2.1 INTRODUCTION

About the 10th century A.D. the Sanskrit theatre ceased to be an active force in Indian Art. Internal and external forces, some of them alien, had already been working in India prior to this time. It is these forces which brought about its decline and eventual demise.

These forces were invasions from outside India which were predominantly Muslim. The invading hordes not only overran the local Hindu kingdoms, notably in north India, but also looted the treasuries of the defeated kings as well as plundered the temples. So the patronage that the arts were receiving from both, the ruling classes and the temples, dwindled and the theatre troupes lost all financial support.

The second force was purely internal. Though Sanskrit was still the language of the courts and temples, various regional languages and literary traditions had started emerging in the rural areas. Thus as Sanskrit as the living language of the land gradually lost its grip over the Indian society, it was a natural consequence that the Sanskrit theatre would also go into decline. Gradually as Islam began to dominate the Indian society it was very natural that all theatrical activities would lose favour since that religion did not accept theatre as a part of human life. As almost the entire northern part of the country came under the great Mughal empire the earlier way of life got pushed to the southern tip of the country. Eventually it was only Kuttiyattam in Kerala that managed to survive, albeit precariously.

Around the 15th century theatre in India once again re-emerged with a dazzling variety; that which was a national phenomenon earlier i.e. the Sanskrit theatre, now split into a wide variety of regional forms which were more or less village arts. Each developed its own unique method of presentation. Each used the language of its region to meet the needs of its people. Very naturally these theatrical forms did not travel beyond the boundaries of their own regions. From the 15th to the 19th centuries virtually every region of India developed its own theatre form; a large number of them still survive.

A very major reason for this regional development was the increasing popularity of the Vaishnava religion or Krishna cult and the attendant concept of bhakti that permeated the Hindu populace. Many of the regional forms are based on the Vaishnava beliefs and are intended as votive offerings.
This is not to say that all the regional forms are religion oriented. There are some noteworthy ones which had secular base and which have now turned to commercial approach with professional performing troupes also.

Though these regional forms are very different from each another so far as execution, costume, make-up, staging and acting style, there are certain broadbased similarities. For instance the south Indian forms generally put a great deal of stress on the dance element; in fact some of them can be called 'dance-drama'. *Krishnaattam* of Kerala and *Yakshagaana* of Karnataka have a large quantum of the dance element; *Jatraa* of West Bengal and *Tamaashaa* of Maharashtra and *Bhavaai* of Gujarat lay stress on spoken words.

These are only a very few generalised forms. There are many which have not been mentioned. Let us consider a few important regional forms. (Presented in alphabetical order).

**Objectives:**

After you study this unit you should be able to:

- a) Distinguish between the elements in classical theatre and those in the regional theatre.
- b) Be able to trace the common elements in the practices of the regional theatres from different parts of our country.
- c) Eventually be able to trace in brief the history of development of theatre as an art that belongs to a single stream.

2.1.1 **Ankiya Naat**

*Ankiya Naat* is a religious theatre form from the north-eastern state Assam. This form was created by Shri. Shankardeva who lived in the 15th, 16th centuries. He was a great devotee of Lord Krishna. *ankiya* means act and *naat* means drama. Shankardeva wrote many plays which became very popular.

The performance of *Ankiya Naat* takes place in a prayer hall located in a sacred monastery (*math*). Usually the spectators sit on the ground or stand facing each other. Usually men perform all the roles, including those of women, in the *math* performances. But outside the *math* women may participate.

The musicians wear shimmering white costumes whereas the actors wear colourful costumes and crowns suitable to the status of the characters in society. The most striking aspect of these performances are the huge effigies made up of bamboos and covered with paper-mache and painted with bright colours. These effigies represent demons and animals and can be as tall as 15 feet. The performances are organised to coincide with religious festivals like *gokulaashtami* or the birth anniversary of a saint.

Performances begin with ritualist drumming songs and dances, then start the actual performance. One of the prominent persona is the *sootradhaara* who is an expert on every aspect of the presentation and is a good dancer. The central theme is the victory of good over evil, the good being represented by Krishna and Balaraama.

*Ankiya Naat* has survived and sustained itself for centuries because it relies upon and glorifies the religious beliefs of the people of Assam.
2.1.2 Bhaagavata Mela

This is actually a folk dance-drama originated in the Melattur village of Tamil Nadu. The term refers to the sacred text *Bhaagavata Puraana* which is so very cherished all over India. It represents the life of Krishna from his birth, through his *leelaas* with his beloved Radha and the *gopis* of Gokul at Vrindaavana. *Mela* means a troupe consisting of dancers and singers.

Its origins are traced to Andhra Pradesh and it is believed that it is largely influenced by Kuchipudi of Andhra Pradesh. After the fall of the Vijaynagara empire, the performing Brahmin families sought refuge in Tamil Nadu and the king Achyutappara Nayak gave them refuge and presented six villages, one of them being Melattur.

During the end of April or beginning of May, two troupes of devotees present performances in front of the Varadaraja temple in celebration of the *Narasimha Jayanti* — Narasimha being the frightening 4th *avataara* of Lord Vishnu being half man and half lion. Performances start with the entrance of the clown or jester (*konangi*) to lighten the atmosphere. Then enter the musicians who sing in praise of Vishnu. Then enters a boy wearing the mask of Ganapati and the deity’s blessings are sought after which the drama begins.

All the roles are enacted by men. Every character enters behind a curtain (*yavanikaa*) held by two helpers. The entrance is always danced to a special song describing the character. This entrance song is called *paatra pravesha daru*. The most popular drama is *Prahlaada Charitram* depicting the story of the devotee of Vishnu, his demon father Hiranyakashipu and his destruction by the Lord in the *avataara* of Narasimha. According to the long standing unbroken tradition, the actor portraying Narasimha fasts and offers * poojaa* to the Lord before wearing the special mask which is said to possess divine powers granted by the deity. It is said that often the actor gets possessed himself and turns violent and has to be restrained.

The music is pure Carnatic system and is highly classical. The orchestra is also classical consisting of the *mridangam*, the *flute*, *violin* and *taalams* (bell metal cymbals). The singer completes the orchestra.

Dancing appears to be a mixture of Kuchipudi and Bharata Natyam.

2.1.3 Bhavaai

This is a folk theatre from Gujarat including Saurashtra. It is also found in the adjoining Rajasthan and some parts of Madhya Pradesh. Its origins are traced to the 14th century in Gujarat.

Bhavaai is traditionally performed as a votive offering at the feet of the Supreme Devi in her forms as Ambaa and Bahucharaa during the *Navaraatri* festival. Yet the content of most of the performances centers around the vices and virtues of the people of different strata of the society. Some performances tell popular mythological stories while some relate to history. The language is a mix of Gujarati, Urdu and Marwadi. The orchestra consists of *bhungal*, *pakhaawaj*, *tablaa*, *jhanjh* (cymbals), *harmonium* and *saarangi*.

Performance begins at nightfall after the evening meal. To attract people a musical ensemble plays popular and attractive tunes. Once there is a sizeable crowd gathered and the dignitaries seated the performance starts with prayers to Ambaaji. These are followed by songs describing a love affair after which the *sootradhaara* (stage manager) enters the stage and begins the rituals. These rituals are very precisely defined and followed. At this juncture an actor dressed as Ganapati enters dancing which appears
Indian Theatre

to be simplified Kathak. After Ganapati’s exit another actor enters dressed as the terrible
goddess Kaali who is propitiated and requested to remove obstacles (vighnas). Now
an actor dressed as a Brahmin enters and the humourous interlude starts. To every
question, he gives ridiculous replies couched in obscene language. His movements are
loud and totally unaesthetic. But, while arousing laughter and revulsion, his comments
have significance since they focus on the political and social ills of the society.

The sootradhaara is called rangalo and who has a female aide who is called rangalee.

2.1.4 Jatraa

This is the most popular regional theatre form for Bengalese and Beengali speaking
people of the adjoining areas.

Jatraa means procession. It is estimated to have taken shape in the 16th century as a
part of the Vaishnava religious movement which relied heavily on the path of bhakti
(devotion and love for God). The chief propagator of bhakti in Bengal was Shri.
Chaitanya Mahaaprabhu. Earlier in its life it was passed on as an oral tradition. Up to
about the 19th century the Jatraa plays focused on religious themes and were instructive
and moralistic. In the 19th century amateurs from the upper crust of the society of
Kolkata established their own theatre groups and started selecting secular themes for
their productions. This also led to borrowing of elements from the western theatre like
the use of the prosenium stage and scenic settings. The townsmen looked down at the
original Jatraa as crude and old fashioned. Thus Jatraa started sliding into oblivion.

All this changed after 1947 (independence) when it started receiving governmental
support. Generally the Jatraa actors come from the lower strata of the society. As in
many regional theatrical arts men enact the roles of women. Its very popular in the times
of the religious festivals like the Durgaa Poojaa, Kaali Pooja, Ratha Yaatra etc.

Jatraa is very melodramatic and abounds in songs and dance. The acting area (asar)
is usually on ground level, covered with durries and bound by short bamboo poles
strung together. Or a low wooden platform is used where a wooden ramp serves as an
extension of the acting area and is used for dramatic effect.

The spectators enfold the entire acting area there by creating an atmosphere of intimacy.
Scenes flow rapidly one into the other there being songs in between two scenes. Jatraa
music is provided by the pakhaawaj, harmonium, violin, clarinet or flute and small
cymbals. The performance begin with a musical concert which may last for an hour or
two before the actual drama stats. The performance is divided into two parts; in the first
part the evening raagas are played. The second part is full of very fast paced, beautiful
drumming. Mood music is introduced at specific plaices to supplement the melodramatic
parts.

2.1.5 Krishnaattam

Krishnaattam is a religious dance-drama from Kerala. From its inception, it has been
performed in the famous Krishna Shrine Guruvaayoor as a votive offering. Legend has
it that the Zamorin king Manaveda, who was a great devotee of Shri. Krishna created
it in the 17th century when he saw the vision of Krishna as a young boy playing in the
courtyard of the temple. Inspired by the miraculous vision Manveda wrote Krishnageeti
– songs of Krishna – based round the episodes of his life. The Krishnageeti are 8
plays which represent the entire dramatic element of this form.

One must remember that Kerala is the home of both Kuttiyaattam and Kathakali.
Thus it is not surprising that Krishnaattam shares many common elements with the other two; at the same time it retains many characteristics which are its own. Specially the dance movements are feminine and lyrical and there are some very beautiful group patterns, which resemble floral garlands of different weaves, when they perform the dances of Krishna with the gopis. Once again it is only the men who enact all the roles. All the actors are committed devotees of Shri. Krishna and their devotional fervour is equally matched by the pilgrims who throng the temple daily. In fact the pilgrims can commission the performance of the any chosen play.

Performances are either held in the kootaambalam or a special courtyard. The performance area is, as usual, lighted with a big oil lamp with some small lamps. The performance starts at about 9 p.m. after the temple rituals are over and goes on till 3 a.m.

Texts of the plays are sung by two chief singers in the Sopaana style which is common to all Kerala performing arts. The actors do not speak at all. Basic rhythm is provided by the drums Maddalam and Edakkal with shruti being provided by a harmonium and taala patterns played on the small cymbals.

Earlier Krishnaattam could not be performed outside Guruvayoar temple but in the recent years it is not only performed all over India but all over the world also.

2.1.6 Nautanki

Nautanki is the most beloved and popular form of folk theatre in the Hindi speaking areas of north India – Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Rajasthan, Haryana and Bihar. It is believed to have been popularised in the 19th century.

Nautauki’s popularity is mainly to the superb singing by the actors and very catchy rhythmic patterns woven by the accompanying drum Nakkaaraa. The actor train very rigourously and have very powerful voices since in a performance, at a time, there could be thousands of spectators who have come chiefly to listen to the songs. It can be performed anywhere in a village. A raised stage is erected or the actors may use the balcony of a house or even use a tree. A performance is usually arranged for a social occasion like a wedding, birth of a male child or even a village fair (melaa).

The dramas are usually melodramatic and portray romantic love. The stories are usually taken from Indian mythology, history and often popular folk tales and legends. The sootradhaara who is called ranga here links different elements of the play into a cohesive plot.

Musical accompaniment is provided by the drum Nakkaaraa, Dholak, harmonium and cymbals. The music is a blend of both classical and Hindi film songs. Earlier the chaste string instrument saarangi was always used but now wind instruments like the clarinet are used which have now given way to the ever present keyboard and the synthesizer. Singing is at certain junctures, broken off by the introduction of dialogues.

Earlier only men participated in a Nautanki performance but of late, women have started participating. It is usual for appreciative patrons to shower money or gifts upon the actors. After accepting the donation, usually the women singers repeat the song – something like an encore.

Today the Nautanki singers and actors are finding it difficult to survive in a society which so very enormously influenced by the Hindi films.
2.1.7 Raamleelaa

This is one of the most famous and beloved performance in north India. Celebrating the life and deeds of Shri. Rama it has an all India appeal. Usually performed on the Dasseraa day it is the including grand finale of the Navaraatri festival.

In simple terms, it glorifies the eternal theme of “victory of good over evil”, the good being represented by Shri. Rama, Lakshmana and their loyal armies and the evil by the various demons (raakshasas) chief among them being Raavana the ten headed king of Lanka. Dasseraa is followed by Divaali the festival of lights which is celebrated to announce the return of Shri. Rama, Sita and Lakshmana to Ayodhya after the 14 years stay (vanavaasa) in the forest.

Raamleelaa means the presentation of the great spiritual play of Shri. Rama who is considered to be the 7th incarnation (avataara) of Lord Vishnu.

There is evidence to show that the Raamleelaa plays were performed in the 17th century. This was a result of the great impact of the saint-poet Tulasidas’ immortal Raamcharitmaanas.

Major centres for spectacular Raamleelaa presentation are Allahbad, Ramnagar, Mathura and Delhi. At all these places the performances receive good official and public patronage.

There are no fixed costumes which may vary amongst different groups. But those are very colourful. The facial make-up is embellished with designs in the shapes of stars, flowers etc and are further decorated with glittering sequins and mica. Ravana wears a special mask which has ten heads.

The music is very folk and each region adds its own flavours. Chanting of Tulasidas’s Raamcharitmaanas is a common factor.

Nowadays, this practice has taken roots where in huge effigies of Rama, Lakshmana, Ravana, Kumbhakarna etc are made with bamboos and papier-mache where firecrackers are attached to the demons. When eventually Rama fires his ultimate arrow at the effigies of Ravana, Kumbhakarna go up in flames added on by the bursting crackers.

2.1.8 Tamaashaa

This is most popular form of entertainment in the rural areas of Maharashtra. There are a large number of Tamaashaa troupes operating in the state which gives a very good financial support to the major troupes. In the recent times serious research projects have been taken up to strengthen the art form as also make the presentations follow certain common basic rules.

A very important characteristic of Tamaashaa is the humour component which forms a large portion of the actual performance. The Tamaashaa artistes satirise the prevalent social conditions as well as the political. They make fun of any body and everybody from priests to businessmen, politicians and the local zamindaars (landLords). They are a dapt at disguising their barbs in the form of historical and mythological stories.

Historically it is estimated that the Tamaashaa developed in the 16th century as a means for entertainment for the armies of the militant Maraathaas and the invading Moghuls. As such, the entertainment was laced with overtones of sexual inferences.

The form that we witness today is a mix of many diverse forms which can be traced
back to many centuries. Some scholars believe that the diverse streams of musical, dance and dramatic types of entertainment got amalgamated to result in Tamaashaa. We can discern the influence of the North Indian classical dance Kathak, the musical modes of Gazal and Quawali, the Dashaavataara musical plays, Bhaarud dramatic poetry, Gondhal religious songs and Keertan the solo musical sermon in Tamaashaa.

All Tamaashaa performances start with the Gan a song in praise of deities. This is followed by the Gaulan in which Krishna and the cowherds engage in humourous dialogues with the Goulans (milkmaids).

After this comes the Vaag which is a short play full of a slapstick humour.

There are two streams Dholki-baari which draws its name from the chief drum of Tamaashaa viz the Dholki. The other is Sangeet-baari which is the oldest styles full of song and dance.

A very deeply loved part of the Tamaashaa is the Laavani (love songs) which are interpreted through singing and dancing and which definitely titillate. The Laavani dancers are all female and they present an amalgam of Kathak and indigenous folk dances.

The Tamaashaa is usually looked down upon by the conservative Maharashtrian society since the Laavani dancers were considered to be akin to prostitutes.

2.1.9 The Yakshagaana of Karnataka

The Kannada-speaking area of India usually called Karnataka, has a rich theatre form known as ‘Yakshagaana’. In earlier times it used to be called ‘Dashaavataara aata’, or simply ‘Baayalaata’. The nomenclature ‘Yakshagaana’ came from a special style of music which accompanies these plays. It is a very ancient style, for there is mention of this style in Kannada literature of the tenth and twelfth centuries.

Yakshagaana embraced in earlier times a form of music played before royal personages. Later on, owing to the advent of more evolved styles of music like Hindustani and Karnatic music, Yakshagaana receded very much into the background. We would have totally lost this form, but for the fact that opera-like plays began to be written in this style and their stage success contributed to its survival right to this day.

An essential feature of these plays is that the play is conceived as a fantasy dealing with heroes, gods and demons; the material chosen for depiction comes from our myths and legends.

The very backbone of Yakshagaana is its operatic nature; songs and verses are employed for the narration of its themes. The language is simple and direct, and can easily be understood by lay audiences. The Bhaagavatar, or conductor of the play, has to sing all those songs (in addition to many narrative verses) to the accompaniment of cymbals and drums.

The purva ranga of the performance is known as Sabhaalakshana. It begins with a prayer to Ganesh, Skanda and other deities. Those who perform the parts of demons are known as bannada vesha. The stree-vesha is lower down in the scale. The two accompanying instruments, the chande and the maddale, are an aid. The Bhaagavatar introduces each character; when a character is alone on the stage and seeks to express his feelings, it is the Bhaagavatar who listen to his problems.

The Sabhaalakshana terminates and the Prasanga proper beings. It is introduced by the vaddolaga. The character, who is about to enter, stands behind a curtain and he is presented to the spectators.
The characters speak out their words in dignified prose after each song; this art has to be cultivated over long years of experience. A speech is delivered extempore and often improvised on the spur of the moment after the Bhaagavata has sung one stanza after the other during the course of the play.

**Yakshagaana** surpasses many folk Indian theatre forms in one particular field, that is in the matter of costumes and make-up. It is based on the essential nature of the characters. The first category belongs to heroes like Karna and Arjuna or avataara purusha like Rama or Krishna. The second type consists of characters of heroic mould who are a trifle too proud of their prowess and consequently slightly immature. The third group includes those like Kiraata who are fearless, yet somewhat uncultured and even stupid. Then there are demons like Ravana and Kumbhakarna who are brave in their own right but, on the whole, quite destructive in their ways. Then there are those deities like Veerabhadra and Narasimha who are entrusted with the difficult task of annihilating demons. Apart from the characters of this devadaanava-maanava group, there are others like Hanuman, Bali and Jambava. Then there are straight characters, like rishis or gurus. The stree-vesha includes queens, princesses and attendants.

The **Yakshagaana** performances used to take place at night. Torches were used to light the arena. The dim, yellowish flames flickered and the dazzling costumes imparted to the atmosphere a suggestion of fantasy.

Those playing the roles of rishis or purohits are usually simply clad. The clothing for all the characters is effective, the ornaments are elaborate and dazzling.

### 2.2 QUESTIONS

1. Fill in the blank spaces from the words given below:

   [Raamcharitmaanasa, increasing popularity, Gujrat, 17\textsuperscript{th}, Krishnaattam, Tulasidas’s, vaishnava, Hindispeaking, Yakshagaana, Nautanki, Bhaagvatmela, rangalo, rangalee]

   a) The major reason for development of regional theatre was the ____________, ____________ of ____________ religion.

   b) ____________, ____________ and ____________ of south lay a stress on dance element.

   c) In Bhavai of ____________ the sutradhaara is called ____________ and his female aide ____________.

   d) ____________ is the most beloved form of folk theatre in the ____________ areas of North India.

   e) In the ____________ century Raamleelaa gained popularity due to the impact of ____________ immortal ____________.

2. Write in 5 to 6 lines on the influence of Vaishnavism on the regional theatre.

3. Write briefly on the broad based similarities in the regional theatre forms.

**Answers**

1. a) increasing popularity, vaishnava

   b) Krishnaattam, Yakshagaana, Bhaagvatmela
c) Gujrat, rangalo, rangalee

d) Nautanki, Hindi speaking

e) 17th, Tulasidas's, Raamcharitmaanas

2. The vedic religion was concentrated on performance of yajna. But after the Christian era started there took very important changes in our religious practices and beliefs. One of the biggest influences in the entire country has been the Vaishnava religion which has given rise to the Krishna cult which even today, predominates. Krishna has become the most beloved God. It is very attractive to enact his miraculous deeds on stage, be it classical or regional or folk.

3. There can be two general broad based classifications of the bulk of regional theatre forms. One, which includes the southern forms lay a great stress on the dance element. In fact some of them can be called “dance-drama”. Whereas the second one, which covers the other part of the country, lay a greater stress on the spoken words or dialogues. Yet the common feature appears to be the robustness of the style of presentation and a direct appeal to the masses.