

# THEATRICAL ARTS IN JATAKA TALES

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M. L. Varadpande

Jataka stories could be described as an 'encyclopeadia of contemporary Indian life' in all its aspects. These stories describe various previous births of Gautam Buddha and instructive episodes related to them. Some of these folk tales are certainly older than Buddha himself, anterior to 600 B.C. The Master seems to have used these stories, quite effectively, to impress upon the monks and his vast following certain principles of his creed. According to the Buddhist tradition the number of these stories is 550 out of which about 547 are available in a collection. Their narration in stone form a major part of early Buddhist art down from Asokan times. Many Jataka stories are artistically engraved on the stone railings and *toranas* of Buddhist monuments such as Bharhut, Sanchi and Amaravati *stupas* and are painted on the walls of Ajanta caves. They present an approximate panorama of Indian life between 600 B.C. to 300 B.C.

Among many other things, we come across many vital references to a number of dramatic arts, in these stories. These popular entertainments of ancient India have a long tradition right upto the present day. Even after the emergence of literary drama on the Indian scene and its consequent development through the years, the mimetic arts continued to entertain the masses. These versatile artists would appear at fairs, festivals, at various religious and social functions and provide the people with some delightful moments full of fun and frolic. They would thrill their audiences with their acrobatic skill and clever magic and earn whatever little money they could. They would wander from place to place in the pursuit of their livelihood and exhibit their histrionic skill in an open arena or even in theatres or temporarily constructed amphitheatres in temple courtyards.

These mimetic artists in ancient India are generally known as *Nata*. *Nata* was a general term used to describe various types of entertainers. In *Vidhurapandita Jataka* a detailed list of entertainers is given which includes *Natas* (actors), *Nartaka* (dancer), *Gayaka* (singer), *Panissar* (expert in hand-music), *Kumbhathunikam* (one who plays on earthen drum), *Langhika* (skilled

at jumping), *Malla* (wrestlers), *Mayakara* (magician), *Sobhiya* (*Sobhanika*, a kind of *Nata*, possibly one who plays in cave theatres) *Mutthika* (boxer), *Vaitalika* (bard). Many of these terms occur in the *Magghima-Sila* of 'Diggha Nikaya', a Buddhist text of great antiquity. Many musical instruments like *bheri*, *mridanga*, *shankha*, *veena* are also mentioned frequently. This gives an idea of the range of entertainment available at the time.

These entertainers formed a distinct social group and caste. In *Ucchisthabhatta Jataka* Bodhisatva was said to have been born in the poor *Nata Kula*. In *Dubbacha Jataka* also Bodhisatva is described as born in the family of *Langhananata*, a kind of *nata*. As related in the *Bherivada Jataka* he was born in the family of drummers (*Bherivadaka*). The social status of these entertainers was not at all high, on the contrary they were looked down upon by the upper strata of society. The priestly class and religious preachers were not very much in their favour. Their company was supposed to be a sure sign of moral degradation and financial ruin. In *Labha Garaha Jataka* Bodhisatva, born as a famous Acharya and wise teacher says sarcastically to one of his young disciples: 'Son, there are four qualities which procures gain for the people who possess them :

'He that hath madness, he that slanders well  
That hath an actor's tricks, ill tales doth tale  
Such is the man that wins property  
Where all are fools, let this your maxim be.'

Here *Nata* is described as a tricky person who wins property by relating ill tales. While slandering the actor, the Acharya has rather grudgingly paid tribute to his art which can easily influence the minds of his audience. In some other stories also he is described as a greedy fool, drunkard and depriver of other people's property. In the *Bhadraghata Jataka* the story of a son of a rich trader is related who had lost his vast fortune by running after actors, dancers etc. Out of his love for these arts he used to pay a thousand silver pieces to each of the runners and tumblers, singers and dancers. He used to wander about 'asking only for song, music and dancing'. He lost all his ancestral property and ultimately died as a pauper because of this. In *Dhammapada* also there is a story of a youth who fell in love with a female acrobat and 'becoming an acrobat himself wandered from place to place.' These and similar incidents might have turned the preservers of social morality somewhat against the actor class though they recognised their value as entertainers.

### Types of Theatres

The shows used to be presented in an open arena or in closed pavilions. We are told in *Bhadraghata Jataka* about the son of a rich merchant who had erected a pavilion, *mandapa*, across the road to watch the dramatic

performances while drinking in the company of his friends. According to *Uddalak Jataka mandapas* used to be made of different kinds of cloth. There is a detailed description of a *Ranga mandapa* in *Guttil Jataka*. A special pavilion was raised for the king and his retinue. The King sat on the throne placed in the middle of the *mandapa* and 'women beautifully appalled, courtiers, Brahmins etc. stood around him.' A temporary circular open-air auditorium was raised by 'fixing the seats circle on circle, tier above tier' around the arena left for the performing musicians. The circular stage is termed as *rangamandal*. In *Ghata Jataka* and *Mahapanada Jataka* also the same type of descriptions occur. In *Ghata Jataka* there is a description of a pavilion erected for holding wrestling bouts. Here also, around the round arena which is called *yuddhamandal*, wrestling ring, the seats were raised tier above tier in a circular fashion. The pavilion was tastefully decorated with colourful flags, *patakas*. In one of the *Jataka* painting at Ajanta (*Mahajanak Jataka*), a king is shown watching a dance performance along with his court jester, *Vidusaka*, held in a colourful pavilion made of cloth. In *Vidurpandita Jataka* various visions appear in a magic jewel. One of the scenes is of *Samajja* where there is a crowd of men and women gathered to see a dramatic performance. Here also the seating arrangement is just as mentioned above : 'crowds are gathered here of men and women, see the seats tier beyond tier created in the jewel.' A mention of *ranga*, a theatre, is found in *Ayoghar Jataka*. It is said here that in a theatre (*Rangamazze*) magician (*Mayakara*) can deceive the people but he could not perform the same trick on Death and deceive him.

'In the theatre, a juggler with his sleight  
Performing can deceive the people's sight  
To cozen death, no trick so quick can be.'

The above quoted passages from *Jatakas* gives a very clear picture of temporary theatre halls of the time. The cloth pavilion used to be raised in the royal courtyard or at any other suitable place. Stage, *rangamandal*, was in the middle of the *rangamandapa*. On one side of the stage there used to be the royal seats and at the other side an auditorium for the common people. The seats in this auditorium used to be raised tier above tier in a semi-circular fashion. Wooden planks might have been used for the purpose. Sometimes, as said in the *Dasannaka Jataka*, the King used to watch the mimetic performance held in the courtyard through the window of his palace. These must have been open-air performances without any pavilion. In Nagarjuna-konda Amphitheatre (see Sangeet-Natak, No. 30) we find seats on all sides of the acting arena, one side being reserved for royalty. But here the shape of the amphi-theatre is square.

#### Royal Patronage

Kings, rich merchants and village chiefs used to patronise performing

artists in the region. In fact, the King used to maintain a permanent band of dancers, actors and singers around him. In *Sonaka Jataka* we find King Arindkumar surrounded by *gandharvas*, *natas* and *nartakis*. Their number, as in *Gandhara Jataka*, many a times is given as sixteen thousand. In *Mahapanada Jataka*, a rich merchant's son, Bhaddaji Kumar, is seen going from one palace to another surrounded by dancers (*natakapariyuto*). People used to build seats, circle upon circle, and tier above tier (*Cakkaticakke mancatimance bandhimsu*) to watch him go past with his dancers etc. The village chief, *Gamani*, was also a patron of artists. He is described in the *Bhisa Jataka* as a person enjoying dancing and music in the company of his comrades. Even now wandering *natas* report to the Village Chief and perform in his domain for which they receive generous gifts from him.

Common people also used to be very generous to these performers and entertainers. One very beautiful dancer named Janapadkalyani was the darling of the people. People were so crazy about her that they used to throng the streets at the mere mention of her name. *Talapatta Jataka* testifies that thousands used to crowd the theatre to watch her sing and dance and cheer her by clapping and shouting '*Sadhu, Sadhu!*'

### Public Festivals

*Natas* and other allied performers used to attend various public festivals termed *Utsava*, *Parva*, *Nakshatra* and *Samajja* to earn money by exhibiting their skill to the people. *Samaj* or *Samajja* is a festival of great antiquity, even mentioned in Vedic literature. Dr. D.R. Bhandarkar in an elaborate article in 'Indian Antiquary' (Oct 1913) has tried to prove on the basis of evidence from Brahmnical and Buddhist literature that the word *Samaja*, *ranga* and *prekshagriha* were used synonymously and that sometimes refers even to a concourse of people assembled. In the *Jatakas* the word *Samajjattanam* occurs in *Talapatta Jataka* which may be explained as *ranga* or theatre, however in other places, it usually means festival fair or festive crowd where all kinds of performers used to exhibit their skill and earn money by entertaining people. In *Bherivad Jataka* we learn that once Bodhisatva was born in the family of drummers (*Bheri* : drum). He thought of going to a festival to be held at Varanasi and earn money by playing on the drum in *Samajjamandal* (stage, acting arena). On his way back, despite his repeated warnings, his son started beating the drums. On hearing the sound, robbers arrived on the scene and deprived them of their earnings. The moral was :

'Go not too far, but learn excess to shun  
For over drumming lost what drumming won'

And also there is an interesting story of a *nata* named Patala who went to Varanasi to earn money by dancing and singing at a fete. On his way back he sat on the banks of the stream and began drinking strong wine. Completely



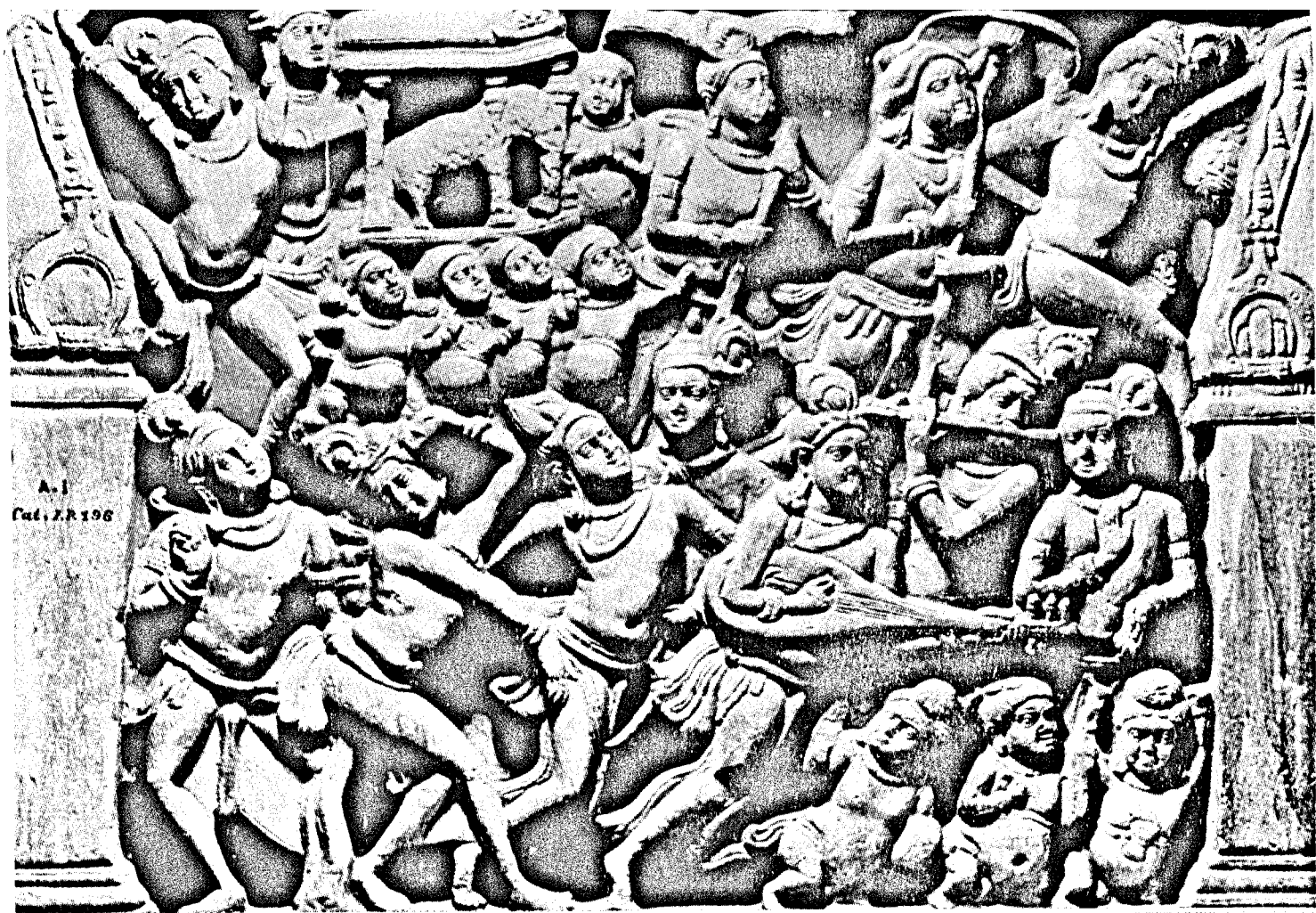
*Above: Details of Rani Gunpha, Udaigiri. Below: Khajuwaho, Laxman Temple, Dance Scene on doorsill of a sub-shrine*





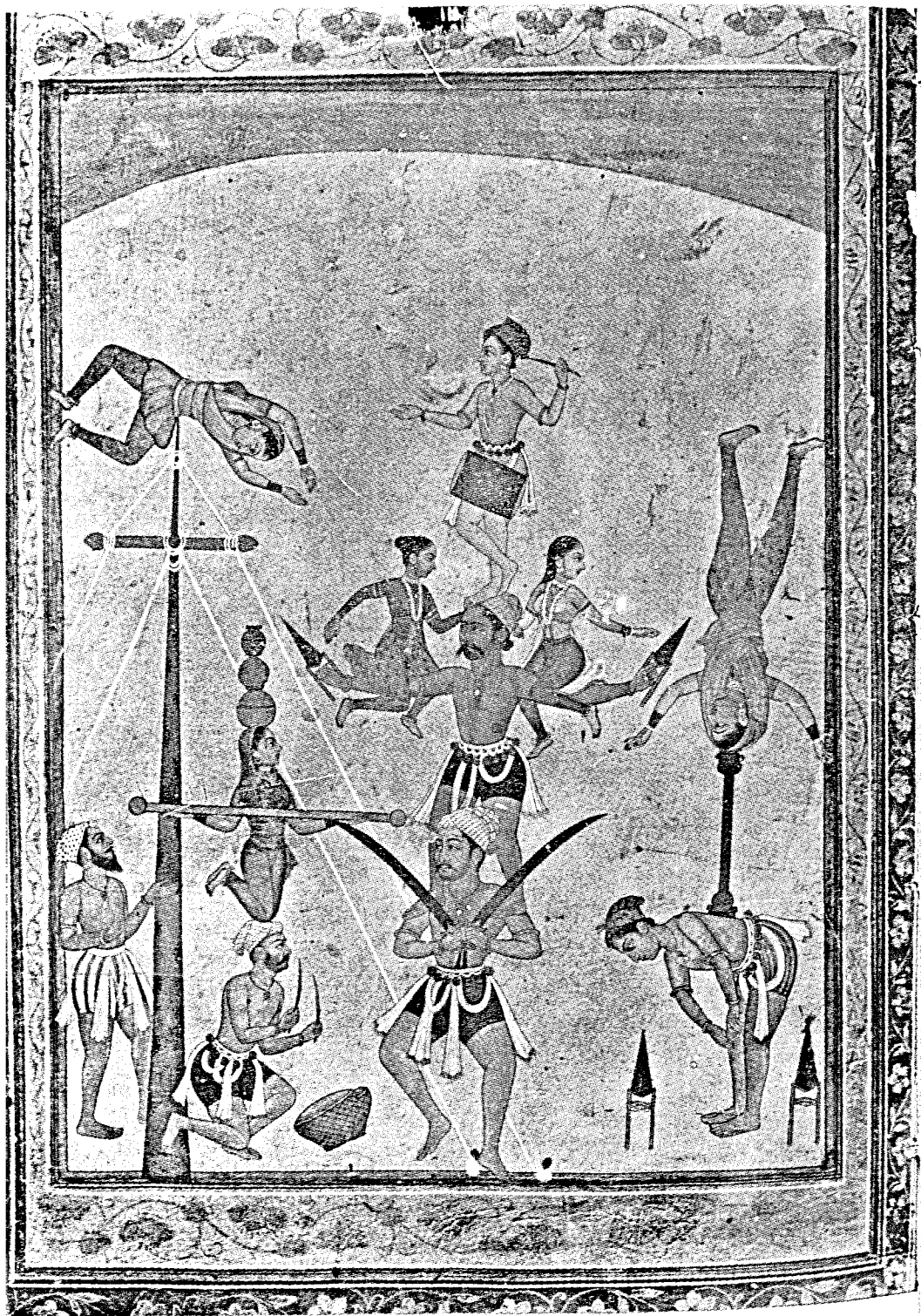
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drunk he fastened his *veena* to his neck and stepped into the stream. The water entered his instrument and he started sinking. His wife requested him to teach her at least one song by singing which in *Samajja* she might be able to make her living. She says :

‘O Patala, by Ganges swept away,  
Famous in dance and skilled in roundelay  
Patala, all hail, as thou are borne away  
Sing me, I pray, some little snatch of song’

It is evident from the story of *Padakusal Manavaka Jataka* that *natas* used to visit festivals and earn money by singing, dancing, playing on the *veena* or *bheri*, or giving acrobatic performances. The Ganika Sama of the *Kanavera Jataka* thus speaks to *natas* : ‘There is no place that you do not visit. You visit *gram* (village), *nigama* (City) and *rajadhani* (Capital) and present dramatic performances. You sing, dance on the stage and allure people.

‘*tumhe gamanigamrajadhaniya gantava.*  
*samajjam katva samajjamandale pathamam*  
*eva imam gitam gayeyyatha*’

We see here that the word *Samajja* has been used with different shades of meaning. Organisers of the *Samajja* used to announce its occurrence by beating drums all around the area. It was a festival of complete enjoyment, a pleasure-giving festival. In *Dasannaka Jataka* we learn that *Samajja* was organised in the palace courtyard to amuse an unhappy king and to vanquish his sorrow, such was the effect of *Samajja* :

‘*Maharaja rajangane Samajjo*  
*vattati tam olokentanam*  
*dukkham pi na dukkham hoti*’

(O Great King, there is a *Samajja* in the palace yard, if men look down at it sorrow turns to joy).

### Acrobatic Feats

Here in this *Samajja* we come across a daring acrobat who swallowed a sword that had a sharp blade of steel, as a part of his performance. *Natas* could perform miraculous feats to amuse people. In *Suruchi Jataka* we come across two actors, Bhandukarana and Pandukarana who thrilled the audience by their magic tricks. All the limbs of Bhandukarana were severed and then his fellow actor resurrected him by sprinkling water on him. Pandukarana entered the fire along with his troupe and was turned into ashes. When water was sprinkled on the heap of ashes he came out dancing with his troupe

wearing a colourful dress of flowers. Sometimes accidents also occur. In *Dubbacha Jataka* a *langhatanata* was killed while attempting to jump over a javelin. Juggling tricks like these are described in the accounts of mediaeval travellers also. A very interesting acrobatic scene is depicted on a pillar found at Bharhut. A sort of human pyramid is shown. Here actors are seen standing on the shoulders of each other. According to Dr. Barua this may refer to a performance at a *mela* held in connection with the celebration of a *stupa* festival (*Thusa Maha*). A Moghul painting showing acrobatic feats is displayed in the National Museum of New Delhi, pointing to the continuity of the tradition since antiquity. Humour forms a major part of folk entertainment. According to certain authorities *natas* were originally figures of mirth. To make people laugh was their main task. In *Suruchi Jataka* there is a mention of a *Nata* who made half his body dance, in which 'one hand, one foot, one eye, one tooth go a dancing, throbbing, flickering to and fro, all the rest stone still.' There is a very graphic description of this humorous and its effects on the audience : 'crowd roared and roared with laughter, scene could not cease laughing, laughed themselves out of their wits, lost control of their limbs, rolled over and over in the royal courtyard.'

Whether actual plays were also performed in the *Samajja* is a debatable question. Some writers claim that *Samajja* itself means regular dramatic performance. Undoubtedly the word *nataka* occurs in *Jataka* tales at least twice denoting a play. In *Udaya Jataka* is the following passage :

‘*Raja puttam rajje abhisinchitva  
natakani ssa paccupatthapessamiti sasanam pesesi*’

(The King desired to make his son king with the solemn sprinkling and to arrange plays for his pleasure and gave command accordingly). In the *Suruchi Jataka* the Prince is said to have witnessed divine plays :

‘*Tassa hi dibbanatakanam ditthatta*’

However no more details are available about their performance. But if we consider the Indian tradition of presenting plays at royal courts these references seems quite significant.