

## Indian Dramaturgy and the 'Sacred-Stage'

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### Abstract

The stage in India has been ascribed a sacred status, and the performance on stage has conventionally been an elevating spiritual medium for the performers and the audience. This research paper seeks to explore the dimensions of the Indian sacred stage and its relevance to-date.

**Keywords:** Sacred Stage, Indian classical stage, Theatre, Drama, Performance Studies

The conception of the stage as a sacred space is an age-old occurrence that finds a place in most religions. The 'sacred-stage', as I call it, is not a physical trait but a mental experience aroused through a suitably performed enactment. Flipping over the pages of history, one can gather that the stage has been both condemned and cherished by the guardians of society.

The first-most instantaneous recollection of reservation against stage performance spontaneously provokes the thought of Plato in relation to his ideas expressed in his utopian work Republic. Plato had advocated banishing theatre for an ideal society based on the philosophical contention of 'imitation'. His ideas were challenged by his pupil Aristotle, who sanctified the performance on stage through his widely accepted theory of 'catharsis'. The unbroken tradition of performance of plays on the Greek stage and the intensity of support for

Aristotle's catharsis serve as pointers that indicate the significance of the stage in society, not only in Greece, but in almost all cultures.

The performance on stage in India, for instance, adhered to the conventions and rituals that were elaborately detailed in the Indian manual of dramaturgy, the sacred Natya Shastra. The prominence of the Natya Shastra can be gauged from its status as the Fifth Veda of the Indian classical tradition. The text laid down detailed rules, such as those with respect to the construction of various parts of theatre like a stage and auditorium. It even mentions rules with respect to invoking deities on stage. The treaty describes the story of the origin of dramaturgy and attributes its origin to Shiva, one of the primal deities of Hinduism. The treaty even stipulates the qualifications of performers who were trained to perform on stage.

The references in the Natya Shastra clearly indicate that a performance on stage was not a mundane act meant merely to entertain or delight. The sacred guideline towards the construction of the physical stage, invocation of the divine deity and the finer aspects of enactment imbued with moments of ecstasy – indicate that the stage was not just a physical space but a vehicle of transcendental experience, planned both anatomically and spiritually.

The stage in India was thus a confluence of architecture, engineering, philosophy, music, song and dance-mudras. It was construed as a liminal space where boundaries blurred between words, songs, pace, performance, senses, body, mind, movement and beyond everything else, the Space.

It should not call for a doctorate in Performance Studies to understand the simple nuances of the classical Indian stage. It should not be totally out of place to compare and suggest what an enlightening performance did to a 'sahridaya' spectator may not be very different from what a Yogi experienced during Yoga.

The sublime status of stage in India is ingrained in the fabric of Indian cultural tradition. The stage, by its very nature, was essentially a medium of transcendental

experience that was created to carry the audience away from the tethers of the ‘unreal-worldly’ illusion to experience the Real through the enactment of the acts.

The stage did not posit the so-called higher-order questions of the Being. Yet its connection with the Real lay in the act, not in the Being. The questions on the Being in Indian dramaturgy can be viewed in the context of knowledge or jnana, and the actual enactment or the performance can be compared to kriya or action. The dramatic act on stage thus involved the cohesion of jnana and kriya on stage. Though kriya is what is visibly performed on stage, it unravels the abstraction of jnana by means of an appropriately imbued kriya.

The Indian stage further established the significance of ‘utterance’ or the aural aspect of spoken words. The dramatic act on stage was performed following immaculate diction and correct pronunciation. The practice probably stems from Indian linguistic theology, that regards the ‘Word’ root as Brahman – the Supreme transcendental Reality.

The conception of the Word as a Creative force that instigates creation through an evolutionary process of language and its transformation is a pervading idea of the Indian linguistic thought. The tradition also reveres Shakti, the dynamic aspect of primal Energy contained in the Word, as a power that progressively evolves and finally breaks free from the bound or tethered aspect of existence, form and Being. The final culmination of words and sounds can be envisioned as the cessation of all its forms into a formless, shapeless state of wordless silence.

The Indian sacred stage is thus a complex amalgamation of philosophy and ritual performance. Like all human actions, the sacred-stage is ingrained with the imprint of the Absolute, which it undertakes to reveal through the dispersed acts of Performance. The acts so performed further are a sum of individual actions of actors, dancers, musicians, and audiences. It may be further understood in terms of actions based on mythic or actual events

that may come from diverse backgrounds such as religious, political, economic, social etc.

The stipulations of the script thus determine different responses to role-play.

The action on Indian sacred stage is bound by the concept of maya-leela that ascribes a liminal space status to the stage. The stage can be visualised as a domain delimited by the time-space dimension of an artistic production where spectators are carried away into a unique experience of transformation. The maya-leela necessitates balancing two contradictory realities simultaneously, particularly in a theatrical performance, which is a stupendous emotional and intellectual achievement.

The Indian sacred stage unravels the core of Indian spiritual philosophy through performance, acts and rituals that evolve and carry forward the core jnana through kriya through successive generations. The dynamic tradition of Indian dramaturgy, from the classical orientation down to modern age, retains the central structure through the diffused acts of mutation on an evolving stage.

The sacred stage is but a fragment of memory in the modern age. The evolution of the stage is progressively breaking free from all tethers of form and is gradually dwindling away into the sublime horizon of boundless space. It would not be long before the live music, dance and action dissolve to make way for the larger, more dispersed digital stage, the sacred connotations to which are harder to define.

The most endearing aspect of the erstwhile sacred stage was essentially the live cathartic enactment of an act that created a momentary experience of rather perilous aspects of life. Through the live act, the audience could identify with an experience that was otherwise denied in 'real life'. The transmission of acts over the digital medium has curbed the ritualistic power of drama. The alternatives to view a performance at a higher speed further impair the cathartic sense. What we tend to retain as a result, is sound and spectacle rather than import of the sublimity revealed through elements such as plot and character.

In a world that is ever changing, we often lose rich forms of traditional heritage, culture and elegance. Subject to a flux change, the Indian sacred-stage gracefully lingers on to radiate mythology, philosophy, spirituality and faith through its crinkly eyes and expressions, wrinkling hands and gestures. Undoubtedly, the old stage looks as graceful, vibrant and relevant as ever!

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