CHAPTER I

KARNATAK : The Land, the People and the Theatre.

The Land : The tract of land where Kannada speaking people have been living from pre-historic times is named 'Karnatak'. Though some of the Kannada kings and emperors held sway over the major portions of India in the days gone by, today, the political and geographical map of India does not bear evidence to a consolidated existence of the land of the people who, it is believed once built empires and preserved intact for centuries their own territorial boundaries. Karnatak is considered to signify that part of South India, which in spite of territorial divisions under different administrations houses the Kannada speaking people.

The tract of land between 11° and 19° north latitudes and between 74° and 78° east approximately, is the home of the Kannada speaking people. The area is about 55,000 sq. miles, covering about 500 miles North to South and about 250 miles from West to East. It has, as its linguistic boundaries, Maharastra in the north, Andhra in the east and Tamil Nadu and Kerala in the south while the Arabian sea touches its border in the west. Geographically, Karnataka covers the land between the rivers Krishna in the north and Kaveri in the south.

1. Chalukya Pulakesin II (early 7th century) was recognised as 'The King of India' by foreign countries like Persia. (History of Persia by Tabari. Quoted by Dr. S.Srikanta Shastri : Sources of Karnataka History p. 48) : Rashtrakuta Jagattunga Govinda IV, father of Nripatunga ruled over for 20 years a great empire that included North India. (Maliya Timmappayya : Kannada Nadoo Desi Sahityavoo. p. 2.)
Vertically divided, the land presents three regions, - the coastal region, the middle mountainous tract and the eastern table-land. Each of these divisions seems to have developed and preserved its own theatre with distinguishable features.

The Kannada land obviously had a great past and a profound culture, for, archaeologists and scholars like John Marshall, G.R. Hunter and Fr. Heras have identified the representative cultural, linguistic and art characteristics of the Dravidians of the South, particularly of the Central South, with that of the people of the Indus Valley. The Mohenjodaro and Harappa excavations have revealed, when compared with the archaeological findings at Chandravalli, Maski and Hirekal, a very close affinity between the cultures of the two 'settled peoples'. This suggests that the farthest northern boundary of the Kannada land was not always limited by the river Godavari though it had come to be so, by the 9th century as suggested by Nripatunga. The Chalukyan and Rastrakuta empires 'which included North India', further strengthens the view that Godavari was not always the northern boundary of the Kannada land. Even if the boundaries of the Kannada land did not extend up to the Indus Valley in pre-historic times, the close affinity between the people of Mohenjodaro and those of the central south, the main land of Karnataka, could be explained by noticing the possibility of hordes of southern people moving

1. Fr. Heras traces a very close relation between even the two languages when he observed that "the Proto-Dravidian language that was spoken in Mohenjodaro was nearer to Hale Kannada." Indian Review: July 1936, p. 14.
up into the north in pre-historic times to settle down in the bountiful valleys of the great Indus. Scholars guess further, that similarities in the settled cultures of Ur, Sumer, Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley, as revealed by the archaeological findings, would suggest that adventurous sections of the people of the Indus Valley moved from their home to the north-west even up to the end of the land, the present Spain, and "even travelled from Spain to far off Ireland".

Centuries after sections of the people of the Central South had settled in the Indus Valley, the Aryan invasion must have taken place. Aryans, a ferocious and nomadic tribe proved to be more than a match to these settled people leading a civilised and comfortable life. The Aryan onslaught started the people on their downward trek, and with every fresh horde of Aryans coming in, the northern boundary of these people's settlement must have receded. The trekking must have continued for centuries until at last the pressure of the incoming Aryans decreased. It was finally stemmed, possibly by the growing spirit of Dravidian resistance for the sake of survival. The centuries that followed witnessed a fusion of Aryans with the indigenous people, the conqueror still keeping his head high, and the vanquished trying to keep appearances by adopting the customs, modes of life and culture of the conqueror. It was possibly after this period of fusion and settlement that

the river Godavari was reckoned as the upper limit of
the tract of the people who spoke Kannada.

Sri. S.B. Joshi, examining the available documents
and the literary evidences in Kannada and Marathi throws some
more light on the story of the moving boundaries of Karnataka.
He suggests that the extensive northern boundaries of
Karnataka which had possibly included the Indus Valley sites
in the beginning of the Christian era shrank down to the river
Godavari by about the 9th century A.D.; still further south to
the river Bheema by about 1300 A.D.; still further down to
the river Tungabhadra during the 15th and 16th centuries and
finally, comprised of the area covered by the river Kaveri
itself during the 17th and 18th centuries with considerable
territorial convulsions. This long past of the land has
something very significant to do with the antiquity and deve­
lopment of its theatre.

On the eve of Indian Independence, the Kannada speak­
ing land was distributed under 22 different administrations
during the


2. Bombay Karnataka, (4 districts known as North Karnataka),
Mysore Karnataka (Mysore Dist.), Cantontment Karnataka
(Belgaum, Bangalore and Bellary with stationed British
troops), Coorg Karnataka, Hyderabad Karnataka, Hyderabad
Jagir, (Koppal and Gadwal) Mysore, Kolhapur State Jagir
(seven villages including Ichalakaranji and Kangala), Sangli,
Aundh, Miraj (Sr.) Miraj (Jr.), Kurandawada (Sr.) Kuranda­
wada (Jr.), Janjirwadi, Mudhol, Ramadurg, Akkolkot, Jath,
Sevemur and Sonkur.
After the remapping of India in the years that followed Indian Independence, the Kannada land today is mainly under the administration of Bombay, Madras, Mysore, Hyderabad and George. The Kannada speaking part of the country of the administration of Bombay is called North Karnataka, that under the administration of Madras is called South Karnataka with Mysore remaining as the central and independent seat of the Kannada speaking people, while the Kannada area under Hyderabad is known as Nizam Karnataka. Each of these regions have with perhaps the exception of Nizam Karnataka, seems to have evolved a theatre of its own on almost original grounds inspite of the common cultural, artistic and aesthetic tendencies.

The people: Some of the earliest references to the people of Karnataka are found in their 'Sabha Parva' and 'Shishma Parva' of Mahabharata. These references are both to the people and the territory they lived in; but as territoriality is a later conception in the history of mankind, racial nomenclature was the usual manner of reckoning like 'Kuru', 'Pandu', 'Kosalas', and 'Karna' and 'Nata'. The inhabitant place even the spoken language often derived their names from the people themselves like 'England' and 'English' denoting the land and the language of the 'Angles'. A similar approach would interpret the name Karnataka as the land which housed the people recognised by the name 'Karnata'. 'Karnatas' themselves are probably

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the outcome of the fusion of two races by names 'Karnas' and 'Natas'. The former race is also known as 'Karnas' and 'Kallas'. This conclusion of the formation of a new people called 'Karnatas' out of the amalgamation of 'Karnas' and 'Natas' is arrived at by Sri. Rajawade who bases his argument on the evidence of Manu, who, while describing the 'Vratya Kshatriyas' of his time mentioned as the two races separately.

The two races are referred to in the Matsya Purana also. The word 'Nata' would be of particular significance in the present context if it ever stood to suggest the profession of the race or even an element of its culture which had something to do with dance or acting to indicate at the root-word 'Nat'.

Archaeological findings however, indicate that this new race - ambitious and enterprising - probably moved up north and settled in the Indus Valley; and a section of it moved on further to Spain and to 'far off Ireland'. When this movement of the people is reconsidered, many a pre-historic finding and the question of the relation between the Aryan and the Dravidian cultures and arts including the theatre will perhaps permit a new and near about interpretation. It is so because the available suggestions indicate that the pre-Aryan people who had settled in the Indus Valley had something very intimate to do with South India. These people cannot simply be termed as 'Dravidians' or 'Proto-Dravidians' as that would

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2. °
naturally prompt a further question as to the stock of Dravidians they came from. Here, the absence of any creditable evidence suggests the possibility of the people of the present Kannada speaking land also forming the bulk of that stock.

This inference gets some support when it is noticed that it is the Kannada and Telugu languages more than Tamil that have been subjected to closer 'Aryanisation'. Customs of the people speaking these languages bear evidence to the impact of Aryan influence. This indicates that the people of the South who came under the influence of Aryans or who combated with them for survival, most probably were the people that spoke Kannada and Telugu languages or at least their close variants. The inference that these people had settled in the north with a profession (Agriculture) and civilisation of their own even before the Aryan advent is amply substantiated by some of the place-names of North India ending with a suffix like 'Uru', 'Patti' or 'Hatti' (the present Guwahati may have been 'Go Hatti') which are essentially 'desi' (or Dravidian) according to Sri. S.B. Joshi. They indicate that those places in North India were essentially the settlements of Dravidian agriculturists, for, Aryans who were nomadic in nature could not have named the places suggesting permanent settlements.

These evidences suggest that even before the advent of Aryans, the inhabitants of South India had a settled living

with a civilised conception of life. At the times of Mohenjo-
daro, the people of the Kannada land were perhaps known as
'Kanner' as suggested by Fr. Heras. They were agriculturists
who held the bull - the mainstay of agriculture - in high
esteem like the Indus Valley people themselves.1 Their cities
were probably well known for, Ptolemy, the geographer who
visited India in about 150 A.D. refers to places that can be
identified in Karnatak.2 The cities of ancient Karnatak had
probably fully developed with a well established commerce
inviting distant countries like Rome and Greece to come to the
shores of India for trade. Dr. R. Shama Shastrī substantiates
this inference when he suggests that Kannada words are found
mixed in a Greek farce of 2nd century B.C., discovered in
Egypt.3 Excavations at different sites in South India like
Maski and Chandravalli reveal that the ancient people who
lived therein centuries ago, led a planned life of good taste.
These evidences go to suggest that the inhabitants of the Cen-
tral South were an ambitious, adventurous, civilised and
prosperous people. Their comfortable living must have been

2. 'Badiamaioi' (Badami), 'Inde' (Indi), 'Modogoulla' (Mudgal),
'Passage' (Palasige) etc.
firm in his belief that the words suggested by Dr. Shama
Shastrī are Kannada words. He also believes that the scene
of action of the Greek farce was Malpe, the harbour near
Dr. S. Srikanta Shastrī identifies 31 words, groups of words
and sentences - all in Kannada - in the said Greek farce.
(Sources of Karnatak History, I, pp. 5-9).
fruitful in leading them to create their own arts and crafts.

A single instance of excavations at Chandravalli reveals that those people of a great antiquity had passed through different stages of civilisation and by the beginning of the Christian era they had come to establish an intimate commercial contact with countries like Burma, China, Italy and Greece as revealed by the coins discovered. They seem to have had a commendable aesthetic sense. The figures of 'dancing girls' discovered at Chandravalli speak volumes of their arts and it is but natural that they should have had some means of theatrical entertainment for "the art of imitation is inherent in human being."

The Theatre: Love of the dramatic being inherent and instinctive in man, the theatre is a universal institution and it has passed almost the same stages in its developmental career in all the countries. This being the general basis, it could be said that Karnataka must have had a definite and independent form of theatre of its own. During the long process of contacts, and sometimes conflicts with the oncoming extraneous cultures and arts, the indigenous theatrical art of the Karnataka land must have had a chain of exchanges of the salient aspects of the art for mutual enrichment. Immaterial whether it is independently evolved or is the result of a beautiful blending of salient components borrowed, one

1. Dr. N.H. Krishna; Karnataka Poorva Charitre. 1953 pp. 25-34.
2. Ibid. p. 29.
could mark the existence of a theatre which can be exclusively
recognised as the theatre of Karnatak; a theatre that represents
the people and the individualistic theatrical art of the Kan­
nada land.

Taking stock of the available evidences, it could b
said that during the last about hundred years, the theatre
of Karnatak stands in relief as an independent and generous
institution of art when compared with the theatres of
the other regions of South India. As potent living influence,
it seems to have inspired into existence theatres of the neigh­
bouring regions like that of Maharashtra, Andhra and Tamil Nadu
providing them with forms and fashions.

On Maharashtra: The professional theatre of Maharashtra which
celebrated its centenary eight years ago, seems to have drawn
its entire inspiration from the folk-modes of the theatre of
Karnatak, for, troupes of the folk artists of North Karnatak
which were frequently visiting Maharashtra drew the attention
of the region. The Yakshagana troupe of Kirki (North Karnatak)
which visited Sangli in 1842 on the invitation of its Chief,
Srimant Appa Saheb Patwardhan, impressed the Raja and the peo­
ple so much that they considered it becoming to mode the Mar­
athi stage on the performances of the Kannada Yakshagana, in
order to make it more sustaining than the prevailing folk­
patterns of 'Tamasha' and 'Lalit'. Vishnu Dhave, a gifted

1. A fuller account is provided by Sri. Muliya Timmapayya.
Parti Subba, p. 123. An idol of 'Krishna' said to have
been presented by the Sangli chief to the troupe at that
time is still preserved by the Hasyagar family of Kirki.
clerk of the Raja of Sangli, under instructions from his Chief, wrote his first play "Seeta Swayanvaru" possibly before 1845. Encouraged by its success, Bhave wrote 'many more' plays in Marathi exactly on the pattern set by the Kannada Yakshagana and staged them in Bombay in 1852.

"Their typical play was much admired by the Governor's Secretary. Religious spirit, 'scientific' singing by a sort of 'chorus' in the midst of dialogue by other characters, crude dances and quaint costumes and make-up and certain skilful sword play were their outstanding qualities. With all their defects, Bhave's pauranic productions had a fixed system, some dignity and intense musical charm." Even in the details of production, the Bhave performances closely resembled the present Yakshagana for "nearly from the beginning to the end he (Sutrakshara) had to stay on the stage. At his invocation the blessing of the elephant headed god Ganapati was exhorted and also of Saraswati, the Goddess of Learning.

... Most of the singing was done by the Sutrakshara and it was his duty to introduce to the public in some way or the other the actor who entered the stage." Very soon Bhave came to be imitated.

1. Vishnupant was the son of Amritarao Bhave, a military officer of the Sangli State. When yet a boy of 12, Vishnupant "made out a clay model of Sangli town" and toys like Mickey-mouse "that could act in whatever way he desired" H.N. Dasgupta : The Indian Stage - Vol. III, p. 194.
"The first company was that of Vishnupant Bhaye. The idea was picked up by many and shortly afterwards new companies were floated in towns around Sangli... All these companies used to stage only mythological dramas and the nature of the performances was also similar... All these companies used to have only one curtain..."

But soon, quite some innovations were introduced by Maharastra and with a magic touch, the performance was remodelled and revitalised. Shantakavi, one of the first Kannada playwrights of Karnataka in the 19th century summed up the innovations made by Maharastra into the Kannada 'Bhagawata' performances, as the introduction of a number of modern musical instruments, musical interludes between scenes, curtains, scenery, sword fight and some new characters.

Later in 1878-79, Anna Kirloskar of Burlaosur (Belgaum dist.) who was fully conversant with the Kannada language inaugurated a new era on the stage of Maharastra by translating into Marathi, 'Shakuntala' of Kalidasa. His translation is said to be deeply obliged to the Kannada version of 'Shankutala' done by his friend Churamuri Seshagirirao in 1869. Anna Kirloskar, in addition, borrowed tunes of his 'Shakuntala' from the 'Javadi', 'Krishna Parijata' and


2. 'संत सृजनानाय कविकल्पं कल्मात्मके अनुभूतिः' रत्नसागर, राजगुप्त, निष्कृती, निशान, निशाद, नागपुर आदि
   - राजसूर, अगलका, अग्निनाथ, अलंकार केले ज्ञा ज्ञानुक आदि, ललित आदि आदि आदि...
'Dasara pada' of Karnataka as is acknowledged by him in the first prints of his plays. The genius of Maharashtra soon gave a great impetus to its theatre. Coupled with munificent royal patronage, the Marathi theatre grew into full stature by 1880, creating a vogue so impressive and influential that the Kannada professional stage accepted it as a model to copy. It is but natural that the brilliance of the Marathi stage almost completely obscured its original contact with the folk theatre of Karnataka. In recent times during the professional phase of its history, the Marathi stage gained a great glory because of the enlightening contributions of eminent playwrights like G.B. Deval, S.K. Kolhatkar, R.P. Khadilkar, R.G. Gadkari, N.C. Kelkar, Mama Warerkar and P.K. Atre and also of the great galaxy of brilliant stage artists including Ganpatrao Joshi, Balwantrao Jos, Boda, Balgandharva and Keshavrao Date. The success of the Marathi stage and its glory is all the more due to the Maharashtrian love of experiment and genius in adaptability and preservation.

On Andhra: It is almost the same thing to say regarding the influence of the Kannada theatre on the professional stage of Andhra. About 25 years ago, Sri. T. Raghavachari, an eminent stage artist of Karnataka and Andhra observed:

"... In the Telugu speaking countries there was no theatre fifty years ago in the sense in which we

understand the term today . . . . only there were a few groups of players called "Bhagavataluvaru" (synonymous with the 'Bhagavata' of Yakshagana in Karnataka) who visited important centres and exhibited in actions and dialogues a few incidents from Sri Krishna's life as described in Sri Bhagavatam . . . . the actors were not more than four or five, the dialogue was long and burdened with innumerable "verses and songs which were explained in prose" 1. The description closely compares with 'Yakshagana which is now accepted to be essentially representing the Karnataka Folk theatre.

The composition of the first Telugu drama proper must go to the credit of Sri D. Krishnamscharlu of Bellary who later came to be hailed as 'Andhranataka pitamaha'. It is interesting to note that he wrote his first play 'Swapna Aniruddha' in Kannada stating in the preface of the play, that though he was not proficient in the Kannada language or literature, he was obliged to write out his first drama in Kannada as his friends expressed the opinion that Kannada was the only language suitable for the stage 2. This


2. Telugu language owes considerably to Kannada language and literature. The well known Telugu pundits and poets had great regard to Kannada language. Shrinatha, a court poet of Vijayanggar wrote that Sanskrit was relished by the learned, Telugu was pleasant for talking and that 'Karnata Bhasha' (Kannada) was THE language for poetry. R.Y. Darwarkar : Kannada Bhasha Shastra - p. 194.
indicates an already flourishing Kannada theatre. It is a fact, however, that the 'Rangacharlu Natak Company' and 'Sakuntala Karnataka Natak Sabha' both of Mysore had paid a number of visits to Bellary early in 1880s/Sri. Krishnarao might have seen their performances at Bellary.

The description indicates again, that the literary merit of the Kannada stage was highly impressive as early as in 1880, but it is possible that their production of the play was not as elegant as the Marathi plays of the time.

Dr. Narayenarao, while tracing the relation between the theatres of Karnataka and Andhra observes that an enthusiastic troupe of Dharwar staged plays in Andhra in the year 1884 and 'captured the country with their specialized technique of production and thus inspired the theatre of Andhra'.

This troupe was obviously the 'Tantupurastha Natak Kendali' of Dharwar referred to by Mudavidu Krishnarao as having toured Maharashtra, Gujarat, Vidarbha, Madhya Pradesh and Andhra under the leadership of Bhimacharya Kri and Gopinath Joshi.

"About 1880" says Sri. T. Raghavachari, "...something occurred in the Telugu countries with the advent of a set of players from Maharashtra, who for the first time


3. This troupe was possibly the famed 'Sanglikar Company' of Vishnupant Shave which had turned professional after the death of its royal patron and toured frequently in Karnataka and Andhra.
in the Telugu country used fashionable stage - proper." This naturally inspired the Telugu country and initiated its dramatic enthusiasts to have a professional theatre of their own. Whether the Telugu theatre drew its inspiration direct from Kannada or through the Marathi theatre, which was itself inspired by the Kannada theatre earlier, the fact remains that the Kannada stage (professional in particular) was fully flourishing and to a considerable measure, responsible for inspiring the Telugu stage into existence.

On Tamilnad: The theatre of Tamilnad had an active folk stage and performances called "Terukkuttam", very similar which in nature to the Kannada Yakshagana, were frequently staged particularly on festive occasions like 'Pongal'. "One of the most ancient and fascinating stories acted on the stage for centuries is that of 'Nalatangi'." As early as in the eleventh century, a Chola king (Rajaraja I) "built a beautiful Shaiva temple in his own name and instituted a dramatic troupe which had to enact regularly, every year the "Rajaraja Natka". Similarly the temple has always remained the platform for the Yakshagana performances in the coastal tract of Karnatak and every temple is invariably associated with a troupe of Yakshagana artists.

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3. The prominent among them today is the Manjunatha temple of Dharmsasthal to which the well known troupe of K. Vittalashastri, the Manjunatha Yakshanataka Mankali is devoted.
The earliest written form of the drama was called 'Hadagam' in Tamilnad, but as V.V. Srinivasa Iyengar clarifies, the name did not suggest any written form of the drama as is understood today. It was only a 'Kavya' or 'Prabandha' like the Kannada Yakshagana having a string of verses with no written dialogues. The very first written drama in the current sense of the term was written and staged in Tamilnad by Govindaswamiraja of Karnataka who came originally from Maharashtra. His play contained a number of compositions in Sanskrit. The real inauguration of the Tamil theatre was made by Bellary Krishnamacharya, author of 'Swaga Aniruddha' and the father of the Telugu drama who went in about 1883 to Tamilnad with his troupe 'Sarasa Vinodini Nataka Mandal' and staged a number of plays in Telugu. These plays were enthusiastically received and Sri. Sambandham, "Father of the Tamil Drama" who was fully influenced by these performances started writing plays in Tamil. The salient features of the Kannada theatre were thus carried by the Telugu stage to inspire into existence the Tamil drama. It is evident therefore, that at least to start with and at the initial stages the professional theatres of Maharashtra, Andhra and the Tamilnad owed considerably to the flourishing and inspiring theatre of Karnataka. Later, after 1880s, during the professional phase up to 1940 approximately, a close contact was

2. V.V. Srinivasa Iyengar. Ibid. p. 116.
maintained by the regional theatres of different languages, though as professional rivals. Professional troupes freely visited the regions of each other with mutual influence on the modes of presentation and exchange of dramatic themes. The 'give and take' between the regional theatres became inevitable owing to close contacts and mutual visits.

The theatre of Karnataka which had originally supplied the 'elan vital' to the theatres of other regions, later received from them specialised patterns of presentation like stage music, scenery, settings and refined methods of acting, particularly from the theatre of Maharashtra.

In order to estimate the personality of the Karnataka theatre which influenced others into activity, it would perhaps be desirable from the point of view of an academic study, to divide the Kannada land into three main parts where-in the theatre has manifested itself in different branches. These divisions would be Bombay Karnataka (North Karnataka) Madras Karnataka (South Karnataka) and Mysore. Though these divisions are too limited to cover the entire Kannada speaking area, they could be accepted as it is mostly under these divisions, the growth of the Karnataka theatre be traced with distinct and almost independent feature - though with mutual influences in the later phases. The theatre seems to have developed differently in its three branches cited above owing to the dictation of different climatic and geographical

1. In Hyderabad Karnataka, Koppal has some dramatic traditions, but obviously owing to the influence of the visiting Marathi troupes - which could be considered later.
environment, inevitable contact with the art and culture of the particular division and also action and interaction with the language, culture and arts of the neighbouring region like Maharashtra, Andhra, Tamilnad or Kerala. North Karnataka and South Karnataka virtually form one continuous stretch of land and remained even administratively undivided until 1862. From the point of view of the evolution of the theatrical art, the entire coastal tract could be reckoned as one region, which evolved the indigenous folk mode of the famed dance dramas, 'Yakshagana'. The eastern plains formed another tract of land with a totally different environment which originated the professional theatre and nursed it into great prosperity. Thirdly the table-land of Mysore evolved its own theatre, springing into existence on account of royal patronage, a tradition preserved in the palace of Mysore from the times of Vijayanagar. Though the divisions evoked their theatres on individual lines, an inevitable mutual influence could be traced between them. It was the folk theatre of the Kannada coast that influenced in a large measure, the springing up of the professional theatres of North Karnataka and of Mysore - as could be considered later, and then some of the trained professional troupes of the latter regions exchanged frequent visits and together visited the coastal tract to inspire into existence an indigenous professional phase in the history of the theatre there.

Thus, the theatre of Karnataka has remained a potent Institution of Art with three branches developed and
specialised in the three different regions of the land. It includes different phases like the folk, the professional and the modern amateur theatres. In modern times, its growth strikes as direct and conspicuous. Its indigenous and independent characters and patterns project a premise of its antiquity - which could be considered at length in the foregoing pages.