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AN EXPLORATION INTO THE DEVELOPMENT OF DRAMAS

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ABSTRACT

Drama is a composite art. It is closely linked with the social instincts of men in ancient literature of the east and the West, and we have evidence of the beginnings of drama in all narrative efforts. Even in the conversation between individuals, there is an unconscious move towards drama in the shifting from indirect speech to direct speech. It came to be written by a dramatist and to be directed by professionals and acted by professionals. The stage itself became a part of the presentation and so there came up a group specialising in setting the stage. Thus, the company involved in drama became a many-pronged establishment and became more and more complex. However, the professionalised framework of drama did not completely avoid or outgrow the folk element. This continued to butt in at least for the sake of providing boisterous comedy for the groundlings. From such an early beginning, drama grew very fast. This is the history of modern drama in the West. Before that, of course, there had been the classical theatres of Greece and Rome of ancient times. These also had a considerable element of the folk, perhaps. There was lots of music and dance in this. The western drama has played a vital role in the development of modern theatre in the non-western world. By historical accident, English became an important part of the cultural and social life of a larger part of the world, and countries like France, Germany and Italy also exerted their influence on the life of the non-western world. Though modern drama in the non-western world was influenced greatly by western drama, it also went to its native roots for ideas and suggestions. To study contemporary drama in India, we must consider Indian drama classic and folk and western drama. Ironically, this drama that has gone to native roots for inspiration is often written in English or written in native languages and then translated into English.

Drama is a composite art. It is closely linked with the social instincts of man. In ancient literature of the east and West, we have evidence of the beginnings of drama in all narrative efforts. Even in the conversation between individuals, the reason unconscious move towards drama in the shifting from indirect speech to direct speech. In epic narration, there is quite often the presentation of dialogues and dramatic moments of presentation rather than representation. In the West, in the millennia before Christianity, comedy and tragedy flourished probably beginning with religious rituals and gradually progressing to complex presentations of the philosophical and the realistic elements of life. The early church used a method of dialogue- mingled narration in church services to avoid monotony. In the course of time, this dramatic effort led to more of drama and excitement and when it was felt to have grown into an extent where the dramatic effort overwhelmed their

religious base the dramatic element was thrown out of the church. From this grew the dramatic secular effort. It culminated in the miracles and the moralities which still had their base in religion and morality, but instead of using religion alone in the appropriate solemn vein, this pressed into service the circumstances with public life.

What does this mean?

It means that the artists who developed the miracles and the moralities could think of other elements in drama than the solemn alone. They could bring into their presentation elements of comedy. For instance, in one of the early plays on the birth of Jesus, there is a scene in which Joseph kicks up a row about the claim of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary. Bill could be more innocent comedy in the conversations of shepherds and shepherdesses. Such comedy and sentiments could not be accommodated within the church, and so they came onto the public platform. Ultimately the intention of the miracle play and the morality plays was indeed religious and spiritual, but they allowed other, secular, interests also into their directions.

From moralities which used secular themes with the great admixture of religion-based morality and representative, personified virtues, and vices, gradually drama moved to more refinement and more secular life, less often didactic component and more of entertainment. From the folk theatre, it became specialized and professionalized drama came to be written by a dramatist and to be directed by professionals and acted by professionals. The stage itself became a part of the presentation and so there came up a group specialization in setting the stage. Thus, the company involved in drama became a many-pronged establishment and became more and more complex.

Yet, the professionalized framework of drama did not completely avoid or outgrow the Folk element. These continued to butt in at least for the sake of providing boisterous comedy for the groundlings. They were also used even in more important contexts. For instance, in *Dr. Faustus* (produced first possibly around 1589) of Christopher Marlowe (1564 to 1593), the personifications of the Good Angel and the Evil Angel appeared to symbolise the conflict in Faustus's mind between good and evil. From such early beginnings, drama grew very fast.

This is the history of modern drama in the West. Before that, of course, there had been the classical theatres of Greece and Rome of ancient times. These also had a considerable element of the folk, perhaps. However, they soon became very classical and refined with elaborate customs. There was so much music and dance in this. Though originally Greek drama accommodated only two characters on the stage (the chorus was a separate group entity making its appearance on the stage to comment on the play that was developing) It eventually developed even five or six characters on the stage at any given moment. When once the basic convention had been set, Greek drama, both comedy and tragedy, was perhaps more the making of the dramatist. The literary part of it meant so much to the Greeks. Yet it remained a composite art form because there were the dancers of the chorus, and there were the Moss and other strange properties.

This is the Story of the western drama. Indeed, the western drama has played a vital role in the development of modern theatre in the non-western world. By a historical accident, English became an important part of the cultural and social life of a larger part of the world, and countries like France and Germany and Italy also exerted their influence on the life of the non-western world. Though modern drama in the non-western world was influenced greatly by western drama, it also went to its native roots for ideas and suggestions. So, to study contemporary drama in India, we must consider Indian drama classic and folk, and western drama. Ironically, this drama that has gone to native roots for inspiration is often written in English or written in native languages and then translated into English.

In considering Indian drama of all times, we have to consider the influences that India has been exposed to, from early times. Of course, there is much controversy surrounding the history of India and its civilisation. Was there an Aryan invasion of the subcontinent at all, upsetting a native Dravidian civilisation? Or is that conflict a figment of the imagination of the western historians? The Cambridge Guide to Theatre states in quite confident terms:

Because of its strategic location, the Indian civilisation has been shaped over time by a multitude of social, political, and religious forces which, in turn, have had a direct bearing on the shape of its theatre.

The Indus Valley civilisation dating from 2300 BC was the first great culture to inhabit areas of the north, along the Indus Valley basin. The advanced city-states that were formed there came to an abrupt and unexplainable halt by 1750 BC. Eventually, India was populated by Indo -Aryans who migrated from Persia¹.

According to this authority, India's civilisation developed from the Aryans. Over the centuries, the Aryans developed a religion, philosophy and culture, and the main vehicle of all this was the Sanskrit language which was the language of communication between the aristocracy and the priestly classes which dominated the culture in those days. The myths that developed in this, reinforced Indian society as one of the earliest civilised societies of the world, thus Sanskrit drama and theatre came into being and flourished in a relatively peaceful. Between the 1st and the 10th centuries AD in the history of the huge country which was divided into small parts ruled by Kings, the many subsequent invaders of India influenced the development of India's variegated culture and civilisation.

Yet the history of Sanskrit theatre is shrouded in mystery. The Cambridge Guide to Theatre acknowledges the problem and presents it thus:

It is difficult to affix an exact date, or even determine the precise century, of the origin of Sanskrit theatre. Fragments of the earliest known plays have been traced to the 1st century AD, and yet the sophistication of the form of the fragments suggests that a living Theatre tradition must have existed in India at a somewhat earlier date. The earliest traces of civilisation in India date from between 2300 and 1750 BC and yet the enormous wealth of archaeological evidence provides no hint of the existence of a living theatre tradition. Dancing music seemed to have been enjoyed by the people of those times perhaps as part of religious celebrations, but theatre is not in evidence. The search of the way does sacred hymns among the Vedas earliest literary outpourings dating from approximately 1500 thousand BC reveals no trace of theatre even though a few of the hymns are composed in a short elementary dialogue some of the rituals practices of the Vedic age have the potential of developing into drama but do not seem to have sparked a theatre tradition².

The important problem is that neither archaeological evidence of a Theatre nor any extant drama text nor any treatises on drama. In Patanjali's yoga sastra of around 140 BC. There is a reference to action. He says that action could be determined in several ways: Pantomime, Recitation, song, and dance.

Although drama (*Natya*) is not specifically mentioned, references is made to individuals who recite and sing (*Natas*). Coupled with the existence of dramatic rituals, great epic stories which were later interpreted in dramatic form and the existence of traditions of song, dance, and recitation, firmly established in Indian tradition, it is feasible that Sanskrit drama came into being about this point of time³.

This authority also points out that there is no evidence to claim that the visit of Alexander introduced a drama to India. Alexander is known to have been very much interested in drama, and his dramatic troupe attached to his armies might have introduced the practice to Indians some way, but there is no evidence to prove this claim. Much later, Bharata wrote his *Natyasastra* possibly between 200 BC and 200 AD.

The Cambridge Guide pays tribute to Bharata's book as being more comprehensive than Aristotle's work on drama – the *Rhetoric*. Aristotle lived between 384 and 322 BC, and their *Rhetoric* probably dates from the 330s to the 320s. Bharata's treatise covers acting, theatre architecture, costuming, makeup, properties, dance, music, play construction, as well as the organisation of the Theatre companies, audiences, dramatic competitions, the community of actors and ritual practises, among other things. This authority pursues that in those distant days drama was one of the sacred arts, called the fifth Veda, and its actors were Brahmins, the highest caste in the Hindu religious hierarchy. It admitted all subjects into its purview and counted both entertainment and education as parts of its purpose. It was considered a vehicle for religious instruction, and its fables were based on mythology⁴.

From such sources, it could be seen the actors, were led by the stage manager called the *sutradhara*. His name means "The Holder of the thread or stings". He was thus the person who controlled the activities of the actors onstage. The actors were trained rigorously for their profession by the *natyacharya* (teacher of acting). Men and women both participated in plays, and it is possible that there were troops which were exclusively male or female. It could also be noted that the actors and actresses had to be highly proficient in speech and singing as well as Adept at poorly movement, both realistic and abstract. The ability to dance may also have been required.

Oscar Brockett says that the western and eastern theatre traditions have remained almost wholly different:

While classical, mediaeval, and renaissance errors were underway in Europe, the theatres of India, China, Japan, and Southeast Asia with developing forms that have remained vital. The years between the beginnings of the Christian era and 1700 sword perfection of the convention so different from those of the West and that the two two traditions have remained almost wholly distinct down to the present, despite sporting interactions during the twentieth century⁵.

Brockett places the arrival of the Aryans in India around 1500 BC and says that "Perhaps the most important of these influences on drama were Hinduism the caste system and Sanskrit literary conventions."⁶ Of the early days of Indian culture, Brockett says:

A 'golden age' of Indian culture began around 120 AD and lasted until about 500 AD. It reached its peak during the fourth and fifth centuries when the Gupta Empire of northern India was a major centre of art, learning, and medicine. Beautiful cities arose there, universities where founded, and a great and graceful civilisation flourished. Another high point came during the first half of the 7th century under the rule of King Harsa, who was also the major playwright of that time. During Harsa's reign, India's influence spread through Southeast Asia, laying the basis for future developments in drama in those areas⁷.

Brockett also acknowledges the difficulty in dating the beginning of Indian drama. He also refers to the great work of Bharata and places the work around the 2nd century AD. He attributes the difficulty in dating Indian drama to the Indian indifference to chronology and record keeping. He puts that period of great Indian the drama between the fourth and tenth centuries AD.

Sanskrit plays are not categorised according to such western forms as tragedy, comedy, or melodrama; and, rather than action character development, or philosophical issues, the central goal of Sanskrit drama is the appropriate *rasa* (variously translated as an aesthetic delight, fundamental mood, or joyful consciousness). The *Natyasastra* states: "nothing has meaning in the drama except through *rasa*"⁸.

According to the most accounts, `the history of Sanskrit drama ranges from the 1st century to the 10th century AD. Out of the hundreds of plays written during this, some twenty-five has survived in full. The earliest extant remnants of drama or those of *Asvaghosa* who probably a Buddhist monk was. Possibly among the best of this crop was Bhasa, thirteen of whose plays survive. He was the author of *Svapnavasavadatta*, which is one of the best plays of the Sanskrit theatre. Basha took most of his stories from the epics and the Puranas, though he wrote plays on storeys of his own also. Another great name in the early Indian theatre is that of Sudraka who wrote *The Little Clay Cart (Mrchakatika)* and nothing else. The best among the group was possibly Kalidasa who probably lived around the 5th century AD in the court of King Chandragupta. He authored at least three places *Malavikamitra*, *Vikramorvasiya*, and *Abhijnasakuntala (Sakuntala and the Ring of recognition)*., *Bhavabhuti* is probably the last of the great dramatists, and he probably lived around 700 AD.

Rather than surviving as a reflection of life in ancient India, Sanskrit drama served as a model of ideal human behaviour. The idealisation of the characters, their values and actions, all point to this lofty aim. Sanskrit drama is not a drama of protest or of reaction but a Theatre of elevated ideals. Guided by their *Natyasastra*'s rules, the writers cooperated and lived within their society rather than breaking down barriers or exhibiting individual individualistic points of view⁹.

By the tenth century, however, the inspiration of the Sanskrit drama was lost. There were many reasons. There were repeated invasions, especially of Mohammedan chieftains. The political and social unrest of that north of India especially affected all artistic work. Sanskrit was no longer a familiar language in all parts of the country, and regional languages were coming up with their own literary claims and tendencies. Losing Royal patronage, perhaps drama troupes began going into the rural areas, necessarily adopting vernacular plays. Gradually, perhaps, the highly stylised conventions of Sanskrit drama gave way to less sophisticated but more popularly intelligible rural ways. What followed was possibly a dark period of Indian art history.

It is surprising that the Cambridge guide should miss all references to the rich tradition of the South of India right from the early days. According to tradition, the Tamil country had three Tamil academies in three different periods. Title and other disastrous took out all of these, and there are only references to the works of the earlier two of these academies, but the third and last academy is supposed to have existed between the second century BC and the second century AD. It was during this period that this great work of grammar Tolkappiyam was written. It was also during this period that the Chera prince and Buddhist monk Ilamko Adikal wrote one of the great dramatic work in Tamil called Silappadikaram. This great work of their Prince Savant contains not only a dramatic Story but also countless references to details of dance, drama, and music. Though the next official dramatic work in Tamil was only in the nineteenth century, there was unofficial, nonclassical popular drama and this had a continuous history.

Coming between the refined drama of the tradition of refined Sanskrit drama and the popular theatre in vernacular languages are various traditions of scholarly and folk theatres. Modern Indian drama has taken advantage of the reformed tradition of learned drama, folk traditions, and semi-dramatic moves like the Harikatha¹⁰. This is in addition to the western influence occasioned by the coming of the British and their rule the country from the eighteenth century to the first half of the twentieth century. So modern Indian drama has two language options: English and the vernacular languages. Both modes are very rich. Some of the great playwrights of contemporary India have done distinguished work in both the vernacular theatre and in the westernised convention in the English language.

Notes & Bibliography

¹ *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre*, ed. Martin Banham (1988, New York: Cambridge University Press, rep. 1992).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ In ancient India all arts were considered dedicated to religion and spirituality. Music was devotional; all odds where idealistic, and their purpose was basically to help man in his spiritual pursuit. The practise of music, for instance, was called Nada Upaasana, the worship of and through, sound, and it was considered one of the methods of attaining godhead. Sound was not just what we scientifically understand by the term, but something that has Mystic spiritual significance. In this way all arts have the substance of spirituality in their core

⁵ Reference: Oscar G. Brockett, *History of the Theatre* (1965; Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1977) {Ed VII} p.593.

⁶ Ibid. p.593.

⁷ Ibid., p.594

⁸ Ibid., p.595

⁹ *The Cambridge Guide earlier cited.*

¹⁰ It is interesting to note that African drama of today has also taken a similar route. Western drama had a tradition here from the early part of the 19th century at least, with the German and English settlers bringing in drama troops and dramatic repertoires of their native countries. When the 20th century writers of the nationalist's era began writing, they went consciously back into their own native traditions of long ago. These used techniques of those days with great effect, and much of modern African drama is indebted to ancient African drama at least as much as it is indebted to western dramatic traditions.