

## Prelims Master Program (2023-24) – Ancient, Medieval, Art and Culture

### Handout 31: Natyashastra

Natya Shastra is considered the **sacred text for all performing art forms**. It is the most important single source for understanding the character of classical and Sanskrit theatre, poetics, aesthetics, dance, and music.

Bharata's **date is much debated** (2<sup>nd</sup> c BC to 4<sup>th</sup> c CE), but the Natyashastra is the **oldest extant work** on the theory and practice of ancient Indian performance. It was an attempt to build up a **comprehensive theory** on every facet of theatrical practice in ancient India. It is **descriptive** in the sense that a lot of observed details of existing theatre practice go into it.

- Bharata had centuries of theatre theory to direct him. According to Panini (400 BC), there already existed two authors, Shilali and Krishashav, who had written Natasutras, the manuals of acting. Perhaps Natyashastra came as the acme of centuries old theatre theory.

According to Indian tradition, every **shastra** was first composed in **sutra** ('thread') in cryptic language marked by brevity and precision. It later developed through **vartika** and **bhashya**. **Vartika** is a text explaining what is unsaid or imperfectly said and supplying omissions. **Bhashya** is a further investigation of both **sutra** and **vartika**, offering comments of its own. Tradition grows further in commentaries and sub-commentaries.

In theatre, poetics, and aesthetics, Bharata is regarded as the author of the **sutra** (Natyashastra), Harsha of the **vartika** (since lost), and Abhinavagupta (950–1025), from Kashmir, the only available **bhashya** (titled Abhinavabharati).

It also came to play a **prescriptive** role for the generations that followed.

- For a greater part, the lineage of the greats of Sanskrit drama that included dramatists like Bhasa, Shudraka, Kalidasa and Vishakhadatta appeared not only aware of Bharata's views but seemed to conform to his rules about theme, plot, characterisation and depiction of rasas.

Bharata offers the fundamentals of theories developed later, especially those of **rasa** and **dhvani**. An encyclopaedic compendium, it also contains elements of **architecture, painting, prosody, language, grammar, phonetics, and other aspects as related to theatre**, and draws on disciplines as diverse as **philosophy, psychology, mythology, ritual, and geography**.

We know of commentaries on the Natyashastra dating from the 6<sup>th</sup> -7<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the earliest surviving one by **Abhinavagupta** was followed by works of writers such as **Saradatanaya** (12-13<sup>th</sup> century), **Sharangadeva** (13<sup>th</sup> century), and **Kallinatha** (16<sup>th</sup> century). Abhinavagupta provides not only his own illuminating interpretation of the Natyashastra, but wide information about pre-Bharata traditions as well as varied interpretations of the text offered by his predecessors.

## Contents of Natyashastra

The Natyashastra has been divided into 36 chapters, sometimes into 37 or 38 due to further bifurcation of a chapter or chapters. A vast treatise, it contains about 6000 verses.

**First Chapter:** It begins with the origin of theatre, opening with inquiries made by Bharata's pupils, which he answers by narrating the myth of its source in Brahma. He also explains the very nature, objective, and expanse of natya as a Veda through this unique myth.

We may interpret it in many ways, but can draw certain obvious **characteristics of Sanskrit theatre**, as follows. It consists of four elements –

Element	Meaning	Source
Pathya	Text, including the art of recitation and rendition	Rig Veda
Gita	Songs, including instrumental music	Sama Veda
Abhinaya	Acting, expressing the poetic meaning in the text and communicating to spectator	Yajur Veda
Rasa	Aesthetic Experience	Atharva Veda

- As an audio-visual form, theatre mirrors all the arts and crafts, higher knowledge, learning, sciences, yoga, and conduct. Its **purpose is to entertain as well as educate**.
  - It emphasizes the significance and importance of drama in attaining the joy, peace, and goals of life.
- **An ideal theatre artist** is one who, like Bharata, has experienced pleasure as well as pain in life, and is gifted with restraint as well as vision.
  - Performance is a collective activity that requires **a group of trained people knit in a familial bond**, just as Bharata had a family of one hundred pupils and sons.
  - The company comprises both men and women, bound to each other in a family-like relationship.
- **The spectators** come from all classes of society without any distinction, but are expected to be at least minimally initiated into the appreciation of theatre, so that they may respond properly to the art as an empathetic **sahridaya**.
- Theatre
  - It flourishes in **a peaceful environment** and requires a state free from hindrances.
  - Bharata, in the end, recommends the **worship of the presiding deities** of theatre and the auditorium.

**The second chapter** lays down the norms for theatre architecture (**prekshagriha** or auditorium)

- It protects the performance from all obstacles caused by adverse nature, malevolent spirits, animals, and men.
- It describes the medium sized rectangular space as ideal for audibility and visibility, apparently holding about 400 spectators.
  - Bharata also prescribes smaller and larger structures, respectively half and double this size, and square and triangular hall.

- Saradatanaya speaks of a circular space too.
- Bharata's model was an ideal intimate theatre, considering the subtle abhinaya of the eyes and other facial expressions he prescribed.
- The tradition of the Natyasastra auditorium survived in kuttampalams built for the performance of Kutiyattam in temples of Kerala, and some of its principles may be seen in folk forms or the Ankiya Bhaona of Assam.

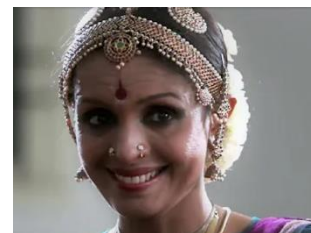
**The third chapter** describes an elaborate puja for the gods and goddesses protecting the auditorium and prescribes rituals to consecrate the space. The entire hall appears to be a replica of the cosmos presided over by gods, goddesses, demigods, as well as demons, presenting the triple universe according to theatrical needs.

**Chapter 4** is called Tandava Lakshanam.

- It begins with the story of a production of **Amritamanthana** ("Churning of the Nectar"), After some time, a drama titled Tripuradaha ("Burning of the Three Cities") is staged, relating Shiva's exploits.
- **Shiva asks Bharata to incorporate tandava dance in the purvaranga preliminaries and directs his attendant Tandu to teach Bharata.**
  - Tandu explains the components of tandava, the categories of its movements, and their composition in choreographical patterns.
  - **These form the pure dance movements** required for the worship of the gods and the rituals.
- This chapter also lays the **foundation of angika abhinaya** (physical acting) developed in later chapters.

**The fifth chapter** details the elements of purvaranga.

**The 6-7 chapters** deal with the fundamental emotional notions and aesthetics of **rasa and bhava**. **Chapter 8-12** give elaborate treatment to the bhavas, which include the vibhavas, are communicated to spectators through abhinaya, especially angika. These codify body language based on a definite semiology.



Bhava	Rasa
Rati (love)	Sringara
Hasa (laughter/humour)	Hasya
Shoka (sorrow/grief)	Karuna
Krodha (anger)	Raudra
Utsaha (energy/vigour)	Vira
Bhaya (fear)	Bhayanaka
Jugupsa (disgust)	Bibhatsa
Vismaya (amaze/wonder)	Adbhuta
Sama (tranquility)	Shanta



<b>Angika</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Movements of <b>angas</b> (head, hands, waist, face), <b>pratyanga</b> (shoulders, things, knees, elbows etc) and <b>upanga</b> (eyes, eyelids, cheeks, nose, lips, teeth etc)</li> <li>Through it, a dancer portrays various sancharibhavas and sthayibhavas.</li> </ul>
<b>Vachika</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Speech is used in drama and also in music when the singer expresses emotion through his/her singing.</li> <li>In the Kuchipudi and Melattur styles the dancers often mouth the words.</li> </ul>
<b>Aharya</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Costumes, jewellery and physical decorations of the actors and the theatre</li> <li>It is distinguished by the sex, race, sect or class or the social position of the characters, giving the production of the presentation some semblance of reality.</li> </ul>
<b>Satvika</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sattvika Abhinaya is the mental message, emotion or image communicated with the audience through the performer's own inner emotions.</li> </ul>

- Hand gesticulation** is so important that Nandikeshwara says that it leads to generation of Rasa.

**Chapter 13** talks about **Movement**.

- It requires well defined blocking, so immediately afterwards the Natyasastra lays down the **principle of kakshyavibhaga (zonal division)**.
- The extremely flexible and easy principle of **establishing space on stage** and altering it through parikramana (circumambulation) is a unique characteristic of traditional Indian theatre and dance.
- It closes with the discussion of the two modes of performance, ***natyadharmi and lokadharmi***, the former more conventional, stylized, and refined, and the latter more natural, nearer to behaviour seen in people's ordinary lives, thus spontaneous and simpler.

**Chapter 14-17:**

- Chapter 14: Poetic text** is considered the very embodiment of drama: therefore, the Naryashastra elaborately articulates the **structure and metres** to be employed.
- Chapter 15-16:** discuss the **metres and distinctive poetic form** and diction of the performance script.
- Chapter 17:** examines **language, such as Sanskrit and the Prakrits** in Sanskrit plays.
  - It analyses dramatic language deeply in order to enrich the understanding of playwright and artist, so that a good text for performance is created and better comprehension of verbal delivery attained.
  - Bharata shows the broader principles of phonetic change from Sanskrit to Prakrit and explores the dialects for characters hailing from different regions or belonging to various classes.
  - He enumerates the appellations and epithets occurring in Sanskrit drama, offering insights on the use of nomenclature.
  - The chapter then discusses **vacika abhinaya in detail**.

### Chapter 18-19:

- **Chapter 18** discusses the **ten major rupakas (forms of drama)** and natika, a variety of uparupaka.
- **Chapter 19** analyses the **structure of drama as well as the inclusion of lasyangas** (feminine dance) in theatre.

### Chapter 20-27:

- **Chapter 20** gives an elaborate account of the **vrittis** (styles).
- **Chapter 21** deals with **aharya abhinaya**, which covers make-up, costume, properties, masks, and minimal stage decor.
- **Chapter 22** begins with **samanya ('common') abhinaya**. It compounds the four elements of abhinaya harmoniously. It discusses other aspects of production too, may be viewed as 'inner', adhering to prescribed norms and systematic training, and 'outer' or done freely outside such a regimen. This chapter ends with an analysis of women's dispositions, particularly pertaining to love and terms of address.
- **Chapter 23** deals with male qualities and **patterns of sexual behaviour, as well as classification and stages of feminine youth**.
- **Chapter 24** enumerates the **types of characters** in Sanskrit drama.
- **Chapter 25** deals with **citrabhinaya**, especially meant for delineating the environment occurring as a stimulant of different bhavas. It also defines the specific ways of expressing different objects and states, and the use of gestures, postures, gaits, walking, and theatrical conventions.
- The **next two chapters** present the nature of dramatis personae, the principles of make-up, and speak about the success and philosophy of performance.

### Chapter 28-34 deal with music employed in theatre.

- **Chapter 28** covers **jati** (melodic types or matrices), **shruti** (micro-intervals), **svara** (notes), **grama** (scales), and **murcchana** (modes, now ragas).
- **Chapter 29** describes **stringed instruments** like the vina.
  - It also distinguishes between vocal and instrumental music.
- **Chapter 30** describes **wind instruments** like the flute and ways of playing it.
- **Chapter 31** deals with **cymbals**, and tala, rhythm, and metrical cycles.
- **Chapter 32** defines **dhruva songs**, their specific employment, forms, and illustrations.
- **Chapter 33** lists the qualities and defects of **vocalists** and **instrumentalists**.
- **Chapter 34** relates the origin and nature of **drums**.

The concluding chapters lay down the principles for distributing roles and the qualifications for members of the troupe.

- Bharata ends by stating the glory of theatre and of its Veda.