

# INDIAN THEATRE

Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

**Genre** Theatre traditions in India usually combine dance and story, which is why classical forms of dance and drama are both known as *natya*. Although classical Sanskrit drama is now all but extinct, there are several vibrant regional forms that combine dance and drama. Many of these dance-drama traditions, generally known as *nataka* (in north India) and *natakam* (in the south), are still performed today. Shadow puppetry was popular but is now in decline, while modern theatre has yet to establish a firm foothold in today's India.

**Sanskrit** Classical Sanskrit drama survives in fragments of a play by Asvaghosa (c. 100 CE), although two texts, the *Mahabhasya* ('The Great Commentary') and the *Nāṭyaśāstra* ('A Treatise on Theatre') from the same period provide evidence of a developed drama form. The earliest extant complete plays are those by Bhasa, Sudraka and Kalidasa (5<sup>th</sup> c. CE or earlier).

## South

**Kathakali** Perhaps the best-known current dance-drama tradition is Kathakali, whose very name ('story-play') indicates its combination of movement and narrative. This tradition, which began in 17<sup>th</sup> c. CE Kerala, enacts stories from the myths and epics in an elaborate spectacle of colour and music. The all-male actors, accompanied by large drums, use stylised costumes, magnificent headdresses and make-up (as distinct as masks) to portray stereotyped characters. They do not speak, however, but rather communicate through a highly sophisticated vocabulary of gestures and facial expressions. Kathakali's once-traditional overnight, open-air and free performances have now been telescoped into a two- or three-hour ticketed event in a large hall.

**Teyyam** Teyyam, on the southwest coast of India, is closely related to Kathakali. It, too, uses a balance of dance and story, percussive instruments, make-up and elaborate headdresses. Even the gestural language is derived from Kathakali. The chief differences lie in context and therefore function. While Kathakali was performed largely as court entertainment, Teyyam is a rural form whose ritualistic performance involves spirit possession and priests.

**Yakshagana** Closely related to both Teyyam and Kathakali is a third tradition known as Yakshagana. It contains all the elements mentioned above, crucially the balance of movement and storytelling. And like Teyyam, and in contrast to Kathakali, Yakshagana is a village-based form with a strong ritual foundation. Yakshagana is performed in southwest Karnataka, geographically close to the other two traditions. These three traditions thus represent a distinct form of dance-drama on the southwest coast of India.

**Teru Kuttu** Another south Indian theatre tradition, but this time in Tamil Nadu on the east coast, is Teru Kuttu ('Street Play'). Teru Kuttu also differs from those mentioned above in that storytelling is more important than dance, and prose dialogue is used instead of verse. Like Teyyam, however, it is performed by itinerant troupes patronised by small temple or village communities, and the actors' costumes resemble those of Kathakali and Yakshagana. Teru Kuttu plays are dominated by stories from the *Mahabharata*, whose main female character (Draupadi) is a local goddess in many temples in the area. A week-long festival at these temples will often include a series of Teru Kuttu performances, particularly those in which Draupadi is disrobed and then gambled away in a dice game. As with other ritual performances at the local level, Teru Kuttu induces spirit possession in the actors and audience.

## North

**Ram Lila** Storytelling also dominates most major theatre forms in north India, the most famous of which is Ram Lila. The term *lila* has the same range of meanings as the English 'play' and connotes not only theatre but also amusement, spontaneity and frivolity. Although the 'Play of Rama' is adapted from the Hindi *Ramcaritmanas* by Tulsi Das (16<sup>th</sup> c. CE), it embraces various types of performance, from a day-long procession to a month-long series of overnight events. Here, too, as with many dance-dramas, masks are worn to indicate specific characters, and the memorised verses are spoken by non-professional actors. In contrast with most of the southern traditions, Ram Lila has been recently elevated to something like a court tradition by the patronage of hereditary rajas in Varanasi.

**Pandav Lila** Pandav Lila is a dance-drama tradition in Garhwal, in the foothills of the Himalayas. It takes its story from the *Bhagavad Gita*, when Krishna instructs Arjuna about the duty of a warrior. It enacts this dramatic story with all-night performances, mixing dialogue with dance in a powerfully charged ritual context. Like Teru Kuttu, Teyyam and Yakshagana, Pandav Lila is a folk tradition without courtly patronage.

**Nautanki** Nautanki is a north Indian secular form of theatrical entertainment. In this respect it typifies a large number of rural traditions that combine songs and instrumental music with erotic dancing by female actors and transvestites. However, Nautanki has a syncretic Indo-Muslim character (especially in its Urdu songs) that contrasts sharply with the Hindu religious content of both Ram Lila and Pandav Lila.

## Other

**Shadow Puppetry** One form of Indian theatre without human actors is shadow puppetry. Found in six traditions in south and central India, shadow puppet performances are dominated by complex narratives, typically based on the Rama story. During all-night performances, puppeteers deliver verse and prose narration while manipulating the puppets. Most traditions were performed for entertainment, although the Kerala tradition is still deeply religious. Today audiences are declining and some traditions are on the endangered list. The origin of Indian shadow puppetry is unknown, although some connection with Greek and Turkish traditions seems probable.

**Modern Theatre** Modern theatre, on the western model with a proscenium arch, was introduced during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. *Othello* was staged in Calcutta in the 1840s and that city has been a centre for modern theatre ever since. During the middle decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, political parties, especially communist parties, used modern theatre (and folk theatre) to communicate with large crowds. However, modern theatre has never been a major art form in India, perhaps because entertainment in a combination of speech, story, song, music and movement is supplied by the cinema.

## Reading

Farley Richmond, Farley, Darius Swann and Philip Zarrilli. *Indian Theatre: Traditions of Performance* (Hawaii, 1990)

Anuradha Kapur, *Actors, Pilgrims, Kings and Gods. The Ramlila at Ramnagar* (Seagull, 1990)

Philip Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text: Performing the Ramcaritmanas of Tulsidas* (California, 1991)

J.R. Freeman, Gods, groves and the culture of nature in Kerala. *Modern Asian Studies* 33: 257–302 (May 1999)

Wayne Ashely, The teyyam kettu of northern Kerala. *The Drama Review* 23: 99–112 (June 1979)

Stuart Blackburn, *Inside the Drama-House: Rama Story as Shadow Puppets in south India* (California, 1996)

Richard Frasca, *Theatre of the Mahabharata: Terukkuttu Performances in South India* (Hawaii, 1990)

William S. Sax, *Dancing the Self: Personhood and Performance in the Pandav Lila of Garhwal* (Oxford, 2002)

Martha Bush Ashton, *Yakshagana (Abhinav, 2002)*

Alf Hiltebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadi*, 2 vols. (Chicago, 1988, 1991)

Kathryn Hansen, *Grounds for Play: The Nautanki Theatre of North India* (California, 1991)

## Discussion questions

Locate the position of dance-drama in the spectrum of Indian arts by an analysis of its formal elements: visual, kinetic, narrative, song, instrumental music. Compare this combination of formal elements with those in other art forms—dance, classical drama, painting, sculpture, literature, cinema, classical music concerts. How does the combination of these five elements contribute to the popularity of the dance-drama?

Analyse the historical development of Kathakali, Ram Lila or Teru Kuttu (the three traditions with sufficient published research). Explain why this particular form emerged where and when it did. Consider patrons, artists and audiences.

Analyse dance-drama in India by comparing it with a similar tradition in another culture, such as the Peking opera, Japanese kabuki or Javanese topeng. Describe and compare formal elements, cultural status and social function.

The history of shadow puppetry in India is not well documented, largely because this was and still is a local, albeit complex tradition. One of mysteries concerns the relationship between the various international forms of puppetry: Indian, Turkish, Chinese, Thai, Cambodia, Malaysian, Javanese and Balinese. Describe and then assess the various theories explaining the spread of shadow puppetry. Did Indian forms influence those in Southeast Asia? Are the Indian forms derived from Turkey? Having described these possibilities, then build an argument for the one that is the most convincing.