THE KARNATAK THEATRE

PROLOGUE: Some aspects of Drama and Theatre.

Before examining details that concern the theatre connected with drama in general could be briefly considered here in order to estimate its lofty place in literature and social life.

A collective Art: In general, drama which is the soul of the theatre is an art that developed through the times with the aid of other fine arts and therefore, it is called a collective art. It has also earned the reputation of being an ennobling art. In order to achieve its noble objective, it calls for the co-operation of Literature, Music, Painting, Sculpture and the Art of Acting that includes effective articulation and appropriate gesticulation. These different fine arts while trying to maintain their own individual complexion and inspiring values, co-operate with each other in order to bring out a new creation, the drama, which could produce a happy and homogeneous total impression. Each of these arts, in its individual capacity usually appeals to one of the senses alone, while in the collective form, all together, will produce the cumulative effect of a harmony that is at once rare and rejuvenating. Drama, therefore, has come to occupy a distinguished position of rare significance.

A Kavya: Ancient Indian literary critics paid a deserving compliment to drama when they said that it is the loveliest
of literary expediences that imparted light and delight. Kalidasa gave drama the status of a 'Yajna' coveted even by the gods. Drama attempts to entertain every individual however different his taste may be and aims to educate him indirectly through such entertainment. Drama is said to possess the essential qualities of a 'Kavya' as it invokes different sentiments with intensity. Drama seems to enjoy some advantages even over poetry which is recognised as 'kavya' in its purity. While poetry gives out a personal and imaginative picture, drama presents an objective and realistic picture of life. Poetical expression would be symbolic and therefore abstract; but drama aims to remain concrete, real and substantial. Drama makes up the limitation of the dry written word and animates it with a powerful medium through 'the art of acting'. Unlike poetry which is meant mostly for individual enjoyment, drama provides both for the individual and collective enjoyment. As a visual performance (Drishya Kavya) drama will perhaps be more appealing to the majority of the people than poetry, a 'Shravya Kavya'.

Drama aims at initiating a new experience, a real to every taste experience and a full experience and therefore, it brings about a blending in itself of various different arts judiciously proportioned. Drama can, in a couple of hours reveal the best

1. అన్ని లాముం కాలు రాతుదు (ః)
2. అన్ని లాముం కాలుయింది కాలు షాంతి గుహం దినం నాటకం కామం తుమించి నాటకం ప్రదర్శనం కామం తుమించి నాటకం ప్రదర్శనం కామం తుమించి నాటకం ప్రదర్శనం - I 4
of any fine art that has developed for hundreds of years.\(^1\)

Normally, no fine art should suffer at the hands of drama for, it calls for co-operation and not subordination. Thus, with the co-operation of literature and fine arts, drama becomes an enchanting and impressive 'kavya'; a kavya which, in the words of Kalidasa would successfully cater to the satisfaction of variegated tastes by portraying life in all its emotional aspects.\(^2\)

**The Fifth Veda:** In India everything noble is usually traced to the divine origin and is considered sacred. 'Natya Shastra', the earliest available treatise in Sanskrit on the science and arts of Indian dramaturgy, believed to have been written by a sage by name Bharata is considered to be the fifth Veda evolved from the four others. In the words of Professor Horowitz,

*Natyaveda, that is the Veda of the theatre sprang out of the divine thought and such was the will of the Lord, who made the fifth Veda, taking the quintessence of the drama out of the four Vedas - dance from the Siva, song from the Sama, mimicry from the Yajur and passion from Atharvan.\(^3\)* Though the vedic status provided to the 'Natya Shastra' put a veil of obscurity on its historicity,\(^4\) the suggestion regarding its composition would indicate that the original fundamentals of drama were 'dance' and 'music' which later came to be joined by 'mimicry' and 'passion' to make a fullfledged performance. It is significant however, that

---

1. \(\text{sic}\)
2. \(\text{sic}\)
4. \(\text{sic}\)
considerable importance is still given to dance and music in some of the folk modes of drama in different parts of India. In general, it looks as though gradually through the times the original components of drama — dance and music — receded into the background making way for the spoken words and the art of gesticulation. This is evidenced in the plays of Bhasa, Kalidasa and the later playwrights, but still, the emphasis of the Indian drama has always remained the same on its entertaining and elevating values.

In literature: Drama is assigned a distinguished position in literature obviously because of its universal appeal and objective entertainment. Some of the outstanding critics of the day including Professor Nicoll consider that it occupies a most elevated position in literature. "The drama is at-once the most peculiar, the most elusive and the most enthralling of all types of literature. It is so deeply associated with and dependent upon the whole material world of the theatre with its thronging crowds and its universal appeal; it lies so near to the deeper consciousness of the nation in which it takes its rise; ..... it is so social in its aims and in its appreciation; it is so prone to descend to the uttermost depths of buffoonary and of farce, and yet ascends so easily and so gloriously to the most magnificent heights of poetic inspiration, that it stands undoubtedly as the most interesting of all the literary products of human intelligence."  

A country like Greece or England could be particularly proud of her drama. It is said that the greatest glory of England is her literature and the greatest glory of her literature is her drama.\(^1\) Considering the lofty quality and merited variety, drama occupies a similar position in Indian literature also. Ancient Indian plays, particularly those of Bhasa, Kalidasa and Shudraka are read and staged over and again. In this regard, they are real pieces of literature for "the plays that we can never tire of seeing is literature.\(^2\)

Drama, which is but an aspect of the theatre, has to fulfill stringent conditions to become real literature. The playwright cannot afford to choose any subject and deliberate on it in any manner - as perhaps a poet or a novelist could do. He is bound down by a prescribed plan from the early times - as evidenced by 'Natyashastra'. It is not different in the west, for, Aristotle laid down the elements that were to make up the drama as "the fable, the character, the diction, the thought, the decoration and the music". The selection of the theme (fable) and its presentation must be such as to provide a feast to people of different tastes and belonging to different strata of society. It is only then that drama will have a universal appeal and will be literature in the real sense of the word.

**Drama as an Interpreter**: Drama is an effective and popular medium through which crusades have been carried against social

---

wrongs and immorality. In the hands of an imaginative and purposeful playwright like Ibsen, Chekov, Shaw, Tagore or Kailasam, the drama becomes a dynamic force to set people into action against prevailing social evils, wrongs and artificialities. On the Kannada stage itself, plays like 'Bahishkara' of Kailasam, 'Devadasi' of Hirannayya, 'Kapotanataka' of Sriranga, 'Uddhara' of D.R. Bendre and 'Garbhagudi' of Karanth have pricked the society to pondering over the prevailing unholy social evils. "In all ages" said Walter Scott, "theatrical art has kept pace with the improvement of mankind and the progress of letters and fine arts". Drama aims to interpret the salient objectives of the society, criticizing its obsolete and oppressive customs. It is an index of the social status of the people and their artistic tastes. Thus to the posterity, the drama interprets the social position and the artistic tendencies and tastes of a particular time and acts as its history.

An Institution of Education: Drama, is a "mirror in which nature is reflected", and while reflecting on the tastes and tendencies of a particular time - mostly the time of its writing - it aims to teach the truths and wisdom of life. Bharata, quotes the words of Brahma the Lord Creator who comforted the complaining Danavas saying, "Drama is not a piece of propaganda as the three worlds shall be described here;

There is religion for those who are religious minded;

love for those that are amorous minded; knowledge for

the ignorant, criticism for the learned, a delight for the Gods and a solace for the afflicted . . . . where else could you find reason with recreation, knowledge with attraction and morality with beauty? 

Those words are perhaps true of drama all over the world for things seen are mightier than things heard. Though with a note of exaggeration, the words of Henry Arthur Jones are not far from truth. He observes that "no book, other art, no more spoken address, no system of education can so instantly and vividly burn and brand the memory with the realities of life and leave them for ever stamped and pictured in the chamber of imagery as can an acted play . . . . . Beyond giving a deep and searching knowledge of the hearts of man and great truths of life, the stage has a higher and pleasanter task in teaching the good manners and the delicacies and amenities of social intercourse."

Drama is thus a potent institution that can make some gift to every person. "To the thoughtful and the reading man the drama brings, the life, the fire, the colour and the vivid instincts which are beyond the reach of study. To the common man . . . . it brings visions of glory and adventure of emotion and of broad human interest . . . . to the most torpid and unobservant, it exhibits the humours in life and the sparkle and fineness of language." 

educative and entertaining qualities of drama that
have earned for it an exalted position in literature
and society of every country from ancient days."

Indian view of the theatre: To the Indian, life in this
world is but a stepstone to achieving eternal salvation.
It is natural, therefore, that his emphasis is on moral and
pious living. The ancient Indian seems to have conceived
the theatre as a medium through which the ignorant common
man could be adequately introduced to the methods of moral
living. Thus, the theatre could do by interpreting through
entertainment the lofty morals and philosophy of our land.
The Theatre was to bring 'precious knowledge' down to the understanding of the common man releasing it from its technical
status of 'Shastra' and from the monopoly of the learned.
Theatrical art came to fulfil an ethical purpose bringing
through ideal models, all the moral and philosophical
teachings of the land and so, the stage came to be called
"the People's University". Like the temple, the stage came
to be recognised with imparting knowledge and unlike
the temple, it moved to the doors of the people which accounts
for its popularity. Theatre throbed the emotions, senti-
ments and ethical aspirations of the people and kept them
alive to the ideal living of a pious life in this world in
order to achieve the real goal. The Indian theatre presented
in symbols the three inherent qualities - 'Satva' (God),
'Rajas' (man) and 'Tamas' (devil) and by careful and convincing
process, presented methods of raising the animal-man to a status
of Godly-man. The emphasis always remained on the moral methods of living.

It is but natural that the society which learnt moral lessons from the theatre expected that the stage should itself be essentially moral, and when some times the artist became an unfortunate victim of the conflict between art and morality, the society spurned the stage and its artists. At one such odd corners perhaps, Kautilya looked down on the art of singing and dancing as the duties of shudras.\textsuperscript{1} Manu disqualified a bard singer and actor from taking part in holy ceremonies\textsuperscript{2} and for all times, the actor came to be dubbed as "ill-moral" ("Kushilava")\textsuperscript{3}. This heavy punishment accorded to the actor suggests the Indian views of the stage - as being fully moral, elevating and sacred; a view particularly of the conservative section of the society.

Fulfilment of the drama: Whatever be the type of the play, mythological, historical or social, and its form - prose or verse, its purpose remains the same. It is to impart education through entertainment. In order to maintain a good balance between the two, the stage has imposed several conditions on itself. The three Unities of drama conditioned the creative writing of the Greek. The rigidity of the Unities seems to

\textsuperscript{1} Kautilya - Artha Shastra. Prakarana I. Chap. 3.

\textsuperscript{2} Manusmriti. III. - 355.

\textsuperscript{3} There is another interpretation to say that the word 'Kushilava' came out of the names Kusha and Lava - the singers of the epic Ramayana.

have faded through the time but the *Unity of impression* has influenced the stage throughout. "To be strong and durable, an impression must be single". The *Unity of impression* which is an essential quality of drama depends on its theatricality; "a dramatic work must always be regarded from a double point of view: how far it is poetical and, how far it is *theatrical*". In order to make his play fully theatrical, the playwright will have to master the technique of the stage, and one will agree with Elizabeth Drew when she observes that "just as the medium of literature is words, the medium of drama is theatre. The writer has to master the technique of the playwright to become a dramatist and write to suit the stage. It is true that the drama can not exist fully without theatre and the theatre without drama". The dramatist has to produce the maximum impression within the minimum time at the disposal of his spectators, and so, it is a specialised writing, for he has to attend equally and proportionately to the importance of 'the theme, the characters, the diction, the thought, the decoration and the music'. The Indian dramatist, it may be said, has achieved all this and more like the Greek dramatist, by interpreting the religions, arts and philosophy of the country, through the theatre.

---

2. Shlegal : Quoted by Prof. A.Nicoll : *The Theory of Drama* p. 64.
Treatment: It is in the epics of our land, the playwright finds abundant material of rare lustre. He could treat the subject at his will and express it perhaps in Sanskrit, one of the most dignified and flexible of world's languages, but he cannot under any circumstances ignore his spectator. It is restraint that brings dignity to a play and like the teacher, the dramatist will have to be sympathetic to the sentiments of his spectator. It is only after establishing confidence and communion with the audience, the dramatist could take some liberties with the set notions and thoughts without meeting much of an offence. This earning of social sympathy is possible only when the playwright presents both sides of a question equally, leaving the liberty of the conclusion to the audience themselves. Preaching, thus will have to be subtle, imperceptible and indirect as much as it is convincing. Drama should achieve its fulfilment by coaxing the audience to a sublime state of what Sri. Bendre terms, 'conscious unconsciousness' and leave them free to reflect on or laugh at their own social evils and problems. An intelligent playwright always leaves the audience to come to their own judgement, but treats the theme in such a manner that they will invariably come to his judgement.

Production in good taste: The drama should testify to a "gentlemanly entertainment with the maximum of taste and minimum of vulgarity". This good taste depends both on

1. 'नृत्य मनोकथा समस्याओं से अलग होने सार्वजनिकीय', म. न. विजय, संवादपत्रीक 2. Herald Downs: Theatre Going, p. 22.
the literature of the drama and the method of presentation. Dignity and good taste in production is given particularly emphasis in Indian dramaturgy. Bharata lays down a code of conduct for the sake of dignified showmanship by ruling out of the stage scores of activities including long travel, murder, war, eating, bathing, toileting, sleeping and such other distasteful conduct. Some of them are in the interest of practical production of the play, which when unheed, will ruin the Unity of Impression.

Indian drama invariably aimed at the beautiful and not ugly; at the sublime and not the grotesque. The good standard set by the traditions of Sanskrit drama is a compelling influence on the modern theatre of the different regions including that of Karnatak. Even the flare for modern realism cannot afford to ignore good taste and its fulfilment is in the mental, moral and social elevation of the individual.

The audience: "A play without an audience is inconceivable", and it is the audience, the playwright and the artists have on mind in a performance. The ultimate aim of the dramatist is to be approved and honoured by the audience. If the playwright captures them with his convincing skill and portrayal, he leads them; if on the other hand, their critical faculties are superior and tastes better, he will have to follow their lead. It is in a way, a duel between the capacities of the playwright and his audience.
If the audience is enlightened, responsible and responsive, the theatre can be brilliant as an art and forceful as a medium. As a matter of fact, the audience owe an obligation to the theatre in the interest of larger and more ignorant masses. They help themselves if they would be responsible for the growth of the theatrical art and responsive to its teaching and frankness. For its own prosperity and brilliance, the theatrical art calls for fairmindedness on the part of the audience and sympathy on the part of the playwright. It calls also for the co-operation between the audience and the actor, the audience correcting the shortcomings of the actor and the actor enlightening the ignorant spectator. The critic comes in when the unenlightened audience would need a pointer, but more often than not, intuition wins the race against intellect, for it is the audience more than the critic that decides the merit of a play.

Patronage: It is said that the learned, the lady and the creeper cannot flourish without support. The saying could be true with regard to any art and artist, and drama can not be an exception. Arts and literature have flourished mostly under patronage of kings, nobles and institutions. Drama as the collective art is too costly an endevour, but what is luxury for the common man is the grace of the wealthy and royal. The theatrical art flourished mostly under

1. W. Darlington, a noted stage critic of England recalls a competition of stage plays in England when the audience voted a play the best, the very one that the critic had condemned threadbare.

the patronage of royal courts in ancient India. It is not improbable that the drama was almost a monopoly of the court for "even if 'natya' were to mean a dramatic performance in Kalidasa's opinion, it was a common entertainment to various people and not an entertainment to common people. Sanskrit drama did not belong to the common people." Till the birth of the professional theatre in the 1880s, even in the Kannada country it was the court theatre of Vijayanagar and Mysore that nourished the written drama, but in modern times, the theatrical art became commercial and flourished because of the patronage of the common people.

A note of dissension is often expressed against royal patronage fearing that the art would turn out to be a hand-maid of the patron. History also evidences efforts made to command the artist to the taste of the patron but more often than not, when the command compelled itself, the freedom loving artist rebelled and threw down the shelter in order to save the soul of his art. The royal patron invariably understood his artist and kept him in good humour allowing him considerable privileges. But for the munificent

2. Quite a number of examples could be cited in this regard. Some fanciful facts regarding the liberties enjoyed by the court poets and artists of Vijayanagar are cited by Prof. S.S. Malwad. (Karnatak Sahitya Samaskruti Darshana pp. 162-165). Regarding the great privileges enjoyed by actors and artists of Mysore, Sri. C.K. Venkataramaiah narrates interesting anecdotes. (Alida Kahaswamiyavaru. pp. 110-115.).
patronage extended by kings and emperors, every fine art would perhaps have had a stunted growth and undeveloped characteristics. In fact, the ups and downs in the history of arts and literature seem to be considerably due to the royal patronage or the lack of it, and drama is not an exception to this.

The Theatre: Drama needs a theatre for its production and in this singular and narrow meaning, the word 'theatre' would suggest a building or a structure meant essentially for the presentation of the drama. In its generic meaning - the meaning desired in this context - it would stand for something more than a mere structure, for it suggests an institution that embodies the various aspects connected with the art of the presentation of drama. If drama is a collective art, the theatre is a collective institution including the drama itself with the stage, the actor, the spectator and everything else connected with its presentation. The 'theatre' of a region or a country would consider the type of drama, the manner of its presentation, the tastes and tendencies of the audience and finally, the very evolution of the stage in that region or country. It would provide pictures of its different phases like the folk, the professional and the modern amateur stages, all perhaps existing together side by side. Theatre in this broad sense, would in addition, eloquently reflect on the trends of a particular time and the ideas of a people regarding the theatrical art. Thus, the scope of the theatre in its generic meaning would include the meaning and philosophy, the purpose and fulfilment of all the forms.
and types of dramatic art.

As in any other region of our country, the theatre of Karnataka presents three different phases in the folk, the professional and the amateur stages, which have succeeded each other chronologically, but by no means each on the grave of the other. Each in itself and all together built up the Theatre of Karnataka with a life force and continuity. When the three phases present themselves together, there is the theatre which would both depict and teach the love of liberty in man, his compassion for the suffering, his expression of suppressed emotions, his strong desire for self-improvement and his suspicion about the age worn traditions - all in the interest of building a happy future. For all these variegated human expressions there is perhaps no better medium than the theatre. With its impact of impression, the theatre has been and can yet remain "the University of the people" and "the temple of the people that bring to those that sit within the shelter of their homes, all the thought, all the glory of Universal experience and thought".

Drama is thus a typical collective art that is capable of catering to different tastes at the same time. It is a dynamic social force in the hands of a purposeful playwright who can bring about revolution in social ideas for the advancement of the society. While it enables

1. Smt. Sarojini Naidu: Opening speech in the first All India Drama Conference convened by the Amateur Dramatic Association of Bangalore in 1921. Published Reports.
the individual actor to realise his best through the release of his latent art and emotion, it ennobles and elevates the individual spectator. For its fulfilment, the theatre and depends on an understanding/purposeful playwright, talented artists, tasteful production, enlightened and responsive audience and lastly, patronage, immaterial be it royal, institutional or social. It is then, the theatre serves the society by initiating it to "new patterns of inner experience in which are purged and centigrated the emotions and ideas of the world of reality". It would then teach the salient truths of life and morals and make the society laugh at its own faults and follies. It would then introduce the society to new experiences of seeing life in different colours and appreciating the finer and delicate human values. It is in this capacity, the theatre is the true friend, philosopher and guide of both the individual and the community.