

Grounds for Play is thought-provoking, delightfully composed and written, and easily accessible for any reader with an interest in the folklore of India. It recently won the Coomaraswamy Award for best book of the year at the 1994 Association for Asian Studies meeting, an honor it richly deserves.

Nauṭaṅkī is a form of secular theater popular in towns and villages over a wide area of northern India. As a theater form of that name it can be traced back to the late nineteenth century in the region around Delhi, from which it spread as far as Rajasthan to the west and Bihar to the east. It is historically related to a number of other forms, generically called *svang*, and derives its particular name from a certain popular libretto: the story of Princess Nauṭaṅkī, beloved of Phul Singh, the younger brother of Bhup Singh. Versions of the story are known in oral tradition throughout Rajasthan, Sind, Gujarat, Punjab, and Uttar Pradesh. Nauṭaṅkī theater is by no means limited to this story, however — the form lends itself to hundreds of distinct tales, drawing upon a wealth of legendary heroes and lovers from Indian and Islamic tradition both local and distant. Throughout its history Nauṭaṅkī has been an extremely dynamic tradition, incorporating new materials, styles, and themes and changing with the times, embodying the tastes and values of ordinary people.

Because the dynamic corpus of Nauṭaṅkī texts is large and varied, it provides a wonderful place from which to view changes in North Indian popular culture. Western scholars are often more drawn to religious phenomena in India, while Indian critics are prone to discard popular secular theater like Nauṭaṅkī as “vulgar” and “depraved.” Despite the views of the critics Nauṭaṅkī continues to thrive, embodying the actuality of Indian popular culture. Only cinema and video are likely to replace it in the future.

Chapter 1 examines various hypotheses regarding the derivation of the term *Nauṭaṅki*. Chapter 2 looks at Nauṭaṅkī theatre in relation to classical and folk traditions and identifies it as both folk and popular theater. Chapter 3 surveys the milieu of performance forms current in northern India from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries, out of which Nauṭaṅkī crystallized as a distinct dramatic form. Chapter 4 looks at the history of the texts (*sangit*), concentrating on the writers, while chapter 5 traces the history of some of the major libretto themes from an early stress on classical images of kingship to a greater interest in warrior kings to a more contemporary enthusiasm for bandit-heroes (historical and legendary outlaws with whom the unjustly victimized villager can relate). Chapter 6 examines the sources — both historical and emotional — and the consequences of Nauṭaṅkī's exuberant expressions of love between star-crossed lovers. Chapter 7 explores the ironic contrast between the strong and aggressive women that are often portrayed in Nauṭaṅkī with the societal ideal of the chaste and demure female. The large number of preserved texts and the dynamic nature of Nauṭaṅkī itself allow Hansen to explore in detail the significant changes that have occurred over the past century in the way in which women are represented. Chapter 8 concludes the substantive portion of Hansen's presentation with a competent analysis of the formal characteristics of Nauṭaṅkī's multilayered media of song and music.

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SELTMANN, FRIEDRICH. *Schattenspiel in Karṇāṭaka, Süd-Indien* [Shadow plays in Karṇāṭaka, South India]. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden, 1993. Volume 1: Text. 320 pages, 229 illustrations (102 in color), map. Volume 2: 236 pages, plates, 278 illustrations (180 in color), map, indices, table (in folder). Hardcover, both volumes DM 490.—; ISBN 3-515-05646-7. (In German)

The author of the book under review is an authority on the shadow theater in Indonesia,

where he has lived for several decades. Tracing Indonesian shadow-theater back to India, he has for many years studied the art form as it is found there, especially in South India. His research has been uncommonly extensive and successful, for he has published a number of books and articles on the subject since 1971. A 1974 article and a 1990 book present the fruit of his comparative study of the Indian and Indonesian forms; the other works are independent descriptions of Indian shadow plays. The present study, his most exhaustive and well-documented monograph on the shadow plays of Karnāṭaka, fills in the gap that remained after his earlier publications on the shadow plays of Kerala and southern Mahārāshtra. It is obviously a work of love, not only in the exactness of its descriptions and in the depth and range of its knowledge, but also in the quality of its production. The two volumes contain drawings and photographs of the figures in both color and black-and-white that are simply superb.

In his introductory chapter, Seltmann explains that the shadow plays are of two kinds. In one kind the figures are cut of fairly thick leather, so that the image thrown on the screen is determined solely by the figure's outline and perforations. The image is black-and-white, of course, although the figure itself may be artistically painted. In the second kind, the material out of which the figure is cut is thin and transparent, so that any coloration can be cast upon the screen. The result is an image far superior to the first type. The first type of shadow play is found in Kerala, Orissa, Thailand, Cambodia, Malaysia, Java, Bali, and Lombok; the second type is found in Turkey, China, and southern Mahārāshtra in India (from where it has now spread all over South India).

In the past this second type may have been popular in northern India also, but it has now been replaced there by other forms of entertainment. Seltmann is of the opinion that it was imported from Turkey, not China, and that it probably came with the invading Islamic armies. The author subdivides this type into three kinds of figures, according to the size of the figures and the movability of certain parts (the arms, legs, head, etc.). All three types are found in Karnāṭaka, although one type (which employs both large and small forms with more or less movable parts, and scenery) is found mostly in the marginal areas near Andhra and Thailand.

In his lengthy second chapter (18–167), the author gives a detailed account of his research on twenty-five shadow-play performers in Karnāṭaka. This research must have been extremely hard for a foreigner ignorant of the local language and unaccustomed to the way of life. He was often given evasive answers to his fifty-four questions by the suspicious artists, and he was sometimes refused permission to photograph and measure the figures. Only by dint of single-minded devotion, infinite patience, and iron will was he finally able to gain a full and reliable picture of the present-day situation of this once-popular art form.

Shadow plays were not meant as pure entertainment. They had a ritual aspect too: when the monsoon failed or an epidemic threatened, a shadow play was arranged to drive away the evil spirits. Shadow plays were also performed on festive occasions, such as weddings and funeral feasts, and at social or religious gatherings. The author notes that these performances — requested by village communities, local leaders, wealthy landlords, political figures, and even temple dignitaries — contributed to the moral and religious edification of the mainly illiterate village population, for the themes were usually taken from the sacred literature of Hinduism, from Hindu myths and legends (particularly the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*), and less often from historical or local events. Thus the performance of the shadow play had a message to transmit, and the performers were fully aware of it.

The author's detailed account of the life of the performers — members of a highly specialized nomadic caste — also forms a valuable contribution to Indian anthropology, enabling us to see rural life in Karnāṭaka from the perspective of a low-caste outsider. In Mahārāshtra and northern Karnāṭaka the performers belong to the Thakar caste, and although they are not actually untouchables (even claiming Rājput ancestry), they are kept at a distance by respectable Hindus. Because of their occupation they have a better knowledge of the Hindu religion than the average villager, yet they remain more or less on the outside

of village community life.

The performers may not actually have been Rājputs to begin with but leather-working Chamars, for the manufacture of their puppets required them to select and cut hides, tan them, make them transparent, shape them, and paint them. This art has declined, and nowadays the performers are no longer able to produce new puppets (at present only a few old men are still able to make minor repairs to damaged figures). This is one reason why performers in Karnāṭaka so often give up their traditional occupation — many of the shadow figures have become damaged or lost, and there is no possibility of replacing them. Many plays can no longer be staged because of a lack of figures, and when the plays are not performed the puppeteers soon forget the orally transmitted texts.

In the third chapter the author summarizes the results of the enquiries mentioned in the second chapter. Seltmann states that his informants were always ready to give information about the gods whom they presented in their plays, but became rather reticent when asked about their own personal religion, and in particular about their own ancestors and their cults (even though these ancestors have a definite function in the plays and are honorably mentioned at the beginning and end of each performance). Seltmann also discusses the puppeteer himself. This puppeteer functions like a priest, since he regards the play as a sacred rite. Offerings are made before each performance and certain rites and regulations are observed to make the play a success. Some performers even fall into a trance and are possessed by the deity they address. The puppeteer is usually succeeded by his oldest son, whom he instructs formally and informally from early childhood.

In the past the performances were usually held during the dry season, to protect the figures against moisture. Sometimes the troupe of performers was on tour for four or five months. At harvest time they returned home, where they had to undergo a purificatory rite before being allowed to enter the house. Each troupe had its definite territory. They were paid in grain or given an animal (usually a goat or sheep, rarely a cow), and now sometimes in cash. The expenses for the light (oil or electricity) are covered by the inviting party, who also offers the performers food and shelter (though of the poorest kind). The performers collect their fee from house to house on the day after the performance.

In earlier times a troupe might have given up to twenty performances a month, but now even the best-equipped are happy with seven to ten (smaller troupes are glad if they can give six to ten a *year!*). The loss of figures and the falling competence of the performers are partly to blame for this sad decline in a once-flourishing art, but the principal reason is, of course, the competition offered by films and now by television, available in even the remotest villages of Karnāṭaka. Shadow plays simply cannot vie with these modern media, which have transformed visual art into a mass-produced commodity.

The rest of the book is dedicated to descriptions of the hundreds of figures that the author has photographed and identified. Seltmann first gives a detailed description of the manufacture of the figures, then explains how they are manipulated and stored. He then gives (here and in volume 2) a rich inventory of all the figures and puppets still in actual use by the shadow-play performers he was able to interview. The figures are expertly reproduced and identified and their functions explained. This material is of immense value and will comprise an irreplaceable source for future study and comparison. The author has saved for the Indian people the memory of an important cultural art form at a time when it seems destined to disappear under the assault of technically superior but culturally ambivalent mass media. Others have published articles and books on the subject, but none have displayed Seltmann's learning or matched the quality of his visual evidence.

The second volume, apart from the 278 photographs and drawings, contains a valuable bibliography and various registers and glossaries of religious and mythological terms and names, plus an author and subject index.

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