

Performing Arts in Ancient Kāśī

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Cultural history of Ancient Kāśī would remain incomplete without an evaluation of the role of performing artists that included vocalists, actors, dancers, acrobats, instrumentalists and percussionists to mention the major ones of the stratum. In later period a district school of dance and music flourished in the city that also remained the seat of playwrights, Bharatendu Harischandra and Agha Hashr Kashmiri. Compared to the extensive research done on this later phase no effort was made to compile the literary references and examine such details against the perspective of archaeological material.

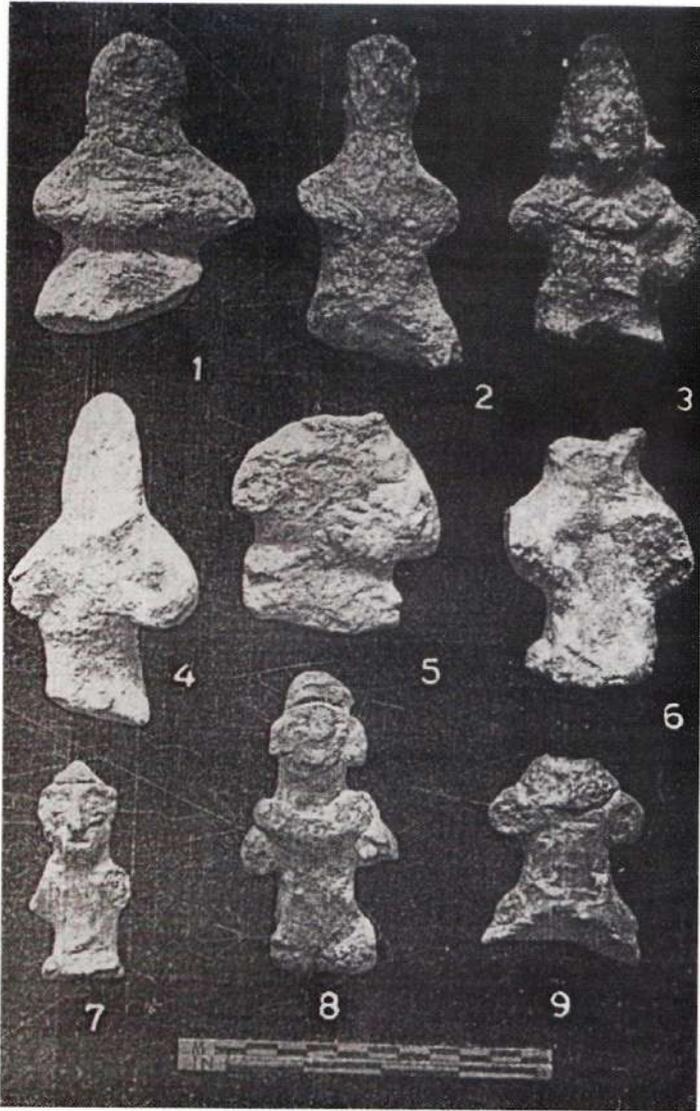
Since the time of *Jātakas*, Kāśī had been a city of festivals and each ceremony gave an opportunity to men and women to entertain themselves by dancing and singing. This is supported by Jaina texts, as they also refer to the festival *Kaumudīmahotsava*, when the entire city was in a mood of revelry, musical recitals being one of the main events.¹ Actors, musicians, dancers and acrobats used to visit such festivals to earn money. In *Bherivādaka Jātaka*² Bodhisattava was born as a drummer, in a neighbourhood village of Kāśī. Hearing about a festival to be held at Kāśī, he came to the city to play his drum. Paṭala *naṭa*, had come to play his *veṇā* in another festival at Kāśī.³ As narrated in *Saṅkhadhaman Jātaka*⁴ Bodhisattava, born as a conch blower in the suburb of Kāśī, came to the city with his father during a public festival to earn money by his conch blowing. *Dasaṅṅaka Jātaka* refers to the festival *Samāja* full of dance, music, jugglery and acrobatics held in the palace of the king of Kāśī.⁵ *Guttila Jātaka*⁶ comprises the story of a lute player of Kāśī - Guttila, who mastered all the branches of music and became famous all over India as "Guttila, the musician," The *Jātaka* mentions another lute player, Musila of Ujjain, who came to the city to learn the art at the feet of master Guttila. Guttila knowing that he is not a good person, refused to teach but his parents, out of generosity, forced him to teach. When Musila learnt the art he wished to get the job in the court of the king of Kāśī who asked him to compete with his teacher to prove his ability. King further said that he would get as much money as Guttila was getting only if he would defeat him in the competition. Guttila did not want to compete but Sakka came and asked him to play and said that while playing the lute he

should break all seven strings of the lute one by one, he would go on playing with nothing but the body of the lute and from the ends of the broken strings the sound would go forth, pervading Varanasi and its twelve leagues.

In Jaina literature we get reference regarding the gifted vocalists residing in Varanasi. In the story of Brahmadata Chakravarty the events of his previous birth are described. Born as the son of a *Cāndāla* at Kāśī he learned vocal music under the guidance of a *brāhmaṇa* priest. He used to roam in the lanes and *bazars* of Varanasi singing in his melodious voice with his brother. The impact of their art was so deep on the minds of people, specially on ladies, that driven by their melodious singing they flocked to them. The honourable citizens did not like it and complained against them. The king then prohibited their entry into the city.⁷

Besides instrumentalists and vocalists there were also *naṭas* (actors), as creative as musicians. They had their troupes that travelled far and wide presenting their shows. This we know from *Kaṇṇavera Jātaka*.⁸ In this *Jātaka Gaṇikā Sāmā* of Varanasi sent her message to her lost love through actors and asked them to sing her message in *Samāja*, a very common festival of ancient time. The actors started from Varanasi. Troupes of *naṭas* belonging to other cities also visited Kāśī, *Mahāvastu*,⁹ a first century C.E. text, refers to a troupe of *naṭas* coming all the way from Taxila to Varanasi to present their show. Thus it seems that the city gradually earned the name of a centre of performing arts attracting artistes from distant lands, either to learn the art under the direction of famous musicians of the city or to get recognition and money.

There were also dwarf artistes engaged in music and acting at Varanasi. Some crude hand made squatting dwarf figures (Pl. 22.1) allied to votive tanks, had been discovered from Rajghat¹⁰ belonging to Period III i.e. a period between first to third century C.E. Votive Tanks, are infact, ritual objects, most probably associated with mother goddess cult. These dwarfs are categorized by A.K. Narain and P.K. Agrawala as dwarf musicians. One such figure probably carried a drum in his hand (parallel to the chest)¹¹. Another dwarf figure carries a small drum (?) under his armpit, and his right hand is held near the chest presumbaly carrying a stick.¹² This shows that probably the artist played the drum with a stick, as the *tāsā* player of present day. There is another hand modelled dwarfish male figure discovered from Rajghat belonging to Period IV, i.e. third to seventh century C.E, that seems to carry in his left hand a lute of which the incised strings appear on either side of the curved staff in a frontal view.¹³ *Vāmana* artists were mentioned even in Bharata's *Nāṭya Sāstra*. While describing the actor suitable for the role of *vidūṣaka* in a play, Bharata says that a dwarf with exposed teeth, hunch on the back, bald and possessing brown or yellow



Pl. 22.1: Dwarf musicians, allied to votive tanks, Rajghat. After Rajghat Excavation Report, Pt. IV



Pl. 22.2: Dwarf from Satna, 5th century CE



Pl. 22.3: Drummers, Rajghat, Courtesy: Bharat Kala Bhavan, B.H.U., Varanasi

eyes should be given the role of *vidūṣaka*.¹⁴ *Śukla Yajurveda*¹⁵ enjoins that for entertainment a dwarf should be called- *Kubja, Vāman*.

“उत्सादेभ्यः कुब्जं प्रमुदे वामनं.....”. They are mentioned also in *Rāmayaṇa*. By the miraculas power of sage Bhāradwāja the trees of his *āśrama* assumed the forms of entertainers as *kubja* and *vāmanas*, to entertain the army of Bharata.¹⁶

“ततः सरलतालश्च तिलका नक्तमालकाः
प्रहृष्टास्तत्र सम्पेतुः कुब्जा भूत्वाऽथ वामनाः”

There were female dwarf entertainers also as we know from *Vasudeva Hīndī*,¹⁷ a text from late Gupta era. In sculptures also such dwarfs are shown, for example one such figure with thick neck, pot belly and conical cap has been discovered from Satna, datable to late 5th century C.E. (Pl. 22.2). This sculpture was identified as *gaṇa* but this can also be taken as representing a *vāmana* entertainer. Terracotta figures from Rajghat prove that *vāmana* musicians were also there at Varanasi. Some small terracotta figures of drum players from Rajghat belonging to Gupta period¹⁹ suggest that drum playing was quite a popular art. (Pl. 22.3).

Varanasi had a tradition of another form of performing artistes in the form of *gaṇikās* (courtesans) who were known for their knowledge of dance and music. *Therīgāthā* mentions *Aḍḍhakāsī* who has migrated from Varanasi to Rājgrha and later became a *bhikṣuṇī*. She was famous for her art and was so much in demand that her fee for one day was half of the total income of Kāśī.²⁰ *Sāmā*, another *gaṇikā* of Kāśī as mentioned in *Kaṇṇavera Jātaka*²¹, was also known for her art and was a favourite of the king of Kāśī. Her fee was one thousand *mudrās* and she had six hundred female slaves. The name of another *gaṇikā* of Kāśī is mentioned in *Takkariya Jātaka*²² who was as rich as *Sāmā*, earning one thousand *mudrās* in one day. *Pādatāḍitakam* a *Bhāṇa* play of early fifth century C.E., describes a courtesan *Parākramikā* who had come to Varanasi from Ujjaini; she was playing *pichholā*, a musical instrument, when *viṭa* saw her.²³ From *Kuṭṭanīmatam*, an eighth century C.E, text, it appears that Varanasi continued to be an attractive place for performing artistes. The text states that after the death of King Anaṅga Harṣa, who was a famous patron of theatre, a *Naṭācārya* from Kashmir came to Varanasi and presented the first act of *Ratnāvalī*, a play by Śrī Harṣa, in honour of Samarabhata²⁴ (a prince of Deveraṣṭra) in the temple of Viśveśvara at Varanasi.

Why Kāśī became a center of performing arts? Firstly, besides being a pilgrimage city it was a centre of trade and commerce. Wealthy traders patronized not only the artists but also organised festivals to provide a platform to the musicians and dancers. There is another reason for Kāśī emerging as the centre of performing arts. Some scholars believe

that originally Varanasi was the centre of *Yakṣapūjā* and later it was dominated by Śaivism and most of the Yakṣas worshipped at Varanasi were incorporated into the entourage of Śiva.³⁰ Even now different localities of the city are named after the Vīras (Yakṣas) such as Lahurabir, Daitrabir, Bhojubir, Karmanbir etc. Yakṣas and Yakṣiṇīs are known as capable of changing forms,³¹ a quality of *naṭas* (actors). *Jakkhajattā* and *Jakkhamaha* (festivals in honour of Yakṣas full of theatrical performances) are known from Jaina literature. Jaina text *Aupapātika-Sūtra*³² states that the temple of Yakṣa Pūrṇabhadra was haunted by actors, dancers, rope walkers, jesters, narrators of Kathā, picture showmen, pipers, lute-players and minstrels. Jaina text *Jīvakacintāmaṇi*³³ describes how grateful Jīvaka, a Jaina saint who was saved by Yakṣa Sutanjan, first erected a temple in his honour and then prepared a drama relating the history of the Yakṣas. Probably this drama was presented in the Yakṣa temple one some festive days to please the deity.³⁴ The tutelary Yakṣas at Vaiśālī were worshipped with oblation, dance and musical offerings.³⁵ At Nagārjunikoṇḍā there is a temple of Hārīti, a Yakṣiṇī who was later transformed into a Buddhist guardian deity, adjacent to the Nāgārjunikoṇḍā amphitheatre. Though the temple is one or two centuries later than the theatre, but the construction of a temple of a Yakṣiṇī in the vicinity of the amphitheatre is of some significance. All these references speak of a very close association of performing arts with the cult of Yakṣa. Could it be possible that since Varanasi was a pre-eminent seat of Yakṣa-pūjā it was simultaneously developed into a centre of performing arts?

Footnotes

1. Bhuvaneshvar Prasad Gurumaita, *'Prakṛtī tathā Jaina Kathā Sāhitya men Kāśī ke Kathānāyaka evaṁ Ghaṭanākrama'*, *Varanasi Through the Ages*, Ed. T.P. Verma, D.P. Singh, J.S. Mishra, Bhārtīya Itihāsa Saṅkalana Samiti, p. 272.
2. E.B. Cowell, *'The Jātaka Stories'*, Vol. I, p. 146.
3. *Pādakusalakamānavaka Jātaka*, V. Fousball, *The Jātakas*, Vol. III, p. 507
4. E.B. Cowell, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 147.
5. V. Fousball, *op. cit.*, Vol. III, p. 338.
6. E.B. Cowell, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 172.
7. Bhuvaneshvar Prasad Gurumaita, *op. cit.*, 272.
8. Cowel, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 41.
9. *Mahāvastu*, Vol. II, p. 169, Ed. Senart, Paris, 1882-87.
10. Pl. 22.1
11. A.K. Narain & P.K. Agrawala, *'Excavations at Rajghat - 1957-58, Part IV A, Text.* p. 80.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 81, Period III (789); RGT 1A (10), Pl. XV.4.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 183, Pl. LXIV.1.
14. *Nāṭyaśāstra* 35.79.

15. *Yajurveda*, 30.10
16. *Rāmāyaṇa*, 91/50.
17. A.P. Jamkhedkar, *Vasudeva Hindī : A cultural study*, p. 425.
18. Pl. 22.2
19. Pl. 22.3
20. *Therīgāthā*, Dukhanipāto, Addhakāsi, Therīgāthā., 26 Chief editor Swami Dwarkadas Shastri, *Bauddha Bharati*, Varanasi. V.S. 2003.
21. Cowell, *op. cit.*, Vol. III, p. 40.
22. *Ibid.*, Vol. IV, p. 157.
23. *Caturbhāṇi*, p. 187-88, Tr. and Ed. Motichandra, Bombay, 1960.
24. *Kuṭṭanimatam*, Verse-800. - Tr. Atrideva Vidyalkar, Indological Book House, Varanasi, 1961.
25. *Ibid.*, Verse-124.
26. *Caturbhāṇi*, pp. 122-123.
27. *Ukti-vyakti-prakaraṇa*, 51.6. Bombay, 1953.
28. *Nāṭyaśāstra* I. 53-55; IV. 267-268; XXXIII. 19-20
29. *Abhinayadarpaṇa*. 12-14. Ed. Vachaspati Garola, Samvartika Prakashan, Allahabad, 1967.
30. Diana. L. Ek., *Banaras City of Light*, pp. 54-55.
31. *Telapṭta Jātaka*, Cowell, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 234-3-235; A.K. Coomarswamy, *Yakṣa*, Part I, p. 13.
32. *Aupapātika-Śūtra*, 2, pp. 4-5, Jinagam Granthamala, Byawar, 1982.
33. Coomarswamy, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-16.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 26.