

## From the Echelons of Sanskrit Drama to the Popular Folk

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**Abstract:** Sanskrit language is the most ancient language of the Indo-European group and its literature is considered as the most ancient record of civilized human existence. It also comprises of, in its widest sense – Epics, court poetry, lyrics, drama, prose, romance, didactic fables, popular tales as well as scientific literature. The corpus of Sanskrit literature has contributed more to the growth of humanity than any other literature.

Sanskrit drama, earliest form of Indian drama, manifests various forms of classical Indian art. The origin dates back to 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. It flourished during the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C. to the 10<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. *Natyashastra* is the first treatise on Sanskrit drama ascribed to Bharata Muni. The *Natyashastra* considers the origin of drama as divine. In the first chapter of *Natyashastra*, *Natya* is described as – त्रैलोक्येषास्य सर्वस्य नाट्यम भावानुकीर्तनम् (*Natyashastra* 107). It means that *natya* is the embodiment of the emotional state of the three worlds – ‘swarga’, ‘mrityu or prithvi’ and ‘patala.’ This suggests that the realm of *Natya* is not limited to mere imitation. It goes beyond that.

India has a long and rich history of folk theatre, a composite art which includes various elements taken from *Nataka* like music, dance, gesture, pantomime, versification, epic, ballad recitation et cetera. Most of the genres of folk theatre in India are derived from Sanskrit language, for example, the *Manch* of Madhya Pradesh is taken from Sanskrit *mancakam* which refers to the stage. The *Ramlila* and *Raslila* of Uttar Pradesh is taken from the Sanskrit term *lila* which means “sport/ play”. The classical Sanskrit drama and Folk Theatre both share a number of stage conventions.

The objective of this research paper is to trace the growth of folk theatre in India through the evolution of Sanskrit Drama.

**Key Words:** Sanskrit Drama, Folk Theatre, *Natyashastra*, *Nataka*, *Dramaturgy*, *rupaka*, Sanskrit Poetics, Ancient Indian Drama.

There is a saying about the *Mahabharata* – “yanna bharate tanna bharate” (Tripathi 86) which means this great epic contains everything encompassed by this vast country i.e *Bharata* (India). With a slight variation, the same can be applied to the *Natyashastra* of Bharatmuni. The *Natyashastra* encompasses everything that sustains and nourishes the Indian tradition of art and aesthetics. Bharatmuni is the Vyas of Indian theatric universe.

The term *Natya* in Sanskrit refers to the art of drama and practice of theatre. *Natyashastra*, literally means a discourse on the discipline of *Natya*. It is the codification of a tradition in practise well before its time. It is composed in verse form and comprises around 6000 stanzas in 36 chapters.

It is believed that the knowledge of the *Natya* (dramaturgy) was revealed to Bharatmuni by Lord Brahma himself, who at the behest of Lord Indra, created the *Natyaveda* by culling Recitation (*padya*) from *Rigveda*, Music (*gana*) from *Samveda*, Histrionics (*abhinay*) from the *Yagurveda* and Sentiments (*rasa*) from the *Atharvaveda*. *Natyaveda* created from the *Vedas* was an audio-visual source of entertainment. One of the intentions behind writing *Natyashastra* was to raise the moral standards of the people.

After the emergence of *Natya* from the *Vedas*, came the concept of *Nataka*. The concept of *Nataka* was more refined than the concept of *Natya*. Chapter 20 of *Natyashastra* distinguishes between ten kinds of plays which accounts for long, multi act plays and everything in-between. *Nataka* is a type of *rupaka* which corresponds most closely with what Aristotle called Tragedy, although there are some crucial differences. In tragedy, the characters of the plays are divine-gods, demons and royalty, and stories are not invented but taken from “history” whereas *Nataka* concerns with the stories of cosmic import, reiterating the divine roles of kings and sages from *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*.

The other important difference between *Nataka* and Western drama is that *Nataka* does not end tragically; when the Western tragic hero falls, the hero of *Nataka* triumphs. Sanskrit plays termed as *Nataka*, affirm a celestial order that sustains a temporal order that serves the cosmic good. The noble characters of the plays exist as a function of cosmic order, and consequently, survive and thrive in conjunction with the cosmos. Kalidasa’s *Abhijnanshakuntalam* is the best known example of the *Nataka*.

Furthermore the stories that the plays (*Nataka*) dramatise tend to reinforce upper class authority and values. At first glance Sanskrit drama seems to be very exclusive. However, when observed closely we find the presence of other dialects such as *Prakrit*, *Magadhi*, *Saurseni* et cetera. Only the elite characters in the play, divine beings, kings and Brahmins speak Sanskrit. Other characters including soldiers, merchants, town people et cetera and nearly all women characters speak a variety of dialects collectively referred as *Prakrits* which means the characters occupying the stage converse with each other in different dialects. Imagine a play in which a king and his closest advisers speak Latin while his Queen and lesser members of the court speak Italian and the merchants and town people who conduct business around the capital speak Spanish and Romanian. Sanskrit Drama therefore appeals to a relatively diverse audience. The plays include many *Prakrit* dialogues that ensure that even those members of the audience, who do not understand Sanskrit, can understand the plays. Sanskrit Drama has its Vedic genesis in the sacrificial alters and going through fragments and short pieces it took the shape of a real drama (performance orientated) around the 1<sup>st</sup> century C.E. and continued up to the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Some of the widely recognised, read and performed Sanskrit Dramatists are Bhasa, Shudrak and especially Kalidasa. The writings of all these playwrights fall within the 1<sup>st</sup> century to 4<sup>th</sup> century C.E.

The main concern of the plays was the exploits of the kings and heroes of history. Similar to Greek drama, the major characters of Sanskrit Drama are historical figures with noble births. The characters are also taken from epic poetry. Gods, deities and supernatural beings play crucial roles in the plot of Sanskrit Drama. Important minor characters belong to various social strata and come from the middle and lower classes such as soldiers, merchants, fishermen and courtiers.

The numerous scriptures and literature of this country proves that the art of *Natyashastra* was well understood and practised in *Bharatvarsha* (India) till the 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D. in the North and 14<sup>th</sup> century A.D. in South.

There is also literary evidence that the path shown by Bharata was referred to, as '*marga*' and the regional practices were known as '*desi*'. It is evident that *desis* having their roots in the *Natyashastra*, and developed and interpreted the concept of *Natyashastra* following the regional preferences, i.e '*parvrtti*'. Thus we had the *desi* form of *Odissi*, *Bharatnatyam*, *Kathak*, etc., dance coexisting with their *marga* technique, just as Sanskrit language coexisted with the other *Prakrits* and regional dialects. (Rajagopalan 254)

Folk theatre is a composite art in India which includes various elements taken from *Nataka* like music, dance, gesture, pantomime, versification, epic and ballad recitation etc. Most of the genres of folk theatre in North India are derived from Sanskrit language, for example, the *Manch* of Madhya Pradesh is taken from Sanskrit *mancakam* which means the stage. The *Ramlila* and *Raslila* of Uttar Pradesh is taken from Sanskrit *lila* means "sport, play". In the same way *Nautanki* has been traced back to *Nataka* via a hypothetical term *Nataki*.

In the case of the Sanskrit Theatre, the classical tradition would comprise around twenty dramatic texts written by various Sanskrit playwrights between the first and tenth century A.D. together with the performance practices associated with them. "Folk" is a remainder, what is left. The non-Sanskrit traditions are thereby termed the "folk" theatres, a category including forms as divergent as the *Kutiyattam* of Kerala (which incorporates the texts of Sanskrit dramas and in the view of some scholars uses old, "classical" performance conventions). (Hansen 43)

In the words of V. Raghavan,

Not only are the "folk" theatres ill served by this residual classification; the presence of folk element in the Sanskrit drama is glossed over. Sanskrit drama as known from extant texts was more accurately Prakrit drama, the Prakrits or spoken dialects being used to represent the caste, class, and gender of most of the characters except the male protagonist. Songs were composed in Prakrit by the musicians of the theatrical troupe, possibly following folk models. Comic interludes were often interpolated drawing on folk humor and dialectical usage. These elements facilitated the reception of the drama by spectators of diverse backgrounds. (Raghavan 65)

*Nautanki*, (a folk form) emerged from the Sanskrit drama, has taken various elements from it. In the words of Kathryn Hansen,

They share a number of stage conventions. They divide performance time into several segments, beginning with the symbolic construction of the performance space, its ritual sanctification, and the worship of deities, followed by musical overtures played on various instruments (to attract and settle the audience), introductory dance items (to entertain and warm them up), and finally the entrance of the stage manager-director (*sutradhara*) who formally invites the audience to view the play. All these activities constitute the *purvaranga* (literally, pre-theatre); they are present in abbreviated or expanded form in the traditional theatres and in Sanskrit drama performance. Then there are the rhetorical features of the verbal text: its formulaic invocation (*mangalacarana*) and epilogue (*bharatavakya*), the alternation between prose and poetry, use of different speech levels or

dialects, and conventional modes of address, soliloquy, and offstage dialogue. Character roles also show similarities: the usual array of hero, heroine, villain, and servants is supplemented by the *sutradhara* (also called *ranga* or *kavi*), who often appears at intervals after the introduction to comment on the play in the manner of the early Greek chorus, and also the ubiquitous clown or jester, the *vidusaka*, who may act as a foil for the *sutradhara*. The dramatic entertainment is in both cases multitextured, mixing speech and recitation with song, instrumental music, dancing, and mime. (46)

Folk theatres such as *Jatra*, *Manch*, *Nautanki*, *Yakshgaan* etc. have fragments that can be traced to Sanskrit drama. The *Natyashastra* lists ten major types of drama and is termed as *rupaka*. Another treatise on Sanskrit drama, the *Sahitya-darpana* divides the Sanskrit drama into two main classes, the *rupaka* and the *uparupaka*. The *uparupakas* are “minor” or near dramatic forms in which music and dance become prominent. According to V. Raghavan, these *uparupaka* evolved from folk dances and folk plays that were “taken, refine, refashioned, and fitter into the classical technique and framework.”(Raghavan 37) The *uparupaka* (dance drama) emerged when *rupaka* (major types of drama) declined; and later *uprupaka* with time changed into different region based folk forms. “Thus *Nautanki* as a sub genre is viewed as the most recent descendant of the largely vanished medieval theatrical tradition represented by the *rupakas* and *uparupaka*, which grew from the Sanskrit drama and replaced it sometime after 1000 AD.” (Hansen 47)

In the present scenario classical Sanskrit Drama is deviating from its old elaborate form to a new simplified look and this is the primary reason for emergence of different subgenres. These subgenres follow some conventions but vary in techniques. Classical Sanskrit dramas present a break with the past and allow a broad scope for intermixing and adaptation of genres or making some new genres.

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