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The Contemporaneity of Bharatamuni's Natyashastra

By

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Abstract:-

The Contemporaneity of Bharatamuni's Natyashastra The article talks about the Natyashastra, widely considered an Aakargrantha – An authentic source book – of the traditional performing arts, which remains relevant even in the 21st century. The traditional forms, though ancient, have also been 'active' and as such have evolved with the times. The performing arts remain true to their original iterations as well as their regional influences. The article discusses three such regional theatre traditions – kutiyattam of Kerala, the yakshagana of Karnataka and the ankinayata. Moreover, the Natyashastric concept of the natya mandapa can be seen reflected in the namaghara of Assam and the kuttambalam of Kerala. The guiding principles for the use of theatrical space – both horizontal and vertical, can be seen preserved not only in these dominant forms but also in almost all other performance forms of north and south India. The article traverses through these unique traditions and concludes that the Indian traditional theatre forms are surprisingly closer to the post-modern notion of theatre than what may be commonly understood.

The Contemporaneity of Bharatamuni's Natyashastra

na tad gyaanam, na tat shilpam na saa vidyaa na saa kalaa/

na saa yogo na tat karma yan natye asmin na drishyate// (NS: 1.116)

that is, there is no knowledge, no crafts, no wisdom, no art, no Yoga, no action; which is not shown in the Natya. In other words, the Natya comprises all that is there which we know by the appellation of the arts. Bharatamuni's Natyashastra has remained an aakaragrantha – authentic source book – for centuries, containing within itself a systematic presentation of the conceptual framework of theory and praxis of the tradition of performing arts that is followed in India even today.

Through the efforts of M. C. Bryski and F B J Kuiper as well as several Indian scholars, the question of the origin of Indian drama has been resolved – it is now proven that the most obvious source of Indian theatre is the Vedic tradition that itself was an assimilation of other streams of tradition as well. The publication of Bharata's Natyashastra, complete with Abhinavabharati from Baroda in 1964, coincides with a fresh interest of theatre-persons not only in the Natyashastra but also in Kutiyattam and numerous forms of traditional folk theatre scattered throughout India. The Natyashastra also covers a wide range of artistic disciplines such as music, dance, prosody, dramaturgy, aesthetics, architecture on the one hand, and philosophy, psychology, myth, ritual, grammar, phonetics and geography, on the other. It is an astonishing, seminally rich work which brings together all the theatrical traditions of every region of the sub-continent.

The Natyashastra has been a continuous and significant source for Sanskrit theatre to draw upon from the days of Kalidasa (Malavikagnimitram, Vikramorvashiyam and Abhigyan Shakuntalam) and other Sanskrit playwrights such as Shudraka (Mrichchakatikam), Vishakhadatta (Mudrarakshasam), Bhavabhuti (Malati Madhavam, Mahaviracharitam and

Uttararamacharitam), just to name a few. It has also been a determining force for the genesis of later forms of traditional Indian theatre. Researchers have found how a number of uparupakas (minor plays) had emerged in pre-medieval India that had their source traced to Kohala, a student of Bharata. Abhinavagupta (Abhinavabharati), Bhoja (Sarasvati Kanthabharana and Shringara Prakasha) and Sharadatanaya (Bhava Prakashanam) have offered a lot of important information on these uparupakas. This new development related to Sanskrit theatre is likely to shed more light on the aspect related to continuity and growth of the traditional Indian theatre.

The praxis part of Natyashastra is often understood through the commentary by Abhinavagupta that is presented under Natyavedavivritti or Abhinavabharati combined with the stage directions provided in Sanskrit plays and references found in literary sources, old commentaries on Sanskrit plays, texts on dance, drama and music as well as commentaries found on dramatic texts of regional theatre forms. Sanskrit theatre as well as several pre-medieval and medieval traditional theatre forms such as bhand pather, kutiyattam, yakshagana, kathakali, ankiyanata-bhavana, ramalila, raasa, bhavai and so on that developed in different parts of India have been inspired by Natyashastra; even when they continued to be very deeply rooted into their own regional traditions and texts. These traditions and texts were kept active and changed according to the trends of their times. There was a marked shift as a number of the new trends emerged forcefully. Those largely responsible for this were Kulashekharavarman in the south and Rajashekhara in the north, which introduced innovation in Sanskrit drama-writing and provided fresh stimulus by assimilating new trends prevailing in their own regions. Kulashekharavarman infused new strength in the ancient kutiyattam tradition of Kerala preserved by the Chakyars and also composed new plays. Rajashekhara wrote plays in Sanskrit as well as Prakrit. His Prakrit play, Karpuramanjari is an example of Sattaka, which is a variety of uparupaka. Another

well-known playwright, Vatsaraja revoked older forms like the samavakaara and dima of the rupakas and introduced new content and themes.

While there were numerous regional theatre traditions, there are three that stood out in their strong connection to the continuity of Sanskrit theatre. These are the kutiyattam of Kerala, the yakshagana of Karnataka and the ankinayata- but assimilating the elements of Natyashastra in it as well. While the textual content of Shankardeva's plays retained the structure of prose dialogues, he invariably mingled verse on the one hand and the use of Sanskrit text with Brajabuli, on the other. This technique also preserved the use of dhruva-like songs coinciding with entry and exit as prescribed in the Natyashastra. Also, being a pious Vaishnavite himself, Shankaradeva's devotion to Rama and Krishna as well as interaction with the acharyas of bhakti movement, pilgrimages to important tirthastanas in north India and Orissa, led to the rise of a unique theatre form that marked the continuity of Sanskrit theatre and the further evolution of the rama lila form by Tulsidasa, and the raasa form by Haridasa.

This development also impacted the way traditional temple theatre forms began to take shape outside the temple premises. They also indicate that these forms originated from uparupakas like sangitaka. As a dominant temple theatre form ankiyanata has an affinity with raasa and ramalila. When we examine the form of Sanskrit theatre we find that its core structure develops a long two parallel lines held by the sutradhara and the vidushaka respectively. These two characters are often found in regional theatre forms as well. The role of the sutradhara in its performative aspect allowed him to freely intervene and carry forward the flow of the play through his comments for the benefit of the audience. This has become a valuable source of understanding the theatre-style and structure of older Sanskrit plays. This role is an integral part of yakshagana (Karnataka), bhagvatmelanatakam (Tamil Nadu), ramalila and raasa (Uttar Pradesh) and other popular forms. Shankardeva's Ramavijyanataka is one of the best examples. Such indications point to the unique aspect of the continuity of traditional Indian theatre and

now that its inter-relatedness is clearly proven, more importantly, it is perceived as a mark of the clear identity of Indian theatre. This has also led a few noted contemporary theatre directors to use traditional theatre forms in creative contemporary adaptations. The multiple levels of language – Sanskrit, Prakrit, and Apabhramsa — also make Sanskrit theatre quite unique. Sometimes Apabhramsa is replaced by the local popular language (such as Malayalam in kutiyattam), and this is generally used by the vidushaka. The vidushaka also freely moves between time of the dramatic text and the time contemporaneous to him. He also takes the liberty to ridicule whatever he finds to be reviewed, criticized and reformed. Female characters spoke in Prakrit. Kutiyattam, which traces its history back 2000 years, is an excellent example demonstrating the continuity of performance of Sanskrit plays and most valuable for understanding several aspects of the principles embodied in Natyashastra. If one only takes the kutiyattam from the south and the ankiyanata-bhavana from the north as dominant forms that charted the course of the development of traditional Indian theatre forms that drew from the Natyashastra as well as regional influences, one can study the evolution of Sanskrit theatre in different regions of the country.

In addition to textual content, form, acting principles, language and accompanying music, these two forms also illustrate the remarkable fact that the Natyashastric concept of the natyamandapa can be seen reflected in the namaghara of Assam and the kuttambalam of Kerala. The guiding principles for the use of theatrical space – both horizontal and vertical, can be seen preserved not only in these dominant forms but in also almost all other performance forms of north and south India. Natyashastra and contemporary theatre and theatre-artistes in India continue to be influenced by techniques and styles from Sanskrit as well as traditional theatre forms. This is apparent in the works of modern Hindi dramatist Dharamvir Bharati, who chose to move away from Western theatre practices (Aristotelian) that inspired modern Hindi theatre in the post-Independence era. For instance, he introduced the sutradhara once again in

playwriting after Bharatendu and also infused poetic form into the text. Similarly, playwrights such as Chandrasekhar Kambar (Kannadiga) and Laxmi Narayana Lal (Hindi) also drew from elements in popular folk form, including content. Where theatre directors are concerned, eminent persons such as K N Panikker (Kerala) and Ratan Thiyam (Manipur) have incorporated several elements from traditional Indian theatre in their work in such emphatic and creative ways that they have offered interesting new directions to the post-modern challenge that Indian contemporary theatre faces.

In the beginning of the 21st century, the situation has become more complex. Theatre, as we all know, now faces challenges from technology, and that has completely altered our understanding of the speed with which communication can take place. Theatre person Eugino Barba voiced the concern for a possible extinction of traditional theatre forms in Copenhagen in the year 2000 when he organized a festival of traditional performance forms from China, Japan, South Korea, India and European Opera. Theatre has been overwhelmed by the vast wave of TV, Internet and live streaming that focus on the importance of the 'here and now', of the 'presence', rather than of representation and narrative. This has caused the sense of distance, spatial and temporal, to vanish, whatever is happening at any point in the world, is often available to us to experience at the same moment that it is happening. This experience of 'presence' taking place 'here and now' in our routine life, this over-powering illusion of 'presence' available to us so easily via the electronic media, has seriously blurred our vision so much that we have drifted away from representational art forms, and especially representational theatre. The emergence of film and video, and its subsequent popularity, has posed a major challenge to traditional theatre, especially Asian traditional theatre. There are two issues here. Modern, or rather post-modern, audiences have little patience with classical languages, formal ancient clothing, out-of-sync ideologies or politically incorrect ways of thinking. They are also not very tolerant of reviving a form that they imagine has no place in the contemporary context.

Then there is another issue of the new technology itself. This new technology has introduced a novel mode of expression that Richard Schechner (pronounced Shekner) calls 'restoration of behavior'. For example, a film director would shoot a strip of film which he later rearranges and reconstructs in a way that is completely independent of the causal system – social, psychological, technological, temporal – that brought it into existence. Thus the reality in which the film was shot and the reality portrayed in the same film, once technology is done with it, are likely to be very different ones.

So we see that the technology gives immense power to the modern electronic mass media to alter and focus on the reality the way they want to. This immense power to regulate and alter the response of viewers has been able to rob the viewer/receptor of all freedom to review or reject a thought or an experience presented to them. Strangely a lot of people are fine with this (and their numbers keep adding with each passing day), and this has caused theatre to withdraw majorly from public space as viewers are disappearing and there is a total transformation of public taste. This 'death of theatre' scenario, however, will likely and hopefully help the emergence of a new form of post-modern theatre in India, even Asia. Researchers and thinkers of theatre and its forms believe that traditional Indian theatre is not as dependent on the 'reproduction of reality' or 'mimesis' as is generally presumed. It is more of an *anukeertana* or the 'retelling of a bhava', which cannot really be defined in terms of 'mimesis'.

Hence, there is no compulsion to look at it in terms of 'representation' pure and simple, or the 'presence' as defined by Western postmodern thought. The idea of 'presence' in Oriental philosophy has three dimensions – past-present, present-present, and future-present. Therefore, the aesthetic view arising from such a thought is totally different from the post-modern one which emerges from its phenomenal and empirical presuppositions. The multi-layered openness of Oriental thinking offers poetic meanings that are fundamentally different from the naturalistic and realistic theatre forms of European theatre of the 18th -19th centuries. In that

sense, Indian traditional theatre is surprisingly closer to the post-modern notion of theatre, to the extent that it rebels against one-dimensional realistic theatre!

This highlights the age-old Indic thought of 'sarvam hi sarvaatmakam' (or everything is connected to everything) in and which strongly advocated a holistic worldview. The Natyashastra is a practical guide for realizing this thought. If we all could appreciate the importance of this phenomenon, I am sure the world we live in will become a better place.

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