

ANCIENT INDIAN DRAMATURGY: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF BHARATA'S NATYASHASTRA

Dr. Shruti Das
Reader,
PG Department of English,
Berhampur University,
Odisha

Natya or theatre is an ancient practice of entertainment in India. Surviving texts and treatises suggest that theatre existed in the Indian subcontinent prior to the vedic age. Both Gods and human beings were said to be connoisseurs of art. The golden period of Indian theatre, mostly in Sanskrit, is said to have lasted until the 5th century AD, soon after which the flow of Sanskrit drama waned¹. In spite of dramatic literature receding, performance traditions thrived through dancers, musicians, singers, and storytellers. The basic aesthetics of dramaturgy survived, morphed into various variants, through the traditional folk and classical forms. Paul Kurtz² suggests that the Rig Veda gives evidence that dramatic theatre in India came into being around the eighth century B.C. According to Kurtz, the Jataka stories illustrating Indian life between 600 B.C. and 300 B.C. contain evidences of theatre. Like its Greek counterpart Indian drama and theatre owes its origin to religion. The two great Indian epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata have contributed vastly to performing arts in ancient times. Kurtz observes that, like the cult of Dionysus, Vedic religion also held the seeds of dramatic theatre in India. In the fourth century B.C, actors were employed to perform at temples in the honour of Gods. Also, some villages exhibited public performances in the form of Stree Preksha (women's drama) and Purusha Preksha (men's drama) (66). The *Natyashastra* of Bharata Muni brings out the evidence of theatre arts at festivals and public celebrations during the Maurya Dynasty, founded by King Chandragupta (reigned 321 B.C -297 B.C). The Maurya Dynasty ruled India for a long period. During this period, kings sent Buddhist missionaries to various places like Ceylon, Syria, Egypt, Greece, Tibet, China and Japan to spread Buddhism. The missionaries used various forms of arts including drama, to teach Buddhist dogma. In a similar way, the Gupta Dynasty (A.D. 320- A.D. 535) ushered in India's golden or classical age in which the Buddhism accepted by King Asoka (reigned 274B.C- 232 B.C) and the dramatic theatre flourished. The great playwright Kalidasa was patronized by King Vikramaditya (A.D. 373 – A.D. 415) and also gathered a unique group of poets and scholars (ibid)³.

Kasturi and Vardhan⁴ cite the noted historian Will Durant and are of the opinion that least the seed of drama lies in the Upanishads. The more actual source of drama surely older than these scriptures is the sacrificial and festival ceremonies and religious procession. According to the critics in Shodhganga⁵, a website,

The finding of terracotta figurine of dancer, a stone and a bronze dancing statute, the masks, the musical instruments show that the elements of theatre were present even in the oldest civilization of India Indus valley civilization Later the Vedic deities were not only fond of the dramatic arts,

including music and dance but also were great performers. The Mahabharata refers to dancing halls attached to the palaces and known as *nrutyashalas*, where the artist used to teach to the princess. Later the *kamsutra* of Vatsayana reflects another kind of theatre that is puppet theatre. *Bhasa*- the famous dramatist of India writes in “Balcharita” about the famous theatre of Lord Krishna. In the early Buddhist literature there is reference of theatre of Ranga. The *jataka* tales describes two types of theatre – open air and covered ones. In the fifth century B.C. Bharata wrote “Natyashastra” the first Indian epic of dramaturgy. According to him, drama is life size art; practically nothing is left out of its cope. It also means the performing arts of dancing, singing and playing on musical instruments together. Entire universe is theme of drama. (1)

Many known and unknown historical factors contributed towards the production of Indian theatre and gave it a religious stamp that prevailed throughout the classic age in the serious nature of the drama. The contact of civilizations and culture established by Alexander’s invasion between India and Greece probably the final spur to drama say many historians. History of dramatic literature of India starts with the plays of Bhasa which are ascribed to fourth-fifth century B.C. The most interesting thing to note is that without knowing who the author was the individual acts of Bhasa’s plays were performed by the Chakyar actors of Kerala in Kutiyattam style in the temple theatres known as Koothambalam at least for one thousand years. The age of the classical theatre is believed to be the golden period of Indian theatre. This period last until the fifth century, soon after which the wane period for Sanskrit drama began. Although the dramatic literature diminished, the performance traditions transformed into various forms through the traditional and classical folk prevailed.

The *Natyashastra*, which has been described as the science of drama, is an ancient treatise on dramaturgy that throws light on Indian Aesthetics, poetics and performing arts. Bharat Muni in the second century BC is supposed to have composed this book on theatrical practice and theory that formulates Indian aesthetics. The text of *Natyashastra* provides a system by which performance experience can be organized and made sense of and rendered comprehensible. Scholars date the *Natyashastra* as early as 200, BC, and as late as 600, AD. Most likely, the text in an oral form, similar to what we know as the *Natyashastra* today, was composed between 200 BC, and 400 AD. Bharata’s identity has always remained a mystery as neither is there a distinct documentation of the history of composition of the text, nor like the Greek and Roman prosceniums that exist even today in the form of ruins, is there any physical evidence of ancient stage present in the Indian sub-continent at present. There has been a lot of debate on the issue of the authenticity of the composer of the *Natyashastra*. Scholars have wondered if ‘Bharata’ is a proper name or an acronym or title. It is even possible that the text was composed by Abhinavagupta or several authors over a period of decades or even centuries. All debates converge on the fact that the author of the *Natyashastra* clearly knew theatre from experience. Kapila Vatsyayna⁷ is of the opinion that *Natyashastra* was composed by one person, i.e. the Sage Bharata who was actively engaged in theorizing when Sanskrit drama came into being. The existence of dramatic rituals, epic stories which were later interpreted in dramatic form, also establishes the fact that it was this time that Sanskrit drama came into being. Unfortunately, there is no physical evidence to substantiate the existence of Sanskrit dramatic performances. Unlike the Greek and Roman theatre, whose ruins have left behind some tangible evidence of theatre and performance, there are no surviving Indian theatre structures. Plays,

dramaturgical texts (surviving on palm leaf manuscripts) and descriptions through commentaries provide information.

The *Natyashastra*'s primary concerns are not philosophical or theoretical; rather, the text elucidates and elaborates how theatre is performed. It prescribes in detail the construction of theatre spaces in India, the application of make-up, the design and building of props, arm, foot, eye and other body movements, ritual practices, the organization of theatre companies, the audience, dramatic competitions and the community of actors with additional chapters on music and audience appreciation. It elaborates the affectiveness of theatre. Primarily dealing with stagecraft, the *Natyashastra* prescribes and influences Indian music, dance and literature. It nourishes itself with mythology of classical India which was transcribed into drama and performed in the temples and courts. Besides its relevance to the theatre, the *Natyashastra* shapes our understanding of music and dance in ancient India. Both, music and dance have derived a great deal from the guidelines laid down by this text. For example, dance which is dependent on body language to actualize emotions on the stage, has taken its language of gestures, steps and moves from it. In addition to that, the guidelines for critique that Bharata developed are said to have influenced dramatic criticism till today.

The poetics of theatrical performance that the *Natyashastra* promotes has become important to understanding of original Indian arts in general. The *Natyashastra*'s primary interest has been in the stylish presentation of bodies in motion on a stage. Yet, in India, one can hardly critique a novel or a poem or a dance or a painting without taking into consideration the term *rasa*, which the *Natyashastra* identifies as a touchstone of aesthetic experience. In spite of this, classical Sanskrit drama regarded the *Natyashastra* as a prescriptive text that finds little or no application so far as real performance on the stage is concerned. As in Greek drama, a lot of variation has been visible in Sanskrit dramas which allude to things that seem to coincide with parts of the *Natyashastra*, but many Sanskrit dramas also include elements that the *Natyashastra* does not mention or even forbids. Here one can compare the *Natyashastra* to Aristotle's *Poetics*, which was in itself prescriptive and had little application on the Greek stage. Wide in scope *Natyashastra* has contributed towards the growth and development of Indian classical music, dance, drama and art. Hence it maybe said that *Natyashastra* has laid the cornerstone of the fine arts in India. The commentaries on the *Natyashastra* are known, dating from the sixth or seventh centuries. The earliest and the only available one is the *Abhinavabharati*⁸ by Abhinava Gupta written between 950-1020 AD. It was followed by works of writers such as Saradatanaya of twelfth-thirteenth century, Sarngadeva of thirteenth century, and Kallinatha of sixteenth century. However the *Abhinavabharati* is regarded as the most authoritative commentary on *Natyashastra* as Abhinavagupta provides not only his own interpretation of the *Natyashastra*, but a range of information about pre-Bharata traditions. It gives us an enduring theory about theatrical performance that pervades South Asian culture and aesthetics.

Religion and philosophic thought have always influenced society and art in particular moments of history. The political and spiritual climate was different from what we see today at the time of composition of the *Natyashastra*. There were various religious strains in India, namely, Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic faiths. The development and propagation of religion was accompanied with vivid imagination which was reproduced in works of art. No aesthetic could be devoid of spiritual form and content. The two epics The Ramayana and the Mahabharata fed the imagination of the artists. People believed in the supernatural and emphasis was placed on the mystic symbolism in dance, music, art and theatre. *Nataraj*, the representation of the dancing Shiva came to symbolize the cosmic rhythm of creation and destruction. The myths and legends

of Shiva and Krishna have contributed to the imagination and have lead to the rendering of this to song, dance and drama in Indian aesthetics particularly, Sanskrit drama.

Bharata's *Natyashastra*⁹ (*natya*, meaning drama or theatre; shastra, a generic term referring to an authoritative text) establishes the characteristics of Sanskrit drama. The mythological origin of classical South Asian theatre is narrated in the *Natyashastra* (The Birth of Theatre, The *Natyashastra*, Chapter 1). The narrative at the opening of the *Natyashastra* points at certain characteristics of Sanskrit drama, such that:

1. It is composed of sacred material.
2. It is meant for an audience that is well-versed in the performance tradition.
3. It is performed by members of the highest rank in the caste system, i.e., priests.
4. It requires special knowledge and skill to execute.
5. A complete understanding of dance, music, recitation and ritual language is a must.
6. Training is a hereditary process descending directly from God, and passed down from father to son.
7. It must be performed on consecrated ground.
8. It serves a dual purpose -- to educate as well as entertain.

The *Natyashastra* was written in Sanskrit which was the language of the educated and elite upper class society. It as a work of erudition intended for an educated, elite audience. Like classical Greek theatre, classical Indian theatre was also performed in temples or in the king's court. Hence, the *Natyashastra*, like Aristotle's Poetics, also propagates a theory that associated theatrical performance with religious activity. It confirms through the description of the performers, stage and emotions that theatre performers in classical India occupied a particular position in the social hierarchy. Bharata's *Natyashastra* is considered, traditionally, as an additional Veda; the fifth Veda⁹. Written in Sanskrit, the vast treatise comprises 6,000 sutras. It has been divided into 36 chapters, sometimes into 37 or 38 due to further bifurcation of a chapter or chapters. The title can be loosely translated as "A compendium of Theatre or a A Manual of Dramatic Arts". The *Natyashastra* is believed to be a compendium of answers to the queries made by a number of munis or sages, who approached Bharata to know about the secrets of *Natya veda*. Therefore, narratives, symbols and dialogues comprise *Natyashastra*. It begins with inquiries made by Bharata's pupils, which he answers by narrating the myth of its source in Brahma and thus, opens with the origin of theatre. Bharata explains the very nature, objective, and expanse of *natya* as a Veda through this unique myth. **Hence, the text is in the form of elaborate dialogues between the author and a group of munis or sages, who wished to know about *Natya veda*, the knowledge of the performing arts as dance, music and drama. Bharata, in response, presents a detailed inquiry in to the various facets of drama including its nature; and the origin, theories, techniques of the theatre with all its components of speech, body-language, gestures, costumes, décor and the state of mind of the performers, apart from rituals, architecture of theatre etc. *Natya veda* can be interpreted in many ways, and bases itself on certain obvious characteristics of Sanskrit theatre. *Natyashastra* consists of four elements namely *pathya* or (readable) text, including the art of recitation and rendition in performance taken from the Rig Veda; *sangeet* or songs, including instrumental music from the Sama Veda, *abhinaya* or acting, the technique of expressing the poetic meaning of the text and communicating it to the spectator from the Yajur Veda, and finally, *rasa* or aesthetic experience from the Atharva Veda. It's spirituality is obvious in the *anukarana* or `redoing` of the *triloka* or the triple universe and life in its entirety, and its rendition reposes on the *anukirtana* of bhava i.e `re-telling` of emotive states in order to create a new world of `imagination`.**

Written in archaic form of Sanskrit, the text consists about six thousand (5,569 – to be exact) *sutras* or verse-stanzas spread over thirty-six chapters. Some passages are in prose. Though *Natyashastra* speaks of theatre (*natya*), it actually encompasses all forms of art expressions. The text, in fact, claims that there is no knowledge, no craft, no lore, no art, no technique and no activity that is not found in *Natyashastra* (1.16). The reason that theater-arts were discussed specifically is that, in the ancient Indian context, drama was considered the most comprehensive form of art-expressions. Further, at the time the *Natyashastra* was compiled, the arts of poetry, dance, music and drama; and even painting, sculpture and architecture were not viewed as separate and individualized streams of art forms. It was an integral vision of art, which blossomed in multiplicity. All artistic expressions were viewed as propagating beauty while providing both pleasure and education, through refinement of senses and sense perceptions. The objective of drama during the time was to show people the proper way to live, an ideal way in which one could live and behave, so that one might be a still better human and attain *mokshya* or salvation.

The *Natyashastra*, for convenience, categorizes the entire Sanskrit Poetics into ten constituents or *kavyamgas* observes Satya Dev Choudhary (2002). They are, he says,

1. *Kavyasvarupa* (the Nature of Poetry): a. The causes of poetry, b. The definition of poetry, c. Various classifications of poetry, d. The purpose of poetry.
2. *Sabdaskiti* that is the significance of a word.
3. *Dhavni-kavya*, that is, a piece of poetry containing an aesthetic suggestivity.
4. *Gunibhuta-vyamgya-kavya*, that is, a piece of poetry where the suggested sense is secondary to the primary sense.
5. *Rasa* (Sentiment) that is, the poetic relish.
6. *Guna*, that is the excellences of poetic expression.
7. *Riti*, that is the style of composition of poetry.
8. *Alamkara*, that is, the use of figurative words to enhance the beauty of poetry.
9. *Dosa*, that is, blemishes in poetic expression. And
10. *Natya-vidhana*, that is, the science of theatre or dramaturgy.

Apart from this, the *Natyashastra* is composed in thirty-six books or volumes, as follows:

1. The Mythic Creation of Theatre
2. Theatre Buildings
3. Religious Rituals
4. Dance
5. Pre-Show Activity
6. Rasa
7. Bhavas
8. Acting: Head and Face
9. Acting: Hands and Limbs, part 1
10. Acting: Hands and Limbs, part 2
11. Stage Movement: Steps
12. Stage Movement: Combinations of Steps
13. Stage Movement: Gaits
14. Areas of the Stage and Styles of Plays
15. Voice
16. Meter
17. Poetic Figures

18. Languages, part 1
19. Languages, part 2
20. Types of Plays
21. Plot
22. Mood
23. Costume
24. Acting: Imitation and Representation
25. Acting: Characterization
26. Gesture
27. Success of a Production
28. Music
29. Stringed Instruments
30. Hollow Instruments
31. Tala (Drumming Rhythms)
32. Songs
33. Drums
34. Character Categories
35. Roles
36. The Theatre Myth

Yazhini Balu¹¹ has made a comprehensive summary of the *Natyashastra*. For our understanding of the text it is pertinent to cite Balu's summary in entirety. She says,

In the first chapter Bharata ... talks about the response and involvement of the spectator in drama. The spectators come from all classes of society without any distinction, but are expected to be at least minimally initiated into the appreciation of theatre. This is because of the fact that they may respond properly to the art as an empathetic *sahridaya*. Theatre flourishes in a peaceful environment and requires a state free from hindrances. The first chapter ends emphasizing the significance and importance of drama in attaining the joy, peace, and goals of life, and recommending the worship of the presiding deities of theatre and the auditorium. The second chapter lays down the norms for theatre architecture or the *prekshagriha* i.e. auditorium. This also protects the performance from all obstacles caused by adverse nature, malevolent spirits, animals, and men. It describes the medium-sized rectangular space as ideal for audibility and visibility, apparently holding about 400 spectators. Bharata also prescribes smaller and larger structures, respectively half and double this size, and square and triangular halls. Bharata's model was an ideal intimate theatre, considering the subtle *abhinaya* of the eyes and other facial expressions which he described in the second chapter of *Natyashastra*. The third chapter describes an elaborate *puja* for the gods and goddesses protecting the auditorium, and prescribes rituals to consecrate the space. Chapter four of the *Natyashastra* begins with the story of a production of *Amritamanthana* i.e. 'Churning of the Nectar', a *samavakara* performed according to Brahma's instructions on the peaks of Kailasa, witnessed by Siva.

After some time, a *dima* titled *Tripumdaha* or 'Burning of the Three Cities' is staged, relating Siva's exploits. Siva asks Bharata to incorporate *tandava* dance in the *purvaranga* preliminaries and directs his attendant *Tandu* to teach Bharata. *Tandu* explains the components of *tandava*, the categories of its movements, and their composition in chorographical patterns. These form the pure dance movements required for the worship of the gods and the rituals. This chapter also lays the foundation of *angika abhinaya* or

physical acting developed in later chapters. The fifth chapter however details the elements of purvaranga. Thus the first five chapters are structurally integrated to the rest of the text. The sixth and seventh chapters deal with the fundamental emotional notions and aesthetics of rasa and bhava. The bhavas, which include the vibhavas, are communicated to spectators through abhinaya, especially angika. Therefore it receives elaborate treatment in chapters 8-12.

The chapters like 8,9,10, 11 and 12 thus codify body language based on a definite semiotics. Movement requires well-defined blocking, so immediately afterwards the Natyashastra lays down the principle of kakshyavibhaga in the thirteenth chapter. The extremely flexible and easy principle of establishing space on stage and altering it through parikramana or circumambulation is a unique characteristic of traditional Indian theatre and dance and are subtly dealt in the next chapters of Natyashastra. Chapter 18 discusses the ten major rupakas, or forms of drama and natika, a variety of uparupaka. The next chapter analyses the structure of drama as well as the inclusion of lasyangas or components of feminine dance derived from popular dance and recitative forms in theatre. Chapter 20 gives an elaborate account of the vrittis. Chapter 21 deals with aharya abhinaya, which covers make-up, costume, properties, masks, and minimal stage decor. Chapter 22 begins with samanya or `common` abhinaya, which compounds the four elements of abhinaya harmoniously. It discusses other aspects of production too, which may be viewed as `inner`, adhering to prescribed norms and systematic training, and `outer` or done freely outside such a regimen. This chapter ends with an analysis of women`s dispositions, particularly pertaining to love and terms of address, while the following chapter 23 deals with male qualities and patterns of sexual behaviour, as well as classification and stages of feminine youth.

Chapter 24 enumerates the types of characters in Sanskrit drama. Chapter 25 deals with citrabhinaya i.e. `pictured acting` especially meant for delineating the environment occurring as a stimulant or uddipana vibhava of different bhavas. It also defines the specific ways of expressing different objects and states, and the use of gestures, postures, gaits, walking, and theatrical conventions. The next two chapters present the nature of dramatis personae, the principles of make-up, and speak about the success and philosophy of performance. The chapter twenty seven deal with music employed in theatre. Chapter 28 covers jati or melodic types or matrices, sruti or micro-intervals, svara or notes, grama or scales, and murchana or modes, now ragas. Chapter 29 describes stringed instruments like the vina and distinguishes between vocal and instrumental music, further dividing vocal into two types, varna or `colour`, only syllabics and giti or `song`, with lyrics. Chapter 30 describes wind instruments like the flute and ways of playing it.

Chapter 31 deals with cymbals, and tala, rhythm, and metrical cycles. Chapter 32 defines dhruva songs, their specific employment, forms, and illustrations. Chapter 33 lists the qualities and defects of vocalists and instrumentalists. Chapter 34 relates the origin and nature of drums. The concluding two chapters lay down the principles for distributing roles and the qualifications for members of the troupe. Bharata narrates the story of his sons, who ridiculed the sages and were cursed. He instructs them to expiate their sin, so that they attain their lost glory again. He returns to the performance in heaven where Indra enacts Nahusha, and finally to the descent of theatre on earth. Bharata ends his

Natyashastra by stating the glory of theatre. Natyashastra remained an important text in the fine arts for many centuries whilst influencing much of the terminology and structure of Indian classical dance and music .For about 2000 years the Natyashastra has inspired new texts and various regional traditions of theatre. Kutiyattam in Kerala is an extant Sanskrit form that imbibed and developed the theory and practice originating from the Natyashastra. The analysis of body forms and movements defined in Natyashastra also influenced Indian sculpture and the other visual arts in later centuries.

The content of Natyashastra is so vast and varied that for centuries it was a challenge for dramatic theorists to formulate new doctrines regarding Indian aesthetics and dramaturgy surpassing those stated by Bharata. The Natyashastra gives us an elaborate and exclusive theory about theatrical performance that pervades South Asian aesthetics. Bharata's sense of how theatre affects audiences, rooted in his understanding of the Sanskrit terms bhava and rasa, are quite akin to Aristotle's Poetics of Greek drama and continue to illuminate and challenge how we think of what theatrical performances can do.

Thus questions like whether or not the *Natyashastra* was compiled in a particular year by a particular person are not very important. The historicity of the matter and answers to these questions that have remained a mystery, for many historians have many views. Yet it cannot undermine the importance of this ancient work, diminish its worth nor distract its wisdom. It is unanimously accepted that the *Natyashastra*, the ancient treatise of Indian Dramaturgy, has provided a sustainable foundation and framework for development of theory and practice of performing arts in India. Just as Panini standardized the classical form of Sanskrit, Bharata's Natyashastra has standardized the classical form of drama.

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