

MODERN SANSKRIT DRAMAS OF BENGAL

Though a classical language, a language of ancient religion and philosophy and acclaimed as the sacred language of gods (*devabhāṣā*), Sanskrit has never lived in isolation but has always kept in touch with contemporary ideas and problems. It has exhibited a remarkable vitality of continuing to produce even today literary and other works of high qualities.

We have quite a large number of Sanskrit dramas based on modern topics written by modern dramatists in all parts of India. Whether it is the question of national integration, or of social problems like womens liberation and family planning, or labour and refugee problems, Sanskrit dramas have not lagged behind the march of time. It is, however, not possible to give an account of all the modern Sanskrit dramas in the limited space of an article like this and it will be our endeavour here to present a sketch of important modern Sanskrit dramas, modern in spirit and in style, written in Bengal and indicate their trends and characteristics.

We can not deny that there is some truth in the criticism that Sanskrit dramatists of the classical age have not exhibited much originality in invention commonly borrowing their plots from history or epic legends, and because of their inclination to strictly conform to the rules laid down by the theorists their plays lack the variety of life and action. But it is true that inspite of their self imposed obligations to theorists Sanskrit dramatists could not ignore the influence or impact of time in which they grew up. An individual is a part of the society he belongs to and a poet or a dramatist as an individual is a member of his society. In this way literary compositions have become mirrors of contemporary societies and we may well imagine that change of values in a society will reflect itself in contemporary writings particularly in the dramas. The social environment in which Bhasa, Kalidasa lived were totally different from the societies in which we are living in. Social,

political and religious conditions of India of those days were far more peaceful and congenial for the development of poetry in an idealistic way. The compositions of those days could dwell on and propagate the values of truth and lofty ideals. They could point to the eternal problems of mankind and could interpret the relation between *dharma* and *artha*, *dharma* and *kāma*, *kāma* and *mokṣa* etc. from an idealist point of view. The truth and values of life explained in these works may not be true for a particular society or people only but may hold good for the people of all times and place.

We may mark the difference in trends in the modern Sanskrit dramas under two heads: plot construction and style. Our dramas now depend more and more on the actual state of life and society for their plot and are gradually discarding the well known and much repeated themes of the epics and other popular Tales. The *Bhārata-vijayam* and *Vira-Pratāpam* of Mathura Prasad Dikshit, *Kāśmīra-sandhāna-samudayam* and *Hyderabad-vijayam* of Bhīma Bhaṭṭa, the collection called *Raṇasrī-raṅgaḥ* by Velankar are all specimens of modern dramas dealing with the political problems of India and propagating patriotism. On the crisis of culture we have such interesting compositions like the *Bhrānta-Bhārataḥ* by a group of students of Gokuldas Tejpal Sanskrit college and *Punarunmeṣa* by V. Raghavan. The *Mahimamaya-Bhārata* of Jatindra Bimal Chaudhuri deals with the problem of irrigation etc. and the *Kāma-suddhi* by Raghavan records the protest of the women-folk against becoming a mere play-thing in the hands of men. In style and technique we observe the most remarkable difference in the scenic divisions and less dependence on versification. It is also to be noted that many of the stereotyped theories and rules of the rhetoricians have been ignored although the form of presentation has remained almost the same.

These changing trends are also noticeable in the modern dramatic compositions of Bengal. The history of Sanskrit dramatic literature opens in Bengal with the *Lokānanda* of Candragomin in the 5th century A.D. Sanskrit dramatists of Bengal have produced dramas of high quality and the tradition has remained unbroken till today. Well known Sanskrit scholars like Mahāmahopādhyāya Pañcānan Tarkaratna, Mahāmahopādhyāya Haridās Siddhāntavāgīśa, Mahāmahopādhyāya Kālipada Tarkācārya have all produced Sanskrit dramas of high merits and they have been successfully staged to kindle the imagination and inspiration of thousands. The *Amaramaṅgalam* of Mm. Tarkaratna and the *Mivāra Pratāpam* of Mm. Siddhāntavāgīśa deal with the struggle of Mevar against the alien rule of the Mughals, the *Vaṅḡiya-Pratāpam* and *Śivājī-caritaṃ* of Mm. Siddhāntavāgīśa depict the exploits of rebellious Pratāpāditya of Bengal and Śivājī of Maharashtra both of whom tried to remove the authority of the Mughals over their respective mother lands. Although these dramas are based on the themes of medieval history of India and follow the technicalities of Sanskrit theorists they nevertheless reflect the contemporary Indian mind, its indignation and resentment

against a foreign rule. Changes in trends could be noticed already in those dramas written in a conventional way. Comparatively later dramatic works of Bengal can be divided into three groups: (i) Dramas based on themes of Epics, Purāṇas etc. (ii) Sanskrit rendering of well-known Bengali dramas and (iii) Dramas with absolutely modern topics or problems.

In the first group we get the dramas of the well known *nyāya*-scholar Mahāmahopādhyāya Kālipada Tarkācārya who was himself a reputed actor. His *Nala-Damayantīyam* is based on the Nala-episode of the Mahābhārata and the Purāṇa-story of Uddālaka-Aruṇi is the theme of his *Mānavakagauravam*. In his *Prasānta-Ratnākaram* Mm. Tarkācārya dramatises the episode of Ratnākara who is later transformed into Vālmīki. Though these dramas have much similarity with the dramas of ancient times in respect of plot, ideal, approach, treatment of *rasa* etc. they are truly modern in the scenic sets and stage direction. Technique employed here reminds one of the Bengali *yātrā*-style and most unconventionally Sanskrit songs are tuned to the *Bhāṭiyāli* and *Kīrtana* forms of Bengali folk songs which add to the charm and grace of these plays. The dramas of Mm. Tarkācārya are remarkable for their dramatic qualities and are wonderfully suitable for the stage. His *Prasānta-Ratnākaram* was one of the most successful dramas of the late fifties.

To this group also belong some of the dramas of Pandit Śrījīva Nyāyatīrtha, worthy son of Mm. Pañcānan Tarkaratna and a prolific Sanskrit writer. He has about thirty dramatic compositions to his credit. In *Mahākavi Kālidāsam* he gives for the first time a dramatic version of the traditional life story of the great poet. His *Raghuvamśam* and *Kumārasambhavam* are the dramatised versions of Kalidasa's mahākāvya. Other dramas of Pandit Śrījīva belonging to this group are *Śrī-kṛṣṇakautukam*, *Nāganistāram*, *Śrī Śankarācārya-vaibhavam*. These dramas are based on ancient themes and written more or less with an orthodox structure. His other dramas have a true modern flavour in all respects and belong to the third group of our classification. Pandit Viśveśvara Vidyābhuṣaṇa has five dramas based on plots derived from ancient works, viz., *Dasyu Ratnākaram*, *Vālmikisamvardhanam*, *Bharata melanam*, *Cāṇakya-vijayam* and *Uttara-Kurukṣetram*. These dramas exhibit the tendencies of classical dramas and his success lies more in approach and representational aspects rather than innovations. He also follows the *yātrā*-style but with a closed stage as is done in the modern Bengali *yātrās*. The dramas of Jatindra Bimal Chaudhuri belonging to this group are mostly of biographical nature excepting the *Svapna-Raghuvamśam*. His *Niṣkiñcana Yaśodharam* is the dramatic representation of the life of Yaśodharā-Gopā and was successfully staged in Rangoon by the Prācya-vāṇī troupe of Calcutta. Acts divided into scenes his dramas have been attractive because of the Sanskrit songs tuned to the *Kīrtana* style. The dramas of Rama Chaudhuri, widow of the late Jatindra Bimal also belong to this class excepting perhaps the *Vimala-*

*Yatindram*, a dramatic representation of the life and works of her eminent husband. Her other dramas include *Kavi-kula-Kokilam* on the life of Kalidasa, *Meghamedurīyam*, a dramatised form of the *Megha-dūtam* and *Amara-Mīram* on the life of *Śrī Mīrābāi*. A former member of the Indian Administrative Service Dr. B. K. Bhattacharya has written a good number of dramas of which *Kavi-kālidāsam*, *Gīta-Gaurāṅgam* and *Siddhārtha-caritam* belong to this group both in form and content.

In the second group we may mention the *Vārtā-gr̥ham* of Dhyanesha Narayan Chakravarti which is a very attractive Sanskrit rendering of Rabindranath Tagore's Bengali drama entitled *Dākghar* (Post Office). Chakravarti's *Muktadhārā* is the Sanskrit rendering of Tagore's Bengali drama of the same title. He has also done a very faithful translation of the stage-successful Bengali drama *Candragupta* of D. L. Roy. Bimal Matilal's *Ratharajjuh* is the Sanskrit rendering of Tagore's *Kāler-yātrā* (March of time).

The third group of modern Sanskrit dramatic compositions of Bengal include quite a large number of dramas and we may here deal with the prominent among them. These dramas are mostly short plays and are based on the various problems our modern society is faced with.

The name of Pandit Śrījīva Nyāyatīrtha should be mentioned as the pioneer in this field of modern dramas in Bengal. He has about fifteen Sanskrit dramas to his credit which are truly modern in their form and character.

His two-act *prahasana* entitled *Puruṣa ramanīyam* depicts the historic tour of India by the Śankarācārya of Kāñci-kāmakoṭi. This play portrays the condemnable character of the frauds and upholds the glory of Lord Śiva and the excellence of the Lord's devotees. On the social problem of the equality of man and woman Pandit Nyāyatīrtha has an excellent *prahasana* entitled *Vidhiviparyāsam* which was composed to mark the historic convention held at Poona in 1944 to discuss the « Draft Hindu Code Bill ». Śrījīva's one-act play *Caura-cāturīyam* presents the story of a very clever thief who ultimately becomes a *sādhu* under the influence of wise counsel. In the two-act *prahasana* entitled *Caṇḍatāṇḍavam* Śrījīva has depicted the horrors of wars written at the outset of the Second World War. This play brings to the fore the clash between the communistic ideals supported by the material progress and happiness as advocated by Russia and some other countries of Europe and India's ideals of truth and non-violence. We find dramatic characters like anger (*krodha*), greed (*lobha*), sin (*pāpa*) and violence (*hiṃsā*) entering the stage with all the glammers of present day victorious generals only to be baffled by India armed with moral weapons of religion (*dharma*), truth (*satya*) and non-violence (*ahiṃsā*). The *Svātantrya sandhikṣaṇam* of Śrījīva is a symbolic drama which presents the political situation of the Indian sub-continent at the time of Independence. In a very skilful and interesting way are narrated the circumstances under which the country was partitioned. While dealing

with the Rāmāyaṇa-story of Rāvaṇa's capture of the *Puṣpaka*-chariot Śrījīva's one-act *vyāoga* type of play *Kailāsanātha-vijayam* depicts the victory of non-violence over violence. The two-act play *Rāgavirāgam* extols the influence of music by which a king who is much opposed to music gets changed at heart and revises his anti-music actions. A small *Bhāṇa* type of composition the *Puruṣa-puṅgavaḥ* depicts the character of a clever (*dhūrta*) man named *Vāgvīra* who is really a *vāgvīra* inasmuch as he fights but with words only for the freedom or liberty of women, and when occasion comes for the real trial of his sincerity, like so many of our so-called social reformer leaders, *Vāgvīra* is not to be found anywhere near the scene. Another interesting one-act *prahasana* entitled *Vivāha-vidāmbanam* depicts the social problem of the marriage of an old man with a poor young girl. With the help of a go-between who gets a handsome fee from the old man the marriage is settled but at the last moment the go-between plays a trick and the girl is married to a deserving young man. *Vanabhōjanam* is a small one-act *prahasana* without any female character in it and it deals with the story of a picnic organised by some foolish students. *Rāmanāma-dātavya-cikitsālaya* is an one-act play of a new type which can not be classified under any of the ten *rūpakas* of the theorists. The plot is based on a novel plan of medical treatment proposed by Śrī Śrī Sītārāmdās Onkārnāth. The *Daridra-durdaivam* exhibits the jealousy, selfishness and foolishness of our modern society with the help of the character of a professional beggar-brahmin who having received a wonderful magic dice finally casts it to perpetuate poverty for himself and his fellow brethren. He could get anything from the dice on condition that his fellow brethren would get double of that for themselves. In the one-act *prahasana* entitled *Satavārsikam* Pandit Śrījīva deals with some modern scientific achievements and pleads for the application of our scientific progress to improve the condition of mankind. His *Kṣutkṣemīyam* exhibits the excellence of *karma* (action) along with the domineering position of fortune. The *Cipitakacarvaṇam* is a very interesting one-act *prahasana* which depicts the ridiculous account of a miser who by his nature and attitude creates troubles and sufferings not only for himself but also for his nearest relatives. The *Sāmya-sāgara-kallolam*, is an allegorical one-act play in which Śrījīva has utilised the political situation of India in the mid-seventies as the subject matter. This play occupies a unique position inasmuch as it is for the first time that a Sanskrit drama has dealt with the socialistic idea of ancient India and has exhibited its excellence along with the theory of non-violence and the political thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi based on that theory. The *Yogya-yugala-melanam* is a *prahasana* based on *bhakti*-cult. Haladhara, a devotee of Govinda, holds Govinda as a superior deity while Jaladhara, a devotee of Śrī Rādhā, thinks Śrī Rādhā as the better, and they fight each other with arguments and counter arguments leading to a crisis. Their differences are solved and a reconciliation is arrived at. The identity of

the two personalities is established at the end exhibiting the hollowness of such partisan attachment.

These dramas of Śrījīva are marked by an elegant language, suspenseful action and familiar characters mostly drawn from the middle and low class society. These are truly modern dramas and have been successfully staged.

The *Prabuddha-himācalam* of Viśveśvara Vidyābhuṣaṇa is another drama with contemporary events based on the tense political and disturbed social situation of India particularly of West Bengal around 1969.

Siddheśvara Chaṭṭopādhyāya's *Dharitṛi-patinirvācanam* is a satirical play depicting the international situation between 1967-70. This drama presents *dharitṛi* (Earth), the heroine, as engaged in choosing her life partner (*svayamvarā*) from among a host of countries represented as suitors. She does not find any of the suitors worthy of her and is unable to make the choice. Chaṭṭopādhyāya's *Atha Kim* is a very interesting play which exhibits the hankering of the modern man in the modern society after the unknown and unidentified NEW! Such men run after anything new, whether it is a creed, or a style or a political view or even a social custom without having any knowledge of the thing they are actually desiring for! His *Nanā-vitādanam* represents the pitiable plight of mother *nanā* i.e., Sanskrit language, posing a serious problem to the educationists of India about the place of Sanskrit in our curriculum. The ill-fate of the new democratic republic of India suffering in the hands of a few crazy political leaders has been brought forth in his *Svargīya-Prahasanam*.

Dr. B. K. Bhattacharya has at least three excellent modern dramas dealing with the most current problems of Bengal. As the Commissioner of the Department of Transport in the Government of West Bengal he was well acquainted with the weal and woe, demands and complaints of the State transport workers. His personal knowledge of the subject has enabled him to bring forth beautifully the problem of the daily life of such workers in the playlet entitled *Sārdūla-sakaṭam*. His *Saranārthī Saṁvāda* portrays the painful picture of the plight of the refugees rushing in thousands from East Bengal to West Bengal. Bhattacharya's most remarkable modern Sanskrit play is perhaps the *Veṣṭana vyāogaḥ* which presents the uses and abuses of the widely employed means of *gherāo* in the hands of the labour community in West Bengal. Popular slogans in Bengali language like *calche calbe* — « our strike is on and will go on » — has been translated into Sanskrit with all the force as *caladidam caliṣyati*, and the unscrupulous character of some so-called trade union leaders who are in the field for their personal benefits only has been vindicated. The treatment of the plot and the dialogue of the play are attractive and forceful.

As discussed above these modern dramas deal with the problems of our present generation mostly exhibiting the evils and banes of our modern society. One noteworthy point of these dramas are that they

are as if by a rule small plays of one or two acts. A modern man in a modern society with all the problems of his daily life can hardly find any time to sit through an enactment of seven to ten acts and it seems the modern dramatists have kept this difficulty of the modern man in mind to limit the extent of their dramas to one or two acts. In this regard we may observe an influence of the Bengali stage on these modern dramatic compositions in Sanskrit.

*Santiniketan.*

- a) The dramas of Pandit Śrījīva Nyāyatīrtha have been published from Calcutta in the various issues of the Samskrita Sahitya Parishad Patrika, Praṇava Pārijāta, the Samskrita Pratibhā etc.
- b) The dramas of Jatindra Bimal and Rama Chaudhuri have been published by the Prācya-Vāṇī of Calcutta.
- c) The dramas of B. K. Bhattacharya and Siddheśvar Chattopadhyay have been published by the Samskrita Sahitya Parishat, Calcutta.
- d) The dramas of Pandit Viśveśvara Vidyābhuṣaṇa have been published from Rishi-Dham, Dattapukur, Dt. 24-Parganas, West Bengal.