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## The Uniqueness of Sanskrit Dramas

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### Abstract

The Sanskrit dramas lure the rudiments of poetry and musical recitation, poetic imagination, emotions, etc. from the epics. Such elements of the dramaturgy have caused the creation of the Sanskrit drama. The theoreticians have articulated that drama is a composition that can evoke intellectual pleasure and is suitable for representation on the stage. The oldest work on dramaturgy, available at present, is the Nāṭyaśāstra of Bharata. The Sanskrit plays are lyrical and they are predominantly poetic. The poetic passion is more predominant than dramatic action. The incorporation of multiple languages, the dominance of poetic elements over dramatic action, and the inclusion of musical and dance components in subsidiary varieties showcase the multifaceted nature of Sanskrit dramas.

Keywords: Sanskrit dramas, Vedic, Nāṭyaśāstra, Ṛigveda,

### Origin of Drama

The origin of drama is generally traced to the Vedas. In the Ṛigveda, several interesting dialogues Viz., Yama and Yamī, Saramā and Paṇi, Purūravas and Ūrvasi are found. Seeds of many other aspects of Sanskrit drama such as enacting the roles of Gods, ceremonial dances, gestures, etc., are found in many of the rituals and sacrifices mentioned in the Vedas. But the Vedas are in the form of injunctions hence it is not easily comprehensible. Whereas the epics Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata convey the message of the Vedas in a more easily understandable manner.

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Sanskrit dramas draw the elements of poetry and musical recitation, poetic imagination, emotions, etc. from the epics. These elements of the dramaturgy paved the way for the creation of the Sanskrit drama. The dramas *Kaṃsavadha* and *Balibandha* are mentioned in the *Mahābhāṣya* of Patañjali (2 century B.C.) and derive their plots from the epics. Though these two plays are not available at present, we can have an idea of the existence of Sanskrit drama as a definite literary form even before the second century B.C.

The *Nāṭyaśāstra* of Bharata, a treatise on music, dance and drama, is the oldest work on dramaturgy, available at present. This work gives the following episode about the origin of the drama:

महेन्द्रप्रमुखैर्देवैरुक्तः किल पितामहः।  
क्रीडनीयमिच्छामो दृश्यं श्रव्यं च यद्भवेत्॥  
न वेदव्यवहारोऽयं संश्राव्यः शूद्रजातिषु।  
तस्मात् सृजापरं वेदं पञ्चमं सार्ववर्णिकम्॥  
नाट्यवेदं ततश्चक्रे चतुर्वेदाङ्गसम्भवम्।  
जग्राह पाठ्यमृगवेदात् सामभ्यो गीतमेव च।  
यजुर्वेदादभिनयान् रसानथर्वणादपि॥ (Natyasastra, 1.11-12)

The Gods, assembled, requested Brahma to compose a new Veda to give pleasure simultaneously to their eyes and ears of all classes of people alike. Thereupon, Brahma took the elements of dialogue from the *R̥gveda*, music from *Sāmaveda*, representation or gestures from *Yajurveda* and the sentiments and other technical aspects from *Atharvaveda* created a fifth Veda called *Natyaveda*.

Generally, the Sanskrit dramas fall under the *Dr̥śya Kāvya*s i.e., the *kāvya*s that can be seen. According to rhetoricians, a drama is a composition that can evoke intellectual pleasure and is suitable for representation on the stage. The oldest work on dramaturgy, available at present, is the *Nāṭyaśāstra* of Bharata. The Sanskrit dramas are called *Rupakas* and are classified into ten types.

#### Daśa Rūpakas

नाटकं सप्रकरणं भाणः प्रहसनं डिमः ।  
व्यायोगसमवाकारौ वीथ्यकेहामृगा दश ॥

*Nātaka* is a *rūpaka* which is divided into acts. The acts may vary from five to ten. It should contain five sandhis, and the *aṅgi* (prominent) *rasa* should be *śṛṅgāra* or *vīra*. The hero should be of *Udāta* type and there should be descriptions of *devatas* and *ṛṣis*.

*Prakaraṇa* also should be divided into 5 to 10 acts and contain five sandhis. It should be based on the life story of a *brāhmaṇa*, a merchant, or a minister. The main *rasa* should be *Śṛṅgāra*.

*Bhāṇa* is a monologue wherein the hero narrates dramatically a variety of incidents either to himself or to others. The plot is conceived by the poet and it should deal with love, war, fraud, and intrigue. *Śṛṅgāra* and *vīra* are the prominent *rasas*. It contains only two junctures – the opening and the concluding.

Prahasana is so-called because of the large amount of laughter it causes. It has no restriction of acts. Its subject matter is imaginary and it represents people of questionable characters. The hero is of a low character. The main sentiment is hāsya. It is of three kinds – regular, modified, and mixed. The parasites and hypocrites of society are ridiculed in Prahasana.

Dima is one in which the subject is well-known. The hero should be a God, a Yakṣa, a Rākṣasa, a serpent, or a goblin. It contains rasas other than hāsya and śṛṅgāra. The dominant sentiment is raudra.

Vyāyoga is a one-act play with a few female characters. The plot should be well-known and the hero should be of dhīrodātta type. He should not be a person with divine attributes. Adbhuta and raudra may be the main sentiments. Descriptions of battles, duels, attacks, counter-attacks, and exchange of insults of many men engaged in a struggle can be found in a Vyāyoga.

Samavakāra consists of four acts and a well-known story of devas and demons. Several subjects are mixed together in this type.

Vīthi is also a one-act play. It should be arranged with the employment of one character or two. The touch of śṛṅgāra is there.

Aṅka is a one-act play where the plot may be borrowed from the epic. Sometimes it may be well-known. The main sentiment is karuṇa. As there are lamentations of women who lost their dear ones in battles and dialogues expressing disgust, it can be reckoned as a play depicting the consequences of war.

Ihāmrga consists of four acts. Natyasastra defines it as उद्धतपुरुषप्रायः स्त्रीरोषग्रथितकाव्यबन्धश्च (20.82.3). Here, the hero is disappointed because he could not get his beloved. The plot is a mixed one. (Hero tries to gain a divine heroine who is as unattainable as a deer). The hero should be a dhīrodhātta.

Apart from these ten major types, the subsidiary varieties of Sanskrit drama, known as the uparūpakas sometimes give more importance to musical presentation. Vācika abhinaya or dialogues are given lesser importance in this type of rendition at times and attention is centered on the facial expression of the actors. Each word of the text is elaborately interpreted. Thus, uparūpakas focus on music and dance. Viśvanātha, the author of Sāhityadarpana recognizes around eighteen types of uparūpakas while according to Śāradātanaya there are twenty such forms.

In Sanskrit plays a mixture of languages can be seen. The heroes, kings, Brahmins, and men of high social rank speak in Sanskrit while the women and other less important characters speak in dialectical Prakrit. This diversity of language adds an element of realism to the play.

### **Characteristics of Sanskrit Dramas**

The majority of Sanskrit plays are lyrical and they are predominantly poetic. The poetic fervour is more predominant than dramatic action. Elaborate descriptions and long dialogues that are full of emotion are found in almost all the plays in Sanskrit. Further numerous stanzas in various meters poetically depict the reflections prompted by the various situations.

The plots of Sanskrit dramas are predominantly taken from the epics and occasionally from well-known historical episodes. Nature always takes a prominent place in the Sanskrit drama. The characters are surrounded by nature, which not only provides the romantic background but plays an integral part in the emotional side of the dramatic development and profoundly influences lovers' minds.

### **Nāndi and Prasthāvana or Āmukha**

In Sanskrit dramas, it is customary to begin with a benedictory verse called as Nāndi. This is followed by a prelude called prasthāvana or āmukha, in which Sūtradhāra (stage director) enacts a conversation with some other actor or actress through which the preliminary details of the play, the author and also a brief note on the personal history of the author is given.

The play proper follows next and it may be divided into acts and it is enacted on stage through dialogues, soliloquies, side comments, and regular stage directions for gesticulation.

### **Praveśaka**

Acts are connected by interludes called praveśaka and viṣkambhaka. In praveśaka, the dialogues are in Prakrit. Only low characters are employed in a Praveśaka and it may be presented in the form of announcements from behind the curtain, by actual indication of the succeeding event by the last outgoing character, called Aṅkasya, or by an unbroken continuity called Aṅkāvatara. The first act should have a Praveśaka.

### **Viṣkambhaka**

Śuddha and Miśra and the two types of Viṣkambhaka. While middle characters participate in Śuddhaviṣkambhaka and the dialogue is exclusively in Sanskrit, Miśraviṣkambhaka has both Sanskrit and Prakrit language used in the conversations.

### **Key Elements in a Sanskrit Drama**

Vastu (plot), Netā (hero), and Rasa (sentiment) are the three vital elements in a Sanskrit drama.

### **Vastu**

There are three different types of plots. For example, the Prakhyāta is the storyline that is well-known from ancient epics or history. On the other hand, the Utpādyā is the own creation of the poet, and the Miśra combines the two. The plot of the drama is carried on through five stages called sandhis Viz., mukhasandhi, pratimukha, garbhasandhi, avamarśasandhi and upasamhārasandhi.

### **Neta and Nayika**

There are four types of netas (heroes). They are Dhirodaatta, Dhiralalita, Dhiroddhata and Dhirasanta. Sublimity, amorous gaiety, tranquillity, and boisterousness are each other's particular qualities, yet fortitude and heroism are commonly found in all the Netas.

The nayikas (heroines) are classified into eight categories, viz. Vasakasajjika – one who is dressed up for union, Virahotkhandita – one who is distressed by the separation from her lover, Swadhinbhartka – has her husband under control, Kalahantarita – is separated from her husband by a quarrel, Khandhita – one who is enraged, Vipralabdha – one who is deceived, Prositabhartka – the one whose husband is on travel and Abhisarika – who due to her infatuation is attached to the lover and gives up modesty in going out to meet him.

### **Navarasas**

The Navarasas Viz., Sringara (love), Hasya (comic), Karuna (pathetic), Vira (heroic), Raudra (anger), Bhayanaka (fear), Bhibatsa (disgust), Adbhuta (wonder) and Santa (tranquil) must be employed in a Sanskrit drama. Sringara, Vira or Karuna may be the predominant rasa.

### **Styles**

Four different kinds of dramatic styles Viz., Kaisiki, Arabhati, Sattvati, and Bharati are prescribed in dramaturgy works to suit the various sentiments.

### **Vidushaka**

Vidushaka is the hero's friend who helps him in his romantic relationships. He plays an important role in the hero's love episodes. He is a Brahmin character who is always joked at. His sense of humour is usually low.

### **Tragedy**

Sanskrit dramaturgy does not allow unhappy endings. One of the most striking things about Sanskrit dramas is that there is no tragedy. In most cases, a sudden turn of events due to supernatural intervention converts the tragic episodes into a comedy by bringing about a happy end. Plays ending in the death of the hero and the major characters are not found in Sanskrit.

### **Bharatavakya**

Bharatavakya is a concluding stanza in most Sanskrit dramas. It is a tribute to Bharata, the architect of Indian dramaturgy.

### **Conclusion:**

Thus, the uniqueness of Sanskrit dramas lies in their deep roots in Vedic literature, particularly the Vedas and the epics like the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata, which serve as a rich source of inspiration. They act as a medium through which the Vedic ideals are conveyed to a layperson. The Nāṭyaśāstra of Bharata, the oldest extant work on dramaturgy, provides a comprehensive guide to the origin and development of Sanskrit drama, attributing its creation to the Lord Brahma himself. As a subtype of the Kāvya, Sanskrit dramas, known as Rupakas in Sanskrit, encompass a variety of forms. These include Nāṭaka, Prakaraṇa, Bhāṇa, Vyāyoga, Samavakāra, Ḍima, Ihāmrga, Aṅka, Vīthi, and Prahasana. The incorporation of multiple languages, the dominance of poetic elements over dramatic action, and the inclusion of musical and dance components in

subsidiary varieties showcase the multifaceted nature of Sanskrit dramas. The intricate plots, rich lyrical content and the integration of nature into the narrative contribute to the distinctive characteristics of these plays. Additionally, the presence of key elements such as Nāndī, Prasthāvana, Praveśaka, Viškambhaka, and the emphasis on Vastu, Netā, and Rasa further underline the sophistication and depth of Sanskrit dramaturgy. The absence of tragic endings, the classification of heroes and heroines, the utilization of Navarasas, and the inclusion of various styles contribute to the comprehensive and nuanced nature of Sanskrit dramas. In essence, the legacy of Sanskrit dramas remains as a unique and versatile form of literature and performance, characterized by its distinct rules, styles, and expressions.

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