

TEXT AND PERFORMANCE IN SANSKRIT DRAMA

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Classical Sanskrit drama is the domain almost exclusively of the literary student. What has come down to us are texts, texts of plays and texts of treatises or handbooks on the theory and practice of the drama. About the actual performance we know virtually nothing. The texts of the plays, for example, are bare of stage-directions. The few directions which are found concern the entries and exits of the actors and modes of speaking (for instance, "speaking angrily"). The latter type of direction, however, seems to have been optional. References in Sanskrit literature to the performance of a Sanskrit play are extremely rare and those that do occur are concerned with the circumstances under which the performance took place rather than with its technique.¹ What we do know, from the treatises referred to, is the existence of a great variety of skills required of an actor, such as eye-movements, gestures, postures of the body and different uses of the voice, and their respective connotations. This tells us something about the importance of such skills in acting, but nothing about their actual application. Information on the overall effect of a performance is lacking.

In this article I will attempt to reconstruct certain aspects of the performance of Sanskrit drama.² The starting-point will be Kūṭiyāṭṭam, a living tradition of Sanskrit drama still found in Kerala in the extreme south of India, and the descendant of a tradition brought to South India

1. A case in point is the reference, cited by Sylvain Lévi, *Le Théâtre indien*, Paris, 1890, 2nd edn, 1963, 320 ff., in *Avadānaśataka*, where the arrival of the players is mentioned, as is the request of the king to have a play performed. After that the text continues by mentioning that the king was highly pleased by the performance and that he distributed rich gifts among the actors. Not a word is said about the performance itself.

2. Particularly relevant to the present article is *Sanskrit Drama in Performance*, eds Rachel van M. Baumer and James R. Brandon, Honolulu, 1981. This work is a concerted attempt by a forum of scholars to reconstruct the performance of a classical Sanskrit drama. However, it overlooks, the highly relevant evidence from *Kuṭṭantmata* (see below 104ff.) and, partly as a result, it tends to underestimate the importance of Kūṭiyāṭṭam in such a reconstruction.

from the north at the beginning of the seventh century.³ Some features of Kūṭiyāṭṭam performances can be traced back to the classical period of Sanskrit drama — in fact, Kūṭiyāṭṭam would seem to be an enlarged or blown-up version of the classical tradition (and this in itself is a characteristic of the classical tradition). By way of conclusion I will discuss the circumstances which may have accounted for this situation and its subsequent development. But firstly in considering performance traditions I will focus on the division of labour in Kūṭiyāṭṭam between the text and the performance, beginning with a brief history of the dramatic literature.⁴

The classical tradition of Sanskrit drama is generally placed between the fourth and the ninth centuries. From the ninth century onwards the Hindu kings in North and Central India were gradually replaced by Turkish rulers from Central Asia, which does not mean that the production of Sanskrit literature abruptly came to an end, although Sanskrit culture did lose the hegemony it had enjoyed in the preceding centuries. Often it was replaced by Islamic culture or by a blend of Hinduism and Islam. The dramatic literature may be taken as beginning with the poet and playwright Kālidāsa, who is believed to have lived in the fourth century or the fifth at the court of the Gupta kings. Kālidāsa is not the first Sanskrit playwright to have existed, but of the works of his predecessors little has survived apart from scraps of quotation. An exception is the Buddhist author Aśvaghōṣa (probably from the first

3. The case of Kūṭiyāṭṭam is exceptional in that it is the only tradition in India which performs actual Sanskrit plays, i.e. plays, often well-known classical plays, composed in Sanskrit. The other dramatic traditions found in India use a local language (or even English), though the stories may ultimately go back to Sanskrit sources, in particular the epics, the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyāna*: see Hanne M. de Bruin's "Kaṭṭaikkūttu: Folk Theatre of Tamil Nadu" (below 115-40). It seems possible through a study of its repertoire to establish a direct link between Kūṭiyāṭṭam and the dramatic tradition introduced into South India by the Pallava dynasty at the beginning of the seventh century: see my forthcoming article, "The So-called Trivandrum Plays Attributed to Bhāsa", *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens*, XXXVII, 1993, which ideally should be read along with this present essay.

4. For a more complete survey of this literature, see Lévi, and A. Berriedale Keith, *The Sanskrit Drama*, Oxford, 1924. As a general introduction to Sanskrit drama, J.A.B. van Buitenen, "The Classical Drama", in Edward C. Dimock, Jr. *et al.*, *The Literatures of India: An Introduction*, Chicago, 1974, 81-114, may be consulted.

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century), fragments of whose plays have been found in old excavated libraries along the Silk road in China.⁵

A history of Sanskrit literature does not present the picture of a continuous and even development of the drama. It is characterized by great leaps in time as well as place — Kālidāsa in the fourth or fifth century in North India, Harṣa in the seventh in Kanauj, Mahendravikramavarman in the seventh in Tamil Nadu, and Kulaśekhara-varman in the eleventh in Kerala. However, throughout this entire period the literary form of Sanskrit drama represents a strikingly uniform picture. Thus, the plays of the eleventh-century South Indian Kulaśekhara-varman are hardly distinguishable from those of the fourth-century North Indian Kālidāsa.

The oldest treatise on the drama is the *Nāṭyaśāstra* or *Treatise (śāstra) on the Art of the Drama (nāṭya) or Dance*. It should be noted that it is not always possible to distinguish in meaning between “dance” or “drama” performance. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* acquired great authority, and all later treatises on drama pay it lip-service, and indeed it is as complete a handbook on drama as can be, dealing with the text, the plot, the performance technique and the audience. All this material has been subordinated to an aesthetic theory dealing with the audience’s fascination with a performance.⁶

The *Nāṭyaśāstra*, which is traditionally attributed to the mythical figure Bharata, is a compilation, and in its conception it is older than the earliest known plays. As such it contains, among other things, material pertaining to the pre-history of the Sanskrit drama. It has been shown on the basis of this material that in origin Sanskrit drama was a religious ceremony performed for the benefit of the king and involved a reiteration of the cosmogony.⁷ This context has remained relevant for the historical

5. The existence of these early plays, which dealt with Buddhist themes, is a moot point in the study of Sanskrit literature. As will be pointed out later, Sanskrit drama originates in brahmanic ritual, which was precisely one of the elements of social life rejected by the Buddhists. Apparently already in the first century Sanskrit drama had developed into such an important royal institution that no king, even if he were a Buddhist, could ignore or neglect to patronize it.

6. See Edwin Gerow, *Indian Poetics: A History of Indian Literature*, ed. Jan Gonda, V/3, Wiesbaden, 1977, 245-50.

7. Various theories have been set forth regarding the origin of the Sanskrit drama, including the suggestion that it is derived from Greek drama which would have come to India in the wake of Alexander the Great’s expeditions. The most convincing theory seeks the origin of the Sanskrit drama in Vedic ritual: see F.B.J. Kuiper, *Varuṇa and Vidūṣaka*, Amsterdam, 1979 esp. 110-244.

period. The plays can be properly understood only against the background of royal ambitions or concerns. The themes, in many instances still in the garb of ancient myth, celebrate the king's successes in the founding and continuation of the royal dynasty, and in the gaining of political allies. Sanskrit drama has thrived under the royal patronage of Hindu kings. As we have already indicated, after these kings had been replaced in North India by Muslim rulers Sanskrit drama ceased to be a living tradition there.

The influence of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* was not restricted to texts of its own genre, but seems to have affected playwrights and actors as well. In any case, Kālidāsa already mentions the *Nāṭyaśāstra* as an authority, although in connection with a dance performance:

One director of a group of dancing-girls to another: The art of the dance [or: drama, *nāṭyaśāstram*] is tested by the performance. What is the use of further disputation on this subject? (*Mālavikāgnimitra*, I, prose after verse 15).

The sixth-century playwright Bāṇa describes the plays of his predecessor Bhāsa in technical terms derived from the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. These and other such examples⁸ would testify to the importance of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* or the dramatic theory in general for the dramatic tradition.

Kūṭiyāṭṭam

Kūṭiyāṭṭam,⁹ a form of dance drama, is the only surviving performance tradition of Sanskrit drama in India, and is found in Kerala in South India. The performances take place within the precincts of temples, or in the family estates of the local aristocracy. The tradition of Kūṭiyāṭṭam has been transmitted in cakyar-families, which belong to the temple service community in Kerala. The influence of this traditional patronage has dwindled since Indian independence in 1947. In recent years the role of patron has been taken over by antiquarian societies, which require performances to accommodate themselves to more modern tastes, by such things, for example, as the reduction of the duration of a performance to a single night.

8. For instance, Kālidāsa's *Vikramorvaśya*, II, verse 17, which refers to the wise seer Bharata, the reputed author of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Here, Bharata is said to have laid down rules for the performance based on the eight aesthetic experiences.

9. On Kūṭiyāṭṭam, see in particular Pragna Thakkar Enros, "Producing Sanskrit Plays in the Tradition of Kūṭiyāṭṭam", in Baumer and Brandon, 275-98.

With its emphasis on music, make-up, costume, mime, gestures, modulations of voice and other technical details, a Kūṭiyāttam performance may give us a fairly good impression of what a classical performance might have looked like if performed according to the rules of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. On the other hand, many of these details, in their forms as well as their execution, are almost certainly of local origin, as a comparison with the many other current theatrical and dance traditions of Kerala would show. The present approach is not to compare such technical details with what the *Nāṭyaśāstra* has to say in their respect; instead, I would like to start from the total effect of these and other such details on the performance.

In this connection one feature should be mentioned in particular. In a traditional Kūṭiyāttam performance every sentence is performed at least three times. First it is recited slowly in a special tone of voice; then it is performed a second time completely in mime, in which every word and every grammatical element (for example, case endings and personal endings) have their own gestures; after this the sentence is recited again, apparently to produce a smooth transition to the next sentence. Even a short dialogue may take so long that the person addressed retires backstage to await his cue. The result of this detailed and stylized technique is that the performance of a play is never finished in one night. In Kūṭiyāttam a play is cut up into Acts, which are performed as plays by themselves. A performance of one such Act takes at least three consecutive nights, due to the preliminary and final rituals (on the first and last nights). Performances of one Act over a period altogether of thirty nights were not exceptional.

However, the threefold repetition of each line is not the only factor responsible for this extremely long drawn-out performance. For instance, the plot is frequently interrupted by the *vidūṣaka*, the companion of the king. In Sanskrit drama this figure has traits which we associate with the court-jester. Frequently, by way of comment, he translates into plain terms the king's high-flown, clumsy reveries. In Kūṭiyāttam he may occasionally depart from the text, but not his role, in order to discuss local, current issues. Another element responsible for the length of the performance is the occurrence of flashbacks. When an important character enters the Scene the action of the drama is completely halted in order to relate the newcomer's biography. Such a flashback, which is not necessarily restricted to that part of the biography which is relevant to the play, may itself take up several nights. For each play these enlargements have been laid down in handbooks, which have been transmitted by different families of Kūṭiyāttam actors, who jealously guard them. The flashbacks in particular do not represent improvised

acting. It should be noted that the text of the play itself is completely unaffected by these interruptions and additions, and continues to be performed to the letter, functioning as a kind of skeleton that is fleshed out in the course of a performance.

The classical performance

From the point of view of the text of the play, a Kūṭiyāttam performance may come across as abstruse. However, its deviation from classical practice is probably only a matter of degree. From one of the few accounts in Sanskrit literature of a performance — found in the *Kuṭṭanṭmata*, or *The Opinions (mata) of a Procuress (kuṭṭanī)*, by the eighth-century Damodaragupta from Kashmir — it becomes clear that this, too, was a lengthy affair, which would test the patience of an uninitiated audience. The *Kuṭṭanṭmata* describes a performance of *Ratnāvalī*, a play by the sixth-century king and playwright Harṣa. The director of a group of actors begs their patron, a king, to sit out at least one Act, so that their efforts will not have been in vain.¹⁰ The reason for the director's modesty is the king's supposed restlessness. The king himself admits that "people like me generally do not take to performances of a play. Our hearts lie with chariots, horses, infantry and such like things" (verse 907). However, the king's enthusiasm at the end of the performance knows no bounds: "After the performance of the act had come to an end and the noise of the music and singing had died down, the king started to praise the spectacle profusely" (verse 906, after which comes verse 907 translated above). His praise would seem to show that, as in the case of Kūṭiyāttam the story of the play was secondary to the spectacle.

In this connection a misunderstanding by Abhinavagupta, a ninth-century Kashmirian commentator on the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, of a passage from that text is relevant as well. The passage referred to, verse XVIII 21, is concerned with the unity of the actions brought together in one Act, which should all take place in one single day, that is to say leaps of time, as occasioned by a long journey, for instance, or by a period of exile, should be relegated to the entr'actes. Instead, according to Abhinavagupta the verse contains a warning against the performance of an Act exceeding the duration of a day. For the actors, he adds, it would be physically impossible to be on stage any longer. The same would apply to the audience in the hall. I leave aside here a discussion of the textual basis

10. Damodaragupta, *Kuṭṭanṭmata*, or *The Opinions of a Procuress*, Bombay, 1887, verse 856.

of Abhinavagupta's peculiar interpretation. The point I wish to make is that, irrespective of the question whether Abhinavagupta based himself here on personal observations or on conclusions derived from a vaguely understood text, as far as he was concerned such a warning addressed to the playwright or the director was perfectly relevant, and neither superfluous nor out of order.

With this we still do not know exactly what factors may have caused a classical performance to take so long. One indication may be found in the inventory of the acting skills found in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and from some stray remarks in Sanskrit literature itself, which refer to dancing and singing. It would seem that a classical performance, at least in its spirit, was not much different from Kūṭiyāttam.

The text

So far we have dealt with what seems to be one of the most striking features of Kūṭiyāttam and, probably in only a slightly lesser degree, of the classical performance as well — the contrast between the text of a play and the performance. Text and performance seem to live completely separate lives, on both the level of dialogue and of story or plot.

The first point becomes clear from a brief glance at any translation of a Sanskrit play. A play consists of brief dialogues, interspersed with descriptive or topical verses. A lively exchange or wordplay of two lines, for example, is completely lost when it takes fifteen minutes or an hour. A second point concerns the performance of the Act of a play as an autonomous, self-contained theatrical event. This is at odds with the dramatic theory, on the one hand, and with the function of the plays, on the other. As far as dramatic theory is concerned, it shows a great concern with the plot. (In this contrasting sharply with the other, lyrical, poetical tradition, which, at least in its early phase, was concerned exclusively and almost obsessively with language.) The *Nāṭyaśāstra* mentions no fewer than three categories of items which deal with the construction of the plot.¹¹ One of these categories represents a kind of theory of the novel *avant la lettre*, in that it distinguishes the five successive stages, in the psychological development of the hero, from his initial desire to obtain a certain object, usually a girl, through his efforts and frustration, to the final success.

11. Here the *arthaprakṛti*, *samdhi* and *avasthā* are meant. For a study of the three categories and in particular of their function in the drama, see Siegfried Lienhard, "Plot Development in Classical Indian Drama", *Indologica Taurinensia*, II (1974), 133-47.

All Sanskrit plays end happily. This happy ending is essential, as it represents the benefit of the performance to the patron who is identified with the hero-king of the play. Nevertheless, however essential the happy ending may be, up to the very end of the play its possibility is virtually denied. It never is, and apparently is not meant to be, the logical or necessary result of the actions that preceded it. The function of the play would seem to lie in its unpredictable — and unpredicted — denouement. The question what exactly constitutes the happy ending may not even always be made explicit. This point may be clarified by the summaries of a few plays.

The first example is *Śākuntala*, a play in seven Acts, by Kālidāsa (fourth or fifth century), the first and most often translated of Sanskrit dramas.¹² It tells the story of a king, who, as the result of a curse, is doomed to forget that he has married Śākuntalā (at their wedding in her father's hermitage in the forest no witnesses had been present). To make things worse, Śākuntalā, while bathing in the river, loses the ring which the king had presented to her as a pledge of his faithfulness. After the wedding the king returns to his capital with the intention of fetching her later, alas, only to forget about her existence completely. His memory returns when a fisherman who has found the king's ring in the stomach of a fish is brought to him. But then it is too late. Śākuntalā has disappeared without a trace. As a result the king remains unaware that when he left her Śākuntalā was pregnant. Several years later the king finds her again by accident. Returning from a campaign near a hermitage he observes a little boy playing with a lion's cub. He looks on fascinated. When he makes enquiries about the boy, he is told that he is the son of a certain Śākuntalā, who lives in the hermitage. At the end of the play the king is happily reunited with his wife and with his son and heir.

The existence of the latter does not, at least not explicitly, play a role in the drama. However, this securing of a son and heir, which lies literally outside the text, is probably precisely what the play is all about. Two of Kālidāsa's other works, in both cases epic poems, end in almost exactly the same way: one with the discovery by the deceased king's ministers that the queen is pregnant, thereby removing their fears that the dynasty will become extinct; the other with a description of the wedding night of a god and his wife. Their son, who it is supposed will be conceived that night, will later save mankind from the oppression of a demon. What we have to do with here is a conscious narrative strategy particularly favoured by Kālidāsa, with which Western critics have had

12. The first translation was made by Sir William Jones in 1789. For a recent translation, see Michael Coulson, *Three Sanskrit Plays*, Penguin, 1981, 29-161.

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great difficulty and which has led them to assume from the way these two epic poems end that the works are incomplete.¹³ In the original myth, reworked in *Śākuntala*, the son is no other than Bharata, the founder of the Bharata-lineage and as such the ancestor of all Indians. Working back from this ending *Śākuntala* would appear to be concerned basically with the problem — and the reward — of the founding of a dynasty. The example is the Bharata-lineage, which, almost nipped in the bud, is miraculously saved and lives on for ever.

Another example concerns a whole class of plays, the *nāṭikās*, the classical examples of which are *Priyadarśikā* and *Ratnāvalī* (the play already mentioned earlier in connection with the description of a performance in the *Kuttanīmata*) by the sixth-century king and playwright Harṣa. The titles of these two plays represent the names of their respective heroines. The plots of these plays, which usually consist of four Acts each, follow a similar pattern. A princess, on her way to be given away to a king, is separated from her escorts by a disaster, such as a shipwreck or an attack by robbers. She is rescued without being recognized and enters as a handmaiden into the service of the wife of the king she had been meant to marry. All this has occurred before the opening of the play, which begins with the king spotting the mysterious girl in the garden, and falling deeply in love with her, although his jealous wife prevents him from meeting her. A companion of the king's attempts to help prove ineffective and merely increase his unhappiness. Just as the situation is coming to a climax, a party in search of the princess arrives at the palace, recognizes her and reveals her identity. Knowing of the girl's royal descent and seeing the king's unhappiness, the queen feels obliged to give up her opposition to the addition of the girl to the king's harem.

What is presented here as a domestic problem is in reality a political one. The girl was sent to the king by her father as a pledge of his allegiance. The status of wives in the king's harem is derived from, or indicative of, the status of the allies. The older ones are reluctant to give up their status or to admit yet another competitor for the king's favours. In his turn the king is not supposed to distribute his favours according to his own preferences. Love upsets the balance, especially when its object is a girl of unknown origin. Only when it is revealed that the mysterious girl is a princess of a noble family is she accepted, for an additional alliance with a noble family is beneficial to all. At this point the king's

13. See in this connection, Herman Tiekens, "The Structure of Kālidāsa's *Raghuvamśa*", *Studien zur Indologie und Iranistik*, XV (1989), 151-58.

love for the girl is in fact an assurance to her family that they too will be included in the king's preferential treatment.

The third play, a short one-act farce, *Mattavilāsa* (*The Drunken Sport*), composed by yet another royal playwright, the South Indian king Mahendravarman I (610-630), is completely different from those described so far.¹⁴ At the opening of the play we meet a mendicant kapālin friar and his pupil, a beautiful barber's daughter. Both are, in accordance with the customs of their sect, dead-drunk. On their begging tour through the town the kapālin discovers that his begging bowl has vanished. He is faced with a problem of an almost existential nature, for without his *kapāla*, literally "skull", he is no longer recognizable as a kapālin, or "skullbearer". After a fruitless search for the bowl the kapālin concludes that it must have been stolen, and, as it contained delicious roasted meat, that the thief must have been either a Buddhist friar or a dog. With these speculations on the identity of the thief the incidents which follow are already anticipated; not so, however, the denouement, which is completely unexpected.

The kapālin and his pupil start a search for the thief. Almost immediately in the crowd on the street they spot a Buddhist friar, who is visibly hiding something under his long, lavish robes. This is Nāgasena, on his way to the monastery to savour the delicacies he has collected on his daily round of the houses of the rich. Buddhism prescribes that the begging bowl should be kept covered, which explains why Nāgasena is hiding it under his robes. The kapālins stop the Buddhist and start an argument. When the Buddhist refuses to hand over the bowl, or even to show it, the kapālin threatens to cut off his head and make it into a *kapāla*. Fearing for his life, the monk starts to scream for help, in which he is joined by the kapālins. At this point, attracted by the screaming, a third ascetic enters upon the scene, another mendicant friar, of a rival sect, the pāśupatas. This intervention turns out to be troublesome for the kapālin, since it transpires that the pāśupata has a crush on the kapālin's pupil, who precisely at that moment is holding the Buddhist's hand. The Buddhist has merely helped her to her feet as she had stumbled in the fight. Resenting the apparent success of this "playboy Buddhist", the pāśupata starts to play off the kapālin and Buddhist, against each other, hoping that in the end he will be left alone with the drunken girl.

14. For a translation of this play, see L.D. Barnett, "Matta-Vilāsa: A Farce by Mahendravarman", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies*, V (1928-1930), 697-717.

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In the end, the Buddhist gives in and shows the bowl. When the kapālin refuses to accept that it really is the Buddhist's own bowl, the pāsupata proposes — an unexpected proposal from the mouth of a social outsider — taking the matter to court. The kapālin is dismayed, as he fears a verdict in favour of the rich Buddhist, but realizes that he cannot refuse. However, on their way to the court-house the company is approached by an idiot clothed in rags and talking nonsense. This idiot lives off the left-overs found on the street, and turns out to be carrying a *kapāla* filled with roasted meat which he has just managed to wrangle away from a mangy dog. This happens to be the kapālin's *kapāla*. The idiot is then tricked into handing over the bowl. In this way the lost bowl is returned to its rightful owner and everybody can once more go their own way.

Since the action of this short farce is situated in a milieu entirely consisting of holy men it is unique, and it should be noted that the last person to appear, the idiot, might be included in this category as well, for his idiocy, entailing his having to suffer ridicule and pestering, is to be regarded as a form of asceticism. Among the holy men featured in the play, he is clearly the most wayward and radical type. On the other hand, it is this unpredictable and, again, unpredicted figure who restores peace among his brethren. As such, the milieu presents a mirror image of the normal world. In this normal world peace is established by the king, who, we are made to believe, is the complete opposite of the fool.¹⁵

In fact, the image of the king in Sanskrit drama is that of the wise fool. He is a figurehead, around whom things just happen and whose desires and actions prove completely ineffective. Nevertheless, in the end everything always turns out well. This dramatic image of the king corresponds with how the monarch is seen in reality by his brahmin adviser.¹⁶ The brahmin represents culture, wisdom, scholarship, and religion, all in one. The king requires the brahmin's co-operation in order to free himself from the image of the volatile upstart or the old soldier and to legitimize his position (for instance, as taker and giver of wealth) and his actions. The king's actions are motivated by his desire to maintain and foster the world as viewed by the brahmins. The

15. The above is a summary of my introduction to a Dutch translation of the *Mattavilāsa*: see Herman Tieken and Godard Schokker, *Vorstelijke humor: Drie kluchten uit het klassieke India*, Leiden, 1991, 61-67.

16. On the relation between king and brahmin, see "The Conundrum of the King's Authority", in Jan C. Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship and Society*, Chicago, 1985, 108-27.

brahmin, in his turn, is prepared to co-operate with the king or to lend his name to the king's actions, if the latter is prepared to leave all decisions to the brahmin.

The portrayal in the plays of the king as an ineffective but innocent fool reflects, in its exaggeration, the tensions or uneasiness that must have existed in real life between the king and his brahmin advisors. In the plays the brahmin claims the role of the invisible hand by whose influence everything always turns out well. At the same time, we can imagine the king doing his utmost to restrict the role of the brahmins mainly to public or ceremonial occasions, a drama performance being one of them.

In Kūṭiyāṭṭam we have noticed a wide gap between the aims of the performance and those of the text. A similar situation may be assumed for a performance in the earlier period. By way of conclusion some points will be considered which may have contributed to or facilitated the peculiar course Sanskrit drama has taken. However, two preliminary remarks need to be made. The first concerns the question whether the texts as we now have them were indeed ever meant to be performed. So far this question has not been taken up seriously. Lacking evidence to the contrary, we have to assume that they must indeed have been intended for performance. Actors may have used their own scripts, as in Kūṭiyāṭṭam, but in these the text was observed to the letter. Whatever adaptations were made, they were in the nature of additions and interruptions.

The second remark concerns the assumption that for the performance the text was not really important, because the story, which in the majority of cases was based on a traditional tale or myth, was usually already quite familiar to the audience, for whom only a few clues would be necessary to enable them to follow the plot. To this it may be objected that Sanskrit drama was never a popular art form. The present-day abbreviated performances of Kūṭiyāṭṭam show what happens when Sanskrit drama becomes dependent on the support of an uninitiated public. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* enumerates the qualifications required of the audience, which are too many and too varied to be present in a single person. The different aspects of a performance were therefore to be judged by specialists.¹⁷ Apart from this, there are a considerable number of plays with completely novel, fictional plots, the brief farce

17. See J.K. Balbir, "Sanskrit Drama and the Spectators", *Indo-Iranian Journal*, VI (1962-1963), 38-44.

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just described being but one example. In these cases the assumption that the audience was familiar with the story does not hold at all.

In order to understand the character of Sanskrit drama it is necessary in the first place to consider the position of Sanskrit, which is not a natural, spoken language. It is a language to be learned during a long period of study. Its grammar had been standardized by the grammarian Pāṇini sometime in the fifth century BC. Its vocabulary is finite and laid down in dictionaries, which is to say that new terms are coined either by compounding or by metaphorical expressions. The use of Sanskrit is limited as well. Its study is in principle open only to men belonging to the higher, brahmin caste. Whatever the truth of this brahmanic claim, few people will have considered its study as a viable goal in life. Furthermore, the atmosphere surrounding Sanskrit is that of the sacred. Thus, there are bilingual inscriptions with the introduction and the sacred formulas in Sanskrit and the profane purpose of the inscription, a donation of land for instance, in the vernacular.

Sanskrit was also the principal medium of learning, comparable to Latin in medieval Europe. Virtually all sciences, from grammar, astrology, philosophy, law and poetics to elephant-lore, were codified in Sanskrit texts. So by definition Sanskrit drama was not a popular art form, but a learned exercise, or an exercise of learning. The science of the drama was codified in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and had to be studied from that work. Teachers may have played an important role in this, especially in translating the written rules of the book into concrete images. However, the text has retained the status of the ultimate authority. Initially for a student every detail to be studied is of equal importance; and a selective or specialist attitude towards what has to be learned is counter-productive, since it may be interpreted as weakness or unwillingness, certainly if the object of study, as in the case of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, consists of an inventory of details. A performance provides the occasion for a demonstration of one's learning: and the tendency, visible in the history of Sanskrit drama, to fully exploit every detail was therefore built into the learned status of the art form.

In this connection it should be noted that the history of Sanskrit literature in general has witnessed several periods of revival. Its introduction in South India in the seventh century, for instance, is the result of a conscious policy of the expanding Pallava dynasty. It has been possible to explain some peculiarities in the South Indian dramas as corrections of the prevailing practice, which had their origin in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. This suggests the continuing importance for dramatic practice of this handbook, which dramatic art relied on in every crisis.

A second factor which may have determined the character of Sanskrit drama should be sought in its origin, which was a religious ceremony patronized by the king. Thus, like a ceremony or a ritual, a drama performance took place in a separate space set apart from the ordinary world, in this case an especially constructed, walled playhouse. This playhouse contained a stage, which before every performance is turned into a veritable sacred space by a highly complex and protracted ritual.

In a ritual the roles are played by experts; and all actions down to the minutest detail are regulated by rules, whose precise execution is of the utmost importance, since the result of the ritual depends on it. In this respect as well Sanskrit drama simply followed the mode of the ritual. This is most clearly visible in the performance technique, with its overriding concern with the precise execution of every detail. As in ritual the form tends to replace the meaning. A similar concern might be recognized in the text as well, which in complete accordance with classical literary canons and exemplifying many of the rules given in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* with regard to the plot and other matters, is in highly correct Sanskrit. The text, too, is in many respects a *tour de force* of learning.

It may be argued that the development of Sanskrit drama, culminating in Kūṭiyāṭṭam was to a large extent determined by the origin of the drama performance as a ritual; as such Sanskrit drama contributes an interesting variant to the discussion of deviance or stylizing as a characteristic of a drama performance. Here the mode of deviance is ritual, which Sanskrit drama persistently and continually elaborates and exploits.

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