

42. THE TRADITION OF DRAMA AND THEATRE IN INDIA

The study of drama is half literary and half sociological because drama comes in direct contact with the people, literate as well as illiterate, through stage production. The role of the audience is an important factor. Drama in India has had a rich and glorious tradition. It began its journey with the Sanskrit plays. Indian tradition, preserved in the *Natyasastra*, the oldest of the texts of the theory of the drama, claims for the drama divine origin, and a close connection with the sacred Vedas themselves. The origin of the Indian theatre is still obscure. It is certain, however, that even in the Vedic period dramatic performances of some kind were given, and passing references in early sources point to the enactment at festivals of religious legends, perhaps only in dance and mime. The surviving Sanskrit dramas are numerous and varied, ranging from short one-act playlets to very long plays in ten Acts. The chief dramatists were Asvaghosa, Bhasa, Kalidas, Bhavabhuti and Sudrak. Tragedies like *Urubhanga*, romances like *Abhijnana-sakuntalam*, and historical plays like *Mudrarakshas* form an imperishable part of our literary heritage.

All literature in Sanskrit is classified into *Drishya* (that can be seen or exhibited) and the *Sravya* (that can be heard or recited). While poetry in all forms can be said to fall under the latter, drama falls under the former. Drama in Sanskrit literature is covered under the broad umbrella of '*rupaka*' which means depiction of life in its various aspects represented in 'forms' by actors, who assume various roles. A '*rupaka*' has ten classifications of which '*Nataka*' (drama), the most important one has come to mean all dramatic presentations. The Sanskrit drama grows around three primary constituents, namely, *Vastu* (plot), *Neta* (hero) and *Rasa* (sentiment). The plot could be either principal (*adhikarika*) or

accessory (*prasangika*). The former concerns the primary characters of the theme and pervades the entire play. The latter serves to further and supplement the main topic, and relates to subordinate characters other than the chief ones. This is further divided into banner (*pataka*), and incident (*parkari*). The former is a small episode that presents describes, improves or even hinders the primary plot to create added excitement. The latter involves minor incident represented by minor characters.

The *Neta* or the hero, according to the definition prescribed by the *Natyashastra*, is always depicted as modest (*vineeta*), sweet-tempered (*madhura*), sacrificing (*tyagi*), capable (*daksha*), civil in talks (*priyamvada*), belonging to a noble family (*taktaloka*), pure (*suchi*), articulate (*vagmi*), consistent (*sthira*), young (*yuva*), endowed with intellect (*buddhi*), enthusiasm (*utsaha*), good memory (*smriti*), aesthetics (*kala*), pride (*maana*), brave (*shura*), strong (*dridha*), energetic (*tejaswi*), learned (*pandita*) and pious (*dharmika*). The main category in which the hero of Sanskrit drama normally falls is the '*Dheerodatta*' that is he who is brave and sublime at the same time. The *Rasa* or sentiment is the lasting impression which appeals to poetic sensibility, arising out of any emotion of pleasure or pain pervading the heart. The primary sentiment is nourished and excited by subordinate and related feelings. There are nine primary emotions, namely '*rati*' (enjoyment), '*hasa*' (mirth), '*soka*' (grief), '*krodha*' (anger), '*utsaha*' (enthusiasm), '*bhaya*' (fear), '*jugupasa*' (disgust) '*vismaya*, (surprise) and '*sama*' (peace). On these emotions are based respectively the well-known *Navarasas* (nine primary sentiments) of '*sringaga*' (erotic), '*hasya*' (comic), '*karuna*' (pathos), '*rudra*' (fury), '*veera*' (heroic), '*bhayanaka*' (fearsome), '*beeabhatsa*' (loathsome), '*adbhuta*' (wonder) and '*santa*' (tranquil). *Sringara* or the erotic is the chief *rasa* in plays like *Abhijnana-Sakuntalam*, *Vikramorvasiyam*, and *Malavikagni-mitram* of Kalidas and *Swapanavasavadattam* of Bhasa. *Karuna* or pathos is the chief sentiment in *Uttararamacharita* of Bhavabhuti, *Veera* or the heroic is the pervading *rasa* in *Venisamhara* and *Mudrarakshasa* of Visakhadatta.

Each play consists structurally of a prologue introduced by an invocation and a formal ushering in of the plot and author, by the *Sutradhara*. This is followed by the theme presented in equally divided parts of five or ten acts. Every act is concluded by the exit of all the characters and the stage is left empty. Incidents like journeys, killings wars etc. are never enacted, but are only suggested. It is important to note that "Sanskrit drama never offers tragedy unlike many of the Shakespearean plays." While all emotions including grief, terror and disgust are depicted the Sanskrit drama never allows a tragic catastrophe to cause a painful impression in the minds of the audience. As **Sri Aurobindo** argues in *Hindu Drama*: "*to the Hindu it would have seemed a savage and inhuman spirit that could take any aesthetic pleasure in the sufferings of an Oedipus or a Duchesse of Malfi or in the tragedy of Macbeth or an Othello.*"

It is evident that a drama with a tragic end has never been popular in India. Sri Aurobindo exhibits the spirit of Indian drama in these words: 'An atmosphere of romantic beauty, a high urbanity and a gracious equipoise of the feelings, a perpetual confidence, is the sunshine and the flowers are the essential spirit of Hindu play: pity and terror are used to awaken the feelings, but not to lacerate them, and the drama must close on the note of joy and peace: the clouds are only admitted to make more beautiful the glad sunlight from which all come and into which all must away.' It is obviously a matter that is closely related to the Indian attitudes and philosophy of life. The difference between Western and Indian thinking and traditional belief has been so great that the two artistic expressions could not but be different. A comparison between the two traditions takes us deep into the hearts of the two cultures. In the West 'evil' has been a positive thing, a force to be fought against or reckoned with whereas in India 'evil' is not a positive force; it does not stand on its own. It is just absence of 'good.' Darkness cannot exist unless there is light: rather darkness is the sure proof of the existence of light. It can be called the temporary absence of light. The moment light flashes, darkness disappears.