

Sanskrit Drama: Its Origin and Development

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Abstract: Sanskrit drama is the earliest structured dramatic tradition in world literature. The origins of Sanskrit Dramaturgy continue to be a source of great curiosity among scholars. In Indian tradition, *Nātya* is regarded as a divine art created by Bharata and documented in the *Nātyaśāstra*. Some Western experts have suggested the presence of foreign influences, particularly analogies to Greek drama. This paper examines these principal theories on the formation of Sanskrit drama. Sanskrit drama did not have a simple or solitary beginnings. It found power in holy ceremonies, folk-based dramatic manifestations, palace traditions and the slow evolution of literary culture.

Keywords: Sanskrit drama, Theories of Ridgeway, Keith, Pischel, Kṛṣṇa cult, Me'pola dance.

Introduction

Sanskrit drama has a special and important place in India's literary and cultural legacy. It is one of the most amazing dramatic traditions in the world because of its sophisticated structure, profound philosophical content and artistic depth. As an artistic medium, Sanskrit drama unites poetic creativity with melodic, kinetic and theatrical elements. Many academics are interested in the origin and development of Sanskrit drama, a renowned dramatic tradition of ancient India. While traditional sources such as the *Nātyaśāstra* describe drama's divine origins under Brahma's supervision, modern academics investigate the gradual development of drama through ritual performance, cultural interchange and social activities. Understanding the social and theological context of the development of Sanskrit drama is greatly aided by the insights offered by Ridgeway, Keith, Pischal, Ludars and Kono, and the theory of me'pola dance. This paper examines how the framework of Sanskrit drama was influenced by literary invention, ritual performance and socio-religious transformations.

Origin and Development of Sanskrit Drama

The earliest form of Indian drama is the Sanskrit drama. The origin of Sanskrit drama is one of the interesting studied in the history of Sanskrit literature and divergent views are found in this regard. Some scholars are of opinion that Sanskrit dramas exhibit some influences of Greek drama.¹ They want to refer to some of the similarities between two. It is true that some similarities can be identified between Sanskrit drama and Greek drama. As for example the development of the plot, charac-

terization, dialogue delivery etc., are common in both forms. But the most important difference between Sanskrit drama and the Greek plays remain in the context of three unities, viz., the unity of time, place and actions which are completely absent in Sanskrit drama. Moreover, Sanskrit drama categorically ends with a happy mode where as in western plays the treatment of pathetic sentiment plays a great role. Thus in Greek plays tragedy or tragic end is very common.

Indian tradition attributes divine origin to the Sanskrit drama. It is accepted by all that Bharata's *Nātyaśāstra* is the earliest well-known book on Sanskrit dramaturgy.² The third century C.E. is the commonly accepted date of the *Nātyaśāstra*.³ It is stated that the *Nātyaveda* had been composed by taking the element of recitation from the *Rgveda*, songs from the *Sāmaveda*, gestures from the *Yajurveda*, and sentiments from the *Atharvaveda*.⁴ The *Nātyaśāstra* tells that the dramas are written during the *Indradhavaja* festival. The first two dramas enacted in this earth were the *Amṛtamanthana* and the *Tripuradāha*.⁵ The scholars are of opinion that the *Saṁvādasūktas* of the *Rgveda* like the conversational hymns between Yama and Yami,⁶ Pururavā and Urvaśī,⁷ Saramā and Panī⁸ etc., remained at the root of the origin of Sanskrit drama.⁹

In Sanskrit literary world, some theories regarding the origin and development of Sanskrit drama are in vogue. Those have been discussed there.

Ridgeway's Theory

According to Ridgeway the origin of Sanskrit drama started from hero worship. He tells that the worshiping of dead ancestors become the reason of beginning of dramas. As per this opinion both in Greece and in India the lyrics which used to be employed its pray forefathers can be traced as the initial stage of dramatic works. The *Rāmalīlā* and the *Kṛṣṇalīlā* have been taken as the great examples of this.¹⁰

Keith's Theory

Keith proposed a new view of the origin of drama. He believes that drama originates from the desire to embody natural changes in front of the public. This view is somewhat supported by the performance of the play *Kāṁsavadha* in the *Mahābhāṣya*. The *Bhasya* says that Karīsa and his followers wear black faces and Kṛṣṇa and his followers wear red faces in dramatic performances. The use of colour here seems to symbolize opposing natural forces, with black perhaps representing death or decay and red symbolizing vitality, renewal or life force often associated with spring. Keith believes that the main objective is to conquer spring seems to hinge on this symbolic battle between life and death, a recurring motif in many ancient cultures. Kṛṣṇa's victory is only a symbol of the life force that excels in the plant world.¹¹ On the subject of this bizarre decision, it can be said that its inventor does not believe in this view either.

Pischel's Theory

The German scholar Pischel believes that puppet dance remains at the

origin of Sanskrit dramatic literature. He believes that puppet dance originated in India and from here the art of dance spread all over the world. In Sanskrit drama, the stage manager is called *Sutradhāra* which means one who holds the threads. In a Sanskrit drama a *Sūtradhāra* explains in shout the main theme of the drama after declaring the name of the drama and its composer. Thus the term *Sutradhāra* remains as one connected with the process of the puppetry where the organisers used to run the show with the help of holding the thread tied with the bodies of the puppet.¹²

Theory of Ludars and Kono

According to Ludars and Kono the root of Sanskrit drama is the *Chāyānāṭaka* or Shadowplay. But it is not acceptable as there is no solid sign of existence of any *Chāyānāṭaka* in ancient India. The famous *Chāyānāṭaka* like *Dutāṅgada* in Sanskrit literature is of later origin.¹³

Theory of *Me'pola* Dance

According to some scholars Sanskrit dramas developed from *Me'pola* dance. In western countries the *Me'pola* festival is observed in the month of May. In this festival all the men and women find a great joy by dancing. It is a type of folk dance community dance. Many of the western scholars are of opinion that drama originated from this *Me'pola* dance. In India, the *Indradhavaja* festival can be equated with the *Me'pola* festival. This *Indradhavaja* festival is still celebrated in Nepal. But whether this type of festival can be taken as the source of Sanskrit drama is not certainly ascertained by the scholars.¹⁴

Kṛṣṇa cult Theory

According to some scholars Kṛṣṇa worship or Kṛṣṇa cult is the origin of Sanskrit dramas. The Kṛṣṇa cult theory explores the complexities and richness of Kṛṣṇa mythology, its cultural significance and its impact on spirituality, art and society. It refers to the several interpretations and examinations of the significance and impact of Kṛṣṇa worship. This worship, as per the opinion of some scholars, has shaped art, literature, music, dance in Indian traditions. Kṛṣṇa has been worshipped as a deity since ancient time. The scholars opine that the ways of worshipping Kṛṣṇa led to the origin of dramatic poetry. This theory was developed by western ideologist in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹⁵

According to Dhanañjaya, drama is the manifestation of acting connected with *Dharma*, *Artha* and *Kāma* and it projected various events.¹⁶ A Sanskrit drama is characterised by five Arthopakṣepakas viz., ākṣepa, *vidhāna*, *prāpti*, *samādhāna* and *paribhaṣā*.¹⁷ All these five Arthopakṣepakas serve their individual purposes.

Sanskrit literature offers a vast field of dramatic works. Bhāsa, Kālidāsa, Bhavabhūti, Viśākhadatta and the like are regarded as the stalwarts of Sanskrit dramas. Their works remain as the iconic literary works in the entire world. Though the plots of the dramas are taken from some established story, yet the touch of the dramatists has made the plays unique in various dimensions.

Conclusion

A gradual and complex interaction of ritual activities, folk traditions, devotional expressions and literary creativity led to the emergence and growth of Sanskrit drama. Understanding the numerous influences that involved its evolution allows us to better understand the roots of Sanskrit drama and acknowledge its enduring importance in India's creative legacy.

Sanskrit drama's beginning and steady development serve as unmistakable proof of ancient India's creative prowess and cultural vibrancy. Its enduring influence on the development of world theatre is demonstrated by its continuous presence in contemporary performance traditions and scholarly studies.

Endnotes

1. *The Sanskrit Drama: In its Origin, Development, Theory & Practice*-V. p.p. 57-72.
2. *Nātyaśāstra*, Chapter. 36
3. *Ibid.*, Introduction. P.1.
4. jagrāha pāthayamrgvedātsāmabhyo gītameva ca / yajurvedādabhinayān rasānāthavarṇādapi // *Ibid.*, 1.17.
5. *Ibid.*, 4.10.
6. *Rgveda.*, 10.10.
7. *Ibid.*, 10.95.
8. *Ibid.*, 10.198.
9. *The Sanskrit Drama: In its Origin, Development, Theory & Practice*-I. p.p. 10-20.
10. *The Sanskrit Drama*, p.p. 46-47.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
12. *Ibid.*, p.p. 52-53.
13. *Ibid.*, p. p. 53-55.
14. *Sanskrit Sāhityar Burañjī*, p. 173.
15. *The Sanskrit Drama*, p.46.
16. kāryam trivargastat śuddhamekānekānubandhi ca / *Daśarūpaka*, 1.16.
17. *Nātyaśāstra*, vol. II. P. 12-16.

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