



### Origin and Development of Sanskrit Theatre: A Critical Study

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Drama, of all forms of literature, is the closest to life. It can be called an imitation of the multiple colours of life on stage by using multiple dramatic techniques. It creates an imaginary landscape on stage by imitating the real aspects of human life. It not only presents the realistic approach of life on stage, but also enacts what life can be. Imitation is the key concept of theatre, but at the end of a play, it reveals that life has more colours than we normally see. Theatre got its birth with particular performances on the occasions of religious ceremonies and with the passage of time it expands its wings. Today it presents social, cultural, economic, historical civilization on stage in a secular manner. Even in ancient days drama got its place along with other forms of creative writings. Bharata had given a full-length description of theatre in his *Natyashastra* (often known as “Fifth Veda”) and on the other hand, in the Western world, Aristotle had given a full fletched description of theatre in his book *Poetics*. Aristotle placed tragedy as superior to epic (the highest mode of poetic form) in the matters of both imitation and aesthetic pleasure. But the harsh reality of theatre is that it got less attention of critics in comparison to other genres of literature. Academicians think that it is a performing art so they talk less about theatre while theatre artists pay more attention of the dramatic performance part and not bother about the academic part of the text. So, the growth of theatre is restricted due to the neglect by critics and is slowly becoming a marginalised activity.

The development of Indian theatre can be traced from *Natyashastra* a classic work of Bharata Muni to the present day. *Natyashastra* had presented a systematic study of theatre and theatrical elements. Sanskrit theatre demanded a lot of labour and attention in the matter of presentation. On the other hand, Folk theatre was also a part of an Indian theatrical tradition which demands lesser effort than Sanskrit theatre in the matter of presentation. It was meant only to entertain the audience not to educate them. Folk theatre grew gradually and is still popular among the folk people in different



regions in different forms. The achievement of folk theatre is that it carries the traditional culture and traditional values with its presentation. It is also called “Desi theatre”. With the passage of time Parsi theatre makes its entry as a revolutionary theatre in India. Bengali theatre also grew-up as an independent theatre which shows the direct influence of Western theatre and set new trends in theatre. They presented experimental theatre like “Third theatre”, “Street theatre”, Dance drama to the audience. Proscenium theatre makes an entry with the colonisation of India. So, there is a long history of trends of theatre in India.

Sanskrit theatre is one of the oldest theatres not only in India but also in the world. It is commonly believed that the development of Sanskrit theatre begins with *Natyashastra* (literally means “science of drama”), written by Bharatamuni during the period of 200 BC and 200 AD. It is the single most important work which represents the classical Sanskrit theatre and its dramatic components like poetics, aesthetics, dance, music and other essential components of theatre, etc. It also presents the development and origin of theatre in the hands of Brahma, the supreme among the gods and the creator of the world. It is a complete work which contains 6000 *slokas* and it is based on an older text *Gandharva Veda* (appendix to *Samveda*). The book is divided into 36 chapters, written in poetic language (although few parts are written in prose language). It presents the full-length descriptions of all the dramatic aspects like stage construction, stage settings, stage craft, design, music, dance, make-up, costume, actor’s training, gestures of actors, dramatic construction, architecture, props, the organisation of *natak* companies, the role of audience, offering to the gods and goddesses, etc. The above-mentioned things are discussed in such a way that all the descriptions are relevant till today.

Bharata has described fifteen types of drama ranging from one to ten acts. Today, whatever play is performed; it would fall in some category or the other that is described by Bharata in *Natyashastra*. Ananda Lal counts the names of all the forms of drama and divides them into two forms. He divides drama into *rupakas* and *uprupakas*. Lal says:

Sanskrit drama was divided into *rupakas*, the ten major forms, and *uparupakas*, the minor forms. The *rupakas* comprised *nataka*, *samavakara*, *vyayoga*, *dima*, *ihamriga*,



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*utsrishtikamaka, prakarana, prahasana, bhana, nadvithi*. Their plots were broadly classified as those known from tradition, which the playwright derived from myths, legends, and history, or as those newly created by his imagination . . . *Uparupaka* forms included the *natika* and *sattaka*. (417-18)

Nowadays only the *rupakas* are found. The performance of *rupaka* has both means to teach as well as to entertain while *uparupaka* is meant to be short performance on special occasion. The performances of *uparupakas* are not found now because of its short period of performance and also because of its lesser use of dramatic techniques. In the matter of structure all the above-mentioned forms are different. All the *rupakas* have their own independent dramatic techniques and independent ways to select the themes. Bharata has described all these forms of the dramas in a detailed manner. Bharata's description is based on the different folk tradition found in those days.

In *Natyashastra*, Bharata paid a lot of attention on *rasa*, *bhava* and music. He has talked about eight principal *rasas*: *sringara* (erotic), *hasya* (comic), *santa* (peaceful), *karuna* (pathetic) *raudra* (furious) *vira* (heroic) *bhayanaka* (terrible) *bibhatsa* (odipous) *adbhuta* (marvellous). In the matter of *bhavas*, Bharata says that *rasa* can be enjoyed on stage only in association with specific *bhava*. Bharata also talks about the use of music and explains that music helps us to produce aesthetic pleasure on stage by producing multiple *rasas*. He says that music should be in accordance with the act going on the stage and must be supportive to the dialogue and gesture of the actors on the stage. Different musical instruments should be used at different time in order to produce different *rasas* on stage. In *Natyashastra* he has presented the different use of many musical instruments at different times.

According to *Natyashastra*, the person who commands all the actions on the stage is known as *sutradhara* in Sanskrit theatre. He is also known as the leader of the troop and the stage-manager on the stage. His major job is to supervise the action on the stage, but sometimes he plays the role of actor, perhaps the leading male character. Lal says about the description of *sutradhara* by Bharata:

Bharata and Matrigupta, an early writer on dramaturgy, describes the *sutradhara*'s qualities, according to which he must be proficient in playing the various musical



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instruments, an expert in theatrical speech, gaits, and movements of different characters, highly conversant with *rasa* and *bhava*, skilful in the presentation of *natya* (theatre) and other arts and crafts, learned in all the disciplines of knowledge, and capable of determining the rhythm and time measure to accompany various songs as well as comprehending the essence of prosody. He should himself be an excellent performer and, after understanding the play, must be able to impart the training to other performers. (457)

Thus, the role of *sutradhara* is, after all, to control all the parts of the theatre on and off the stage. He should have great knowledge of myth, folklore, literature and the dramatic techniques in order to present a fine play on stage. The person who plays the role of *sutradhara* must have knowledge of so many epics and *vedas* in order to present multiple narrations on the stage. In the middle of the performance, he attaches so many narratives from epics and *Vedas* in the support of the performance and enriches the performances. He plays the role of link between the action and the audience and by the narration of *sutradhara* the plot become easy to understand for the audience.

In Sanskrit theatre the actors, as described by Bharata, are known as *nata* and *nartaka* and the actresses are known as *nati* and *natakaya*. He describes the qualities of an ideal actor/actress and says that he/she should have physical strength, intelligence, knowledge of time and tempo, understanding of emotion and sentiments. His age must be in accordance with the role he is playing. All the actors must have the knowledge of vocal music, dance, stage fright, excellent in gesture, etc. He must be able to recite the text clearly enough to be heard throughout the theatre. He should transfer his own soul into the soul of character and behave like that character from the core of his heart. According to *Natyashastra* both male and female can play the role of each other because in the matter of singing the voices of females were suitable while in the matter of battle scenes males were suitable. So, according to the need man could play the role of female and female could play the role of the male as the character requires. *Natyashastra* also presents the detail study of the causes of failure of the actors on stage. In this respect Farley P. Richmond counts, “(1) unnaturalness in acting, (2) incorrect movement, (3) unsuitability for role, (4) forgetfulness, (5) improper use of gestures, (6) defect in costume and ornaments, (7) defect in rhythm of execution, (8) improper projection, (9) excessive



laughter and weeping.” (37) It explains that a character must be trained for a special role, for example, if someone is trained for the role of a fool then he must take the role of a fool in a play and if someone is trained as an attendant then he must play the role of an attendant preferably.

In *Natyashastra*, Bharata has written five long chapters on bodily movement. It talks about the three kinds of bodily movements – the movements of limbs, the movements of face and the movements of the entire body. It divides the limbs into two parts- major limbs and the minor limbs. Head, hand, legs, waist, and chest fall in the category of major limbs while the minor limbs contain the eyes, eyebrows, nose, lower lip, and chin. In acting the actor, first of all, should pay much attention on the movement of major limbs and then the minor limbs. But as a perfect actor, he must have knowledge of both types of limbs. Bharata explains that with the knowledge of bodily movement an actor can produce *bhavas* on stage, which also helps to produce *rasas* on stage.

In the matter of acting, *Natyashastra* recognises two ways of dramatic performance- *lokadharmi* and *natyadharmi*. The word *lokadharmi* means “the popular” and it is very close to the realistic presentation while on the other hands *natyadharmi* means “the theatrical” and it is very close to the conventional performance. Ananda Lal explains the distinctions between these two:

The first *lokadharmi* was nearer to the way things are seen in ordinary life, more natural. The second *natyadharmi*, was more conventional. However, a dialogue between them always existed; they were not completely opposite modes, but shared some complementarity. *Lokadharmi* may be seen as having survived in innumerable Indian folk forms, whereas *natyadharmi* is viewed in classical dance or dance-drama. (418)

Nowadays *lokadharmi* dance and theatre are popular because these performances present the realistic approach of life. On the contrary Indian folk theatre mixes both forms of drama in a single shape. Folk theatre most of the time presents performance as a dance drama by mixing both *lokadharmi* and *natyadharmi*. The reason behind the selection of both *lokadharmi* and *natyadharmi* is because both realistic and the imaginary are included and both types of settings, plots and characterisations existed in folk theatre.





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Sanskrit plays are composed of two languages *samaskrta* (refined) and *prakrta* (vulgar). It explains that the play must be written by using both of the two languages. The selection of the language of the dialogue is based on the character who is delivering the dialogue on the stage. The verse form is suitable for gods, kings and courtly people; prose language is used for common people and clowns. Animals and birds are also able to speak in common language. Sanskrit theatre also supports the use of regional dialects in the play. In Sanskrit theatre the language used by the characters is based on their social rank assigned in the play. Thus, the languages spoken by characters are determined by the occupation of characters and to whom he is addressing. In the matter of the selection of different languages in the play, it can be compared with Shakespearean plays. In Shakespearean play the poetic language was used for the aristocratic class people while the simple prose language was used for common people. The best example can be seen in Macbeth in which “porter scene” is written in prose language and the poetic language is used by Duncan, Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, etc. in their conversation.

The components of the spectacle can be divided into four parts: stage properties, decorations, make-up and creatures. The stage properties are like swords, arrows, bows, etc. but some symbolical places are shown through some objects like temples, mountains, idols of deities, etc. *Natyashastra* explains that the playwright should make clear of all these things while writing the text. It explains that the items like garlands, ornaments and costumes can be used to decorate the actors/actresses. These actors must be decorated according to the region of country to which they belong, their age, occasion, their caste and their occupation. Sanskrit theatre pays much attention on the ornamentation of the characters but does not give clear indication of this entire thing. In make-up it suggests that it should be applied to the face and body of the actor and it should be applied in such a way that each and every part of the body must be clearly visible to the audience.

*Natyashastra* also presents a significant discussion on the construction of playhouses and stage. It presents the long history of the development of theatres from its divine origin from Brahma till the human written text. In the matter of stage construction, *Natyashastra* talks about three types of structures. Richmond comments on the structures suitable for playhouses:



The text prescribes three shapes suitable for playhouses: rectangular, square, and triangular. Each was to come in a small medium and large size. Bharata lavishes more of his attention on medium-size rectangular building than he does on any other structure. He says that this is the ideal structure because spectators may easily see the facial expression of the actors and hear their speeches and songs. (49)

Although, nowadays all types of stages are used for the performance. But the theatre what we are using nowadays is rectangular as suggested in *Natyashastra*. It suggests the performance in an enclosed area because in those days the attacks of demons at the theatre were common, but nowadays the performance takes place in enclosed area due to the reason of technicalities. In enclosed area all the illusionary realistic effects can be created through lights and sounds. In these days the fashion of theatre is of proscenium theatre which demands enclosed area for performance.

In the *Natyashastra*, Bharatamuni has divided the roles of *nayakas* and *nayikas* according to different situations. He divides the roles of *nayakas* according to their productive role in the social system. He describes four kinds of *nayakas*; *Dhiralalit* (king, ministers, etc.), *Dhiraprashant* (Brahmin), *Dhirodatta* (*Kshatriya*, this is the hero of first *Rupanataka*) *Dhiroddhata* (mostly will be *Kshatriya*). The roles assigned to the men are based on their productive roles in society. These kinds of roles of *nayakas* are also divided into some other kinds according to their characteristics and age. In the portrayal of *nayakas*, the influence of patriarchal structure of society can be seen. In the play, the leading character will always be the *nayak* not the *nayika*. If the *nayika* will be the leading character then the playwright celebrates her beauty and physical appearance.

On the other hand, Bharatamuni has divided the roles of women according to their relationships with men. He does not consider women's role in the productive sphere although society cannot function without the productive participation of women. In the context of *Natyashastra* the conditions of women are same as in *Kamasutra* (John & Loknita, 2008). It describes the character of women on the basis of their beauty, age, characteristics, sexual behaviour, and their position in love affairs. Bharata has presented 144 kinds of *Nayaka* and 348 Kinds of *Nayikas* in the text (Dwivedi,



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2004 p. 322-330). The interesting fact which comes out of the discussion is that the *Natyashastra* always advocates that heroine and other female character must be beautiful and charming.

Besides all these things *Natyashastra* also pays much attention to the dramatic components like dance, music, voice, sentiment and emotion, occasion of performance, playwrights and their work, opening verse and prologue/preliminary, objectives of the theatre, poetic composition, etc. Thus, the text is a full-fledged study of all the dramatic elements as required in performance. The text is rightly called “the science of theatre” which presents the objective approach towards theatre and discusses theatre and theatricality inch by inch. Even today all the concepts of Sanskrit theatre are used either as it is or by modifying something. All the remaining dramatic elements are discussed in the next chapter based on the use of Sanskrit theatre by Girish Karnad entitled “Sanskrit Theatre and Girish Karnad.” The techniques of Sanskrit theatre passed from one generation to the other as by oral tradition and later in written text. The practitioners had written so many plays by adopting the model of Sanskrit theatre. Among them Bhasa, Kalidasa, Bhavabhuti, Shudrak, Bhatta Narayana, Vishakhadutta and Harsha are famous playwrights. Bhasa wrote 13 plays, Kalidasa wrote 3 plays, Bhavabhuti 3 plays, Shudrak 1 play, Bhatta Narayana 1 play, Vishakhadutta 1 play and Harsha 3 plays ([wikipedia.com](http://wikipedia.com)). All the playwrights have paid much attention to the strict rules and regulations of *Natyashastra* and written so many plays. The reason for the downfall of Sanskrit theatre is due to the strict rules of dramatic performance. A second reason for the downfall is mainly because of the lack of interest of folk and illiterate people. The Sanskrit theatre became Brahminical and elitist.

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