

Naat.yas'aastra: Contents & Date

by Bharat Gupt

Naat.yas'aastra, ascribed to Bharata Muni, is primarily a text for theatrical arts. But as dance, gestures, music, poetry, costume, masks and decoration are essential ingredients of theatre, the NS is regarded as a fundamental text for them also. Its ideas of emotional enjoyment (bhaava-rasa), heroines (as.t.anaayikas) and exciting background (vibhaavas) have influenced Indian sculpture, architecture, painting, folk poetry, dress and even the art of conversation.

Attempts have been made to date the NS through linguistic analysis, possible Greek influence on Indian theatre, references to other texts like Amarakosa, Arthas'aastra etc., but the scholarly opinion varies placing it anywhere from 2nd century B.C. to 6th century C.E. A more accurate way of dating it is to examine the performance terminology it uses for acting, costume, music, dance, gesture and musical instruments and compare it with the terminology used for the same things in the Braahaman.as, Vaalmiki's Raamaayan.a, the Puraan.as and the Smritis. The NS knows musical instruments of the harps variety only and has a musical theory based upon them alone, hence we may conclude that it was formulated before the arrival of zithers which appear in sculpture around 300 B.C. But as it denotes music by the word "Gaandharva" or the science of Gandharvas who had no relation to music in the Vedic Samhitas and the Brahamanas, it must belong to a period well after the Braahaman.as. The relationship of the Gandharvas with music begins with epics and Puranas. As Vaalmiiki has used so many technical terms of music (such as 'sruti', 'sthaana', 'muurcchanaa', 'jaati', 'sammuurcchanaa', 'angahaara', 'aatodya' etc.) corresponding exactly to their definitions in the NS and as poetry does not create technical terms but takes them from S'aastras, it is safe to presume that NS was compiled well after the Brahamanas but around the same time as Vaalmiiki's Raamaayan.a (5th to 4th Century B.C.). Its compiler, Bharata Muni was very likely a historical figure, not a line of persons or just an actor (nat.a) but a teacher (aacarya) who collected all the material of earlier teachers (acarayas) like Tumburu, Naarada and Nandi and gave it a complete coherence.

The presently available Naat.yas'aastra text is based on manuscript of the Abhinavbhaaratii commentary of Abhinavagupta (11th century C.E.) of which a critical edition was prepared by RK Kavi and published from the Oriental institute, Baroda and is referred to here under. It has thirty-six chapters of which major contents are as follows:

1. Origins of Naat.yaveda (science of performance, 1: 1-5) called the fifth Veda to equate it in importance with other Vedas (1: 6-14), and the concept of Anukarana or imitation (1:106-121) of life.
2. Theatre House: Three kinds of theatre buildings (2:7-10) and their ritual consecration (3: 1-5) by the city and sponsor.

3. Purvaranga (preliminary performance) in nineteen parts enacted to please the gods and the audience (5: 8-17).
4. Definition of eight Rasas (aesthetic tastes/flavours) (6: 32-39), Bhavas (emotions), Vibhavas (actors/stage-sets) and Anubhavas or gestures (7: 1-8) as crucial elements of emotional experience in theatre.
5. Four kinds of Abhinayas or body and facial expressions (8: 5-15); two kinds of Dharmis or theatrical representations (13: 65-78); four kinds of Vrittis or modes of productions (20: 62-66); two kinds of Siddhi (success) divine and secular (27:1-17); employment of Svara or pitch and notes in speech, song and enunciation (17: 1-4, 24-47); Atodya or musical instruments (28: 1-12), Ganam or use of songs called Dhruvas inserted between dialogues for dramatic effect (32:314-323); and finally Ranga or theatre house.
6. Dasarupakas or the ten genres of plays namely Nataka, Prakarana, Samavakara, Dima, Vyayoga, Ihamrga, Utsristikanka, Prahasana, Bhana and Vithi and their charactersitics (18:1-12, 95-105, 112-114).
7. Structure of the dramatic plot or Itivritta; Avasthas or the stages of action; Arthaprakritis or the nature of episodes; Sandhis or the interconnected emotional states of the hero (19:1-22).
8. Nayakas and Nayikas or heroes (24:1-6) and heroines (24: 6-12).
9. Svaras or musical notes; Gramas or musical scales and ways of playing musical instruments like strings, flutes, drums and cymbals.

The text of the Natyasastra had become antiquated in many respects by the second century C.E.. Out of its ten genres it had categorised, only three or four were being practised by playwrights. Theatre seemed to have declined in its mass appeal as is witnessed by the disappearance of genres of action drama like Ihamrga, Dima and Vyayoga . The distinction between a performance script and a script written more with literary niceties in mind seems to have crept in. As a result, plays with literary value were preserved even when they had outlived their immediate potential as performance. No wonder that now we have only a tiny fraction of the total number of plays that saw the light of theatre. By the eighth century C.E. the living theatre of Bharata Muni's tradition seems to have further declined in India. Theorists of the practical art were substituted by literary and philosophic speculators who had less of the living art to witness and enjoy and more of the text to study and explicate.

The text of Bharata Muni, however, has remained through the ages as the primary source of performing-knowledge (Natyaveda) for actors, dancers and musicians throughout the subcontinent and East Asia, who have upheld its directives with some major regional adjustments called Desi done in medieval times when certain antiquated aspects of it were classified as Margi. The *Natyasastra*, therefore, stands out in history as the foremost texts of cultural interchange and unity. Like the artists, the theoreticians have also lived under its shadow. Successive works such as *Dattilam*, *Brhaddeshi*, *Hasta-bhinaya*, *Sringaraprakasa*, *Sarasvatihridayalankara*, *Sangita-ratnakara*, *Nrttaratnavali*, etc, have high-lighted only one

area of performance such as music, dance, gesture or poetry aiming neither at comprehensiveness nor upon focusing theatre as a complete art.

The Present Utility of Natyashastra

This problem is of an un-subsidizing conflict between the traditional genres and the modern genres. The latter came to India from Europe a century and half ago but have by now become the domineering content of the art scene. Whether it be the divergence between a print published and occasionally performed realism based urban Hindi play like *Andha Yuga* and a traditional rural *Svanga*, or the difference between a modern naturalistic novel like *Godaana* or *Samskaara* and a folk mythic epic like *Alah-Udal*, or the difference between a modern Malayalam film (its song and dance numbers notwithstanding) and a *Kudiyattam* performance, the hiatus offers very few meeting points between urban and traditional/rural genres. A lone exception among Indian art forms that resisted westernization so far was music, but that too has come under a severe neo-colonial influence in the last decade and is succumbing to westernization at an unprecedented scale.

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