

From
Ritual
to
Dance

The similarities between rituals and theatre notwithstanding, there are important differences. A ritual is sacred theatre whereas the theatre is secular ritual. The audiences of the two are also different. So are the spaces. The ritual is performed in the midst of the faithful members of a community; not so in the case of theatre. The spectator in theatre is motivated by the desire for amusement. Though both ritual and theatre happen in a space earmarked for the purpose, only the ritual space is considered sacred. Some vestiges of the sacred still exist in the theatre. In the course of its evolution, the theatre moved towards greater secularisation. Different theatres are at different stages of this process. The ancient Greek and Sanskrit theatres are still not very far from the sacred while the Elizabethan theatre has come a long way from the sacred, and the modern theatre is still further away.

Because the subject of this book is Indian traditional theatre, we have no occasion to go deep into the analysis of rituals. We can only attempt a brief survey of a handful of ritual theatres from different parts of India.

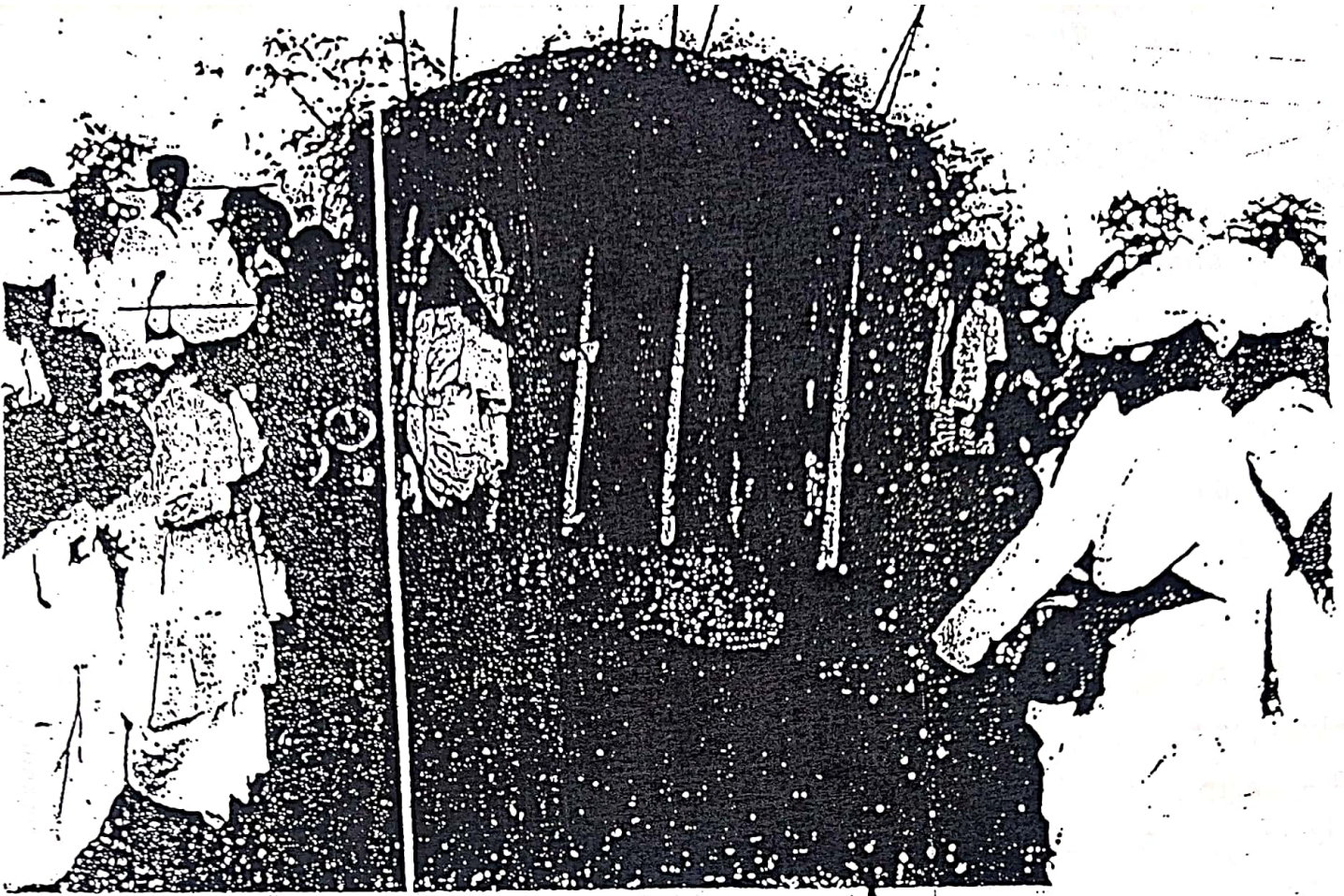
In Kerala and Tulunad and in the coastal districts of Karnataka, there is a popular form of ritual theatre called Teyyam in Malayalam and Bhootaradhane in Kannada. Though the upper caste participates, this form belongs predominantly to the exploited backward castes. It involves the worship of different categories of local deities —

RIGHT
Teyyam performance

the family deities, the village deities and the ancestral deities. The spirits of heroic men and women sacrificing their life for the community are also worshipped. In Karnataka these deities are called *bhootas*. This word stands today in Indian languages for ghosts or demons. But the Tulu for it is *booth*, which means 'God'. This points to the fact that the deities considered benevolent by local and tribal communities were identified with demons by the upper-caste Hindus. Later some of the most popular *bhootas* were identified with attendants of Shiva, the originally non-Aryan God later adopted into the upper-caste Hindu pantheon. One of the popular *bhootas* of Tulunad, Annappa, has become Shiva's attendant guarding the Dharmasthala Temple dedicated to Shiva. The Malayalam word, *teyyam* also means a 'demon'.

Bhootas are worshipped in the sacred spaces at the temples dedicated to them. The performers paint their faces like masks and wear headgears and costumes that appear to be the prototypes of Kathakali and Yakshagana — the two popular theatrical forms in this region. The performance is believed to bring happiness to the participants and fertility to the land. While narrators sing praises of the *bhoota*, the ritualistic actor dances them out. He often goes into a trance and establishes his communion with *bhootas*. He makes predictions for believers and often provides solutions to the problems. *Bhoota* performers also do the settling of legal disputes. *Teyyam* or *bhoota*-worship is very ancient. *Teyyam* is referred in Tamil Sangam literature to going back to the earliest period of Christian era but in the changing course of centuries, a lot of upper-caste features have been adopted.

A similar change can be seen in Nagamandala of Tulunad area and which is another primitive ritual theatre form going back to the earlier times. Nagas, the snake-deities, are popular all over India. Nagamandala is an elaborate ritual-theatre centering on snake worship and expected to bring health and prosperity to the people and fertility to the land. These days it is an elaborate and expensive ritual, which combines tribal and



Brahminical elements. It is financed by rich non-Brahmin castes of the region on the advice of Brahmin priests well-versed in ritual details. The ritual space is a special space where an elaborate *mandala* (sacred geometric pattern) symbolising a snake is drawn and worshipped with offering of plantains, tender coconuts and rice. The idols of all the important local deities are brought to the ritual area and offered special worship. The ritual takes place with the full attendance of local divinities. Vedic rituals like *Chandi-homa* are also performed. However, the culmination of rituals takes place with the fascinating snake dance performed by a trained Brahmin priest who invokes and personifies *naga yakshi*, the female attendant of the snake deity. This is accompanied by songs praising the exploits of the *nagas* and is sung to the accompaniment of a hand-drum. At the point of climax, the movements become extremely wild and assume conspicuous erotic suggestions. The ritual concludes with all the participants partaking the *prasadam*, the sacred offering.

Lai Haraoba is another fertility ritual popular in the region of Manipur. Though this ritual has many regional variations in Manipur, the type performed around Imphal — the Kangla Lai Haraoba, is regarded as the most comprehensive. It is performed either in the pre-agricultural season or in the pre-harvest months. It can last from seven days to a whole month. This complex ritual theatre has several acts. On the first day the priestess in trance gathers life-spirits from water via a raw thread passed through a pot hung on the neck of males. On the second day, the sleeping deities are awakened by the songs of minstrels, bathed and worshipped. Symbolic dances are performed to dramatise the creations, the cosmos and the human beings. Next, the minstrel sings lullabies to put the deity to sleep. The gods and the consorts are taken out in a palanquin for a hunt and feast. On the last day but one, a ritual drama is staged. Panthoibi, the cosmic-Creator, clears the jungle, disguised as Nurabi, a tribal woman. The women spectators become her colleagues in the exercise. They meet a hill-man who lays claim to the land. An elder settles the dispute that follows. The speeches involve a lot of jokes and banter with bawdy associations. This drama of rapprochement between male and female polarities is followed by intense oath-taking between gods and performers assuring each other of harmony. On the last day the ritual of cutting down trees is performed, followed by the song of creation, intended to remember the departed souls after the straying of elements during the festival. Thus the Manipuri ritual theatre of Lai Haraoba is an elaborate drama depicting how gods and human beings come together to produce benefits for the good of the community.

Lai Haraoba as a ritual theatre retains its pristine non-Aryan identity whereas those of Kerala and Tulu Nadu represent different degrees of amalgamation between different cultural identities. The Veeragase of Karnataka and Andhra represent the clash between cultural polarities. A special mention is made here of this form because, unlike most ritual theatres, it dramatises conflicts more than communion. People trained,

mostly hereditarily, perform it. The occasion is either Saivite festivals like Shivaratri or some auspicious occasion like a marriage in the family of the devout. It can be a *solo* or group performance. The performers are called *Lingadabeeras* (heroic Shaivites). Alternatively, they are called *Puravantas* (rehabilitators of cities). This word seems an antonym of *Purandhara* (destroyer of cities) and is another name of the Aryan God, Indra, indulging in the destruction of well-built fort-cities of non-Aryans. Thus this ritualistic form of martial dance-drama places itself in an antagonistic relationship to Aryan culture. The mythical narrative informing the form too points to it. The dancer-actor embodies the violent destruction that Virabhadra, Shiva's commander-in-chief, wreaked through the fire sacrifice of the Aryan king, Daksha. The reason for the fury was Daksha's choice to keep Shiva out of the sacrifice. Enraged at this, Daksha's daughter and Shiva's wife, Sati, jumps into the sacrificial flames and immolates herself. Out of Shiva's anguished fury, Virabhadra is born and Shiva sets out to butcher all the participants in the *yajna*.

The above story is narrated in rhythmic prose and songs either by the actor or narrator to the accompaniment of deafeningly loud beats on *halage* (a huge drum) and *mukhaveene* (a small wind-pipe). Brandishing a sword, the actor performs a vigorous dance, dressed in a saffron *kurta* and white *dhoti*, a crown and other ornaments of the deity, forehead smeared with holy ash and neck adorned with a *rudraksha* necklace, the last two being Saivite symbols. His costume includes the Saivite symbol of *shivalingam* worn on the chest and the metal head of Daksha tied around his waist as the story culminates in the beheading of Daksha by Virabhadra. The dance is punctuated by *vadaku*, rhythmic utterances, of Saivite philosophy. The dance is sometimes accompanied by the ritual of one or more actors walking through a *pit-field* of burning charcoal. This is called *konda hayuvudu* (crossing the fire-pit), symbolising the ordeal that a Saivite devotee has to pass through.

Veeragase is a prototype of protest ritual theatre forms. On the other hand, ritual performances of the north-western Himalayan communities, the Gaddis of Himachal Pradesh, has a more complex structure in which conflicting elements are accommodated. In ritual performative practices, the socio-political and cosmological aspects of life are integrated through an intricate symbolism. The textual basis of these ritual theatres is the *Gaddi Shiva Purana* which is very different from the classical *Shiva Purana* in Sanskrit. While narrating and enacting episodes from the Shiva mythology, the Gaddis celebrate and sanctify their own lifestyle, history, geography and socio-political organisation. They perform the ritual theatre, Nuala, to celebrate the auspicious occasions like marriage, house-warming and childbirth.

The oral narratives about Shiva are sung to the accompaniment of instruments like *dholakis* and *dhanthal*. Alongside the singers, a male dancer dances. The performance also includes a *jogi*, the silent witness to everything, and a supporting group of women singers ready to take over from male singers needing rest. It further involves a *chela* (priest and human medium of the deity) serving as a link between the people and God. The arena of performance is an east-facing wall smeared with cowdung. A complex *mandala* of 32 squares is drawn on the plastered square. The hub of the *mandala* is identified with Sumadh Parvat Kailash, Shiva's abode which is watered by nine streams of Ganga symbolised by nine woollen threads. A ram is sacrificed in honour of the deity. Lord Shiva is invoked and placed at the centre of the *mandala* during the performance. Though no overt reference is made to the actual history of the people, the consecrated space itself becomes symbolic of these lands and is integrated with the exploits of the deity.

Another form of ritual theatre enacted by Gaddis is Manimahesh Jatra. It involves a journey from a small village, Sachuin, to the foothills of Mount Kailash. The ritual journey is the re-enactment of Shiva's mythical journey

Traditiona



to this land and that of a low-caste Sippi boy to Shiva's cosmic home. This mythical route also conforms to the seasonal migratory pattern of Gaddis and establishes control over the region; thus unifying their social, political and religious realms. This ritual journey is voluntary and not for all. But there is a class of *Shivchelas* who perform it annually on the day of Radhashtami, 15 days after Krishnashtami. The theatrical element here is the transformation of the *chela* into Shiva and the sacred land. He wears the traditional Gaddi dress which includes a cap, whose top is identified with Kailash and flaps signify Parvati's abode. The belt he wears represents Gayatri, one of Shiva's emanations. Thus his body also becomes Shivabhumi, the Gaddi-land. The event lasts several days and is punctuated with brief stops and ritualistic performances en route. They visit the Chaurasi Temple housing various deities and are joined by other pilgrims and *sadhus* as they sing and dance to music, till landing in a state of complete trance. It concludes at Mount Mani Mahesh where they cross a lake, thus symbolically merging their persona with Shiva. The participation of

theatres

different local deities integrates all sections of people into the ritual journey from the human plane to the Shiva plane.

Chatrari Jatas is the third ritual theatre of Gaddis symbolising the people's victory over demonic forces, lasting for three days and enacted at a Shiva-Shakti Temple in the village of Chatrari. The stage is the temple courtyard and the temple itself becomes the greenroom. The first part involves the circumambulation of the temple by the idol of Batuk Mahadev, an incarnation of Shiva. The procession is joined by huge crowds of devotees and led by musicians singing. After the return of the deity to the temple comes the core of this ritual drama. Kappar Baddhe, the mask dancers, come out of the temples and begin to dance. As they represent demonic forces, the audience does everything to keep them out — jeering, mocking, screaming, tugging and throwing branches of a stringent plant. This is followed by the dance of male members and the sacrifice of a black goat. The goddess now enters in the human form with the *chela* embodying her. He performs a trance dance, answers the crowd's queries and gives them blessings. The male crowd performs the ritual dance depicting the victory of the goddess over demonic forces. In this way the performance reaffirms the



cohesion of the community, their internal conflicts notwithstanding.

Yet another ritual play of the Gaddis is Kugti Jatar. It is the juxtaposition of the serious dance by *chelas* impersonating as Baba Balak Nath and another dancer, the *chela* Hanuman, playing monkey tricks. The serious dance continues in spite of this distraction and culminates in a collective trance followed by partaking of gifts and sacred offerings.

All the ritual forms including those described above convey feelings of reverence, adoration, determination to rise above obstacles, and integration with different and conflicting spheres of being. In different measures, these are built into other forms of theatre, too.



2 | Sanskrit Theatre – Visual Poetry

The *Natyashastra* was an attempt to build up a comprehensive theory on every facet of theatrical practice in ancient India. It is descriptive in the sense that a lot of observed details of existing theatre practice go into it. But it also came to play a prescriptive role for the generations that followed. Bharata had centuries of theatre theory to direct him. According to Panini (400 BC), there already existed two authors, Shilali and Krishashav who had written *Natasutras*, the manuals of acting. Perhaps *Natyashastra* came as the acme of centuries-old theatre theory.

What is interesting is the kinship between the teachings of *Natyashastra* and the actual practice of great Sanskrit dramatists who flourished between the 1st century to the 5th century AD.

Though Sanskrit playwriting continued well beyond this period, with the exception of Bhavbhuti (AD 700), the quality of playwriting plummeted thereafter. For a greater part, the lineage of the greats of Sanskrit drama that included



dramatists like Bhasa, Shudraka, Kalidasa and Vishakhadatta appeared not only aware of Bharata's views but seemed to conform to his rules about theme, plot, characterisation and depiction of *rasas*.

Only Bhasa at times went against Bharata's prescriptions. For instance, Bharata had imposed a taboo against death scenes on the stage. But Bhasa showed the hero, Duryodhana, dying on the stage. However, these were rare exceptions. In his other major plays, even Bhasa followed the path of Bharata.

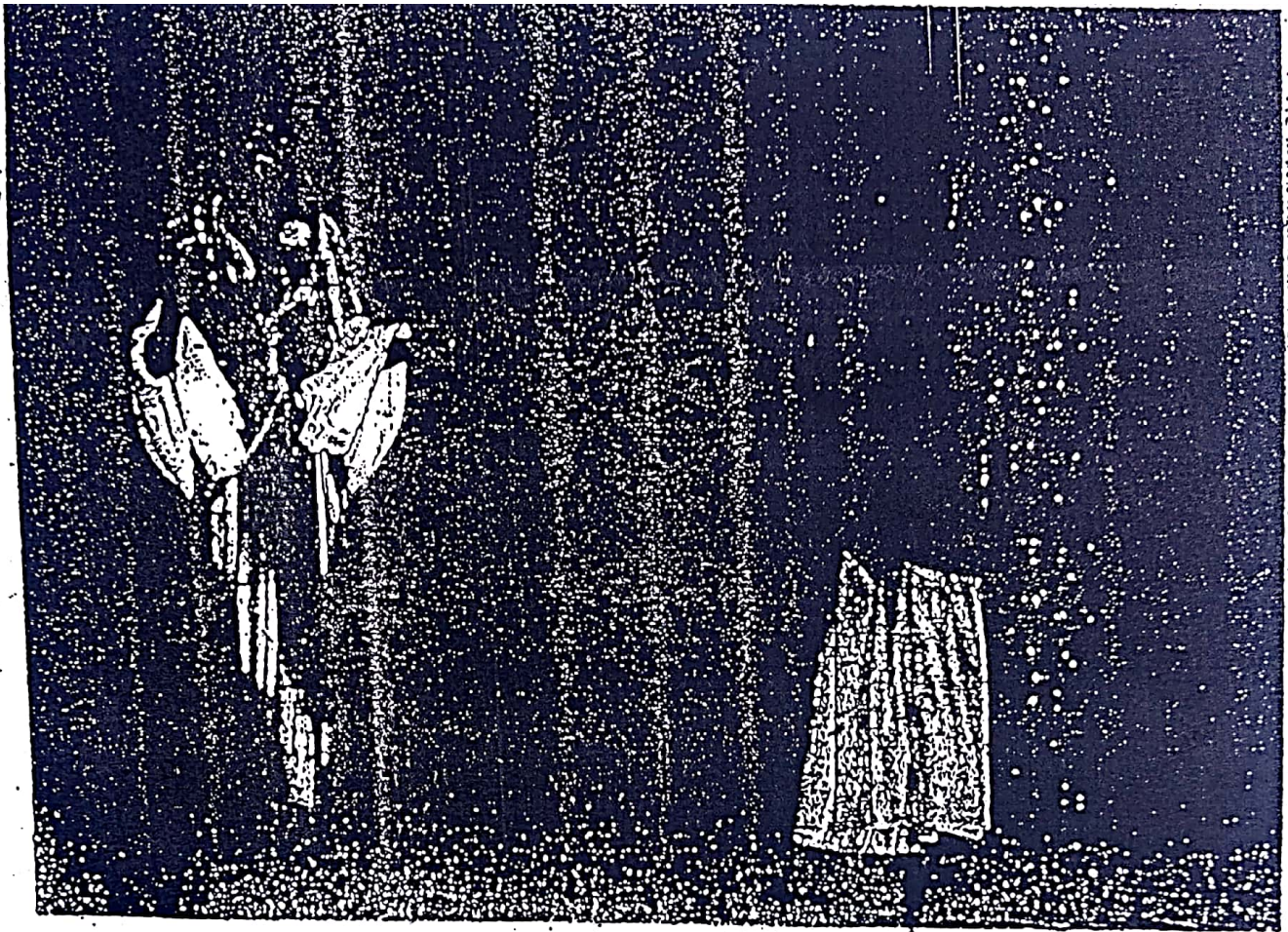
ABOVE
Abhijnana
lakuntalam enacted
on the stage

Sanskrit dramatists shared certain characteristics vis-à-vis dramatists of other great theatrical traditions.

It was once believed that Sanskrit drama had strong Greek connections. Sanskrit theatre used curtains to mark off the elevated part of the stage at the back. *Yavanika* is the Sanskrit word for 'curtain'. This word was believed to have been derived from the word *Yavana*, meaning 'Greek'. At the same time, Sanskrit drama has nothing to compare with Greek tragedy which was the most powerful expression of ancient Greek creativity. The majority of Sanskrit plays were romantic comedies in which conflicts were happily reconciled at the end. In this, they were closer to the Attic comedies of Greece which, like Sanskrit plays, centred around losses and recoveries, separations and unions, of the loved ones. Though tragedy in the sense of a sad ending was not uncommon in other Indian traditions, like folk and tribal, tragedy as a form never developed in Sanskrit drama. "Again, the sweet outcome of a heart-rending situation," says a character from Bhavabhuti's *Mali-Madhava*. This sentence sums up the worldview contained in Sanskrit drama.

If we compare Sanskrit drama with Elizabethan drama, another rich dramatic tradition of the world, we find that the later Sanskrit drama employed a mixture of prose and verse. However, Sanskrit drama was never written entirely in verse form. Further, Sanskrit drama used more of a non-verbal language (dance, music, mime, etc.). On the whole, Sanskrit drama is very much more coded.

Sanskrit drama is, on the whole, the polar opposite of Western realistic/naturalistic drama based upon verisimilitude, that is, the correspondence between the stage and the world. Following the Greek theory of three unities (meaning time, space and action on stage should resemble those in the world, like a photograph resembling the person or the thing photographed), it demands that the spectator identifies himself with the action. This does not happen in Sanskrit drama. Like the non-classical



Elizabethan drama, it freely moves from space to space and time to time. Neither does Sanskrit strive for individual characterisation as in a play by Ibsen or Bernard Shaw, the well-known exponents of realistic playwrighting. In fact, a great deal of modern Western drama too was a reaction to realism. Sometimes, this change came as in Brecht's epic theatre, from the originally Sanskrit source.

The kinship of Sanskrit drama to Asian dramatic forms, like the Chinese opera and Japanese Kabuki, is conspicuous for these theatrical traditions employ a well-orchestrated system of many non-verbal languages involving gesture, movement, dance, music, make-up, etc.

Like Greek, Elizabethan, and other Asian playwrights, the Sanskrit playwrights did not make up their own stories. This was so despite the fact that Bharata allowed the playwright to make up his own story in some of the

ABOVE
Nagavandujjukayam
being staged by the
actors

Traditional Theatres

dasaripakās (10 theatrical forms). The stories were taken from well-known classics. Bhasa's one-act plays are based on the *Mahabharata* episodes. His *Pratimanatakam* is a rehash of an episode ~~from the Ramayana~~ whereas his *Svapnavasavadatta* goes back to the well-known narratives of folklore. His *Charudattaprakaranam*, now extant only in fragments, ~~was based on~~ the Buddhist Jataka tales. This play was rewritten later by Shudraka as *Mrichchakatika Prakaranam*. Similarly Kalidasa and Bhavabhuti too took their stories from very well-known sources. However, in the end, these all too well-known stories went through a sea change. For instance, Kalidasa could make Dushyanta, the typical male chauvinist hero of the original *Mahabharata* story into an eminently lovable character in his play. Similarly Rama of Bhavabhuti's *Uttarāmacharitam* is much more humane than Valmiki's Rama in his conduct towards Sita. In order to enable the Sanskrit dramatist to communicate *rasa*, the characters had to be shown not realistically, but in an idealised form.

The genre of Sanskrit drama certainly has a set of generic features, some of which have been outlined above. However, this tradition of playwriting has been enriched by the genius of individual playwrights, whose works have survived the test of changing times. The genius of the ideal Sanskrit playwright can be likened to that of a classical singer or dancer who, while keeping to elaborate rules and conventions, can still illuminate the performance with one's own very special alchemic touch:



3 | Devotional Theatres

India's rich heritage of mythological legends kept evolving with the changing times and presented itself in the form of a vibrant devotional theatre.

ANKIANAT

In the 17th century, a great socio-spiritual movement swept over Assam, transforming the culture of the region radically. It was spearheaded by Shankaradeva, one of the greatest reformers of medieval society. The region of Assam in the north-east of India was a conglomerate of various tribes — Rabhas, Bodos and Ahoms, who came from further east. From the early centuries of the 1st millennium it was a great centre of Shakta-Tāntric cults. The Kamakhya Temple was the hub of Shakti cult. Animal sacrifices are still practised at this temple. During Shankaradeva's time, the

can be seen in some of the folk theatres in the neighbouring Karnataka, particularly Bayalata of interior regions and in Sree Krishna Parijata.

After the 12th-century Maharashtra became the centre of the progressive Vaishnavite movement of Varkaris, pioneered by saints Jnan Dev and Namdev, Sant Tukaram and Ekanath furthered this social and cultural movement. The performance of *abhangs* (the song-compositions) of these saint-poets is associated with a lot of theatrical elements. Sant Ekanath popularised a street-theatre form called Baroodh to spread the message of his faith. However, Tamasha, remotely traceable to Vaishnavite sources, did not directly emerge out of Vaishnavite devotional roots. Though the form is comparatively a new one, it is the melting-pot for several earlier forms of performances prevalent in Maharashtra.

Tamasha is said to have been founded in the 18th century by a Brahmin called Ram Joshi. His collaboration with Margó Pant, the famous writer of the period, helped to enrich the form. It led to a new musical form called Lavani that became popular in the folklore of both Karnataka and Maharashtra. Ram Joshi used the singing form of Lavani for didactic purposes. Baji Rao I, a Maratha ruler of the same period, contributed to the development of the form. The artistes who performed at his court were from all castes but predominantly from among the Mahars and Mangs. It is these communities who took upon themselves to perform, spread and develop Lavani in the succeeding period.

Several earlier forms were combined to forge the existing form of Tamasha. Gondhal is one of them. It was a Shiva-and-Shakta form involving song, dance and drama and performed in the temple dedicated to Amba. Gondaligara Mela, one of the popular folk-theatrical forms of Karnataka, appears to be a cousin of Gondhal. Lavani singing was another stream that flowed into Tamasha. The question-and-answer form of singing was common to both Gondhal and Lavani. The former was mainly ritualistic and the latter, secular. The theatrical forms of Dasavatara, popular

of the whole of *Mahabharata* over a period of 18 days is not very usual now. The majority of performances now show selected episodes.

The *Mahabharata* came to Tamil Nadu from beyond the Vindhya around the 2nd century AD. In the 13th century, a poet called Vellipettur produced a Tamil version of the *Mahabharata*. Vellipettur was a follower of the Tamil Vaishnava tradition. His work constitutes the basis of the Draupadi Amman festival which is celebrated in two ways. The first entails a discourse on the *Mahabharata* for the faithful and the second, the performance of Terukuttu, for the common people. Though the Terukuttu performances are primarily based on the *Mahabharata*, they also carry in their repertoire episodes taken from other epics too. One of the most popular Terukuttu plays on the Draupadi theme has characters from the *Mahabharata* but inspired by folk forms like Kuravanchi, a very popular figure in south Indian folklore and which has passed into Bharatanatyam too.

The Terukuttu performance has a very close relation to the agricultural cycles of the rural areas of Tamil Nadu. It is normally performed between mid April and the beginning of June. By January, crops would have been harvested; by February and March the paddy would have been sold. By April, villagers would have enough money to commission Terukuttu performances.

The usual performance takes place on the corner of a street. At times, it is also performed in front of Draupadi temples. Terukuttu is meant to be an open-air musical opera, staged on level ground, sometimes under a flat roof supported by four pillars. The audience sits on three sides of the acting area. No stage effects are employed. Illumination is provided at night from oil-lamp torches which are now being replaced by electric bulbs. However, the *Mahabharata* Terukuttu during the festival season is performed for eight successive days and concludes with actors and the audience breaking the earthen image of Duryodhana. The women's roles are played by men. The costumes and make-up are colourful and attractive and the characters wear different headgears according to their status. Light wooden ornaments are

used, decorated with gilt paper and glass pieces. Anklets worn around the neck of the actress tinkle throughout the performance.

The orchestra comprising the musicians and singers sits backstage, providing music with the following instruments: *mridangam*, *mukhavin*, cymbals and harmonium. The play begins with an invocation by the orchestra to Ganesha to ward off obstacles. Other deities are also involved. Then enters the *kattaiikkaran*, the *sutradhara* or narrator. He is also the clown, ever-present on the stage. He comments, connects, contextualises and gives information about the story — the link between the players and the spectators. Before the entry of characters, the *patrapravesham* takes place. They perform by singing and dancing behind a small curtain held up by supporting artistes. Two types of dance are used: one involving the violent form for male characters and the other involving delicate movements, for female characters.

Terukuttu uses no written script. It depends mostly on the memorised oral scripts handed down from generation to generation. The text consists of songs and poems and the lines of the songs sung by actors are repeated by singers seated backstage — *pinpattu*. The prose passages which make up for the dialogues and descriptions — *vachanam*s, are completely improvised by the actors on the spot. The talent of the actor depends mainly on his innovation, capacity to improvise, drawing upon a wide range of allusions from Tamil language, history, culture and commonsense. The *kattaiikkaran* is also a past master in scintillating improvisations. His jokes often degenerate into downright ribaldry and he often aims his arrows of sarcasm against stereotypes of the countryside. This is how performers relate mythical realities to the immediate.

A part of the Draupadi Amman festival and re-enactment of the *Mahabharata* story in the context of *Bharata Visha*, the musical drama of Terukuttu, apart from fulfilling ritualistic functions, serves to purge the minds of the audience by releasing social and sexual tensions. This is its therapeutic value.

YAKSHAGANA

The ceremonial sounding of vigorous beats of the *chenda* are heard from a platform specially erected for the performance. The beats of the *chenda* signal that the play is about to begin. Meantime the actors are busy putting on their elaborate make-up and the complicated but colourful costumes: the types of headgears, long gowns and elaborate ornaments for the neck and armbands and bracelets for the arms. The *bhagawatas*, the singer-narrators and the orchestra take the seat at the back of the stage dressed in white *dhoti* and red turban. As the spectators begin to pour in, hymns are sung first to Ganapati and then to other deities like Shiva, Shakti and Vishnu. Followed by the introduction of the story and the plot, the main actor appears behind a small curtain held up by two persons and performed through the introductory dance. In earlier times this part of the preliminary was very elaborate for it included the dance of *balagopalas* (children) and *kodangi*, the clown. These days, only the *kodangi* enters, dances and carries on a scintillating exchange with the *bhagawata*. The curtain is pulled down to show his face. This is the elaborate and stylised *patrapravesha*, the technique of any character's entry and which is found in several other traditional forms, like Kathakali. After the beginning of the play proper and before the start of every scene, every major character appearing for the first time, performs a dance behind the curtain. The play revolving mostly on *shringara* or *veera rasa*, (the erotic or heroic sentiment), unfolds itself through the rich and many layered semantics of song, dance, gesture, movement and a complete symbolic language of *abhiyabhinaya* (make-up). The narrator sings out the metrical passages in a mixture of classical and folk conventions, which in turn are elaborated by the stylised dance of actors involving all the expressive parts: the face, the eyes, hands, fingers and feet. Further elaboration of the text is effected through an on-the-spot improvisation by the skilled actors, who through their innovativeness, bring their wit, wisdom and real-life experiences to bear on their acting. The performance that

traditionally lasts, the full night concludes with a song of benediction and hymns to the *ishta devata* (the chosen deity).

The stage performance is bracketed as it were by a ritual taking place off-stage. Ganapati-worship is offered at the beginning, either in a temple nearby or in a special place inside the greenroom. This is called *chowki puja*. Without it, actors cannot get on to the stage. Ganapati is worshipped not in his regular iconic form but in the form of a *makuta* (crown). There is another *puja* following the conclusion of the play.

This is a brief account of the performance involved in the art of Yakshagana, one of the most widely discussed and researched forms of Indian theatre. This form is characteristic of the coastal districts of Karnataka: Mangalore, Udupi and Uttara Kannada. Though there are several varieties of this art, only two major categories are important — Badaguthittu (northern style) and Thenkuthittu (southern style). In terms of textual contents, there is no difference. However, differences are seen in the style of the performance. The northern style, popular in places like Karwar, Gokarna and Sirsi, emphasises song, music and dance which are of a more stylised variety. The southern style, characteristic of places like Kundapur, Udupi and Mangalore, is more rustic, dramatic and dialogue-oriented. The late Shivaram Karanth, the first internationally celebrated exponent of Yakshagana, refined the form into something resembling a classical ballet. He brought about further sophistication to the Badaguthittu style. Differences are also observed between the two varieties in details of the make-up, costumes and movements. The northern style emphasises *lasya* (the graceful) and the southern style, the *tandava* (the vigorous). It is also observed that the northern style is closer to the Kerala theatre forms, like Kathakali and the southern style to Bhootarathanai and other tribal rituals of the south of coastal Karnataka.

The relationship between the text and the performance is an important aspect of Yakshagana. The basic text is not a written play. It is a *chempu*

... *...aparata* or one of the famous *Puranas*. The verse employs a wide range of traditional Kannada metiers. Within the framework of this basic text sung by the *bhagawata*, the narrator, the skilled actors introduce another layer of the text through their inspired and impromptu improvisations. The more experienced the actors, the more surprising are his improvisations. The actor depends for this on his accumulated learning of traditional mythology, history, and his own storehouse of topical issues. He also draws upon wit and word play. The leading Yakshagana actors specialise in playing particular roles of, say, Krishna, Bhima or Duryodhana. As a result of repeated performances, they gain experience enough to introduce something new in each performance so that the audiences never tire of watching the same roles played repeatedly. Added to this verbal level of communication is the use of multi-layered non-verbal language. Yakshagana has evolved a whole complex aesthetics of make-up and costumes. The roles are divided into different categories — the king, the woman, the ruffian and the *rakshasa* and these are represented by different colours.

The grammar of colours is very complex. But some broad rules are clear. Young characters are given red. Krishna is given red in the northern style and green in the southern style. Female characters go with green except for the demonic women like Shurpanakha who is given black. The intricate art of painting the face in Yakshagana is called *mukhavarnike*. They also wear different types of crowns and headgears. The colouring of the face of the *rakshasa* characters is so heavy as to make it look like a mask.

There are rules on the use of different forms of dances for different characters. *Veera rasa* (the heroic sentiment) involves vigorous footwork and dance. *Karuna rasa* (the sentiment of compassion) is expressed through a slow-motion dance. Female characters employ more graceful movements. The young characters move and dance faster as compared to the dignified movements of the elderly characters. The acting too is many-faceted: acting

last century, the Yakshagana is being performed in Tulu, the local language of this region. These are popular in areas covered by southern style and in Mumbai, the metropolis where a large number of Tulu people have settled down.

The change of language to Tulu in Yakshagana performances, according to conservative scholars, is the death of the art. But the exponents of the change hold this as a great step of freeing Yakshagana from the upper-caste grip of the Brahmins. The language change has also led to the introduction of historical episodes of Tulunadu in place of the exclusively mythological themes.

The nomenclature of the form is often disputed. According to some scholars Yakshagana is the name of the literary composition forming the basis of the performance. The performance itself has other names like Bhagawatara Ata, Dasavatara Ata and so on. It is also argued that its original tune is *talamaddale* derived from the two major percussion instruments used in the performance. However, the term Bhagawatamelu is now used for indoor performances—during the rainy season when the outdoor performance is not possible. The *bhagawatas* and performers without costume sit in a closed room and perform the same play with music, dialogue and *vachikabhinaya* (voice acting) but without dance.

Another alternative name for the form is Yakshagana Bayalatta. *Bayalatta* means 'an out-door performance'.

As already pointed out, the form described above belongs to coastal Karnataka that constitutes the western part of the state. Scholars have called this the *Paduvalapaya* Yakshagana (Western Yakshagana). The inland varieties of outdoor performances are collectively called *Moodalappaya* Yakshagana (Eastern Yakshagana) which in turn has several varieties. On the whole, this type of Yakshagana is more influenced by local folk forms. It is less elaborate and less stylised. The Yakshagana of this region devoted to mythological themes is called *doddatta* (the big play). At times, heroic stories

~~.....-one genre-~~ When over long periods of time, people got tired of mythological themes, social themes were introduced after 18th century. A new form of realistic outdoor performance called *sannatta* (the little play) came into being. The most famous plays in this genre are *Kadlimatti Station Master* and *Sangya Wanya*. The latter play written by one Pathar Master is a remarkable work dealing with marital disloyalty and its aftermath in the context of a village in north Karnataka. The haunting tale of the protagonist's adultery with his friend's wife resulting in his murder by the husband and the punishment meted out by British government on the murderer and his allies is popular among the performers in the interior region. This play has been successfully revived on modern stage several times.

Dasaratta and Sharanaratta are the sub-genres influenced by the Vaishnava and Shaiva Bhakti traditions of the region. Dasaratta has a popular erotic content. It has two parts, the mythical and the realistic. The mythical part tells the story of Krishna trying to collect toll from a milk-vessel-bearing maid. The woman refuses to pay. A witty debate ensues between the two characters till she complies with Krishna's request. The second part has the same content in a realistic form: the debate between the milkmaid and a locally powerful man who is fascinated by her. After a long and witty debate and exchange full of rustic jokes and repartees, the woman complies. When this genre grew monotonous, a new variation was introduced to this theme and it led to the rise of another form called Radhanattam in which the woman beats the man in argument and refuses to comply. The Saivite Sharanavara attas are played on the stories of great Saivite saints. The religious content is made entertaining by introduction of a lot of rustic elements loved by the rural masses.

Krishnaparijata is another form performed on a small stage with a small cast. It has stock characters: Krishna, Rukmini, Satyabama and Narada. The quarrel ensues between Krishna's two wives, Rukmini and Satyabhama as to

F

who should get the rare flower of Parichata. The embarrassment of Krishna between two quarrelsome wives is aggravated by the mischievous intervention of the trickster sage, Narada.

Sind Yakshagana is a primitive theatrical form performed by Madigas, the nomadic castes of Sind, in the border areas of Andhra and Karnataka. This centres around Lord Vishnu's bigamous love for a tribal beauty, Chenchulakshmi by name. Mad in love, the great lord engages the tribal girl in a debate to win her love. The next problem is to get the acceptance of his divine wife, Lakshmi. Again the lord with his persuasive skills convinces her that his tribal love is another aspect of his divine wife. The play culminates in the merging of the tribal and divine wives of the lord.

In all the forms named above, the play text, mostly oral and sometimes written, is an excuse for the performer's impromptu improvisations drawing upon his powers of wit, pun and wordplay. The orchestra consists of *mummela*, the main singer, and *himmela*, the supporting singer. A percussive instrument and a melodic instrument, mostly a small windpipe called *mukhaveena*, accompany the singing. They all have one clown figure or the other (*sarathi*) in *doddatta*, a *dhuti* (a woman messenger) in *Sunnatta* and Narada in *Krishnaparijata*. The key figure in most of these forms is an experienced drama master, moving from place to place and training the local people in putting up a performance. He is the forerunner of the modern director. Both he and the performers are mostly illiterate but educated in oral and remembered texts and gifted with rustic wit and skill.