

The Evolution of Sanskrit Drama

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Sanskrit Drama is of great antiquity and dates back at least to a few centuries before the Christian era. Allusions to a kind of dramatic activity or representations, found in Brahmana and Buddhist literatures, Panini's mention of *Natasutra*-s and Patanjali's reference to the mimetic showing of mythical happenings indicate early beginnings.¹ The archaeological discovery of an open-air theatre in the Sitabenga cave, attributed to 300 B. C., is another pointer in this direction.² The available text of Bharata's *Natyashastra* may have been put together in the epic period. But it mentions older authorities; and some of the subjects discussed, like the sections on music, on *abhinaya*, and on the role Shiva played in shaping the dramatic performance by suggesting the addition of dance, are actually older still. Thus though literary drama may have emerged two or three centuries before Christ, dramatic activity, as such, has to be placed in the sixth century B. C., if not earlier still.

Literary drama, as known to us through the plays of Bhasa, Kalidasa and the fragments from Ashvaghosha's play, shows a fully-developed form, patterned into formal types and executed in a polished literary mould. It is natural to suppose that it is a culmination of the preceding stages of gradual development. But we have no data by which to plot these stages, except, on the one hand, an account of the first performances given by Bharata and recorded in the *Natyashastra*, and, on the other, the completely evolved pre-classical and classical Sanskrit plays. The gaps between these two points will have to be filled by plausible and reasonable conjecture. This is what the present article attempts to do.

The *Natyashastra* assumes a divine origin for Sanskrit drama. Brahma, the Creator, created *natya* as a 'Fifth Veda, choosing definite elements of recitative text, music, histrionics and the emotions and sentiments from the four Vedas. The *natya* was created as a *Kridaniyaka*, a plaything, an instrument of diversion and pleasure, from which noble instruction came naturally and easily. The pleasure of *natya* was open to all people, irrespective of religion, caste, social status or occupation.³ Brahma handed over the *Natyaveda* to Bharatamuni and his hundred pupils and asked him to propagate it among the people, advising him to take the help of celestial nymphs in the performance.

Accordingly, Bharata prepared and presented, on the slopes of the Kailasa mountain, a performance of *Amritamanthana* and *Tripuradaha* before an assembly of gods and demons and in honour of Shiva. This is what is gleaned from the account in the *Natyashastra* of these performances⁴ where the following points emerge:

(i) The occasion chosen for the performance was the *Indramaha* festival, a festive event and an occasion to celebrate a victory.

(ii) The theme of the first *natya* performances was drawn from myth. *Amritamanthana* and *Tripuradaha* belong, technically speaking, to the *sama-vakara* and *dimā* types of plays. These are plays in which celestial characters appear, the action revolves round the emotion of anger and heroism; and the 'story' points to the intervention of the Divine Hand to set right the balance of the Universe and to ensure the victory of the gods over the *asura*-s, the triumph of good over evil.

(iii) Bharata first performed *purvaranga* and *nandi* and then presented the dramatic spectacle as an *anukriti*, that is to say, as mime.

(iv) Bharata was advised by Shiva to add the dance element of *tandava* and *lasya* to make the performance more graceful and enjoyable.

It appears from this account that drama began first as a spectacle depicting mythical, legendary or Puranic stories such as the churning of the milk-ocean for nectar by the gods and demons or the burning of the three citadels of a demon by Shiva. Patanjali's reference to the mimetic performances of the 'The Killing of Kamsa' and 'The Binding of Bali' is consistent with this original concept of drama. And this is also true of the vernacular drama in India. Drama must have turned to mortal heroes and social themes in the process of evolution, in course of time. However, the interest of writers in mythical and Puranic themes continues to this day. Gradually, the earlier concentration on heroic themes was supplemented by the theme of love. These twin sentiments govern the composition of Sanskrit drama. The choice of a festive occasion, with a religious background, is quite natural. Such an occasion would attract the people who, with devotion in their hearts, would also be responsive to song, dance and spectacular shows.

The performance presented by Bharata included *purvaranga*, *nandi*, and *anukriti* and dance. This suggests that the first and early performances contained a conspicuous element of ritual worship, salutation and songs of praise in honour of deities, and the presentation of dance. This is *purvaranga* or the dramatic preliminaries of which *nandi* is a part. The ritualistic element is a concession to the religious sentiment of Indian audiences. Not just the spectators but the performers themselves believe and feel strongly that art is a form of service to divinities. For them art is a path to please the gods and obtain divine protection and blessings. The *Natyashastra* expresses these ideas distinctly.⁵ Kalidasa describes *natya* as 'a visual sacrifice offered unto the gods.'⁶ The religious preliminaries, however, came to be considerably curtailed with the development of literary drama; yet the *nandi* remained as a symbol of the religious attitude throughout the entire history of Sanskrit drama. Today our drama is modernized, even westernized; yet no performance in India can be imagined without the *Nataraja-pujan* conducted on the stage and behind the curtain, before the start of a performance. The musical and dance elements in the *purvaranga* are partly religious, but in the main they are intended as entertainment for the audience.

Presenting the drama as an *anukriti* means that it was projected through mimetic acting or *angika abhinaya*, imitating the actions, movements and gestures representing the 'action' of the drama. It also means that there

was no *pathya* in the sense of spoken dialogue to convey the 'story' to the audience, but only in the sense of a simple recitation or songs, carrying perhaps the gist of the story and recited or sung by the *sutradhara* and his assistants or the musicians. This, in all probability, was the beginning of Sanskrit drama. It is paralleled by the history of our Marathi drama, which started much the same way. The story was conveyed through songs sung by the *sutradhara* and the musicians who stood at the rear of the stage throughout the performance; the actors indicated the 'action' by mime and occasionally by a few improvised exclamations.

In spite of such a simple beginning, this is still 'drama', and not *akhyana* or story-telling or ballad-singing; because the different 'characters' in the story are portrayed by different actors, using appropriate make-up, costumes, movements and actions; the whole show is thus 'acted'.

It is difficult today to imagine a drama without spoken dialogue. In its developed stage Sanskrit drama, too, came to possess this essential feature. Yet its beginnings could have been an *anukriti* without dialogue, as Bharata testifies and Indian tradition upholds. This may be due as much to the Indian *ethos* as to the particular concept of *natya* advanced by Sanskrit dramatic theory. Bharata states that *natya* is *anukarana* and *bhava-anukirtana*.⁷ To explain: drama presents an emotional experience of the entire world of beings. This emotional content is the literary substance of drama. In constructing this experience, a creative artist produces characters, situations and incidents. He also creates their actions, speeches, passions and emotions. In this process of creation he *imitates* life either at first hand or from his observations of human life and behaviour. This is the *anukarana* or *anukriti* part which is common to all literary art including drama. Further, when such an emotional experience is suitably created and presented, it is enjoyed by the reader or spectator. This is *rasa*, which is thus the emotional content of literary art and drama and the aesthetic relish or enjoyment it affords. The *anukarana* element enters drama from yet another angle. An actor plays a particular role. In doing so, he will depict a character, portray his actions, gestures, speech and emotions. He will employ suitable make-up, costumes and other accessories to produce a realistic impression of the character he is presenting on the stage. The producer-director may also help this make-belief by providing some props on the stage to produce an illusion of the place and time of the happening. This is *abhinaya* or 'acting' a drama. It will be seen that the elements of *abhinaya*, namely, the spoken word, physical movements and gestures, portrayal of the emotions, and the use of make-up, costume and stage props, are all based on *anukarana* of things in real life; they have to be so in order that they appear realistic and convincing and succeed in producing the expected impact. Hence, setting aside the literary aspect of drama for a moment, Bharata speaks of *anukarana* or imitation and *abhinaya* or histrionic representation as the essential aspects of *natya*.

Bharata's concept of *natya* is fully endorsed in later theory. Dhananjaya, the author of *Dasharupaka*, describes *natya* as 'an imitation of the (physical and psychological) conditions of life.'⁸ He adds one more concept. The Sanskrit word for drama as a stage art is *natya*, and the word which

includes its literary aspect is *rupaka*. *Rupa* is something that is 'seen'; drama is called *rupaka* because it is a visual presentation. *Rupaka*, in poetics, means a metaphor, as when a face is called the moon in order to imply its loveliness. Such a metaphor based on temporary identification is present in drama. A writer creates a character, for instance that of Rama; we take it to be the real Rama; this is one kind of identification or super-imposition. There is another, when an actor plays that character in a stage performance and we accept him as the real Rama for the time being. Due to this double identification drama is called *rupaka*. The principle behind the metaphorical identification is *anukarana*; the writer imitates the character through words, the actor through make-up, costume and *abhinaya*, and the reader-spectator through make-belief or 'suspension of disbelief.' Sanskrit dramatic theory, therefore, leans heavily on mimetic representation (*anukarana* or *anukriti*), carried out by appropriate histrionic techniques (*abhinaya*) as the most important characteristic of drama. In a fuller definition, Bharata describes *natya* as 'a mixed experience of sorrow and happiness of all humanity as rendered through *abhinaya*.'⁹

This may provide a new theoretical perspective on the supposed divine origin of drama. Brahma took *pathya* or the recitative part from the Rigveda, *gita* or song or music from the Samaveda, *abhinaya* or histrionic elements from the Yajurveda and *rasa* or the sentiments from the Atharvaveda, fused them together and created *natya* as a 'Fifth Veda'. Historically speaking, the dialogue hymns of the Rigveda, the music of the Samaveda, the symbolical enactment of ritual of the Yajurveda, in imitation of real acts and happenings, and the varied feelings expressed through the verses of the Atharvaveda as a basis of the emotional life of human beings may have proved to be the inspiration and source for the development of drama and could well have supplied the components required for producing drama. Theoretically speaking, *pathya*, in the form of recitation or dialogue, and *abhinaya* are the distinctive components of dramatic art. *Rasa* or sentiments or the emotional experience is the stuff of drama and literature. And *gita* or song may have been used either for story-telling in the early stages or as delightful and entertaining accompaniment to the performance. It is quite likely that the *pathya* element in the early stages may have been songs embodying the outline of the story, before full dialogue in prose and verse came to replace it in the succeeding stages of development.

The connection between dance and drama goes deeper than the assumption that dance was the forerunner of drama. In Bharata's concept of *natya*, dance and drama are not distinct entities but are knit together by the common element of *abhinaya*. The emotion-based dance mode, popularly known as *Bharata-natyam*, is based theoretically on the *Natyashastra*. Kalidasa equates the terms *natya* and *nritya* in his *Malavikagnimitra*. The dance mode was used for movements, gestures and actions such as a chariot-ride, a duel or a fight in the stage representation of a drama, and sometimes as a substitute for *nepathya* or stage equipment. Bharata groups these modes under the term *natyadharmi abhinaya* which is conventional, symbolical and suggestive representation. Unlike Western drama or the modern drama familiar to us, Sanskrit drama was a symbolical and graceful presentation

of varied emotions. That made the employment of dance technique natural and inevitable when a drama was enacted on the stage. The technical distinction between *nritya* and *natya* is of degree, not of kind. *Nritya* presents the graceful *abhinaya* of an emotion, a mood, an aspect of a mental state; *natya* is a representation of a basic, permanent state of the human mind, with all the accompaniment of passing mental conditions. So, a representation of an emotional state by appropriate facial expressions, physical gestures and movements to the accompaniment of music and song is *natya* in Sanskrit aesthetic theory. The element of spoken dialogue is *vachika abhinaya*, which considerably expands the scope of *natya*, enabling it, together with make-up, costumes and stage-props, to render not only different emotional states effectively but also to project a *total* experience. Against this theoretical background it should be possible to understand Bharata's first dramatic performance without spoken dialogue as the real beginning of drama.

The next stage of development came probably when the 'story' of the drama was conveyed through dramatic speeches. The ancient *purvaranga* and *nandipatha* were set performances; the *sutradhara* and his performing actors would introduce only minor changes of names, places etc. to suit a particular performance; more than this could not be expected of them because they were professional players and not writers. So, the dramatic speeches, too, must have, in the beginning, been set speeches, with minor improvisations consistent with the actual play in production. The speeches must naturally have supplied the major links of the story. They commented upon and explained the actions that were presented on the stage.

The *sutradhara* must have played an important and central role in these early stages of the development of drama. According to the ancient *purvaranga*, he performed all the ritual and musical preliminaries and presented the *nandi*. He or his counterpart, the *sthapaka*, introduced the play and its author and started the dramatic performance.¹⁰ Later Bhasa dispensed with this additional actor and the *sutradhara* himself came to open the play. In addition to these duties, the *sutradhara* had to keep the threads of the entire production in his hands, relate or sing the 'story', co-ordinate the actions and activities of all actors and watch the performance till it came to its successful finish. It is this responsibility that made him a real *sutradhara*, and he did not receive this name because he came from a background of 'string-pulling' in a puppet show. Later dramatic theory explains that the production of the entire performance in which the central theme of the drama is woven is called *sutra* or thread and the producer-director is called *sutra-dhrit*,¹¹ because he holds and controls the thread of the whole production. We also learn from Bhavabhuti's prologue to *Malatimadhava* and from Bana's reference to *bahu-bhumika*, in the context of Bhasa's plays, that, in actual practice, the *sutradhara* played a multiple role for the Sanskrit drama as producer, director, and teacher of *abhinaya* and as actor if called upon to do so.

The evolution and curtailment of the ancient *purvaranga* is a further clue for conjuring the next stages of the evolution of drama. As the specta-

tors' response to the dramatic show increased, the preliminaries (which had more of music and dance) did not need a very elaborate presentation. Besides the dramatists had by now started handling the *nandi* and *prastavana* of the plays themselves. With the playwright's active co-operation the entire drama could now be constructed and presented through spoken dialogue, using music and dance mainly as modes of presentation, factors for heightening the emotional impact of the dramatic action and also sources of pleasure and entertainment. In other words, drama in the familiar sense had arrived.

The stages of evolution as contemplated here are:

- (i) ritual and musical preliminaries; mimetic action (*anukriti*);
- (ii) the 'story' of the drama conveyed through set narration or songs;
- (iii) some improvised dialogue, mostly of a set type;
- (iv) the entire dialogue composed by dramatists and the actors presenting it as *vachika abhinaya*.

In the light of the *themes* used for dramatic production, the earliest were mythological and belonged to a heroic genre. The transition possibly occurred in two directions: a change from a celestial to a royal hero; and a theme of love instead of a heroic theme. There is an indication that this, too, may have happened quite early. The *Natyashastra*¹² mentions the story of a curse on the actors and the desire of King Nahusha to hold a dramatic performance among the mortals on the earth. Nahusha was the grandson of Pururavas. He had witnessed in heaven a drama composed on the love of Pururavas for the celestial nymph Urvashi and his subsequent suicide or death through unrequited love. Urvashi had acted in the performance and Nahusha wanted the show enacted in his own harem. This story is suggestive of the double transition. The story of Urvashi, later immortalised by Kalidasa in his play, presents a mortal hero in a drama of love; it is an advance from the war-like celestial drama. The next stage has all dramatic characters treated as human or preponderatingly so, and the sentiments (*rasa*) show a larger variety or a combination of several harmonious emotions. A full-fledged play, especially with a realistic social background, would probably complete this development on the thematic side, leaving further variations to the creative imagination of writers.



Notes :

1. *Dighanikaya* I. i. 1. 13; *Avadanashataka*, II. 24; *Ashtadhyayi*, IV. 3. 110-111; Patanjali's *Mahabhashya*, III. 1. 26.
2. T. Bloch: Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1903-1904.
3. *Bharata-Natyashastra (NS)*, Gaekwad's Oriental Series (GOS), I. 8-17.
4. See *NS. GOS. IV. 5-18*.
5. Cf. *ibid. XXXVII. 29-30*.
6. *Malvikagnimitra*, I. 5.
7. *NS. GOS. I. 107, 112*.
8. *Dasharupaka*, I. 7.
9. *NS. GOS. I. 119*.
10. See *NS. GOS. V. Purvaranga*; also my *Bharata-Natya-Manjari*, Introduction.
11. See Sagarandini's *Nataka-lakshana-ratna-kosha*, Dillon's ed., 11. 2159-2161. Also, *Bhavaprakashana*, GOS. ed., p.288, 11. 7-10.
12. *NS. GOS. XXXVII. 1-12*.