

# GENESIS OF THEATRE IN INDIA AND EARLY GENDER

## REPRESENTATION

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### Abstract

*Dramatic women play gender-normative roles. They were divided into "good" wives, mothers, and "evil" mistresses and sorceresses. Bhas's woman characters meet society's expectations. Marriage was crucial. Vikramorvasiya, Malavikagnimitra, and Abhijnanasakuntalam, four-century dramas by Kalidasa, feature powerful women. Kalidasa saw men and women as equals with honour and respect. Shakuntala was quite unique. Visakhdutta's historical play Mudra-Rakshasa features no female characters. Bhavabhuti depicted women's deterioration in the seventh century. Women were mostly confined in love and family dramas. At the time, women were barred from the theatre, therefore young boys played feminine parts.*

### Paper Identification



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### Introduction

According to the ancient Indian tradition, drama is a life-size art, the highest form of fine art which imitate people, their emotions, feelings, mental and physical states, actions, situations they were found in. 'Lokasya Charitam'- means 'human life in all its complexity' is considered

to be the subject of drama (Varadpande Traditions 6; History 271, 278). The *Natyashastra* calls dramatic performance a sacred event, a visual sacrifice (*yajna*) to the gods. According to *Natyashastra*, Brahma, the god of creation has created drama (*Natya*) and the purpose of drama is to entertain as well as to educate the masses. “There is no wise maxim, no learning, no art or craft, no device, no action that is not found in drama” (Ghosh 15).

Dating history of Indian theatre is complicated due to cultural factors and linguistic diversity as Anand Lal wrote in his book *Theatres of India: A Concise Companion* (vii). A plethora of books are available to channelize the history of theatre in India but they cover largely from the nineteenth century onwards i.e. from the colonial period. The nationalist movement and the political agenda of constructing a strong and positive cultural image of the country was the major factor behind the need to look back and explore the history, art and heritage existed in India. However, the tradition of writing and enacting plays in India dates back to the ancient Vedic period (1500 BC-600 BC). K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar said that it is likely enough that the dramatic tradition was fully formed in the country before Greek dramas came to knowledge (1). The major source to trace the genesis of Indian dramaturgy is Bharata Muni’s magnum opus, *Natyashastra* (believed to be written between 200 B.C. and 200 A.D.). It is the oldest treatise on the theory and practice of Indian theatre and performance traditions. Bharata Muni, who is being regarded as the founder of Indian dramaturgy, explored in detail all the major aspects of drama, namely, stage-setting, music, plot construction, characterization, dialogue and acting in it and narrated the religious roots of theatre in India. In the views of R. N. Rai, *Natyashastra* provides “not only a theory of drama but also the guidelines for directors, actors, spectators and critics” (6).

Sanskrit drama was the earliest form of classical theatre in India. Sanskrit drama flourished from the first to twelfth century A.D. and folk theatre commenced during the fifteenth century. Sanskrit Theatre prospered till twelfth century under the patronage of kings and aristocrats but the development was stifled after invasions due to the political uncertainties, economic deterioration and certain other related outcomes. This disruption was for a longer span of time and it is generally assumed that after the tenth century, no significant plays were written in Sanskrit until its revival during British colonial period in the late nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the exact origin of Sanskrit theatre is not known, only the evidence is found in the dramaturgical texts survived in palm leaf manuscripts. The most important source among them all is Bharata’s *Natyashastra*. Some scholars like J. Hertel and A. B. Keith find the germs of the

dramatic art in Vedic rituals and Vedic hymns sung and performed in certain places with specialised gestures (Lal 118; Richmond 29).

Sanskrit was the dominant language and the medium of communication among kings, priests and scholars during the period. Hence, Sanskrit dramas had been associated with the life of elites and cultured class of people. Farley P. Richmond writes, “Classical traditions depend on high degree of audience knowledge and expertise” (8). Regarding the disposition of the Sanskrit plays, K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar wrote, “Sanskrit theatre was essentially romantic in its impulsion and expression and preferred to conclude on a note of peace and calm and felicity” (1). Bhas, Kalidas, Shudrak, Vishakhadatta, Harsha, Bhatta Narayana, Bhavabhuti are some of the prominent playwrights whose contributions are significant in establishing the tradition of Sanskrit theatre in India. Bhas is regarded as the first Sanskrit playwright (second–third century). Although Ashwaghosh had written a play (first–second century AD) before Bhas his complete play is not available. Bhas’ play *Swapna Vasavadatta*, Kalidas’ *Vikramorvashiyam* and *Abhigyan Shakuntala*, Shudrak’s *Mricchakatika* (second century AD), Vishakhadatta’s *Mudra-Rakshasa* (fifth century AD), Harsha’s *Ratnavali* (sixth century AD), Bhatta Narayana’s *Venisamhara* (seventh century) and Bhavabhuti’s *Uttar Ramcharita* (seventh–eighth century) are some of the classics in the tradition of Sanskrit playwriting (Lal 120-121) and these plays are still staged with fervor. Sanskrit theatre performances were seen as a kind of celebration much connected to the temple festivals. Having more than two thousand years old history, Sanskrit drama is still surviving with dignity and certain stature. Translations and adaptations of Sanskrit plays continue till date.

The period between 1000 and 100 BC saw the rise of the great Hindu epic *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* which provided inspiration for dramatic compositions and many plays are based on the stories of these two great epics, for example, Bhas’ *Swapna Vasavadatta* and Bhatta Narayana’s *Venisamhara*. The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* refer to certain dramatic terms like *Nata* (performer), *Nartaka* (dancer), *Nataka* (drama), *Gayaka* (singer). The seeds of Sanskrit drama are also found in Patanjali’s *Mahabhasya* (second century BC) where the references are given to individuals (*nata*) who recite and sing (Brandon 64-68). In Kautilya’s *Arthashashtra* (written between 321 and 296 B.C.) there are many references in different contexts to the dramatic arts, performing artists (*natakamandalis*) and the audience who watch these performances. He discussed the salaries of performing artistes along with the salaries of the other state employees in his book which proves the existence of theatrical arts and artistes in Maurya

Empire (322 BC - 185 BC). Drama was a popular form of entertainment during the Buddhist period (Sixth Century BC to fourth Century BC). In the ancient Buddhist literature *Tripitak*, many references to dramatic arts have been made. The evidence from Ashokan inscription suggests that it was popular among the masses (Madhu vii). Theatrical arts have got references in Jataka tales that is described as an encyclopaedia of contemporary Indian life. Apparently, these multiple references in the different sources since the Vedic period establish the historic tradition of dramatic performances in India. It is also evident that ancient dramatic texts are a big source of history to understand the contemporary society as a whole. There are several references to the *varna* system, *Jatis*, *ashrama*, family, marriage, *dharma*, *niti*, economic organisations, administrative organisations etc. The prevalence of polygamy and the status of women could be well understood by studying these texts.

According to James R. Brandon, rural theatre forms developed in India about the fifteenth century (64). Sanskrit drama and theatre started and flourished in the relatively peaceful period, unlike rural theatre. A great number of folk forms are developed in India for example, *Ramlila*, *Raaslila*, *Bhagat*, *Swang*, *Khyal*, *Bhavai*, *Jatra*, *Yakshagana*, *Chhau*, *Tamasha*, *Nautanki* etc. which reflects the linguistic, cultural and religious diversity of the country. “Indian dramatic art is primarily indigenous in its culture and is essentially a fusion of many elements of varied aesthetic and culturally defined forms,” said Meena Sodhi (24). *Natyashastra* gives the reference of two modes of theatrical representation: *Lokadharmi* (folk drama) and *Natyadharmi* (Classical drama). However, the two are not completely opposite, having some shared characteristics (Lal 123). Folk theatre has remained popular among common people since ancient times. It has broken the language barrier and spoke in the language of common masses unlike Sanskrit theatre (Sanskrit used to be the language of elite class). Sanskrit theatre was meant for the specific class or elite class of the society and it is mostly performed in closed spaces, sometimes in a temples’ courtyard or in kings’ palaces. Rightly known as ‘popular theatre’, the popularity of folk theatre is due to its nomadic nature which does not require fixed space and an established theatre house to be staged but require only a makeshift stage and audience. Balwant Gargi used the term “folk theatre” and described it as the drama that should be “performed by, for, and through the support of the general populace” (qtd. in Richmond 9). Nevertheless, Sanskrit theatre and folk theatre both have their own significance and contribution to establish and enrich the tradition of theatre in India. Most of the folk plays are based on religious themes which confirm the close connection of religion with performance. It is a matter of fact that in

ancient times when texts were written on palm leaves and controlled by a few hands, enacting dramas are one of the most effective medium to convey the ideas and communicate to the masses at large (Madhu 74-75).

### ***Natyashastra* and Performance Space**

Drama is meant for enactment and dramatic texts get accomplished by stage performances. The earliest evidence of theatre hall or performance space is found in *Rigveda* and *Atharvaveda*. There are references of dancers performing under the sky, encircled by the audience which is an indication towards an open-air performance space. In *yajna mandapas*, the rituals were performed in which dance, music, and dialogues with appropriate gestures played a definite role. In the later period, the performances were held for the amusement of people. *Yajna mandapa* is not a theatre in the strict sense but its role in the evolution of the theatre cannot be denied. Theatrical performances were also held in *Sabha* as its references are given in the epics. There are many references of *ranga*, *sangeetshala*, *nrityashala* even before the *Natyashastra*. In many *Jataka* tales also a temporary circular space like the open-air auditorium is mentioned which is often called *ranga mandapa*. Some evidence is found in erected edifices of Mohenjodaro too. During the Indus Valley period the evidence of the art of puppetry is found (Madhu vii). Some references of cave theatres are being identified and the oldest among two or three survived structures is the Sitabengara cave in Ramgarh hills to which Dr Bloch called ‘an Indian theatre of third century B.C.’ (Varadpande, Traditions 53-61). *Natyashastra* describes various types of theatre arena in detail but there is no surviving example in present except the remains of an amphitheatre, found at Nagarjunakonda, a brick build structure which is probably constructed in the third century A.D. It is much like Bharata’s descriptions of the auditorium in the *Natyashastra*. Thus, the above descriptions suggest the existence of both permanent and temporary performance spaces in ancient India (Madhu 81, 87).

The first theatrical structure was created by Vishwakarma, the divine architect, said by Bharata in his masterpiece. Bharata Muni was a great sage and was well aware of the literary as well as the technical aspects of theatrical production. In *Natyashastra*, he covered all the aspects related to drama in detail. According to Bharata, the audience who comes to watch theatre is called *preksaka* means ‘those who see’. Thus, from the word *preksaka* comes to another word *prekshagriha* which means a theatre hall. The term *preksha* is a Sanskrit word and it is called *pekkham* in Pali (Varadpande, Tradition 5). *Natyagrha*, *natya mandapa*, *preksagara* are some of the other Sanskrit terms used for theatre in ancient texts.

Bharata Muni had written about the ideal place of performance in the second chapter of *Natyashashtra* in detail. It gives details of particular steps in the selection and preparation of a performance space followed by the rituals. Theatres should be constructed on specially selected sites and the soil of the site should also be the particular one. The idea of the playhouse came to Bharata Muni from *yagyavedi* and the rituals performed by the *rishi* (*yagyavedi*, having special shapes and seers performing *yagya* with a particular gesture according to the type of *puja*). When walls were built over the base of these different shapes of *vedis*, the idea of building performance hall came into existence. Bharata Muni wrote about three types of theatre structures: square (*Chaturasra*), triangular (*tryasra*) and rectangular (*vikrasta*) and there were small, medium and large varieties of these three shapes. Among them, the medium sized rectangular building is discussed in detail which suggests that Bharata regarded this shape as the most suitable type for performance (Brandon 68-70). Bharata stated clearly in his *Natyashashtra* that no play could be enacted without before worshipping the stage in a prescribed manner otherwise the performance would face various obstacles. The ritual to worship the stage is called *Rangapuja*, and here, *ranga* denotes the place where the drama is performed i.e. the stage (Varadpande, Traditions 4).

The open halls made for the performances owned by kings and wealthy people were called *Nat-mandir* and were made in front of temples which were open for common people (Ghosh LVII). There is evidence of *nat-mandir* hall in the cave temple at Ellora. M. L. Varadpande wrote about the *Nata mandir* that is attached to many temples at various places in India like Orissa, Kerala. In Kerala temple theatres, Sanskrit plays were performed. Theatre Hall constructed in the temple premises were known as Koothambalams (Traditions 11).

The appropriate size of the playhouse is around thirty yards long and sixteen yards broad, capable of accommodating four hundred spectators in comparison to Athenian theatre which accommodates around fifteen thousand people. Bharata says that if the playhouse is very big, the expressions of the actor would not be clearly visible to the spectators. Greek theatre was dependent on considerably different techniques. Unlike Greek open-air theatre, Indian theatres were not without roofs since Bharata mentioned about the construction of pillars in the auditorium in order to support the roof. The term *natya mandapa* also suggests of a roofed theatre. Kerala temple theatre has a different and huge architecture with imposing roof and having spacious *Ranga Mandapa* and small *Nepathyagriha*.

*Natyashastra* gives details about raising four pillars in the playhouses based on four *varnas*: *brahmin*, *kshatriya*, *vaishya* and *shudra*. The seating arrangement in the auditorium was based on the *varna* system and followed a hierarchical order. In Greece, although the theatre was a symbol of democracy yet the sitting arrangements in ancient Greek theatre followed the hierarchical order of the social divisions and the ‘vanishing point’ of the performance area was being marked from the location of the King’s chair. However, the descriptions found in the *Natyashastra* give the clear impression that the theatrical art was a highly important and popular art form in India which required specialisation and followed certain patterns. The details suggest that every part of the theatre space and its architect have particular purpose and relevance behind it (Madhu 97).

Further, Bharata Muni divides the theatre area into three sections: (i) *Nepathya* (the tiring room), (ii) *Rangshirsha* or *Rangpeeth* (the stage) and (iii) *Rangamandala* (the auditorium). *Rangshirsha* is the back side of the performance area which is to be covered by a dark blue curtain and the whole acting area is called *Rangpeeth*. Bharata Muni wrote about the measurement units (*hasta* and *danda*) of the area of performance. There should be two *mattavaranis* on the two sides of the stage similar to wings in modern theatre. *Mattavaranis* is a kind of gate or window or a small balcony which connect the stage with the *nepathya griha*. Curtain plays an important role in the performance and the terms used for the curtain are *Yavanika* or *Javanika*. It is debatable whether the curtain was drawn aside on two sides or raised (Ghosh LVIII).

### **Women in the Tradition of Theatre in India**

In the above discussed long tradition of Indian theatre, it becomes important to point out the presence of women in the tradition of theatre as they have been ignored despite their presence and contribution to the development of Indian performance tradition. Women’s visibility could be described in three ways: a woman as an actor, the female character represented in the plays by the dramatists and also women’s presence in the audience’s space. In the early instances, women were present as performers (*natakiya* as Bharata Muni pronounced). According to Varadpande, all-female theatre tradition flourished in India at least since the fourth century B.C. (Traditions 39).

There are certain indications of the tradition of female theatre as discussed by Bharata Muni in chapter twenty of *Natyashastra*. He describes different types of dramatic performance

and among them, *Lasya* is one of the minor forms. “The *Lasya* has a form similar to that of *Bhana*, and it is to be acted by one person” (Ghosh 377). There are twelve types of *Lasyas* which are to be acted out by women only and sometimes it is performed by a single female actor. For example, it is *Geyapada*, one of the types of *Lasyas*, “If a woman in a sitting posture sings a song in praise of lover, and delineates the same with a dance including gestures of her different limbs” (Ghosh 377). It is *Pushpagandita*, a form of *Lasya* “when a woman in a guise of man recites something sweetly in Sanskrit for the pleasure of her female friend” (378). History of male actors being disguised as a woman (female impersonation) to perform on stage is quite old in India which is still in practice, for example, the famous *Ramlila* of Ramnagar in Uttar Pradesh. It takes place once in a year in the month of October and all female characters are performed by male actors. On the other hand, it is mentioned in Bharata’s *Natyashastra* that female performers also used to disguise themselves as man and act on the stage which is an important fact to understand the history of female theatre. Such evidence makes it clear that female theatre tradition flourished in India since the fourth century B.C. and women are associated with dramatic arts since the theatre came into existence (Varadpande, Traditions 39).

Bharata wrote in *Natyashastra* that Brahma created *Apsaras* for practising *Kaisiki* (graceful) style which “cannot be practised properly by men except with the help of women” (Ghosh 8). The *apsaras* were skilled in the art of drama and their names were Manjukesi, Sukesi, Misrakesi, Sulochana, Saudamini, Devadatta, Devasena, Manorama, Sudati, Sundari, Vigadha, Sumala, Santati, Sunanda, Sumukhi, Magadhi, Arjuni, Sarala, Kerala, Dhriti, Nanda, Supushkala and Kalabha. By mentioning the names of *Apsaras*, Bharata made the female actresses of his time visible (qtd. in Varadpande, Traditions 35-36). The male actor was called *Nat* and the female actor, a *Nati*. The female actors of the era to which Bharata is referring to are said to have received training in theatrical arts like male actors by their *acharya* or *guru*. They were professional artists who work for the professional theatrical troupe.

In Kautilya’s *Arthashastra*, there is a reference of ‘*Stree Preksha*’ as Kautilya mentioned, “If a woman, without the permission of her husband, ventures out in the daytime to see a dramatic spectacle by women- *Stree Preksha*-, a fine of six *panas* should be recovered from her. A fine of twelve *panas* should be imposed if she attends *Purusha Preksha*- a performance by male actors. Double the amount should be imposed as a fine if she attends these shows in the night” (qtd. in Varadpande, Traditions 35). The term *Stree Preksha* was used in fourth century B.C. which becomes a significant evidence of female tradition in dramatic performance. It



suggests that certain kind of performances were exclusively performed by the female artists. In this way, *Lasya* is certainly a kind of *Stree Prekhsha*. There is a reference of *Stree Prekhsha* in Kalidasa's *Vikramorvasiya* also. The reference of *Purush Prekhsha* in *Arthashastra* gives the indication of the binary gender based categories in the performance tradition. The lawmaker Manu prescribed a fine for women who attend dramatic performances suggests that women were restricted to assemble in such gatherings to watch performances in public places. Women's mobility has been restricted from ancient times in public sphere.

Bharata says in *Natyashastra*, "The gods are never so pleased on being worshipped with scents and garlands, as they are delighted with the performance of drama" (qtd. in Varadpande, Traditions 45). While drama was seen as a form of worship to the God, the Supreme Being, the female actors have been seen as public women ironically. As written in *Arthashastra*, it was particularly *Ganikas*, *Dasis* and *Rangopajivanis* who used to receive training in performing arts and acting was one of the means of livelihood for them. Although dramatic performances are taken as a sacred ritual, as a form to worship God and drama is equated to 'yajna', women were restricted to attend the dramatic performances. The references of *Devadasis* are found in *Kamasutra*. They were associated with the theatrical activities. The tradition of *Devadasi* has witnessed decline after the eleventh century. As *Nati*, *Ganika* or *Devadasi*, female artists served Indian theatre for centuries but not given their due credit in the history and tradition of theatre (Varadpande, Traditions 35-45).

## Conclusion

Women, in dramatic roles, have been imagined and projected as playing gender normative roles according to the societal norms. They were largely categorised in the binary division as "good" woman in the role of an obedient wife, mother and "bad" woman in the role of mistress or sorceress. One of the earliest playwrights in Sanskrit drama, Bhas's women characters, as portrayed, fulfils the expectation of the society. Marriage was considered as an important step of life. In the fourth century, Kalidasa's plays like *Vikramorvasiya*, *Malvikagnimitra* and *Abhijnanasakuntalam* have women characters in their assertive self. Kalidasa believed in the complimentary role of man and woman in which both possess certain honour and dignity. For example, the character of Shakuntala was in possession of her individuality to some extent. Visakhdutta's *Mudra-Rakshasa* which is based on a historical theme has no place for a female character. In the eighth century, Bhavabhuti had captured the existing deteriorating condition of women. More or less women were straight-jacketed in their portrayal and that too, they were

visible in the plays based on love themes and familial relations. Moreover, the stage had been a restricted space for women during the time and boys of tender age were assigned to play female roles wherever required.

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