

# INDIAN DRAMA —Postclassical Period

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## Early Postclassical Drama

### Overview

In the first half of the early postclassical period, Sanskrit drama maintained a level of excellence, with several plays that are considered worthy of comparison with Kalidasa's masterpieces. By the end, however, the political impetus for much of classical Sanskrit culture had waned and the remaining texts are mediocre. One interesting feature of all these plays, nonetheless, is the intermixing of drama and politics, a combination that, on reflection, seems entirely natural. In south India, drama is virtually absent from the historical record, although inscriptions and other texts do refer to specific titles and playwrights.

### Sanskrit

**Bhavabhuti** Following the high water mark of Sanskrit drama during the time of Kalidasa (5<sup>th</sup> c. CE), the tradition was ably continued by Bhavabhuti (7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> c. CE). Fortunately, three of his plays have come down to us in more or less complete form: 'Malati and Madhava', *Mahaviracarita* ('The Deeds of the Great Hero') and *Uttararamacarita* ('The Later Deeds of Rama'). The first of these is a melodramatic story, full of incident and terror, in which a heroine is repeatedly rescued from death. The other two texts rework the Rama story. Critics judge Bhavabhuti as inferior to other dramatists of this period in terms of plot and characterisation, while at the same time praising his ability to express sorrow and loss.

**Visakhadatta** Visakhadatta (6<sup>th</sup> c. CE?) wrote plays about politics, although only one entire play and fragments of another have survived. The partial text (*Devichandragupta*, 'The Queen and Chandra Gupta') is an ambitious attempt to tell the story of Chandra Gupta II and his rise to power in the 4<sup>th</sup> c. BCE. The other, complete play is the justly famous *Mudraraksasa* ('The Minister's Signet Ring'), which focuses on high-drama intrigue during the same historical period.

**Minister's Signet Ring** The complex plot of this play begins with a plan to overthrow the fourth-century CE Nanda dynasty and put a Maurya king on the throne. The plotters are successful and divide up the kingdom among themselves, but one key figure is soon poisoned to death, leaving his son to take his place. Now, a minister of the defeated dynasty plots with the son to reclaim the lost territories. The coup gains strength from its alliance with the kings of Persia, Kashmir and Sind, but they are foiled by the clever minister of the Mauryas, who persuades the son to rejoin his side.

**Historicity** The convoluted plot of the *Mudraraksasa* does appear to describe historical events that took place about a thousand years before it was written. Indian and Greek sources tell a roughly similar story of political intrigue, including the usurpation of the Nandas by the Mauryas, and warfare between the Mauryas and the smaller kingdoms in northwest India, which were formed after the departure of Alexander the Great. Here again, we see evidence that Greek tradition may have influenced classical Indian drama.

**King Harsha** Politics and drama combined once again in the figure of Harsha, who was both king and playwright. After the fall of the Gupta Empire (4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> c. CE), which patronised much of classical Indian culture, central and north India fragmented into small kingdoms. But then in the early seventh century, Harsha gained control of most of the subcontinent, excluding south India.

**Playwright Harsha** Three plays are ascribed to Harsha, although they may all be the work of a 'ghost' writer. *Ratnavali* and *Priyadarsika* are both comedies based on the lives of the ladies of the harem, in which the eponymous

heroines display wit and charm through banter. The third play, *Nagananda* ('Joy of the Serpents'), is a religious story in which a prince gives his own life in order to stop the sacrifice of snakes to Garuda, a divine bird.

**Decline** With these three literary figures, the legacy of Kalidasa lingered for several centuries, but without further genius eventually declined. Toward the end of the early postclassical period, Bhatta Narayana (8<sup>th</sup> c. CE?), Murari (9<sup>th</sup> c. CE), Rajasekhara (10<sup>th</sup> c. CE) and Krsnamisra (10<sup>th</sup> c. CE) all continued to write plays, though the dialogue became stilted, the language more and more literary and the texts intended for reading rather than performance. With the advent of Muslim rule in north India, from about 1000 CE, Sanskrit drama became a thing of the past.

### Tamil

**Mattavilasa** *Mattavilasa* ('Drunkards' Gest') is the only Tamil drama that survives from this period. It is a one-act play written by Mahendravarman I, a Pallava king of south India (c. 7<sup>th</sup> c. CE). It is a delightful farce, parodying both Hindu and Buddhist ascetics at a time when conflict between these two sects often resulted in violence. In the play, at least, a drunken Hindu mendicant uses a human skull to drink wine, as well as to collect alms. When it goes missing, he accuses his Buddhist counterpart of stealing it, prompting a series of humorous satirical dialogues. In the end, of course, the dog took the bowl.

**Lost plays** Tamil literary tradition and inscriptions tell us that dramas were produced and performed during this period, although no text, not even in fragments, survives. One frequently mentioned play is *Pumpuliyurnatakam* ('Play of Pumpuliyur'), which appears to be a religious play set in the fictional town of Pumpuli. Another is *Rjarajesvaranatakam* ('Play of Rajarajesvara') written by Narayana Bhattitayar in the late 9<sup>th</sup> c. CE. The story is based on the life of the famous Chola king Raja Rajesvara and his construction of the temple at his capital, Tanjore.

### Questions

1. While Kalidasa's successors have generally been regarded as less skilled than the master, others have suggested that this judgement is simply a cliché and not borne out by close textual analysis. Compare one of the later dramas mentioned in this article with one of Kalidasa's dramas and make your judgement.
2. Although the genre of drama (*natakam*) has a long textual history in Tamil, and several inscriptions and commentaries mention plays, no text (with the exception of a single one-act play) has survived from this period. This poses the question of how literary memory functions in the absence of raw material. Consider, for instance, a Shakespearean tradition based entirely on secondary sources.

### Reading

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## Late Postclassical Drama

### Overview

**Decline** Following the high water mark of Indian drama represented by Kalidasa, his contemporaries and his successors (4<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> c. CE), this form of writing seems to disappear from Indian literature. There is no doubt that classical Sanskrit drama never recovered from its Golden Age during the Gupta Empire, and this can be probably be explained by two inter-related factors. First, there was the loss of royal patronage at court, not only because the Gupta Empire fragmented but also because the successor Muslim courts did not promote drama. Second, the dominance of devotionism (*bhakti*) during this period, especially as sung poetry and music, pushed other performance styles, like drama, to the side-lines, even in Hindu courts.

**Exceptions** However, this verdict of the death of drama is somewhat exaggerated. While the diminution of courtly performance in north India is incontestable, one tradition in south India, the *kutiyattam* tradition in Kerala, flourished. It is also true that other forms of more provincial drama continued to develop in both north and south India. Although no play texts survive from the period, contemporaneous literary references and twentieth-century documentation enable us to reconstruct the beginnings of these more provincial drama traditions. In north India, these emerging drama traditions include Ram Lila and Nautanki, while in south India, they include Kathakali, Yakshagana and Terukkuttu.

### Kerala

**Kutiyattam** While north India experienced the beginnings of Muslim rule, and much of south India was overwhelmed by devotionism, one region of the south continued to perform Sanskrit drama. *Kutiyattam* is a drama of medieval Kerala combining classical Sanskrit models with innovations from Malayali playwrights. One of its chief characteristics is that it was performed in temple compounds, using elaborate costumes, face paint and unusual percussion instruments. The term *kuti-yattam* means 'acting/dancing together' and apparently refers to the fact that the actors were both men from the Chakkyar caste and women from the Nampiar caste.

**Beginnings** Ancient Tamil poetry (Sangam) and temple inscriptions (from the early centuries of the Christian era) mention *kutiyattam* and provide a few details about patrons and performance. However, we have no textual or material evidence before 1000 CE that establish the presence of *kutiyattam*.

**Repertoire** The repertoire of *kutiyattam* includes revised versions of Kalidasa's and other classical playwrights' texts, as well as plays written for this drama form. These locally produced plays include some of the earliest drama texts in Indian literary history. They are *Kalyanasaugandhika* by Nilakanthakavi, and *Subhadradhananjaya* and *Tapatisamvarana* by KulasekharaVarman, all dated to the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> century CE. Most *kutiyattam* plays draw on the Rama story for inspiration, and tend to focus on either Ravana (the demon king) or Sita (Rama's wife) rather than on Rama himself.

**Abandonment of Sita** This emphasis is illustrated by a play, still performed today, called *SitaPratiyagam* ('Abandonment of Sita'). After Sita is rescued from Ravana, rumours of a love relationship between captor and captive spread. Lacking belief in the fidelity of his wife, Rama submits to pressure and abandons her in the forest, where she gives birth to two sons. Husband and wife are reunited, but Rama demands that she undergo a trial by fire. In despair, Sita asks the Earth goddess to accept her, and despite Rama's protestations, the Earth opens up and receives her.

**KulasekharaVarman** KulasekharaVarman (late 10<sup>th</sup> or early 11<sup>th</sup> c. CE) was a king in the Chera dynasty that ruled the southwest coastal region of India, known as Chera (Kerala). He was not just a playwright but also a stage director, who introduced the practice of using both a play text (*granthapatha*) and a performance text (*rangapatha*). He also introduced the technique of *nirvahana* (summarising the play's plot by an actor) and codified the repertoire of eye movements for expressing emotions. Finally, he promoted the element of dance (*attam*) over pure acting (*abhinaya*).

**Language** While the early plays used Sanskrit only, by the 13<sup>th</sup> century CE they were written in a combination of Sanskrit and Malayalam (the regional language). In this innovation, the stage manager or Nampiar (a stock character) spoke to the audience in Malayalam to introduce and later comment on the action. However, since Malayalam had not yet evolved into a separate language from Tamil, the language of the stage manager was actually called *Nampiar Tamil*.

**Manuals** Malayalam was also used to write manuals for the actors. One of these (*attaparakara*) explains what an actor should do to interpret and enact the verses and the prose sequences. A second manual (*kramadipika*) provides details for make-up, costumes and props. Fortunately, for scholars, these manuals have survived in manuscript form.

**Temple theatre** Although we believe that these Kerala plays were originally performed in temples, we have no supporting archaeological evidence for this until the 15<sup>th</sup> century CE. A temple theatre (*kuttampalam*) is in fact a covered, open-air hall that is divided into two halves: one for the acting and one for the audience. The oldest theatre, which is still standing at the Vadakkunnathan temple in the town of Trichur, is believed to date from 700 CE

### Questions/Discussion

1. What accounts for the presence of a flourishing classical drama tradition in Kerala at a time when it had vanished elsewhere in India?
2. *Kutiyattam* is still performed today, more than a thousand years since its inception, but it is much changed and largely intended for a tourist audience. It receives funds from the UNESCO cultural heritage programme, which some people see as fossilisation rather than protection.

### Reading

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