

# ANCIENT INDIAN STAGE DESIGNING, ARRANGEMENTS AND PERFORMANCE TRADITIONS AS PORTRAYED IN NĀTYAŚĀSTRA

Dibyendu Biswas

- Assistant Professor; Department of Sanskrit, Bagnan College; Bagnan, Howrah

W.B. – 711303, India.

## **Abstract**

Stage performance is a fine art that uses live performers, typically actors, to present the experience of a real or imaginary event before a live audience in a specific place, often a stage. The specific place of the performance is also named by the word “theatre” as derived from the Ancient Greek language. Ancient Indian theatre is also known as *nātya* in Sanskrit, which encompasses gesture, dialogue, speech, song, music, and dance. Designing of the stage and arrangements, specially in drama is of utmost importance. Stage designing and arrangement includes the sets, painted sceneries, costumes, lighting and several other mechanisms. These all are to enhance the physicality, presence and immediacy of the experience. The oldest contribution about Indian stage designing and arrangement comes from *Nātyaśāstra* which throws lights on almost all aspects of theatre architecture to artifacts to performers movements to the make-up. Most importantly, it gives a vivid idea about the stage designing and arrangement of ancient Indian theatre which is crucial for the reconstruction of the facts of the yesteryears.

**Keywords:** Stage performance, Theatre, Stage designing, Stage arrangement, Performance Traditions, Ancient India, *Nātyaśāstra*.

The ancient Indian drama actually refers to the classical Sanskrit dramatic literature. Drama can be considered as the highest achievement of Sanskrit literature. The Sanskrit drama of the theorists is, despite of its complexity, essentially intended for pure performance only. There is slightest doubt that the early dramatists were anything but composers of plays meant only to be read. They were connoisseurs in the merits which would accrue to their works from the accessories of the dance, music, song, and the attractions of acting; the *Vikramorvaśīyam* must, for instance, have had much of the attraction of an opera, and as a mere literary work seriously loses its attraction.

*Nātyaśāstra*, is the most important text of dramaturgy that ancient India produced. The title literally means “drama science” but a cursory review of the text is all one needs to indicate that this is more than a science of drama; it is a veritable encyclopedia of knowledge concerning Sanskrit drama and theatre, the most comprehensive work of its kind to survive anywhere from ancient times. Without the benefit of the information it contains, we would know relatively little about a number of important issues concerning the Sanskrit theatre.

At a glance the *Nātyaśāstra* is obviously broader in scope than the other great text of ancient dramaturgy. The work consists of numerous chapters, beginning with the origins of theatre. Within its scope are a multitude of topics, such as theatre architecture, acting, costuming, makeup, properties, dance, music, play composition, grammar, composition of theatre companies, audiences, dramatic competitions, the actor community, and ritual observances, to name the more important.

On the other hand, the existence of regular theatres for the exhibition of drama is not assumed in the theorists. A drama was normally performed on an occasion of special rejoicing and solemnity, such as a festival of a god, or a royal marriage, or the celebration of a victory, and the place of performance thus naturally came to the temple of the god or the palace of the king. We learn often in the drama and tales of the existence of dancing halls and music rooms in the royal palace where the ladies of the harem were taught these pleasing arts, and one of these could easily be adapted for a dramatic performance. But we have from the second century B.C. the remains of a cave which seems to have been used, if not for the performance of plays, at any

rate for purpose of recitation of poems or some similar end; it is found in the *Rāmgarh* hill in chhota Nagpur<sup>1</sup>, and, although it is quite impossible to prove that it had anything to do with plays, it is interesting to note that the *Nāṭyaśāstra* states that the play-house should have the form of a mountain cave and two stories. According to the *Śilpa-Śāstra*, the play-house as made ready for performance may be of three types-

*trividhaḥ sanniveśaśca śāstrataḥ parikalpita ||  
vikrṣṭaścaturasraśca tryasraścaiva hi maṇḍapaḥ |  
teṣāṃ trīṇi pramāṇāni jyeṣṭhaṃ madhyaṃ tathā 'varam |  
pramāṇameṣāṃ nirdiṣṭaṃ hastadaṇḍasamāśrayam |  
śataṃ cāṣṭou catuṣaṣṭirdvātriṃśacceti niścitaḥ ||  
aṣṭādhikaṃ śataṃ jyeṣṭhaṃ catuṣaṣṭistu madhyamam |  
kaṇīyantu tathā veśma hastā dvātriṃśadiṣyate ||*

The first, square for the gods, 108 hands long; the second, rectangular, 64 hands long and 32 hands broad; the third, triangular, 32 hands long, the second being praised on acoustic grounds<sup>2</sup>. The house falls into two parts, the places for the audience and the stage. The auditorium is marked off by pillars, in front a white pillar for the seats for the *Brāhmins*, and then a red pillar for the *Kṣatriyas*, in the north-west a yellow pillar marks the seats for the *Vaiśyas*, while the *Sūdras* have a blue-black pillar in the north-east. The seats are of wood and bricks, and arranged in rows. In front besides the stage is a veranda with four pillars, apparently also for the use of spectators. In front of the spectators is the stage (*raṅga*), adorned with pictures and reliefs; it is eight hands square in the second from of play house; its end is the head of the stage (*raṅgaśīrṣa*), decorated by figures, and there offering are made<sup>3</sup>.

Behind the stage is painted curtain (*paṭī, apaṭī, tiraskaraṇī, pratisīrā*), to which the name *Yavanikā* is given, denoting merely that the material is foreign, and forbidding any conclusion as to the Greek origin of the curtain itself or the theatre. When one enters hastily, the curtain is violently thrown aside (*apaṭīkṣepa*)<sup>4</sup>. Behind the curtain are the actor's quarters (*nepathyagrha*) or tiring rooms. Here are performed the sounds necessary to represent uproar and confusion which cannot be represented on the stage; here also are uttered the voices of gods and other persons whose presence on the stage is impossible or undesirable.

The colour of the curtain is given in harmony with the dominant sentiment of the play, in accordance with the classification of sentiments already given, but others permit the use of red in every instance. Normally the entry by two maidens, whose beauty marks them out for this employment (*dhṛtiryavanikāyāḥ*). The term *Nepathya* has suggested an erroneous deduction as to the relative elevation of the stage and the foyer, for it is conceivable that it denotes a descending (*ni-patha*) way, and it has been concluded that it was, therefore, below the level of the stage. But the regular phrase of the entry of an actor on the stage (*raṅgāvatāraṇa*) would suggest exactly the opposite, a descent from the foyer to the stage<sup>5</sup>. Many a times, when the stage was to be put up in a hurry for some temporary aims, they followed no fixed practice. So, it would be difficult to say, what the stage decorations, arrangements and height of the stage platform was. In the case of a play within a play, in the *Bālarāmāyana* of Rājaśekhara, we find that both a stage and a tiring room are erected on the original stage, though we may assume that these were of a very simple structure. The number of doors leading to the tiring room from the stage is regularly given as two, and apparently the place of the orchestra was in between them.

Indian theatre is a vivid introduction to the colorful and often surprising world of Indian performance.

Examining the texts of the extant Sanskrit plays, it is next to impossible to determine how music and dance were integrated into a performance. Indeed from the plays alone, you might well get the impression that Sanskrit drama was dialogue drama without the benefit of music and dance, except for the rare occasion in certain text in which a character is said to sing or dance or do both. And yet the *Nāṭyaśāstra* tells us something quite different. Songs and dances seem to have been very much a part of the total performance experience.

As indicated earlier, the chapters devoted to music are our earliest source of information about the music of ancient India. According to the text, melodic sounds were either produced by the human voice or by musical

<sup>1</sup> Bloch, Arch. Survey of India Report, 1903-04, p.123

<sup>2</sup> Bharat nāṭyaśāstra, II, 8-10

<sup>3</sup> Śilpaśāstra, (ed.TSS), p.201

<sup>4</sup> Kāvya-mānsā, p.54

<sup>5</sup> The theory of a transverse curtain (Wilson, I, xviii) is not supported by evidence of any clear kind. P.113

instruments. Musical instruments, traditionally associated with dramas were essentially either stringed; covered, namely the various drums; solid such as the cymbal; or hollow, like the flute.

The appropriate place for the musicians to sit was upstage center, on a rug on the floor, between the two doors leading to the dressing room. This was strategically a very vantage position to watch the progress of the play, which gave them a full view of the acting area and also gave easy access to the dressing room, which was also advantageous in case of any changes in needed on short notice.

It is apparent from the early chapters of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* that music was essential to the progress of the preliminary rituals. The songs that were sometimes sung by an actress in the prologue probably needed a musical accompaniment, as did the songs referred to on occasion in some of the scripts.

Besides mapping the vast range of performance traditions, the volume provide in depth treatment of representative genres, including well-known forms such as *Kathākali* and *Rāmlīlā* and the little-known performance such as *tamāśā*. Each of these chapters explains the historical background of the theatre form under consideration and interprets its dramatic literature, probes it's ritual or religious significance, and, where relevant, explores its social and political implications. Moreover, each chapter, except for those on the origins of Indian theatre, concludes with performance notes describing the actual experience of seeing a live performance in its original context.

Of the part played by the song, dance, and music in the drama the theorists curiously enough tell us comparatively little of interest, though it is certain that both were most important elements in the production of sentiment. The types of dance recognized in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* are two, the violent dance of men, invented by Śiva himself, the *Tāṇḍava*, and the tender and voluptuous dance Pārvatī, the *Lāsya*. The later one, by reason of its special importance, is carefully analyzed into ten parts of *Śilpa-Śāstra*, which shows the essential union of song and dance. The first is the song proper, which is sung by one seated, to the accompaniment of a lute, without dancing; the recitation standing (*sthitapāṭhya*) is a declamation in *Prākṛit* by a woman pacing rapidly under the influence of love<sup>1</sup>, or it may also mean, according to Abhinavagupta, a declamation by a woman in anger. The recitation sitting (*āsīna*) is performed by a woman lying down, under the stress of sorrow, without musical accompaniment. In *Puṣpagaṇḍikā*, a kind of farce in Sanskrit, we find that men act as women and vice versa and there is a musical accompaniment as well. In the *Pracchedaka* a woman sings to the lute her grief at her lover's infidelity. The *Trigūḍha* is the acting of a man in woman's dress, as of Makaranda in the *Mālatimādhava*, Act VI. The *Saindhava* is a song to a clear accompaniment of lady whose love has failed to keep his tryst. The *Dvigūḍhaka* is a harmonious song, full of sentiment, in dialogue form. The *uttamottaka* is a song filled with the bitterness of a troubled love. The *Uktapratyukta* is a duet, in which one lover addresses to the other feigned reproaches. Some of these performance traditions used musical accompaniments and some did not, but it must be remembered that motions of the performers are essential in the performance.

Though music was the essential part of Sanskrit drama, but it is not discussed in length in the later theorists. Still one can come to the conclusion with the help of other texts that each sentiment has its special appropriate music and each action its special accompaniment. Thus the *Dvipadikās* accompanied the performance of roles of persons distressed, unwell, and unhappy; the *Dhruvās* were chosen so as to intimate at once to the audience the quality of the new arrival on the stage.

Unfortunately, none of the theatre structures of ancient India have survived the ravages of time, to reconstruct texts on drama, stage or performance traditions of that era. Only substantial source of information regarding the size and shape of the buildings that are said to have housed Sanskrit play productions is the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Though from the discussion it appears to have been written with the intention of laying down rules for the construction of "ideal" models, rather than recording the size and shape of existing structures.

Sanskrit is an ancient language of India, which was widely used by the mass but gradually it became the language of high culture, especially the language of literature. Sanskrit literature can be considered as classical Indian literature. Sanskrit drama is essentially a part of Sanskrit literature. These Sanskrit literatures actually laid the foundation of ancient Indian culture and literature. Sanskrit drama is essentially a part of Sanskrit literature. Sanskrit plays are the most important aspect of these literary works. The practices of Sanskrit drama and plays were enshrined in the encyclopedic work named *Nāṭyaśāstra*. That is the only notable work regarding Sanskrit drama of ancient India. From the blue prints of the stage, to the architectural designs, to the performance rituals or to the performance traditions, *Natyasastra* has described almost all aspects of Sanskrit

<sup>1</sup> Weber, IS. Xiv.p.225

dramas. It is really astonishing to believe how modern and scientific the designs, stage arrangements was at that time. Each and every little aspect was considered with utmost importance and sincerity. One can easily understand, with the textual evidences that Sanskrit drama with its notable stage designing, its stage arrangements and its performance traditions could have easily compete with the Universal standards of drama, not only of ancient times but as well as of modern days dramaturgy.

### **References:**

- [1] Bandyopadhyay Suresh Chandra and Chakrabarti Chhanda: Bharat Nāṭyaśāstra (vol-I) Nabapatra Prakashan, 1980, Calcutta.
- [2] Dalal. C. D.: *Kāvyaṁīmāṁsā of Rājasekhara*. Baroda: Central University, 1916.
- Ghosh Monomohan: *The Nāṭyaśāstra: English translation with critical notes*. Munshiram Monoharlal Publishers, 1999.
- [3] Grosset.J: *Contribution a l'étude de la musique hindoue*, Paris, 1888.
- Keith. A. Berriedale: *The Sanskrit Drama, in its origin, Development theory and practice*. Oxford University Press, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1924.
- [4] Richmond. Farley P, Swann. Darius L, Zarrilli. Phillip B.: *Indian theatre: traditions of performance*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publications Pvt. Ltd. 1993.

### **External –Links:**

1. <https://archive.org>
2. <https://books.google.co.in>
3. <https://jambudveep.files.wordpress.com>
4. <https://en.m.wikipedia.org>
5. [www.crystalimks.com](http://www.crystalimks.com)

