

# THE CONCEPT OF DRAMA IN INDIAN TRADITION

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## ABSTRACT

*We can look upon drama purely as a literary work or as a work of performing art. In traditional Indian drama, performative aspect of drama (natya) could be understood in the light of Bharata's Natyashastra. Since Bharat did not treat natya as a literary genre, the problems before him were also different. Bharata viewed natya as an adaptation of life in terms of certain moral objectives. The term Bharat uses for theatrical representation is anukarana which literally means imitation. Bharata is aware that language forms the basis of both the structure of the play and also of the dialogues rendered by the actors. If the script is weak, then, no matter how powerful the facial and bodily gestures of the actors, the play would lack strength. Bharata's Natyashastra is like an encyclopedia of drama. It deals exhaustively with the different dimensions of theatric representation, right from the inception of a dramatic theme and its rendering into a metrical form to the construction of the playhouse and the dress and make-up of different characters. It becomes quite obvious from the Bharata's treatment of natya that, unless one is able to have a collaboration of architects, painters, sculptors, dancers, actors, musicians and poets, one cannot have a successful dramatic performance.*

**Key Words:** Performance, Representation, Imitation, Poetics, Aesthetics, Rasa, Bhava, Vibhava, Dramatic Spectacle.

Drama is the one of the most complex of art forms, next only to the film. We can look upon drama purely as a literary work or as a work of performing art. There is a tradition of poetics which forms a part of literary criticism. There is also a tradition of drama criticism which treats theatre as a performing art and which is no less a developed field of study. Thus the ways of looking upon drama have been institutionalized. It is interesting to note that both these ways of looking upon drama as a part of practical criticism existed in ancient India. Performative aspect of drama (natya) could be understood in the light of Bharata's *Natyashastra*. This dimension of drama got overshadowed by the enthusiastic attempts of writers on Sanskrit poetics to include it under the genre of poetry (*kavya*). While Bharat was more interested in the performance of drama, later writers saw it more as a literary form. Consequently, they concentrated more on the kind of communication one achieves through poetry than on the staging of play. Bharat, on the other hand, took interest in the performance of a dramatic work right from the construction of a play house to the actual staging of the dramatic spectacle. He was mainly interested in giving detailed instructions to directors and actors to work together for a dramatic performance. Since the genre

of drama (*natya*) involved both music and dance as well as dialogue, he was quite aware that it was a composite art form involving the use of other art forms. The spectacle of *natya* requires architecture, sculpture and painting, while the dramatic performance needs music, dance poetry as well as good diction. Unless other arts are practiced in collaboration, one cannot have a good dramatic performance. Since Bharata did not treat *natya* as a literary genre, the problems before him were also different. This becomes clear if we compare him with Abhinavagupta. While the latter treated the performance of drama as incidental, Bharata did not conceive it without performance. Perhaps Abhinavagupta's interest in drama was more akin to that of a literary critic, Bharata's was closer to that of a director. The former was interested in the appreciation of drama; the latter was primarily interested in its creation. For Bharata, the spectator figured only as a feedback for the actors and the director. This should be kept in mind while trying to understand Bharata's theory.

Bharata viewed *natya* as an adaptation of life in terms of certain moral objectives. The term Bharata uses for theatrical representation is *anukarana* which literally means imitation. But by reading Bharata's *Natyashastra* it becomes evident that he held drama to be an adaptation of life rather than a literal imitation of it.<sup>1</sup> According to Bharata a successful dramatic work rests upon the coordinated development of *patra* (dramatis personae), *prayoga* (dramatic representation) and *samriddhi* (magnificence of spectacle). Thus for its performance drama is the conjoint interplay of the rules of the stagecraft and the gestures and movement of actors.

Bharata is aware that language forms the basis of both the structure of the play and also of the dialogues rendered by the actors. If the script is weak, then, no matter how powerful the facial and bodily gestures of the actors, the play would lack strength<sup>2</sup>. Bharata refers to two kinds of dialogues in drama – that which is in Sanskrit and the one in Prakrit. The different dramatis personae are to use these two languages according to their role and sex: kings, queens and noblemen are to speak in Sanskrit, while servants, women and other menial characters are to speak in Prakrit. These dramatic conventions seem to have been formulated by Bharata after a close observation of life. While discussing poetic diction, Bharata gives the elaborate details of the organization of words into different kinds of metrical compositions. Each meter is composed in the light of the kind of aesthetic emotion (*rasa*) intended by the playwright. Bharata shows that the emotive quality of a dramatic work determines the kind of language that is used in it. For instance, *vira*, *raudra* and *adbhuta rasas* should be rendered in the poetic form with short words and should contain similes (*upama*) and metaphors (*rupaka*). *Vibhatsa* and *karuna rasas* should have words with sounds heavy to the ear. They help to create the requisite effect. Bharata's *Natyashastra* is like an encyclopaedia of drama. It deals exhaustively with the different dimensions of theatric representation, right from the inception of a dramatic theme and its rendering into a metrical form to the construction of the playhouse and the dress and make-up of different

characters. It becomes quite obvious from the Bharata's treatment of *natya* that, unless one is able to have a collaboration of architects, painters, sculptors, dancers, actors, musicians and poets, one cannot have a successful dramatic performance (*siddhi*).

Bharata defines plot (*itivritta* or *vastu*) as the body of the *natya* and classifies it into two types: *adhikarika* and *prashnangika*. These have been translated by Manomohan Ghosh as 'principal' and 'subsidiary' respectively. That which centers around the main objective to be attained by the leading characters relates to the principal plot. Any incident that helps in building the main theme can be called a part of the subsidiary plot.

Bharata characterizes an ideal actor (*patra*) as follows:

"Intelligence, strength, physical beauty, knowledge of time (*tala*) and tempo (*laya*), appreciation of the states and the sentiments, proper age, curiosity, acquisition of knowledge and arts, their retention, knowledge of vocal music and dance, suppression of stage fright and enthusiasm will be the requisite qualities of an actor (*patra*)."<sup>3</sup>

All these qualities are necessary for an actor to be able to act (*abhinaya*) well on the stage, for *abhinaya* is the main function of an actor. Bharata defines it as follows:

"As the root *ni* preceded by *abhi* means 'carrying the performance (*prayoga*) of a play (to the point of direct) ascertainment of the meaning', so (the word made out of them) becomes *abhinaya* (carrying towards)."<sup>4</sup>

The very etymology of the term *abhinaya* shows that it carries forward the main objective of the play. Bharata classifies *abhinaya* into four types: bodily (*angika*), verbal (*vachika*), dressing (*dharya*) and emotive (*sattvika*). Bodily gestures are further subdivided by Bharata into three involving the limbs (*sharira*), face (*mukhaja*) and of the whole body (*cheshtakrita*). Bharata goes into great details of the relationship between various types of emotions and their rendering through different bodily gestures. The *Natyashastra* contains elaborate instructions for the physical training of the actors, so that they are able to achieve a mastery over their body. Just as in *yoga*, the ideal for an actor is to emulate nature with all its flora and fauna – snakes, peacocks, swans, lotuses and trees. Both the *yogi* and the actor in their various postures (*asanas*) and gestures (*mudras*) emulate nature. Perhaps this is why Bharata says that there is no *yoga* or *shilpa* which is outside the domain of *natya*.

Bharata discusses verbal representation (*Vachika abhinaya*) at great length. He points out that both the playwright and the actor need to have a mastery over language in order to reach out to the audience. If the playwright does not choose his words carefully, his play would not be effective, for words are the body of dramatic compositions. Similarly, if the actor fails in

pronouncing the words accurately and rendering his dialogues with accurate pauses and punctuation, then he would not be able to infuse life into his dialogue. Bharata starts with detailed directions for the pronunciation of the various vowels and consonants of Sanskrit and analyses the grammatical differences between “verbs (*akhyata*), nouns (*nama*), roots (*dhatu*), prepositions (*upasarga*) and particles (*nipata*), nominal affixes (*taddhita*), euphonic combinations (*sandhi*) and case terminations (*vibhakti*).”<sup>5</sup>

There are thirty-six characteristics of good play, according to Bharata. All the items of this list do not have the same level. Some relate to the felicity of expression, others to ornateness of language, similes and metaphors. The list also contains references to etymology, slips of tongue, wit, censure and cleverness of manners. Seeing this list it appears that these characteristics (*lakshana*) of good *kavya* are really the various types of poetic communication that one can have through a dramatic composition.

In Bharata’s *Natyashastra*, *sattvikabhinaya* forms the basis of the entire emotive communication of the play. *Sattvikabhinaya* in the literal sense is that which refers to the rendering of inner feelings as against bodily gesture. However, as these feelings are expressed by way of bodily behavior, they are not private to the individual but are communicable to others. It is *sattvikabhinaya* which highlights the relationship between feelings, bodily gestures and dialogues. Without it the performance will lack life and would be merely mechanical. Bharata enumerates the eight *sattvika bhavas* as follows:

- (1) Paralysis (*stambha*);
- (2) Perspiration (*sveda*);
- (3) Horripilation (*romancha*);
- (4) Change of voice (*svara bhanga*);
- (5) Trembling (*vepathu*);
- (6) Change of color (*vaivarnya*);
- (7) Weeping (*ashru*); and
- (8) Fainting (*pralaya*)

It is apparent from this list that *sattvika bhavas* lay emphasis on the role of feeling in acting. However, this also shows that Bharata did not believe in the dichotomy between the inner and the outer; feeling without their manifestation through facial and bodily expression cannot be conveyed to the beholder.<sup>6</sup> Therefore *sattvikabhinaya* along with *vachika* and *angikabhinaya*,

helps to project the different kinds of *bhavas*. Bharata says that, just as various spices and condiments help to present the cooked dish, so the different kinds of *abhinaya* help the *bhavas* to project the requisite *rasa* (aesthetic flavor).

In this context, it is necessary to see that *bhavas* are further sub-divided by Bharata into *sthayi* (permanent) and *vyabhichari* or *sanchari* (transitory). *Sthayibhava* literally means the permanent mood, and in the context of drama it refers to the leading emotive quality of a play. Thus, while *sanchari bhavas* are fleeting, the *sthayibhava* inheres throughout the play. The *sthayibhavas* are only eight, while *sanchari bhavas* are thirty-three in number. The basic idea behind this distinction is that, while there are many different emotions in a play, they are guided by a leading emotion which directs their interweaving into a pattern<sup>7</sup>. It is this interweaving which makes the dramatic work a unity in diversity. If there is one emotion rendered in a play, then it will create a monotonous effect on the spectator and there will be no surprises and unanticipated moments. It is precisely for this reason that the playwright builds into his plot a series of antagonistic situations as well as emotions, and finally resolves them into a harmonious unity; and it is in virtue of that that a play is able to captivate the spectators. Bharata says:

“No play in its production can have one sentiment only. If in an assemblage of many States, Sentiments, Styles (*vritti*) and Local Usages (*pravritti*) in the production of a play any one item has varied representation it should be considered the Dominant Sentiment and the rest the transitory ones.”<sup>8</sup>

It is the dominant emotive experience (*sthayibhava*) of the play which gives rise to *rasa*. Talking about the relation between *rasa* and *bhava*, Bharata points out that *bhavas* create the *rasa* and not the other way round. The meaning of *rasa* is quite ambiguous; and there is no simple English equivalent which can adequately translate all the variegated senses in which the term *rasa* is used. Although the primary feature of *rasa* is its emotive quality, unlike *bhava*, which is dependent on the actor's *abhinaya*, *rasa* is the emergent quality of the whole dramatic work. The analogy offered by Bharata to distinguish between *bhavas* and *rasa* is that of a various spice of a dish to its final flavor. The flavor of the dish emerges only after the various stages of the recipe have been covered. The flavor is dependent on all the ingredients being proportionally added, and it is not merely a sum total of all the ingredients but something new which emerges from mixing. Since *rasa* in the literal sense means juice or essence, the above analogy shows that *rasa* is what marks the essential nature of the dramatic work.

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