

A Student's Handbook of Indian Aesthetics

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By

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PREFACE

Indian aesthetics has provided a huge range of human experiences, thoughts, lasting values, beliefs, and pleasures. The tradition of Indian aesthetics is the oldest and vastest of any, with commentaries emanating from the far north in Kashmir to the deep south in Tamil Nadu. Over time, Indian aesthetic theories have crossed the disciplines and have become useful to almost all researchers and scholars of the different arts and of literature. Of primary importance, it is considered the prototype of Sanskrit, which in due course made it relevant not only to literature and the humanities but also to the performing arts, comparative studies, and social sciences. This book is an attempt to understand the basics of aesthetics in Indian poetics. Indian aesthetics is a vast and diverse subject that warrants a keen interest from practitioners of aesthetics. The aim of this book is to present key scholarly works, thereby creating greater general interest, and relate this to the various fields of Indian aesthetics.

This book is based on various sources, including Bharata-Muni's *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Ānandavardhana's *Dhvanyāloka*, Abhinavagupta's *Abhinavabhāratī* and *Locana*, and other relevant texts. It sets out to address issues related to Indian aesthetics and Indian poetics from both technical and philosophical perspectives and aims systematically to examine key problems in Indian aesthetics. It assimilates and documents the different manuscripts, texts, commentaries, and sources available in Sanskrit, Hindi, English, and Gujarati, gathering these materials into a single book. The book's appendices include prestigious scholars' thoughts on the subject to widen readers' understanding of the available perspectives. Finally, many Sanskrit words are explained in English in the text itself to support the flow of the thought, and a comprehensive glossary is given at the end of the book to help non-readers of Sanskrit.

A number of scholarly writings illuminated the paths of thoughts toward this book. The publisher is to be thanked for including this work in an important series. A number of libraries, booksellers, and publications provided much needed support in bringing out this edition. I also owe my gratitude to the eminent scholars, researchers, and critics whose comments and commentaries I've followed constantly.

The author hopes to stimulate and promote interest in research in Indian aesthetics with this indefatigable attempt.

Neerja A. Gupta
Prabodhini Ekadashi, 10 November 2016
Ahmedabad

CHAPTER ONE

CONCEPT OF INDIAN AESTHETICS

The word “aesthetics” belongs to the field of the science and philosophy of fine art. Fine art has the capacity to present the “Absolute” in sensuous garb and aesthetic relation. Indian aesthetics is primarily concerned with three arts—poetry, music, and architecture—however, sculpture and painting are also studied under aesthetic theories.

Poetry is the highest form of literature. Indian art is the art of sign and symbols. This can be seen in the art practice of the eleven participating artists in “From the Tree to the Seed.” The “adequacy” and “inadequacy” of symbols are directly related to their “truth” and “frailty.” This adequacy or inadequacy of the symbol is determined by the degree to which it symbolises its referent symbol of art, because by being its likeness its “truth” is iconic and becomes the projection of its intended referent. Consequently, it communicates super-sensuous truths or forms. Hence, when symbols of art lack the attribute of likeness, it leads to frailty. Alternatively, these symbols raise poetry to the mount of aesthetic pleasure.

Introduction

The first seekers of aesthetic pleasure were the ardent followers of Vedantic principles. Vedantism seeks pleasures in both attainment and renouncement, yielding it a unique attribute. “We can assume that there are two kinds of men in Hindu India, those that live in the world and those that have renounced it, and begin by considering things at the level of life in the world.”¹

Unfortunately, the whole idea of Hinduism has been disseminated primarily through one channel of the *Veda-Upaniṣad* philosophy, in particular, through Śaṅkara’s monistic-monolithic idea of Advaita-

¹ Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*, trans. Mark Sainsbury, Louis Dumont, and Basia M. Gulati (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 270.

Vedānta. For the Indian aesthetic tradition also, this idea supplied the primary motifs through which to interpret aesthetic experiences, which itself presents the impossibility of an aesthetics environment in this environment. And why, instead of going against the *Veda-Upaniṣad* tradition, major early schools of Indian philosophy (except *Lokāyata*) were anti-aesthetic and there was pessimism towards life behind all their claims of moral and ethical beauty.

Vijay Mishra in his interesting study of Indian aesthetics sees two principles at work: the first is the principle of “non-differentiation and absolute non-representation,” the second—its complete opposite—is “excessive representation and differentiation.” He further emphasises that at first the conception of non-differentiation and absolute representation led to the mystical tradition in which the relationship between the one and many is kept intact through an essentially mystical logic.

A critical overview

It has been said that the *Upaniṣads* tried to find the philosophical conceptions of religions and gods through deep speculations and the sheer idea of consciousness. But, as is articulated by Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, in general the *Upaniṣads* were too preoccupied with deeper speculations to exhibit a conscious art, or to discuss why the art of their times lacked “explicit aesthetics.”² On that given freedom, neither free thought nor free sense could have been developed. Coomaraswamy is right to deny the existence of “explicit aesthetics” in the *Upaniṣadic* period. However, he was only considering aesthetics in the context of art; indeed, in his thought the non-exhibition of art accompanied the non-existence of aesthetics as a whole.

In terms of their intrinsic nature, Indian philosophical schools can be divided into two broad categories, *āstika* (orthodox schools) and *nāstika* (heterodox schools); the first believes in the authority of the *Vedas* (as a whole), the second does not accept the authority of the *Vedas*—in this category are Jainism, Buddhism, and *Lokāyata* (although the categories overlap). The division has also been understood as a division between the Indian non-atheist school (*āstika*) and the atheist school (*nāstika*)—here, mainly *Lokāyata*.

Contemporary debates in Indian aesthetics are a result of dominant views of the Indian aesthetics tradition and its cross-cultural interactions, which came about via oriental exigencies and through nationalist discourses—full of idealisation, sometimes as a total negation of the

² Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Shiva: Fourteen Indian Essay*, p.23.

spiritual aspect, and sometimes negating material aspects. Both views reflect only an incomplete idea of the aesthetic conception. Despite these dichotomies, one thing is very obvious in the context of the Indian aesthetic tradition: that it has developed its unsystematic and abstract aesthetics in a quite systematic and scientific way. These approaches have given it a basis with which to claim that it is a philosophy of art, logic, and science of art with all its metaphysical abstractness. According to K. C. Pandey, "From the Indian points of view aesthetics is the science and philosophy of the independent arts—the arts which present the Absolute in sensuous garb in such a way that their products serve as the effective mediums for the getting of the experience of the Absolute for such connoisseurs as possess the necessary subjective conditions."³

From these arguments it can be established that Indian aesthetics is not limited only to sensuous and spiritual experiences but equally invites vibrant debates on its material aspects, the different types of self, and *Brāhman*; it even goes so far as to reject *Brāhman* in aesthetic experiences, and so on. It never was and is not now a monolithic conception of aesthetics. What should be noted in the Indian context is that the development of aesthetics was not driven by philosophy; it was not philosophy that shaped this particular idea of aesthetics, rather it was the emergence of a vibrant aesthetic tradition and its popularity among Indian people that forced philosophy to move and change accordingly. Art and life in India have been inextricably intertwined from the ancient to the contemporary. Art as a way of life, art as ritual, art as decoration, and art as unity with Godhead bore testament to the socio-cultural milieu; the high level of sophistication that developed in ancient India was reflected in the arts by their holistic study of these subjects. The arts thus strived to home man's intellectual sensibilities, thus raising him to the level of the transcendental, which in India was *Brāhman* or ultimate reality.

The origin of drama is closely connected with the Hindu religious trinity: (i) Brahma, (ii) Viṣṇu, and (iii) Mahesvara. Emerging from consciousness, artistic representation may be traced back to Vedantic and pre-Vedantic philosophy where "thoughts" preceded "form." From the abstract to the figurative, and from the figurative to the abstract, the core of Indian aesthetics developed in highly structured and original fashion in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. The Indian conception of *nāṭya* is considered one of the best ways to understand the Indian conception of art and aesthetics due to its inter-genre artistic and aesthetic characteristics. At its simplest, *nāṭya* as a part of the Indian poetical tradition is considered as visible poetry

³ K. C. Pandey, "A Bird's-Eye View of Indian Aesthetics," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 24, no. 2 (1965), 59–73.

with *prayoga* (practice)⁴ and praised as the best among all poetry due to its effectiveness and wider approaches and significance. In other traditional performances it is *līlā* or *attam* (*Kṛṣṇalīlā*, *Rāmlīlā*, *Kuddiattam*, *Mohiniattam*, etc.)—the term also stands for “play.” Moreover, since in these performances, the performer is at the centre—or one can say that traditional Indian performances are performer-centric—from this perspective whatever is performed (presented) by *nata* (performer) is *nāṭya* (performance). From the viewpoint of presentation, it is an imitation of that world in which we live (*lokavritinukarnam nāṭyameṭanmayakṛita*) or the representation of the states of three worlds (*trailokashyashay sharvashya nāṭyam bhāvanukirtanam*). In the words of Brahma, “I have devised this *nāṭya* as the mimicry of the ways of the world, endowed with various emotions and consisting of various situations.” Therefore, it is very clear that, although it is an imitation, it is not the imitation of the real but the ways of the real that is in fact very suggestive (based on *nāṭyadahrmī*), rather than realistic acting based on *lokadharmi*.⁵

The *Nāṭyaśāstra* also discusses the performative and major psychological aspects of *nāṭya* and emphasises the moral and religious aspect of art with its typical elite and feudal concerns based on *Veda-Upaniṣad* philosophy. The purposive definition of *nāṭya* in the Indian aesthetic tradition locates art from the purpose of religion and morality, rather than in its actual aim of aesthetics, which rests in the free realm of art. In fact, the differences among different schools of the Indian aesthetic tradition lies in how they have treated that free realm or ideal condition of art. This moral and religious aspect of *nāṭya* has been well established by D. C. Mathur. Citing Abhinavagupta’s conception of art, he says:

for Abhinavagupta the immediate aim of dramatic presentation was enjoyment of *Rasa* but its ultimate goal was to promote the four traditional values of *Dharma* (Virtue), *ārtha* (economic prosperity), *Kāma* (pleasure), and *moksha* (liberation) in their proper relationship. . . . while maintaining the autonomy of the aesthetic category of *Rasa*, he maintained the supremacy of the moral and religious over the purely aesthetic.⁶

Besides, it says *nāṭya* as an art provides:

⁴ G. H. Tarlekar, *Studies in the Nāṭyaśāstra* (Delhi: Motilal Banarasidas, 1975), 2.

⁵ Ibid., 1.

⁶ Dinesh C. Mathur, “Abhinavagupta and Dewey on Art and Its Relation to Morality: Comparisons and Evaluations,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 42, no. 2 (1981): 224–35.

religion (duty) for religious people, pleasure for pleasure seekers
 Restraints for the ill behaved, tolerance for the well behaved
 Courage to the cowards and energy to the braves
 Knowledge for the unknowing and wisdom for the wise
 Enjoyment for the rich and solace for the worried
 Money for the needy and stability for the disturbed.⁷

More significantly, in the reflection of the moralistic aspect of *nāṭya*, we can find the very origin of *nāṭya* itself. Asked about the reason behind the creation of *nāṭya*, Bharata says:

Long, long ago people of this world of pain and pleasure, goaded by greed and avarice, and jealousy and anger, took to uncivilised ways of life. It [the world] was then inhabited by gods, demons, *yakshas*, *rakshas*, *nagas*, and *gandharva Shudras*. Various lords were ruling. It was the gods among them who, led by Mahendra, approached God [Brahma] and requested him [thus]: “Please give us something which would not only teach us but be pleasing both to eyes and ears. [True] the Vedas are there but [some like] the *Shudras* are prohibited from listening to them. Why not create for us a fifth *Veda* which would be accessible to all castes?”⁸

Therefore it can explicitly be stated that *nāṭya* as an art evolved from its own moral and religious philosophy. From its very aesthetic sense, it can be said that *nāṭya* is meant to evoke *rasa*, which is the aim of *nāṭya* and its end too.

This metaphorical definition of *rasa* has been defined differently in different schools of thought. According to the Vedantic tradition, the role of art was a step towards experiencing a state of being that was more or less akin to the experience of bliss—*Brāhmaṇandasahodara*—which arises from the knowledge and contemplation of the Ultimate Truth. The ultimate pleasure that *nāṭya* provides can be judged the same as the one attainable from the communion of God. This supreme blissful state is the means to experience *Brāhmaṇandasahodara*.

Ananda (aesthetic delight) achieved through *nāṭya* should not be understood as merely rejoicing in our daily activities. It is more similar to aesthetic activities in which both pleasure and pain are contemplated as an aesthetic experience. “When the nature of the world, possessing both pleasure and pain is depicted by means of representation through gestures

⁷ For the original text, see *Nāṭyaśāstra of Bharata-Muni*, Chapter 1, Verses 109–111.

⁸ For the original text, see *Nāṭyaśāstra of Bharata-Muni*, Chapter 1, Verses 8–12. Translation quoted from Adya Rangacharya, *The Nāṭyaśāstra*, 1.

and the like (i.e., speech, dress, and make-up and temperament)” it is called *nāṭya*.⁹ *Nāṭya* is said to provide the ultimate happiness (*Ānanda*), which recommends both pleasure and pain in the same intensity.

⁹ For original texts see *Nāṭyaśāstra* of Bharata-Muni, Chapter 1, Verse 121.

CHAPTER TWO

NĀTYAŚĀSTRA: ORIGIN AND CONCEPT

Drama or *nāṭya* is considered the most beautiful part of Indo-Sanskrit literature. The earliest forms of dramatic literature in India are represented by *samvāda*—*Suktas* (hymns that contain dialogues) of the *Rigveda*. Bharata-Muni is the founder of the science of music and dramaturgy. His *Nāṭyaśāstra*, with its encyclopaedic character, is the earliest known book on Sanskrit dramaturgy. The first chapter of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* relates to the origin of drama. The gods, under the leadership of Indra, expressed their desire for something that was *drishya* (enjoyable to the eye), *shravya* (delightful to the ear), and *krīḍanaka* (entertainment to fulfil desire). Brahma created a fifth *Veda*—the *Nāṭyaveda*, taking elements from four other *Vedas*—*pāṭhya* (dialogue or text) from the *Rigveda*, *gīta* (music) from the *Sāmaveda*, *abhināya* (acting) from the *Yajurveda*, and *rasa* (emotions) from the *Atharvaveda*. *Amritamanthan* and *Tripurdaha* were the first two plays, which were staged on the occasion of the flag ceremony of Indra.

Bharata-Muni and his disciples brought this art from heaven to the earth. *Rūpakā* is the general term in Sanskrit for all dramatic compositions. *Nāṭya* is another wider term for drama. Sanskrit dramaturgy has classified dramas into two types: major and minor (*uparupaka*). The *rūpakā* is divided into ten classes—*natak*, *prakarana*, *bhāna*, *prahasana*, *dima*, *vyayoga*, *samavakara*, *vithi*, *anka*, and *ihamriga*. There are eighteen classes of *uparupaka*, the most important of which are *Natika*, *Sattaka*, and *Trotaka*.

Vāstu (the plot), *neta* (the hero), and *rasa* (the sentiments) are the essential constituents of a drama or *rūpakā*. The plot of a *rūpakā* may be borrowed from history or tradition, or it may be fictitious or mixed. The characteristic features of Sanskrit drama are as follows:

- (1) Absence of tragedy—Sanskrit dramas never have sad endings. They are mixed compositions, in which joy is mingled with sorrow.

Love is the main theme of most of the dramas and *vidushaka* is the constant companion of the hero in his love affairs.

- (2) The interchange of lyrical stanzas with prose dialogue.
- (3) The use of Sanskrit and Prākṛit languages. Sanskrit is employed by the heroes, kings, *Brāhmanas*, and men of high rank, Prākṛit by all women and men of the lower classes.
- (4) Every Sanskrit play begins with a prologue or introduction, which opens with a prayer (*nandi*) and ends with *Bharatavakya*.

Bharata, at the very beginning of his *Nāṭyaśāstra*, pays obeisance to Brahma and Mahesvara for no other reason than that he recognises the former to be the originator of drama and the latter to be the originator of dance. Bharata mentions Prajapati, the originator of drama, first because he recognises that dance is simply an embellishment of drama. There is another piece of evidence that also supports the view that Mahesvara was the originator of dance. Hindu religious tradition recognises him to be the greatest dancer. He is called *Natarāja*.

Drama is the product of the essentially cultured condition of national history. It presupposes the existence of an all-important art. The foundation of Indian aesthetic theory can be traced to Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra*, in which he gave the theory of beauty. In ancient India the very essence of appreciating the art lay in the concept of the "sap" or juice of expression. Written in the sixth century at the height of the golden age of Indian art, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* is the most inventive of all texts to have survived. "Bharata," its author, conceded his indebtedness to earlier scholars who had theorised on the arts. Often celebrated as the fifth *Veda*, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* is the only source through which to understand Indian aesthetics.

Bharata-Muni (fifth–second century BC) wrote the theoretical treatise on Indian performing arts, including theatre, dance, acting, and music. It was known to Bharata that the very beginning of Indian culture and philosophy coincided with the designing of Indian literary criticism. The foundation was perhaps laid when the *Taitriya Upaniṣad* set down the aphorism "raso vaii sahaRasa" (verily is he [absolute Brāhman]).

Brahma—and for that matter Bharata—borrowed various aspects of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* from different *Vedas* and their subsidiary branches. This *pañcam Veda-Nāṭya-Veda* is explicated in Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra*, which is intended as a guide to the science of the stage for poets and play-goers alike. The thirty-six chapters deal with the art of histrionics and other ancillary arts. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* tells us not only what is to be portrayed in a drama but also how the portrayal is to be done. Drama, as Bharata says, is the imitation of man and his doings (*loka-vṛtti*). As man and his doings

have to be respected on the stage, so drama in Sanskrit is also known by the form *roopaka*, which means portrayal.

The literal translation of *nāṭya* is “drama” or “*nataks*,” which today does not include dance; but *nataks*, a Sanskrit word, derives from the word meaning “dance” (root: *nāt*). Hence, in traditional Indian dramas, music and dancing are integral parts of acting.

Bharata has attempted to answer the following questions in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*:

- (1) What were the circumstances that led to the creation of the fifth *Veda*, and for whom was it created?
- (2) Into how many parts is the *Nāṭyaveda* divided? Are there so many parts that it can't be fully grasped?
- (3) What are the various arts that are necessary for the presentation of drama? Of how many parts is drama made? Is it an organic whole or merely a jumble?
- (4) What are the various means of knowledge that are necessary in order to know the different parts of drama? And, if drama is an organic whole and not a mere jumble, “is there any special means of knowing the interconnection of part”? And, if so, “what is it”?
- (5) How are the different parts of drama to be presented?

The answers to the first three questions are given in the very first chapter. The answer to the first question may be stated as follows: The circumstances that led to the creation of dramaturgy were the product of time. During *Treta yuga*, when *Vaivasvata Manvantarā* was running, the gods who headed India approached Brahma with a request for him to create a play thing that would be pleasing to both the eye and the ear and lead people automatically to follow the path of duty, without the need for any external compulsion, such as the order of a king.

Such a diversion was necessary for humanity. For humanity, being under the influence of *Rajas*, was deviating from the right path, pointed out by the *Vedas*, and was ignoring the rites due to the gods. The gods therefore wanted an instrument of instruction that could be utilised for instructing all, irrespective of caste, and which would not merely be a command but instead would be a delightful instruction made palatable by mixing the bitter tones of command with the sweetness of aesthetics.

These were the circumstances that led to the creation of the fifth *Veda*.

The second question, into how many parts is the *Nāṭyaveda* divided?, is answered as follows: primarily there are four parts, which deal with the following topics: (1) art for effective speech or recitation (*vācika* *abhināya*), (2) the art of music, (3) the art of acting, and (4) *rāgas*.

The answer to the third question, how are the various parts connected?, is that drama, with the science or theory of which the *Nāṭyaveda* is concerned, primarily presents *rāga*, and that the three arts are the means of its effective presentation. Thus, it is an organic whole.

The answer to the fourth question is that it is apprehended directly through the eyes and ears. The reply to the fifth question takes up the whole of the rest of the work.

The Indian dramatic art is the “*nāṭya*” in *Nāṭyaśāstra*. In Indian tradition, *śāstra* refers to holy writing dedicated to a particular field of knowledge. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* is a compilation of work by various sages but the tradition assigns its authorship to the sage Bharata. Thus, it came to be called *Bharata-Muni’s Nāṭyaśāstra*. Its date is not definitely known: it is taken to be from 200 B.C. to 200 A.D. Its present form must have been reached sometime during this period. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* is an encyclopaedic work in thirty-seven chapters; it deals with various topics that are necessary for the production and presentation of drama before spectators.

With a basic postulation that aesthetics is a study of the state of fundamental human capacity, a state of the non-alienated condition of the senses, *nāṭya* stands for a broader meaning of art, aesthetics, and philosophy and envisions the idea of artistic life. For instance, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* claims that there is no art, no knowledge, no yoga, and no actions that are not found in *nāṭya*.

The four *Vedas* were created by Brahma, but lower-caste people and women were not allowed to study them. So, the myth says, Brahma created the fifth *Veda*, called *Nāṭyaveda*—that is, the art of drama, which can be studied and practised by everyone. While creating this *Nāṭyaveda*, Brahma adopted its constituents from four other *Vedas*. Recitation was adopted from *Rigveda*, music and song from *Sāmaveda*, histrionics from *Yajurveda*, and sentiments from *Atharvaveda*. Subordinate *Vedas*, called *Upavedas*, were also connected with *Nāṭyaveda*—for example, *Ayurveda* was used to show expressions of diseases, their symptoms, and certain mental moods, and so on, as explained by Charaka and Sushruta. *Dhanurveda* (archery) was made use of in the representation of fights on the stage. *Gandharvaveda* was used in the preliminaries and in the actual performance of drama. *Sthāpatyaveda* (architectural science) was necessary for construction of the theatre. Bharata assures us that we cannot think of any piece of knowledge or lore, art or craft, design or activity that will not enter into the composition and stage presentation of drama.

The story goes that this *Nāṭyaveda* was handed over to Indra and Indra handed it over to Bharata, who supposedly had one hundred sons. This probably means that Bharata made use of all kinds of people in society, people who came from all different parts of the country or who had

deformities like squinting eyes, stammering speech, or were very tall, very short, bald, hunchbacked—just about anybody—in the presentation of the drama. To play the role of women, Brahma created *Apsaras* (celestial maidens), who were experts in dramatic art.

Ancient dramas were danced and presented. The dance form was attributed to Śiva. He requested one of his disciples named *Tāndu* to teach the dance, hence it was called the *Tāndava*. The feminine form of dance, called *Lāśya*, was taught by Pārvatī. The drama was performed on the slopes of the mountains or in the open. Later it was found that it needed protection from natural calamities and from bad elements in society, especially when protests from some groups of people take a violent form. This can be seen even today. Thus, theatres were constructed. Bharata gives details of the construction of a theatre, including the selection of land and its preparation, construction materials, building plans, pillars, measurements, and so on and so forth.

There are rituals it is essential to practise before the presentation of drama: The principle deities of drama—viz. Brahma, Viṣṇu and Śiva—are worshipped. Śiva is in the form of *Natarāja*. Even today, *Natarāja* is offered a *puja* before any stage performance. Then the well-being of the spectators is wished for.

The *Vedic* traditions can be considered intrinsic constituents of the *Vedas* and their further substitutes in the form of *Upaniṣad* and *Aranyaka*. The *Vedas* are divided into four parts, *Rig-Veda*, *Sāma-Veda*, *Yajur-Veda*, and *Atharva-Veda*, which are further divided into *Samhita*, *Brāhmaṇa*, *Aranyaka*, and *Upaniṣads*. (Due to its complexities and gradual development, *Veda* can be divided into four parts: *Samhita* (a collection of abstract ritualistic mantras), *Brāhmaṇa* (little developed religious texts), *Aranyaka* (wilderness texts), and *Upaniṣads* (philosophical texts). The early *Samhita* of the *Rig-Veda* shows its ritualistic and sacrificial composition by a primitive society; it is believed to be greatly important for ceremonial rites that can definitely be considered an art but not necessarily one with a concept of aesthetics. Because the concept of aesthetics does not depend on philosophy, it cannot be understood without philosophy; second, directly or indirectly, aesthetics is a conscious effort to search for beauty. Therefore, the early development of the *Rig-Vedic* period cannot be considered to fall under the scope of aesthetics. In its gradual development, the *Vedic* poet exclaimed: “I do not know what kind of thing I am; mysterious, bound, my mind wonders.” If the same poem could have been uttered now, it would have been provided with a sense of aesthetics; however, the truly unaware self cannot perceive the aesthetic.

Thus, it can be explicitly stated that *Nāṭya* as an art can be evaluated from its moral and religious philosophy. Here we cannot say that religion

was an aesthetic choice in that society; rather, it applies vice versa that aesthetics was a religious choice.

In the first chapter of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Bharata gives a mythical account of the creation of *nāṭya*. *Nāṭya* was created by Brahma, the god of creation, to meet a demand for a plaything—a source of pleasure to minds made weary by the strife, wants, and miseries of daily existence. An art form such as drama fulfils this demand very ably because it has a visual and aural appeal. Any piece of advice communicated through a visual-aural form has more of an impact on the human mind than any other form. A drama, besides offering entertainment, can also influence and uplift the minds of spectators. Further, there is a chapter discussing the aesthetic theories, definitions, characteristics, and so forth in detail.

Abhināya in the Nāṭyaśāstra

Bharata describes histrionics, which is called *abhināya* in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. The drama according to him is communicated to the spectators in four ways:

- (1) Communication through body movements, called *āṅgika abhināya*, where the movements of major limbs (like the head, chest, hands, and feet) as well as movements of minor limbs (like the eyes, nose, lips, cheeks, chin, etc.) are involved. The glances, gestures, and gaits are also part of *āṅgika abhināya*.
- (2) Communication by speech is called *vāchika abhināya*. In this, the vowels, consonants, and their places of origin in the mouth, intonation, modes of address, and so forth are discussed. While giving the literary aspect of drama, Bharata describes ten types of dramas that are known as *daśarūpaka*. One of them is *Veethi*—that is, roadshows. At present, a lot of them are seen at election time.
- (3) Extraneous representation is called *āharya abhināya* and is done by means of costumes, make-up, ornaments, stage properties, and so forth.
- (4) Representation of temperament of the characters is called *sāttvika abhināya*. It is the highest quality of *abhināya*, expressing the inner feelings of the character through subtle movements of the lips, trembling of the body, redness of the face, tears rolling down, and so forth.

Bharata further describes how to represent abstract phenomena—such as sunrise, sunset, different times of the day, rains, and so forth—which is

called *Chitrabhināya*. He also mentions in detail how to show animals onstage: how to create them artificially and with what material.

Bharata goes so far as to propound notes of dramatic competitions in one of the chapters: how to conduct them, the qualification for judges, and gifts to be given to the actors.

CHAPTER THREE

NĀṬYAŚĀSTRA: STRUCTURE AND DESIGN

Bharata created the *Nāṭyaśāstra* as an analogue to the physical layout of *yajna*. It is a religious ritual yielding spiritual results, to be performed and prepared using a particular design. Just as *vedis* of different sizes and shapes are built in a *sāla*, there are both concurrent and multiple actions in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. They all replicate the cosmos and correct the cosmic time and calendar. So *nāṭya* too represents the micro and macro environment of *Brahmmandā*; the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and its chapters with divisions are the ritual altars of this grand and complex design. The dramatic spectacle has a moral and ethical purpose. The arts are thus an alternate if not a parallel path for goals of life to which one aspires. It leads to three stages: *adhibhautika*, *adhyatmika*, and *adhidevika* (respectively, the material, individual, and metaphysical divine).

We can discuss *Nāṭyaśāstra* using three concepts: “system,” “structure,” and “discourse.” A significant way to know these concepts would be to understand Bharata’s enterprise as an interesting answer to two related questions. First, what happens to structures that are parts of different, distinct wholes—we could say systems—when these structures are amalgamated to form quite another whole or system? And, second, how can one formulate a *śāstra*, that is a theoretical scheme of discourse, for this new resultant whole, given a context where the different structures transposed into this new whole are already formulated into systems with well-defined *śāstras* of their own?

The first chapter contains the following statement: “There is no field of knowledge, no craft, no art, no application, and no activity which is not to be found in *nāṭya*.” He voices the same idea towards the end of the work, just before he begins to speak of music and the forms it takes in theatre. He speaks here of *nāṭya* as *vividhāshraya* (that which depends on many).

The whole verse in which this phrase occurs is pertinent to his notion of theatre as a composite art. Bharata says that song, instrumental playing, and *nāṭya*, which is *vividhāshraya*, should be rendered like an *ālata-cakra*

(a flaming torch so rotated as to appear like an unbroken circle of fire). He further says, “*nāṭya* is a mixture of many distinct activities so distinct that they need to be apprehended through different sense organs.” These have to be carefully combined into a single whole so that to the mind of the audience they appear as one single object. Similarly, a theatrical performance consists of different activities that have to be skilfully brought together into a single equilibrium (*samyapādana*).

Bharata was aware that the different activities he was combining into a single *cakra* were each a world in themselves with distinct universes of discourse. He begins talking about the *nāṭya* proper in the sixth chapter of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Earlier chapters introduced both the subject matter and the actual “*nāṭya*,” which began with a ritual like *pūrvarānga* (literally, “that which precedes the staging”), described in chapters four and five.

The text of *Nāṭyaśāstra* moves in a circle with a definite design with a real centre. Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 make up one group, in which spatial and temporal relations are outlined. Chapters 6 and 7 make up another group, in which *rasa*, *bhāva*, and their variants are abstracted. Chapters 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13 deal with all the aspects of body language. Chapter 13 also provides a pause where space is transformed into space onstage. Chapters 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, and 19 deal with all aspects of verbal sounds and speech. Chapters 20 and 21 present another pause, in which Bharata discusses the structure of drama, types of plays, and different layered movements of plots. This section also discusses time as an aspect. Chapters 22, 23, 24, 25, and 26 consider how expression, costume, and design become essential aspects. Chapters 27 as well as 26 concern pictorial and mixed acts in drama called *sāmanyābhinaya* and *citrābhinaya*. Chapters 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, and 33 are devoted to music. Chapters 34 and 35 are devoted to the distribution of roles and organisation. Finally, chapter 36 completes the cycle by returning to drama and its descent from heaven.

Like a master craftsman, Bharata designs his work as an organic whole. He assigns a role to each vital instrument relevant to drama. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* is a symphony of moods, scripts, actors, sentiments, sounds, and combinations constituting an organic whole of the art of dramaturgy. The structural arrangement now needs a separate discussion to cover each of its attributes.

Chapters 1 and 2 of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* lay down, in unambiguous though veiled terms, the foundation of this structure. Bharata internalises the world view of the *Upaniṣads* at a level that considers concepts and the ultimate goal of the artistic experience; the structure he creates is analogous to the Brāhmanical ritual (*yajna*).

The *Nāṭyaśāstra* is explicitly divided into thirty-six chapters and has a

distinct sequence. The structure of the text can be restated in terms of the concern of the author to present all levels of artistic experience and all forms of expression, nature, and level of response.

The thirty-six chapters of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* can also be grouped from the point of view of: (i) artistic experience; (ii) the artistic content or state of being, the modes of expression through word, sound, gesture, dress, decorations, and methods of establishing correspondences between physical movement, speech, and physical states also as communication and reception by audience and readers; and (iii) structure of the dramatic form, popularly translated as plot. The *ittivṛtta* is, however, a more comprehensive term for both structure and phrasing.

On this conceptual foundation, the physical structure of the theatre is created. Chapter 2 deals with the actual construction of the stage and theatre including different sizes and shapes of theatre. It is a micro model of the cosmos. The physical place replicates the cosmic place. He deals at various lengths with a great variety of subjects all of which together are needed to build up *nāṭya*. He begins with architecture, in the sense that the second chapter of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* contains an expert description of the *nāṭyagrha*, the theatre hall. He describes a number of possible structures of various sizes and shapes, recommending those with the best acoustics and the best view of the stage for all viewers. More integral to the theatre itself is the division of the stage space into separate sections, known as the *kaksya-vibhaga* (described in chapter 13).

Nāṭya for Bharata was a representation of the *triloka*—the three worlds of gods, men, and demons. The *kaksya-vibhaga* divisions symbolically transform the stage into the cosmos, allotting separate space to separate *lokas*; furthermore, since it is the world of men that is mostly to be represented, the *kaksya-vibhaga* divides the stage into different geographic categories, such as the city, the village, the forest, the mountain, the river, and the like.

The chapters that follow, chapters 3, 4, and 5, are closely linked. Bharata begins with conceptual, mythical, and physical space in chapters 1 and 2. Chapter 3 concerns the methodology for consecrating the physical space that is created so that for the time and duration of the play the space is cosmic.

The formal *Śāstra* of the *nāṭya* begins with chapter 6. *Śāstras* formally begin with a catalogue of the major concepts and categories that together describe and articulate the field to be surveyed. Such a catalogue, a conceptual itinerary of what is to follow, was often termed *uddesa* (aim). Bharata calls it *sangraha* (a collection).

Introducing the *sangraha*, he says that it is difficult to say everything about *nāṭya* in its entirety. Why? Because it consists of many fields of

knowledge (*jnana*) and an infinite variety of skills (*silpa*). Even a single field of knowledge is like an ocean in itself: difficult to cover in all its essentials (*ārthatattvataḥ*). Not only was Bharata aware of different “oceans of knowledge,” to use his own phrase, but he was also aware of their theoretical formulations.

More interesting, however, are the transformations that were needed to make the arts of performance, music, dance, and the arts of language, speech, poetry, and narrative integral to *nāṭya* and how these transformations have been conceptualised. It will take three of these to illustrate three different ways in which Bharata orchestrates the given material into “*nāṭya*” and the conceptual tools he uses for the purpose.

Music occupies an important place in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* in which about nine chapters are dedicated to music. In vocal and instrumental music, he describes *svara* (a musical note) and its use in expressing particular aesthetic sense—that is, *rasa*.

Gāndhāra and *niṣāda* are used for expressing the pathetic sense (i.e., *karuṇa rasa*, *śadja*, and *ṛṣabha*), the heroic and marvellous senses (i.e., *vīra* and *adbhuta rasa*, *madhyama*, and *pañcama*), and the erotic and comic senses (i.e., *śṛṅgāra* and *hāsyā rasa*); *dhaivata* is used for the odious sense (i.e., *bībhatsa rasa*). Details of *murcchana* (a group of *svaras* to be sung together) and its types are also given.

Music is derived from *Sāmaveda*. Seven notes were already established in *sāma* music. *Gandharva* music is also *sāma* music. *Svara*, *pāda* (composition), and *tāla* (beats) are the three constituents of *gandharva* music. The *sāma* singers were connected with sacrifice; *gandharvas* were professional singers or musicians. Bharata gives details about songs to be used in drama. They are called *Dhruvas*.

Bharata also defines the instruments that are used in *nāṭya*. They are divided into four groups:

1. Stringed instruments are called *tata*: stringed instruments such as the *vīṇā* are of different types. *Chitra*, *vipanchi* are the major *vīṇās*; *ghosha* and *kacchapi* are the subordinate *vīṇās*. The human body is also called *vīṇā*: it is a musical instrument because it produces musical notes through vocal cords. The stringed and wind-blown instruments naturally produce pleasant notes so they are the most highly regarded among musical instruments.

The *chitra vīṇā* has seven strings and is played with the fingers. The *vipanchi* has nine strings and is played with a *kona* (plectrum). These *vīṇās* can be seen in early sculptures of Sanchi, Barhat, Amaravati, Nagarjunkonda, and so on. In Buddhist literature, mention is made of a seven stringed *vīṇā*. It describes there that

Buddha broke the seven strings one by one and still the notes continued. It shows that the influence of music lasted even after the actual music stopped. There are other types of vīṇās that have fourteen strings for two *saptakas* (*mahati*) and twenty-one strings for three *saptakas* (*mattakokila*).

2. Wind-blown instruments are called *sushira*: these wind blown instruments include the flute. They are hollow and have holes to control the airflow. The flute is the major instrument while the conch and the *tundakini* are the subordinate ones. The *shahanai* is also a wind-blown instrument. The flute is the key leading instrument. The magic cast by Kṛṣṇa's flute is well known. In many dance panels in ancient Indian sculptures, the flute is seen though the vīṇā is absent. In the Khajuraho temple structure, the vīṇā is seen with the flute, drum, and cymbal.
3. Percussion instruments are called *Avanaddha*: the third group encompasses percussion instruments such as drums. These instruments are covered tightly with hide. The tightening or loosening of the hide changes the pitch higher or lower. *Mrudanga*, *Panava*, and *Dardura* are the major ones and *Pataha* and *Zallary* are the minor ones. The face of the drum is called *pushkara* and is covered by mud. A drum with three faces, *tripushkara*, is seen in the Natarāja temple at Chidambaram. It is said that sage Swati heard the raindrops falling on the petals of the lotus. The sound thus produced appealed to him and he created this instrument. In the detailed treatment we get *mrudanga* (two faces), *panava* (two heads then thinning in the middle part and fastened with strings), and *dardura* (a drum with one face shaped like a pitcher, i.e., *ghata*). Bharata also describes how to play these instruments.
4. The cymbals are called *ghana*: the fourth is group includes *zanza* and *manjira*. They supplied rhythm—that is, *tāl*. *Tāl* is derived from *tāla*—that is, stability—and is the foundation necessary for music. It is indicated also by handclaps. Bharata describes various *tāls*. He says that music, whether vocal or instrumental, and dance should be performed harmoniously to give a pleasant experience like a fire band (*alātachakra*). A stick with fire at both ends, when rotated fast enough in a circular movement, creates an impression of a circle of fire. That is called *alātachakra*.

Having laid out the parameters, Bharata puts emphasis on the “core” of his work. The famous chapters 6 and 7 on *rasa* and *sthāyībhāva* have captured the imagination of theoreticians and practitioners alike. The abstraction of life into primary moods, sentiments, and primary emotive

states is basic and universal to humans. The primary human emotions are expressed in many ways. *Rasa* theory shall be dealt with separately.

From chapter 8 onwards, Bharata's concern is with the formal values of art, technique, and systems of communication and response. He begins with the anatomy of the body—the motor and sensory system. His main concern is joints rather than musculature. The *āṅgikabhināya* chapters have to be understood as the study of body language and not merely as gestures, poses, or positions. He divides the principal parts of the body into the head, trunk, pelvis, and upper and lower limbs. He then explores the possibility of these parts' movements. He is precise anatomically and physiologically. These he terms *anga* and *upanga*.

In chapter 9 he explores the direction and height of movements away from and towards the body. His study of vertebrae, ball-and-socket joints, and wrist and elbow joints are points of articulation. Then in chapter 10 he moves to other parts, like the pelvis, trunk, and lower limbs. The possibilities of each part of the body and its related activity with other parts are then discussed. He adds comments to bring beauty, grace, and meaning into bodily movements. He adopts the term *vinīyog* from Vedic ritual and applies it to *āṅgikabhināya*.

Bharata's study of the body doesn't stop there. He goes further, providing a broad spectrum of movement techniques in chapter 11, in which the whole body is employed. Training the body is essential. Without *vyayāma* (exercise) and proper nourishment, drama is not possible. He combines the concepts of *hathayoga* on one hand and the modern concept of martial arts on the other. Equilibrium and equivalence while holding the spine with an equilibrium is suggested by two terms, *sāma* and *saushthava*. These terms are later used in relation to music and language too. Foot movements are described in chapter 12 and *gati* related to character types in chapter 13. Bharata provides detailed notes covering postures of sitting and *gati* to suit gender, character, occasion, mood, and dramatic situation.

Chapter 2 dealt with physical space. This is limited, defined space. Bharata transforms this physical space into a grid to formulate space for earth, water, and sky, diverse regions, and different locales of outside, inside, proximity, and distance. Chapter 14 brings out Bharata's entire concept of space. It also touches the concept of style (*vr̥tti*), regional schools (*pravṛtti*), and two schools of delivery and movement—namely, *nāṭyadharmi* and *lokadharmi*. To understand how *nṛtta* (a term applicable to both drama and dance) became *nāṭya samagri*, a part of the dramatic whole, it is helpful to be acquainted with Bharata's concept of the *nāṭya dharmi*.

Nāṭya was an *anukarana* of the world, especially the human condition (*lokasvabhava*); however, it did not attempt to replicate the world. What it

presented was a world transformed through imagination and the artistry and devices that playwrights and directors of plays could command. This transformed world and the means by which the transformation was made were both called *nāṭya dharma* (“having traits peculiar to ‘nāṭya’”). *Nāṭya dharmi* was based on *loka dharma* (“traits belonging to the world of men”), yet it created a world of its own. It was an idealised world presented in a stylised form. Ordinary gestures were heightened and rendered with the grace of dance. This opened the door for *nṛtta* to enter the realm of *abhināya*. Bharata counts *nṛtta* as having entered the realm of *abhināya*.

Abhināya has many aspects. Some are more strictly *anukarana*-based than others. Projecting human feelings, emotions, and states of mind through the exacting art of reproducing physical signs, facial expressions, and the almost-involuntary bodily movements or gestures that normally accompany them is a major part of *abhināya* and is patently *anukarana*-based. So also is mime the reproduction of a voluntary action. Apart from these, *abhināya* also includes that gamut of gestures, borrowed or reproduced from *loka*, that like language are fixed conventional symbols given a certain meaning—raising the thumb as an indication of victory, for example. This is a conventional gesture, rooted in a particular culture; it is symbolic of victory and thus means “victory.” In another culture it might mean nothing, or it might convey quite another meaning. Thus, in many parts of India, the same raised thumb, especially if also moved from left to right, might mean “look how I have duped you.” Such gestures are, obviously, very different from those that imitate an action or those that imitate “signs” of mental states.

All types of *abhināya* use the gestures that are available from *loka*, Bharata’s *abhināya* added to the available vocabulary of the language of gestures by incorporating into it many *nṛtta* gestures and assigning them meanings. We are familiar with such usages from the Bharata-inspired *abhināya* of Bharata *nāṭyam* or *Oddisi*. In fact, in these styles of dance, we may see the same gestures in a purely *nṛtta* manner as well as in *abhināya*, where they are used to project the meanings of the words in a song.

To move on to Bharata’s next concern—words and speech—he devotes four long chapters to *vācika* (chapters 15 to 19). For him *vācika* is the body of drama; words are the course of everything in this world. The articulated word he divides into two: Sanskrit and Prākṛit. We start with what Bharata calls the *pāṭhya*. *Pāṭhya* may be translated as “dramatic speech.” Bharata includes it in his *sangraha* list as an essential element and concept in theatre, which it obviously is. The literal meaning of *pāṭhya* is “that which is to be read out.” The reference is to the script, to be spoken by the actors performing a play. The science of speech, that is,

phonetics as a discipline concerned with the articulation of the sounds produced in uttering a language was already a sophisticated science in India centuries before Bharata. He brings in a minute analysis according to the principles of unit structure, nouns, verbs, particles, prepositions, suffixes, compound words, euphonic combinations (*sandhi*), and case ending. Chapter 15 ends before metrical arrangements. Chapter 16 is devoted to the same. He cites many examples of metrical arrangements. He brings forth how the characters of flora and fauna inspire the shape and form of metres.

Chapter 17 is logically devoted to diction (*lakṣaṇa*) and its thirty-six varieties. *Lakṣaṇa* itself has many layers of meanings and connotations. Metre, rhyme, and diction are all related to the moods and sentiments (*rasa*). This is followed by an analysis of figures of speech—in particular, *upma* (simile), *rūpakā* (metaphor), *dīpaka* (condensed expression), and *yamaka*. He also talks of *guṇā* (attributes) and *doṣā* (faults).

Chapter 18 deals essentially with languages, especially with recitation in Prākṛit and uses of different dialects. At the same time, Bharata never dictates from a rigid perspective and adheres to simple exemplary rules. He adopts an open attitude toward language and dress, realising their limitless variety.

Chapter 19 speaks about intonation and modes of address. Bharata identifies three voices, relating them to the sentiments and moods: these registers are *vras* (breast), *kantha* (throat), and *siras* (head). He talks of four accents, *uddata*, *anudatta*, *svarita*, and *kampita* (high, grave, circumflex, and quivering, respectively).

Here Bharata takes another pause. Before we discuss the remaining chapters, which actually deal with time and movement of drama, it is important to deal critically with the aspects covered so far.

Having created a form of *nāṭya*, a *samavakara* called *Amrtamanthana*, Bharata showed it to the gods and demons who enjoyed it greatly (partly because it was an enactment of a great deed of their own doing). Satisfied, Brahma proposed that a *nāṭya* should now be shown to Śiva, the great critic. So Brahma and Bharata and his troupe all went to Śiva at his home in the beautiful Himalayas. There they presented for him a *dima*, another form of *nāṭya* called *Tripuradaha* (with a story from Śiva's own deeds). Śiva was pleased; but he made a suggestion. He created a dance that should be incorporated into *nāṭya* as part of its prologue, called *pūrvarāṅga*, where it could be associated with *gitaka* songs. This would, he adds, lend colour to the proceedings and the meanings of the songs, too, could thus be represented through *abhināya* gestures and mime. He then asks his disciple *Tāṇḍu* to describe this dance and explain it to Bharata. A long manual on this dance, termed *nṛtta* and also *Tāṇḍava* (since it was