

## Classical Sanskrit Drama: Growth and Development

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### **Abstract**

*The earliest form of Indian drama was the Sanskrit drama. It began after the development of Greek and Roman drama and before the development of theatre in other parts of Asia. Sanskrit drama was the main source of Indian theatre with culture, customs and ethnicity. The origin of Sanskrit drama dates back to 2000 B.C. It is clear that the Hindus of over 2000 years ago had their own theory of drama and that their dramatic practice avoided both the severe austerity of Greek tragedy and opulent extravagance of the ancient Chinese drama. But it is very difficult to trace the origin of the Indian theatre with exact date of its commencement. Whatever the origin of the classical drama on the one hand, we have playwrights like Kalidasa, Bhavbhuti, Sudraka, Harsha and Vishakadatta; on the other hand we have the exponents of dramatic art like Bharata, Bhatta, Abhinavagupta, Dhananjaya, Ramchandra and Ashvaghosha etc. All these are the pioneers of classical Sanskrit drama in India.*

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**Key words:** Sanskrit drama, Indian theatre

### **Introduction**

The earliest form of Indian drama was the Sanskrit drama. It began after the development of Greek and Roman drama and before the development of theatre in other parts of Asia. It emerged sometime between the 2nd century B.C. and the 1st century B.C. and

flourished between the 1st century and the 10th century, which was a period of relative peace in the history of India during which hundreds of plays were written. With the Islamic conquests that began in the 10th and 11th centuries, theatre was discouraged or forbidden entirely. Later, in an attempt to re-assert indigenous values and ideas, village theatre was encouraged across the subcontinent, developing in a large number of regional languages from the 15th to the 19th centuries. Modern Indian theatre developed during the period of colonial rule under the British Empire, from the mid-19th century until the mid-20<sup>th</sup>. The earliest-surviving fragments of Sanskrit drama date from the 1st century. The wealth of archeological evidence from earlier periods offers no indication of the existence of a tradition of theatre. The ancient *Vedas* (hymns from between 1500 to 1000 B.C.. that are among the earliest examples of literature in the world) contain no hint of it (although a small number are composed in a form of dialogue) and the rituals of the Vedic period do not appear to have developed into theatre. The *Mahābhāṣya* by Patañjali contains the earliest reference to what may have been the seeds of Sanskrit drama. This treatise on grammar from 140 B.C. provides a feasible date for the beginnings of theatre in India. Overall, Sanskrit drama was the main source of Indian theatre with culture, customs and ethnicity.

There are references regarding drama in Patanjali's 'Vyakarna', Vatsyana's 'Kamsutra', Kautilya's 'Arthashastra' and Panini's 'Ashtabhyam'. Therefore the origin of Sanskrit drama dates back to 2000 B.C. It is clear that the Hindus of over 2000 years ago had their own theory of drama and that their dramatic practice avoided both the severe austerity of Greek tragedy and opulent extravagance of the ancient Chinese drama. But it is very difficult to trace the origin of the Indian theatre with exact date of its commencement. Even though there are contradictory opinions about origin of Indian theatre among scholar, but all this shows that classical Sanskrit drama probably originated from the folk theatre of the country. Whatever the origin of the classical drama on the one hand, we have playwrights like Kalidasa, Bhavbhuti, Sudraka, Harsha and

Vishakadatta; on the other hand we have the exponents of dramatic art like Bharata, Bhatta, Abhinavagupta, Dhananjaya, Ramchandra and Ashvaghosha etc. All these are the pioneers of classical Sanskrit drama in India.

## **Elements of Sanskrit drama**

All literature in Sanskrit is classified into Drishya (that can be seen or exhibited) and the Shravya (that can be heard or recited). While poetry in all forms can be said to fall under Shravya category; and drama comes under the Drishya form. Drama in Sanskrit literature is covered under the broad umbrella of 'Rupaka' which means depiction of life in its various aspects represented in forms by actors who assume various roles. A rupaka has ten classifications of which 'Nataka' (drama), the most important one, has come to mean all dramatic presentations. The Sanskrit drama grows around three primary constituents namely Vastu (plot), Neta (hero), and Rasa (sentiment). The plot could be either principal (adhikarika), or accessory (prasangika). The former concerns the primary characters of the theme and pervades the entire play. The later serves to the further and supplement the main topic and relates to subordinate characters other than the chief ones. The Neta ( hero), according to the definition prescribed by Natyashashtra, is always depicted as modest (vineeta), sweet tempered (madhura), sacrificing (tyagi), capable (daksha), civil in talk (priyamvada), belonging to noble family (taptaloka), pure (suchi), articulate (vagmi), consistent (sthera), young (yuva), endowed with intellect (buddhi), enthusiasm (utsaha), good memory (smrthi), strong (dridha), energetic (tejaswi), learned (pandita) and pious (dharmic). Overall, the hero in sanskrit drama falls in the category of 'Dheerodatta' which means a hero who is brave and sublime at any time in every situation.

## **Major Sanskrit Playwrights**

### **Bharata:-**

Sage Bharata was an ancient Indian musicologist and worldwide popular as an author of 'Natya Shastra', a theoretical treatise on ancient Indian dramaturgy and histrionics dated between roughly 400 B.C. and 200 B.C. There is a legend regarding Sage Bharata and his treatise 'Natya Shastra' that when Gods asked Brahma to create a Veda that could be understood by commoners, sothat Brahma created the 'Panchamaveda' (fifth veda) called 'Natya Veda'. Drawing pathya (words) from the Rig Veda, abhinaya (gesture) from the Yajurveda, geet (music) from Samaveda and rasa (sentiment and emotion) from Atharvaveda, he synthesized Natya Veda. After creating Natya Veda, Brahma asked sage Bharata to popularize it on earth. Thus 'Natya Shastra' came into existence as a concrete foundation of Indian drama tradition

Bharata composed 'Natya Shastra' approximately in the third century, originally written in Sanskrit consisting 6000 sutras or verse stanzas incorporated in 36 chapters. The title can be loosely translated as 'A Compendium of theatre or a manual of Dramatic art'. The 'Natya Shastra' legend indicates an intimate relation between the idea of dancing and dramatic representation. According to Bharata, poetry, dance and mime in life's play produce emotion but only drama produces flavor (Rasa). The drama uses the eight basic emotions of love, joy, anger, sadness, pride, fear, aversion, and wonder attempting to resolve them in the ninth holistic feeling of peace. Thus, when the dramatic art was well comprehended, the 'Natya Veda' was performed on the occasion of the celebration of Lord Indra's victory over the 'Assuras' and 'Danavas'. In the 'Natya Shastra', there is a verse in its sixth chapter which can be quoted as Bharat Muni's own summary of his dramatic theory-

**“The combination called Natya is a mixture of rasa, bhavas, abhinayas, Dharmis, varttis, pravrittis, siddhi, svaras, instrument, song and theatre House.”**

Bharata, the great author prescribes not only the stage worthy things which are both entertaining and didactic but also the qualifications for the audience. His 'Natya

Shastra' highlights almost all aspects of drama- stage setting, music, plot construction, characterization, dialogue and acting. 'Rasa' is another significant gift given to the Indian classical theatre by Bharata. Even in contemporary India the term 'rasa' means 'flavour' is used colloquially (local language) to describe the aesthetic experience. There are eight basic rasas proposed by Bharata such as- love, joy (humour), anger, sadness, pride, fear, aversion, and wonder. These all eight basic rasas attempt to resolve in the ninth holistic rasa of peace. These nine rasas are co-related with bhavas, the imitation of emotions that actors perform.

Many scholars tried their hand in comparing Aristotle with Sage Bharata. Their study reveals that the western theory of drama derives from Aristotle's '**Poetics**'. His theory of drama can more properly be called the theory of tragedy, peculiarly, a Greek concept. On the other hand, Bharata's conception of drama is based on the Indian theory of 'Karma'. According to this theory, man is not just the play thing in the hands of fate but the architect of his own destiny. His fate is determined by his own actions. Obviously there is a fundamental difference between Aristotle and Sage Bharata, which determines the different approach to drama, which is western and Indian.

Nevertheless, Sanskrit drama, in its long and checkered history, has throughout conformed to these classical norms prescribed by Bharata in his famous treatise 'Natya Shastra'. The best Sanskrit drama had been intimately associated with stir and manifoldness of the life of a cultured class of people like Sage Bharata. The same tradition continued by other prominent scholars such as- Bhasa, Shudraka, Kalidasa, Harsha, Bhavbhuti and Vishakadutta and their creative Sanskrit works are the product of vigorous creative energy as well as sustained technical excellence.

### **Bhasa:-**

Another prominent Sanskrit playwright was Bhasa, who is the oldest known dramatist, might have flourished some time between 500 B.C. to 50 B.C. a period

certainly earlier than that of a celebrated grammarian Panini. Thirty-five plays are to be said written by him, but only thirteen plays are in record at present. Bhāsa does not follow all the dictates of the Natya Shastra. This has been taken as a proof of their antiquity; no post-Kālidāsan play has been found to break the rules of the 'Natya Shastra'. Bhāsa allows scenes that contain signs of physical violence to be shown on stage in plays like *Urubhanga*. This is strictly frowned upon by Natya Shastra. The *Uru-Bhanga* and *Karna-bhara* are the only known tragic Sanskrit plays in ancient India. Though branded the villain of the Mahabharata, Duryodhana is the actual hero in *Uru-Bhanga* shown repenting his past as he lies with his thighs crushed awaiting death. His relations with his family are shown with great pathos. The epic contains no reference to such repentance. The *Karna-bhara* ends with the premonitions of the sad end of Karna, another epic character from Mahabharata. Early plays in India, inspired by Natya Shastra, strictly considered sad endings inappropriate. The plays are generally short compared to later playwrights and most of them draw the theme from the Indian epics, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. Though he is firmly on the side of the heroes of the epic, Bhāsa treats their opponents with great sympathy. He takes a lot of liberties with the story to achieve this. In the *Pratima-nataka*, Kaikeyi who is responsible for the tragic events in the Ramayana is shown as enduring the calumny of all so that a far noble end is achieved.

### **Kalidasa:-**

Kālidāsa was a renowned Classical Sanskrit writer, widely regarded as the greatest poet and dramatist in the Sanskrit language. Nothing apart from his works is known with certainty about the life of Kālidāsa, such as his period or where he lived. Little is known about Kālidāsa's life. There has been great ambiguity regarding the exact date of Kālidāsa but in 1986, Sanskrit scholar Ramchandra Tiwari of Bhopal claims to have conducted a thorough research on Kalidasa and after analysing 627 archaeological evidences which included 104 sculptures, 30 pictures and 493 scriptural words determined that Kalidasa lived in the period 370-450AD. Kālidāsa wrote three plays. Among them, '*Abhijñānaśākuntalam*' generally regarded as a masterpiece. It was

among the first Sanskrit works to be translated into English which is the story of King Dushyanta who, while on a hunting trip, meets Shakuntalā, the adopted daughter of a sage, and marries her. A mishap befalls them when he is summoned back to court: Shakuntala, pregnant with their child, inadvertently offends a visiting sage and incurs a curse, by which Dushyanta will forget her completely until he sees the ring he has left with her. On her trip to Dushyanta's court in an advanced state of pregnancy, she loses the ring, and has to come away unrecognized. The ring is found by a fisherman who recognizes the royal seal and returns it to Dushyanta, who regains his memory of Shakuntala and sets out to find her. After more travels, they are finally reunited.

Another important work 'Vikramorvasivam' ("Pertaining to Vikrama and Urvashi") by Kalidasa tells the story of mortal King Pururavas and celestial nymph Urvashi who fall in love. As an immortal, she has to return to the heavens, where an unfortunate accident causes her to be sent back to the earth as a mortal with the curse that she will die (and thus return to heaven) the moment her lover lays his eyes on the child which she will bear him. After a series of mishaps, including Urvashi's temporary transformation into a vine, the curse is lifted, and the lovers are allowed to remain together on the earth.

Thus these two memorable Sanskrit plays made Kalidasa a world wide famous playwright and undoubtedly he is often called the Shakespeare of India, though he does not have the range of and variety of Shakespeare, but he has given the world a profounder spiritual vision of life.

### **Bhavbhuti:-**

Bhavbhuti was an 8th century scholar of India noted for his plays and poetry, written in Sanskrit. His plays are considered equivalent to the works of Kalidasa. Bhavbhuti was born in a Deshastha Brahmin family of Padmapura, Vidarbha, central India, in Gondia district, on Maharashtra and MP border. His real name was Srikantha Nilakantha, and he was the son of Nilakantha and Jatukarni. He received his education at 'Padmapawaya', a place some 42 km South-West of Gwalior. Paramhans Dnyananidhi is

known to be his guru. He composed his historical plays at 'Kalpi', a place on banks of river Yamuna. He is believed to have been the court poet of King Yashovarman of Kannauj. Kalhana, the 12th century historian, places him in the entourage of the king, who was defeated by Lalitaditya, King of Kashmir, in 736 AD. 'Mahaviracharita' (The story of highly courageous), depicting the early life of Rama. 'Uttararamacharita' (The story of Rama's later life), depicts Rama's coronation, the abandonment of Sita, and their reunion.

The play '**Malatimadhava**' is set in the city of Padmavati. The king desires that his minister's daughter Malati marry a youth called Nandana. Malati is in love with Madhava ever since she saw him and drew his portrait. Madhava reciprocates, and draws a portrait of her in turn. Malati suspects her father's motives in falling in with the King's plans for her. A side plot involves the lovers' friends Makaranda and Madayantika. The latter is attacked by a tiger, and Makaranda rescues her, getting wounded in the process. After numerous travails, all ends well, with the two couples uniting.

### **Sudraka:-**

Another notable playwright Sudraka, genuinely an Indian king, was wellknown playwright for his monumental drama '**Mricchakatika**' (The Little Clay Cart). He has been identified as Abhira king Indragupta, who used the pen name 'Sudraka'. Among the known dramatic composition of ancient India, the 'Mrichchhakatika' occupies a very high and distinguished position. It is a creation of outstanding brilliance. The Mrichchhatika is a Sanskrit drama written by Sudraka in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C., in ten Acts based on the story of the love of Charudatta, a prominent but poor inhabitant of Ujjayini, and Vasantasena, an exquisitely beautiful but pure-minded courtesan of the city. The play is full of romance, sex, court intrigue, and comedy. Nevertheless, the plot of the play has numerous twists and turns. The story is about a man named 'Charudatta' and his love for Vasantsena, a rich courtesan or nagarvadhu. The love affair is complicated by a royal

courtier who is also attracted towards Vasantsena. The plot is further made complicated by thieves and mistaken identities which ultimately results in a hilarious and entertaining play. This is powerfully documenting the social and political conditions of the time as well as delicately delineating personal emotions. Another major feature is its use of several different Prakrit dialects spoken by the minor characters, the women, and the vidushaka. It also contains much wit, humour, and satire.

### **Conclusion:-**

The Sanskrit drama is the ultimate foundation of Indian theatre and the success of present Indian theatre is solely dependent on it. The Sanskrit drama flourished in its glory under the patronage of the court and the aristocracy till the 12<sup>th</sup> century when the Mohammedan intrusion shifted the Sanskrit stage. The glory of Sanskrit drama became a thing of the past in the period of decline when it was divorced gradually from the stage. But still it has relevance in folk theatre at present. The genuine development of Sanskrit drama is ceased down in true sense except its few elements are in still practice. Modern Indian theatre is under the great influence of Western philosophy which neglected the traditional Sanskrit drama tradition. Nevertheless, we cannot deny the importance of Sanskrit drama tradition in the development of Indian theatre.

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