

## Introduction.

The *Rās Lilā* theatre of Vrindavan (Vrindaban, Brindavan 90 K.M. southeast of Delhi) is one of the famous forms of traditional Indian theatre, which enacts episodes from the story of Hindu mythical God *Kṛṣṇa*. *Rās Lilā*-s have attracted the attention of scholars both such as Norvin Hein (1972), Vasant **Yamadagni** (1980), Shyamnarayan Pandey (1980), **Ramnarayan** Agrawal (1981), John.S. Hawley (1981& 1992), Varadapande (1982) and Prabhudayal **Mital** (1983), who have done several kinds of analysis about them.

### The problem of research.

Presently, the following features of *Rās Lilā* performances are being taken up for study : (i) The performers perform and the audience watch the *Rās Lilā*-s over and over and again and again without showing a pinch of feeling of monotony or boredom. (ii) The *Rās Lilā* performers perform as 'playfully' and as involvedly as children do. (iii) In spite of absence of any extraordinary quality of acting talent, these performers succeed in transporting the audience into the realm of the content of their **performances**. (iv) The whole performance is, in fact, a collective participation by the audience-crowd, producers, directors and the actors. The demarcation between the performers and the audience is almost invisible as the audience converse directly with the directors and the performers on the stage and vice versa, apart from the audience moving on to the stage, participating in the stage **activities**. (v) Audience break into uncontrollable wailing with incessant **outpouring** of tears over the cheeks. At times they shout loudly with raised hands at the **appearance** of *Kṛṣṇa* and other characters, uttering their names.

These features **of** *Rās Lilā* theatre distinguish it from other kinds of theatre. Here, an attempt has

been made to get an insider's view of the participants of *Rās Lilās*-s, to comprehend these features. It may be noted that the insiders do not like the use of the word Drama or *Nāṭaka* in reference to their theatre and prefer to call it as *Lilā*. For example, Fateh Krishna, the director of a leading troupe of *Lilā* performances, argues, as long as *Lilā* is considered as Drama or a *Nataka* one will not be able to understand it. Neither will one be able to do any research on *Lilā*. It can be seen that for *Svami Fateh Krishna*, the notion that Drama and *Nāṭaka* are just the English and Hindi words for any theatre and thus can be used to talk about US is wrong' (Fateh Krishna, Director of *Svami Fateh Krishna Ras Mandali*). Taking a cue from the words of *Svami Fateh Krishna*, it makes sense to look at (i) the Western theatre, beginning from Classical Greek Tragedy to the modern experimental plays; (ii) traditional Indian theatre, covering mostly the Sanskrit plays composed by poets like Kalidasa, Bhasa and so on; and (iii) *Ras Lilā*-s of Vrindavan, as different kinds of theatre, and to identify 'Drama,' 'Nataka' and 'Lilā' as three different categories covering three kinds of theatre, respectively. A careful scrutiny reveals that more appropriate word for traditional Indian theatre would be *Natya* rather than *Nāṭaka*. The word *Natya* in the most popular sense appears as a reference to traditional Indian Dance. But a knowledge of Sanskrit poetics, especially, of works like Bharata's *Natya Śāstra*, will help in understanding that the word *Natya* refers to the traditional Indian theatre which includes dance elements and has a Vedic cultural background. Though what Fateh Krishna expressed is the articulation of an insider and not the sophisticated analytical statement made by a researcher, it gives a hint that to be true to an insider's point of view and to get its complete understanding, *Lilā* must be viewed in contrast to 'Drama' and 'Nataka.'

In fact, such an insider's view is well articulated in a theoretically elaborate form by scholars such as Rupa **Goswami** (1489 - 1564) in *Bhakti Rasamrta Sindhu* and *Ujjvala Nīlamanī* and Jiva **Goswami** (1503 - 1598) in his books *Sat Sandarbha* and so on. These authors and books belong to *Gauḍīya Vaisnava* tradition, a particular tradition among several traditions participating in *Lilā* (for example, Fateh Krishna belongs to *Nimbarka* tradition). Rupa **Goswami** and Jiva **Goswami** were the disciples of the

famous saint Chaitanya (1486-1523) and developed *Gaudiya Vaisnava* philosophy<sup>1</sup> based on his teachings. *Gaudiya Vaisnava* poetics of *Lilā* themes, which helps in understanding the *Rās Lilā* performances takes from where the *Nāṭya tośt\** ends, in the sense that it presupposes the knowledge of the *Nāṭya Śāstra* discourse from its readers and runs into polemics with it compelling a clear distinction between *Natya* and *Lilā*. An uncritical application of the category of *Natya* to the *Lilā* theatre of Vrindavan leads to confusion, because though *urn* shares the Vedic background of *Natya*, it has its locale in the *bhakti* (spiritual devotion) culture (see Ch.3).

Looking at the *Nāṭya Śāstra* from the point of view of philosophy behind it reveals that there are several philosophical problems in the interpretations of this work. Traditional scholars who follow different schools of philosophy accepted or rejected a separate status for the aesthetic pleasure given by *Lilā* which is called *bhakti rasa*. Review of these polemics have been done by modern scholars such as VRaghavan (1975) by not delving into the different philosophical backgrounds of both *Natya* and *Lilā*. But when the philosophical backgrounds of the different stances are taken into consideration each of these stances can be found to be correct from within the background on which the stance is based.

A new reading of *Natya Śāstra* from the point of view of philosophy behind it also reveals that there are several philosophical problems in the English interpretations of poetics of the *Natya Śāstra*. Scholars like R.L. Singal (1977) have viewed *Natya* as just a kind of theatre like Drama. This is evidenced by their uncritical application of the elements of *Natya* such as *vibhāva* and *sānta rasa*, among others, to Drama (see 2.6.3). Though the word Drama is often used to describe a play, a critical overview reveals its locale in the Western literature and Western culture. Hence it can not be uncritically applied to describe either plays like Kalidasa's *Abhijñāna Śākuntalam* or to *Lilā-s*.

Similarly, instances of reading the elements of Drama into *Us* can also be noted in the English

interpretation of the themes of *Uli* which is the content of fib *Uli*\*. An instance of uncritical application of the notions of Greek Drama to *Līlā*-s is found in Sudhir Kakar's (1981) psychoanalysis of *Līlā*-s (the pastimes of *Kṛṣṇa*, which are the content of *Rās Līlā*-s). Kakar applies psychoanalysis to infer the impact of descriptions of the activities of *Kṛṣṇa* on the readers/audience. He considers *Kṛṣṇa*'s dalliance with the cowherd damsels of Vrindavan (see 4.3.5.2.II) to be libidinous.<sup>1</sup> He further asserts that the activities of *Kṛṣṇa* propose utter 'freedom' and 'instinctual' exhilaration,<sup>1</sup> which, for him, is akin to the Dionysian element in Greek mythology (also associated with Greek Drama). He does not take into account the fact that within *Līlā*-s, there is textual evidence to show that the essential feature of the concept of Love in *Līlā*-s is its trans-erotic quality (see 3.5 & 4.3.5.2.II), while the Dionysian element found in Greek Drama is predominantly passionate. This example clearly illustrates the theoretical problems that can emerge from not taking into account the distinctions that exist in the worldviews inherent in the *Līlā* and Drama.

All this leads to see that as a conceptual category, *Līlā* needs to be distinguished from Drama on the one hand and from *Nāṭya* on the other. The categorization of theatre helps, not only to understand *UIS* from the insider's point of view, but also to be close to the truth of what *Uli* is. The present dissertation is an attempt to show how this justification is available in the theories of Drama, *Nāṭya* and *Līlā* and in the reality of the *US* tradition in Vrindavan. This distinct understanding of *urn vis-a-vis* *Nāṭya* and Drama answers the question about the distinctive features of *UIS* such as repeated performances of the same themes, total dissolution of performer-audience demarcation and intense emotional expressions and so on. It also helps to trace the sources of confusion which led to seeing 'instinctual' exhilaration<sup>1</sup> and so on, into *US* (see 4.3.5.3.II).

### **Previous scholarship.**

The scholars mentioned above tried to give a picture of *US* in various different ways. The origin, the

performance structure, the literature, the contribution of poets, music and other aspects of *Rās* LAM have been discussed by Vasant Yamadagni (1980), Ramnarayan Agrawal (1981), Prabhudayal Mital (1983) and others. Norvin Hein in his book, *The m.mr-le plays of Mathura* (1972), has dealt with the different kinds of theatrical performances that take place around Mathura (which is the **district** in which Vrindavan is located) and translated the *Uddhava Us* which is one of the most prominent *Līlā-s*. John.S. Hawley translated four major *Līlā-s*: The Birth of Krishna (Ch.2), The theft of the flute (Ch.3), The Great Circle Dance (Ch.4), and The Coming of Akṛūr (Ch.5), with an introduction to each chapter in his excellent work At Play with Kṛṣṇa : Pilgrimage Dramas From Brindavan (1981). He also separately dealt with one of the most popular themes from the *Līlā* stories, *Kṛṣṇa* as the Butter Thief, in his book. Krishna : The Butter Thief. Varapande in his book The Krishna Theatre (1982), discussed *Rās Līlā* theatre, placing it under the broad category of theatre with *Kṛṣṇa* themes in different places in India. He also translated a *US* called *Sri Kēvat Līlā* (the pastime of boatman). All the scholars mentioned above, have attempted to take meticulous care in their translation, not to miss the delicate aspects of the **worldview of *Līlā-s***.

David Haberman (1988), who observed that the *Gauḍīya Vaṣṇava* poetics of the *Līlā* themes presupposes the knowledge of the poetics of *Natya*, has done a penetrating analysis of *bhakti rasa* vis-a-vis *Natya rasa* in his book Acting as a mode of salvation : Rāqānuqā Bhakti Sādhana. But as he limited his scope to the study of *bhakti* in *Gauḍīya Vaisṇava* tradition, he has not dealt with the philosophical foundations of the poetics of *Natya* and *Līlā*. Since the aim of the present work is to show the difference between traditional Indian theatre as known from the *Natya Śāstra* and *UIS* theatre of Vrindavan, which is a product of *bhakti* traditions, this work analyses those foundations.

Though Agrawal and others have, to some extent, dealt with the topics like the emotional experience of the audience of *Līlā*, they have not elaborately discussed the nature of this experience and the reason behind such an intense experience. Many more questions such as the

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difference between the emotional experience of *Līe. Nāṭya* and Drama, the cultural background of those who participate in these *Līlā*-s, which makes such an experience possible, are left behind. This created the scope for the above mentioned intellectual journey from *Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava* poetics, through the poetics of *Nāṭya* (centered around *Nāṭya Sum*), to the theories of Drama. The forthcoming discussion is the end product of such a journey.

### Methodology.

There are several ways in which *Drama*, *Nāṭya* and *Līlā* can be compared. Any comparison needs a common axis. The common axis of comparison that can be found suitable for the comparison of these forms is the (issue of) the presentation of the 'self' and its 'fulfilment.'

The word 'self' is popular in English literature on Indian philosophy as a translation to the word *ātman*, which is a metaphysical and spiritual notion. But, here, it is being used in the sense in which Irving Deer and Harriet A. Deer, in their book on Drama, *Selves : Drama in perspective* (1975), have used : the human personality/ human individual/ human subject. Interestingly, this notion of human subject has a clear elaboration in the philosophy of *Nāṭya* and *Līlā* too and along the way of this elaboration, has a conceptual link to the above mentioned idea of self (*ātman*) as a metaphysical and spiritual concept. This makes the notion of self, the best choice for the axis for the comparison of *Drama*, *Nāṭya* and *Līlā* being taken up here.

For the purpose of fulfilling the requirements of performance study and ethnography of the topic of the present research, a purely fieldwork based qualitative empirical method of data collection, observation and analysis has been adapted. The present study is done through a stay in Vrindavan for more than three hundred days spreading over a period of three years, closely examining the Vrindavan culture (popularly called as *braj* culture) in general and the *Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava* culture in

particular, by participating in and observing the performances and noting their nuances and at the same time taking guidance from the great *Gauḍiṣya Vaisnava* guru (spiritual teacher) Haridas Shastriji and the modern *Gauḍiṣya Vaisnava* scholar Satyanarayanadas and several other scholars

The stay includes following the daily routine of the *Bṛāṇvāsī-s* (the inhabitants of Vrindavan) and participating in the *Līlā-s* along with the traditional audience by becoming completely one among them. Nevertheless, this participant observation is optimally complemented by the non-schedule based interviews conducted with the performers, the organisers of the performances, patrons and the audience. The descriptive categories of *US* have been gathered emically from the participants of the *Līlā-s*. The texts of the *Līlā-s* are inevitably collected from the performance context.

#### End note :

Since Chaitanya took birth in Bengal which is also called *Gauḍya* region, his philosophy is called *Gauḍiṣya* (Bengal) *Vaisnava* philosophy.