



# Theatre, performance and society in early India (Study Of Sanskrit Dramas In Social , Ritual And Politico-Economy )

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## Introduction

Among the various sorts of literary composition the drama holds the most important position as social reflector and living essential. According to Esslin<sup>1</sup> 'Drama is mimetic action, action in imitation or representation of human behaviour'. While we are studying here the basic anatomy of drama its impact on society with its mutual relation with social arrangements and livings. As we know that drama consists of two principal species, 'tragedy' and 'comedy', the minor species are tragi-comedy , farce, burlesque and melodrama. Both tragedy and comedy had attained their perfection in Greece long before Christian Era and For English drama it has taken rise from the mysteries or sacred plays by clergy in the middle Ages endeavored to import a knowledge of Christianity.

But here, case of origin of Drama and Theatre in India is different as it originated with some obscurity. A.L. Basham a prominent historian, has viewed that 'the origin of Indian theatre is still obscure'. However for general understanding and clarity, we here can draw a clear progression line regarding Indian Classical Dramas that has been widely accepted by historians.

In India, it has been postulated that excavated ruins at '*Sitabengra*' and '*Jogimara*' caves represent the world's oldest amphitheatres which highlight the long tradition of theatre in Indian cultural scenario. In vedic age, dialogic conversation of '*Yam-Yami*', '*pururavo-urvaani*', '*Agstya-lopmudra*' and '*indro-aditi*' give us an idea of proto-drama writings. But a rich tradition of drama writings and theatre performances<sup>2</sup> can be traced only from *Sanskrit dramas*.

In this opinion, first developed evidence of dramaturgy<sup>3</sup> can be found in the Bharat Muni's *Natyashastra* written somehow between 200 BC and 200AD<sup>4</sup>. In it ten types of plays from one act play to 10 acts have been described and covers all aspects of these classical Sanskrit literatures, and theatre such as acting, make up, direction,

<sup>1</sup> Esslin M (1978), An Anatomy of drama, London, Mauries temple smith.

<sup>2</sup> Drama is the printed text of a play while theatre refers to the actual production of the text on the stage.

<sup>3</sup> The theory and practices of dramatic composition.

<sup>4</sup> Antiquity and writing time of *Natyashastra* is debatable. Some scholars have view of its later writing than many dramas.

emotions, modes of communications, ritual practices and erection of the stage. The mythological origin<sup>5</sup> ascribed to 'Natyashastra' give it the sanctity and authority of scripture.

The most distinguishing features of the Sanskrit drama tradition is its aesthetic theory of 'bhava' and 'rasa' as it describes eight basic human sentiments (*rasa*) such as comic (*hasya*), rage (*raudra*), heroism (*vira*) etc. Aspects like acting (*abhinaya*), performances (*vrittis*), gestures (*mudras*), songs (*dhruvas*), theatre hall (*Natya griha*) curtain for realistic scenery (*Yavanika*) have been discussed in detail in the *Natyashastra* but despite giving an authoritative status to *Natyashastra*, it was not only single basic text for theatre performances but dramatist like Bhasa and Ashvaghosh have not followed the techniques and theories described by the *Natyashastra*.

Generally Sanskrit dramas can be attributed as a Narrative form of art in the words of *Rupaka*, *Prishakavya* and *preksakavya*. They can be categorized in two main types, 'lokadharmi' (depiction of daily life) and 'Natyodharmi' (Stylised narration and overt symbolism). Almost all dramatists have appreciated second type which has some basic features like happy ending (*Sukanta*), male protagonist (*Nayaka*), *Vidusaka* (Comic Characters) and last but not least a stage manager and director (*sutradhara*).

A short chronology regarding Sanskrit drama can be started from the first example of Ashvaghosh's Sanskrit drama 'sariputra prakran' that was an act play. Another important dramatist was 'Bhasa'. Some historians have argued that 'Bhasa' was predecessor of Bharata but we don't have enough evidences to date Bhasa because his plays had been lost for centuries until the manuscripts were rediscovered in 1913 in other texts like 'Kavyamimansa' of Rajshekhar attributes the play 'swapnavasa vadattam' to Bhasa.<sup>6</sup> Some other dramatist like 'Sudraka' was the first to introduce the essence of conflict in his play 'Mriechakatika' and this play features an antagonist (*shakar*) first time. Kalidasa's works like 'Shakuntalam', 'Vikramovarshi' and 'Malavikagnimitram' are finest examples of eternal conflict between desire and duty. Some sorts of socio-political reflection like urban life, female condition, varnasharma dharma and caste organisation economy-trade and profession, status of Religion has been efficiently depicted in the plays like *Harshacharita* (BanaBhatta), *mudrarakashas* (vishakadatta) *Ratnavali* (Harsha) and *Kathasaritasaga* (somdeva) etc.

## Sanskrit dramas and society

If drama is considered as a reflector of social organisation and cultural pattern then it is necessary to analyse the relation of society and its understanding of drama and theatre vis a vis development of theatre art. In western drama theories, it has been described as an essential object of society. In the words of Peter Brook "it is as necessary as eating or sex in the society". Evreinor opined that 'it is something as essentially necessary to man as air, food and sexual intercourse'. But why drama and theatre performances should be so essential, to understand this we can relate that participating in drama and theatre allows connections to unconscious and emotional processes to be made. It satisfies human needs to play and to create the festive act of people coming together through drama and theatre is seen to have social and psychological importance.

<sup>5</sup> It is said that Brahma, the creator himself was inspired to create theatre, dance and music for aesthetic pleasure and gave *Natyashastra* as status of fifth Veda.

<sup>6</sup> T. Ganapati Sastri (1860-1926) was a Sanskrit scholar who was editor of the Trivandrum Sanskrit series and discovered the plays of Bhasa.

But in the view of the ancient Sanskrit dramas we have some indigenous questions to address first regarding society and dramas like what were the main social subjects of contemporary drama? To what extent society can be seen as true reflector in dramas? How many and from which section (were they lower class people and woman?) people were aware of drama art and therapy<sup>7</sup>, Last but not least were performances of dramas really meant for public? because details of theatre architecture suggest that rather than being a public theatre, performances were mostly meant for courtly audiences. Despite these Facts it is true that drama and society both always have a sacred relation because whether is it reality play or imaginative writing work of drama, performances of theatre will always give us idea or some sorts of social features and trends.

In this reference we can analyse society and drama in another traditional perspective of historiography that is defined as 'embedded history' in the words of *Romila Thapar*. Historians had efficiently tried well to construct social history on the basis of sanskrit dramas Ex. Mauryan society from *mudrarakshas*, issues like inner conflicts of Brahman & Kshatriyas, social status of Brahman / upper class (*Charudatta* respect in court room scene). Status of public life of independent women like *Basantsena* (who was prostitute) and independent stand of authors and dramatist from the rule of *Dharmashastra* regarding prostitution and women status (*Sudraka* has given utmost honour and respect to *Basantsena*). Organisation of urban life and rituals can also derived from these dramas therefore, we also can find the complexity of society and inner contradictions from these sanskrit dramas.

In the study of Ancient Indian dramas, we know that sanskrit theatre emerged as a dominant tradition, But for our proper understanding of Indian drama theory we should be remained aware that despite being domination of the sanskrit dramas we have evidences of other popular forms flourished even before of sanskrit dramas like in the Prakrit (*Samvad*)<sup>8</sup>. Although the *Natyashastra* provide information on just one type of ancient performance. It would be safe to deduce that there were probably many others existing at that time, perhaps more modest in scope, but equally, if not more meaningful to society at large. Among these must have been the bards and story tellers/singers who created/transmitted the stories from *Mahabharat/Ramayanas* or *Puran texts*, in addition, ancient India must had folk songs, dances, solo performances, street theatres (*nukkad nataks*), local dramas as of today but unfortunately, The performances aspects of these are not described in any of the early literature (although occasional tantalising hints)<sup>9</sup>.

So, main argument of theatre performances and society should be seen in the broader perspective not only in the available texts of sanskrit dramas. secondly sanskrit drama texts should be read thoroughly and apply as it is for modern theatre theories but for historical analysis, it should be criticised properly. In the words of *Krzyzanowski (Sciences of literatures)* any literature should be criticised sociologically (Factors which was responsible for literature making and contemporary conditions), historically (problem of originality of text, back ground of writer and literary tradition) which is a fundamental attitude of any historian, Aesthetically (Basic features and structures

<sup>7</sup> Phil Jones, *Drama as therapy (theory, practice and Research)*, Routledge, 2007

<sup>8</sup> E.P. Horwitz, *The Indian theatre*, 1969, quoted in Varodpande, M.L, *the History of Indian Theatre*, New Delhi : Abhinav Publications, 1987, p. 88.

<sup>9</sup> Aditi – *The living Arts of India*, published by smithsonian Institutionn, Washington D.C. New Delhi : Motilal Banarsidas, 1987

of litérateur and its peculiarities) and last ethically (expression of some reactions of life).

As the topic depict, main focus will be made towards theatre and social livings, where subjects related to the social formations and structural changes of society from vedic to Gupta Era can be dealt. Progression of drama writing is itself complex process, it took shape more in complex way simultaneously with increasing complexity of society from post Mauryan time, it was the time during which with economic diversity, political decentralization, social class amalgamation, cultural progress were also being taking place and artistic life was becoming more and more prosperous . Drama also emerged as a narrative form of art and Studying of drama in social livings also need a diverse approach regarding societal understanding of the History because themes of dramas are not always of their contemporary time Ex. *Mudrarakshas* was written in gupta era but its topic shows the court play of mauryan era. Another problem about the depiction of society in the dramas is urban life based society and focused mainly on the upper classes and ruling political authorities. We here also face the problem of not knowing the real social relation of drama and common public.

Although we will not only also see the subjects in the context of rituals like what were the social and religious rituals of the people in dramas but also for what type of rituals dramas were used to play? And Expression of rituals, religions and customs in different writings of dramas is our argument in mutually or exclusive context.

Our last argument will be about the theatre as a economic profession where some points of questions like whether drama/theatre was a economic profession? question is necessary because most of the drama was created under royal patronage and used to performed by skilled artists, so it might be a proper developed economic Industry and might also be a revenue source for the state.

Whole natures of hypothesis will be about the historical analysis of sanskrit dramas under social organisations but one important caution is necessary here that we will have to keep differentiation of historical analysis from general analysis of dramas for artistic purposes.

Therefore, all the aspects related to the exploration of dramas and society in this way need more exploration and elaboration for the sensible conclusion.

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