



## MODERN IS FOREVER: THE 'MODERN' IN THE EARLY KANNADA THEATRE AND DRAMA

Prasad Rao M.<sup>1</sup> and Prof. Nagya Naik B.H.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>P.G.Deartment of English, Govt.First Grade College and Centre for P.G.Studies, Theknkanidiyur, Udupi  
Karnataka.

<sup>2</sup> P.G.Department of P.G.Studies and Research in English, Kuvempu University, Karnataka.

### ABSTRACT

*Several historical, cultural factors contributed to the emergence of drama in Kannada. The colonial modernity, resurgence of a nationalist, classical tradition, vernacularisation and the adoption of the native forms to the modern form of drama acted together to forge a new identity to the drama in India. Kannada drama too engaged with these issues which made it a vibrant cultural practice. The article researches into the response of the early Kannada drama, by approaching the issues of modernity, identity and the regional aspirations which made the Kannada theatre and drama what it is now.*

**KEYWORDS:** colonial Indian drama , national identity , study of modernity , Indian languages.

### INTRODUCTION

The paper makes a study of modernity in the context of colonial Indian drama with reference to the Kannada drama. The national identity of India drama rests upon two important phases of drama in India, both marked by a difference of period and language. First, Indian drama includes the Sanskrit drama. Secondly, the drama in languages in India, including those in English are called India drama in India. The difference between the two being, while the Sanskrit drama is associated with the classical tradition, drama in other Indian languages are regarded as modern. The difference may also have a political implication if the classical drama is said to represent the true India tradition and the modern Indian drama is the product of colonialism and modernity. Therefore, it is necessary to analyse the meaning and value of modernity and tradition in modern India drama. That is, we need to see how modernity and colonialism affected the drama in India and how far the modern drama in India represents the tradition and the modern.

As stated earlier, since drama in different languages in India emerged along with the colonial rule, it is not an easy task to discuss all the plays in different Indian languages within the scope of a paper. Therefore, this paper focusses on the influence of colonial modernity in one of the languages in India-Kannada. It looks in to the manipulations of modernity in the emergence of modern theatre in Kannada by taking the instances of growth of professional troupes (also called Company drama) in the Kannada speaking region, which popularise drama and theatre in different parts in Karnataka. The paper believes that the reasons spelt out by the company theatres for their emergence; the subject and the manner of presentation, and the audience they look for help us to locate them in relation to colonial modernity and tradition. Further, this paper takes up a study of plays written/ authored during the colonial regime to analyse their response to the colonial ideology. In other words, the paper focusses on the development of theatre and playwriting to arrive at a better understanding of the issues of tradition and modern in the



context of Kannada plays. it helps to understand the nature of Indian identity in the colonial Kannada drama and helps to appreciate the shifts and changes in the modern Kannada drama in a later period.

The first section of the paper discusses the problems faced in the discussion of modern drama in the Indian tradition. The second section discusses the meaning and relevance of modern and modernity. The third section deals with emergence and growth of the modern theatre in Kannada. The two reputed professional troupes that came into prominence in Kannada in the early days of company drama were from Gadag and Mysore. The paper looks in detail the purpose and early activities of the two drama companies. The fourth section considers the two significant plays authored during the colonial rule. It contends that IggappaHeggadeyaVivahaPrahasana and SangyaBalya deal with colonial modernity. This section explores the traditional and modern ideologies located in these two plays.

### MODERN DRAMA, LANGUAGE, AND IDENTITY.

The word modern is associated with “something new” “not of the past” It has also the connotation that it is untraditional, when it is used in relation to arts and culture. However, the idea of tradition in literature has become the source of polemics and so is the idea of modern in relation to tradition. From a historical perspective, ‘modern’ is suggestive of a historical phase, and is widely accepted to be the effect of emergence of modernity. However, there is no agreement as to when really modernity emerges in the West and it is linked to different periods or events. Some scholars associate it with Enlightenment and imperialism, some others with industrialisation and capitalism. A few argue that American war of Independence and the French revolution are the emerging forces of modernity. Though this paper cannot discuss the arguments about modernity, the intention is to show that it is not easy to pin point a time frame to the emergence of modernity, either in India (in various regions and cultures) or in the West.

In the twentieth century, modern drama was used in another sense in relation to European drama. It suggested a break from the naturalist or the realist drama. The plays of Brecht, Becket, and Ionesco and such avant-garde writers which challenged the existing ways of making meaning out of a dramatic performance were also referred to as modern. They were highly ideological and anti-capitalist. The activism and political ideology of these modern play wrights distinguished them from the modernist writers who stood for holistic experience through art in the age of crisis. In the avant-garde sense of the word, modern drama in the twentieth century challenges the existing set of beliefs, practices and the systems of thought and their expressions.

The discussion points to the difficulty of defining ‘modern’ in relation to drama in Indian languages including Kannada. It shows that it is not an easy task to arrive at a consensus regarding either the features of modern/ modernity or its point of emergence, But, this argument does not negate the fact that certain drama in the West and in the Indian context are referred to as ‘modern’. The next section tries to explore the idea of modern drama in relation to the pre-modern drama.

It is a common perception that there are two kinds of drama in India – classical and modern. By classical drama we mean the Sanskrit drama of the pre-colonial era, though most of them came to light and were edited in the colonial period and after. Shakuntala, for example, was introduced to the modern world largely through translations, and the first English translation which was also an edited text.(Williams,10)The attributive ‘modern’ is used to refer to the drama in vernacular languages which emerged through translations or as original writings. The translation of the plays from English and Sanskrit to vernacular languages like Kannada increased in variety and frequency. Shakuntala was translated by to Kannadaby at least three dramatists within a period of ten years.(Ranganath,84-85) It is interesting to note that adaptations of Shakespeare’s appeared in Kannada company drama, Merchant of Venice was adapted as Basappa Shastri translated Othello.(Das,226-228). K.V. Akshara, noting the problems involved in attempting a linear, uniform modernity in the Indian context notes that Yakshgana, a pre-modern Kannada theatrical form, adapted Shakespeare’s play *You Like It* into its formal presentation long before a Shakespearean play was performed on the proscenium stage.(Akshara, 588)

There is a view that colonial modernity ushered in an age of translations and adaptations. However, this was not a new phenomena which is an attribute of modern influence. Sheldon Pollock says that, “If one of the defining or enabling features of European modernity was the vernacularization of the cultural and political spheres, the same occurred in South Asia altogether independently of European influence. Not only did Indian “premodernity” contain elements of European modernity, but in some key areas of culture, such as the analysis of language, it might even be said to have provided a stimulus to the development of that modernity”(Pollock,9) That is to say, the translation and vernacularisation of the Sanskrit texts was practised in the pre-colonial pre-modern India too. Perhaps the European modernity reshaped itself after its “knowledge of the pre-modern India. For example, in Europe, translation and linguistic normativity are the consequences of Enlightenment and modernity. The translation of the literary texts from Sanskrit was not a modern practice. In fact, Singararya had translated Ratnavali a Sanskrit dramaby Sri Harsha to Kannada as early as 1680.( Ranganath,7)

Therefore, it is the historical context of translation or adaptation and the dominant ideas in such texts that help us to examinethe nature of modernity in Kannada drama. One of the major contexts of translation of drama in the colonial period was the need for plays in the modern theatre which grew popular with the advent of the Parsi theatre. Therefore, the works that came in different languages in India to meet the requirements of in the modern theatre, whether translations or original writings are the products of modernity since the form of the modern theatrical presentation determines the textualization of a premodern text, whether a myth, or a classical literary work. However, this does not suggest that there is only one kind of modern theatre in India or in a vernacular, or that the texts of modern plays in different regions and languages were similarly affected by modernity. Instead, it means that the native culture and its expressions could not avoid responding to colonial modernity when colonial ideology touched them, though at different points of time. It may be through adaptation, appropriation or subversion, the native writers responded to the western modernity and also constructed a modern self. That is, the response of the native cultural practices to the colonial and modern ideology not only changed their identity but redefined the idea of what was colonial and modern. The native cultural practices, whether they resisted colonial modernity, manipulated it or adapted to it, nonetheless re-formed modernity in different ways even as they reformed themselves either as representatives of tradition or modern.

To summarise the argument so far, the ides of modern drama in Kannada is not defined by the essential features of western modernity, though it is a significant factor that shapes multiple modernities in different cultures in India. Secondly, the modern drama in Kannada and other Indian languages, though originated from the new cultural forms called drama and theatre, introduced by the colonial modernity, reforms the western forms and the classical tradition as well as the vernacular modes of theatrical tradition. In doing so the Indian drama may privilege some aspects of modernity, traditionalism or vernacular identity. It may also forge a new identity of being its own self which critically looks at all the three. Thus, the identity of modern Indian drama rests not upon its modernity, linguistic identity but on the national identity itself. By national identity we mean, the forged identity which creates a space for the modern perspective on the pre-modern and colonial perspectives. Again, here, modern is understood not as an essential idea but in the Habermas’s conception of it as the historical force of change that has evolved the ideals of self, emancipation and political equality.

### MODERN THEATRE CONTEXTS AND IDENTITY IN KANNADA

The rise of the drama companies is a historical phenomenon in different regions of India. Those vernacular cultures which came into contact with modern theatre, either directly influenced by the performances of the troupes from England, by the performances of Parsi theatre began to follow the model of organisation and performance which gave rise to the company drama in different vernaculars.

This section analyses the emergence of two company drama troupes in Karnataka to elaborate on the nature of modernity of Kannada theatre. Though theatres for drama were built in Calcutta and Bombay in in mid nineteenth century(Darwadker,xvii), the drama troupes in Karnataka appeared as late as 1877.

Karnataka Nataka Company or SriVeeranarayanaPrasiditaKritapuraNatakaMandali in north Karnataka was the first drama troupe that emerged in Karnataka. (Ranganath,81 )Shantakavi had great passion for traditional Yakshagana. But he struggled hard to run a company drama troupe. He observed that Yakshaganawas losing its audience because of Marathi company drama. Shantakavi says that he wrote his play Ushaharana (1877) and performed it with the enthusiastic group of Kannada actors supporting him. He reveals his love for Kannada and the rivalry of Marathi in verses in the play Ushaharana. (Ranganath,80note ,81note)

The immediate reason for Shantakavi and others like him to establish a drama troupe was not the desire to modernise Kannada audience but to refine their taste with the help of Kannada plays performed in the Yakshaganafom. However, the plays Shantakavi wrote, and directed showed his deep understanding of the audience and he was successful largely successful in engaging his audience. The plays were practiced with vigour and were delivered with the best possible results. Even then, the company could not survive for more than seventeen years. The veteran actors passed away, and the profits dwindled.

Ranganath notes that, Shantakavi wrote and directed his plays full of poetic beauty and splendour of traditional Yakshagana. In doing so he not only redefined the modern theatre, but adapted traditional Yakshagana with a new identity, Further, when he produced the classical plays like Shakuntala in Kannada in 1865, (Ranganath,82) he reforms the classical, the traditional and the modern in to a syncretic Kannada theatre performance of the contemporary. Thus, the customary recognition given to Shantakavi, that of 'Karnataka NatakaPitamaha'(Father of Kannada Drama) who established the identity of Kannada culture in the phase of the dominance of the Marathi theatre and who showed the musicality and beauty of Kannada speech(Ranganath 84-86) is only a partial recognition and an understatement. Shantakavi, wrote modernity in to Kannada theatre by reforming the traditional and the classical, and in the process his work was written by modernity.

The modern company theatre in Karnataka had its beginnings in another important place, the court of Mysore king.Instructed by the king, the "Palace Company" came to exist in 1881 and was renamed "Sri Chamarajendra Karnataka Nataka Sabha in 1882. The first performance of the play was a Kannada translation of Shakuntala written by the noted Sanskrit scholar Basappa Shastri. Ranganath notes that, "The show was put up for the public in the specially erected stage at Kalyani Maidan in December 1881." (Ranganath,104) Further, he notes that the play was technical perfection of the Parsi Theatre, since the king had sent the persons for training in Bombay. He gathers the reviews of the production and says "People for the first time saw the marvel of a Kannada play in such dazzling settings and costume. The miracle was performed by the rolling-up curtain in the same way as it did on the Parsi stage. (Ranganath,105)

The royal patronage and the scholarly guidance and training to the tactors and technicians, made it very popular for a long time.The troupe had to work hard for a perfect play, it had no anxieties of financial distress, but it had to keep up to the expectations of the royal court. The king presented himself as a great lover of theatre and art, his troupe helped to spread the image dignity and authority of the king, though no mention has been made about his public appearance among the audience of the drama presented by the troupe. The traditional hierarchyof the Kingship was mot challenged, nor did the theatre space become secular.

But, "On the instructions of the Maharaja who desired that well known English plays also should be translated into Kannada," (Ranganath,105) Shakespeare's Othello, Romeo and Juliet and The Merchant of Venice were staged. Ranganath notes "These plays, when staged by the Palace Company... the public taste considerably, and improved stage production from the standards of Dasavataradaata" (a traditional performance in the royal presence) (Ranganath,105) in the later phase, the troupe performed the Sanskrit plays, like Vikramorvasiya, Chanda Kausika, Ratnavali, UttararamaCharitre and Malati Madhava. The Sanskrit dominance and the earlier fancy for English plays show the preferences of the people who managed the company drama troupe. It may be noted that neither the king hire writers for original plays nor were the courtiers willing to present an original play to the king. The modern theatre company followed the traditional authority, even as it promoted the modern trends in the theatrical presentation. The hegemonic

culture of the royal court wrote modern theatre on its own. It could command the new techniques and expertise to create wonder and awe about the drama as well as the 'aesthetic' bent of mind of the King. (Ranganath, 103-4) Modernity does not challenge belief in the superiority of Sanskrit texts, In fact, it aids the spread of this belief through translations and theatrical productions which are presented with great clamour as in the case of dramatization of Shakuntala by the royal drama company, mentioned above.

However, this does not encourage us to conclude that the presentations and productions were clear representations of the power of the people of the palace only. In other words, in spite of being modern, the traditionalist ideology which the palace stood for dominated the choice of the plays and their presentations. A further observation that can be made is that, the democratisation and secularisation of the theatre effected through Shantakavi's struggle in Gadag, was not the motivating force to the Palace Company. This points to the two different ways Kannada theatre responded to the modernity of the colonial era. Shantakavi's modernity resists influence of Marathi with the help of native forms and popularising the classical in vernacular forms. The theatre in Mysore aims at modern sophistication in technique and scholarliness in presentation. It shows that modernity does not affect the two theatre groups similarly, nor do they attempt similar things with the help of modernity. The Palace Theatre company was disbanded by on the wish of the king in 1917. It was reconstituted the following year by the artists but the troupe could not survive without royal patronage in the way other companies did since they faced the problems from the inception itself. (Ranganath, 106)

The modern company theatre in Kannada responded to the needs of assertion of identity of Kannada. The issue of indigenous linguistic oppression in the border of Karnataka was addressed to by the adaptation of Kannada to the needs of modern theatre form. Moreover, it was used with a feeling that Kannada is more amenable to such modern changes (Ranganath, 81) Shantakavi produced more than ten plays in Kannada and most of them were popular. It showed that he did succeed in his mission of weaning the Kannada audience away from the Marathi productions.

But this does not mean that all of the drama companies in Kannada felt the crisis in cultural identity in the same way as Shantakavi. There were other and several reasons for the rise and popularity of drama in Kannada. As stated earlier, the modern drama company in Mysore was started by the King. It accompanied him on his tours and was permitted to many allowances. The patronage to drama in Kannada speaks of another model of appropriation of the modern form.

### MODERNITY IN THE EARLY KANNADA PLAYS, TEXTS AND INTERPRETATIONS

This section examines the drama texts of the colonial period in relation to the identity and modernity.

Modern Kannada drama refers to drama in India which emerged in Indian languages with the advent of the colonial rule. One of the arguments is that drama being a form derived from the West, the writers in India who took to drama writing Indianized the form. It is also observed that the classical tradition of drama, once it was discovered, influenced the form as well as the themes of modern drama in India. And thirdly, modern drama in India derived its strength from the native traditions, both literary and performance traditions refashioned the texts as well as their theatrical presentations. All in all, as Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker elaborates in the introduction to *Theatres of Independence* the modern theatre and drama in India is historically determined by all of all these three factors. (Dharwadker, 2-10)

We can consider two early plays in Kannada, to examine for the formulations of the modern, traditional and the native in them. *Sangya Balya* is authored by Rayappa Pattar, sometime in the last two decades of 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is in the folk form of Sannata. It finds a place in the print medium much later in the twentieth century. But the history of performance shows that the play was a great success and passed on from generation to generation in the oral form. (Naikar,) The play is translated to English by Basavaraja Naikar in 2005. The other play under discussion is *Iggappa Heggade Vivaha Pahasana*. It is written by Karki Vekataramana Shastri, published in Bombay in 1897. (Hegde, 156)



The author, a HavyakBrahmin from a religious and scholarly family of Karki, in the coastal district of North Kanara, chose to remain anonymous and did not mention his name in the printed text of the play since it dealt critically with the marriage and education for Havyaka community. The reformist preferred to call himself 'a well-wisher of Havyaka'. However, a prolific writer and himself a printer, he got many books on religion and Yakshagana printed in his name from Bharati Printing Press in Bombay. He was involved with freedom movement, wrote in Kannada criticising the British government, and faced imprisonment. He worked for the betterment of life of his native people with his as (Hegde, 157-158). These details about the author show the anxieties of the upper-caste well-educated person, given to modernity and reformism. It may be said that, the desire to change, impelled by the acceptance of modernity and mobility is at variance with the dominant religious beliefs of the community to which he belongs.

The play deals with social issues directly. It has a realist structure. It speaks about kanyavikraya, or selling the girl in marriage, the consequent widowhood, promiscuity and infanticide. The structure of the play follows the western dramatic structure, language is a dialectical variant of Kannada used by the HavyakBrahmins. Narayan Hegde, the translator in to English notes that the difficulty of the Havyakdialect used in the play and a general apathy towards the social plays are the most significant reasons for the play not being staged for a long time. The play was reprinted in 1953, and came to be recognised as the first realist play in Kannada. (Hegde, 156)

These details of the text's later fame in the twentieth century raise some significant questions regarding the reception of the modern play. The language and the content of the reformist play did not allow it to be popular in a period when the problem of bride's price was a burning issue. The Kannada theatre was not prepared to experiment with the form. The mythologicals and the translations from the other languages were thought to be the proper subjects for representation on the stage. Thus, a text marked heavily with the cultural practices of a Kannada speaking community did not catch the attention of the modern Kannada theatre. The play perhaps was too modern to the modern Kannada theatre of the times.

Therefore, in this instance modern cannot be declared as a singularly and uniformly. The text itself presents different levels of modernities, through the attitude of the characters. Nadig, a character, for example, comments about the Havyaks as the squandering group of people who do not bother about the legalities. The judge, though a representative of the Western system, shows a deep and tolerant understanding of the Havyak practices. His speech in the end of the play is more a liberal criticism of the hypocritical religious institutions than a non-interfering judge in a court. (Hegde, 191-194) More importantly, the practices of money lending, mortgaging and contractual agreements pervade the text so much that it is difficult to believe that the Havyak community, said to be agricultural community, has a pre-modern existence. Therefore, the play emphasises a form of radical modernity where education and equality have to spread among all the members and not merely the Havyaks. The play, if it is defeated in its purpose, it is not because of the language but because of the radical change it wants to assert.

*SangyaBalya* is another significant text of modern Kannada drama. The form of the play is folk, a narrative for theatrical performance called Sannata. The history of the form of Sannata is interesting because it is a hybrid of the folk and the commercial theatres. "Sannata is virtually a drama set in traditional folk patterns but bearing the influences of professional drama, particularly with regard to the stage, settings, make-up and dialogues" (Ranganath 71) Further, "... typical with the folk theatre, the playwright is not usually known though the plays themselves are recent in origin and are quite popular." (Ranganath, 72) The play has its identity in the performance and not in the authorship or in the printed textual form. Sannata, the form itself, suggests the complications in defining modernity in concrete clear-cut terms. The play *SangyaBalya* is composed by RayappaPattar (1860-1950).

The play *SangyaBalya* deals with extra marital love, treachery and murder in a place called Bailahongala. Representation of a realistic incident in theatre is a modern practice, but in *SangyaBalya*, the realistic incidents are presented through songs and dialogues, a common practice in folk theatre. The modern reading of the play is given by Basavaraj Naikar in his introduction to the English translation. He says that "Illicit sex, crushing poverty and betrayal happen to be the main thematic concerns of the play." (Naikar, x) He

holds that the play deals with “the role of elemental passion in interpersonal and human relationships.” (Naikar,x)These words sumup the play in universal terms. The world of the play deals with the changing attitude towards money, towards religion and towards legal and judicial system. The songs are in refined language, but the colloquial prose is rugged, vigorous at times and even abusive.

The plot presents the conflict between the two forms of literary representation as well as the duality in all kinds of human relationships. The meaning of friendship, fidelity, manliness, womanliness or religion etc. are represented in two different levels. Sangya and Balya are presented as great friends, but Sangya uses Balya’sfriendship to fulfil his unethical desire for Gangi. Balya betrays Sangya in the end, but he doesnot trustIrya too. He demands that the promises made to him be given in writing. Irya is the husband of Gangi, yet he is a trader excited about the new business even when his wife speaks about her desire for him. In the temple, the priest ogles at Gangi, but performs the puja and prophesies that the worshipper would beget a son. Paramma is helpful to Gangi, but entices her in to the hands of Sangya. Gangi is a wife but she is also a concubine of Sangya. None of these realities erase the other, and the contradictory worlds co-exist. It may be seen that the contradictions inhabit the space of the modern and premodern. There are repeated references to money, mobility, trade, and the police system and law. Irya, says that money can buy justice and set him free, but he bravely confesses in the court and feels his manliness vindicated in the end. The presence of dual and contradictory worlds corresponds with the presence of the two authors, one that is orally passed on and the one that is realised on the stage. Both come into existence simultaneously and do not reject other’s presence. *Sangya- Balyais* a representative of synthetic tradition of Indian theatre, which is at once modern and traditional, local yet universal. It shows that simplification by the suppression of any one of part of the contradictory worlds would only take away the genuine identity. It would privilege a fixed identity in the place of the fluid one.

The analyses of the modern drama companies and the two plays shown the complexity in defining the modernity in relation to drama and theatre in Kannada. The historical understanding of modern involves a constant search for the change on the basis of the fundamental emancipatory ideology of the modern. The western modernity in India is a historical fact, and the meaning of traditional and pre-modern depends upon how the modern minds today construct the other. Therefore, the meaning of Indian cannot exclude the regional and local cultural responsesand mediations of their identity.

#### WORKS CITED

- Akshara, K.V. “Reversal of Roles”  
[www.indiaseminar.com/2008/588/588\\_aksharakv.htm](http://www.indiaseminar.com/2008/588/588_aksharakv.htm) accessed on 10-07-2014
- Das, Sisir Kumar *A History of Indian Literature 1800-1910 Western Impact: Indian Response*. Sahitya Akademi: New Delhi, 2005.
- Dharwadker, Aparna Bhargava. *Theatres of Independence Drama, Theory, and Urban Performance in India since 1947* University of Iowa, Iowa City, 2005.
- Hegde, Narayana, “An Introduction to the Play” in *Indian Literature*, 56: 2(268) (March/April 2012), 156-158.
- Naikar, Basavaraj Sangya Balya: *Betrayal* Minerva Press, New Delhi 2004
- Pollock, Sheldon *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men : Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India*. University of California Press: Berkeley Los Angeles London, 2006
- Ranganath, H.K. *The Karnatak Theatre*. Karnatak University, Dharwar, 1960.
- Suri, Venkataramana Shastri. Narayan Hegde *The Marriage Farce of Iggappa Hegade (Iggappa Hegade Vivaha Prahāsana)* *Indian Literature*, 56:2 (268) (March/April 2012), 159-194
- Williams, Monier *Sakoontala: Or The Lost Ring*. Project Gutenberg E-Book. 2004