

INDIAN DRAMA – Early Modern Period

Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

Overview

Although India never again produced drama that rivalled classical Sanskrit theatre, this period generated a variety of interesting forms. Three trends can be identified. First, in the absence of patronage at the Muslim courts, drama moved from the palace to the temple. Second, in doing so, particularly in south India, it became more ritual performance than textual enactment. And third, again in south India there was the emergence of drama (and other literary forms) at minor courts of the Nayak kings during the 16th to 18th centuries. In these turbulent times of European advance and Muslim retreat, these new drama forms, often composed in a mixture of Tamil, Telugu, Marathi and Sanskrit, were satirical, with a good deal of farce.

North India

Ram Lila Based on the text of Tulsidas's *Ramayana* (16th c. CE), Ram Lila ('Play of Rama'; *lila* carries both meanings of the English 'play,' plus a connotation of divine play) is a hugely popular drama that is still performed annually throughout the Hindi-speaking regions of north India. With elaborate costumes, it is staged outdoors over a series of nights, typically ten, though in Varnasi it stretches to 31. Dialogue is minimal, and reciters are used to chant verses from the Hindi text. Although we have no reliable evidence prior to observations by Europeans in the 19th century, it seems reasonable to assume that the Ram Lila formed sometime in the 17th century and

Pandava Lila Another popular drama in north India is Pandava Lila, which takes its name from the five Pandava brothers, protagonists of the other great epic of the *Mahabharata*. Unlike Ram Lila, however, it is written and performed in the Garhwali language spoken in the mountainous region of Garhwal. Performances are temple rituals loosely based on textual versions of the epic, and different villages focus on different episodes in the epic story. It, too, appears to have emerged sometime in the period between 1600-1800 CE.

Nautanki Unlike the preceding two traditions, Nautanki is a secular theatre tradition, drawing on popular tales from Hindu and Muslim traditions. Dialogue is usually in Hindi, while libretti are often in Urdu. There is a strong satirical strain in the plays of Nautanki, as revealed by its original name of *svang* ('impersonation', 'mime'). As with the other north Indian theatres of this time, its history is poorly documented, although most scholars believe it coalesced into its present form sometime around 1600 CE.

South India

Terukkuttu As in the north, south India a popular theatre form based on the *Mahabharata*. Terukkuttu ('Street Theatre') is a ritualised enactment of episodes from Tamil versions of the epic text. The plays, which are performed over a series of nights (from one to 18), focus specifically on the character of Draupadi, the wronged wife of one of the Pandava brothers, and are performed in temples dedicated to her. Again, song dominates over dialogue.

Tolpava Kuttu Tolpavu Kuttu ('leather puppet play') is a traditional shadow puppet play based very closely on the Tamil *Ramayana* (12th c. CE). It is performed over a number of nights (typically 8 to 41) in certain temples on the border between Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The puppeteers memorise and recite thousands of verses from the medieval text, while peppering their all-night performances with humorous banter.

Kathakali Kathakali ('Story-drama') is a highly sophisticated theatre, or opera, performed in central Kerala. One of several related drama forms found on this southwest coast region, it consists of a number of plays written in a Malayalam heavily influenced by Sanskrit and dating from the late 16th century and early 17th century CE. Sanskrit verses recited by vocalists explain the action, while the actors, in elaborate costumes and face paint, 'speak' the dialogue by dance, gesture and eye movement.

Teyyam Further up the northern coast of Kerala, Teyyam is another ritualised drama form that we can trace back to this period. Like Kathakali, from which it is surely derived, it uses elaborate costumes, especially headgear, face paint and the language of gesture. It is a heavily ritualised form, performed only in temple compounds, and involves intense spirit possession.

Yakshagana Similar in performance mode, but not textual base, Yakshagana is a theatre form performed in the Kannada- and Telugu-speaking areas of south India. The Telugu tradition, which emerged in minor courts during this period, employs a high-literary Telugu (mixed with Sanskrit) to create plays ostensibly devotional but laced with mockery, usually directed at Brahmins. The Kannada tradition, which uses stories from the epics, is more serious, ritual theatre performed in temple precincts.

Kuravanci Another largely parodic theatre form of south India is Kuravanci ('Play of the Fortune-Teller Lady'). This text-based Tamil theatre arose in the eighteenth century in the courts of noblemen and temple festivals. Fortunately, we can date the first play, the *Kuttrala Kuravanci*, to 1718. Like most of these early modern drama forms, singing dominates over dialogue, although there is a more or less fixed plot. A tribal fortune-teller woman pines for her high-born lover and sings of the beauty of her hilly homeland. Her bird-catcher husband tries to find her, and the tribal couple are reunited, but not before all the characters, from tribesman to king, are made the object of satire.

Nonti Natakam Nonti Natakam ('The Gimp's Play') is yet another popular and satirical drama that appeared during this period in the Tamil country. Scholars date the first texts to the late 17th or early 18th century and pinpoint the action to the large city of Madurai. The play is narrated by a one-legged thief who is cheated out of his ill-begotten gains by a courtesan. Forced to steal to replenish his funds, he grabs a king's horse but is punished by amputation. A holy man sends him to a temple, where a god restores his missing limb (possibly a hint of Christian influence). Despite the devotional overtones, and as with other dramas of the time, it has elements of farce and parody.

Cavittu Natakam Cavittu Natakam ('Stamping Play') is a unique form of drama that arose during the latter half of the sixteenth century in Kerala among the region's recently-arrived Christian community. While it draws on local drama traditions in its theatrical elements (a stage manager, for example, who comments on and translates the action), the stories are biblical. Plays of Charlemagne and of St. George are performed on feast days, at weddings and other major events by the Catholic community of Kerala.

Questions/Discussion

1. Many of the drama traditions that arose or took final shape in the early modern period involve satire, parody or farce, or all three. Some cultural historians have explained this as a response to the fragmentation and new ethnic mix of society during this period (see Narayana Rao et al, below). Even if this is not a simple one-to-one causal relation, can we explain literary history by reference to such macro cultural history?
2. There is very little evidence that Muslim courts, either of the opulent Mughal Emperors or the smaller kingdoms in the Deccan, patronised drama. Some scholars have challenged this, repeating the mantra that 'absence of evidence is not evidence of absence,' and indeed there are creditable references to Akbar hosting some kind of drama at his court. A future ground-breaking study of the hidden theatre at the Muslim courts is not unlikely.

Reading

Anuradha Kapur, *Actors, Pilgrims, Kings and Gods: The Ramlila of Ramnagar* (Seagull, 2006)

James R. Brandon, Martin Banham (eds.), *The Cambridge Guide to Asian Theatre* (Cambridge, 1997)

Philip Zarrilli, *The Kathakali Complex: Performance & Structure* (Abhinav, 1984)

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

Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Symbols of Substance: Court and State in Nāyaka period Tamilnadu* (Oxford, 1992)

Texts

1. From *Kuttrala Kuravanci*, trans. Lakshmi Holmstrom, 2009

There courting monkeys gather fruit and offer them as gifts,
And heavenly poets beg for fruit that the monkey couples scatter.
There passing hunters gaze upwards inviting the gods to descend.
Venerable saints come there to tend their herbs and rare plants,
Where water rears up from sweet streams, reach skyward and pour down,
While the sun-god's chariot wheels and horse's hoofs slip on the spray,

Our mountain belongs to the god who wears the crescent in his hair.

2. From *Bhisma Vijaya* (Yakshagana), trans. Shivarama Karnath, 1997

[Two persons appear on stage holding a curtain. From behind the curtain a mask of Ganesh peeps at the audience. Two women dance and offer prayers to Ganesh, remover of obstacles.]

[palace of a king]

King: Listen to me, minister. It is not a lie. I am very worried. My daughter, now beautiful and young in age, is ready for marriage. Invite the kings, send them letters, let my daughter select a husband.

[Another king is addressed by a servant]

Oh, king. The king of Kashi has sent letters to kings everywhere, to come and win his daughter in a fight. But you, who are brave and who do not care for anyone, neither on earth or in heaven, you have been done a great injustice. You are not invited.