

# INDIAN DRAMA —Classical Period

Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

**Overview** Although little is known of the beginnings of drama in India, the earliest surviving plays (from the 5<sup>th</sup> c. CE) contain some of the best-loved stories in Indian literature. Classical Indian drama is, at the same time, very different to modern Indian 'theatre.' Closer to folk and regional traditions, classical drama is a mixture of the three arts of music, dance and theatre. As with classical Indian poetry, drama flourished under the generous patronage of the Gupta kings of north India. While drama was certainly performed in classical south India, we have no surviving texts or reliable evidence of this tradition.

**Genre** 'Theatre' in Sanskrit is known as *natya*, although this term also covers 'dance' for the simple reason that the two arts were combined in classical India. Another term, *nataka* (or *natakam*), refers to 'drama' that is based on epic themes, although now it is used widely in most Indian languages to mean 'theatre' in the western sense. Ancient Tamil literature refers to 'drama' using the Sanskrit term *nataka*, and several plays (or what appear to be plays) are mentioned in subsequent literature, though none survive. The Tamil term *kuttu* is used for more localised, regional and today's folk theatre traditions.

**Aesthetics** Indian classical theatre, and all Sanskrit literature and many art forms, is guided by an aesthetic theory. The two key terms are *bhava*, the mood or emotion of the dancer, and *rasa*, the distillation of that mood that is evoked in a (discerning) audience. The eight different *rasas* (love, pity, anger, disgust, heroism, awe, terror and comedy) were also later used to describe music and poetry.

**History** Early fragments of a drama by Asvaghosa date from the 1<sup>st</sup> c. CE, although it seems likely that dramatic performance must have occurred earlier. Two early Sanskrit texts, the *Mahabhasya* ('Great Commentary [on grammar]') and the *Nāṭyaśāstra* ('Treatise on Theatre'), from about the same period, provide evidence of a developed drama form. The earliest extant complete plays are those by Bhasa, Kalidasa and Sudraka (all 5<sup>th</sup> c. CE).

**Greek influence** Some scholars have detected Greek influence in early Indian drama, arguing that plays enacted at the courts of Indo-Greek kings (c. 250 BCE-50 CE) inspired Indian poets to develop their own form. Indeed, the curtain that divided the stage is called *yavanika* (from the Sanskrit word for 'Greek'). The famous 'Clay Cart' (see below) also bears a superficial resemblance to the late Greek comedy of the school of Menander.

**Transmission** Manuscripts of plays by both Kalidasa and Sudraka have been copied and transmitted throughout Indian literary history, but Bhasa's 13 plays had been lost for centuries and were known only from mention in other works. In 1912, however, palm-leaf manuscripts were found in an old Brahmin house in south India. None mentioned an author, but linguistic research eventually (after much debate) credited them to Bhasa.

**Performance** Plays were performed by troupes of professionals, of both men and women, but amateur dramatics were not unknown (texts refer to performances at court by officials, kings and ladies of the harem). No physical theatre building survives, and it is assumed that plays were performed in palaces or in the homes of rich merchants. A curtain, through which actors emerged, divided the front from the back stage; no curtain divided the actors from the audience. Scenery was non-existent and props were few. Conventional costumes were worn by stock figures, who also used the language of gesture to convey meaning.

**Form** Plays began with an invocation to the gods, followed by a long prologue, in which the stage manager or chief actor often discussed with his wife or chief actress the occasion and nature of the event. Most of the play's dialogue was in prose, interspersed with verse, declaimed rather than sung.

**Content** Classical Indian drama, like most of Indian literature, did not hold with tragedy. Heroes and heroines might suffer defeat and loss, but a happy ending was not far away. There was, however, sufficient melodrama to satisfy the emotional needs of the audience. Innocent men are led toward execution, chaste wives are driven from their homes and children are separated from their loving parents.

**Bhāsa** Very little is known about Bhasa, the earliest (and arguably the greatest) of the classical playwrights. He is dated between 200 BCE and 200 CE, and all that is certain is that he pre-dated Kalidasa and that 13 plays are

attributed to him. Many of those plays retell episodes from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, and some are tragedies, which was unusual in classical Indian theatre. For example, the *Pratima Nataka* tells the story of Kaikeyi from the *Ramayana*, usually considered the evil step-mother responsible for the sufferings of Rama and his father. *Bhasa*, however, shows how she herself suffered from her guilt.

**Kalidasa** The best-known playwright of the classical period is Kalidasa (5<sup>th</sup> c. CE), whose fame rests also on his poetry. Three of his plays have survived: *Malavika and Agnimitra* (a palace intrigue), *Urvashi Won by Valor* (the Vedic story of Urvashi) and *The Recognition of Shakuntala*. This last has always been considered his finest work and is still performed today, around the world.

**Shakuntala** *Shakuntala* is a love story, between a king and Shakuntala, the foster-daughter of a hermit. After their meeting and falling in love, much of the play describes their love-sickness, as they are unable to meet or marry. When they do meet again, the king gives her a ring to remember him by and to plight their troth. They marry but are cursed by an irascible Brahmin: Shakuntala will lose the ring, and the king will not remember her. In a tragic scene, Shakuntala, pregnant and veiled, is led before the king, who is unable to recall her. In folktale fashion, the lost ring is found by a fisherman inside a fish. The king recovers his memory and all ends happily.

**Sudraka** The only other surviving play of significance in this period is *Mrcchakatika* ('The Little Clay Cart') written by Sudraka, a contemporary of Kalidasa. This story is one of the most realistic and the plot one of the most complicated in the large corpus of classical Sanskrit literature. The central narrative concerns a love affair between a poor Brahmin (whose son can only have a little clay cart instead of grander toys) and a virtuous courtesan, but quickly moves into political intrigue, stolen jewels, a vivid court scene and the overthrow of a wicked king. With this moving story, 'The Little Clay Cart' is the most easily appreciated of classical dramas.

### Questions

1. Drama was popular with court cultures in the classical period of Indian history, yet it has struggled since the medieval period to achieve a similar status. Drama has had similar fluctuations, as both literary form and popular entertainment, in Greece, China, Russia and England to name only a few nations. How does this history compare with the history of drama in two other countries?
2. The recognition theme in *Shakuntala* is widespread in world literature (cf. the ancient Egyptian text of *Sinuhe*, *King Lear*, *Cinderella*, *Lord of the Rings*). Consider how such topics as memory loss and recollection, identity and disguise, loyalty and betrayal, are expressed in different literary cultures.
3. A theory of classical Indian aesthetics was codified in the *Natyasastra*. The two key terms are the *bhava* ('mood,' 'emotion') of the artist (poet, dancer, actor) and the *rasa* ('taste,' 'sentiment') or the distillation of that mood that is evoked in a discerning audience. How does this aesthetic theory compare with another aesthetic, such as that in Greek theatre, Chinese opera or Shakespearean theatre?

### Reading

Rachel Van M Baumer and James R. Brandon (eds.), *Sanskrit Theatre in Performance* (Motilal Banarsidass, 1981)

Farley P. Richmond, India. In Martin Banham (ed.), *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre* (Cambridge, 1998)

Farley P. Richmond, Darius L. Swann, and Phillip B. Zarrilli (eds.), *Indian Theatre: Traditions of Performance* (Hawaii, 1993)

A. L. Basham (trans.), *The Little Clay Cart* (SUNY 1994)

Adithi Rao, *Shakuntala and Other Stories* (Penguin India, 2011)

### Text

from 'The Little Clay Cart,' translation by Arthur Ryder, 1925

Maitreya [a friend]: Well, which would you rather, be dead or be poor?

Charudatta [Brahmin]: Ah, my friend,

Far better death than sorrows sure and slow;

Some passing suffering from death may flow,

But poverty brings never-ending woe.

Maitreya: My dear friend, be not thus cast down. Your wealth has been conveyed to them you love, and like the moon, after she has yielded her nectar to the gods, your waning fortunes win an added charm.

Charudatta: Comrade, I do not grieve for my ruined fortunes. But this is my sorrow. They whom I would greet as guests, now pass me by.

"This is a poor man's house," they cry.

As flitting bees, the season o'er,

Desert the elephant, whose store

Of ichor [blood of the gods] I spent, attracts no more.

Maitreya: Oh, confound the money! It is a trifle not worth thinking about. It is like a cattle-boy in the woods afraid of wasps; it doesn't stay anywhere where it is used for food.

During the mating season, a fragrant liquor exudes from the forehead of the elephant. Of this liquor bees are very fond.

Charud: Believe me, friend. My sorrow does not spring from simple loss of gold; For fortune is a fickle, changing thing, whose favors do not hold; but he whose sometime wealth has taken wing, finds bosom-friends grow cold.

Then too: A poor man is a man ashamed ; from shame

Springs want of dignity and worthy fame;

Such want gives rise to insults hard to bear;

Thence comes despondency; and thence, despair;

Despair breeds folly; death is folly's fruit

Ah! The lack of money is all evil's root!

Maitreya: But just remember what a trifle money is, after all, and be more cheerful.

Charudatta: My friend, the poverty of a man is to him a home of cares, a shame that haunts the mind,

Another form of warfare with mankind; the abhorrence of his friends, a source of hate

From strangers, and from each once-loving mate; but if his wife despise him, then't were meet in some lone wood to seek a safe retreat.

The flame of sorrow, torturing his soul, burns fiercely, yet contrives to leave him whole.

Comrade, I have made my offering to the divinities of the house. Do you too go and offer sacrifice to the Divine Mothers at a place where four roads meet.

Maitreya: No!

Charudatta: Why not?

Maitreya: Because the gods are not gracious to you even when thus honored. So what is the use of worshipping?

Charudatta: Not so, my friend, not so! This is the constant duty of a householder.