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The *Nāṭyaśāstra*'s World of Aesthetic Ideas

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The article is dedicated to the main aesthetic treatise during Indian classical period, the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, which examines dramaturgy, stage direction, organization of scenic space, scene adornment, musical accompaniment, theatre construction, artistic theatre genres, scenic action, actor's work, means of artistic expression and other problems. The author discusses *Nāṭyaśāstra*'s creation time, authorship, the fields of main problems and terms. Special attention is given to its principal aesthetic categories, *rasa* and *bhāva*, as well as to the analysis of dramatic action theory, multiple components of dramatic action, hero types, characters, acting sequence, means of artistic expression and many other artistic elements of drama. The article reveals an exceptional role that this treatise along with its ideas would have for further development of Indian aesthetic thought.

Keywords: *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Indian aesthetics, *rasa*, *bhāva*, theory of dramatic action, Indian theatrical art, Sanskrit dramaturgy.

In the development of Indian literary aesthetics during the Classical Period, what is undoubtedly most important are the aesthetic treatises devoted to the synthetic art of drama. This fact can be explained by the hierarchy of arts during the Classical Period, when, as we have mentioned, poetry was dominant, and drama was proclaimed the highest form of poetic art because India attributed to it *the ability to best reflect various situations in life and an incomparable power of emotional effect*.

In the history of Indian aesthetic thought the influence of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* has been more important than that of Aristotle's

Poetics in the West. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* is a multilayered work devoted not only to drama but also to art theory in general. It is astonishing for its intellectual maturity and for its abundance of ideas, problems treated, and comprehensively developed aesthetic theories. It is a genuine encyclopedia of drama and of other closely allied arts – literature, music, dance. The name *Nāṭyaśāstra* consists of two Sanskrit words: *nāṭya*, which means 'theater, drama, dramatic art,' and *śāstra* – 'holy book or treatise dealing with a specific field of knowledge and providing a totality of certain normative precepts and doctrines.' Thus, the most precise translation

of *Nāṭyaśāstra* into English would be 'About the Art of Theater,' although in India the translation is usually somewhat broader, taking into consideration its content: 'About Drama, Music, and Dance.'

The authorship of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and the time and circumstances of its creation have been extensively discussed in scholarly literature for more than a century, but even today these questions remain open. The first authority on this text and translator of individual chapters into French, Paul Regnaud, already raised, in his research of 1880–1884, many still current hypotheses about when the *Nāṭyaśāstra* was written, its authorship, and the historical circumstances of its formation. Most contemporary students of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* think that the oldest part of this text was formed around the 6th–5th century B.C., and the main text of the short redaction – at the turn of the millennium or at the very beginning of our era. After meticulous textological research, this hypothesis was also confirmed by one of the greatest authorities on the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Manomohan Ghosh, the author of the best scholarly translation of the critical text with extensive commentaries (*Nāṭyaśāstra*, 1961–1967).

The oldest references to the *Nāṭyaśāstra* are to be found in the works of Pāṇini (5th century B.C.). We know that in antiquity the *Nāṭyaśāstra* already had, at the same time, two different redactions, of which we should first single out the older, "extensive" one of 12,000 two-verse *ślokas*, whose author according to tradition is Bharata Muni. The second, "abridged" redaction of later origin consists of 5,000 distichs written in the poetic meter of the *śloka* and comprising 36 independent chapters with prose interpo-

lations of various scope. This latter redaction was polished for many centuries, rewritten, and later canonized. The textological differences between these two redactions and their specific features were studied in detail by Paul Regnaud's student Joanny Grosset.

According to tradition, the author of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* is the legendary sage Bharata, who belonged to the famous Bharata tribe mentioned in the *Ṛgveda*. Researchers are perplexed by two circumstances connected with the authorship of this text. First, the word *bharata* is also occasionally used in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* as a common noun meaning 'actor or director.' Second, a legend is related at the beginning of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* about the divine origin of dramatic art and of the treatise itself, which is attributed to Bharata, and the purpose of this legend is probably to emphasize the significance of the ideas developed in this treatise.

Upon better acquaintance with the stylistically diverse, multilayered text of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, there is no doubt that it developed over a long time and was edited and supplemented by various authors. The leading light of 10th-century Indian aesthetics and most authoritative commentator on the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Abhinavagupta, maintains that the early redaction of this treatise was called the *Bharataśāstra* (Manual on the Actor's Art) and only later acquired the name *Nāṭyaśāstra*. The oldest version of this text was probably created by one or several authors who have survived in history under the name of the legendary sage Bharata, and it was later re-edited and supplemented by other authors. The researcher into Indian aesthetics Sushil Kumar De thinks that the main part of this treatise was written by

Bharata but was later supplemented and expanded by Kohala, Vātsya, Śāṅḍilya, and other theoreticians who created this compendium (De, 1923, p. 26).

The appearance of such an encyclopedic, comprehensive work, its principles for explicating ideas, and the nature of its formulations all attest to the high level of ancient Indian aesthetic thought and theatrical art: the main art forms, styles, and genres had already crystallized. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* confirms this fact with long chapters that provide practical recommendations for directors, dramatists, actors, theater builders, organizers of theatrical contests, set and costume designers, and masters of music and dance. The way its ideas are explicated and its references to other sources allow us to guess that the *Nāṭyaśāstra* was based on earlier normative treatises on the art of poetry, drama, music, and dance, even though they could hardly have dealt with theoretical problems in such a universal manner and on such a high level.

The grammar by the famous theoretician of the 5th century B.C. Pāṇini mentions the *naṭasūtras* (*naṭa* 'dancer, actor' and later 'drama') that the recognized authorities Śīlāli and Kṛśāśva devoted to the art of acting. When analyzing ancient Indian written records and the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, we encounter indisputable facts attesting that even earlier there had already existed aesthetic treatises devoted to dramatic art. Before the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, at least three known treatises on dramatic art were written that have not survived – the *Brahmābharata*, the *Sadāśivabharata*, and the *Ādibharata*. This fact is also attested by the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, which quotes earlier sources in prose and verse. These quotations of other sources

suggest different layers of thought, i.e. that the text may have been edited by different persons and at various times.

This treatise has neither a unified composition nor a clear structure, and it does not stand out for a coherent explication of its thought. The ideas developed in individual chapters often go beyond the subjects indicated by their titles. This treatise deals with dramaturgy, direction, the spatial organization of the stage, set design, musical accompaniment, theater construction, genres of theatrical art, the action depicted on stage, the work of the actor, his means of artistic expression, and many other problems.

The *Nāṭyaśāstra* treats, on a high theoretical level, many fundamental problems of aesthetics and the philosophy of art that go beyond what is specific to theatrical aesthetics. The reflections in this text on beauty and art return to the earlier aesthetic ideals developed in the *Vedas*, *Brāhmaṇas*, *Upaniṣads*, *Rāmāyaṇa*, and *Mahābhārata*. Indeed, in classical Indian theatrical aesthetics drama is understood as a spectacle embodying the highest ideals of celestial beauty and harmony – one in which gods and heroes are inspired by great deeds. In this respect, classical Indian drama is close to the traditions of classical Greek and Japanese drama. This spiritual kinship emerges not only in the exaltation of the heroic element but also in the functioning of the dramatic art itself. In all the traditions we have compared, the purpose of drama is moral and didactic but inseparable from aesthetic pleasure.

The features of theatrical aesthetics that we have discussed are also obvious in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, in which there emerge many of the ethical and didactic motifs of later

Indian aesthetics, motifs that exalt the social purpose of drama and its ability to influence human consciousness and emotions. The first chapter of this treatise states:

Drama is the expression of human actions – in it, the virtuous find virtue, lovers – love, the disobedient – taming, the obedient reveal their obedience. It emboldens the weak, spurs on the bold, enlightens the ignorant, and provides knowledge for the learned. It entertains rulers and sustains those oppressed by misfortune, it provides the living with material benefit and is a source of strength for the perplexed. (*Nāṭyaśāstra*, Chapter 1:10–11)

The main goals of drama, according to Bharata, are implemented by depicting, in a performance, the deeds of gods, rulers, sages, and common people with all their characteristic joys and other spiritual states, which have a didactic meaning. The central theory of *rasa* ‘aesthetic experience’ developed in this treatise organically encompasses both refined spirituality and hedonistic aspects. Thus, we encounter a didactic conception of dramatic art, one based on high humanistic and ethical ideals.

In Bharata’s treatise, for the first time in the history of Indian aesthetic thought, we encounter a comprehensive treatment of many of the problems of theatrical art. The first chapter discusses the circumstances under which theatrical art and this treatise itself appeared. The second treats the architectural problems of theater buildings. From the third to the fifth there is a survey of the religious rituals from which dramatic spectacles developed. The sixth and seventh chapters examine the theory of unity of action and explore the basic aesthetic categories of

rasa and *bhāva*. From the eighth chapter onward, there is a comprehensive treatment of acting, general poetics, dramatic genres, types of roles, music, dance, technical stage equipment, the most diverse means of artistic expression, and many other problems.

The Theories of *Rasa* and *Bhāva* in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*

The central part of the concept of aesthetics developed in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (and Bharata’s main contribution to the theory of world aesthetics and art) is the teaching about the mood (*rasa*) that arises when a work of art is created or experienced and about the visual language of art (*dhvani*). These theories of *rasa* (aesthetic mood) and *dhvani* (the hidden meaning, subtext of a work of art) are of metaphysical Vedic origin, for they contain a hint of the transcendental and nonmaterial origin of existence and of the assumptions made when explaining the nature of the artist, the creative process, the work of art, and its apprehension.

Rasa – the basic aesthetic category developed in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* – has a broad semantic field. In texts of the Vedic Period, the concept *rasa* means ‘juice, vital fluid, milk’ and later ‘taste, sense of smell.’ In Pāṇini’s works (5th century B.C.), the term *rasa* is still used in a purely technical sense, while Patañjali (2nd century B.C.) already uses it as an aesthetic category. In most aesthetic texts of the Classical Period, the category *rasa* means ‘aesthetic experience, aesthetic pleasure, aesthetic mood,’ and the closely allied term *rasavant* denotes ‘a tastefully created thing or work of art,’ while another related concept – *rasika* – refers to ‘a person of refined aesthetic taste.’ In French and English

aesthetic literature, the category *rasa* is usually translated with the word *sentiment*, in German – with *Stimmung*, and in Russian – with *nastroenie* or *esteticheskoe perezhivanie*.

Emphasizing the profound connection of the concept *rasa* with the old rituals of the Vedic Period and with the transformation of actors into their roles, Yulia M. Alikhanova notes that in late Vedic texts *rasa* primarily means ‘juice, vital fluid, essence’ (compare the famous passage in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* [Chapter 1:1–2], which speaks about the *rasa* of living beings, earth, water, plants, a person, etc.). It is well known that the performers in a ritual process consider themselves not actors performing one role or another, but demons, gods, or heroes, whom they become, as it were, during a spectacle. For ancient actors performing in mysteries dedicated to the glory of Indra, what we call type of role was the life source of various beings that fused with their prayers for divine favor and helped them evoke the holy reality of myths. For this reason, “it is said of *rasas* that they were created by Brahmā and that each of them has its own divine patron. All the things that helped an actor become (in the literal sense of the word) the character he was creating – costume, make-up, gestures, manner of walking, etc. – all these things were classified as *rasas* or understood as factors stimulating their birth” (Alikhanova, 1988, pp. 179–180).

Indeed, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* usually considers *rasa* an indelible mood, an aesthetic experience, the most important vital force in every part of a performance, and a peculiar quintessence that determines the mood of a performance, the character of a dramatic action, the acting, the characteristics of the

music and dance, and many of the other components of this synthetic art. As in Aristotle, aesthetic experience (pleasure) is declared the main purpose of art. An aesthetic experience, writes Kanti Chandra Pandey, consists of experiencing a basic emotion. The process of deindividualization leads to the forgetting of self that music provides in the introductory part of the drama – identifying with the hero, becoming another person, seeing the world through the hero’s eyes, completely experiencing the aesthetic situation together with the hero, and forgetting the person one has become when the basic emotion reaches its highest intensity. (Pandey, 1959, vol. I, p. 12)

Bharata’s reflections about *rasa* and about a true understanding of artistic creation obviously resound with elitist motifs. Not everyone can grasp the subtleties of art and fully enjoy *rasa*, but only those who are noted for refined manners, who are highborn, filled with tranquility, and industrious, who seek a good name and virtue, who are impartial, who have a good knowledge of music and reality, who are able to discern the truth, who feel the subtleties of dramatic art, who can distinguish the *rasas* and *bhāvas*, who know the rules of language and meter, and who can orient themselves in the various fields of art. Therefore, subtle connoisseurs of art are vividly compared here to refined gourmets: “Persons who eat prepared food mixed with different condiments and sauces, etc, if they are sensitive, enjoy the different tastes and then feel pleasure (or satisfaction); likewise, sensitive spectators, after enjoying the various emotions expressed by the actors through words, gestures and feelings feel pleasure, etc.” (*Nāṭyaśāstra*, Chapter 6:37–38).

This treatise emphasizes two aspects of aesthetic experience that are related to the theory of *catharsis* (spiritual sublimation) expounded in Aristotle's *Poetics*. First, a true work of art spiritually purifies those who apprehend it, and second, an aesthetic experience gives them spiritual purgation and relief. Thus, the category of *rasa* is directly connected here with art in its function of harmonizing the human spirit. By emphasizing *rasa* in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Bharata directs classical Indian aesthetics toward an examination of the subtle problems of the psychology of art. Placed at the center of his study is the complex world of the aesthetic experiences of the artist and the apprehender of his work of art.

Here, *rasa* is interpreted as the result of an interaction involving three different factors:

1) the cause of emotion (*vibhāva*), 2) its outward manifestation (*anubhāva*), and 3) transitory emotion (*vyabhicāribhāva*). "As the sensation of taste arises from a blend of various spices and ingredients," writes Bharata, "so, too, *rasa* is born from the interaction of various emotions" (*Nāṭyaśāstra*, Chapter 6:33).

The *Nāṭyaśāstra* distinguishes eight basic types of *rasa* (aesthetic mood): love (*rati*), mirth (*hāsa*), sorrow (*śoka*), anger (*krodha*), energy (*utsāha*), fear (*bhaya*), disgust (*jugupsā*), and surprise (*vismaya*). Each *rasa* (mood) corresponds to a certain *bhāva* (emotion). In this treatise, a *bhāva* is interpreted as a vital spiritual force that relies on the expressive possibilities of words, gestures, and spiritual states (in an actor's performance) and reveals dramatic meaning to the audience (*Nāṭyaśāstra*, Chapter 8:6).

Emotions are classified into three basic groups: 1) permanent (*sthāyī*), 2) transitory

or secondary (*vyabhicāri*), and 3) spontaneous or natural (*sāttvika*). The most important of them are the eight permanent emotions, which are directly connected with and correspond to the above mentioned eight basic *rasas*. The erotic corresponds to the *rasa* of love, the comical – to mirth, the pathetic – to sorrow, the furious – to anger, the heroic – to energy, the frightening – to fear, the loathsome – to disgust, and the marvelous – to surprise. Permanent emotions are formed from complexes of primal emotions (hidden in the depths of the human subconscious) that, when external stimuli appear, are expressed through various reactions. Apart from these eight permanent emotions, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* distinguishes a gamut of 33 transitory ones that are connected with brief, quickly passing psychological and physiological states (drowsiness, giddiness, etc.).

The third group consists of another eight powerful emotions – spontaneous ones connected with natural experiences. Unlike the permanent emotions, these are transitory and "are born spontaneously in the sensitive spirit of the apprehender" (*Nāṭyaśāstra*, Chapter 7:91). These eight spontaneous emotions are: stupefaction (*stambha*), perspiration (*sveda*), shuddering/bristling (*romāñca*), faltering of the voice (*svara-bheda*), trembling (*vepathu*), change of color (*vaivarṇya*), tears (*aśru*), and loss of consciousness (*pralaya*).

At the center of the psychology of art developed by Bharata is the problem of the relationship between *rasa* and *bhāva*. Here, *rasa* acquires meaning only through interaction with *bhāva*. "Only when an object or *bhāva* creates a response in the viewer himself does it change into *rasa*" (*Nāṭyaśāstra*,

Chapter 7:7). Moreover, the conceptual pair of *rasa* and *bhāva* is employed in Bharata's aesthetics when examining different dramatic genres and when discussing the unfolding of dramatic action and the patterns in plastic movement, declamation, and music. Here, the priority of *rasa* in respect to *bhāva* and other aesthetic categories is absolute and indisputable. In terms of hierarchy, each feeling (*bhāva*) is unconditionally subordinate to a mood (*rasa*), and in this respect, just as a *rājā* rules his subjects, and a teacher – his pupils, so, too, the basic mood dominates among the emotions. In the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, *rasa* is not only the highest title that can be bestowed on only a few *bhāvas* but also the main component of theatrical art, the one that determines the essential components of a drama.

Thus, at the center of Bharata's psychology of art is the psychic world of the creator and the apprehender, overgrown in the process of creation or aesthetic apprehension with subtle aesthetic experiences and emotions that constantly stimulate activity. Obviously, however, natural emotions are not in and of themselves aesthetic, because in real human life psychic states are accompanied by pleasure, pain, and many other emotional experiences. Therefore, when the artist focuses on these emotional states and uses his talents to harmonize them, there are then born, through his flights of imagination, controlled emotional states such as did not exist earlier and that are called *bhāvas*.

The aesthetic theory developed in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* proclaims the canonical requirement of unity. Each dramatic spectacle can give meaning to a broad range of emotions, but their totality has to be dominated

by one mood (*rasa*), which determines the character of the dramatic action and organizes its main components. Therefore, the dominant *rasa* and its allied constant emotion require conformity from all the other emotions (*bhāvas*). Most of the Sanskrit dramas that have survived from the Classical Period are dominated by three constant emotions: the erotic (the most widespread), the heroic, and the comical. Love intrigues and their allied erotic *rasa* (*Śṛṅgāra-rasa*) were the driving force behind classical Indian dramaturgy. Here, the erotic *rasa* not only overwhelms the other emotions but also often acquires an almost sacred meaning because, apart from the specific apprehension of sensory beauty, it is associated with the light, radiance, brightness, and purity that characterize divine symbolism.

The essence of the love mood involves dramatic conflicts in the union or separation of two loving hearts – conflicts that unfold in the spectacle through many external factors, starting with a description of the natural beauty surrounding the hero and heroine and ending with the purely psychological experiences that exalt their feelings of love for each other. In the culminating and final scenes of dramas, Bharata recommends introducing a feeling of the marvelous (*Nāṭyaśāstra*, Chapter 7:36).

In Bharata's conception, each of the eight *rasas* and constant emotions is under the patronage of a specific deity who is spiritually close to this mood: the erotic – Viṣṇu, the comical – Śiva, the pathetic – Yama, the furious – Rudra, the heroic – Indra, the frightening – Kāla, the loathsome – Mahākāla, and the marvelous – Brahmā (*Nāṭyaśāstra*, Chapter 6:44–45). Moreover,

in the descriptions of these *rasas* we can see manifestations of the symbolism characteristic of Indian aesthetics. Each *rasa*, along with its allied constant emotion, is distinguished by a specific symbolical color: the erotic – dark blue, the comical – white, the pathetic – grey, the furious – red, the heroic – orange, the frightening – black, the loathsome – blue, and the marvelous – yellow (*Nāṭyaśāstra*, Chapter 6:42–43).

The Theory of Dramatic Action

In the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, for the first time in the history of Indian aesthetic thought, we encounter a comprehensively developed concept of dramatic action. Influenced by the dominant theories of the late 19th century, which bluntly contrasted “Indian inaction” and a tendency toward *nirvāṇa* with European dynamism, early students of this text, including Sylvain Lévi, unjustifiably minimized the significance of dramatic action in the classical aesthetics of Indian theater. When we delve into the concept of dramatic action developed in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, in which the art of drama is described in a spirit close to Aristotle as “the imitation of an action” (*Nāṭyaśāstra*, Chapter 26:122), the superficial nature of these views becomes clear.

This treatise distinguishes four basic styles for developing dramatic action: 1) the verbal style (*bhāratī vṛtti*), which usually dominates in the prologue, when an actor exploits the possibilities of language; 2) the grand style (*sāttvatī vṛtti*), in which energy, bravery, and heroism are expressed through the actors’ manner of speech, gesture, and movements; 3) the graceful style (*kaiśikī*

vṛtti), which is usually expressed through erotic moods; the creators of this style are women who distinguish themselves on stage through beautiful movements and subtle dancing and singing; and 4) the energetic style (*ārabhaṭī vṛtti*), which unfolds as rude frenzy, treachery, and the use of force.

In the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, all these artistic styles are directly connected with an intriguing dramatic plot and a musical accompaniment that subtly expresses the conflicts in the dramatic action. An impressive plot, in Bharata’s opinion, can partially compensate for other defects and provide the audience with complete aesthetic pleasure. According to the canonical requirements formulated in this treatise, the plot of a drama consists of five different stages (*avasthā*), five junctures (*sandhi*), and five motifs of the dramatic action (*arthaprakṛti*). In this fivefold concept of dramatic action, most attention is directed toward these successive stages: 1) the beginning, 2) efforts, 3) hope of achieving the goal, 4) faith in success, and 5) achievement of the goal. In addition to these stages, when the development of the dramatic action is described, the special role of the five junctures is emphasized: 1) the opening (*mukha*), 2) the development of the plot (*pratimukha*), 3) the ripening of the conflict (*garbha*), 4) the pause (*avamarśa*), and 5) the conclusion (*nirvāhana*).

In the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the development of the dramatic action is also connected with the gradual unfolding of five motifs of action, which have these metaphorical names: 1) the seed (*bija*), 2) the drop (*binḍu*), 3) the banner (*patākā*), 4) the episode (*prakāri*), and 5) the objective (*kārya*). Here,

the seed metaphor is used to name the initial impulse that becomes the driving force of the plot development. The drop refers to the motif that refreshes the development of the main story line. The banner is interpreted here as a side motif or action that stimulates the development of the main action. The episode is understood as a separate fragment of dramatic action. The objective is the dénouement of the dramatic action, which is crowned with the achievement of the ultimate goal.

“The beginning of a work of art,” the *Nāṭyaśāstra* states: refers to the juncture in which the birth of the seed (*bīja*) provides the impulse for various concepts and moods. The development is [the juncture] in which the seed that lay hidden in the beginning starts to unfold in everything, emerging and completely disappearing into the unknown. The pause is [the juncture] in which [the action] breaks off, and the reasons for this break are the consequence of anger, passion, or temptation that ripened in the seed. That which leads to the resolution of the different events and junctures that have the seed concealed within them is called the dénouement. (*Nāṭyaśāstra*, Chapter 21:38–42)

A special role in Bharata’s theory of dramatic action falls to the hero (*nāyaka*), who is one of the

main organizing elements in the play. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* distinguishes four basic types of hero: happy (*lalita*), full of imperturbable tranquility (*śānta*), high minded (*udāṭṭa*), and haughty (*uddhata*). Each of these types embodies a set of characteristic features that are directly connected with the hero’s social status. In this respect, all heroes are divided into

three hierarchical social classes: upper (*uttama*), middle (*madhyama*), and lower (*adhama*) (*Nāṭyaśāstra*, Chapter 24:85). The *Nāṭyaśāstra* distinguishes 48 types of hero, each of which is described in detail. The canons defined by the *Nāṭyaśāstra* give an extremely important role in the transition from one plot line to another to a character of the common folk, grotesque and full of ingenuity, whom the dramatist was advised to depict as hunchbacked, dwarfish, lame, and dressed in rags. This comic character is in his element when making funny and nonsensical speeches, displaying nonexistent learning, and behaving spitefully, and his main concern is to eat – much and well (*Nāṭyaśāstra*, Chapter 12:121–126).

In order to compensate for the lack of stage sets, special attention was given to costumes, makeup, and many of the iconographic elements and other complicated details that determine the visual aspects of a performance. Here, special attention was concentrated on color symbolism, which provided the audience with additional information about the heroes’ social status, the principles by which they live, their way of thinking, their psychology, and their character traits. The actors who played rulers wore purple, and the palace aristocracy – multicolored clothes; Brahmans were dressed in white, and monks – in saffron robes. In the organization of the dramatic action on stage, an important role fell to the music, which starting with the prologue determined the atmosphere of the entire spectacle, its story lines, its dramatic conflicts, and its shifts in mood. Unlike Western musical theater, in classical Indian drama there is neither a composer to write the musical score, nor a conductor, nor a director

to control this process – spontaneous and, at the same time, strictly regulated by canonical requirements. All these functions were taken over by a musical ensemble that consisted of a small group of performers. Included were vocals (a male or female singer) and a small group of stringed, wind, and percussion instruments. An excellent feeling for one's partners and well-developed improvisational abilities helped create structurally coherent performances.

The type of music performed in a play depended on the type of drama. Religious themes were accompanied by solemn celestial music, heroic ones – by passionate and pathetic music, and comical ones – by playful music full of humorous intonations. According to the canonical requirements of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the director of the theater (*sūtradhāra*) began the performance with a prologue (*pūrvarāṅga*), which was the long and minutely structured introductory part of a dramatic action. The prologue consisted of two different parts: the first was more technical, preparatory, and unfolded behind the curtain, on the inner stage, unseen by the audience, and the second, later part took place in front of the audience.

The prologue of the performance began with a strictly ritualized part called the *pratyāhāra*. At this time, backstage, the musicians with their instruments and the singers arranged themselves in a set order. At first, they meticulously tuned their strings, rehearsed, and repeated the most complicated gestures and dance elements. Later, after a short break, hymns resounded in worship of various demons and lower-ranking gods.

The second part of the prologue, which took place before the audience, was also strictly ritualized and consisted of ten basic steps. In the culmination of this part, there was the necessary blessing of the stage, and the pantheon of the main gods was worshiped. Here, the most important part was a concise *nāndī* poem recited in honor of the god Soma and usually hinting at the plot of the play to be performed. The prologue had a vocal and instrumental musical accompaniment that precisely reflected the undulating tension in the ritual action of worshiping the gods. “Worshiping the gods,” Bharata states, “begets harmony (*dharma*), glory, and longevity” (*Nāṭyaśāstra*, Chapter 5:57).

The *Nāṭyaśāstra* describes two different types of prologue: one that is *narrated* and one that is *acted*. In the first, which developed earlier, a narrator actor introduces the audience, by means of a monologue, to the world of dramatic conflicts in the play to be performed. The second, which is of later origin, is in the form of a dialogue. In discussing it, Bharata recommends that the dramatist “not overload the prologue with actors’ speeches” (*Nāṭyaśāstra*, Chapter 22:35). The acted prologue most often involved either the director of the troupe and the narrator actor or two of the leading actors, who usually began with verses that described a specific season. These verses imperceptibly led to a dialogue with the narrator actor, the actress dancer (*naṭī*), or the buffoon (*vidūṣaka*) about the lives and cares of the troupe of actors.

Thus, the participants in the prologue first existed on the same spatial and temporal plane of apprehension of the world

as the audience seated in the hall. Later, as they moved on to reflections about the theme of the play to be performed, they imperceptibly entered a completely different plane of spatial and temporal existence – the one inhabited by the characters in the play they were putting on. This plastic movement from a slice of real life to artistic space and this interweaving of two different spatial and temporal structures has aroused tremendous interest on the part of postmodern theatrical aesthetics, which has sought to reflect the dynamism of contemporary consciousness.

In practical terms, the movement from the prologue to the plane of the play's dramatic action was implemented in three steps delineated by theatrical aesthetics. First of all, the director of the play or the narrator actor imperceptibly shifted, with several well-chosen metaphors, from verses about a specific season to the action of the play. Then, as he connected the end of the prologue with the beginning of the play, he announced the appearance of the hero. Finally, the actor who came on stage picked up on the phrase, metaphor, thought, or reply that had resounded at the end of the prologue and directly connected it with the theme of the play that was now beginning. Once the persons participating in the prologue had withdrawn from the stage, a special musical introduction (*dhruvā*) resounded, and the director's assistant appeared, dancing a ritual dance called the *cārī*. After paying homage to the gods and Brahmins, he told the audience who the author of the play was and its title, which according to canonical requirements had to refer to its content.

The number of acts (*aṅka*) in a play was

not strictly determined. It varied from one to fourteen. The number of characters in an act usually did not exceed four persons; moreover, the main hero of the play had to appear in each act. The symbolical division of the stage into two main spaces – an inner one that even without a set symbolized the interior of a home and an outer one that reflected everyday life in the street and the city – was directly connected with the concept of artistic space and time developed in Indian theatrical aesthetics. Crossing the boundaries separating these two spaces on stage meant that the actor had passed over into another psychological atmosphere. These spatial and temporal movements during the performance were reinforced by the close interaction of histrionic art, declamation, plastic movement, mimicry, and music – all of which helped preserve the unity and consistency of the dramatic action. The normative requirements of theatrical aesthetics proclaimed that one act should not contain more than the events of one day. An act had to end with the logical dénouement of the motif being developed.

In plays of different genres, the development of the story lines and of the plot and the style of acting had their own specific features. The liveliness of the performance and the natural movement of the action from one plot to another were supposed to be helped by the dynamic infusion of new motifs and story lines. The time period between the events taking place in different acts of the play was not supposed to exceed one year.

Information about events that transpired between the acts or whose depiction was prohibited by theatrical ethics was

given in intermezzos performed during the intermissions. There were two kinds of intermezzos: “pure” (*siddha*), in which “high” aristocratic Sanskrit was spoken, and “mixed” (*saṃkīrṇa*), in which characters from lower social strata participated speaking various dialects. In this way, intermezzos contributed to the dramatic action: they highlighted character development and helped direct the flow of the story line in the direction desired by the dramatist.

The theory of dramatic action developed in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* stands out for its detailed regulation of many of the components of dramatic art – types of heroes and characters, sequences of action, means of artistic expression, and other elements.

Moreover, it cannot be denied that these rules provide the basis for the view that dramatic art should, in its diversity, reveal just as many nuances as real life. Characters can be heroic and virtuous, and they can be haughty and villainous. It is entirely natural that they have conflicts among themselves, but Bharata holds to the principle that ultimately virtue must triumph. The performance ended with a ritual blessing for everyone and with wishes for happiness and prosperity expressed by the actor who played the most important role.

The *Nāṭyaśāstra* reveals many of the specific tendencies of traditional Indian aesthetics, of which we should first distinguish emphatic attention to the psychology of art and an orientation toward the subjective emotional aspects of artistic creation and aesthetic experience. This tendency to psychologize aesthetics is directly related to the emergence of the psychologized categories of *rasa* and *bhāva* in the

aesthetic system of the Classical Period and to the *Nāṭyaśāstra*'s definition of dramatic art – a definition which became classical:

Drama is what we call the representation on a stage of gods, prophets, rulers, and people living in families and of real earthly events, based on a rendition of spiritual states that are in character with them. (*Nāṭyaśāstra*, Chapter 26:114–115)

The system of dramatic action developed in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* was, in fact, taken over unchanged

by later scholars. However, Bharata's main contribution to world aesthetics and Indian aesthetic thought is connected with his creation of the original doctrine of *rasa* and *bhāva* and with his subtle treatment of the problems of artistic creation and aesthetic experience. The problem of the relationship between *rasa* and *bhāva* became the main object of Indian aesthetic polemics and theoretical reflection. In the later development of aesthetic thought, there emerged many new interpretations of the *rasa* theory, and this category became increasingly otherworldly and spiritual – a process that reached its apogee in the conceptions of Ānandavardhana and Abhinavagupta, who were the leading lights of the Kashmir School of Symbolic Poetics.

References to the aesthetic principles of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* can be seen in the works of such leading lights of Sanskrit drama as Aśvaghōṣa (2nd century), Bhāsa (2nd–3rd century), Śūdraka (2nd–3rd century), and Kālidāsa (4th–5th century). Commentaries on this treatise were written by many famous Indian aestheticians: Bhaṭṭa Lollaṭa, Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka, Ānandavardhana,

Abhinavagupta, Kīrtidhara, Udbhāṭa, Śāṅkuka, Bhaṭṭa Yantra, Māṭrigupta, and others. The main assertions and theses put forward in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* became the norm to which the most eminent creators of traditional Indian aesthetics constantly oriented themselves.

Eventually, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* became the most authoritative canonical text in classical Indian aesthetics, and its author, Bharata, was proclaimed a *muni* (sage), an undisputed authority in the field of dramaturgy, poetry, dance, and music. This most significant monument of classical aesthetics determined the entire future development of Indian aesthetic thought. The features that emerged in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* – normativism, didacticism, canonicity, and a tendency not to describe phenomena, but to form a single hierarchical system – became typical of later treatises on Indian aesthetics.

The Place of Theatrical Art in the Artistic Hierarchy of the Classical Period

The rudiments of Indian theatrical art and Sanskrit dramaturgy began to crystallize around the 6th–3rd century B. C. The earliest attestations to the existence of theatrical art and of aesthetic treatises devoted to it are found in the works of Pāṇini (5th century B.C.), and the clearest token of the maturity of this art and main source of knowledge about it is the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. On the basis of this text we can reconstruct many of the most important components of theatrical art: the principles of direction, dramaturgy, repertoire, dramatic structure

and action, music, dance, acting, etc. By adopting many elements of ritual process, theatricized mysteries, and ritual dances, theatrical art quickly acquired, as it developed, important didactic, ethical, and aesthetic functions in Indian society.

The latest research shows that Sylvain Lévi was too categorical in emphasizing the elite nature of Indian theatrical art. “Indian art”, he wrote, “is unavoidably aristocratic; the caste system reserved for the elite the field of intellectual culture and kept it away from the majority” (Lévi, 1980, p. 417). Despite the great popularity achieved by this assertion, we are forced to doubt its validity because of the aesthetic ideas of Indian theatrical art, the openness of the theaters to members of all castes, and the surviving dramatic texts, in which apart from the literary Sanskrit of the upper aristocracy the same plays make parallel use of seven different Prakrits, i.e. vernacular languages and dialects. Thus, one of the specific features of classical Indian dramaturgy is connected with its multilingualism. Alongside characters of high birth, who speak an exalted Sanskrit, there are also common people and women, who speak Prakrits (*Nāṭyaśāstra*, Chapter 17:31).

Eventually, Indian theatrical art crystallized into these main genres: 1) *nāṭaka* – dramas or ritual spectacles enriched with dances and dominated by motifs taken from religious mysteries and mythology; 2) *prakaraṇa* – dramas depicting secular scenes of everyday life with various stories about merchants, craftsmen, and other city dwellers; 3) *ḍima* – dramas telling about significant historical events, in which the deeds of real or epic heroes and of rulers

are naturally interwoven with those of the gods; and 4) *prahasana* (imitation) – satirical, humorous spectacles characterized by clear-cut elements of grotesque imitation, clownery, and buffoonery. An analysis of the oldest dramatic texts and of the aesthetic ideas of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* provides a sound basis for the assertion that India also had the genre of tragedy, which was closely connected with historical drama, but that it later disappeared under the influence of severe Brahman religious and ethical restrictions.

In ancient India, theatrical art had already reached such a high level of development and such social status that bricks were used to build special architecturally complex, rectangular theaters that consisted of three functionally different parts: a hall for the audience, a stage, and backstage rooms for the actors. Separating the upstage from the backstage were the musicians. In one theater of the 2nd century B.C. excavated by archaeologists, we can see a compositional structure similar to one described in detail in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Such a theater held about 500 spectators. At the front of the auditorium, in the place of honor, were the seats for the ruler and his retinue. Members of the higher castes, the Kṣatriyas and the Brahmans, sat closer to the front, and the lower castes, the Vaiśyas and the Śūdras – farther back.

Performances and contests between various theatrical troupes were organized not only in special theater buildings but also in the open country, in parks, in public squares, and on temporary stages set up near temples. These contests between theatrical troupes were popular and usually

drew large audiences, and performances were evaluated by special commissions of specialists in ritual, dance, music, language, and art, who meticulously noted the strengths and weaknesses of these performances by competing troupes and awarded them points. Later, these points were added up, and the ruler – who was formal head of the commission – publicly announced the score and gave awards to the authors, actors, directors, and troupes that had distinguished themselves.

Understanding that theatrical art exerted a powerful influence on the emotions and that it could promote both positive and negative human behavior, the creators of Indian theatrical aesthetics introduced many restrictions and normative requirements. The normative provisions of theatrical aesthetics prohibited the dramatic depiction of battles, the deposition of a ruler, death, and the siege of cities; these events were related during the interludes between acts (*Nāṭyaśāstra*, Chapter 18:19). Later, as the influence of conservative Brahman ideology grew stronger, the number of these prohibitions perceptibly increased, and they embraced not only the field of state functions but also the sphere of human emotions, even of such an important one for Indian art as love. Under the influence of the harsh ethical and religious attitudes of the Brahmans, the genre of tragedy disappeared, and pungent dramatic themes were softened.

Nothing has survived from early Indian drama. The extremely important period in which classical drama flourished began around the 2nd–5th century. A contemporary of the emperor Kaniška and the leading light of Buddhist literature, Aśvaghoṣa

(2nd century), wrote the poem *Buddhacarita* (Acts of the Buddha) and the drama *Śāriputrāprakaraṇa* (Story of Śāriputra). Two other eminent figures were also active: Bhāsa and Śūdraka (both 2nd–3rd century). Later, during the 4th–5th century, there arose the great Indian dramatist, famous court poet, and theoretician of art Kālidāsa, who is believed to have written his plays during the reign of the emperor Candragupta (380–414).

This subtle dramatist and poet of love and of the beauty of nature discerned in drama an instrument, much more powerful than in the other arts, to influence human consciousness and practical, ethical, and aesthetic attitudes because the imagination of the artist gives birth to a concentration of dramatic events and ideas such as do not exist in reality. According to Kālidāsa, the main goal of the dramatist is to form a harmonious personality and give meaning to an exalted ideal of beauty that unfolds within an equilibrium between its intellectual and emotional sources. The

essence of Kālidāsa's dramatic theory – the principle of a “hidden meaning” or of a “second, unspoken level” – acquired in Indian aesthetic theory the name *dhvani*. The revelation of the “hidden effect” or deep nature of a work of art, according to Kālidāsa, requires a special artistry, the ability to rise to another level of understanding and artistic creation. Therefore, artistic mastery of this principle helps the artist create highly suggestive and refined art.

In its synthetic goals, forms, plots, and patterns of dramatic action, classical Indian theatrical art differs from ancient Greek drama, which like Greek art in general is somewhat more transparent and clearer, especially in regard to the development of story lines. Even so, it should be acknowledged that Indian theatrical aesthetics and drama are not inferior to the Greek tradition in refinement and many other aspects. They developed many principles that were completely unknown to the Greeks. All these aspects of Indian drama were reflected in aesthetic treatises.

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