

VIDUSAKA IN INDIAN FOLK THEATRE

M. L. Varadpande

Humour is inextricably associated with theatre from its inception. Early theatre in the form of primitive tribal rituals and magico-religious ceremonies had element of humour. Recreation and magic were two aspects linked with humour in the early manifestation of ritualistic drama. Brockett informs us of the 'pleasure plays' evolved by some primitive tribes in Australia, the Philippines and Africa which were 'motivated by the attempt to ward off evil by ridiculing unfriendly spirits, unsuccessful war or hunting tactics or socially unacceptable behaviour.' In India also, among the local tribal societies, dramatic dances are prevalent in which dancers present comic imitations of various birds and beasts. In Vedic literature, we find comic characters like Indra's ape-friend Vrishakapi, humorous *Suktas* like *Manduka Sukta* or funny episodes like Brahmacharinheteeira clash of Mahavrata and the seller-purchaser quarrel in the ritual of Soma purchase. It is significant to note that all these rituals in which some writers claim to have found the rudiments of early Indian drama, were magico-religious in their nature. If we closely examine them, we can say with Prof. Ghoshal that these Vedic rituals display the tendency which they obtained from the long standing tradition of popular stage.

Traditions of Indian theatrical arts are of great antiquity and make their existence felt right from the Indus Valley Civilisation. A curly haired erotic dancing girl from Mohenjodaro and a torso of a male dancer, possibly of a *Nataraja*, testifies to the fact. Pashupati-Siva with phallic connotation is associated with this culture in various ways.

He is regarded as a presiding deity of the theatre and his connection with humour is acknowledged by the great sage Bharata himself. He has mentioned 'Pramatha' as a deity of *Hasya Rasa*. Pramatha is one of the numerous names of the Siva and also denotes certain class of his *Ganas*, associates. Wearing all sorts of comic animal masks they dance around him. This tradition still lingers in some of the Himalayan tribes with modifications. We may conjecture that as in Greece, theatre might have been evolved out of festivals in honour of this phallic deity. Erotic and comic elements might have been predominant in these festivals. Bharata has also established relationship between the erotic and comic. 'A mimicry of erotic', he says, 'is called comic.' (6.41,42). According to him *Hasya* originated in *Sringara*. However he forbade obscenity on the stage. Taking into consideration the interest of the people in comic-erotic situations in drama, Bharata remarks that 'common women and uncultured men are delighted by them.' (27.61). He also says, 'this sentiment is mostly seen in women and men of inferior type.' (6.51). Obviously here Bharata, the creator of sophisticated classical drama, is referring to the fun loving folk audience and their crude humour.

There is a continuous tradition of folk theatre in India the mention of which is found in literature right from the Vedic age. In *Yajna*, most sacred of the Aryan institutions, theatrical arts flourished along with religious rituals. Folk artists performed at *Yajna* ceremonies and humour formed a part of their performances. In the *Purusha Sukta* of *Vajasaneya Samhita* of *Shukla Yajurveda* it is stated that at the *Yajna* ceremony, *Suta* should be invited for dancing, *Shailusha* for singing and a comic actor for making people laugh. These recreation programmes might have been arranged to attract the common people to *Yajna Mandapa* in order to impress upon them the greatness of Aryan institutions and culture.

Various forms of popular entertainments developed with *Samajja* like festivals and ultimately culminated into organised theatre. We find mention of 'Saman' festival in *Rigveda* and epics. In later period it became famous as a *Samaj* or *Samajja*. It was a very popular festival with maximum of folk participation. In Buddhist and Jain literature *Samaj* festivals are described in great details. *Kamashastra* also advises the *Nagaraka* to organise *Samaj* festival and invite the actors and dancers to participate in it. A temporary amphitheatre used to be raised around a circular arena to witness shows that included dancing, singing, walking on ropes and other acrobatics, playing on different musical instruments, story telling etc. Gay and lively atmosphere prevailed at *Samaj* festivals where actors, dancers etc. used to amuse large audiences with their histrionic skill. 'To make

people laugh' was the chief motive of folk artists. In *Suruchi Jataka*, there is a description of a *Nata* performing '*Ardhanga Nritya*' which made people roar with laughter. Mimicry was a source of amusement and humour. In *Brahmajala Sutta* of the Diggha Nikaya Buddha has criticised the tendency of doing 'mimicry of deformities' by the actors and has asked the Bhikkus to refrain from such shows. In *Chullavagga*, there is a story of 'wicked and shameless' Bhikkus, Assagi and Punabbasu, residing in Kitagiri hills. They used to visit theatre, indulge in dancing, singing and playing music and also used to amuse themselves by 'mimicking other peoples' acts'. There is a very thin line of demarcation between imitation and mimicry. As far as theatre is concerned they are just two sides of same coin. In works on dramaturgy, imitation i.e. '*Anukrti*' or '*Parasyanukrthih*' is described as a source of *Natya*. Mimicry is an imitation with a difference and a source of dramatic humour. In the crude form acting was sort of mimicry. This explains the very close relationship of humour and theatre. Out of this tendency of mimicking other peoples acts a comic character on the stage might have been evolved.

In this context, O. H. DE A. Vijeshekera has pointed at an important passage of *Gamani Samyutta*. Thus it reads: "Then Talaputa, the chief of the village of dancers came to Exalted one and sat down at one side. So seated, Talaputa said to the Exalted One: I have heard, Lord, traditional teachers of the old who were actors speaking (in this wise): "A player who on the stage or in the arena makes people laugh and delights them with truth and falsehood, on dissolution of body, after death, is reborn in the company of laughing *Devas*.' What does Exalted One say regarding this matter?"

In this passage we come across important theatrical terms like *Rang* (theatre), *Samajja* (festival of song, dance, drama etc.) *Natagamani* (leader of *Natas* or *Sutradhara*) etc. which clearly points at the existence of folk theatre. It also speaks about the belief of the *Nata* community that it is their sacred duty to make people laugh and for that they will be rewarded in next birth suitably. The idea of 'Laughing *Devas*' is quite novel. That emphasises the importance of humour in the contemporary theatre. On this evidence, Vijeshekera remarks that *Nata* was originally a figure of mirth. He further says, 'In the *Nikayas* there are references to *Natas* and even *Natagaminies* who were not merely mime or dancers but were clearly comedians'. But the term *Nata* has a wider connotation. He is not only a comedian but also a dancer, magician, singer, in fact a versatile theatrical personality. However it must be admitted that in the popular theatre humour was his main business. Even Bharata has agreed that an audience smiling or roaring with laughter is one of the signs of the

success of the play. After the passage of time the task of making the people laugh might have been entrusted to one particular actor in the troupe from whom might have developed the jester or *Vidusaka* figure.

Such was the attraction of these shows full of fun and frolic that custodians of popular morality and administration of state found it necessary to put some restrictions on them. Religious leaders prohibited their disciples from attending the shows. King Asoka, in one of his rock edicts, has expressed his opposition to such shows by branding them as objectionable. By the time of Kautilya, *Natas* organised themselves into *Sanghas* and legal relationship existed between them and the State. They were required to pay entertainment tax, *Preksha Vetan*, of five *panas* per show to the state. They were prohibited from showing obscenities on the stage and making fun of sacred institutions like country, caste or *gotra*. A fine of 12 *panas* was prescribed for the breaker of the rules. On the evidence of prohibitive rules made applicable by Kautilya we can say that the *Natas* were in the habit of making fun of important personages and their satire was so telling that he was compelled to restrict its scope. But the contemporary folk audience was extremely fond of these shows and even neglected agricultural operations to enjoy the fun. That was the reason why Kautilya emphatically laid down that theatres should not be constructed near villages. Despite all these rules and regulations of state administration or moral restrictions enforced by religious leaders, village folk always attended theatrical performances and enjoyed the humorous feats of the actors. This attachment of village folk for their theatrical amusements persists even today.

Chronologically the term '*Vidusaka*' as a humour-creating character is of later origin than that of '*Nata*'. We find this word mentioned in the Epics, works of Panini and early Buddhist Pali literature frequently. But the first literary evidence of the existence of *Vidusaka* is found in *Natya Sastra* and then in the plays of Bhasa and Asvaghosha. Early Sanskrit dramatists must have taken the mirth provoking *Nata* of folk theatre and turned him into *Vidusaka*. Sten Konow says that the *Vidusaka* is just a figure from old popular plays where the manners and the demeanour of the higher caste have been ridiculed. Above cited evidence from *Arthasastra* supports this statement. *Nata*, the folk comedian became the royal jester *Vidusaka*, entered Sanskrit theatre, became almost regimented and ultimately died of suffocation. However he still very much exists in the folk theatre of the country recreating his audience by his pranks.

There is ample evidence indicating lively communication between classical Sanskrit and regional folk theatrical traditions. In fact classical

theatre developed out of popular forms of amusements. Some of the *Rupakas*, forms of dramas, mentioned by Bharata bears unmistakable stamp of folk theatre. According to certain authorities the *Dima*, *Vyayoga*, *Prahasana* and *Bhana* varieties of drama are of popular origin. In *Prahasana* the comic is the chief sentiment and the poet borrows the content from daily life, where all kind of deception, quarrels and dissension between rogues and unworthy persons occupy an important place.' In the mimic monologue of *Bhana* oblique, humour is inherent. Many of the *Uprupakas* described in the *Sahitya Darpana* also speak of popular influence. Forms like *Natyarasaka Uttapya*, *Kavya* give prominence to *Hasya Rasa*. From *Natya Sutra* (2nd Century B.C.) to *Sahitya Darpana* (14th Century A.D.) thus we can establish the continuity of folk theatrical tradition. With the advent of the Bhakti movement it received new impetus and various new forms also emerged which are retained upto our times. Hence we can say that our present folk theatre has a continuous and long tradition. It must have changed with the times but must have retained its basics. One such basics of folk drama is humour.

Vidusaka as a 'simpleton whose imbecility, real or assumed, is utilised for entertainment' appears in folk theatre in various forms and under different names. He is very dear to the village audiences. He is a shrewd person with wide experience and keen observation under the garb of simplicity. All through his evolution he never lost contact with contemporary life. He has shown tremendous capacity to change with time and remain eternally fresh. Like his counterpart in classical theatre, he is not bound by a 'written script' or a 'set rules of behaviour and appearance' laid down by the dramatists; he is free and flexible enough to change, to adopt to changing sensibilities, to acquire new traits.

Vidusaka is dear to the audiences not only because he evokes laughter and relieves them of the tensions of day to day life, full of difficulties and hard work but they feel that he is one of them, going through the same experiences of life. He establishes rapport with his audiences by crossing all psychological barriers between them. He has always shown concern about their problems and never spared the persons-in-authority responsible for the same. He may be acting in mythological plays but he has a capacity to share the life of his audiences. He is a link between past and present. He easily enters the past with mythological or historical characters and with the same ease comes out of it to comment upon contemporary life. This sort of anachronism is not only tolerated but also encouraged by the audiences. While indulging with the audiences he is required to face all sorts of eventualities but a good jester always keeps his rustic

audience under control and happy by his sharp repartee and keen sense of humour.

Though intelligent, his humour is usually crude and spiced with eroticism. Sometimes he uses humour as a powerful instrument of social, even political criticism. Cynicism of the downtrodden peasant, his pungent sense of humour is reflected in the oblique remarks of the jester. Through him, he takes revenge on the people who ill-treat him, takes bribe from him or put him to all sort of troubles.

Sometimes he acts as a *Sutradhara* and guides the flow of the story with ease. He introduces the character to the audience by asking him funny but leading questions. When he finds that his audience is losing interest in the play he comes forward to enliven the proceedings with his instant witticisms. He also works as stage-manager and makes necessary stage arrangements while the play is in progress. In addition to his own role as a jester, he assumes other minor roles if necessary. This sudden transformation from one role to another is the magic of wonderful flexibility inherent in folk theatre. As he belongs to the audience, he knows their social customs, religious institutions, political life quite well enough to put his finger exactly on the incongruities in them. Like the *Vidusaka* of classical theatre he does not belong to any particular caste as a rule. As a jester, every individual actor has lots of freedom in devising his own ways of entertaining his people. He tirelessly carries on his work of holding a mirror up to the foolish world thus to reveal its true image.

His dress and appearance differ from place to place. It is interesting to note how contemporary social and political life influences his dress and general mode of behaviour. After the advent of British paramountcy in the country, in the majority of secular folk plays, jester started appearing as a life size caricature of his new ruler, wearing tattered hat, loose tie, soiled suit and torn boots speaking funny English on the tip of his tongue. Swaraj brought for him a new cloak. Now he dresses like a village leader or *Sarpanch* and parades before his audience with a mock air of superiority. However there is no hard and fast rule regarding his mode of appearance. He may wear any dress to look comic and may also sometimes paint his face.

In *Tamasha*, theatre of Maharashtra, jester is known as '*Songadya*' and he plays prominent part throughout the performance. He appears as a close friend of the Hero, but all the time he is engaged in making fun of him exposing him before the heroine. The audience immensely enjoys the discomfiture of hero caused by

him. His remarks are usually lewd and carry double meanings. In the opening scene, *Purvaranga*, he poses as *Mavashibai*, the old and experienced aunty of beautiful milkmaids going to the Mathura market and engages Krishna and his mischievous associates in the battle of wit. In the 'Wag' drama part of *Tamasha*, he plays witty roles and delights the audience. The *Wag* is usually humorous and *Songadya* adds much fun to it. His witty outbursts are extempore and intelligent. However much of his humour is erotic and sometimes very vulgar. He takes every opportunity to lash out at contemporary social and political situations and make people roar with laughter. His dress is simple, just like any one of his rustic audience. His importance in *Tamasha* theatre can be gauged from the fact that the name of the actor playing the role of *Songadya* is advertised along with the name of chief dancing girl of the troupe.

Bhavai of Gujarat is notable for its humour. The small *Bhavai* plays are called '*Vesh*' and they are full of fun and frolic. *Rangalo* shoulders the responsibility of entertaining the audience by his ready wit and fantastic lies. Sometimes he indulges in the very peculiar activity of asking a question and replying to it as if two persons are speaking among themselves. He actively participates in the *Vesh* by assuming one of the roles. He is also famous for his erotic remarks and criticism of social and political incongruities.

Nautanki is the popular form of folk theatre prevalent in Uttar Pradesh. At fairs, villagers flock to see *Nautanki* plays and enjoy feast of music. *Shahjadi Nautanki*, *Dhola Maru*, *Laila Majnu*, *Sultana Daku* are some of the popular *Nautanki* operas. Here jester is known by various names including *Munshiji*. He is continuously present on the stage poking his sharp nose into anything available. He indulges in wit and frolic with other characters of the play and sometimes bangs their bottoms with split bamboo stick. His jokes are usually erotic and vulgar. He appears on the stage in a colourful and funny dress, usually like a circus joker, and makes his audiences roar with laughter with his pranks. As an appreciation of his witticism some members of the audience give him paltry sums of few paisas. While accepting it gracefully he will hurl such a remark at his miserly benefactor that he will carry its memory for a long time. In the published texts of the *Nautanki* plays we seldom find this character but he is always present on the stage pleasing his audiences.

'*Bhands*' are professional jesters visiting the villages of Panjab and neighbouring regions in a small troupe of four to five persons. They perform hilarious farces known as *Naqal* and entertain the people

by presenting funny side of their social life. *Bhands* pick up small episodes from village life and colour them with their uncanny sense of humour. So strong is their love for jest that to quote Balwant Gargi, a *Mirashi* (Muslim artist clown) would rather lose his wife than a good joke. For centuries they have been making people happy and forget their troubles.

The religious *Leela* plays of Uttar Pradesh are based on the eventful lives of great epical heroes Rama and Krishna and those are presented in different styles. In *Rasleela*, along with *Bhakti*, *Sringara* and *Hasya* are two main sentiments. Audiences watching the show are delighted by the childhood pranks of Lord Krishna. Stealing the butter from the house of a milkmaid is one of his famous *leelas*. *Mansukha*, his jester friend, devours butter in such a hurry that his face gets smeared in the process and he is caught red handed. *Mansukha* makes fun of the *Gopis* and also becomes the butt of their ridicule. He wears the dress of a typical milkman of Uttar Pradesh and tries to create laughter by making a mess of everything. In *Ramleela* plays, army of monkeys under the leadership of Hanuman provides the fun. Sometimes crisp humorous episodes are enacted on the stage which has no apparent connection with the story. An imaginative director with an eye on box-office imposes a buffoon on *Leela* plays for the additional recreation of his folk patrons though the story does not demand his presence at all. This is a clearcut evidence of the fun-loving nature of our village folk.

Konnagi is the *Vidusaka* of *Kuchipudi* dance-drama of Andhra Pradesh. This grotesquely attired jester is known as *Chodigadu* or *Hasyagadu* also. He appears on the stage in the beginning of the performance and while doing a comic dance asks the audience to stop making a noise and to pay attention to the play about to begin. Improvised humorous episodes known as *Pagati Veshamu* are enacted intermittently to provide comic relief. In *Bhagvata Mela Natakas* of Tamil Nadu, *Konnagi* is the first to appear on the stage. "To the accompaniment of rhythmic dance syllables he capers about for a while and keeps shouting *Sadu, Sadu* (Quiet quiet).

In fact, *Konnagi* originally belongs to colourful *Yakshagana* theatre of Karnataka. It is said that Sidhendra Yogi, originator of *Kuchipudi* dance drama, spent many years learning Madhwa philosophy at Udupi which was a great centre of *Yakshagana* theatre also. *Kodangi* means monkey brats and their leader is known as *Hanumnayak* and *Hasyagar*. They are present on the stage right from the *Purvaranga* of *Yakshagana* plays and enact minor roles like messenger etc. as the story proceeds. After the invocatory songs, *Hanumnayak* and his

associate *Kodangis* appear on the stage dancing on the rhythm of *Chanda* and *Maddale* in a funny dress. They carry a small branch of mango in their hands. The first casualty of their humour is *Bhagwat* with whom they will carry on their irrelevant conversation and who also will not hesitate to make fun of the gods. Pointing at *Ganesha* on the stage they will ask who this mountain is. *Hasyagar* introduces the character by asking him funny questions or by describing his attributes with a flourish. He takes liberty with mythological characters without bothering about their status or importance in the story. The characters of the *Yakshagana* plays speak highly sophisticated language but *Hanumnayak* speaks the language of his village audience and becomes a sort of link between audience and great mythological heroes present on the stage in glamorous and highly colourful outfit. In this sense, in mythological plays, jester moves on the stage as a representative of the audience and with his help members of the audience reach the mythic characters by crossing the gap of time. This is one of the most important functions of the *Vidusaka* of mythological folk theatre. In this context it will not be out of place to mention the *Vidusaka* of Sanskrit *Kutiyattam* plays of Kerala. In addition to his usual function of evoking laughter from the audience, he explains into local language the Sanskrit, Prakrit dialogues of the play by sometimes adding a pinch of humour or presents intelligent parody of the same. By introducing Malayalam speech he helps to bring the classical Sanskrit theatre to the common folk of Kerala. In the Kerala Temple theatre a play is enacted for several consecutive days. *Vidusaka* takes more than four days for '*Purushartha*' discussion and during the course of his very elaborate mono-act lashes out at undesirable social behaviour and other incongruities.

Chavittunatakam is a popular form of entertainment of Kerala Christians and here the jester is known as *Kattiyan*. He also follows the tradition of jesters in local *Kuttu* plays. He introduces the characters, cuts jokes at their expense, also acts as a stage-manager and property man. If the audience is pleased by his jokes, he is offered a garland of cakes and bananas as a token of their appreciation. Equally popular is *Komali* who appears in the *Therukoothu* plays of neighbouring Tamilnadu state. 'He enters slapping and beating the spectators with a cloth whip, stumbling and jumping over their heads. He announces himself with a song in third person, changes to prose and makes fun of highest and noblest.' (Gargi) Making fantastic overstatements about himself is his habit and in the process he makes people laugh heartily. He also introduces the mythological characters on the stage by describing their attributes and appearances.

Veethi Bhagavatam developed in Andhra is in fact an interesting off-shoot of *Kuchipudi* dance drama of the region in which humour has ample scope. It is known as *Golla Kalapam* also. Here a *Gopi* carries on satirical conversation with a Brahmin to expose his hypocrisy and lack of real knowledge. The Brahmin *Vidusaka* becomes uneasy under the torrent of her searching questions. Describing his technique as a comedian, Dr. V. Raghavan says that whenever there is a song introducing a character setting forth a sublime aspect the *Vidusaka* starts off with the parody of the song mentioning ridiculous things. Here *Vidusaka* and *Sutradhara* are one and the same person carrying on two roles.

The most peculiar of the jesters in the Indian folk theatre is *Sankasur* of *Dashavatara* plays of Goa and Maharashtra. He is a villain-turned-jester. *Sankasur* a demon steals *Vedas* from Brahma and ultimately gets killed by Lord Vishnu. He appears on the stage in a black garb and cotton mask with red tongue protruding, covering the face. He carries on odd conversation with *Sutradhar* while dancing and prancing on the stage to the rhythm of the *tabla* or *mridanga*, recreates the audience.

These are some of the jesters in Indian folk theatre, acting foolish themselves in making the world wise.