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| <b>History</b> | <b>Paper 2:<br/>Cultures in the<br/>Indian<br/>Subcontinent</b> | <b>Unit</b> | <b>Lesson 2 : Evolution of Sanskrit and Folk<br/>Theatres</b> |
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### Author and Reviewer Details

|   | Author  | Reviewer |
|---|---|----------|
| <b>Photograph</b>   |  |          |
| <b>Name</b>   | <b>Arti Minocha</b>   |          |
| <b>College/Department</b>                                     | <b>Lady Shri Ram College,<br/>University of Delhi</b>                             |          |
| <b>Contact No.</b>  | <b>+919810612175</b>  |          |
| <b>e-mail ID</b>  | <a href="mailto:artiminocha@yahoo.co.in">artiminocha@yahoo.co.in</a>              |          |
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## 2.1 : Theatrical Traditions in India

Theatrical Traditions in ancient India are impressive for their antiquity, range and theoretical sophistication. Traditional theatres are generally classified into the classical Sanskrit tradition that developed between 200 BC and 10<sup>th</sup> century AD; and folk theatres that evolved around 11<sup>th</sup> century but went into disrepute in the colonial period. The Sanskrit tradition contains one of the most highly refined and elaborate aesthetic theories in the ancient times that are still extant in written manuscripts. However, the belief that ancient theatrical traditions are centered only around written literary texts is erroneous. Dance, music, ritual practices, **bardic traditions**, recitations and other **oral traditions** make a composite history of living theatre traditions in India.

### What the Critics Say

The rituals of Vedic Aryan society, which probably go back three thousand or more years, have, however, been preserved in great detail; they provide the perfect illustration of the power of oral tradition serving as a community "archives" by preserving knowledge of the way of performing these ancient rituals, including the knowledge of how to make the artifacts necessary for the performance.

**Source** : Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, *Aditi - The Living Arts of India*, New Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass, 1987, p. 223.

#### 2.1.1: Origins

As mentioned in the previous chapter, drama seems to have evolved from ritual **impersonation**, dance, community recreation and magic. Prehistoric picture galleries and cave paintings found in Bhimbetka are important evidences that trace the story of the evolution of theatre. Musical instruments, stone and bronze dancing figures, clay masks and assembly halls for performances discovered in the archaeological remains of the Indus Valley indicate the presence of rudimentary performative traditions.



Figure 1: Figure of a dancing girl discovered in 1926 at Mohenjo-daro

**Source** : [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Dancing\\_girl.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Dancing_girl.jpg)



Figure 2: Mask/ amulet found at Harappa. Loosely included under the rubric of terracotta "figurines" are the terracotta masks found at some Harappan sites. One mask clearly has a feline face with an open mouth with exposed fangs, a beard, small round ears and upright bovine horns. It is small and has two holes on each side of the face that would have allowed it to be attached to a puppet or worn, possibly as an amulet or as a symbolic mask. The combination of different animal features creates the effect of a fierce composite animal. As an amulet or a symbolic mask, it may represent the practice of magic or ritual transformation in Indus society.

**Source :** <http://www.harappa.com/figurines/70.html>

The Vedic narrative traditions that date back to 1500 BC incorporated elements of dialogue and dramatic hymns. The enactment of Vedic rituals and ceremonies that require impersonation and symbolic gestures also contain elements of dramatic representation. The epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* and the *Puranas*, consisting of stories that deal with the life of Krishna, provided a rich source of stories that proved to be vital to the development of drama. In fact, in both the epics, references to theatrical arts and the tradition of learning *natya* from a teacher can be found.

#### What the Critics Say

So the *Vedas* offer a consistent view of the performative structure of creative acts, and it is not surprising that this perception underpins epic literature and is transferred into theatre. The transfer can be located in textual form in the *Vedas*: as instructions for rituals and/or 'sacrifice', which operate the merging of individual and para-individual; in the dialogue of Yama and Yami in *Rg Veda*, which embodies a resolute and active questioning of gender, sexuality, relationship and procreation; in the epics and other texts, as myth and story, as exemplary action; or via performance instructions in the *Natyashastra*.

**Source :** Yarrow, Ralph, *Indian Theatre: Theatre of Origin, Theatre of Freedom*, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2001, p.38.

The works of ancient Sanskrit grammarians Panini and Patanjali indicate the existence of theatrical arts during 5<sup>th</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> century BC. In his work *Astadhyayi*, Panini refers to manuals of dramaturgy called the *Natasutras* (rules for the *nata*, translated as actor, dancer, performer). A similar reference to *natas* is made by Patanjali in his work of grammar, *Mahabhasya* (around 140 BC). The *Mahabharata* also contains allusions to another kind of theatrical entertainment – the puppet theatre and shadow theatre. Clear references to puppet theatre can also be found in the Tamil epic *Cilappatikaram* (2<sup>nd</sup> century BC) and *Therigatha*, an ancient Buddhist work. It can be conjectured that Sanskrit theatre emerged at this time as an amalgamation of these dramatic rituals, epic stories, recitation, pantomime, dance and puppet theatre. Information on Sanskrit Theatre can be gleaned from dramaturgical manuals and scripts of plays that survive in palm leaf manuscripts.

#### Audio-Visual Material

See a Tholpavakoothu performance. Tholpavakoothu is a ritualistic art form, still practised in Kerala, that makes use of shadow puppetry.

**Source :** <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZOZWb9zFnMw&feature=related>

## 2.2: The *Natyashastra*

The most important and authoritative source for understanding Sanskrit theatre is the dramaturgical manual titled *Natyashastra*, attributed to sage Bharatamuni and dated variously between 200 BC and AD 200. 'Natyā' means drama and 'shastra' refers to an authoritative and systematic body of knowledge. *Natyashastra* is an encyclopaedic treatise on practically all elements that pertain to theatre – from play construction to acting, make-up, direction, modes of communication, emotions, ritual practices, and erection of the stage. The mythological origins ascribed to *Natyashastra* give it the authority and sanctity of scripture. It is said that Brahma, the creator himself was inspired to create theatre, dance and music for **aesthetic** pleasure. He culled out the essence of dance, acting, narrative and dramatic presentation from the four *Vedas* and evolved a fifth *Veda* - the *Natyashastra* that would be accessible to all *varnas*. This was transmitted to Bharata, who codified this knowledge in the form of the *Natyashastra*.

Bharata and his sons were summoned by Brahma since it was considered inappropriate for the gods to act. Theatre needed to be given respectability by describing *Natyashastra* as the fifth *Veda*, a sacred text. Authoritative descriptions prove that actors did not enjoy social status in ancient India and were often classed with bandits and prostitutes. The final chapter of the *Natyashastra* describes Bharata and his sons being cursed by respected sages who took offence at their caricatures that the actors staged. These outcaste actors were patronized by kings to preserve their art form from extinction. Thus began the practice of royal patronage despite the ambivalent position of theatre in society. The divine architect Visvakarma devised a **consecrated** ground on which dramatic presentations would take place without any interference by evil spirits. The *Natyashastra* may have been compiled together from fragments of various available manuscripts but the thematic coherence and encyclopaedic scope of the book is remarkable. The standardized form of the book now available consists of 36 chapters and about 6000 verses (Lal, 2004, p.309), explaining the origin, purpose and methodology of theatre practices.

### List of Chapters in the *Natyashastra*

- \*Origin of drama
- \*Description of the playhouse
- \*Puja (offering) to the Gods of the stage
- \*Description of the [[karana dance]]
- \*Preliminaries of a play
- \*Sentiments (rasas)
- \*Emotional and other states
- \*Gestures of minor limbs
- \*Gestures of hands
- \*Gestures of other limbs
- \*Cari movements
- \*Different gaits
- \*Zones and local usages
- \*Rules of prosody
- \*Metrical patterns
- \*Diction of a play
- \*Rules on the use of languages
- \*Modes of address and intonation
- \*Ten kinds of play
- \*Limbs of the segments
- \*Styles
- \*Costumes and make-up
- \*Harmonious performance
- \*Dealings with courtezans
- \*Varied performances
- \*Success in dramatic performances
- \*Instrumental music
- \*Stringed instruments
- \*Time measure
- \*Dhruva songs
- \*Covered instruments
- \*Types of character
- \*Distribution of roles

### 2.2.1: Aesthetic Theory

The *Natyashastra* evolved a set of practices and **conventions** that included all aspects of performance: acting (*abhinaya*), styles of performance (*vrittis*), preliminary rituals (*poorvaranga*), sentiment (*rasa*), communication of emotional states (*bhava*), gestures (*mudras*), songs (*dhruvas*), construction of theatre hall (*natya graha*) and delineation of conventional characters. It describes two kinds of enactments or modes of presentation, the realistic mode (*lokadharmi*) and the more stylistic and conventional (*natyadharmi*), and recommends the later to be followed. Hence, most plays of the sanskrit theatre were stylized rather than realistic presentations. One of the most distinguishing features of the sanskrit traditions is its aesthetic theory of *bhava* and *rasa*. The *Natya shastra* describes eight basic human sentiments (*rasa*), such as the comic (*hasya*), rage (*raudra*), heroism (*vira*), etc. These are communicated to the audience by corresponding feelings (*bhava*) of the actors. The performances were expected to be consistent in terms of the dominant emotion of the play. *Abhinaya* (the art of histrionics) was therefore detailed in terms of bodily movement, speech delivery, make up and costume, and psychic states to convey the exact emotion. A variety of hand gestures, poses and gaits as suitable to the rank and station in life of the characters are also given. The *Natyashastra* gives an elaborate account of languages, dialects, grammar and metrical rules as appropriate for various characters (Banham, 1988, p.473). Such an elaborate and sophisticated aesthetic theory also needed an audience who had been initiated into the appreciation of this dramatic practice.

### 2.2.2: Stock Characters

The *Natyashastra* also mentions stock characters or typical role categories such as the *sutradhar* (holder of skeins), the *vidushak* (the clown), the *nayak* (protagonist), and the *nayika* (heroine). In fact, many of these stock characters continued to be used in folk traditions and modern theatre. Critics have conjectured that the character of the *sutradhar*, the director and manager of all the threads of the play may have come to the Sanskrit tradition from puppet theatre (where threads of all characters are held together by one person). Two examples of the effective use of the *sutradhar* in twentieth century are Vijay Tendulkar's *Ghashiram Kotwal* (1972) and Sriranga's *Kelu Janmejaya* (1965).

### 2.2.3: Dance and Music

A very important contribution of the Sanskrit tradition is the weaving together of dance, music and spectacle into the construction of a play. There is evidence that men and women participated in performances as actors, musicians and dancers. One finds an elaborate description of musical instruments and their suitability to various rhythmic movements in the *Natyashastra*. It also makes suggestions on the composition of *dhruvas* (songs) for various kinds of performances. Indeed, the interconnections between Sanskrit theatrical traditions and classical forms of dance and music can be established firmly through the *Natyashastra*.

#### Did You Know

Bharatnatyam and Kutiyattam follow the precepts of the *Natyashastra* in body movements, hand gestures, make up, costume and stylization. These are examples of ancient forms of Sanskrit theatre that are still extant.

Source : Original



Figure 3: The 2,000 year old Sanskrit drama tradition Kutiyattam, performed in Kerala, southern India, strictly follows the *Nāṭya Shāstra*. Guru *Nāṭyāchārya* Māni Mādhava Chākyaṛ as *Ravana* in Bhasa's play *Abhiṣeka Nataka*

Source : [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Mani\\_Madhava\\_Chakyar\\_as\\_Ravana.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Mani_Madhava_Chakyar_as_Ravana.jpg)



Figure 4 : Mudras in Bharatnatyam

Source : [http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Bharatnatyam\\_6.jpg](http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Bharatnatyam_6.jpg)

#### Audio-Visual Material

Kutiyattam is a form of ancient Sanskrit tradition, still performed in Kerala in *kuttampalam* theatres constructed in accordance with the precepts laid down in the *Natyashastra*. Here are two performances.

#### Sources:

Kutiyattam Kailasodharanam: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sdecs0sjLuA&feature=related>

Kutiyattam Lakshmana : [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I5BaR4t\\_510](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I5BaR4t_510)

#### 2.2.4: Rituals

The *Natyashastra* sets out rules for preliminary rituals, invocation to gods, consecration of the sacred space for performance and prologue that addresses the audience directly. It lists a set of eighteen preliminary rituals (*purvaranga*) to ensure the successful staging of a play. These conventions have been frequently reinvented and reinterpreted by modern playwrights to suit the needs of their writing.

#### Interesting Information

Mohan Rakesh in his play *Aadhe Adhure* (1968) uses the convention of the Prologue, a direct address to the audience, in a setting that is realistic.

**Source** : Original

### 2.2.5: The Stage

The *Natyashastra* also prescribes steps towards the construction of a theatre structure. Apart from the rituals that must accompany the construction of a stage, it also lays down shapes of the stage and distinct areas such as the dressing room, space for musicians, the *parikramana* (circumambulation of the stage), the back stage and the auditorium. There is a clear mention of the curtain (*yavanika*) that could be used for the exit and entry of characters and change of scene. This prefigures the use of the drop curtain on stage that came through the influence of English theatre in the colonial period.

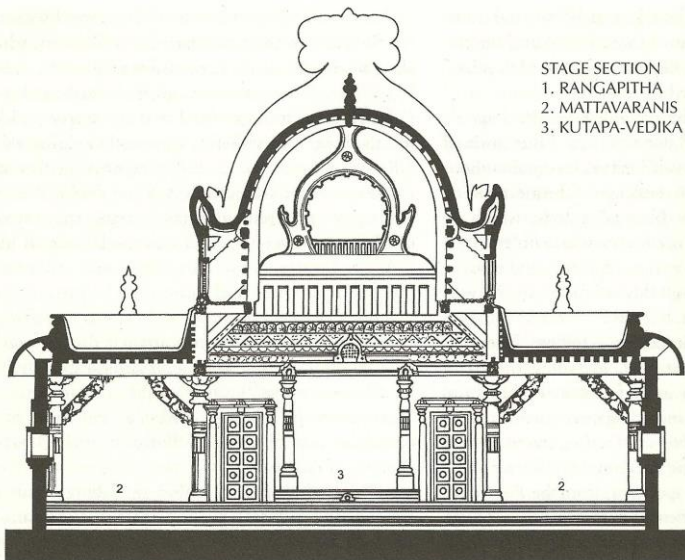


Figure 6 : Frontal View of Medium Rectangular Auditorium as Stipulated in the *Natyashastra*

**Source** : Lal, Ananda, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Indian Theatre*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 310.

## 2.3: The Social Context of the Sanskrit Tradition

The Sanskrit theatre tradition continued to flourish till about tenth century AD primarily in the courts of Hindu kings. Plays would be performed in court on occasions such as coronations, festivals, victory in war, births and other community celebrations. Details of theatre architecture suggest that rather than being a public theatre, performances were mostly meant for exclusive courtly audiences. In fact, most of the famous playwrights of the Sanskrit tradition were either kings or men at court. The practice of royal patronage is also explained through a legend of Bharata and his sons being cursed by some sages and had to be patronized by kings in order to preserve the art (Banham, 1988, p.473). Som Benegal has suggested that the *Natyashastra* was given the status of the fifth *Veda* to gain acceptance for shudra performers (Bhatia, 2009, p.24).

Although the Sanskrit tradition in theatre is a dominant ancient tradition and one that we can reconstruct on the basis of extant manuscripts, it must not be assumed that all theatre came from Vedic sources. Many scholars have pointed out the importance of other cults, such as the Krishna cult in the evolution of Indian theatre (Varadpande, 1987, p. 88). While Sanskrit theatre emerged as a dominant tradition, other popular forms also flourished, simultaneously borrowing and contributing to Sanskrit theatre.

### What the Critics Say

The oldest Indian dramas, or rather colloquies (*sanvadas*) were not composed in Sanskrit but in Prakrit. Indeed, originally the Prakrit *sanvadas* were mysteries too, either Krishna or Shiva acting or dancing the principal part. Favourite episodes from Govinda's eventful life were the slaying of Kamsa and the binding of the heaven-storming Titan. Large crowds came to witness these open-air spectacles... Vedic dialogues reflect the afterglow rather than the first morning flush of the rude representation, staged in a vulgar tongue, of Krishna's and Shiva's ancient mysteries.

**Source** : E.P. Horowitz, *The Indian Theatre*, 1969, quoted in Varadpande, M.L., *The History of Indian Theatre*, New Delhi : Abhinav Publications, 1987, p. 88.

Some historians such as Will Durant also feel that the interaction between India and Greece, after Alexander's invasion was also an important step in the evolution of drama in India (Varadpande, 1987, p. 221-2). Many others have, however pointed out that the aesthetic theory on which Greek drama is based is very different from that elaborated by the *Natyashastra*. Whereas Greek drama is based on **verisimilitude** and a sense of conflict, Sanskrit drama does not seek to reflect reality or individual conflicts. It is largely based on idealization and stylization of characters (Shiva Prakash, 2007) and its aim is to achieve and calm and stability through aesthetic pleasure.

### Another Critical Source

Although the *Natyashastra* provides information on just one type of ancient performance, it would be safe to deduce that there were probably many others existing at that time, perhaps more modest in scope, but equally, if not more, meaningful to society at large. Among these must have been the bards and storytellers/ singers who created and transmitted the epics Mahabharata and Ramayana and the Puranic stories, whose texts were only later committed to writing. In addition, ancient India must have had folk songs and dances to commemorate festive occasions and life and agricultural cycle rites as well as a variety of work-related activities, all of which are common throughout India today. Unfortunately, the performance aspects of these are not described in any of the early literature, although there are occasional tantalizing hints.

**Source** : Aditi – *The Living Arts of India*, published by Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., New Delhi : Motilal Banarasidas, 1987, p.224.

## 2.4: The Playwrights

Most playwrights in the Sanskrit tradition followed the **precepts** of the *Natyashastra* in the composition of their plays. Among the earliest works in this tradition are the fragmentary plays of Asvaghosha that are based on Buddhist teachings. Kalidasa is one of the most monumental figures associated with the Sanskrit tradition. His play *Abhijanasakuntalam*, is considered to be a masterpiece in weaving together intense lyricism and classical rules of the *Natyashastra*. He is said to have lived in 5<sup>th</sup> century AD in Ujjain as a court poet of King Chandragupta II. Another major dramatic work of the Sanskrit tradition is the play *Mrcchakatika*, the only play attributed to Sudraka (5<sup>th</sup> century AD). These two plays are perhaps the most widely performed plays from the Sanskrit tradition. **Indologists** such as Goethe and Max Mueller 'rediscovered' these playwrights in the nineteenth century and gave them a place of pride in the Indian tradition. Consequently, the Sanskrit tradition was taken to Europe and these plays were performed in Paris as early as 1835.

Bhasa, another prominent playwright from the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD, is the only playwright to have experimented with the codes of the *Natyashastra* by giving a tragic end to his play *Uru-Bhanga*. He is the only playwright for whom we have thirteen plays still **extant**. Harsha (7<sup>th</sup> Century AD) and Bhavabhuti (8<sup>th</sup> Century AD) are other significant dramatists of the Sanskrit tradition.

### Other Works of Kalidasa

Plays: *Abhijanasakuntalam*, *Malavikaagnimitra*, *Vikramorvashi*

Dramatic poem: *Meghadutta*

Epic Poems: *Raghuvamsha*, *Ritu-samhaara*, *Kumaara-Sambhava*

**Source** : Original

## 2.5: The Emergence of Folk Theatres



As mentioned earlier, the Sanskrit theatres proliferated and reached their pinnacle in the first ten centuries AD through the patronage of the courts. Changes in the cultural and political milieu around the tenth century led to the gradual erosion of theatres in Sanskrit. The decline of Sanskrit theatres is attributed to invasions from the north-west, such as that of Mahmud of Ghazni that weakened the kingdoms in the north of India and ultimately led to the consolidation of the Mughal empire around the fifteenth century. The Sanskrit court theatres could not survive this period of political upheaval.

This period was also marked by new language formations. It is at this time that new languages and literary traditions emerged in rural parts of India. Thus this exclusivity of Sanskrit, which was the language of the courts was probably another cause for the gradual fading away of its theatrical traditions. Yet, traditions and practices never disappear completely but get **transmuted** into newer forms. Theatre emerged in a rich variety of forms in regional languages across India. It went out of the courts to acquire a living presence among communities and serve their needs. Folk Theatres came up in such large variety that some of these theatres are undocumented to this day.

Another factor that contributed to the emergence of folk theatres was a religious movement called Vaishnavism (12<sup>th</sup> century) that emphasized on direct communication with God and devotion for God, in the form of Krishna, a reincarnation of Vishnu. Enacting the lives of Gods and communicating faith through performative forms thus acquired a religious sanctity. Many folk theatre forms, such as the Ramlila and Raslila in the north, Ankiya Nat in Assam, Bhagavata Mela in Tamil Nadu, Dashavatara in Maharashtra, Krishnattam in Kerala and Kuchipudi in Andhra Pradesh are a few examples that are associated with religious experience.

#### Audio-Visual Material

Watch traditional performances of the Ramlila and the Raslila and a special feature on the famous Ramnagar Ramlila.

Ramnagar Ramlila : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IDQsldnWDOc>

Ramlila : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=89dtCI4oNzU>

Raslila : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aURbT5DUxyk&feature=related>

Other folk forms that originated in vernacular languages were more secular in their origins and provided for community entertainment. Some examples of these are: Bhavai in Gujarat, Jatra in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, Nautanki in Uttar Pradesh, Swang in Haryana and Punjab, Sumang-Leela in Manipur, and Yakshagana in Karnataka. All these folk forms came up in local communities and had their own distinctive features. At the same time, folk theatres adapted elements of music, dance, ritual, stylistic presentation and stock characters from the Sanskrit tradition and incorporated them into new socio-cultural settings. Unlike the Sanskrit dramatic tradition which depended on literary texts, these forms depended more on improvisations rather than fixed texts. Traditional theatres usually drew their themes from myth and folklore and so no authorship could be fixed with a form. They would be performed in open arenas and would be accessible to the entire community. As in Sanskrit theatre, most of these forms had elements of pageantry, spectacle and stylization. Rituals and elaborate preliminaries from Sanskrit theatre were carried forward by some of these forms. Certain forms were more qualified to be called dance-dramas, for example, Kathakali and Krishnattam. Some others were oriented towards dialogue, humour and satire, for example, Tamasha in Maharashtra and Bhavai in Gujarat.

Music and dance were integral to folk theatre performances and served multiple dramatic functions. Many of these folk forms incorporated a non-realistic and stylistic approach to theatre and this necessitated the use of conventions, elaborate makeup and costume. In forms such as Yakshagana, Krishnattam and Terrukuttu headgear, crowns and masks are used and faces are painted with colours and features prescribed for certain types of characters. The performances were usually participative and informal and became community events.

Balwant Gargi in his seminal book, *Theatre in India* differentiates between Sanskrit and folk theatres as follows : " Sanskrit drama, addressed to a sophisticated audience of courtiers, used a highly ornate language that did not touch the life of the people. It is the folk theatre in its diverse forms which is rooted in their lives. It has changed, adapted and developed, adjusting itself to changing social conditions." (p.82-3).

### Audio-Visual Material

Watch a traditional Yakshagana performance

**Source :** <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g9gPmoTMskg>

### Audio-Visuals

Watch two Bhavai performances – a traditional one and another that reinterprets tradition to offer comments on the contemporary theme of global warming. The latter is titled “Jago Jago” and is presented by Dr. Mallika Sarabhai’s Darpana Academy.

#### Sources:

1. Bhavai troupe : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f1OVuVoTxI8&feature=related>
2. Bhavai on global warming : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mq2TKs46234&feature=related>

Folk theatres were more flexible, informal and participative than the Sanskrit theatre and so their reach was immense. Each of these theatre genres have a unique history of evolution and assimilation in the life of communities. The study of these dramatic forms is necessarily a study of continuity and change, of recuperation of traditions to suit modern needs. These forms, as we know them now, have acquired layers of meanings over centuries and are truly reflective of a vibrant and collective life. They are a record of vital lived experiences of the common people in various regions of India and are therefore significant in tracing the cultural history of India.

### Of Further Interest

For detailed information on the evolution of folk forms of theatre refer to:

1. Lal, Ananda, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Indian Theatre*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004.
2. Shiva Prakash, H.S., *Traditional Theatres*, New Delhi: Wisdom Tree, 2007.

### Time Line at a Glance

Indus Valley Culture : 2500-1600 BC  
Arrival of Aryans : 1500 BC  
Vedas : dated from before 1400 BC-1200 BC  
Hindu Epic Literature- *Mahabharata, Ramayana, Puranas*: 1000-100 BC  
*Natyashastra* : 200 BC – 200 AD  
*Cilappatikaram* by Alanko Atikal : 2 BC  
Sanskrit Playwrights : 150 BC-700 AD  
*Therigatha*, a Buddhist work : 6<sup>th</sup> – 1<sup>st</sup> century BC  
Panini : 4<sup>th</sup> century BC  
Patanjali : 5<sup>th</sup> – 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC  
Folk Theatres : 11<sup>th</sup> century-17<sup>th</sup> century

Source: Original

### Summary

- Traditional theatres in India include the Sanskrit dramatic tradition which flourished from 200 BC to 10<sup>th</sup> century AD and folk theatres that evolved around the 11<sup>th</sup> century but had to negotiate with colonial influences in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.
- Our knowledge on Sanskrit theatre primarily comes from the *Natyashastra* composed by Bharatamuni (dated variously between 200 BC and 200 AD) and the works of dramatists

such as Kalidasa, Sudraka, Bhasa, Asvaghosha, Harsha and Bhavabhuti, who largely followed the precepts laid down by the *Natyashastra*.

- Traces of performative traditions can be found in pre-historic picture galleries, remains of the Indus Valley civilization, Vedic narrative traditions and the works of grammarians Panini and Patanjali even before they were codified in the *Natyashastra*. However, not all ancient drama comes from Vedic sources. Puppet theatre, the Krishna cult, traditions in languages other than Sanskrit also go into making a composite history of ancient theatrical traditions.
- The *Natyashastra* is an encyclopaedic treatise on all aspects of theatre that include acting, stage direction, construction of theatre spaces, aesthetic theories, *bhava*, *rasa*, postures, stock characters, dance, music and rituals.
- Performances in this mode were generally non-realistic and stylistic and included music, dance and ceremony.
- The Sanskrit theatre tradition flourished with the help of royal patronage in the first ten centuries AD. Historians attribute its decline to the erosion of the Hindu, Brahmanical courts due to invasions from the north-west. The exclusivity of the Sanskrit language as a language of the courts may have also contributed to its decline.
- However, these traditions and practices went out of court to acquire a living presence among communities in various regions of India. Thus, around the 11<sup>th</sup> century, we see the emergence of a wide variety of folk forms in regional languages across India.
- Vaishnavism, a religious movement that emphasizes on a direct communication with God was also instrumental in the emergence of folk theatres. Folk theatre forms such as the Ramlila, Raslila, Bhagavata Mela, etc. originated as part of a religious experience. Many of these forms gradually became more secular.
- Folk theatre forms incorporated elements of music, dance, spectacle and stock characters into different cultural settings. These forms are based on improvisations rather than written texts and are therefore more flexible, spontaneous and participative. They are a reflection of vibrant and collective lived experience.

## Exercises

### Essay Type Questions

1. Give an account of the origins of ancient theatre.
2. What are the important features of the Sanskrit tradition as it emerges in the *Natyashastra* ?
3. What are the theatrical practices and theories that the *Natyashastra* outlines ?
4. How did the folk forms of theatre emerge and what are their distinctive features ?
5. Explain the theory of *bhava* and *rasa* as outlined in the *Natyashastra*.

### Objective Type Questions

I. Choose the correct option :

1. Traditional theatres in India are: (i) exclusively in Sanskrit language ; (ii) all written texts ; (iii) have a composite history of dance, music, oral traditions and puppet theatre.
2. *Natyashastra* : (i) is written only by one author called Bharata ; (ii) consists of elaborate aesthetic theories of *bhava* and *rasa* (iii) is unreliable because of its mythical origins.
3. The *natyadharmi* mode of presentation is : (i) a realistic presentation; (ii) followed by most Sanskrit playwrights; (iii) about the sentiments and mood of the play.
4. The *sutradhar* is : (i) the clown in a play; (ii) a character who is irrelevant for modern day playwrights; (iii) the holder of skeins.
5. Folk theatres: (i) are completely disconnected from Sanskrit theatre ; (ii) are more flexible and community oriented ; (iii) are all religious theatres.

### Answers

1. (iii)
2. (ii)
3. (ii)
4. (iii)
5. (ii)

### II. State whether True or False:

1. Sanskrit theatre flourished primarily in the courts.
2. There was no noticeable theatre tradition in medieval India.
3. The Kutiyattam performance follows the precepts of the *Natyashastra* even now.
4. All ancient theatrical traditions come only from the Sanskrit language.
5. Vaishnavism hindered the proliferation of folk theatres.

### Answers:

1. True
2. False
3. True
4. False
5. False

### III. Match the following :

- |                       |                        |
|-----------------------|------------------------|
| 1. <i>Natya</i>       | a) <i>rasa</i>         |
| 2. <i>Therigatha</i>  | b) preliminary rituals |
| 3. <i>Poorvaranga</i> | c) <i>Mrcchkatika</i>  |
| 4. <i>Sudraka</i>     | d) dancer              |
| 5. <i>Hasya</i>       | e) puppet theatre      |

### Answers:

1. (d)
2. (e)
3. (b)
4. (c)
5. (a)

## Glossary

Bardic traditions- tradition of reciting epics

Oral traditions – songs, poetry, narratives that are communicated verbally

Impersonation – pretend to be someone else for entertainment

Consecrated – to make sacred

Aesthetic – concerned with appreciation of art and beauty

Conventions – rules or forms that are usually followed

Preliminary - preceding

Verisimilitude – appearance of being real

Precepts – general rules that regulate thought

Indologists – scholars who study Indian literature, culture and history

Extant – still existing

Transmuted – changed in form

Stylization – depicted in a mannered and non-realistic style

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