

# Buddhist Drama



Moriz Winternitz

## Buddhist Drama<sup>1</sup> by Moriz Winternitz

[219] According to the Majjhimasāla section, a certain ancient tract in the Buddhist canon, which is preserved in the Brahmajālasutta and in the Tevijjasutta of the Dīghanikāya,<sup>2</sup> the Buddhist monks were forbidden to participate in all varieties of public entertainments including dancing, singing, recitation, animal fights and similar shows. Here is also interdicted the *pekkha* by which generally a dramatic performance is understood. It is doubtful, however, whether *pekkha*, which is the Sanskrit *prekṣa*, actually indicated a dramatic performance. In the Vinayaṭīka also (Suttavibhaṅga to Saṅghādisesa 13, Cullavagga 1, 13, 1-2) the enjoyment of dances, sport and music is forbidden to the monks, although there is no reference to theatrical performances. Accordingly it is at best questionable, whether at the period when the Buddhist canon was compiled there already existed a theatre and the exhibition of dramatic pieces was carried out.

The Nāṭas who are frequently mentioned in our Jātaka Book are wandering minstrels and dancers and not dramatic performers. Jātaka No. 212, 291, 432; Fick, Social Division in North-Eastern India in Buddha's time p. 188.

In the Jātakas as well as in the Sagāthavagga of the Saṃyuttanikāya, in the Suttanipāta, and in the Thera- and Therigāthās there is not an insignificant number of ballads in the form of dialogues. They consist partly of gāthās and partly of a combination of gāthās and brief prose passages. The best known examples are the Padhānasutta and the Pabajasutta in the Suttanipāta (Windisch, Māra [221] Théâtre Indien p. 319). In Burma of to-day, as a solemn preliminary to the initiation of a Buddhist novice, the Vessantarajātaka is performed as a theatrical piece and the initiation itself is a formal drama.

---

<sup>1</sup> Originally published as Appendix IV in J. Nariman's Literary History of Sanskrit Buddhism. See elsewhere on this website.

<sup>2</sup> In fact the section recurs in all of the first 13 discourses of the Dīghanikāya.

We have preserved to us a complete Buddhist drama in the original Sanskrit which dates from the seventh century. It is the drama of Nāgananda ascribed to king Shri Harsha. During the same period was issued the drama of Lokānanda by the poet and grammarian Candragomi of which we have only the Tibetan translation. Perhaps it is identical with the adaptation of the Viśvantara Jātaka mentioned by I-tsing (Sylvain Lévi, BEFEO, 1903, p. 41; I-tsing, a Record of the Buddhist Religion translated by Takakusu p. 164).

We can only conjecture that in a much earlier age Buddhist legends were turned into dramatic pieces. When I-tsing (p. 165) immediately after the mention of the dramatic poems of Śīlāditya (Shri Harsha) and of Candragomi goes on to say: Aśvaghōṣa also wrote “lyrical poems”, we are to understand thereby similar lyrical dramatic pieces. That appears at least to be so from the context. At any rate, in the Sūtralaṅkāra of Aśvaghōṣa, in the piece relating to Māra, who appears in the costume of the Buddha and like a consummate artist represents the Buddha so true to life, that the holy Upagupta sinks down in adoration before him, we have a poem which is so uncommonly dramatic, that it is evidently a recapitulation of a drama. Ed. Huber (BEFEO, 1904, p. 414) has established that this poem which is to be found in the Divyāvadāna (p. 356) and which has been translated by Windisch (Māra und Buddha, p. 161) originally belonged to the Sūtralaṅkāra of Aśvaghōṣa. From this we can surmise, that in Aśvaghōṣa’s time a species of dramatic poems must have flourished. This conjecture is turned into proved fact by the discovery which Lüders has made. It is now demonstrated that not only a variety of dramatic poesy, [222] but actual dramas, which in their technique hardly differed from those of Kālidāsa, used to be performed in the second century.

Among the valuable manuscript treasures recovered from Turfan there is a palm leaf, which on paleographical grounds seems to belong to the Kuṣāṇa period. Lüders, to whom belongs the credit of bringing it to light, is inclined to agree with Fleet and Franke that the Vikrāma era of 57 B.C. was founded by Kaniṣka. If we admit even the second century as the time of Kaniṣka which would seem to be more accurate – then the Lüders’ Fragments are the oldest Indian manuscripts yet discovered. If they are of extraordinary importance

on that score, they are almost of epoch making significance in virtue of their contents in the literary history of India. For they contain fragments of a regular Indian drama. Lüders has separated pieces of two different dramas. In the first appear three allegorical figures Buddhi, Dhṛti, Kīrti, which remind us of the Prabodhacandrodyā of Kṛṣṇamiśra and the Buddha himself appears surrounded by a brilliant halo (prabhāmaṇḍalena dīptena). Now since the halo was first introduced into India by Greek artists (Foucher, JA 1903 p. 298 and L'art gréco-bouddhique du Gandhāra p. 622), this drama must appertain to the age of the Gandhāra art, which synchronises with the first Christian century, and must have therefore flourished at the latter age, (Grünwedel, Buddhist Art in India, German edition, p. 81; Foucher, *ibid*, p. 49).

The second drama is in such a fragmentary condition that it does not permit of its being completely identified. But it is of vast importance on account of the personæ, among whom we notice Viduśaka and other typical figures that remind us of the Mṛcchakatika. That the technique of the drama had completely developed is shown by the division into acts which are preceded by a prelude by the comingling [223] of prose and verse, the latter in the meter of classical Sanskrit and the alternation of Sanskrit with Prakrit.

Lüders has devoted a penetrating examination to the Prakrit of the fragments, which leads to the conclusion important to the history of Indian languages that here alongside of Sanskrit stand three dialects which are of the same phonetic stage as Pāli and the vernaculars used in the older inscriptions and which may be regarded as the precursors of the well-known three Prakrit idioms, Māgadhi, Ardhamāgadhi, and Śaurasēnī. Thus the language likewise testifies here to an older stratum of the classical drama. On the other hand, so far as we can judge from the fragments, the technique of the scenic art is so developed that we cannot regard them as the beginnings of dramatic composition, but must assume a preceding course of tolerably long evolution.

As regards the authors of the drama, Lüders surmises that they belong to the circle of which the propelling centre was Aśvaghōṣa. This conjecture has been apparently confirmed. Hardly had the surmise

been in print when Lüders discovered three passages in the palm leaves of Turfan in which he came across the fragment of a drama by Aśvaghōṣa. It represents fortunately the concluding portion of a nine-act drama with its colophon which bears the title of Śāriputraprakaraṇa and which exhibits the name of the author Aśvaghōṣa in an unequivocal way. Aśvaghōṣa, who is known as the prominent poet among the Buddhists, here works into a drama the legend of the initiation into the order of Śāriputra and Maudgalyāyana, – a legend which is already so beautifully related in the Mahāvagga of the Vinayapiṭaka.