

## Dance Criticism in Ancient Theatrics

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Critic word comes from the Greek word *Kritikos* which means a person who offers a reasoned judgement or observation<sup>i</sup>. Hence dance criticism is a profession of evaluation of dance performances. Critical analysis exists in India as *Vyākhyāna Parampare*, known through many commentaries on various ancient literary works<sup>ii</sup> like the commentaries by Udbhata, Śankuka, Lollaṭa, Bhaṭṭanāyaka, Rudraṭa and Abhinavagupta on *Nāṭyaśāstra*<sup>1</sup>. Traditionally a simple explanation would be called *Vārtika*, an elaborated one in a little more detailed manner were termed as *Bhāṣya* or *ṭeekawhich* is nothing but Criticism<sup>iii</sup>. The concepts of *Guṇa*<sup>2</sup> and *Doṣa*<sup>3</sup>, *Prekṣaka*<sup>4</sup> and *Praśnika*<sup>5</sup> discussed in *Nāṭyaśāstra*<sup>iv</sup> that deal with the merits, faults, characteristics of the audience and of the assessors suggest the practice of criticism in performing arts like music, dance, and drama during ancient times. Critical evaluation of a dance performance through reasoned judgements is observed in some ancient theatrics which suggest the existence of dance criticism as a distinct profession and the assessors being analogous to critics of present times.

Some of the popular theatrics of ancient times like the causeries of Gupta period<sup>v</sup> namely *Pādatāḍitaka* by Śyāmilaka, *Ubhayābhisārika* by Vararuci, *Padmaprābhṛtaka* by Śūdraka and *Dhūrtaviṭasamvādaḥ* by Īśvaradatta all dating between 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Century CE<sup>vi</sup> and *Mālavikāgnimitram* of Kālidāsa contain dance sequences in their main plot where we come across critical evaluations of the dance performances by the assessors and other elite audience. Most of the causeries mentioned here are set in ancient cities like Vidisha, Pātalīputra and Ujjain<sup>vii</sup>. The dances that were performed in these cities had expert audience who were highly knowledgeable in dance.

We come across the assessors or the *Praśnika* assessing the *nṛtta* recitals<sup>viii</sup> in the play *Pādatāḍitaka* written by Śyāmilaka where the assessors witness a faulty performance and do not get convinced when the judgement goes in favor of the famous: “*aparibhūtyāmevasadasyāgamapradhānatayā mama praśnikanumatepratiṣṭihah pakṣah*”. (Pollock, 112). It shows how objective and unbiased the opinions of assessors were.

In *Pādatāḍitaka* a character named Indrasvāmin who is referred as the Trikūṭaka king of Aparānta is shown as a king to be having expertise in music, dance as well as poetry<sup>ix</sup>. *kāvyegāndharvenṛtaśāstrevidhijñam dakṣam dātāraṃ dakṣiṇam*” (Pollock, 145).

In the same play *Pādatāḍitaka*<sup>x</sup> a verse says, “*tataḥ prasāritesvātodyeṣu devatā maṅgalampūrvamupohyaprusteḡtakepranṛtāyāṃ nartakyāṃ Prathama vastunyeva Mayūrasenāyāḥ khalunṛtprayogadoṣā gṛhītāḥ*” (Pollock, 110). It explains of the assessors who assessed the performance through open discussion and point out the mistakes impartially. It shows the expertise of the audience as well as their impartial and objective assessment. Finally, a winner is announced and a *pāritośaka*<sup>6</sup> is given after such performances.

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> act of Kālidāsa’s *Mālavikāgnimitrām*<sup>xi</sup>, the parivrājikā named *Pāṇḍitā Kauṣiki* ‘s description of Mālavikā’s dance in 8<sup>th</sup> verse: “*Her limbs which were eloquent with expression; the placings of her feet were perfect in unison with time; there was complete identification with the sentiments conveyed; the acting made by means of the hands was gentle, while in its successive stages chased away emotion from its substratum; still the interest remained just the same.*” (Kale, 53). Very much sounds like a professionally written critique. The fact that the king asks a maid to brief on the performance shows that impartial criticism existed during those times. In this play, despite being a maid *pāṇḍitā* Kauṣiki is a very learned woman who gets her title as *pāṇḍita* for dept

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<sup>1</sup> Oldest treatise on dramaturgy authored by Mahamuni Bharata.

<sup>2</sup> Means Merits

<sup>3</sup> Means Faults

<sup>4</sup> Means Spectator

<sup>5</sup> Means Assessor

<sup>6</sup> prize

of knowledge and will be asked to judge the competition as well. Hence, we can say that dance criticism was part of public education and something that every common man would understand and know.

Kings and queens learnt dancing as part of royal education which gave them the edge to be critical about the quality of art in their empire. Allahābād stone pillar inscription<sup>xii</sup> of Samudragupta is significant to understand royal education. Poet Hariśeṇa who is the composer of the verses in this inscription mentions that the king was well versed in the arts of dance and music<sup>xiii</sup>. “*gāndharvalalitairvṛīditatrīdaśapati*” (Bhandarkar, 214). Even Samudragupta was a great musician who patronized many artists too. Bhitārī stone pillar inscription of Skandagupta mentions him as *tānadhīdā vinītaḥ*<sup>xiv</sup>.

These are important evidence in the ancient texts which clearly shows us that dance criticism was a distinct profession during the ancient times. The dance performances were critically assessed by the scholarly audience, critics and even the monarchs themselves. While it was perhaps a matter of esteem for a dancer to perform before such elite audience, since they best performers would be honoured with rewards and recognitions, there was also perhaps equal amount of criticism to be faced. This in turn kept the dancers responsible towards maintaining the quality of art in the ancient society.

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