

# Dhananjaya's Conceptions of Dramatic Art and the Dramaturgy of Early Hindi Cinema

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## Abstract

This paper intends to explore the impact of the classical Indian dramaturgy over the making of early Hindi Cinema, with special reference to Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* and a 10<sup>th</sup>-century treatise on dramaturgy *Daśarūpakam* by Dhananjaya. Dhananjaya's book primarily takes Bharata's ideals forth by adding his own ideas to the concepts proposed in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. However, the conceptions postulated in these two treatises formed the very foundation of Indian drama (Nāṭya) irrespective of genre and time. The journey of dramatic performance to the silver screen is basically from the stage; therefore, the notions which ran through the self of drama were apparently present in the whole being of Hindi Cinema. The rules propounded in the texts mentioned above governed the crucial features of the dramatic representation, which travelling through theatre reached the celluloid world, preparing the ground for the success as well as the failure of the Hindi cinema. Thus, this paper, evaluating the positive and negative aspects of the concepts of classical dramatic art that influenced Hindi cinema the most, concludes by putting forth the relation of the conceptions of classical dramatic art with the dramaturgy of early Hindi Cinema.

**Keywords:** *Daśarūpakam*; Dramaturgy; Hindi cinema; *Nāṭyaśāstra*; Theatre.

## Introduction

The root of Hindi Cinema can be found in the classical Indian dramaturgy propounded in Bharatamūni's *Nāṭyaśāstra* and furthered by the texts such as Dhananjaya's *Daśarūpakam*. The techniques of dramatic art postulated in these treatises influenced the early Hindi Cinema to the core. Though the Sanskrit plays have largely vanished from the arena of Indian theatre, but their impact can clearly be seen in Hindi cinematic representations. Its legacy of romance, music and dance led Bollywood films to the new eras,

namely, to the *talkies* of the 1930s and 40s, the golden era of the 1950s, and the new wave of the 1960s. With the technical bequest of plot structure, depiction, treatment and conclusion of the story from the classical dramaturgy, most Bollywood movies succeeded on the silver screen, following mainly the time-tested formula prescribed by the ancient Sanskrit theatre (Rao, "Greek comedies").

The stories of early Hindi movies usually unfold in the way the Sanskrit plays would progress to arouse various *rasas* (the sentiments) in the mind of a spectator. Also, the subject matter, the concept of hero and heroine, and the plot structure of Hindi films are knowingly/unknowingly derived from the classical Indian dramaturgy to attain a similar goal. Apart from this, the stories of the early Hindi cinema were directly borrowed from or profusely influenced by the ancient Indian epics – the *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata*. The first motion film of Indian Cinema, *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), a debut silent film of Dhundiraj Govind Phalke (alias Dadasaheb Phalke), is based on an episode of the *Rāmāyana*. Phalke's other films also were borrowed from these epics. His *Lanka Dahan* (1917) was based on the *Rāmāyana*, and the story of his *Krishna Janma* (1918) was borrowed from the *Mahābhārata*. Varied episodes of the epics were adopted as narratives for several genres such as family, musical, romantic, and social dramas of Indian cinema. Hindi cinema modelled its heroes and heroines on the immortal characters of the Sanskrit epics, deriving the features from classical dramatic art forms. Henceforth, the article discusses the influence of Sanskrit dramaturgy on Hindi Cinema since its inception.

### **Dhananjaya's Dramatic Art and Early Hindi Cinema**

The era of Hindi cinema begins with the cinematic representation of verse narratives scripted by Dadasaheb Phalke, who started his career as a photographer. Ashish Rajadhyaksha notes that he (Phalke) left photography due to low income and started working as a lithographer with Raja Ravi Verma in Lonavala, but he did not continue that for long (2). One fine day, his love for creative art and photography struck with the idea of portraying Hindu gods and goddesses on the silver screen while watching the silent movie *Life of Christ* (1910s). Phalke said, "While I was watching *The Life of Christ*, the images of Lord Ram and Krishna seemed to rolling in front of my eyes. Could we Indian be able to portray our Gods and Goddesses in Cinematography" (Rajadhyaksha 2). To make his dream come true, he travelled to London. He mastered the cinematographic techniques only to return to India and establish his film-making company known as "Phalke Film Company" in 1912. Taking inspiration from the *Rāmāyana*,

he shot his first silent movie *Raja Harishchandra*, which was released in 1913 (Rajadhyaksha 2).

This movie largely relies on the dramatic techniques of classical Indian dramaturgy for its *vastu* (plot-structure or subject-matter), portrayal of the *nāyaka* (hero), and *rasas* (the sentiments). Dhanamjaya in the *Daśarūpakam* discusses two types of subject matter, namely, *ādhikārika* (the principal subject) and *prāsāngika* (the incidental subject) (6). He writes that the principal subject deals with the main theme, and the incidental subject deals with the subordinate theme – “*tatrādhikārikam mukhyam āngarn prāsāngikam viduḥ*” (śloka 1.18). Accordingly, the film *Raja Harishchandra* also has two themes. The principal theme deals with the life of Raja Harishchandra as a man of truth, and the subordinate theme deals with the envy of sage Vishwamitra towards Harishchandra and his interference in the life of Harishchandra to break his (Harishchandra’s) vow of being truthful in his entire life. Dhanamjaya also gives a threefold classification of the subject matter. These are – legendry, invented, and mixed subjects. In Dhanamjaya’s classification of the subject matter, the story of *Raja Harishchandra*, taken from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and based on the legends of Raja Harishchandra, is fit to be classified as legendry.

Dhanamjaya categorises a hero into four kinds – “*bhedaiś caturdhā lalitaśāntodāttoddhatair ayaṃ*” (śloka 2.1); that is, there are four kinds of a hero – *lalita* (light-hearted), *śānta* (calm), *udāṭṭa* (exalted), and *uddhata* (vehement) (40). Dhanamjaya does not propose any hierarchy in these types, as different kinds of heroes are to be used in different varieties of plays. According to this classification, Harishchandra, the hero of the film, falls under the category of an “exalted” kind of hero. The self-controlled and exalted hero, as asserted in the *Daśarūpakam*, is of great excellence, exceedingly serious, forbearing, not boastful, resolute with self-assertion, and firm of purpose (Dhanamjaya 41). Keeping in view the given characteristics, Raja Harishchandra (the hero) perfectly fits into this category. He is serious, resolute with self-assertion and firm on his purpose. He is so serious and firm with his oath that he leaves the kingdom of Ayodhya with his family, sells his wife and son in the market of Kashi (currently known as Varanasi), and serves the untouchables to keep his word. The story in the movie furthers as per the concepts inscribed in the *Daśarūpakam*. Dhanamjaya says, “*kāryaṃ trivargaṃ tac chuddham ekānekanubāndhi ca*” (śloka 1.24).

This means *kārya* (denouement) of the action consists of one of the three objects of human existence, i.e. *dharma* (virtue), *artha* (wealth), and *kāma* (pleasure) (Dhanamjaya 8). Also, in the case of *Raja Harishchandra*, *dharma*

(virtue) becomes the cause of *kārya* (denouement), for Raja Harishchandra (the hero) believes “truth” is the greatest *dharma* (virtue) of one’s life. The denouement of action starts from *bīja* (the germ), sown in the beginning of the story with a small incident where he comes to know about his future from a fortune teller. The plot structure of the film contains all those elements that Dhananjaya proposes in *Daśarūpakam*. Dhananjaya lists five elements of a plot structure through which the story furthers. He enumerates them as – *bīja* (germ), *bindu* (expansion), *patākā* (episode), *prakari* (episodic incident), and *kārya* (denouement) – “*bījabindupatākākhyaprakarikāryalakṣaṇaḥ/arthaḥ prakṛtayaḥ pañca tā etāḥ parikīrtitāḥ*” (śloka 1.27). Further, we see that Harishchandra goes to meet his beloved Taramati through a jungle, where he loses his path and takes shelter in the house of an old man who happens to be a fortune teller. At this moment, the *bīja* (germ) is sown as he comes to know that he will have to leave his kingdom with his family and serve an untouchable.

This incident puts anxiety in the mind of Harishchandra, and he vows to remain truthful throughout his life as he is told that truth is the ultimate *dharma* (virtue) in one’s life. And this vow leads to the *bindu* (the expansion) of the story as sage Vishwamitra takes a vow to make Harishchandra breach his promise to show his supremacy over him. This incident becomes *patākā* (incidental subject) to further the story to *kārya* (the denouement) and finally Harishchandra had to sell his wife and son in the market of Kashi after leaving his kingdom. All these episodes take place in such a manner that they lead to the emergence of *rasa* (one of the essential elements of drama) in the minds of the spectators. The film fills the minds of the spectators with *Karuṇa rasa* (the pathetic sentiment) when it reaches its climax, when Taramati (Harishchandra’s wife), Rohit (Harishchandra’s son) and Harishchandra go through the most painful suffering of their lives including the death of Rohit. Dhananjaya describes Pathetic Sentiment as:

iṣṭanāśād anīṣṭāpteḥ śokātmā karuṇo ‘nu tam  
niḥśvāsocchvāsaruditastambhapralapitādayaḥ  
svāpāspasmāradainyādhimaraṇalasyasambhramāḥ  
viśādaḥ jaḍatonmādacintādyā vyabhicāriṇaḥ. (śloka 4.87)

The Pathetic sentiment arises with the combination of sorrow, as its permanent states. It evolves from determinant such as separation, curse, accident, death and misfortune; in consequence of sigh, weeping, lamentation, change of facial colour, paralysis; and sleeping, epilepsy, depression, indolence, agitation, despair, anx-

ity and so on, as its transitory emotions. (146)

Here also, the climax of the film depicts the situation of extreme sorrow that prevails at the death of Rohit, which leads to the consequents such as sighing, weeping and lamentation of Taramati, and despair, anxiety, hopelessness (transitory emotions) of Harishchandra that finally results into the emergence of pathetic sentiment in the heart of spectators. In the end, the *dharmā* (the virtue of being truthful) wins, and the film ends on a happy note, as happens in most Sanskrit plays.

Subsequent to the success of *Raja Harishchandra*, Phalke made many other films like *Bhasmasur Mohini* (1913), *Lanka Dahan* (1917), etc., which were also based on the stories of the *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata* following the same technical concepts of dramatic art. The epics like *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyana* are the pillars on which a particular kind of “discursivity” (a discursivity of cross-generic capaciousness) shades the Indian popular culture (Mishra 14). Vijay Mishra sees the adaptation of the stories of epics for cinematic representation as an impact of Parsi theatre which influenced Bollywood heavily. We agree with the fact that the later filmmakers were influenced by Parsi theatre but Phalke’s practice of adapting the narratives from the epics was an outcome of our social practice where these two Sanskrit epics served as the major source of episodic narratives for any musical or dramatic performances (14). It was by the end of the 1920s, the silent film era started declining, and the *talkies* (motion pictures with synchronised sound) gradually replaced the silent movies during the 1930s.

The change in technology also started impacting the cinema industry, and film production became commercialised. But, it seems Phalke could not cope with the new technologies, commercialisation of films and the new culture of *talkies* of Hindi cinema. He did not try much to compete with those who were the heralds of change in the film industry. New directors and producers dominated the industry with new technologies. During this period, the Parsi theatre came into play and largely influenced Hindi Cinema. Ardeshir Irani, Prithviraj Kapoor, and Sohrab Modi are considered pioneers in bringing the tradition of Parsi theatre into Hindi cinema. Sohrab Modi’s *Pukar* (1939) commenced the history of Parsi theatre in Hindi cinema. Besides the influence of Urdu in Hindi cinema, Vijay Mishra writes, “The fascination of song-and-dance, especially the dance of the courtesan (*mujra*) owes its popularity to the Parsi theatre to a great extent which can be seen in the movies like *Anarkali* (1953) and *Muhgal-e-Azam* (1960)” (16). Though the inclusion of song and dance in

Hindi cinema is believed to have been influenced by Parsi theatre, it was lying as undercurrent in Hindi cinema well before the Parsi theatre came into play. The exclusive vogue of song and dance has been running down for ages which goes back to the Sanskrit theatre in ancient India. As Shoma A. Chatterji rightly remarks, "In ancient India, in the Golden age of Sanskrit theatre, the idea of drama was inseparably linked with the song, dance and music. This has been the Indian tradition for many years till 1000 AD when Sanskrit drama went into decline with the death of Kalidas (ca.400 AD)" (3). This statement can be justified by Bharata's argument in his dramatic compendium. In the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Bharata mentions that in the middle of one of his plays, he introduced a song and dance sequence which apparently had no significance to the story. The learned among the audience were surprised. They asked Bharata, "We can understand about acting which conveys definite meaning. But this dance and this music you have brought in seem to have no meaning. What use are they?" (Rao, "Greek comedies"). Bharata concurred that there was no implication of those songs and dances in the story and explained calmly, "Yes, but it supplies the beauty to the presentation, and common audience like it a lot. And, as these are happy and charming songs and dance, people love it more; and they perform these songs and dances at their homes on the occasion of marriage and other happy moments" (Rao, "Greek comedies").

The significance of music that was realised in classical India itself can be seen to have rejuvenated in the era of *talkies* of Hindi cinema, which began in the 1930s with Ardeshir Irani's *Alam Ara* (1931), the first talkie of the Hindi cinema. Shoma A. Chatterji (1999) states that Irani was influenced by the American film *Show Boat* (1929), which led him to make India's first talking and singing film. But, at the time, there was neither a soundproof stage nor a technician who could synchronise a film with sound. He then decided to direct a screen version of the popular stage play of Joseph David, who agreed to adapt the play for the silver screen. Then, Irani established the sound recording department using the Tanar Sound System, which synchronised sound directly onto the motion picture. It was shot with the Tanar single-system camera, recording image and sound simultaneously (Chatterji 4).

Irani's *Alam Ara* was a love story adapted from a Parsi play of the same name and was directed by Joseph David. Song, dance and music, inspired by both Sanskrit dramatic tradition and Parsi theatre, became one of the major attractions of the film. The film is profusely rich in songs and music, including dozens of songs with dance performances. The film and its music were both widely successful. Unlike the previous films, this film was

centred on a female character named Alam Ara. The concepts of classical dramaturgy can very well be witnessed because it was very much present in the Indian sensibility. The subject matter of this movie is inventory and is based on the love story of a gypsy girl and a prince, Jahangir Khan. In the film, the principal subject revolves around the story of the kingdom of Saleem Khan (the sultan), and the incidental subject deals with the life of Alam Ara (a gypsy girl) in exile, who was brought up by a fakir (A Muslim ascetic who lives solely on alms). The story of this film also moves ahead following the five elements of a plot structure as conceptualised in *Daśarūpakam*. The germ (*bīja*) of the story is sown when Alam Ara, despite being the king's daughter, was kept out of the palace and was brought up by a fakir as her father wanted if a daughter born to be killed in want of a son who could succeed him. The minister plans to exploit king's ardent desire of having a son to succeed him, and conspires to make his son successor to the king by replacing the girl (Alam Ara) born. He tries to get the girl killed but the fate saves her to be brought by a fakir. The incidental story proceeds as an episode (*patākā*) till the end, which deals with the life of Alam Ara as a devotional lady who helps the poor to bring happiness in their lives. On the other side, the episodic incident (*prakari*) moves the story into a conspiracy hatched to kill the king to make the minister's son his successor.

The denouement (*kārya*) of the action arrives when the attempt is made to murder the king for the coronation of the minister's son. But the king escapes and takes shelter in the house of the same fakir who had brought up his daughter Alam Ara. Soon the king learns that the girl in the house is his own daughter, whom he had planned to kill just after her birth. Having realised his mistake, he repents a lot and apologises to his daughter. Alam Ara forgives him and saves his life from darkness. With the help of Alam Ara, he regains his kingdom and crowns his daughter as the new emperor. The story takes the turn of romance when Alam Ara falls in love with prince Jahangir Khan, and they are contrived to be separated. But the movie ends on a happy note as they eventually unite. Ardeshir Irani's fame as a successful director and producer started growing when he produced the first colour feature film of Hindi cinema *Kisan Kanya* in 1937 and many other such films, which raised his stardom as a successful director.

After Ardeshir Irani, there comes the time of Prithviraj Kapoor starred and Sohrab Modi's directed films in the late 1930s and 1940s. Sohrab Modi was an Indian-Parsi stage and film actor, director and producer. Sohrab started his career with Parsi theatre as an actor with some experience in silent films. Virchanda Dharamsey says, "... as the popularity of Indian

cinema grew that of Parsi and other regional theatres steadily declined, and a number of theatre stars, as they were also popular actor-singer, continued with their career in film instead' (29). Sohrab Modi, having experience in Indian theatrical techniques, moved to the cinema industry with the same spirit. The theatres started declining with the arrival of the *talkies* in 1931, and he established the Stage Film Company in 1935. In his films, the trends of Parsi theatre continued in the form of "Oriental cinema, inspired by Western playwrights to put their plot into local suit, generally having Arabic backgrounds weaved into Indian backgrounds and costumes" (Dharamsey 12). His films were very much similar to those of Shakespeare's plays. For example, his famous movies *Khoon Ka Khoon* (1935) and *Pukar* (1939) were claimed to have been influenced by *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet* in their plots which were woven in a similar fashion. His films, which influenced the Hindi cinema with English plays, set him up as a Shakespearian actor and director in the Hindi cinematic world. Apart from this, he also gave a historical touch to Hindi movies. His films were innovative in themselves. His *Pukar* was set in the court of the Mughal emperor Jehangir featuring Shakespearean influence. Besides this, Prithviraj Kapoor starred *Sikandar* (1941) was based on the historical figure of Alexander the Great. Thus, Sohrab combined his experiences of Parsi theatre and British fiction with Indian classical sensibility to weave the stories with the classical Indian plot, giving a new current to Indian Cinema.

Unlike the story of *Romeo and Juliet*, which ends on a tragic note with the deaths of the Hero and Heroine, the story of *Pukar* ends on a happy note, following the tradition of Indian classics with the union of the hero and the heroine. The theme of the movie is innovative and set in the court of Mughal emperor Jehangir, in which *kāma* (pleasure) becomes the denouement of the action. The film shows two separate love stories in which *ādhikārika* (principal subject) deals with the love story of Mangal Singh (the hero) and Kanwar (the heroine) amid the rivalry between their families, and *prāsaṅgika* (incidental subject) deals with the courtly love story of Jehangir (the Mughal emperor of India) and his wife Noorjahan. The *bīja* (germ) of the movie gets inseminated with the murders of the brother and the father of his beloved Kanwar by Mangal Singh himself when he was attacked by them in the name of honour killing.

The story furthers, and Mangal Singh's father (Sangram Singh) captures his son and surrenders him to Jehangir, who gives him the death sentence in the verdict. Jehangir's rule of equal justice to all turns against him when a washerwoman accuses Queen Noorjahan of killing her hus-



band (washerwoman) while shooting a bird with a bow and arrow. Since the washerwoman's husband was killed by the Queen, citing the equal justice, Jehangir gives verdict that the washerwoman should shoot him in the manner the Queen shot her husband. But all the courtiers oppose his verdict, and Sangram Singh suggests that the King should be spared as his life belongs to people, and the washerwoman agrees to compensation in the form of wealth. Noorjahan suggests releasing all the prisoners so that Noorjahan would not be a special case, and Jehangir accepts the suggestion. Thus, Mangal Singh gets released with all other prisoners and marries his love Kanwar. This way, the film ends on a happy note like other Hindi films. The hero of the movie is portrayed as *lalita* (light-hearted) and *śānta* (calm), as suggested in the *Dhaśarupakam*. Since the film is based on a romantic story, the emotion of *Sṛṅgāra* is prevalent both in the form of *vipralamba* (separation) when Mangal stays far away from his beloved after killing her father and brother, and *saṃyoga* (union) when they unite again and get married at the end of the story. The trend of songs and music continued in this film, which supported the romantic mood of the film.

After *Pukar*, Soharab's next hit film was *Sikander* (1941), starring Prithviraj Kapoor. Prithviraj Kapoor emerged as one of the leading figures of both Indian theatre and Hindi cinema through his performance. Sohrab Modi's *Sikandar* (1941) is best known for his performance as Alexander the Great. Through this movie, Prithviraj Kapoor earned fame as a versatile actor on the stage as well as on the screen. This epic film is set in 326 BC when Alexander, after conquering Persia and Kabul, lands on the Indian border at river Jhelum and encounters Puru, the contemporary Indian emperor, who gives him tough challenges on the battlefield and stops his winning chariot, which makes Sikandar return to Greece. The release of the film aroused patriotic emotion and the feeling of nationalism among Indians as the film coincides with the freedom struggle of India and the Quit India movement. Its appeal to nationalism was so great that it remained popular for many years and played an important role in gaining independence to India.

Even after the independence, the trend of nationalism continues in movies like *Anand Math* (1952), *Jhansi Ki Rani* (1953) and *Rahi* (1953) but these films further brought the elements of social issues along with nationalism. Thus, in the stardom of Prithviraj Kapoor, Hindi cinema attains its golden era in the 1950s and 1960s. But during the 1950s and 60s, the trends of Hindi films also underwent a change from the films promoting nationalism to the films portraying social issues dealing with the life of working class, for instance, Raj Kapoor's *Awaara* (1951) and *Shree 420* (1955), Mehboob

Khan's *Aan* (1952) and *Mother India* (1957), and Guru Dutt's *Pyasa* (1957) and *Kaagaz Ke Phool* (1959) fall under this category.

By the 1960s, Hindi cinema started experimenting with plots and themes. It brushed aside traditional narrative structure and theme. Now, Hindi cinema found its new current under the title "New Wave" as Anubha Yadav claims, "The 1960s, 'New Wave' directors and producers, such as Mrinal Sen and Shyam Benegal, exuberated to turn down conventional and popular filmic codes" (49). In the 1970s, the "New Wave" turned towards the masala film genre – a combination of action, comedy, romance, drama, melodrama, music etc. The impact can be seen in the movies of the time, such as *Zanjeer* (1973), *Deewaar* (1975) and *Sholay* (1975), which were inspired by Western melodramas. Now, conventions of Hindi cinema can be seen changing through the plots featuring Western influence, especially that of Hollywood. This created an emerging market for Indian cinema in the Indian diaspora across the globe. Soon the Hindi cinema was industrialised and established as "Bollywood".

## Conclusion

The paper argues that the journey of early Hindi cinema started under the influence of classical Indian dramaturgy as propounded in Bharatamūni's *Nāṭyaśāstra* and Dhananjaya's *Daśarupakam* with the narratives borrowed from the epics the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*. With the technological advancement, Hindi cinema underwent a rapid change in its thematic construction, plot, music, song and dance. However, the silver screen still carried the craft of dramatic techniques laid down in the classical dramaturgy. The early Hindi cinema remained woven into the classical theatrical formulations even though it had gradually carved out its own cinematic identity. After its commercialisation, Hindi cinema became globalised and significantly impacted the Indian diaspora worldwide. Under the impact of the globalised film market, the influence of Hollywood cinema made a dynamic change in the taste of people in India as well as outside India. Subsequently, Bollywood also felt these influences and incorporated the techniques of Western theatre as well. With these developments, the Bollywood movies seem to have been influenced by multiple theatrical traditions. However, the plot structure, formulaic themes, characterisation, dance, and music of Hindi cinema are indelibly influenced by Sanskrit theatre and use classical Indian dramaturgy unsparingly. It is due to the cultural impact on the spectators' psychology that the Hindi cinema continues to use the classical Indian dramaturgy.

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