

# Bharata's Natyashastra

Ashok Da Ranade

(Published in Facts & News, No.3, NCPA, Theatre Development Centre, Mumbai, August 1987)

Bharata's *Natyashastra* is a work of multiple layers of significance because it is a treatise, a manual, as well as a compilation.

*Natyashastra* as a treatise proves to be elaborate, formal and a literary composition presenting a serious view of the performing trinity in various aspects. It is academic in treatment and is inclined to laying down theoretical abstracted norms of performing behaviour in its totality. As a manual it contains reference matter brought together in a handbook form to note directions and instructions facilitating an actual performance. Finally, as a compilation, it collects material from numerous other books or works to a considerable extent. (It is instructive to note that etymologically the word compile means 'to plunder thoroughly'!)

Ostensibly, there are performers who find Bharata relevant 'practically'. Their aim and claim is to perform according to Bharata's injunctions. Dancers and drama-directors are known to have modelled their creations on Bharata's exposition. However, attempts to perform music according to Bharata are relatively scarce. It should be interesting to speculate on the reasons why practicing musicians have showed less enthusiasm in this respect! Why jatis should prove less tractable than the karnas or the charis is a question worth-considering. Perhaps the direct connection is with the nature of the art of music itself. Performances of music in the Bharata-mould have certainly been the weakest of the recreations, even when they have occurred in dramatic settings.

Those who recreate make a frequent reference to the principle of authenticity. Bharata is quoted chapter and verse in order to bring out the validity of the effort. However, is it satisfactory to invoke the concept of authenticity in this connection? Authenticity, after all, appears to be a grammatical criterion which naturally evokes a 'correct-incorrect' response. A grammatical criterion can hardly be equated with a verdict evoked by aesthetic criteria. If 'a' performs according to Bharata and 'b' proves the performance to be incorrect (and therefore inauthentic) would it ipso facto make the former less artistic/aesthetic? The point is whether authenticity is valuable by itself or whether it has to prove its worth through an enhancement of the contemporary perception. Correspondence to Bharata is not a guarantee of the effectiveness or the

aesthetic impact of the experience involved. Without the enrichment of the concerned art-experience a recourse to Bharata may merely turn into an adventure in exoticism (the aesthetic admissibility of which is denied by a majority). Thus it is illogical to refer to authenticity in order to prove the relevance. It is therefore suggested that the question of relevance can hardly be tackled unless the three-fold character of *Natyashastra* is taken into consideration.

It is helpful to remember that at the treatise level *Natyashastra* is conceptual. At the manual level it is performance-oriented, while at the compilation level it is historical. At the conceptual level it is chiefly concerned with ideas that are essentially contested. For example Bharata's rasa-theory can easily continue to engage human minds for many years to come. Hence Bharata remains relevant at this level. The relevance at the historical level allows perceptive scholars a glimpse into the various layers signifying various periods of the Indian cultural history.

However, it is as a manual that *Natyashastra* seems to evoke a confused response. It is frequently hinted that Bharata's relevance is due to his comprehensive dramatic vision. His vision, it is pointed out, takes care of performing conditions from every possible angle. For example, his auditorium leaves adequate space for actors, locates agents that control the total dramatic expression (e.g. music/musicians) sensibly and ensures proper acoustic and visual focusing of the perceiver's attention etc. Prima facie this is an empirical plank and needs further consideration.

A stronger and a comparatively recent argument in favour of Bharata's continued usefulness has a wider i.e. a cultural bias. Students of Indian culture and particularly those exploring the mind-boggling variety of folk or traditional expressions have drawn attention to correspondence between conventions governing the traditional performances and Bharata's dictums. The reasons why traditional performances approximate Bharata's positions are not clearly stated but they can be easily surmised. It may be that through the intervening centuries Bharata has percolated to the non-elite strata which have retained the influences on account of their reluctance to accept change.

Alternatively, it is suggested that Bharata's entire exposition retains validity due to the intrinsic comprehensiveness. Bharata's vision is a result of the cumulative social wisdom and it cannot be described as a manifestation of an individual's isolated insight. The fact is reinforced by the fundamentally unchanging nature of the human mind. Whatever may be the reason the cultural view maintains that the social strata involved in the traditional performances cannot be understood without understanding

Bharata. Further, our understanding of the Indian society as a whole depends a great deal on our appreciation of the role played by the non-elite. Bharata, therefore, serves as a tool for the greater and better perception of Indian identity. And the debate continues.

We are covering the veteran designer Mr Goverdhan Panchal in this issue. Mr Panchal was interviewed in depth for our video archives and we are carrying extensive excerpts. We are taking this opportunity to include thematic and archival material on stage decor. The material gives an idea of the awareness our critics, historians and writers had about stage decor. In addition the selected material traces the development of decor on Marathi stage.

Marathi theatre criticism is of a varied nature. Readers will find the writings of Kashinath Narayan Patwardhan who wrote under the pen name 'Natkyā' in a sarcastic vein.

---