



Tracing Traditions and Evolution: The Influence of Manu smriti and Natyashastra on Classical Theatre

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ABSTRACT

Classical theatre, with its profound cultural significance and enduring narratives, is deeply rooted in ancient texts like the Manusmriti and the Natyasastra. This seminar paper explores the multifaceted influence of these seminal works on classical theatre, unravelling the intricate interplay between textual prescriptions, societal reflections, and performative innovations. The Manusmriti, a cornerstone of Hindu jurisprudence and ethics, provides a comprehensive framework for societal conduct and governance, shaping the portrayal of characters and narratives in classical dramas. On the other hand, the Natyasastra serves as a foundational treatise on the performing arts, offering technical guidance and philosophical insights that elevate the theatrical experience to a transcendent realm of artistic expression. Through an examination of the Manusmriti's teachings on caste and societal structure and the Natyasastra's influence on performance aesthetics, this paper delves into the dynamic dialogue between ancient texts and classical theatre, shedding light on their enduring relevance in the tapestry of Indian cultural heritage. Additionally, the paper explores the historical association of traditional performing arts forms such as Koodiyattam, Krishnanattam, and Kathakali with caste communities, highlighting contemporary efforts to promote inclusivity and diversity

within these cultural traditions.

Introduction:

Classical theatre, a profound art form embodying cultural intricacies, societal reflections, and enduring narratives, bears the indelible imprint of ancient texts such as the Manusmriti and the Natyasastra. Through an exploration of the lineage of classical theatre, we uncover a vibrant tapestry interwoven with the influences of these seminal works, each contributing distinctively to its evolution and essence.

The Manusmriti, a cornerstone of Hindu jurisprudence and ethics, presents a comprehensive framework of societal conduct and governance. Its profound impact on classical theatre is evident through its delineation of social hierarchies, moral codes, and ethical dilemmas, which resonate throughout the characters and narratives of classical dramas. The Manusmriti's teachings on dharma (duty), karma (action), and varna (caste) intricately shape the portrayal of characters, their motivations, and their interactions on the theatrical stage, offering a reflection of the societal values and norms of the time.

Concurrently, the Natyasastra stands as a seminal treatise on the performing arts, attributed to the sage Bharata Muni. This ancient text serves as a comprehensive guide to theatre, enshrining aspects of drama, dance, music, and aesthetics. It not only provides technical details on stagecraft, acting, and production but also delves into the philosophical underpinnings of performance, elucidating the concept of rasa (aesthetic experience) and its pivotal role in evoking emotional resonance in the audience. The Natyasastra's profound influence on classical theatre is manifested in the intricate choreography, stylized gestures, and nuanced expressions that define the performances of traditional Indian theatre forms such as Bharatanatyam, Kathakali, and Koodiyattam.

Examining the interplay between the Manusmriti and the Natyasastra in classical theatre reveals a dynamic dialogue between textual prescriptions and performative innovations. While the Manusmriti lays down the ethical and social foundations, guiding the moral compass of characters and narratives, the Natyasastra provides the technical scaffolding and aesthetic principles, elevating the theatrical experience to a transcendent realm of artistic expression. Together, these ancient texts serve as pillars of classical theatre, infusing it with depth, resonance, and timeless relevance in the rich tapestry of Indian cultural heritage.

Caste Discrimination:

Caste discrimination has been a complex and deeply entrenched issue in various aspects of Indian society, including classical theatre. Throughout history, caste-based hierarchies have influenced the portrayal of characters, narratives, and performance opportunities within the classical theatre tradition.

In classical Indian theatre, particularly in forms like Sanskrit drama, caste distinctions were often reflected in the roles assigned to different characters. Traditionally, certain characters were associated with specific castes, mirroring the societal structure of the time. Brahmin characters, for example, were typically depicted as wise and virtuous, reflecting the high social status associated with the Brahmin caste. Conversely, characters from lower castes, such as Shudras, were often portrayed as subordinate or relegated to menial roles, perpetuating stereotypes and reinforcing caste-based divisions.

Moreover, the historical association of classical theatre with specific caste communities has contributed to the exclusion of marginalized groups from participation in these art forms. For centuries, access to training, performance opportunities, and patronage in classical theatre has been limited by caste-based discrimination, with higher caste individuals often enjoying privileged positions within the theatrical hierarchy.

Even today, despite efforts to promote inclusivity and diversity within classical theatre, caste discrimination continues to pose challenges. Individuals from lower castes may still face barriers to entry, limited access to resources, and unequal treatment compared to their higher caste counterparts. Addressing caste discrimination in classical theatre requires ongoing efforts to dismantle entrenched social hierarchies, promote equal opportunities for participation and representation, and foster inclusive environments that celebrate the diversity of Indian society.

Manusmriti (Laws of Manu):

Manusmriti, an ancient Hindu legal text, is often cited in discussions about caste discrimination. It delineates a hierarchical social order known as the varna system, where individuals are stratified into four main varnas: Brahmins (priests and scholars), Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (merchants and farmers), and Shudras (laborers and service providers). Dalits, historically considered "untouchables," were often marginalized outside this system. Manusmriti assigns different rights, duties, and privileges to individuals based solely on their birth into a particular caste, perpetuating caste-based discrimination. For instance, it prescribes strict rules regarding interactions between castes, such as restricting access to education, occupation, and even religious rituals for lower castes. The text also

sanctions punishment for those who transgress these caste boundaries, reinforcing social hierarchies and discrimination.

Natyashastra:

While primarily a treatise on performing arts, the Natyashastra, attributed to the sage Bharata Muni, also reflects social norms of its time, potentially including caste distinctions. Though its primary focus is on aesthetic principles and techniques of theatre, dance, and music, some interpretations suggest subtle indications of societal organization and hierarchy. For example, certain roles or characters in theatrical performances may be associated with specific castes, reflecting the social order of the time. However, unlike Manusmriti, which explicitly codifies and perpetuates caste discrimination, Natyashastra's references to caste are more incidental and secondary to its main themes. Nonetheless, interpretations of caste within Natyashastra can vary, and some critics argue that it may indirectly reinforce or normalize caste distinctions through its portrayal of societal roles and relationships.

Furthermore, while the traditional performing arts forms of Koodiyattam, Krishnanattam, and Kathakali are celebrated for their cultural heritage and artistic expression, their historical association with particular caste communities cannot be overlooked. These art forms have been influenced by the socio-cultural context of their time, which included the prevalence of caste-based discrimination in Kerala society. While efforts are being made to promote inclusivity and diversity within these art forms, it's essential to acknowledge their historical roots and work towards creating opportunities for individuals from all backgrounds to engage with and participate in these cultural traditions.

Aim and Objectives:

The research study is to comprehensively investigate the influence of two ancient texts, the Manusmriti and the Natyashastra, on classical theatre, particularly focusing on how these texts have shaped the portrayal of characters, narratives, and performance aesthetics. This study falls within the interdisciplinary domain of cultural studies, theatre studies, and Indian classical studies. It encompasses textual analysis, historical research, and sociocultural inquiry to understand the multifaceted influence of ancient texts on classical theatre and the broader socio-political context in which these art forms have evolved. The research will employ a multi-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods to achieve its objectives. Textual analysis will examine the content of the Manusmriti and the Natyashastra, historical research will trace the lineage of classical theatre and traditional performing arts forms, and sociocultural inquiry will involve interviews, surveys, and participant observation. The

hypothesis of this research posits that the Manusmriti and the Natyasastra have significantly influenced classical theatre, guiding the portrayal of characters, narratives, and performance aesthetics. It is also hypothesized that traditional performing arts forms such as Koodiyattam, Krishnanattam, and Kathakali have historical associations with caste communities and societal norms, which have shaped their evolution and performance practices. Additionally, contemporary efforts to promote inclusivity and diversity within these cultural traditions are expected to be influenced by societal perceptions, challenges, and opportunities identified through the research. Through a comprehensive analysis of textual content, historical lineage, and contemporary sociocultural dynamics, this research aims to provide insights into the enduring influence of cultural heritage on artistic expression and social dynamics in Indian society.

Objectives:

- 1.To analyze the teachings of the Manusmriti and the Natyasastra related to societal conduct, governance, caste, and performance aesthetics.
- 2.To examine the influence of the Manusmriti and the Natyasastra on the portrayal of characters, narratives, and performance aesthetics in classical theatre.
- 3.To explore the historical association of traditional performing arts forms such as Koodiyattam, Krishnanattam, and Kathakali with caste communities and societal norms.
- 4.To investigate contemporary efforts to promote inclusivity and diversity within classical theatre and traditional performing arts communities.
- 5.To identify challenges and opportunities for promoting inclusivity and diversity within classical theatre and traditional performing arts communities.

Challenges of Research:

Access to historical texts and manuscripts, particularly for conducting textual analysis of ancient texts like the Manusmriti and the Natyasastra.

Addressing sensitive topics related to caste discrimination and societal norms within classical theatre and traditional performing arts communities.

Ensuring cultural sensitivity and ethical considerations when engaging with participants from diverse backgrounds, particularly in sociocultural inquiry.

Navigating complexities in interpreting historical data and reconciling different perspectives on the influence of ancient texts on classical theatre and traditional performing arts forms.

Identifying and overcoming biases or preconceived notions that may influence the research findings, particularly regarding contemporary efforts to promote inclusivity and diversity within cultural traditions.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the findings of this research support the hypothesis that the Manusmriti and the Natyasastra have indeed exerted a profound influence on classical theatre in India. In examining the influence of the Manusmriti and the Natyashastra on classical theatre, it becomes evident that while these ancient texts have contributed significantly to the rich tapestry of Indian cultural heritage, they are also deeply entwined with the complex issue of caste discrimination. The Manusmriti, with its hierarchical social order and prescriptions based on birth into specific castes, has perpetuated caste-based discrimination through the ages. Its teachings on dharma, karma, and varna have not only shaped the portrayal of characters and narratives in classical dramas but have also reinforced social hierarchies and marginalized certain communities.

Similarly, while the Natyashastra primarily focuses on the technical and aesthetic aspects of theatre, its subtle reflections of societal norms may inadvertently reinforce caste distinctions in classical theatre. The historical association of classical theatre with specific caste communities has further perpetuated exclusion and discrimination within these art forms, limiting opportunities for individuals from marginalized backgrounds.

Contemporary efforts to promote inclusivity and diversity within classical theatre and traditional performing arts communities are essential steps towards addressing these longstanding issues of caste discrimination. However, these efforts must be accompanied by a critical examination of the historical roots of caste-based hierarchies within classical theatre and a commitment to dismantling entrenched social structures.

Moreover, the challenges of conducting research on such sensitive topics, including access to historical texts, addressing biases, and ensuring cultural sensitivity, underscore the complexities inherent in unravelling the influence of ancient texts on classical theatre and societal dynamics.

In conclusion, while acknowledging the enduring influence of the Manusmriti and the Natyashastra on classical theatre, it is imperative to critically engage with their role in perpetuating caste discrimination. By doing so, we can strive towards a more inclusive and equitable cultural landscape that celebrates the diversity of Indian society and upholds the principles of social justice and equality.

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