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Origins and Growth of Sanskrit Drama in India

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Abstract- There isn't an iota of doubt that Sanskrit drama has had a prosperous evolution and that it still paves the path for modern Indian dramaturgy. The origin of Sanskrit drama however is something that has been a matter of contention amongst scholars and critics. This paper tries to briefly delve into that debate and give and insight into various takes on the origins and growth of Sanskrit drama in India. This paper also tries to argue that Sanskrit drama was influenced from the epic tradition and is a product of that very tradition. It is for this very reason that Sanskrit drama is seen as a subdivision of the Kavya.

Keywords- Sanskrit, Drama, Natyashastra, Epic, Kavya

Everything has a beginning, so does Sanskrit drama. However, the origin of Sanskrit drama has always been a matter of debate amongst Sanskrit scholars and critics. The earliest and most authoritative work on Sanskrit drama is supposed to be Bharata's Natyashastra. For Bharata, drama has two beginnings, first in the divine and second in the mortal world¹. The initial chapters of Natyashastra claim a divine origin of Sanskrit drama. However, some scholars are of the opinion that the entire account is a fabricated one and the contents seem to have been re-worked again and again.²

It mentions that Indira approached Brahma to create a mode of recreation which was accessible to people across different caste and class. So, Brahma decided to create the fifth Veda on Natya by using the existing four Vedas. He used text from Rigveda, music from Samaveda, action from Yajurveda and rasa from Atharvaveda. Indira however, expressed that the Gods' wouldn't be able to perform the play. Brahma entrusted the task to Bharata along with his hundred sons. Later Brahma created nymphs as Bharata did not have female

¹ Jagirdar, Drama in Sanskrit Literature, pg-20

² Shekhar, Sanskrit Drama and its Decline, Chapter- 4

artists for certain roles. The first play to be made was "The defeat of the demons." The demons objected to it and hence, the open fields of Indra were walled on all sides. Later Brahma had to take the task of pacifying the demons by explaining them the purpose of drama. He said that everyone would find in drama as per their need. There is a unique coming together of reason with recreation, knowledge with attraction, and morality with beauty which is very rare.

Such an account has always raised serious debates among scholars. Some tend to dismiss it as merely a fantastical one and of no historical value. Whereas, some believe history in the earlier days can't be expected to have been written in the way it is written today.

Some of the scholars have suggested that Sanskrit drama was influenced by the Greek drama. They draw connections between various aspects of Sanskrit drama which are quite similar to that of the Greek dramatic conventions. Professor Weber and Professor Windisch suggested this possibility based on the similarities between the epic elements present in both Greek and Sanskrit drama. Moreover, the theory of Mimesis, the way the heroic and the mythic figures are introduced, the division of the scenes, they all seem to be running parallel to the Greek drama. Further, it was argued that the first Sanskrit drama was produced at a time when the influence of Greek was at its peak.

Another Professor Levi argued that Sanskrit drama developed during the rule of Sakas. He bases his argument on certain inscriptional evidences which use Sanskrit instead of Prakrit. It could be true that Sanskrit saw a revival during the Sakas, but the drama doesn't seem to be showing any influence of the Sakas. Moreover, certain words which Levi and others use as evidences to back their arguments, have no mention at all in the Natyashastra.

It can then be said that Sanskrit drama was influenced from the epic tradition and is a product of that very tradition. It is for this very reason that Sanskrit drama is seen as a subdivision of the Kavya.

Most of the dramatists were overpowered by the influence of poetry, and this was reflected in their works. Sanskrit plays abound in poetic imagery and delight the readers in the same way as poetry does. The influence of Kavya is so strong that many writers such as Dandin and Bhamaha refrain from acknowledging drama as a form separate from poetry. In Sanskrit drama, the poet and the dramatist seem to be merging into one another, bringing together the elements of Kavya and Natya.

Of all the elements of Sanskrit poetics and drama, the theory of Rasa is perhaps the most important one. The theory of rasa, due to its sheer originality, tends to bring down all the arguments which claim foreign/western influence on Sanskrit drama. For Bharata, Rasa was a crucial element, so much so, that he suggested that without it, no dramatic representation was possible.

Right from its infancy and evolution, Sanskrit drama co-opted the language of common folks, owing to the very purpose of drama i.e. recreation for all. Prakrit was used as the language of characters, except the brahmins and the other “cultured population.” This suggests the co-existence of Sanskrit and Prakrit in Sanskrit drama. The contribution and role of Prakrit in Sanskrit drama suggests that the “drama proper arose not in the priestly circles, but amongst the people of humble rank.”³

Sanskrit drama grew and flourished well in its time; however, it saw a decline later. Its ‘over dependence’ on the epic made the dramatist unwilling to produce new themes and original ideas. Most of them revisited the episodes of the earlier epics. The influence of epic poems and heavy borrowing in terms of description and narration became characteristic of drama. And this proved fatal for the dramatists as “they ignored the dramatic elements and aimed only at typifying morals.”⁴

Sanskrit drama owes a lot to poetry, early dramatists, in their conception of Sanskrit drama, brought the dramatic elements under the direct subordination of the poetic elements. Dramatists such as Bhasa and Kalidasa brought human pathos and a different vigour in their plays, that too without compromising on their poetic skills. However, later dramatists failed to do so as they focused more on style rather than human pathos. Unlike Bhasa and several others, they failed to display true human passion, and most importantly, the realistic element too was not present.

Sanskrit drama grew incorporating poetic images and a plethora of sentiments, but somewhere it compromised and failed to realise the importance of dramatic action, the element of characterisation, and realism. Thus, the forces which lead to the growth of Sanskrit drama, the decline of Sanskrit drama can be traced to those very forces. Sanskrit drama originated thousands of years ago, and owing to its sophistication, it remains a matter of serious study and research till date. The richness of Sanskrit drama lies in the fact that modern Indian drama

³ Shekhar, Growth and Origin of Sanskrit Drama, pg-128.

⁴ Shekhar, Growth and Origin of Sanskrit Drama, pg-168.

and theatre owes its foundations to Sanskrit drama. In its prosperous evolution, it still paves the path for modern Indian dramaturgy.

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