CHAPTER - II

DRAMATIC SHOWS IN ANCIENT INDIA
It seems it has been universally agreed that the Sanskrit theatre could never claim a place among the forms of popular entertainment in ancient India. It has been repeated more than once that, throughout its long history, it continued to nestle in the cozy shelter of princely palaces whose boundaries it never overstepped to reach the common masses. A careful examination will however reveal to us that this is a hasty judgement belied by facts. It must of course be confessed that from the very early times Sanskrit drama enjoyed the patronage of kings and that the most of the famed dramatists were protégés of powerful monarchs of their times. It is also true that a good many of the extant Sanskrit plays of outstanding merit were first staged inside royal palaces. But these facts offer no solid foundation for establishing the contention that the Sanskrit drama was entirely a monopoly of the court. There is, on the other hand, illuminating evidence to show that it remained a form of popular entertainment from the very beginning of its onward march right down to its decadence by the tenth century A.D. Therefore, it may not be impertinent to dwell on this point at some length before we set to discuss the different aspects of this ancient theatre.

The two epics, the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyana, do not afford us any cogent evidence for the existence of drama in a fully developed state at as early a date as the fifth century B.C. The Mahābhārata speaks of dancers, song, music and dance but makes no reference to drama as such save the casual mention of the word 'nāṭaka' which must have, however, crept into the work at a very late date. In the Rāmāyana, we hear of Nātas and Nārtakas entertaining crowds at festivals and concourses (Utsavas and Samājas). We also hear that Nāṭakas were performed at royal palaces for the diversion of the princes. But there is nothing to show that they were anything more than mere humorous dialogues, perhaps accompanied by action, delivered by clowns who were, most probably, court jesters.

1. iii. 44-46; iv. 1. 1 ff.; iv. 2. 29.
3. II. lxvii. 15.
4. Ibid., II. lxix. 1-54.
In an earlier passage we come across the word 'vyāmiśraka' which, according to the commentator, denotes plays with a mixture of languages like Prakrit. But even if we admit the passage to be genuine (for its authenticity is much to be doubted), it is too vague to give us any idea of the kind of performance referred to therein.

The fact that the formation of the word 'nāṭya' has been explained by so early a grammarian as Pāṇini leads us to the conclusion that during that period Nāṭya had assumed a form clearly discernible from that of dance, but whether it was drama in the true sense we cannot definitely say. In the Mahābhārata (c.140 B.C.), however, we find evidence for the existence of at least a rudimentary form of drama in which dialogues were spoken by the Naṭas (actors) and Naṭīs (actresses) themselves while enacting love-episodes. We also hear of Sōbhanikas (mimes) who represented before their audiences the slaying of Kamsa and the binding of Bali, but we have no absolute proof that the Sōbhanikas resorted to dialogues also. These passing allusions by a grammarian to a living stage of his time obviously cannot suffice to present before us a complete picture of that theatre, but they are quite adequate to help us conclude that even before the advent of the Christian era, a theatre was already in the process of being shaped, which attained perfection in the first century A.D., if not at an earlier date.

There are numerous references in the Buddhist Suttas to Samajjas (Sk. Samāja) and even to the so-called Giraggi-samajjas or mountain-fairs which were frequented even by ministers and other dignitaries. These carnivals so to speak, went gay with entertaining shows attracting people from all quarters, and the Buddha had a difficult task in admonishing his indisciplined disciples against visiting such shows on the sly. He forbade them to visit any such shows as might cause impairment to their spiritual lives. Instances where even nuns were forbidden to go to see dancing or to listen to singing and music are found in the Suttavibhāga.

We hear of a Buddhist nun named Thullananda who gave recluses' materials to Naṭas, Nartakas and drummers bidding them praise her in public. The Cullavagga speaks of six nuns who even organized performances by Naṭas.1

These unwholesome spectacles — unwholesome from the Buddhistic point of view — were collectively called Visūka-dassaka and included among other things song, music, dance, Pekkhas (Sk. Prakṣa), ballad recitations (Ākhanas) and pantomime (Sobhanagarakasam).2 Of these forms of entertainment Pekkha and Sobhanagarakaś must have involved a certain amount of acting but nowhere is to be found any evidence of their being full-fledged dramatic performances. Some are inclined to think that the latter was a kind of pantomimic performance given by Sabhanakas who are identified with the Sobhamikas mentioned in the Mahābhāṣya or at least their precursors in the art.3 The terms 'nāṭa' and 'nāṭaka' are found in several places.4 'Nāṭaka' is doubtless the Pāli equivalent of the Sanskrit 'nartaka' meaning dancer while the Naṭas who have been condemned by the Buddha as those who arouse wrong states of mind in their audiences are definitely impersonators, but the question whether they resorted to acting accompanied by words or to mere pantomime remains open. There is the story of a Buddhist monk who had formerly been an actor and who used to joke about the Order to the indignation of the Buddha and other monks.5 But these references fail to convince us that the Naṭas mentioned here were actors in the fullest sense of the term. There is however a solitary episode of the leader of a company of actors (Naṭagāmāṇi), Tālāputa by name, who hailed from an actors' family and who, travelling with his troupe and giving performances at festivals in villages, townships and royal residences, became famous all over India. Ultimately he went to Rājagṛha and the successful performance he gave to the cityfolk there chanced to be a turning point in his life. His ripening insight prompted him to visit the Buddha and, after listening to the Master's discourse, he was convinced that the life he had been living was a sinful one and renounced the world to receive ordination from the Buddha.6

1. "sanaccaṃ karāpenti", op.cit., x. 10. 4; "naṭasamajjaṃ kāranti", VP. i. 295.
2. DN., Brahmajāla-sutta.
4. SV. iv. 197, 285; Milindapaṇha, 191, 331; SN. xlii. 2.
5. SN. loc. cit.
6. SV. iv. 197.
7. Theragātha, colxii; SN. ibid.
The temptation to believe that the shows given by Talaputa and his troupe were dramatic performances is irresistible, but in the absence of conclusive evidence such a contention will have no firm ground to stand.

From the aforementioned references to music, dance and various kinds of shows in the Buddhist canons which are assigned a date 'considerably anterior to the third century B.C.'¹, it can be deduced that the common folk in the pre-Christian India were very fond of attending festivals and social gatherings mainly because of the various amusements they provided. Such convivialities in the early Buddhist India were in no way connected with religion, and, on the contrary, not looked upon with favour from the religious point of view. Nor were they always patronized by the royalty though kings, ministers and other noblemen used to attend them on special occasions. If the above evidences do not conclusively prove that dramatic spectacles of some sort were performed at these festivals and concourses, there is no gainsaying the fact that drama in nuce was beginning to grow in the time of the Buddha himself².

The Arthasastra and the Kāmasūtra also furnish some valuable information about social entertainments in ancient India. The latter work informs us that among the manifold periodic duties assigned to the Nāgarakas or men about the town was to arrange festivals in honour of deities, which were held fortnightly or monthly or on special days set apart for the different deities. On such occasions, dramatic performances (Prekṣpākas) and other kinds of spectacle were to be presented by actors and dancers at the Arts Theatre or Sarasvatī-bhāavana, and the Nāgarakas constituted the audience. If there were artistes come from outside, they received gifts from the Nāgarakas during or after the show. The guests who assembled to witness the spectacle had to be shown hospitality to by the hosts as it was a social obligation³.

The Arthasastra, which is probably some centuries anterior to the Kāmasūtra, recopius that sometimes such religious and national festivals and social gatherings were attended by the king who went there under heavy guard⁴. Spies too were stationed around these places⁵. Special licences valid up to

¹. O.H. de A. Wijesekera: loc. cit., p. 204.
². See ibid., p. 205.
⁴. I. xxi. 28.
⁵. Ibid., V. i. 43.
a period of four days were issued for the manufacture of liquor during such festivities. The citizens were expected to co-operate in the work of preparation for a public spectacle (Pṛksā) and recusants and their families were debarred from enjoying the snow. This also implies that no fees were levied from the spectators as was done in ancient Greece. Since it was a community enterprise, all were required to contribute their share for the success of the show if they expected to enjoy the same. If anyone who had not co-operated in its preparation was found surreptitiously witnessing or listening to the performance, he was compelled to pay a fine amounting to double the value of the contribution expected of him. Here we have a clear allusion to a closed theatre that was out of bounds for those who did not enjoy the right to witness the plays staged therein. Such a strict system of admission would have been impracticable in an open-air theatre. The Arthaśāstra further says that people who were going to or returning from snows and festivities were allowed to stroll about in the city at night without a pass.

The dates of the above two works are yet to be settled. Only their lower limits - the third century A.D. for the Arthaśāstra and the fourth century A.D. for the Kāmasūtra - may be fixed with some certainty. But they may be much earlier and Schmidt places the latter work in the second century B.C. In these works we have seen convincing proof of dramatic performances held sometimes in the open air and sometimes within playhouses either permanent or temporary. But still we have no concrete evidence to affirm that the Sanskrit drama as we know it obtained in those days as a form of popular entertainment, though there is nothing to prevent us from holding such a view. However, we have definite proof of the existence of Sanskrit drama in a highly advanced state as a literary form by the first century of the Christian era. It is interesting to note that these earliest of the extant Sanskrit plays are from the pen of a Buddhist monk, Aśvaghoṣa, by name, who has been placed with considerable assurance in the first century A.D. This fact bespeaks a marked change in the Buddhist attitude towards fine arts which were looked down

1. Ibid., II, xxv, 36.
2. Ibid., III, x, 77 f.
3. Ibid., II, xxxvi, 38.
upon during Buddha's time as something disastrous to the spiritual life of the Buddhist clergy. The fragmentary manuscripts unearthed at Turfan by Lüders contain portions of three dramas, namely, the nine-act Śāriputra-prakarana, an allegorical drama and another drama also of the Prakaraṇa type, the first definitely by Āśvaghōṣa and the rest of doubtful authorship and ascribed by some to the same author. There is no doubt that these plays were intended for the purpose of religious edification. The Bāṣṭrapāla, another play by the same author and yet to be discovered, has been quoted by Vādirāja in his commentary on Akalanka's Nyāyaviniścaya. We have no evidence to show that staging of these plays were patronized by the royalty; nor has it been proved by factual evidence that Āśvaghōṣa belonged to the entourage of Kaniska. We have good reasons to believe that this priest-author's chief aim was to inculcate religious ideals upon the masses through the interesting medium of drama, and thus the earliest Sanskrit plays come down to us were meant for the common run of the populace and not for the privileged, the educated and the culturally advanced alone.

To the same period may be assigned the Avadānāśatka and the Harivamsa which works contain passages bearing testimony to the existence of drama during the time of their composition, if not earlier. The Avadānāśatka, a Buddhist work, describes in one place a dramatic performance given during the life time of a remote Buddha, Krakucchanda by name, before King Śobhana and his ministers in the city of Śobhavati, by a company of actors from the Deccan. In deference to the wishes of the host-king, the drama they enacted was based on the life story of the Buddha himself. The leader of the troupe himself played the role of the Buddha. The king was greatly pleased with the performance and gratified the actors with a handsome reward. The same troupe in a later birth came from the Deccan to the city of Rājagṛha during the time of Gautama the Buddha, to perform at a religious festival called Girivalguka-

1. See ibid., p. 84.
This time the daughter of the stage-manager, a ravishingly beautiful actress named Kuvalaya, took the city by storm, and, hearing about the charming personality of the Buddha, went there to tempt him with her seductive dance. Seeing that she was seducing the minds of his disciples, the Buddha transformed her into a haggardly-looking old woman, who, after listening to his sermon, turned a nun in his order.

The other work, the Harivamsha, is a continuation of the Mahabharata. Apart from the bare mention of song, music, dance and representation (Abhinaya) in a number of places, the work gives descriptions of several dramatic and operatic performances. One such performance was given by the celestial nymphs who descended for a 'darsan' of Lord Kṛṣṇa. They represented various feats of the god like the slaying of Kaṁsa and Pralambha, vanquishing of Cāṇūra on the arena, death of Arioṭaka, Dhenuka, Śakuni and others. The Yādavas, too, performed on their own, after which the opera known as Kālikyageya was presented by the nymphs at the instance of Kṛṣṇa. Nārada, the musician sage, played his lute and Kṛṣṇa himself began to play his flute, Hallīsaka. Music was accompanied by drumming and, while most of the nymphs sang the songs, those proficient in dance like Urvaśī and Rambhā executed representative dances one after another. This performance was however more like an opera than a dramatic show. In a later passage we hear of an actor named Bhadra giving a dramatic performance (Suṁātya) at a horse-sacrifice performed by Vasudeva. A demon named Vajranābha, having heard of the excellent performance of Bhadra, invited him to his own city to perform before him. The Yādavas led by Praduṣumna, the son of Kṛṣṇa, disguised themselves as actors and entered the Vajrapura along with Bhadra’s troupe who were received with warm hospitality. Praduṣumna was to play the hero, Samba the Viduṣaka and Gada the Paripārvika while the cortezans played the female roles. There they staged in the presence of the

3. ii. 88 ff.
4. The descendants of Yadu, members of Kṛṣṇa’s family.
5. Ibid., ii. 89. 66–72. 6. Ibid., ii. 91. 26.
city-dwellers a grand performance based on a Rāmāyana-episode, the vaquishing of Rāvana, presenting the characters of Rāma, Lakṣmīna, Sugrīva, Bharata, Lopamudrā, Daśaratha, Rāyadrīga, Śānta and others. The Yādavas and Bhadra's actors played their roles with such skill and fidelity to the characters they portrayed that the old Danavas (demons) who had witnessed the actual event were struck with amazement. The costumes of the actors, their self-introduction and the representation as a whole enthralled the audience so much so that the latter reacted by presenting them with clothes and valuables.

The visiting troupe was again requested by their hosts to give some more performances in the city and the request was complied with. Before the commencement of the play, the Yādava women sang the melodious Chālikya number to the accompaniment of rich music. When music stopped, the Nāndī (a benedictory verse) was recited and this was followed by a verse on the descent of the Gāṅgā and then the play commenced. This time the theme was a different one. It concerned the romance between Nalakūbara and Rambha. Pradyumna played the hero, Śūra Rāvana, Nanovatī (a courtezan) Rambha, Śamba the Vidūṣaka. The mount Kailāsa was presented on the stage by a magic illusion, and the whole show gave the demons immense enjoyment.

The Divyāvadāna, another Buddhist work probably later than the above two works, relates how Māra presented a dramatic spectacle with the help of heavenly nymphs and attracted the followers of the Buddhist monk, Upagupta, who, however, eventually succeeded in converting the demon to the Budhā's faith. Since he had never seen the Buddha in person, Upagupta asked Māra to appear before him in the Master's guise, and Māra, after retiring to the forest to assume the role, appeared as an actor impersonating the Buddha, followed by a host of others playing the Budhā's disciples. The Lalitavistara.

2. See below, pp. 114, 119 f., 291 f.
3. The story of bringing down the sacred Gāṅgā from heaven to earth by King Bhagiratha who then conducted it to the ocean in order to purify the sins of his ancestors, the 60,000 sons of Sagara, has great religious significance to the Hindus, and this item commemorating that mythical event may have been performed as part of the dramatic preliminaries.
also a Buddhist work of uncertain date, records that Prince Siddhārtha (as the Buddha was called prior to his Great Renunciation) received instructions in Nāṭya and other fine arts in his boyhood.1

Although it is true that the performances described in the Avadhānaśataka and the Harivaṃśa possess qualities of true drama, we are not told whether Sanskrit was used in their dialogues. But the fortunate survival of the dramas ascribed to Aśvaghōsa even in fragmentary form bears ample testimony to the fact that plays were being written and produced in Sanskrit as early as the beginning of the Christian era and that the Sanskrit drama was used as a means of promulgating religious concepts and beliefs, though it may not have been the only purpose it served, is evident not only from Aśvaghōsa’s plays but also from later works especially of Bhāsa and Bhavabhūti who are indebted for most of their themes to the two epics. Pa-hsien, the Chinese traveller-pilgrim, who visited India early 5th century A.D., records that professional actors were brought to the Buddhist monasteries in Mathurā for the enactment of plays concerning the Buddha’s conversion of Śāriputra, Maudgalyāyana and Kāśyapa2, and one among them was most probably the Śāriputraprakāraṇa of Aśvaghōsa. Another Chinese traveller-pilgrim, I-ťiwing, who visited India in the last quarter of the 7th century, alludes to a play by Harṣa written round the story of the Bodhisattva Jīmūtavahana who surrendered himself in place of a Nāga which was popularised by that king by having it performed by a troupe of actors and musicians3. It is obvious that the play alluded to is the Buddhist play Nāgānanda. We do not know whether King Harṣa embraced Buddhism or not, but that he was an ardent admirer and benefactor of that religion is a well-known fact. His other two plays, however, have a courtly atmosphere about them. All his three plays including the Nāgānanda were originally written for staging before an assembly of his vassal princes who gathered at his palace every year to pay their homage and show their fealty to their sovereign lord. Thus even those plays that were written especially for court performances may have been passed on to the public once they lost their novelty. We cannot therefore complain on any ground that Sanskrit plays ever remained the jealously guarded monopoly of the ruling

No doubt the playwrights had to take into consideration the high aesthetic sense of the learned audiences of royal courts, but that does by no means imply that the plays were a taboo to the populace. Both Bharata and Abhinava reiterate that a Sanskrit dramatic performance catered to the tastes of even the most unsophisticated of the audience, of the women, children and the rustics to put in their famous phrase, and this indisputably establishes the fact that the Sanskrit playwrights could never ignore the existence of a lower class of spectators who were neither culturally nor intellectually advanced.

The existence of a popular theatre in ancient India is also evident from the early references and allusions to open-air performances. As a matter of fact, we do not hear of permanently-constructed buildings for staging plays until we come to the time of Bharata. In the pre-Bharata era most of the dramatic spectacles may have been held in the open though we have no clear evidence to show that this was always the case. The Nāṭyaśāstra itself informs us that plays were sometimes staged in open-air theatres on the orders of the patron. All the three plays written by Bhavabhūti were enacted at Yatrā festivals held in honour of the god Kālapriyanātha. These Yatrās were attended by large numbers of votaries mainly from the common masses. It is evident that such serious and pedantic works as those of Bhavabhūti were none the less caviare to the general. Apart from Bhavabhūti's plays, we have a number of later works especially written for Yatrā performances and which, we know for certain, were enacted in the open. The première of the Prasannarāgāhava held at a Yatrā festival in honour of Śāṅkara was undoubtedly an open-air performance, for we hear the Śātradhāra of the play remark that he can see the Nāṭa, his friend and assistant, approaching the stage through the audience. Another play, the Vidagdha-mādhava of Rūpagośvāmin, was shown before a multitude of devotees who were also men of taste (Rasikas) who had assembled at the Kāśītīrtha on a pilgrimage to the Vṛndāvana. This was also, in all probability, an alfresco performance and so must be Murāri's Amargarāghava whose first performance was held at a Yatrā festival in honour of Puruṣottama (Vishnu).
Bhāvaprakāśana refers to a dramatic performance held at the Caitra Yātra festival\(^1\). (The modern Yātrās of Bengal and Orissa, however, have nothing to do with these ancient Yātrās and were introduced only a couple of centuries ago). Another interesting piece of evidence for the existence of theatres exposed to the elements is found in the Rājatarāṅgini of Kalhana (who often draws his similes from the drama), which says that the routed army of a certain king ran helter skelter like the audience at a dramatic show caught in rain\(^2\). There is no doubt that the non-descript poetic drama, Mahānātaka, was also intended for open-air presentation.

It will now be seen that the Sanskrit drama remained a form of social entertainment even during the time it was moving into its precipitous decline and was not absolutely 'a class institution' or a monopoly of princes and the aristocracy at any stage of the history of the Hindu theatre. What is true is that it enjoyed royal patronage, and, in order to win favour of the élite and the learned, it was aimed at satisfying the demands of the upper class. The Sanskrit drama from its very creation was not meant to be a class institution as some are inclined to believe\(^3\), but an art accessible to and to be enjoyed by all people irrespective of class or caste. The conventional use of Prakrit dialects in Sanskrit plays may also be explained as the result of an attempt at bringing the drama closer to the masses. The Prākrit forms employed in drama are, however, not the vernaculars that were current in contemporary society. They are rather formal and affected languages fashioned to suit the dramatic quality of the play, but they were no doubt much closer to the spoken language than was Sanskrit. The absence of definite proof of the Sanskrit drama as a form of popular entertainment during the times of Bāsa and Kālidāsa should not be taken as conclusive proof here, for we know that popular shows were in vogue in the times of Aśvaghoṣa and Bhavabhūti and we are entitled to assume that there was an unbroken tradition of popular entertainment throughout.

1. P. 2, 7-12.
2. vii. 1006; cf. ibid., i. 220-22; ii. 16; vii. 895.