



The Evolution of Odisha's Sanskrit Dramatic Art Tradition A Study

Laxman Majhi

Ph.D. Research Scholar

Department of Sanskrit Utkal University,
Vani Vihar, Bhubaneswar, Odisha-751004
Majhilaxman1994@gmail.com

Abstract. The research paper "The Evolution of Odisha's Sanskrit Dramatic Art Tradition" delves into the historical development and transformation of dramatic art in the ancient Indian state of Odisha. This study investigates how the traditional Sanskrit theatrical performances in the region have evolved over centuries, tracing their origins, influences, and significance in the cultural fabric of Odisha. Through an extensive analysis of ancient texts, archaeological findings, and scholarly works, the paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the various stages of growth that Odisha's Sanskrit dramatic art has undergone.

Index Terms: Odisha, Sanskrit Dramatic Art, Tradition, Evolution, Theatrical Performances, Cultural Heritage.

I Introduction

Sanskrit dramatic art, a timeless and culturally rich form of expression, has played a pivotal role in shaping the artistic heritage of the Indian subcontinent. With its roots deeply entrenched in ancient Indian civilization, this theatrical tradition has been preserved and adapted over the centuries, bearing witness to the dynamic socio-cultural landscape of the region. One of the lesser-explored facets of this tradition can be found in the state of Odisha, where it has thrived with unique characteristics and remarkable resilience. The state's Sanskrit dramatic art tradition, often referred to as '*Rupak*', has evolved and adapted to the changing tastes and sensibilities of its audience while retaining its core essence. It seeks to delve into the historical, artistic, and socio-cultural aspects that have shaped and sustained the tradition within Odisha's unique context. From the classical plays of Kalidasa to the regional variations of Bhavabhuti and Bhasa, Sanskrit drama has flourished across India, and Odisha stands as a testament to its ability to assimilate and evolve.



By tracing the trajectory of Sanskrit dramatic art in Odisha, this study aims to unravel the fascinating narrative of how it has been influenced by historical factors, regional aesthetics, and changing artistic sensibilities. As a result, it will offer insights into the fusion of classical and indigenous elements, revealing how this tradition has metamorphosed while preserving its core principles. In the subsequent sections of this research paper, we will delve into the historical roots of Sanskrit drama in Odisha, exploring its significance in the cultural tapestry of the region. We will examine the major playwrights, their contributions, and the evolution of key thematic elements in Odia Sanskrit dramas. Additionally, we will discuss the influence of the Odia society, religious practices, and the impact of Odia theatre on the larger Sanskrit dramatic landscape.

The study of Odisha's Sanskrit dramatic art tradition is not only an academic endeavour but also an acknowledgment of the enduring legacy that has been passed down through generations. By delving into its historical evolution and its adaptability in the contemporary era, we aim to shed light on the tenacity and transformative nature of this cultural gem. This research, we believe, will serve as a valuable resource for scholars, artists, and enthusiasts interested in the rich tapestry of Sanskrit drama, with a specific focus on its evolution within the heartland of Odisha. The present Odisha is widely known in many *Purānas*[1], *Dharmaśāstras*[2], *Rāmāyana*[3], *Mahābhārata*[4], *Brhat Samhitā*[5], *Aṣṭādhyāyī*[6], *Patañjali-Mahābhāṣya*[7] and other Sanskrit works[8] in different names. Its popular names were Odra, Odradeśa, Trikalinga, Kalinga and Utkala. Another name 'Toshali' occurs in the first and second Rock Edicts of Aśoka at Dhauli. In Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* (Ch.13.V.40) we come across the name of Toshali as quoted below:

'kosalāstosalāścaiva kaliṅgāḥ yavanāḥ khasāḥ'

There too, Toshali has been treated as a separate kingdom. Although it was described as an independent country in an epigraph of 3rd century C.E. and in *Nāṭyaśāstra* of about 4th century C.E., we have enough reason to believe that it was neither a full-fledged kingdom nor disintegrated from Kalinga with which it was attached from the time of Khāravēla i.e. 1st century B.C.E.

The *Atharva Veda Parisistha* Ch.56 places Kośala and Toshali along with the people of the south-coast. The *Matsya Purāna*, Ch.cxiv, v.53 and *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāna* Ch.54 v.51 mention the following:

'tosalā: kosalāścaiva traipurā vidiśastathā !'

On Toshala Vāgbhaṭṭa writes as follows:

'vārāṇasyāḥ parataḥ pūrvadeśaḥ yasyāṅgakalingakośala tośalotkala... !'

Hemacandra refers to it in his *Kāvyaṅgānuśāsana*. The *Harivaṃśa* 11.30, 50, 48 and 55 and the *Viṣṇu Purāna* of 'Wilson's' edition (Vol. V. p.39) describes a wrestler defeat-



ed by Śrīkr̥ṣṇa, as from Toshala or Toshalaka. The historical records support the legends of its vast extending from river Gangā to Godāvārī.

II. Khāravēla-Pioneer in Dramaturgy

It was a citadel of learning and discussion of Śāstras as the rulers of Odisha were highly patronising the scholars in their own interest of the land. In 1st in well as in the interest of the land. In 1st century B.C.E. this Odisha known as Kalinga excelled in the art of dance and music patronized the king Khāravēla. He himself was the lover of dance, music and concert.

The *Gāndharva Veda* which is claimed to have been created Brahmā, was developed in later period by a number of writers commentators like Bharata, Nārada, Tumburu, Kohala, Dattila, Mātaṅga and others. In its full-fledged form the *Gāndharva Veda* is known have consisted of thirty six thousand verses. The *Gāndharva Veda* is now lost to the scholars but it was very likely known at the time of Khāravēla in 1st century B.C.E. He was proficient in *Gāndharva Veda* and declares himself as well versed in the *Gāndharva Art*. He revived the refined cultural trends of ancient Kalinga in dance, song and instrumental music. Due to his sincere patronage, the *Gāndharva School of Music* was famous in all over India. From the Hātīgumphā Inscription, line-5, it is known that Khāravēla was one of the pioneers of Dramaturgy.

The sixty four arts were popular in ancient Kalinga long before the time of Asoka. It is thus described – *muriya kāla bochinaṃ ca coyaṭhi aṃga saṃtikaṃ turiya upādayati* [9] Sanskrit – '*mauryakāla vyavacchinnaṃ ca catuḥ ṣaṣṭhyaṅga (kalā) sammitaṃ tauryatrikaṃ utpādayati*' /

It means “His Majesty revived the *tauryatrika* (performance of dance, song and concert) included in sixty four branches of art that had been suspended during the time of the Mauryas.”



It is also known from the old *gāthās* of the *Tittira Jātaka* experience of a traveller in Kaliṅga who walked through rough roads with staff in hand and enjoyed the company of dancers and fought with cudgel stick in the *samājas* (convivial assembly).[10] Regarding the term *samāja* A.C. Vidyābhūṣaṇa[11] discusses, "In Aśoka's first Rock Edict the word *samāja* is used in two different senses. The following passage occurs in the writings at Girnar -

1. *prabhu hitavyam na cha samāja ketavyo bahukam dosam samājamhi pasati devānām piyadasi rājā.*
2. *asti pitu e kacha samāja sadhumata devānām piyasa.*

D.R. Bhandarkar (Indian Antiquary, 1913, pp.255-58) and N.G. Majumdar have discussed the term *samāja* at considerable length. From many examples drawn from both Brahmanic and Buddhist literature (Indian Antiquary, 1918, pp.221-23), the former has effectively demonstrated that the word *samāja* has two meanings. In the above Edict of Asoka the word *samāja* in the first line is used to mean a place where people could be entertained with songs, dancing and other forms of amusement, and it is clear that Asoka regarded these as sacred institutions. Majumdar supports this interpretation. He points out that Vātsāyana, in his *Kāma-sūtra* (pp.49-51, Chawkhamba Sanskrit Series) has referred to *samāja* in connection with the staging of plays. He has described them as religious institutions of the period. Vātsāyana says that custom required in those days that the priests in charge of the temple of Saraswati should arrange for a *samāja* on each day that ended a lunar fortnight or month. Actors from elsewhere would come and perform. The plays staged on these occasions were known as *prekhnām*. On the following day the priests would congratulate the actors and after that another play would be staged if necessary. Performances could also be stopped if the audience so desired.

From Vātsāyana's statement it becomes clear that *samāja* was a form of drama with strong religious association, for it was at the temple of Vāgeśvari Saraswati, the goddess of drama and theatres, that it would be performed. From the Buddhist *Jātakas* it becomes apparent that *samāja* was used in the sense of stage plays.



When Kalinga got rid of the over lordship of Magadha under the leadership of Chedi Mahāmeghavāhāna, her political and cultural life underwent profound changes. She emerged as a great power under Khāravēla, the third king of the dynasty who revived her age old cultural tradition in the spheres of art and architecture, as well as, dance, music and acrobatics to an unprecedented scale. He not only rehabilitated the cultural heritage by organizing performances of dance, music and concert in grandiose manner but also eloquent by emphasizing on the noble virtue of the mutual arts. He himself attended the public performances with his queens and courtiers and infused a sense of refinement, joy and vigor in the minds of the people.

III. Rāṅgumphā Theatre

The epigraphically statement is amply corroborated by sculptural evidences and we find in the cave of those hills lively scenes of music and dance enjoyed by the people along with the king and queens. The depiction of the dramatic performances is of great significance and it throws a good deal of light on musical attainments of the people. On the cultural activities of the king and on the trend and spirit of the *Gāndharva* music during that time.

In the main wing of the upper storey of the same Rāṅgumphā is depicted another lively scene of dance and music which is, however, heavily damaged. Here it is found that a duet dance performed by two girls exhibiting harmony and rhythm to the tune of music played by three other girls who are all seated. Out of these three players the left one faces side and strikes a many stringed harp with plectrum and the middle girl, who shows her back to the observer, forcefully beats a broad faced drum (*dundubhi*). The player on the right faces the observer and gently beats in her right hand a small drum which she holds on her left thigh with the support of the left hand. Unlike the dance-drama of the lower storey, no stage or pavilion is provided for this scene of dance and music and both the dance and the orchestra are being performed on the floor.

During the reign of Khāravēla the musical instruments like *vīṇā*, *veṇu*, *śaṅkha*, *tūrya*, *mṛdaṅga*, *murāja*, *maḍḍuka*, *dundubhi*, *paṇava*, *paṭaḥ*, *svastika*, *ghaṭṭa* etc. were used at the time of dancing and singing.

A play house is required to perform the dance, drama and music with the pavilion for the artists and spectators. A well-developed auditorium (*prekṣāgrha*) with sculptural art is found in the right wing of the lower storey of the Rāṅgumphā. The right portion of play house (*prekṣāgrha*) is designed as a stage (*raṅgapīṭha*) and the left portion is



designed as auditorium (*raṅgamaṇḍala*). The king, queens seated in the front row and the courtiers and dignitaries standing in the back row were enjoying the dance and music played by the female actresses. It is understood that the *Gāndharva* art in Kalinga appears highly significant.

Dhiren Das is of opinion that the Rāṅgumphā of the Udayagiri hill is a playhouse of the rectangular (*vikṛṣṭa*) type and of medium (*Madhyamā*) variety specified on the Bharata *Nāṭyaśāstra* and he measures the length of the floor exactly as sixty-four cubits.

He points out that the construction of the large (*jyeṣṭha*) variety of the playhouse which is meant for the gods is forbidden by the *Nāṭyaśāstra* which recommends that the king should construct the medium (*Madhyamā*) variety only, while the common people may go for the small variety of playhouses. Accordingly king Khāravela constructed the medium playhouse (*prekṣāgrha*) with the prescribed measurement of 64 cubits in length out of the solid rocks of the Udayagiri hill and the ruins of it which are still in existence are popularly known as the Rāṅgumphā.

The Rāṅgumpha cave in the Udayagiri hill, however, presents architectural features distinct in style and type from the caves in the Ramagarh hills. It is claimed to have resembled the canonical principles of the playhouse (*prekṣāgrha*) prescribed by the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and to be the earliest of its kind found in India. As such, it symbolizes the spirit of musical art and performances in the ancient times.

Kalinga under Khāravela strove for developing the main current of traditional Indian art which emerged from archaic simplicity to monumental grandeur. The creative achievement of the period particularly in the field of dance, drama and music amounted to a pioneering form revealed not only by epigraphically records but also by vigorous and animated modelling of sculptural figures, as well as, the designs of the cave architecture as devices of dramatically stages and pavilions.

As discussed in preceding pages the trace of permanent structure of dancing hall, stage for concerts and opera found in the rock-cut hills of Udayagiri and Khaṇḍagiri at Bhubaneswar, the present state capital of Odish is proved by Khāravela's Hātīgumphā[12] inscription found in Udayagiri hills in the 1st century B.C.E.

The *Nāṭyaśāstra* of Bharata is our earliest authority on the three arts like dance, music and drama. But scholars are of opinion that the cultural complex of Udayagiri and Khaṇḍagiri hills, the beautifully carved out stages, the audience hall etc. were already there before the compilation of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* in the 1st century B.C.E.

Since the reign of Khāravela (1st century B.C.E.) the performance of dance, drama and music had been continuing as a living source of enjoyment for Odishan people.



This is clearly evident from the display of dance and drama as noticed on the walls of various oldest temples of Odisha.

IV. Revival of Sanskrit Literature

The early epigraphic records of Odisha like Hātīgumphā inscription on the hill Udayagiri, Bhubaneswar at the time of Khāavela, the emperor of Kaliṅga, Aśokān Rock Edicts at Dhauli near the river Dayā, Bhubaneswar and at Jaugaḍa near the bank of the river Ṛṣikulyā in the district, Ganjam and the Bhadrakālī Temple Stone Inscription of 4th Century C.E. are written in *Pāli* and *Prākṛta* language. It seems that the Sanskrit language and literature were not evolved in Odisha up to 4th Century C.E. But during the reign of the Imperial Guptas there was vigorous revival of Sanskrit language and literature in Odisha. As a result the use of Sanskrit prose was found in all the copper-plate-grants of kings of Māṭhara family during 4th and 5th century C.E. over the southern part of the present Ganjam district of Odisha and the northern portion of the modern Vishakhapatna of Andhra Pradesh.

The two published copper-plate-grants of the Vighraha family that ruled over the present Puri and Ganjam district of Odisha are important from historical point of view. Because those two grants i.e., *Sumaṇḍala* of the *Prthivī Vighraha* and the Kaṇāsa plates of Śrīloka Vighraha are also written in Sanskrit prose in 570 C.E. and 600 C.E. respectively.

From the epigraphic records of this period i.e., 500-600 C.E., the style of writing in Sanskrit prose developed. In 6th century C.E. the *Tāndivāda* grant informs that *Śṛti*, *Smṛti*, *Veda*, *Vedāṅga*, *Nyāya*, *Upaniṣad* and *Yoga* were being studied in Odisha. The drone of this grant Bhava Śarmā the grandson of Viṣṇu Śarmā, the writer of *Pañcatantra* was learned in Sanskrit studies. It is pertinent to mention here that the Pāralākhimeṇḍi grant of the same king is also very important as it was issued from Virajānagara, Jajpur near the bank of the river Vaitaraṇī. Later on Virajākṣetra became a chief centre of culture during the rule of Bhaumakaras. *Purāṇa*, *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Dharmaśāstra* were also the subjects of study in that age.

For the first time it is known from the Stone Inscription of Skandavarman of the Nanda family at Podagadha in the Block Umakoṭa of Koraput district of Odisha that thirteen verses in Sanskrit language in *Anuṣṭup* meter are written. Mādhava Varman of the Śailodabhava family ruled over the Puri-Ganjam region in 7th century C.E. after driving the *Vighrahas* from that area. The introductory portion of the Royal grants i.e., Buguḍā plates declares the achievements of the donor and his forefathers in original Sanskrit verses in the Royal grants was an innovative endeavor of Bhaṭṭanārāyaṇa, the donee of his Puruṣottampur grant who may be identified as the author of *Veṅṣaṁhāra Nāṭaka*.



The Bhaumakara dynasty ruled over the whole of coastal Odisha extending from the river Gaṅgā in north to the Mahendra range in the south for about 200 years i.e., 700-900 C.E. The Sanskrit verses found in different copper-plate-grants of that dynasty composed in different meters like *Anuṣṭup*, *Puṣpitāgrā*, *Śragdharā*, *Mālinī*, *Vasantatilakā*, *Śārdulavikriḍita* etc., with different figure of speech were very sweet, sonorous, melodious and impressive. At that time the Sanskrit literature of its different branches was being properly studied and the culture of Sanskrit was in a flourishing conditions.

In Sanskrit literature the dramatic texts constitute a great bulk in contrast of other branches such as *smṛti*, *darśana*, *jyotiṣa*, *āyurveda* and *kāvya*s and this undoubtedly shows that the Sanskrit drama exerted a great influence on the life of the people and the society as well.

Though Odisha had a rich treasure of Sanskrit literature, and many distinguished poets, dramatists and rhetoricians were born in this land, they remained in oblivion only because Odisha had not attained a separate State-hood till 1936. For a long time Odisha remained a part of Bengal, and after that it remained a part of Bihar. Therefore, the authorities of the government cared little for search of the palm-leaf manuscripts lying scattered all over the State of Odisha. As a result, while giving an account of Sanskrit literature, the scholars of India and abroad did not have anything to say about the Sanskrit works written by Odishan authors.

But in 1936 when Odisha attained a separate statehood, consistent effort was made for collecting the various manuscripts available in every nook and corner of the state. The Odisha State Museum took up this arduous job and was supported by the different University libraries of the State. And as a result of this effort a number of hitherto unknown palm leaf manuscripts have been collected and preserved and paper copies of most of these are also available there. Hence it is now pertinent on our part to make a thorough study of those manuscripts and to bring them to the lime- light.

The contribution of Odisha to the dramatic literature by the renowned dramatists like Bhāsa, Kālidāsa, Śūdraka and others have greatly enriched, contributed much to this field, the contribution of Odishan authors to this stream is no less when we take into account the dramas of Bhaṭṭa Nārāyaṇa, Murāri, Kṛṣṇa Miśra, Rāy Rāmānanda and so on. On the whole the contribution of Odishan authors in the field of dramatic literature is no less compared to Indian dramatic stalwarts.

V. Conclusion

The research paper sheds light on the rich and vibrant history of Odisha's Sanskrit Dramatic Art Tradition. It becomes evident that the evolution of this art form has been a reflection of the region's cultural dynamism and assimilation of diverse influences. The ancient Sanskrit dramas in Odisha, originating from rituals and religious perfor-



mances, evolved into elaborate theatrical productions, replete with music, dance, and elaborate costumes. The study reveals how Odisha's Sanskrit dramatic art has been shaped by interactions with neighboring regions and other Indian theatrical traditions. The incorporation of local folk elements, music, and dance added a distinct flavor to these dramatic performances, captivating audiences for generations. Through the ages, Odisha's Sanskrit Dramatic Art Tradition has maintained its relevance and allure, showcasing the resilience and creativity of the Odia people. Today, efforts to preserve and revive this art form have gained momentum, ensuring that future generations continue to cherish and celebrate the unique heritage of Odisha's Sanskrit dramatic art. As this tradition evolves further in the modern era, it continues to serve as a living testament to the artistic genius and cultural heritage of Odisha.

References

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(ii) *Matsya Purāṇa*, 186-15-38, 18F-3-52, Ch.-IX.
(iii) The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, Ch.-IX, 23-5, X, 61-29-37.
(iv) *Skanda Purāṇa*, Ch-VI, 2-3.
(v) *Brahmānda Purāṇa*, 11, 16.42, III, 7.3.58.
(vi) *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*.
(vii) *Vāyu Purāṇa*, Ch-85.
(viii) *Harivaṃśa*, Ch.-X.
(ix) *Agni Purāṇa*, Part-II, Ch-338.27, p.874.
2. *Manusmṛti*, 10.44.
3. *Kiṣkindhā Kāṇḍa*, 41.11.
4. *Sabhāparvan*, 31.11, *Bhīṣmaparva*, 9.57, *Droṇaparva*, 4.8.
5. *Bṛhat Saṃhitā*, XIV, 6, 82.
6. *Ibid.* IV, 1-170.
7. S.2.2, pp.191.
8. *Raghuvaiṃśam*, IV-43, VI-54.
9. Hātūgumphā Inscription, line-16, 2nd sentence.
10. *ciṅṇa kaliṅga carita vaṅijjā*
vettācāro saṃkūpatho pi ciṅṇo /
natahi ciṅṇaṃ saḥavākarehi
daṇḍehi yuddhaṃ pi samajjamaṇe // J. III, pp. 541-42, Gāthā, 112-113.
11. The Theatre of the Hindus, Ch-X, The Origin of Indian Drama, p. 208, 1871.
12. *tatiye punabase gaṃdhava veda vudho dapa nata gīta bādita saṃdasaṇāhi usava samāja karāpanāhi ca kīḍāpayati nagarim /* Hātūgumphā Inscription, line-4-5.
Sanskrit - *punaḥ tṛtīye varṣe gāndharva veda budhaḥ darpa-nṛtya-gīta-vādita sandarśanaḥ utsava- samāja karaṇaiḥ ca kīḍāpayati nagarim /* Thereafter, in the third year, well-versed in the *Gāndharva Veda*, (His majesty) made (Kaliṅga) nagarī play, as it were, by arranging festivals and convivial gatherings, and organising performances of acrobatics, dance, as well as, of vocal and instrumental music.



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