

Archaeological Evidences of Early Indian Drama**Sushmita Sengupta**

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Abstract:

For centuries dramatic art had been one of the most popular forms of public and private entertainment used in India since the pre-historic times. The pre-historic cave dwellers of the Mesolithic period residing in the various rock shelters found scattered all over India had documented their lives on the walls of their cave shelters with vibrant hues. The evidences gathered from this rich gallery of cave paintings point to a highly evolved form of entertainment of the settlers. The deified animal figures, hunting dances, magico – religious rituals of these Mesolithic people had dramatic element in them. The complex urban culture of the Indus civilization witnessed a number of remarkable civic activities of the people. Drama or dramatic performance or any kind of performance as such was very much a communal civic activity among the Indus people. Puppet, masks, musical instruments, dancing statues all point to a highly evolved performance style of the Indus valley people. The famous dancing girl figurine and other dancing figures discovered from Harappa, are a pointer to this fact. The association of Shiva with the dramatic art also point to the pre-vedic origin of Indian drama, as Shiva or Pashupati cult was very much a pre-vedic practice. The Pashupati seals found at various Indus sites confirmed this theory. Archaeological discoveries of theatre architecture from all over the subcontinent testifies to a vibrant dramatic tradition of the ancient Indians. Inscriptional evidences of drama or dramatic production or even inscription pertaining to theatre censorship in ancient India confirms the widespread development of dramatic activities in ancient India.

Key words:

Drama, pre-historic, cave-paintings, rituals, cave-theatre, theatre architecture. The origin and development of early Indian drama is a history of myriad interactions, assimilations and interpolations which ultimately weaved its magic to make this art form reach a high level of excellence and become the cause of awe and envy of the other civilizations of the world. The history and development of early India drama cover centuries and regions and included all sections of the society. It was one of the most popular forms of public entertainment used in India since the pre-historic past. An attempt has been made in this paper to trace the development of Indian drama to the pre-historic past based on the archaeological discoveries of theatre architecture, inscriptional evidences as well as other related findings from all over the Indian sub-continent.

As mentioned by Bose (2001) and Varadpande (1987) anthropologists often argued that drama was the most primitive form of art and dance and music also accompanied it. In fact, in the early stages, the history of drama was the history of the origin and development of the different elements of this art, which came together in the course of time to weave its magic into a rich fabric. Thus, music and dance were the essential features of Indian dramatic tradition and were

the characteristic features of its structure and form¹. Dance was and still is one of the basic elements of drama, which must have been present in human society since its inception. According to anthropologist Stephen Fuchs (1963) drama, must have evolved out of mimic art, when a person tried to imitate another being. First it must have emerged as optic mimic involving the play of gestures and face expressions with the employment of masks and costumes. Later it developed into acoustic mimicry through words, dialogues, songs and music (Sahoo, 2009). The Indian drama or on that account any type of drama always have developed from the ritualistic animal dances of the pre-historic people. It is also argued by most that drama originated from the religious cult practices of the pre-historic society. In those times the religious and the profane evolved simultaneously, and often got mixed together (Sahoo, 2009). In the case of ritualistic drama, the performers gave up their own ego and assumed the personality of a super human being. Fuchs (1963) also remarked that dramatic art was and still is an all-comprehensive art and it included not only music and dance but also inspired painting and sculpture.²

The pre-historic picture galleries discovered in the ancient rock shelters of India at Lakhajjar, Urden, Bhimbetka, Kathotia, Bhojpur, Badami, Bhopal, etc, trace and narrate the story of the evolution of drama as mentioned by historians like Vatsyayan Kapila (1980), Varadpande (1987) and Madhu (1992).³ Dance occupied a place of prominence in the depiction of daily life in the stone age culture. It appeared in varied and numerous forms, not only as a creative and aesthetic activity, but also as a medium of expression of the joys and sorrows of the pre-historic communities. Dance was a significant part of ritual and was used as a mode of recreation and medium of instruction. Thus drama, dance, musical chants were the most widely recurring cultural symbols. Mesolithic paintings depicted rhythmic movements enforced by a uniform beat, forging a number of people into a unified whole, all of whom shared a common homogenous psychological condition. These Mesolithic cave paintings indicated a very complex dancing culture (Neumayer, 1993).⁴

Presence of many, speech bubbles in front of the dancers' mouths in many paintings also indicated that the dancers were either singing or chanting. Thus, verbalization of rituals was also present in India, which was a step further towards theatre proper. Musical instruments also figured quite prominently in the cave paintings. Harp like musical instruments, types of drakes, gongs, castanets were seen in the hands of the human figures. Dr. Wakankar, the discoverer of the Bhimbetka caves in Madhya Pradesh referred to horn pipes and stone drums being used by these prehistoric people to produce different kinds of musical sounds to aid in dance.⁵ Huge number of the discovered paintings depict the use of musical instruments which undoubtedly proves the popularity of music among the pre-historic communities residing in India as mentioned by both Varadpande (1987) and Nuemayer (1993).

The impersonation and imitation were important elements of drama. The cave paintings of the Mesolithic period have depiction of dancers or performers impersonating as animals or deified animals by wearing masks and animal skin. Some of the most prominent pictures show large figures of deified animals. Deified composite animals closely resembling boars probably occupied a central position in the religious thinking of the Mesolithic hunters and gatherers. This cult of deified animals was very much prevalent during the whole Mesolithic period, across regions. People wearing skull masks were also seen leading the performances. These figures were however shown in much less numbers, but in many paintings. Their elaborate headgear and ornaments made them stand out from the other figures and suggested that these group of people were a select few who were somehow special and superior from the others performing alongside them. They have been identified as wizards or priest performers of the Mesolithic culture by both Varadpande (1987) and Nuemayer (1993).⁶

The Mesolithic cave paintings also often depicted dancers in gorgeous attire. Magnificent head dresses, ornaments and animal skin. The human figures also were seen in different colours of body paint.⁷ These indicated that even the prehistoric people were aware of the importance of costume and make up, while performing public enactments. The art of proper costume and application of make-up was and still is one of the most important auxiliary arts, associated with dramatic production and representation. Dances with sexual overtones also were very commonly depicted in the cave paintings. Human figures bearing huge models of fake male and female organs were shown in processions. Many figures were shown engaged in orgiastic movement accompanying the models in the procession. These paintings probably depicted the popularity of phallic cult practices and other fertility rituals among the pre-historic people as mentioned by Varadpande (1987) and later corroborated by Madhu (1992).⁸ This element of fertility and phallic cult practices had always been associated with dramatic production in all ages throughout the whole world.

Nuemayer Erwin (1993) has mentioned that hunting scenes dominated the walls of the cave paintings across India. Hunting dance of tribal communities were performed as rituals to ensure success in hunting. Acute emphasis was given on the naturalism of the animal figures and these hunting scenes also encompassed several stylistic variants. The human figures were shown as dancing, running or jumping. These human figures were also often draped in heavy adornments, headgears and other embellishment. The pictures were interwoven and organized in a narrative sequence often depicting mythical stories. Small group of hunters attacked herds of animals with their microlith barbed spears in the earliest paintings. Some paintings also depicted hunting by large groups of men in several hunting expeditions. Several dozens of beaters were depicted as driving the game towards strategically placed archers. Thus, the hunting dances were a kind of ritualistic drama.⁹ The pre-historic cave paintings presented a panorama of very rich dance culture with simple and intricate postures, costumes, make-up, musical instruments, chants, songs and imitation, enactment of hunting expeditions, imitation of deified and natural animals and

birds, impersonation of spirits, performance of rituals or, the basic elements of drama proper were present in the Mesolithic period. Thus, dramatic techniques found their origin in the early religious and magical rituals of the pre-historic communities.

The emergence of a rich, urban civilization known as the Indus Valley Civilization or the Harappan Civilization in the north western part of the Indian sub-continent was a great advancement from the time of the ancient cave dwellers of the Mesolithic period. These culturally refined urbanites having a varied civic and social life must have had their own form of dramatic amusements. Beautiful terracotta figures of dancers and stone and bronze figurines have been excavated in large numbers from the numerous Indus archaeological sites. A male dancing figure full of vitality, sculptured in greenish sand stone, discovered from Harappa has been identified as the Nataraja, the divine dancer of Indian mythology and art (Mcintosh, 2008).¹⁰ Another important find from Mohenjo-daro, a bronze figurine of a gracefully supple female dancer in an inviting posture wearing only bangles and a necklace testified of a rich dancing culture possessed by the Harappans. The figure was nude, thus leading to the conjecture that it was a figure of a public woman. She was also said to have represented the Mother – goddess as dance was closely associated with religion as mentioned by Sekhar (1960) and latter corroborated by both Mackey (1998) and Ratnagar (2001). She has been commonly referred to as the dancing girl and her proto type though much less graceful has been referred to as the ugly twin. Another statue, representing a male dancer balancing on the right foot with the left foot raised in front, and the body above the waist and both the arms bent down, full of vitality, has been suggested as walking or dancing.¹¹ The presence of dancing dwarf figurines of the Indus Valley Civilization advocated the existence of drama in some form or the other.

Many musical instruments have been uncovered by the archaeologists from the various Indus sites like drakes, castanets, string instruments, flute, some instruments made of leather, whistles, etc. At Mohenjo-daro hollowed masks with horns made of baked clay have also been discovered. These cleverly designed small objects were probably used as votive offerings for the Indus deities (Varadpande, 1987) (Mackey, 1998).¹² Full-sized as well as miniature terracotta masks have been unearthed which might have been used as finger puppets. There were grotesque human and animal figures which might have been used for dramatic presentation of religious stories. Miniature terracotta masks fastened to puppets were also probably used as props in public enactments or narration of sacred lore. Scenes from Harappan mythology depicted on a number of seals and other inscribed objects have also been found. Such mythological stories might have been enacted using the models and masks of human, animals and composite creatures as props as mentioned by Mcintosh (2008).¹³ Thus the rituals of the Indus people were also permeated with dramatic elements, which ultimately contributed to the evolution of drama in India.

Theatre censorship appeared in India during the time of the universal monarchies of Magadha under the guidance of Ashoka. The great emperor was a follower of Buddhism and might have been influenced by Buddha's earlier attitude towards performing arts and artists. He extended little patronage to the performing artists, but accepted them as tax payers as is evident from the

Arthashastra, the treatise written on Mauryan state craft as mentioned by the renowned Sanskrit scholar Shamasastri (1960) in his translation of the Arthashastra, which was later corroborated by Rangarajan (1992).¹⁴ However in pursuance of his policy of Dhamma Vijaya or moral conquest, Ashoka had launched a concerted campaign to mitigate the sufferings of his subject people, rather all living beings in his empire. He was probably the only king who had undertaken such huge works on public utility. Murti and Aiyangar (1951) mentioned that Ashoka had even ordered and banned the sacrificial killing of animals together with the samajas or merry making, feasting and similar other amusements in his Rock Edit No. 1 (Ahir, 2010).¹⁵ He however approved of state sponsored shows, which would help to propagate his ideals of kingship. The fact that Ashoka went to the extent of censoring dramatic performances in an inscriptional form, that to in a major rock edict, undoubtedly proves the prevalence of this artform during that time.

Numerous archaeological findings throughout the Indian sub continent and even from central Asia have authenticated the existence of early Indian drama. Mention must be made of the discovery of an open-air cave theatre, the stage construction conforming to the Natyashastra (ancient Indian treatise on drama and dramaturgy) directions in the Sitabenga cave and an inscriptional record mentioning dramatic performance in a cave by devadashi Sutanuka from the nearby Yogimara cave of the Ramgarh hills Laxmanpur in Surguja district of Madhya Pradesh by the famous archeologist T. Bloch (Shukla, 2002). The theatre dating back to 300 B.C. is the oldest surviving theatre structure of the world. The Ramgarh hill cave theatre has excited great curiosity among students of Indian antiquity. It was undoubtedly the oldest theatre structure of the world. It was a semi-circular auditorium rising steeply by rows. The seating arrangement was also in three levels in gallery fashion.¹⁶ This theatre must have been constructed to satisfy the dramatic urge of the people residing in that area. The period was of Mauryan centralized monarchy. The Chhattisgarh area may have formed a part of the Mauryan empire, but no doubt, the age itself witnessed a transformation from rural tribalism to sophistication and cultural refinement initiated by the benevolent but despotic Mauryan monarchs as mentioned by Ahir (2010).¹⁷ Shukla (2002) mentions that the inscription in Brāhmī in Yogimara also suggests that this cave was probably excavated by a devdashi Sutanuka and her friends. Sutanuka, herself was probably the stage manager and director and trained and directed the performers in various aspect of the dramatic presentation after a ritual initiation.¹⁸

Varadpande (1987) mentions the archaeological discovery of another theatre from Nagarjunakonda. A statue of Dionysus has been found nearby. This theatre was said to have been constructed possibly by the Greek settlers in south India.¹⁹ Nagarjunakonda which was a famous Buddhist centre of learning had attracted people from a far. Kharavela the great Jain ruler of Orissa, who was said to be a contemporary of Bharata (2nd cent. B.C.), the celebrated dramaturgist of ancient India and the author of the Natyashastra, had constructed an auditorium at Ranigumpha in the Udaygiri, Khandagiri caves of Orissa, as per the regulations of the Natyashastra of Bharata. It is probably one of the oldest remnants of a shailaguhakara prakshalaya or cave-theatre existing in India till today (Sahoo, 2009). Kharavela had also built a 'prat-talikachata' or roofed theatre between Khandagiri and Udaygiri, which was in a gallery form

with seating arrangements for about 2000 people. Out of the hexagonal galleries, two still exist today and remind the people of the dramatic heritage of ancient India. The Tourism Department of the Orissa government stage dance and music festivals at Ranigumpha every year.²⁰ Discovery of fragments of Ashvaghosa's play *Shariputraprakaraṇa* in Brahmi script from Turfan in Chinese central Asia recorded the development of drama as far back as the 1st century. A.D. in India (Sarkar, 1965).²¹ The discovery of the Thirteen Trivandrum plays in 1910/11 by, Sri Ganapati Sastri ascribed to Bhasa was also very important in tracing the antiquity of Indian drama (Balwant, 1962).²²

Inscriptional evidence of banning of theatre (Samaja) is found in Rock Edit No. 1 (RE No. 1) of emperor Ashoka (Murti & Aiyangar, 1951).²³ Another inscription of the famous Jain ruler of the Chedi dynasty Kharavela of Kalinga is found in the Hathigumpha cave at Udaygiri near Bhubaneswar, Orissa, which has a reference to drama. The inscription mentioned samaja or theatre festivals organized by Kharavela in the 2nd century B.C. It recorded that Kharavela himself was well versed in dramatic art or *gandharvidya* and entertained the inhabitants of his capital through performance of dance, vocal and instrumental music. He has been described as "gandharva veda budho", in the inscription (Kant, 2000) (Sahoo, 2009).²⁴ Inscriptional evidence of as late as the 12th century. A.D. has also been uncovered by archaeologists. A whole drama in inscriptional form has been discovered which was said to have been composed in the honour of the Cahamana King Vigharajadeva IV (1153-64) A.D. of Sakamva by his court poet Somevara or Somedeva, named "Lalitavigharajadeva", which was found engraved on a stone slab. King Vigharajadeva IV is himself said to have composed the drama "Harkelinatika", which was also found engraved on a stone slab (Sarkar, 1965).²⁵ Another inscription containing the first two Acts of an unknown nāṭikā "Parijatmanjari" or "Vijaysrinatika" has been discovered, written in the Nagari script, by a Bengali brahmaṇa named Madana (Sarkar, 1965).²⁶

Sanskrit drama had also influenced other forms of art through the ages. Varadpande (1983) and later Tarlekar (1991) mentions that in the field of sculptural art representations are found which may suggest depiction of certain scenes from plays. (i) A medallion from Bhita has the depiction of a scene which is quite similar to the first scene of the Act I of the play *Abhijnashakuntalam*. When the king enters the forest hermitage while hunting, he is requested to refrain from killing animals / birds of the hermitage by the ascetics. The medallion supposedly of the Sunga period has the king in a chariot with four horses, who have checked their speed by raised hoofs. An ascetic looking person with stretched hands is there as if requesting to stop. At the back of the chariot is a female figure standing near a tree in front of a cottage. Another kneeling figure holding a lotus is also found at the bottom of the medallion. There are however contradictory claims and many refute this fact. (ii) Another sculpture from National Museum New Delhi belonging to the Kuṣaṇa period is said to be the depiction of a scene from the act of *Mricchakatika* of Vasantasena in flight pursued by the villain Sakara, viṭa, the figure of the ceta is absent in the panel. (iii) Another sculpture from a temple at Nalanda 6th / 7th century A.D. suggested the depiction of a scene from Act VI of *Shakuntala*, where the king accompanied by the viduṣaka is sitting in the pleasure garden with a picture board in his hand on which *Shakuntala* with her two friends are

painted. (iv) Another relief of fine slate found from Bhita depicts the most tender and lyrical moment in Shakuntala Dushyanta love story as visualized by Kalidasa. Dushyanta is seen here as fanning the lovely damsel Shakuntala with a lotus leaf as in the scene of Act III²⁷.

These archaeological evidences help in establishing the claim of the existence of dramatic activity in ancient India. The history and development of ancient Indian drama is unique and exclusive. This magnificent art form had been in existence in India since ages past. Infact it was there since the time of the beginning of the history of mankind itself. It evolved out of a ritualistic nature worship in pre historic times and gradually developed its own rules and regulations. From the very beginning drama had been associated with the religious practices, when the primitive men imitated animals, humans and even supernatural beings. It was also a collective activity, where the whole community participated, some as performers and the others as spectators. This popular participation of the people was a very important element of drama in ancient times. Archaeological evidences of dramatic performances or public enactments throughout the early historic and historic periods all over from the Indian subcontinent testifies to the vibrant theatre culture prevalent in ancient India. Discoveries of theatre architectures from various places in the sub-continent dating back to the earliest times undoubtedly proves that drama had developed with all its various components, rules and regulations in ancient India.

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