



A Brief Story on Sanskrit Drama

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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.

KEY WORDS: Sanskrit drama, Indian theatre, Bharata, Kalidasa.

I. INTRODUCTION:

The term **Indian classical drama** refers to the tradition of dramatic literature and performance in ancient **India**. The roots of drama in the Indian subcontinent can be traced back to the **Rigveda** (1200-1500 BCE), which contains a number of hymns in the form of dialogues, or even scenes, as well as hymns that make use of other literary forms such as animal fables. However, Indian drama begins its classical stage in the 3rd-4th century BCE with the composition of the **Nāṭyaśāstra** (lit. *The Science of Drama*). Indian classical drama is regarded as the highest achievement of **Sanskrit literature**.

The **Buddhist** playwright, poet and philosopher **Asvaghosa**, who composed the **Buddhacarita**, is considered to have been one of the first Sanskrit dramatists along with **Bhāsa**, who likely lived in the 2nd century BCE, and is famous

for writing two of the only surviving tragedies in Sanskrit drama.



Despite its name, a classical Sanskrit drama uses both **Sanskrit** and **Prakrit** languages giving it a bilingual nature. Sanskrit drama utilised **stock characters**, such as the hero (*nayaka*), heroine (*nayika*), or clown (*vidusaka*). Actors may have specialised in a particular type. **Mahābhāṣya** by **Patañjali** contains the earliest reference to what may have been the seeds of Sanskrit drama. This treatise on **grammar** provides a feasible date for the beginnings of **theatre in India**.

Kālidāsa in the 4th-5th century CE, was arguably one of ancient **India's** greatest Sanskrit dramatists. Three famous romantic plays written by Kālidāsa are the **Mālavikāgnimitram** (*Mālavikā and Agnimitra*), **Vikramōrvaśīyam** (*Pertaining to Vikrama and Urvashi*), and **Abhijñānaśākuntalam** (*The Recognition of Shakuntala*). The last was inspired by a story in the **Mahabharata** and is the most famous. It was the first to be translated into **English** and **German**. **Śakuntalā** (in English translation) influenced **Goethe's Faust** (1808–1832). The next great Indian dramatist was **Bhavabhuti** (c. 7th century CE). He is said to have written the following three plays: **Malati-Madhava**, **Mahaviracharita** and **Uttararamacarita**. Among these three, the last two cover between them the entire epic of **Ramayana**. The powerful Indian emperor **Harsha** (606–648) is credited with having



written three plays: the comedy *Ratnavali*, *Priyadarsika*, and the Buddhist drama *Nagananda*. Other famous Sanskrit dramatists include *Śhudraka*, *Bhasa*, and *Asvaghosa*. Though numerous plays written by these playwrights are still available, little is known about the authors themselves.

Research Methodology : Qualitative Research Methodology is applied in this present study with secondary data.

Origin : 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-20th. 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 'Vyākarna', 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.

Element 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 Natyashastra, 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.

THEORY: Natya Shastra

A major source of evidence for Sanskrit theatre is *A Treatise on Theatre (Nāṭyaśāstra)*, a compendium whose date of composition is uncertain (estimates range from 200 BCE to 200 CE) and whose authorship is attributed to Bharata Muni. The *Treatise* is the most complete work of



dramaturgy in the ancient world^[according to whom?]. It addresses acting, dance, music, dramatic construction, architecture, costuming, make-up, props, the organisation of companies, the audience, competitions, and offers a mythological account of the origin of theatre.^[5] In doing so, it provides indications about the nature of actual theatrical practices. Sanskrit theatre was performed on sacred ground by priests who had been trained in the necessary skills (dance, music, and recitation) in an hereditary process. Its aim was both to educate and to entertain.

Under the patronage of royal courts, performers belonged to professional companies that were directed by a stage manager (*sutradhara*), who may also have acted.¹ This task was thought of as being analogous to that of a puppeteer—the literal meaning of "*sutradhara*" is "holder of the strings or threads". The performers were trained rigorously in vocal and physical technique. There were no prohibitions against female performers; companies were all-male, all-female, and of mixed gender. Certain sentiments were considered inappropriate for men to enact, however, and were thought better suited to women. Some performers played characters their own age, while others played characters younger or older than themselves. Of all the elements of theatre, the *Treatise* gives most attention to acting (*abhinaya*), which consists of two styles: realistic (*lokadharmi*) and conventional (*natyadharmi*), though the major focus is on the latter.

PLAYS: Mricchakatika (The Little Clay Cart)

One of the earliest known Sanskrit plays, this play was composed by Śudraka in the 2nd century BC. Rife with romance, sex, royal intrigue and comedy, the juicy plot of the play has numerous twists and turns. The main story is about a young man named Charudatta, and his love for Vasantasena, a rich courtesan or nagarvadhu. The love affair is complicated by a royal courtier, who is also attracted to Vasantasena. The plot is further complicated by thieves and mistaken identities, and thus making it a greatly hilarious and entertaining play. It invited widespread admiration when staged in New York in 1924. The play was made into a 1984 Hindi movie *Utsav*, directed by Girish Karnad. The Indian play depicted in the 2001 film *Moulin Rouge!* may have been based on *The Little Clay Cart*.

Bhāsa

The plays written by Bhāsa were known to historians only through the references of later writers, as the manuscripts themselves were lost.

Manuscripts of 13 plays written by him were discovered in an old library in Thiruvananthapuram (Trivandrum) in 1913 by the scholar Ganapati Sastri. A 14th play was later discovered and attributed to Bhāsa, but its authorship is disputed. Bhāsa's most famous plays are *Svapnavasavadattam* (*Svapnavāsadatta*) ("Vasavadatta's dream"), *Pancharātra*, and *Pratijna Yaugandharayana* ("The vows of Yaugandharayana"). Some other plays being *Pratimanātaka*, *Abhishekanātaka*, *Bālacharita*, *Dūtavākya*, *Karnabhāra*, *Dūtāghatōtkacha*, *Chārudatta*, *Madhyamavyāvoga* and *Ūrubhaṅga*. *Karnabharam* is a critically acclaimed play and it is being subjected to lot of experimentation by the modern theatre groups in India. Bhāsa is considered to be one of the best Sanskrit playwrights, second only to Kalidasa. He is earlier than Kalidasa and is dated to the 3rd or 4th century CE.

Kālidāsa

Kālidāsa (4th-5th century CE^{[21][22]}) is easily the greatest poet and playwright in Sanskrit, and occupies the same position in Sanskrit literature that Shakespeare occupies in English literature. He deals primarily with famous Hindu legends and themes; three famous plays by Kālidāsa are *Vikramōrvaśīyam* ("Vikrama and Urvashi"), *Mālavikāgnimitram* ("Malavika and Agnimitra"), and the play that he is most known for: *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* ("The Recognition of Shakuntala"). The last named play is considered to be greatest play in Sanskrit. More than a millennium later, it would so powerfully impress the famous German writer Goethe that he would write:

Wouldst thou the young year's blossoms and the
fruits of its decline
And all by which the soul is charmed, enraptured,
feasted, fed,
Wouldst thou the earth and heaven itself in one sole
name combine?

I name thee, O Sakuntala! and all at once is said.

—translation by Edward Backhouse Eastwick

Kālidāsa also wrote two large epic poems, *Raghuvamśa* ("The Genealogy of Raghu") and *Kumārasambhava* ("Birth of Kumara"), and two smaller epics, *Ritusamhāra* ("Medley of Seasons") and *Meghadūta* (*The Cloud Messenger*), another 'perfect' work.

Kālidāsa's writing is characterized by the usage of simple but beautiful Sanskrit, and by his extensive use of similes. His similes have earned him the



saying, *Upama Kalidasasya* (Kālidāsa owns simile).
The full śloka reads: "**upamā Kālidāsasya,
Bhāraṇar artha gauravam | Daṇḍinah
padalālityam, Māghe shanti trayoguṇah ||**"
Mudrarakshasa

Amongst Sanskrit plays, the historical play *Mudrarakshasa* by *Vishakhadatta* is unique because it contains political intrigue and is full of life, action and sustained interest. The time period of composition is prior to 800 C.E. In the play, *Chandragupta* *Maurya* is ruling from Pataliputra, having deposed the last of the Nanda kings. *Rakshasa* the minister of Nanda, attempts to avenge his late master. *Chanakya*, the minister of Chandragupta succeeds in winning over Rakshasa to his master's side.

Other major plays and playwrights

Other great plays include *Ratnavali*, *Nagananda* and *Priyadarsika* by Sri *Harsha* (7th century CE), Mahendra Vikram Varman *Mattavilasa Prahasana*, Shakti Bhadra's *Āścaryacūḍāmaṇi*, Kulasekhara's *Subhadra Dhananjaya* and *Tapatisamvarana*, Neelakanta's *Kalyana Saugandhika* and Sri *Krishna Charita*.

Bhavabhuti (8th century) is one of the great playwrights after Kalidasa. Other major Sanskrit playwrights include *Visakhadatta*, *Bhatta Nārāyana*, *Murari*, *Rajasekhara*, *Kshemisvara*, *Damodaramishra*, and *Krishnamishra*.

Performances

Sanskrit plays were very popular and were staged in ancient times all over India. Now the only surviving ancient Sanskrit drama theatre is *Koodiyattam*, which is preserved in *Kerala* by the *Chakya* community. This form of Sanskrit drama is thought to be at least 2000 years old and is one of the oldest living theatrical traditions in the world. All major Sanskrit plays such as that of *Bhasa*, *Sri Harsha*, *Shakti Bhadra* etc. are performed in *Koodiyattam*. *Guru Nātyāchārya Vidūshakarātnam Padma Shri Māni Mādhava Chākyār* choreographed and directed plays like Kalidasa's *Abhijñānaśākuntala*, *Vikramorvaśīya* and *Mālavikāgnimitra*; *Bhasa's Swapnavāsadatta* and *Pancharātra* for the first time in the history of *Koodiyattam*. He popularised *Koodiyattam* and rejuvenated the only surviving Sanskrit drama theatre in India.



**King Udayana
in *Bhasa's Swapnavasavadattam Koodiyattam*—
the only surviving ancient Sanskrit theatre.
(Artist: *Mani Damodara Chakya*)**

One of the hypotheses (as yet without consensus) of the origins of the "Trivandrum plays" of *Bhasa* is that these 13 plays were adapted from their original sources and brought to Kerala for choreography in the *Koodiyattam* tradition.

Modern Sanskrit plays

Manmohan Acharya, a modern Sanskrit playwright has written many plays and dance dramas. Some worth-mentioning plays are *Arjuna-Pratijna*, *Shrita-kamalam*, *Pada-pallavam*, *Divya-Jayadevam*, *Pingalaa*, *Mrtuyuh*, *Sthitaprajnah*, *Tantra-mahasaktih*, *Purva-sakuntalam*, *Uttara-sakuntalam* and *Raavanah*.





Famous Indian Dance Drama, Tantram by Srjan,
Script written by Vanikavi
Vidyadhar Shastri wrote three Sanskrit plays
viz. *Purnanandam*, *Kalidainyam* and *Durbala*
Balam.
Prafulla Kumar Mishra has written the
plays *Chitrangada* and *Karuna*.

II. 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 12th 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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