by the upper classes, providing only a limited, aristocratic audience. During the 15th century, Islamic rulers, who then controlled northern India, forbade theater. However, local folk and devotional genres emerged elsewhere in India. Secular entertainment, puppetry, dance-dramas, and performances for religious minorities also flourished. In the 18th century, Britain colonized India and introduced Western performance styles. In the 20th century, new genres appeared, including political protest plays and experimental combinations of European and traditional Indian drama. Indian

poet and playwright Rabindranath Tagore won the 1913 Nobel Prize for literature. His plays include *Raja* (1910), *The King of the Dark Chamber* (1910), *Raktakarabi* (1924), and *Red Oleanders* (1925). Significant contemporary artists include playwright and director Badal Sircar, actor Tripti Mitra, director Uptal Dutt, and director and educator Ebrahim Alkazi.

Sanskrit drama was one of the earliest formal theatrical genres to appear in India. It conformed to the rules laid out by the *Natya Shastra*, with its lyrical poetry, successful conclusions, song, dance, and mime. Both sexes probably acted in these dramas, though actors did not always portray characters of their gender. Theaters seated about 400 people. The stage had a rear balcony and machinery to aid in depicting supernatural events, such as the appearance of heavenly nymphs. The most famous Sanskrit dramatists include Bhasa, Kalidasa, and Bhavabhuti. Bhasa composed plays based primarily on the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. His best work is *Swapnavasavdatta* (4th - 5th century; *The Vision of Vasavadatta*). Kalidasa composed the most revered Sanskrit drama, *Abhijnanashakuntala* (4th century; *Shakuntala and the Ring of Recollection*). It tells of love, loss, a curse, and ultimate reunion between a king and a nymph's daughter. Bhavabhuti's greatest work is *Utara-rama-charita* (8th century; *The Later History of Rama*). *Mrichchhakatika* (5th century; *The Little Clay Cart*), attributed to Shudraka, is one of the most popular Sanskrit works.

Scholars believe that some conventions of Sanskrit drama are preserved in *kutiyattam*, the country's oldest continuously performed theatrical genre. In *kutiyattam*, which comes from the southwestern state of Kerala, actors perform ancient Sanskrit plays in India's only permanent, traditional theater structures for Sanskrit drama. Ritual performances occur once yearly at two Hindu temples, Vatukumnathan and Irinjalagauda. Each play takes several nights to complete, three to eight hours per night. A tall, metal oil lamp on the stage provides dim light. Dance, song, chant, gestures with specific meanings, and exaggerated facial, and eye expressions are accompanied by drums, cymbals, a conch shell, and a wind instrument called a *kuzhal*. Performers wear elaborate makeup and costumes.

References:

1. Kironmoy Raha, *Bengali Theatre*, New Delhi: National Book Trust, India, 1978, P. 1.
2. Nand Kumar, *Indian English Drama - A Study in Myths*, New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2003, p. 10..
3. *The History of Indian Literature* (London 1852), tr. J. Mann and T. Zachariae, 1882, p.207f.
4. *The Bhagavat-Geeta or Dialogues of Krishna and Arjuna* (London, 1785),p.10.
5. Francois jost, Introduction to comparative literature (Indianapolis and New York: Pegasus, 1974),p. 29.
6. Ulrich Weisstein, *Comparative Literature and*

Literary Theory: Survey and introduction
(Bloomington and London: Indiana University
Press,1973),p.7.

Comparative Indian Literature (Aligarh:
Department of Modern Indian Language, Aligarh
Muslim University, 1987),p.19.

7. Amiya Dev, 'Towards Comparative Indian
Literature', in K. A. Koshy (ed.), Towards

M.A.(Skt), M.A.(Tel), (M.A.H.R.D), Ph. D.(Skt), D.T.A
Dept. Of H.R.D, A.U.College Of Law,
Andhra University, Visakhapatnam.
Email: Vijayraghavan9999@Gmail.Com