



The Pre-Independence Contribution of Odisha to Sanskrit Drama Literature: A Historical and Literary Study

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Abstract – The contribution of Odisha to Sanskrit drama literature, prior to India's independence, remains a significant yet often overlooked aspect of the region's intellectual and cultural heritage. This paper examines the rich tradition of Sanskrit drama in Odisha, focusing on the historical and literary contributions made by Odishan scholars, playwrights, and patrons. It explores the development of Sanskrit drama in Odisha through the medieval period, highlighting key texts, performance traditions, and the influence of the Odia cultural ethos on Sanskrit dramaturgy. The study delves into notable works and authors, including the role of temple traditions, royal patronage, and the socio-cultural milieu in shaping the region's dramatic literature. Additionally, it reflects on the unique integration of Odia cultural elements within the Sanskrit drama framework, which reflects both regional distinctiveness and broader pan-Indian literary traditions. By providing a historical and literary survey of this contribution, the paper aims to underscore Odisha's role in preserving and enriching Sanskrit drama literature, thereby contributing to the broader Indian literary and theatrical traditions.

Keywords: Odisha, Sanskrit Drama, Pre-Independence, Literary Contribution, Historical Study, Odishan Playwrights, Medieval Sanskrit Theatre, Dramaturgy, Royal Patronage, Temple Traditions, Odia Cultural Influence, Sanskrit Literature, Indian Theatre.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sanskrit drama, with its sophisticated structure and profound philosophical underpinnings, has played a central role in the cultural and literary heritage of ancient and medieval India. While many regions of India contributed to this vast tradition, Odisha's influence on Sanskrit drama literature, particularly before India's independence, remains a distinctive yet underexplored area of scholarly interest. Odisha, with its unique socio-cultural and religious milieu, has significantly enriched Sanskrit dramaturgy, both through its adaptation of classical texts and through the creation of original works that fused local cultural elements with pan-Indian literary traditions.

The historical trajectory of Sanskrit drama in Odisha can be traced back to the early medieval period, during which the region became a vital center for intellectual and artistic pursuits. The patronage of Odishan rulers, especially during the Gajapati dynasty, fostered an environment conducive to literary and theatrical growth. Additionally, Odisha's vibrant temple traditions and the role of religious rituals in public life played a crucial part in the development and performance of Sanskrit drama. Temples like the famous Jagannath Temple in Puri not only served as spiritual centers but also as hubs for cultural expression, where Sanskrit dramas were often staged as part of religious festivals.

This paper seeks to explore the pre-independence contributions of Odisha to Sanskrit drama literature through a historical and literary study. It will examine key Sanskrit plays, playwrights, and the cultural and intellectual context in which these works emerged. By analyzing the integration of Odishan religious, cultural, and artistic elements into Sanskrit drama, this study highlights the region's distinctive



contributions to the larger tradition of classical Indian theatre. In doing so, it aims to provide a deeper understanding of Odisha's role in the evolution of Sanskrit drama, showcasing how its unique cultural identity shaped and enriched this ancient literary form.

2. STUDY OF CLASSICAL SANSKRIT DRAMAS OF ODISHA

The introduction to classical Sanskrit dramas of Odisha and their playwrights reveals that many plays have been composed by Odia authors. Some of these plays have been published, while others remain unpublished. Among these, only a few have been printed in modern times. The study and reading of these works offer insights into the social behavior and cultural life of Odisha during the time they were written. In particular, the study of the roles of women in these dramas is of great importance. Therefore, this paper will focus on the portrayal of female characters in these plays.

The theatrical tradition of Odisha is quite ancient. In fact, it can be inferred that just as the civilization and culture of Odisha are ancient, so too is its dramatic art. As evidence of this, the temples in Bhubaneswar, such as the Brahmesvara, Muktesvara, Rājarāñī, and Liṅgarāja temples, as well as the temples in Puri (like the Jagannātha Temple) and Koṅārka's Sun Temple, contain numerous sculptures of dancers, both male and female, carved in graceful poses. These sculptures showcasing the excellence of Odishan art, also serve as representations of the ancient tradition of Odishan drama. These statues, as symbols of Odishan visual art, also highlight the grandeur of Odishan theatrical tradition.

The Odia playwrights, through their dramas, not only enhanced the pride of their homeland but also enriched the Sanskrit language, thus contributing significantly to the flourishing of Sanskrit literature. Their contributions have preserved and furthered the development of Sanskrit in the later ages. The dramas composed by these playwrights at different points in time show the diversity and richness of Odisha's cultural and literary traditions.

This paper, therefore, will highlight some of these important works. One of the most prominent works is the drama Anargharāghavanāṭakam, written by the great poet and playwright Murārī Mīśra. This play, based on the story of Rāmachandra, is a seven-act drama, which holds significant literary and theatrical value. The play is admired for its engaging narrative, stylistic richness, and intricate characterization. Murārī Mīśra, renowned for his poetic excellence and dramatic flair, has been widely recognized. His works reflect a synthesis of various fields, including grammar, philosophy, political science, and more, thereby demonstrating the intellectual depth of Odishan drama.

Another notable work is Pravodhacandradayam, written by the famous Odishan poet and playwright, Śrī Kṛṣṇa Mīśra. This one-act drama humanizes abstract concepts, blending philosophy and theatrical elements. Despite being philosophical in nature, the play fails to meet the full dramatic potential typically expected from such works.

Candrakalānāṭikā by Mahāmahopādhyāya Viśvanātha Kavirāja is another important work, showcasing his expertise in literature and dramaturgy. The play's language is simple, yet it conveys profound meaning, demonstrating Viśvanātha Kavirāja's skill and literary stature. His contributions to Sanskrit literature earned him prestigious titles such as 'Kavisūktiratnākaraḥ' and 'Nāṭyavedadīkṣāguru'.

The one-act play Utsāhvatī, written by the Odishan poet Jīvadevācārya, portrays the courage, administrative qualities, valor, and independence of women, offering a unique and progressive portrayal of female characters. These characters reflect the social conditions of women in Odishan society and their empowerment.



Other significant works include Jagannāthavallabhanāṭakam by Rāya Rāmānanda, Rāsagoṣṭhī Rūpaka by Anādi Mīśra, Samṛddhamādhavanāṭakam by Govinda Kavibhūṣaṇa, and Maṇimālā Nāṭikā by Anādi Mīśra, which presents a fantasy-based narrative. Madhurāniruddhanāṭakam by Cayani Candraśekhara is another notable play based on mythological themes, enhancing the understanding of Odishan dramatic traditions.

Modern works like Siṃhalavijayanāṭakam by Sudarśanapāṭhīśarmā further enrich the Odishan drama tradition by focusing on women's strength, intelligence, and scholarship, portraying them as heroic figures in historical contexts. This historical drama highlights themes of female empowerment, education, and courage.

Thus, this paper will explore these exemplary works of Odishan classical Sanskrit drama, offering chronological and analytical study of their contributions to the broader landscape of Sanskrit literature.

Table -1: Odishan Sanskrit Dramatists and Their Compositions

Sl. No.	Names of Dramas	Authors	Period of Composition
	Anargharāghavam	Murāri Mīśra	750 CE
	Prabodhacandrodayam	Kṛṣṇa Mīśra	1050 CE
	Nāṭakamelaka-Nāṭikā	Kavirāja Śaṅkhadhara	1290-98 CE
	Puṣpamālā-Nāṭikā	Candraśekhara Sāndhivigrahika Mahāpātra	1353-78 CE
	Uṣāpariṇaya-Nāṭakam	Rādhavānanda Sāndhivigrahika Mahāpātra	1378-95 CE
	Prabhāvatīpariṇaya-Nāṭakam Candrakalā-Nāṭikā	Kavirāja Viśvanātha	1407-14 CE
	Paraśurāma Vijaya-Vyāyoga	Gajapati Kapilendradeva	1435-66 CE
	Abhinavaveṅīsaṃhāra-Nāṭakam	Gajapati Puruṣottamadeva	1466-97 CE
	Bhaktivai Bhava-Nāṭakam Utsāhavatī-Rūpakam	Kaviḍḍima Jīvadeva Ācārya	1450-1535 CE
	Dhūrtacarita-Bhāṇa Pārījāta-haraṇa- Nāṭakam	Kavicandra-Divākara Mīśra	1466-1535 CE
	Jagannāthavallabha-Nāṭakam	Rāya Rāmānanda Paṭṭanāyaka	1497-1535 CE
	Pīyūṣalaharī-Rūpakam	Kavi Jayadeva	13th Century CE
	Śrīkṛṣṇabhaktivātsalya-Nāṭakam	Gajapati Rāmacandradeva	1568-1600 CE
	Trīśiravadha-Vyāyoga Kaṃsavadha	Kavi Cintāmaṇi Mīśra	1497-1535 CE
	Bhañjamahodaya-Nāṭikā	Narasīṃha Mīśra	1648-1660 CE
	Maṇimālā-Nāṭikā Rāsagoṣṭhī-Rūpakam	Anādi Mīśra	1668-1720 CE
	Samṛddhamādhava-Nāṭakam	Govindakavibhūṣaṇa	1736-1793 CE



	Madhurāniruddha-Nāṭakam	Cayanicandraśekhara Rāyaguru	1730-1739 CE
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3. ANALYSIS OF THE SANSKRIT POETIC FORMS IN ODISHAN SANSKRIT DRAMAS

The excellence or inferiority of rūpakas in the poetic style is not to be judged solely based on their presentation in the forms, but rather, the style used in each case should be considered, as it seeks more support in one context than another. In Sanskrit poetry, 'śailī' (style) is generally understood as 'rīti'. However, in Sanskrit literature, dramatic dialogue, the dramatic language, and nature descriptions, among others, are accepted as integral parts of the śailī (style). To define 'rīti,' the author of Śāhityadarpaṇa, Viśvanātha Kavirāja, also describes it as:

"padasaṃghaṭanā rītiḥ aṅgasamsthā viśeṣavat upakartī rāsādīnām"

Just as the attractiveness of the human body is enhanced through the correct arrangement of its parts, the beauty of poetry is manifested through the placement of words, which are of excellent quality, in their appropriate positions. 'Rīti' thus refers to the proper placement of words to enhance the aesthetic qualities of poetry.

In Sanskrit literature, 'rīti' holds a prominent place. Ānandavardhana, too, emphasizes 'rīti' as the essence of poetry, acknowledging it as integral to the soul of the work. 'Rīti' has also been adopted by Western scholars. The term 'style' comes from the Latin word stylus, which means 'iron pen' or 'metal pen.' Hence, 'śailī' (style) can be seen as analogous to a poet's internalized thinking and consciousness brought to light.

The styles of Sanskrit poetry are generally categorized into three types: Vaidarbhī, Gauḍī, and Pāñcālī. However, Viśvanātha Kavirāja also added another style called 'Lāṭī.' To illustrate, let us consider the example of Candrakalānāṭikā, a play by Viśvanātha Kavirāja. In this play, the use of the Vaidarbhī style, with its grace and charm, is evident. As described in Śāhityadarpaṇa:

*mādhurya-vyajñakāḥ vaṃaiḥ racanā-lalitātmikā /
avṛttir alpa-vṛttir vā vaidarbhī rītiḥ śyate //²*

In Vaidarbhī style, the supreme quality of sweetness (mādhurya) is seen. The language is as sweet as possible, and the words are placed appropriately. In Candrakalānāṭikā, the entry of the spring season is described in an enchanting manner, showing the sweetness of expression. For instance:

*latā-kuñja-guñjan-madavadalita-puñjaṃ chapalayann
samālīṅgan-naṅgaṃ drutatarama-naṅga pravalayan /
Maruṃ mandam mandam dalita-mara-vindam taralayann
Rajovṛndam vindan kirati makarandam diśi-diśi //³*

In the third act of the Candrakalānāṭikā, a dialogue by the Queen's chief attendant (Ceṭī) mentions: "kālasarpo kila nīlamanimālārūpeṇa kaṅthe vasati iti ko jānāti?" (p. 47). Here, not just the sweetness of the language, but also the charm (prasāda) is evident. In the 2nd act of this play stated that:

*tavānanasudhādhāmajitaḥ kaluṣitāntaraḥ /
dahatyatīśayaṃ devī! tvāmeṣarajanīkaraḥ //⁴*

Likewise, in the Manimālā-Nāṭikā by poet Anādi, the Vaidarbhī style, along with its sweetness, is employed.



In the first act of this play, the enchanting beauty of autumn is described:

*kalyā vayam sarasa-nāṭya-vilāsavalyaḥ
prītyā rasāyana-manādikaveśca vācaḥ /
śṛṅgāra-śṛṅga-nṛpateś-caritaṃ caritraṃ
bhāgyena bhāti mama tad-guṇarāśī-reśaḥ //⁵*

This description stirs the hearts of the audience. In this case, the sweetness and charm of the Vaidarbhī style is clearly highlighted, especially when used in describing the splendor of nature and human emotions.

In Cāndrakalānāṭikā, the stylistic richness is displayed through the usage of long compounds and elaborate phrases. Similarly, Anādi's Rāsa-Goṣṭhī-Rūpaka shows an independence of expression. The extraordinary nature of the rasa and its connection with love, music, and dialogue is illuminated in Anādi's style. The Rāsa-Goṣṭhī style in particular is showcased in Kāśikī poetry, which is elaborated by Viśvanātha Kavirāja as:

*yā ślakṣṇanepathya-viśeṣacitrā strī-saṃkulā puṣkala-nṛtya-gītā /
kāmapabhoga-prabhavo-pacārā sā kaishikī cārū-vilāsa-yuktā //⁶*

But in Murārī Miśra's Anargharāghavam, a different type of poetic structure is used, not employing the long compound forms as in Viśvanātha's play. Here too, Murārī employs the Vaidarbhī style, especially focusing on the sweetness and charm of the verse. An example is:

*abhedenopāste kumuda-mure vā sthitavato
vipakṣādambhodupagatavato vā madhulihah /
aparyāptaḥ ko'pi svapara-paricaryāparicaya
pravandhaḥ sādhunāmayamanabhisandhānamadhuraḥ //⁷*

The style here is distinct yet maintains the grace and fluidity of the Vaidarbhī tradition.

In the Pravodācandrodyā, by Kṛṣṇa Miśra, the same use of the Vaidarbhī style can be seen, though the stylistic choice is somewhat different from that in Cāndrakalānāṭikā by Viśvanātha. Kṛṣṇa Miśra's play adopts the language of elegance, avoiding long compounds and choosing simpler, more direct expression.

This thorough exploration of poetic styles reveals how various styles like Vaidarbhī, Kāśikī, and others are adopted in different works of Sanskrit drama and poetry, highlighting their impact on the aesthetic experience of literature.

4. THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF ODISHAN SANSKRIT DRAMAS

The Sanskrit dramas composed by the playwrights of Utkala (modern-day Odisha) have unique characteristics, as discussed in this paper. Upon reviewing the works discussed here, it becomes clear that their distinctiveness lies in the fact that these dramas were created and performed during the religious festivals dedicated to various deities. These performances are often linked to the observance of these sacred festivals, reflecting the spiritual and cultural atmosphere of the time.

Whether a full play or a smaller skit, these works seem to mirror the image of society in various ways. Even



though the events portrayed in the plays might be fictional, the subjects and themes depicted are grounded in real-world experiences.

The works of Viśvanātha Kavirāja, such as Candrakalānāṭikā, and Anādi Miśra's Maṇimālā are often considered similar in theme and structure. However, the arrangement of themes in Maṇimālā reflects the changing tastes of the people over time, as the poet adapted the narrative to the preferences of his audience. This shift in the treatment of themes relies on the description of miraculous or magical occurrences.

Additionally, there is a consistent thematic pattern that can be observed across different plays. At the beginning, the blossoming of love between the hero and heroine is described, followed by their longing for each other. When they meet, some external force or character causes an interruption in their union. Finally, the couple is reunited in the end. This sequence of events not only highlights the poet's craft but also propels the drama forward through its progression, moving the plot toward a culmination that emphasizes the growth of love between the characters.

The plays of Anādi Miśra's Rāsagoṣṭhīrūpakam, Rāyarāmānanda's Jagannāthavallabhanāṭakam, and Govinda Kavibhūṣaṇa's Samṛddhamādhvanāṭakam can be seen as comparable in terms of their thematic exploration of love, devotion, and divine relationships. These works suggest that from the time of Rāyarāmānanda (circa 1409 A.D.) to the era of Govinda Kavibhūṣaṇa (1700–1778 A.D.), the Vaiṣṇavism philosophy deeply influenced the religious traditions in Odisha, especially the depiction of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa's divine pastimes in these plays.

Moreover, the similarity in the treatment of subjects like the divine love of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa is evident in all these works. The language and theme in these plays highlight the pervasive influence of Vaiṣṇavism, which shaped the religious and theatrical culture of Odisha.

In contrast, Utsāhavatī, a play by Jīvadevāchārya, stands out because of its novel treatment of the subject matter. It presents a fresh perspective, offering a unique portrayal of themes not often explored in other contemporary works. This innovation gives Utsāhavatī a distinctive place in the Odishan Sanskrit drama tradition.

In conclusion, the Sanskrit dramas from Utkala reflect the playwrights' artistic freedom and independence in choosing their subjects. These works also illustrate the evolving cultural context, indicating a shift from ancient Utkalian traditions to modern interpretations, while maintaining a deep connection to the religious and social customs of the time.

5. CONCLUSION

The extensive tradition of Sanskrit dramas from Odisha demonstrates the region's significant contribution to India's literary and cultural heritage. The works of eminent dramatists such as Murāri Miśra, Kṛṣṇa Miśra, and the Gajapati rulers Kapilendradeva and Puruṣottamadeva reflect not only the depth of Sanskrit literary art but also the integration of regional influences within classical forms. These compositions, spanning from the early medieval period to the 20th century, exhibit a remarkable variety in themes, styles, and dramatic expressions.

The chronological survey of these works, including masterpieces like Anargharāghavam, Prabodhacandrodayam, and Abhinavavenīsaṃhāra, highlights the region's enduring commitment to Sanskrit drama as a medium of intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic exploration. Moreover, the contributions of royal patrons, such as Gajapati Kapilendradeva and Puruṣottamadeva, underscore the



close relationship between political authority and literary excellence, where rulers themselves became creators and patrons of art.

The diversity of genres, including vyāyoga (martial plays), nāṭikā (short plays), and bhāṇa (monologues), along with works reflecting bhakti (devotion) and śṛṅgāra (eroticism), reveal a dynamic engagement with social, spiritual, and aesthetic themes. This literary tradition also embodies the synthesis of classical Sanskrit poetics and the Odishan cultural ethos, bridging regional and pan-Indian dimensions of knowledge and art.

In conclusion, the legacy of Odishan Sanskrit dramas, preserved and celebrated through generations, is a testament to the region's rich intellectual and artistic traditions. These works remain invaluable resources for understanding not only the evolution of Sanskrit drama but also the socio-cultural landscape of Odisha and its profound contributions to the Indian Knowledge System. This tradition calls for deeper study and appreciation to ensure its rightful place in the broader narrative of Indian literary history.

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