In the traditional societies of India and South-East Asia, where life and activity of man are full of rituals, the theatre has since early times had a great significance as a ritual aimed at the propitiation of gods and the restoration of harmony and order in the universe.

Performances in rural societies were part of folk festivals and their main purpose was to confirm the connection of the peasant community with the deities. Usually ritual performances are staged with a view to causing rain, getting a good harvest, warding off an epidemic or an invasion of vermin and appeasing evil spirits. The actors are supposed to be mediators in this ritual exchange between the spectators and gods.

Other forms of theatres arose at the courts of kings: the Sanskrit drama in India, the dance drama in Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, shadow shows in Java, Bali, etc. The refined forms of the classical theatre achieved a high degree of perfection and influenced national arts.

These performances were a product of a developed theatrical culture and they preserved many traits of a ritual inherited from archaic theatrical art. Nowadays we see a visual manifestation of this tradition in the preliminaries to performances in Asian theatres, in which the actors beg the deities for prosperity and protection against calamities.

The aim of the present article is to compare the pūrvarāṅga (the oldest documented preliminaries of Sanskrit drama) with the prologue scenes of modern performances in India and South-East Asian countries, which have been influenced by Indian cultural tradition. From this comparison it is apparent that these preliminaries retain to some extent a resemblance to the pūrvarāṅga. This pūrvarāṅga can be compared to a flowery mosaic, separate fragments of which are scattered in the preliminaries to numerous theatrical forms in Indianized countries of South-East Asia.

According to a hypothesis of Prof. Kuiper, the ancient pūrvarāṅga was not a prologue of the drama but a basic part of the performance, in which the cosmogonical myth about the battle of Devas and Asuras and the subsequent creation of the world by Indra were represented. Only afterwards it became the preliminaries to the performance. In a long historical development many elements of the pūrvarāṅga lost their original meaning. Even at the time when the Nāṭyaśāstra was composed these preliminaries

probably did no longer evoke any conscious cosmological associations in the audience.

Nevertheless the firm preservation of many elements of the *pūrvarāṅga* in the contemporary theatres of India and South-East Asia testifies to the high importance attributed to them in the system of values of the national culture, although they have more than once been subject to transformation and reinterpretation.

The comparison shows that the greatest structural similarity of the modern prologues with the *pūrvarāṅga* is met with, not in the central but in the peripheral theatrical traditions. Apparently those archaic features, which had been lost in Indian theatres as the result of a long historical development, were preserved in the outskirts of the great ancient Indian culture owing to sacred rites. It is precisely here (for example in the Burmese theatrical tradition) that the prologue did retain a connection with the cosmogonical myth. This was clearly demonstrated in the preliminaries to a Burmese puppet play at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Since the Burmese material most vividly confirms Kuiper’s hypothesis of the *pūrvarāṅga* as reproducing the creation myth and its connection with the New Year rites, an attempt will be made to compare, first of all, the Sanskrit *pūrvarāṅga* with the Burmese version of the prologue.

The *pūrvarāṅga*, a prologue before the performance of a Sanskrit drama, as described in detail in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, was to be performed before each play. According to the *Sāhityadārpana* by Viśvanātha, the term *pūrvarāṅga* means that an introductory scene is to be played before the performance for removing all the obstacles. In another version this word is derived from the verb *rañj-‘* to satisfy’ and means that the ceremony is intended for gratifying somebody beforehand (Gupta 1954, 119). The *Nāṭyaśāstra* teaches that the *pūrvarāṅga* consists of 20 parts. The first nine are to be performed behind the curtain: these are the tuning of the musical instruments, playing together on different instruments, entrance and practice of the dancing girls. The main parts of the *pūrvarāṅga* are the following:

1. *nirgītā*, which is performed to appease the Daityas and Dānavas. Its dangerous character is apparent from the fact that it is acted behind the scenes.

2. *uthāpana*, the entrance of the *sūtradhāra* (the director of the theatre) accompanied by his two assistants. He must erect the bamboo staff (*jarjara*) on the stage. This *jarjara* symbolizes Indra’s banner and his *vajra*, with which he separated the sky from the earth (according to the interpretation given by Kuiper).