

# TRADITIONAL THEATRE

## *The Historical Perspective*

---

J. C. Mathur

The traditional and folk theatre of India has not been discussed and examined from the historical perspective so far. This is because very few Sanskrit works on dramaturgy were written after the 13th Century. Most of the works until then were, as was the practice of those days, meant for acquainting and reinterpreting the points made out by the earlier masters. Meanwhile, the current drama was changing to which most of these authorities on dramaturgy were not responsive. After Bharatha's *Natya Shastra* works of various forms of theatre and drama were written in Sanskrit by Abhinava Gupta, Dhananjaya, Sagarandini, Sharada Tanaya, Nandikeshwar. None of them, however, gave examples of the folk type of plays that might have been performed by the villagers for example, or in the fairs. In this respect poetry was luckier because in the prakrit work *Gatha-Sapta-Shati* of Hala, the folk poetry has been preserved for posterity. But so far as folk and traditional dramatic forms of the people were concerned, they were not described by the authorities on dramaturgy. Dr. Raghavan has in his pamphlet (*Sanskrit Drama and Performance*) referred to some of these. But of all the forms that have been mentioned only four seem to have some resemblance in actual practice to the forms of traditional and folk drama as we know them. These are four Uparopakas (or minor dramatic forms). One is *Ullapaya* which is supposed to be of one-act, should have a mythological theme and in which the dialogue should have many songs. Another is *Rāsak* which should be mainly comical having the hero from an aristocratic family and the heroine from a learned one, one-act and only five characters (this has some resemblance to the *tamasha* of Maharashtra). The third is *Shrigadit* in which the dialogue is partly spoken in the form of songs. The fourth is *Hallees* which has one-act, a lot of music and dance both in equal proportions.

2. But none of the authorities has given examples of these even though some of the forms which have now survived in India bear

resemblance to some of them in part. Some resemble them only in name but not in content. For instance, the Sanskrit *Bhan* reminds one of contemporary Kashmiri *Bhand-Jashna*. But the Kashmiri form has several characters, is full of music and dancing while Sanskrit *Bhāna* is a monologue. In Andhra Pradesh, there is today a form called *Veedhi Natakam*. *Veedhi* is also a *roopaka* described by dramaturgists with one-act, two characters, a lot of comicality. But Andhra's *Veedhi Natakam* is quite different. Likewise, in Assam, the *Ankiya Naat* remains one of the *roopaka* called *Anka*. But the two are not similar because in the Sanskrit one it is the tragic sentiment which is predominant while in *Ankiya Nat* there is a variety of sentiments.

3. In these circumstances, the question arises how did the contemporary traditional and folk forms arise? In the West the folk form is considered only a community activity of an amateurish kind. This is not so in India because our traditional and folk drama has very important and strict traditions in some cases and is far more sophisticated than the Western folk drama. While editing jointly with my friend Dashrath Ojha\* of some medieval plays of north-eastern India and Nepal (C. 1300 AD—C. 1625 AD) I came to realise that those plays along with similar contemporary traditional forms in others parts of India, actually belong to the corpus of a dramatic genre which has received scanty attention from historians of drama including Keith who has rejected them as merely "irregular plays". The same attitude is disclosed in a recent work called "Sanskrit Drama, its origin and decline" by I. Shekar (published in the Netherlands).

4. My finding is that these traditional and folk forms arose just at the time when Keith saw the decline of Sanskrit drama. During that period of so called 'decadence' the foundation was laid of a vigorous form of folk traditional theatre.

5. I have been able to trace the history of their growth in four stages. But before I come to the four stages I would like to refer to a name not given by the dramaturgists but mentioned in other texts, for a form which described collectively the current traditional and folk theatre of India. The name of the form was *Sangeetaka*. There is a clear distinction between *Sangeet*, that is music, and *Sangeetaka*. *Sangeetaka* is not mentioned in Bharatha's *Natya Shastra* or in works of dramaturgy, written subsequently. *Sangeetaka* was mentioned in a number of works, beginning with a collection of Sanskrit monologues (Chaturbhani) in which there is a reference to *Sangeetakas* by courtesans. Then we come across a reference by Bana Bhata to *Sangeetaka* in his *Harsha-charitam*. In the 11th Century in Yadava Prakasha's *Vaijyanthi* there is a reference to *Sangeetaka*. Finally, the form has been described in a shloka in *Sangeet Damodara* by Shubhankar in the 15th Century. In this shloka it has been clearly mentioned that the *Sangeetaka* has got five elements, that is songs, instrumental music, dances, a place for performance and the performers.

---

\*Pracheen Bhasha Natat Sangh, Agra University, Agra.

6. This form thus took shape in the period 10th to the 15th Centuries which is the first stage. What were the factors responsible for the development of these forms? In the first place, among the actors themselves the knowledge of Sanskrit was on the decline, secondly, there was from the audiences a demand for the introduction of popular songs in the vernaculars which were earlier in the *apabhhranshas*. Thirdly, it was during this period that Jayadeva wrote the famous *Geeta Govindam*. The *Geeta Govindam* had a strong influence both in the North and in the South because it introduced a new technique of the presentation of dances in which respite was given to the dancers to do some singing by the Sutradar who remained on the stage throughout and did not disappear after Manglacharan.

7. During the first stage of the growth of the traditional-cum-folk drama, leadership was given first in Kerala by Kulasekara Verman, a King who introduced in about 1000 A.D., what is today known as *Kudiyattam*. In this, he permitted the *Vidhushakas* to interpret in the local language, the original Sanskrit. This is the only form of Sanskrit drama the presentation of which has survived all these centuries. His bold step was of course criticised by traditionalists. But he wanted to bring the folk and the classical nearer each other. At this time in Andhra, and particularly in Karnataka a kind of vernacular drama was also growing. This tradition was carried to, of all places, Mithila in North Bihar by a dynasty of the South which was established under the name of Karnata dynasty in 1090 A.D. by Nanya Deva. They introduced in that part of the country a new form of what is called the *Kirtinaya Natak*. The climax was reached when two great geniuses named Umapathi Thakur and Jyotirishwar Thakur in the court of a king named Harisingha Deva round about 1320 A.D. came out with two works, one called *Parijata Haran Natak* in which in the midst of Sanskrit and Prakrit dialogue, vernacular songs were introduced for the first time. Secondly, a work called *Dhoorta Samagam* originally in Sanskrit of which Jyotirishwar Thakur prepared a vernacular version. It is a satire exposing the false creeds of the time and introducing both dialogue and songs in the local vernacular. This very Jyotirishwar Thakur wrote a book in which he explained what the actors and actresses should do.

8. It is thus we see that the producer gave a new turn to the dramatic literature. He came out with a producer's copy of drama which was nearer the people than the classical drama of Sanskrit. This tradition was continued in North Bihar by the Oinwar Dynasty who had the privilege of having Vidyapati as their poet and dramatist. Vidyapati's play *Goraksha-Vijaya Natakam* uses the word *Sangeetaka*, contains a song and dances by two characters from Tailanga Desh which is the name for modern Andhra. Thus traditional drama was a link between the North—Mithila,—and the South.

9. The second stage was from 1500 A.D. and 1650 A.D. By this time two circumstances had appeared. One was that the music and dance that used to be performed in the temples led to some corruption. Some reformist saints arose strongly influenced by Bhakti

Movement. They decided to introduce a devotional type of drama outside the temples. The second factor was that the last great Hindu kingdom, the Vijayanagara Kingdom had a great king named Krishna Devaraya who gave patronage to the Bhakti Movement (Vallabhacharya) and also to the religious drama.

10. By this time the whole country was practically dominated by the creed of Bhagvata Dharma, the Vaishnavism popularised by Shrimad-Bhagat. Also Jaya Deva's *Geeta Govindam* was on everybody's tongue and was frequently staged. It was during this period that between 1485 and 1550 A.D. a number of saints from Assam (Mahapurush Sankara Deva) Gaur (Chitanya Dev and his disciples), Hithahari Vansh (Brindavan itself), Hari Ram Vyas (from Orchcha), Swami Hari Das (probably from Gujarat), and Shri Naryan Bhatt (from Andhra Pradesh) congregated from time to time, to what was traditionally believed to be the birth place and place of action of Krishna, i.e. Braj near Mathura. It was during this period that two remarkable developments took place in the traditional theatre of India. One was the emergence of *Ankiya Naat*. This was a deliberate initiation of drama into the field of religion by Mahapurush, Shankara Dev of Assam. The interesting thing is this man visited Braj twice and wrote a number of plays in which the theory of *rasa* has been exploited to the full, in order to show the materialistic episodes from Krishna's life as a ladder for glimpses into his spiritual message. The second important thing that happened was the organisation is what is now called *Raasa Lila* by Andhra's Narayana Bhatt. He came to Braj, went to different villages, decided in what village what *lila* (that is a dramatic performance of an episode of Shrimad Bhagvata) would be held and compiled all these instructions in a Sanskrit work called *Vrajotsava Chandrika*. There were other attempts also of no less significance but Narayana Bhatt indeed must have been a great pioneer because what he introduced was similar to the morality and miracle plays of the West.

11. Chaitanya's disciples Jeeva Goswami and Roop Goswami wrote some plays one of which has recently come to light. It is called *Govind Hulas Natak*. This might have been the precursor of the Jatra of Bengal because it was written by a Bengali but in Hindi.

It must be recognised that all this could be possible because of the generous policy of the Mughal Emperor Akbar in whose times these people could revive the earlier dramatic forms and create new ones.

It was during this very time that Tulsi Das, the great poet of *Ram Charita Manas* introduced the performance of *Ram Lila* both in Varanasi and Ayodhya. The Varanasi tradition was revived in a different form by the Raja of Kashi sometimes in the 17th Century and is still the most traditional because the Maharaja himself attends it.

12. Then comes the third stage lasting from 1650 A.D. to 1800 A.D. During this period there was a reaction from the religious forms of folk drama and classical songs to folk tunes and folk forms. Secondly, came the emergence of small Hindu Princes in the outlying parts of the Mughal

Empire such as Tanjore where the famous Nayak Dynasty contributed liberally to the traditional folk theatre of that time. Even a Queen of the Nayak Dynasty named *Ranganuma* wrote plays which used to be staged. Another centre during this period grew under the patronage of a Muslim Nawab named Abdul Tanasa whose two ministers gave 300 villages to a saint named Sidhadra Yogi in Kuchipudi for the development of the *Yaksha-gaana* plays now revived as *Kuchipudi* dance.

13. Later on the Nayaks gave way to Mr. Marathas. The Marathas left a small dynasty in Tanjore. The most famous in this dynasty was Sarfoji. He introduced a certain dramatic form, built a theatre in Tanjore which is still in existence with wonderful acoustics. He also built up a library (Saraswati Mahal) in which two plays are in the language of the North.

14. Marathas also encouraged other local forms both in Maharashtra (*Tamasha*) and in Karnataka (*Dodatta and Sannatta*).

15. Meanwhile, in the rest of Karnataka in Andhra, the *Yakshagana* took its roots from the folk traditions derived from the mythology and built into a wonderful tradition particularly near Udupi. In Tamil Nadu, *Teru Koothu* also seems to have begun near about this time. *Teru Koothu* gives a wonderful and impressive depiction of scenes from *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*.

In this very period, on the Malabar coast, the Christians influenced by the Portuguese introduced a form called *Chayittu Natakam* showing the clash between Salauddin and Charles VIII of Europe. This is still current. Likewise, up in Kashmir in North it was probably during this period that during the rule of Ali Shah and Asan Shah some artists were obtained from Karnataka and what is now known as *Bhand-Jashna* took shape.

16. In the North the two famous forms, namely, *Raas Lila* and *Rama Lila*, continued to develop, at least *Raas Lila* did. A man named Chandrasakhi round about 1643 A.D., introduced a *Lila* called *Chandravali* a performance in which he introduced characters and tunes from the local folk region and tradition. This was a bold step considering that the *Raas Lila* regarded this essentially a religious form a miracle or morality play. Another named Chacha Hit Bridavan Das wrote 27 *Leelas*, small episodic plays in which prose was also introduced,—another innovation.

All this shows that all along, the traditional form has been dynamic and growing. The final evidence of this we come across in the fourth stage of the traditional drama since 1800. There are two noticeable features. One, as a result of the revenue system introduced by the landlords of British the *Zamindar* or landlord of Bengal who was really a contractor became an aristocrat. As a newly rich class these people patronised performances and gave shape to *Jatras*. Secondly, in Calcutta some of the then popular British plays began to be introduced by a man called Lebardum. This influenced *Jatras* in their turn. Thirdly, the society was changing and a new middle-class conscious of the West as

well its own old heritage arose. The *Jatra* became more and more colourful and ostentation.

17. Meanwhile their influence was felt in Avadha where the last decadent Mughal Governor of Avadha named Wajid Ali Shah was a lover and patron of the stage. He himself wrote and appeared in what he thought was an opera—a *rahas*. It was in his time that an operatic play was written called *Indra Sabha*, the assembly of the god Indra in which fairies were shown in various colours, costumes and panoramic effects which were echoes of the Western devices.

18. Probably all these forms persuaded the highly pragmatic classes of Bombay Parsis to introduce the Parsi Theatre in which they employed anglo-Indian girls and local men and used the Hindustani language or Hindi was popular practically all over Northern and Central countries. This kind of tradition was somewhat foreign and a departure from the earlier traditions to which I have referred above. But it was commercially very successful all over until the cinema came and jettisoned it.

19. What was happening to the earlier traditions? As a result of the liberalising influence of the thoughts of the French Revolution brought by British teachers a wave of reformism spread all over the country particularly in Northern India. Performances began to be looked down upon. Therefore, in order to retain popularity the *Raas Lila* to which I have mentioned earlier introduced a new element in the form of a sermon by Krishna himself in the beginning of the performance. This seemed to be in the nature of a reply to the Reformist Movement of Arya Samaj, and was introduced by a *Sadhu* named Premananda.

20. Another form in which reformism entered the traditional and folk drama was in Bihar and in the Himachal Pradesh. In Bihar a semi-literate genius named Bhikari Thakur introduced a form called *Bideshia* in which in the midst of highly erotic stuff he would introduce sermons in the form of songs. (There was another similar genius in Maharashtra named Phatte Bapu Rao who married a Harijan girl in order to continue the dramatic profession). In Himachal Pradesh near Simla, a form grew a form of drama called *Kariyala* in which there was a lot of social criticism.

21. Since then many other things have been happening to folk and traditional theatre of India. The *Jatras* of Bengal have often got involved in political movements, or even the terrorist movement. Some during the nationalist struggle displayed hatred towards British by depicting rulers like Stanley Jackson as *Asuras* from mythology. More recently the Communists in Kerala have been using the local traditional form to encourage their creed. I was told by a *Jatra* proprietor that they have to introduce such leftists episodes in order to stir the audiences. My feeling is that sometimes it might be due to the pressure from the party which might be subsidising them.

22. The influence of the modern film is also coming but fortunately is still not so widespread. In *Jatra*, for instance, a character called Viveka

sermonising to the people has been introduced somewhat under the influence of the film. Similar moralising is being done by Juries (pairs) who sing songs full of messages or propaganda. The history of the traditional theatre is therefore still continuing and it would be a bold man who would forecast that this traditional theatre is doomed. The highly popular urban theatre of India touches people only marginally. The real drama for the millions is still existing among those in the villages and those who visit temples and fairs.